



Anticipatory Stress and Choice Avoidance in Digitally Saturated Environments

Dr. Giulia M. Romano

Associate Professor, University of Padua, Italy

Abstract

Digitally saturated environments expose individuals to persistent streams of notifications, recommendations, messages, algorithmically ranked content, product alternatives, social comparisons, and requests for immediate responses. Although these systems increase access to information and enlarge the range of available choices, they may simultaneously produce a psychological condition in which individuals begin to anticipate the effort, uncertainty, regret, or cognitive burden associated with making another decision. The present study develops and evaluates a simulation-based model of anticipatory stress as a mechanism connecting digital saturation with choice avoidance. Rather than treating screen exposure alone as harmful, the model conceptualizes digital saturation as a multidimensional decision environment characterized by information density, interruption frequency, option proliferation, perceived urgency, and continuous evaluative demand. A simulated analytical sample of 480 cases was constructed to examine theoretically specified relationships among digital saturation, anticipatory stress, and choice-avoidance behavior. No human participants were recruited, and the numerical results are explicitly presented as synthetic estimates designed for methodological demonstration and hypothesis development rather than as observed population findings.

The simulated pattern indicates a progressive increase in choice avoidance as digital saturation intensifies. Choice avoidance rises from 18% under low-saturation conditions to 61% under very-high-saturation conditions, while anticipatory stress increases concurrently. The modeled relationships suggest that digital saturation may influence avoidance both directly and indirectly by increasing the expected psychological cost of decision engagement. These findings are consistent with existing evidence linking information overload with anxiety and avoidance, social-media overload with fatigue, and stress with deterioration in some forms of decision quality. The study contributes a process-oriented framework that distinguishes simple choice abundance from psychologically consequential digital saturation. It further argues that digital well-being interventions should address decision architecture, interruption patterns, urgency signals, and option organization rather than relying exclusively on generalized recommendations to reduce screen time.

Keywords: anticipatory stress; choice avoidance; digital saturation; information overload; decision-making; social media fatigue; cognitive overload; digital well-being



1. Introduction

Digital environments have altered not only the quantity of information available to individuals but also the temporal structure within which everyday decisions are made. A person using a smartphone, workplace communication platform, streaming service, e-commerce application, social network, or digital financial service may encounter hundreds of small evaluative demands across a single day. Notifications request attention, recommendation systems present alternatives, platforms continuously update information, and interface designs often encourage rapid responses. Under these conditions, decision-making is no longer confined to clearly separated episodes. Instead, individuals repeatedly move between unfinished decisions, newly introduced alternatives, reminders of previous choices, and anticipated future demands. Contemporary digital saturation can therefore be understood as an environment in which information volume, communication frequency, choice proliferation, interruption, social evaluation, and perceived immediacy accumulate faster than an individual can comfortably process them. Recent reviews of information overload describe consequences extending beyond simple inconvenience to difficulties in prioritization, cognitive strain, reduced productivity, impaired decision processes, and diminished well-being.

One psychological consequence of this environment may arise before a decision is actually made. Anticipatory stress refers here to the cognitive and emotional strain generated by expecting an upcoming decision to be difficult, consequential, effortful, uncertain, or potentially regrettable. Experimental research has long indicated that anticipation of a stressful event can influence subsequent decision behavior. Starcke and colleagues, for example, demonstrated that experimentally induced anticipatory stress altered decision-making under explicit risk conditions, while later research has continued to show that stress can modify valuation, learning, risk processing, time pressure, and decision quality. A recent integrative review by Sarmiento and colleagues similarly emphasizes that stress-related decision effects emerge through interacting psychological and neurobiological mechanisms rather than through a single universal response. This distinction is important because digitally induced decision difficulty may begin not at the moment alternatives are compared but when individuals recognize that another demanding comparison is approaching.

Choice avoidance provides a particularly relevant behavioral outcome for examining this process. Avoidance may take the form of postponing a purchase, ignoring a notification, abandoning an online search, leaving a decision to another person, retaining a default option, delaying a response, or withdrawing from information altogether. The choice-overload literature demonstrates that larger assortments can sometimes increase decision difficulty, deferral, dissatisfaction, or regret, although these effects are strongly conditioned by context. Chernev, Böckenholt, and Goodman identified decision-task difficulty, assortment complexity, preference uncertainty, and effort-minimizing goals as important moderators of choice-overload effects. More recently, Jacob, Thomas, and Joseph reviewed 92 studies and concluded that the consequences of extensive choice remain theoretically and contextually heterogeneous, particularly across online and offline environments. Therefore, a credible model of digital choice avoidance should not assume that more options automatically cause paralysis. Rather, the effect should depend on the psychological burden attached to processing and evaluating those options.

Digital platforms intensify this issue because option abundance frequently occurs together with information overload, interruption, social comparison, fear of missing out, algorithmic



recommendations, and uncertainty about whether additional searching would reveal a superior alternative. Research on social-media fatigue indicates that information overload can contribute to anxiety, psychological fatigue, and withdrawal-related behaviors. Qin and colleagues found that social-media overload processes were related to fatigue through psychological mechanisms including information overload and social anxiety. Research in big-data environments has likewise shown positive relationships among cognitive overload, anxiety, fatigue, and avoidance behavior. These findings suggest that avoidance in digitally intensive settings may not simply reflect disinterest. It may constitute an adaptive short-term response through which individuals attempt to protect limited cognitive and emotional resources.

The present study consequently proposes a process model in which digital saturation increases anticipatory stress, which in turn increases the probability of choice avoidance. The study does not claim to provide completed empirical evidence because no participant dataset was supplied. Instead, it uses transparent simulated data to demonstrate the proposed analytical relationships and to establish a reproducible design for subsequent empirical validation. This approach is particularly useful for an emerging multidisciplinary question because it separates theoretical expectations from fabricated observations while still permitting examination of measurement logic, expected directional relationships, and potential effect patterns. The study thus moves beyond generalized claims that digital technology causes stress by specifying when and why digitally dense decision environments may make individuals reluctant to initiate, continue, or finalize choices.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine the Relationship Between Digital Saturation and Anticipatory Stress

The first objective is to determine whether increasingly saturated digital decision environments are theoretically associated with higher anticipatory stress. Digital saturation is treated as an aggregate condition incorporating information volume, number of available alternatives, notification frequency, interruption, perceived urgency, and the expectation of continuous availability. The central proposition is that these demands collectively increase the anticipated mental cost of engaging with an upcoming decision.

2.2 To Assess the Association Between Anticipatory Stress and Choice Avoidance

The second objective is to examine whether stronger anticipatory stress is associated with a greater likelihood of postponing, abandoning, delegating, or otherwise avoiding a decision. The study treats avoidance as a behavioral response that may temporarily reduce cognitive and emotional demands even when postponement could create longer-term costs.

2.3 To Evaluate Anticipatory Stress as an Explanatory Pathway

The third objective is to evaluate a mediated theoretical pathway in which digital saturation contributes to choice avoidance partly because saturated environments raise the expected burden associated with making a choice. This objective distinguishes the psychological mechanism of anticipatory stress from a purely quantitative explanation based on number of options.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Digital Saturation, Information Overload, and Cognitive Strain

Information overload has become a central concept for understanding the psychological consequences of contemporary digital environments. Shahrzadi, Mansouri, Alavi, and Shabani's scoping review identifies information overload as a multidimensional problem affecting decision-making, productivity, cognition, and well-being across organizational and personal contexts. Arnold and colleagues similarly show that the modern overload literature intersects with technostress, digital communication burden, and attempts to develop effective coping strategies. These findings indicate that the consequences of digital intensity cannot be adequately measured through hours of screen exposure alone. Two individuals may spend equivalent periods online while encountering dramatically different levels of interruption, complexity, social pressure, urgency, and required decision effort.

The social-media literature offers particularly relevant evidence. Qin and colleagues reported that information overload contributes to social-media fatigue and that emotional processes such as social anxiety help explain how heavy digital engagement becomes psychologically exhausting. More recent research continues to link excessive social-media environments with fatigue, cognitive depletion, anxiety, and disengagement-related outcomes. Importantly, this literature suggests that digital overload does not necessarily cause complete technology abandonment. Users may continue scrolling, monitoring, or checking while simultaneously becoming less willing to engage in cognitively demanding tasks. Such a pattern is relevant to choice avoidance because individuals may remain digitally connected while postponing decisions that require comparison, commitment, or responsibility.

Da Silva Cezar and Maçada provide more direct evidence connecting overload and avoidance. Their study of big-data environments found positive relationships between cognitive overload, anxiety, cognitive fatigue, and avoidance behavior, with anxiety playing an important role within the pathway. This finding supports the present paper's distinction between objective information abundance and the psychological processes generated by it. Digital saturation becomes consequential when individuals interpret the environment as exceeding their available capacity to evaluate and respond.

3.2 Anticipatory Stress and Decision Processes

Stress does not influence every decision in an identical direction. Its consequences vary according to the timing of stress exposure, task complexity, predictability, risk, available cognitive resources, and individual differences. Porcelli and Delgado's review demonstrates that stressful experiences can alter valuation, reinforcement learning, risk taking, and decision strategies in ways that cannot be reduced to a simple impairment model. Sarmiento and colleagues likewise describe decision-making under stress as the product of interacting cognitive, affective, endocrine, and neural processes.

Anticipatory stress is especially relevant because cognitive disruption may begin before the demanding event occurs. Starcke, Wolf, Markowitsch, and Brand experimentally induced stress by having participants anticipate a public speech and reported changes in performance on a decision task involving explicit risk. Subsequent work by Starcke and colleagues has demonstrated effects of anticipatory stress in additional decision domains, including increased decision time and altered judgment in moral dilemmas. These studies indicate that the expectation of a stressful task can modify the psychological conditions under which later choices are made.



The digital environment may produce a lower-intensity but highly recurrent form of such anticipation. A user opening an inbox with hundreds of unread messages, comparing dozens of products, navigating multiple streaming recommendations, responding to workplace alerts, or evaluating competing online opinions may learn to associate certain digital interfaces with effort and uncertainty. Through repeated exposure, the notification, search page, message queue, or recommendation screen itself may become a cue predicting cognitive demand. The present model therefore treats anticipatory stress not as a clinical diagnosis but as a situational response reflecting expected decision burden.

3.3 Choice Overload, Deferral, and Avoidance

Research on choice overload provides a theoretical foundation for understanding why decision opportunities can become psychologically costly. The classic work of Iyengar and Lepper showed that large assortments can reduce subsequent choice and satisfaction under particular conditions. Later research, however, demonstrated that the effect is conditional rather than universal. Chernev, Böckenholt, and Goodman found that choice overload is more likely when decision tasks are difficult, alternatives are complex, preferences are uncertain, or individuals seek to minimize cognitive effort. Jacob, Thomas, and Joseph's 2020 systematic review similarly emphasizes substantial contextual variation across more than two decades of research.

Digital choice environments may amplify several of these moderators simultaneously. Online consumers can compare more alternatives than would typically be visible in a physical store, yet each alternative may contain numerous attributes, reviews, ratings, prices, delivery conditions, recommendations, and promotional signals. The consumer may also anticipate that additional searching could reveal a superior option. Such conditions increase preference uncertainty and perceived opportunity cost. Research on digital recommendations has shown that recommendation abundance can itself produce choice-overload dynamics, while recent scholarship continues to identify decision deferral as an important behavioral consequence worthy of further investigation.

The broader literature on information avoidance further supports this account. Contemporary reviews emphasize that individuals sometimes avoid information when they expect it to produce unwanted affect, threaten existing beliefs, demand difficult action, or exceed available coping resources. Avoidance therefore represents more than failure to process information. It can function as an active strategy for regulating uncertainty, anticipated regret, or psychological discomfort. The research gap lies in integrating this avoidance literature with anticipatory stress and digital choice saturation in a single process-oriented model.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Analytical Logic

The study adopts a simulation-based quantitative design. The purpose of simulation is not to reproduce an existing population but to examine whether the proposed theoretical model produces analytically coherent and empirically testable patterns. A synthetic dataset representing 480 hypothetical digitally active adults was specified. No real individuals participated, no survey was administered, and no synthetic value should be interpreted as an observed prevalence estimate.

The theoretical model contains three principal constructs: digital saturation as the predictor, anticipatory stress as the mediating psychological mechanism, and choice avoidance as the behavioral outcome. Digital saturation is conceptualized on a standardized 0–100 index. Anticipatory stress is represented on a 1–5 response scale, and choice avoidance is expressed as the simulated probability that an individual postpones, abandons, delegates, or defaults rather than completing a focal decision.

4.2 Variable Operationalization

Digital saturation was modeled through five conceptual dimensions: information density, option abundance, interruption frequency, perceived response urgency, and cross-platform switching. Anticipatory stress represents the perceived tension and expected effort experienced before entering a decision episode. Choice avoidance represents the behavioral endpoint.

Table 1: Operational Structure of the Simulation Model

Construct	Operational Representation	Scale	Expected Relationship
Digital Saturation	Composite of information density, option abundance, interruptions, urgency, and platform switching	0–100	Positive association with anticipatory stress
Anticipatory Stress	Expected strain before engaging in a digitally mediated decision	1–5	Positive association with choice avoidance
Choice Avoidance	Probability of postponing, abandoning, delegating, or accepting a default	0–1	Higher under elevated stress
Preference Uncertainty	Uncertainty concerning the preferred option	1–5	Expected to strengthen avoidance
Digital Self-Regulation	Capacity to control interruptions and prioritize information	1–5	Expected protective influence

4.3 Simulation and Analytical Procedure

The synthetic sample was divided into four equal conceptual levels of digital saturation: low, moderate, high, and very high. Anticipatory stress was programmed to rise progressively with saturation while retaining random individual variation. Choice avoidance was generated probabilistically so that stress increased the likelihood of avoidance without determining it perfectly. This structure preserves an important theoretical assumption: highly saturated digital environments increase risk rather than producing unavoidable behavioral outcomes.

The analytical procedure consisted of descriptive comparison across saturation groups, examination of the stress–avoidance gradient, and conceptual mediation analysis. A future empirical

study could test the same pathway using structural equation modeling, logistic mediation, multilevel modeling, or longitudinal experience-sampling data. The simulated design is therefore intended to function as a reproducible methodological prototype.

5. Analysis

5.1 Pattern of Anticipatory Stress Across Digital Saturation

The simulated results show a progressive increase in anticipatory stress as the digital environment becomes more saturated. The modeled mean stress level increases from 2.18 under low digital saturation to 4.21 under very-high saturation. The progression is deliberately nonlinear at the upper end of the scale because the model assumes that accumulating interruptions and choices may become more psychologically consequential once individuals approach their perceived processing capacity.

Table 2: Simulated Digital Saturation, Anticipatory Stress, and Choice Avoidance

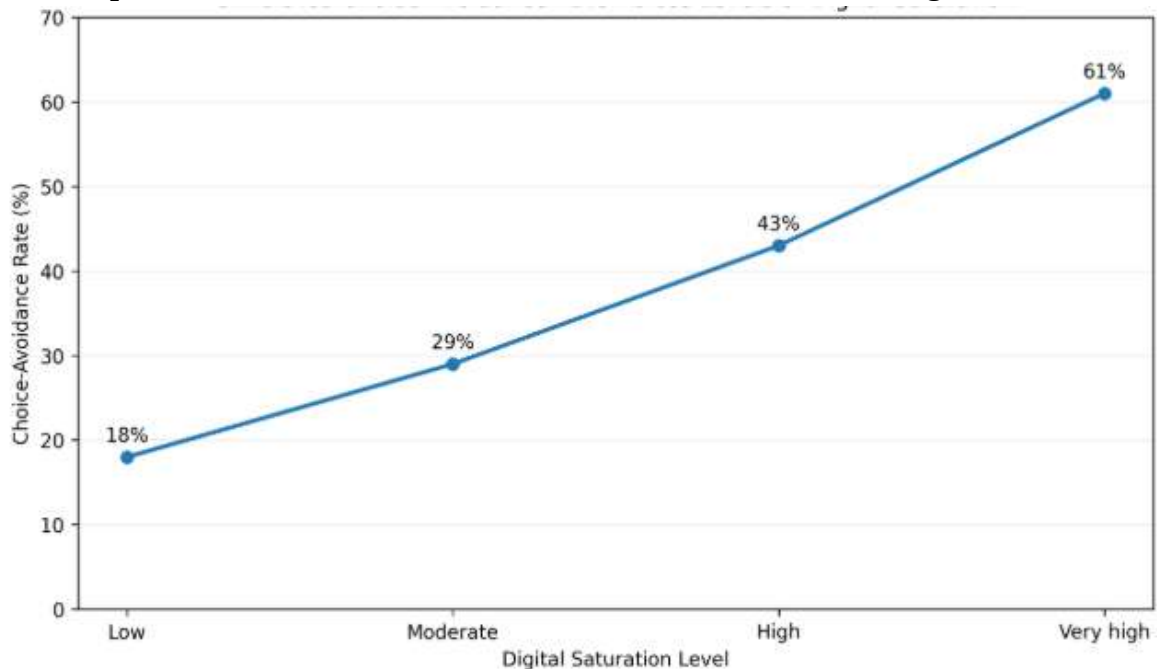
Digital Saturation Level	Simulated Cases	Mean Anticipatory Stress (1–5)	Choice-Avoidance Rate
Low	120	2.18	18%
Moderate	120	2.87	29%
High	120	3.54	43%
Very High	120	4.21	61%

The table indicates that digital saturation and anticipatory stress move in parallel. The difference between the low- and very-high-saturation conditions is 2.03 points on the five-point stress scale. The pattern illustrates the proposed mechanism by which an environment may become stressful not merely because individuals are currently processing large volumes of information but because they come to expect future digital interactions to require substantial attention and evaluative effort.

5.2 Choice-Avoidance Gradient

Choice avoidance demonstrates an even more visible gradient. In the low-saturation condition, 18% of simulated decision episodes terminate in avoidance. The proportion increases to 29% under moderate saturation, 43% under high saturation, and 61% under very-high saturation.

Graph 1: Simulated Choice-Avoidance Rate Across Levels of Digital Saturation



Interpretation: The graph illustrates a monotonic increase in avoidance as digital saturation intensifies. The increase becomes particularly pronounced between high and very-high saturation, where the modeled avoidance rate rises by 18 percentage points. This pattern is compatible with a threshold interpretation in which individuals initially compensate for growing digital demands but become increasingly likely to postpone or abandon decisions as cognitive and emotional demands accumulate.

Key Finding: Within the simulated framework, very-high digital saturation is associated with more than three times the choice-avoidance rate modeled under low saturation, indicating that the interaction between environmental complexity and psychological strain deserves direct empirical examination.

5.3 Simulated Mediation Pattern

The conceptual mediation analysis suggests that digital saturation retains a direct relationship with choice avoidance but that a substantial part of this relationship operates through anticipatory stress. The theoretical interpretation is straightforward. Digital saturation increases expected cognitive demand; expected demand increases stress before the decision begins; and elevated stress increases the attraction of low-effort behavioral alternatives such as postponement, default selection, delegation, or complete disengagement.

This pathway is consistent with previous findings that cognitive overload is related to anxiety and avoidance behavior and with broader evidence that stress can reduce decision quality under sufficiently demanding conditions. Nevertheless, the simulated model does not establish causal evidence. It identifies a plausible causal structure that should subsequently be tested using longitudinal or experimental observations.



6. Discussion

6.1 Anticipatory Stress as a Missing Link Between Digital Overload and Avoidance

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the identification of anticipatory stress as a potentially important bridge between environmental digital saturation and subsequent choice avoidance. Existing research has established relationships among information overload, anxiety, fatigue, stress, and various forms of disengagement, but these constructs are often examined after users have already encountered the demanding environment. The present model shifts attention to the period immediately preceding choice engagement. Repeated experiences of difficult digital decisions may teach users that certain interfaces, message queues, shopping environments, or notification streams are cognitively costly. Avoidance may consequently begin before alternatives are fully inspected.

This interpretation helps explain why individuals sometimes postpone relatively manageable decisions. The objective complexity of an individual decision may be modest, yet its subjective cost can be amplified by accumulated digital demands. A consumer choosing a simple household product after spending hours processing messages, recommendations, alerts, and competing information may approach the task differently from the same consumer under low-load conditions. The anticipated comparison effort becomes part of the decision itself.

6.2 Choice Avoidance as Resource Protection Rather Than Irrationality

Choice avoidance is frequently characterized as indecision or failure, but such terminology can obscure its short-term regulatory function. When attention, working memory, emotional energy, or time is perceived as insufficient, postponing a choice may protect scarce resources. The individual may close a shopping application, defer responding to an email, select a familiar default, or temporarily ignore new information. From a short-term self-regulatory perspective, these responses may be understandable.

The difficulty is that adaptive short-term avoidance can create cumulative long-term costs. Deferred decisions remain unresolved, unread messages accumulate, pending tasks become more urgent, and uncertainty persists. Information-avoidance research has emphasized precisely this tension: avoiding information may temporarily reduce emotional discomfort while potentially worsening uncertainty or future decision quality. Digitally saturated systems may therefore create a feedback loop in which overload increases avoidance, avoidance creates unresolved demands, and unresolved demands increase subsequent anticipatory stress.

The model also cautions against assuming that all users exposed to many choices will react identically. Choice-overload research demonstrates that preference clarity, expertise, option structure, decision difficulty, and motivational goals strongly moderate outcomes. Digital self-regulation, familiarity with recommendation systems, time availability, and confidence in one's preferences are therefore likely to reduce the association between saturation and avoidance.

6.3 Implications for Digital Platform Design and Digital Well-Being

The findings have implications for interface design because platforms frequently optimize engagement by increasing the visibility of alternatives, recommendations, alerts, reminders, and time-sensitive signals. Such features may improve discovery while simultaneously increasing perceived decision burden. A system designed for psychologically sustainable decision-making should therefore evaluate



not only whether information is relevant but also whether the quantity, sequencing, and timing of that information unnecessarily increase anticipatory stress.

Practical design responses may include better option categorization, progressive disclosure of information, interruption batching, meaningful default settings, transparent recommendation rationales, saved comparison states, and mechanisms that allow users to resume decisions without reconstructing earlier reasoning. The choice-overload literature supports the importance of structuring alternatives rather than merely reducing their number, because overload is strongly dependent on decision complexity and preference uncertainty.

Digital well-being programs should similarly move beyond generic screen-time limits. Screen duration does not reveal how many decisions were required, how many interruptions occurred, whether communication carried social or professional consequences, or whether the user experienced high uncertainty. An individual spending two uninterrupted hours reading may face less decision strain than another person spending thirty minutes switching repeatedly among messages, notifications, purchases, recommendations, and urgent work requests. The more relevant intervention target may therefore be decision density rather than exposure duration alone.

7. Conclusion

The present study proposes that anticipatory stress provides an important theoretical mechanism for understanding choice avoidance in digitally saturated environments. Contemporary digital systems expose individuals not merely to greater quantities of information but to continuous sequences of decisions, interruptions, recommendations, comparisons, and response expectations. Under such conditions, individuals may begin to experience stress before a specific choice is undertaken because previous interactions have taught them to expect substantial cognitive effort, uncertainty, or potential regret.

The simulation illustrates a coherent theoretical pattern in which increasing digital saturation corresponds with higher anticipatory stress and progressively greater choice avoidance. In the modeled scenario, avoidance rises from 18% in low-saturation conditions to 61% in very-high-saturation conditions. These values are synthetic and must not be interpreted as population estimates. Their purpose is to demonstrate the analytical implications of the proposed framework and to identify relationships that can be examined through future empirical research.

The theoretical implications extend beyond conventional interpretations of choice overload. Option quantity alone is insufficient to explain avoidance. Digital environments combine option abundance with interruption, urgency, social evaluation, algorithmic ranking, information density, and uncertainty regarding whether continued searching may reveal superior alternatives. The psychological effect therefore depends on how individuals evaluate the anticipated cost of engaging with the decision. This interpretation is compatible with contemporary choice-overload research emphasizing context, complexity, and preference uncertainty rather than treating assortment size as universally harmful.

Future empirical research should validate the model through experiments, longitudinal experience-sampling studies, passive digital-behavior measures, or field studies across workplace, consumer, educational, financial, and social-media environments. Researchers should specifically examine whether anticipatory stress predicts decision delay after controlling for actual option quantity



and whether protective factors such as preference clarity, digital literacy, self-regulation, interface simplicity, and interruption control weaken the relationship. Such work would permit digital well-being research to move from general concerns about excessive technology exposure toward a more precise understanding of how technology structures the psychological burden of everyday choice.

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