



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



The impact of social media content overload on EFL student's academic capabilities: consequences and solutions

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Abstract

Technological advancements have dramatically impacted the educational environment; in this context social media brings many educational benefits, but at the same time presents several challenges. One of these challenges is social media content overload; this, therefore, leads to the investigation on this issue to identify EFL students' opinions about this phenomenon and to know the consequences they experienced and solutions they use to reduce its impact. Data comes from 325 EFL students from Moulay Ismail University in Morocco who successfully completed an online questionnaire. The results from the study indicate that almost all EFL students suffer from social media content overload that exceeds their mental capacities. Also participants added that it is time consuming for them to analyze everything presented on social media. The results showed that EFL students experienced several consequences such as: mental fatigue, low productivity, stress and anxiety etc. These consequences, therefore, negatively impacted their academic achievements. In this regard, participants suggested some applicable strategies to mitigate the impact of content overload for instance: time management strategy, advance planning strategy, one platform use strategy and withdrawal strategy. All in all, the issue of content overload remains everlasting because social media platforms are evolving almost every month thanks to technological advancements and this will make this issue hard to vanish. Therefore, EFL students should accept the reality and take this issue seriously by sticking to strategies that can keep the impact at bay.

Keywords: Academic capabilities; Content overload; EFL students; Social media; Technological advancements

1. Introduction

Thanks to technological advancements, e-learning has grown swiftly via the use of different social media platforms such as: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Whatsapp etc. These platforms, as claimed by Jonassen et al [1], consolidate human communication between EFL separated students and help them to keep in touch and exchange ideas. However, the excessive adoption of social media platforms have unfolded the phenomenon of social media content overload (SMCO) to the point that EFL students find themselves drowning in the ocean of social media content such as: many pages, many group discussions, many emails and texts etc. This, therefore, influences EFL students' academic achievements; this is why the aim behind this manuscript is to explain and achieve a better understanding of this phenomenon, considering its causes to ensure the best practice solutions that endorse social media learning quality.

The phenomenon of social media content overload (SMCO) has been a topic of interest for many researchers and they were able to elucidate this problem in the field of education [2-3-4]. Shrivastav & Hiltz [5] mentioned that SMCO takes place when the content exceeds one's ability to process. On this view, Sadiku, Shadare & Musa [6] stated that EFL students nowadays live in the age of information overload (IO), this means that a huge amount of information can be received just with an easy click. This can be seen as a good thing because it allows EFL students to have knowledge

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about any topic and read about anything they desire, but the problem comes when the brain becomes overwhelmed by the velocity of information it has to manage. When EFL students have a lot of information that exceeds their capacities to handle, they start experiencing poor academic performance like the inability to make a strong judgment, losing concentration and losing desire to carry on learning.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Definition of Content Overload

Content overload (CO) is given many definitions by multiple authors. Fournier [7] explains CO as a state that comes as a result of plethora of information that goes beyond students' capacity. In this context, Chen et al [8] added that content overload is a point where learners' memory capacity is saturated; this means that students' brains have restricted working memory when it comes to receiving content [9]. Jensen et al [10] and Pokharel et al [11] defined CO as a condition in which students feel overwhelmed by the excessive amount of content offered and the condition is exacerbated when content comes from various social media platforms [12].

2.2. Three Common Dimensions of Content Overload

Bowker [13] stated that social media content overload has been a topic of interest of many scholars who argue that content overload can be divided into three common dimensions: information overload, communication overload and system feature overload. First, Whelan et al [14] elucidated that information overload takes place when the information on social media is given in an excessive and continuous manner to the point that students cannot handle the situation effectively. Second, Xu et al [15] explained that communication overload happens when students have many communication demands and platforms that exceed their abilities to manage; this, therefore, impedes their communication skills. Third, Thompson et al [16] mentioned that system feature overload occurs when features offered by social media platforms transcend students' demands.

2.3. Causes behind Content Overload

According to Renjith [17], electronic devices that have internet access are considered the main means to disseminate information such as tablets, mobile phones, laptops etc. In this context, social media remains the major cause behind content overload; the same information can be diffused frequently through different social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and many more. This, thus, raises the issue of social media fake news because authenticity is always questionable and unreliable. The following are the main reasons behind content overload: a- internet affordability, b- the exponential increase in social media channels, c - ease of new information production, d- ease of information replication and dissemination.

2.4. The Impact of Content Overload

Park [18] and Islam et al [19] stated that the immense utilization of social media channels paves the way to the creation of a huge amount of information that exceed students' capabilities to handle. This, as a result, generates a phenomenon called social media content overload. The latter has negatively influenced students' mental and psychological health; in this context, Adhikari & Panda [20] mentioned that content overload makes students stressed and knackered because they invest a great energy and cognitive power to handle the situation. In the same vein, Schmitt et al [21] added that the tremendous number of information on social media goes beyond students' cognitive limit. Therefore, students feel overloaded and overwhelmed when it comes to information evaluation and analysis. As reported by Swar et al [22], Karr-Wisniewski & Lu [23] and Goyanes et al [24], the excessive amount of information on social media creates disturbing behaviors and psychological issues such as: depression, productivity loss, anxiety, frustration, tiredness, control loss and anger etc.

2.5. Ways to overcome content overload

According to Kim et al [25], because of the ease of accessing social media platforms, students are liable to upload and spread both relevant and irrelevant content. On this view, Ahmadi et al [26] mentioned that students are in need of dependable and authentic content; therefore, some ways are suggested to mitigate social media content overload. Wang et al [27] stated that social media content overload can cause tiredness, stress and anxiety. Hence, some researchers such as: Van Erkel & Van Aelst [28], Tunney et al [29] and Plass & Kalyuga [30] argued that social media content avoidance can be the solution to overcome content overload. This means that students avoid content consumption when they feel overwhelmed with content. In this regard, Chae [31] added that students get rid of content to lessen cognitive burden and diminish uncomfortable emotional moods.

Another way to overcome social media content overload is social media content filtering. As suggested by Lee et al [32], students face a huge amount of content that comes from various social media platforms with different degrees of credibility. Therefore, students get the inclination to implement social media content filtering to reduce the cognitive burden and avoid unimportant and irrelevant content. This can be done through network-filters or algorithm filters.

Media literacy can be considered as another way to overcome content overload. Vesali et al [33] mentioned that the expansion of social media platforms increases the need for information and news; this gives the fact that media literacy should not be dismissed. Vraga & Tully [34] acknowledged that students, who are high in media literacy, are able to distinguish relevant content from irrelevant content and their critical thinking capacities help them to filter irrelevant, incredible and unreliable content. Also, students who are high in media literacy, as claimed by Ku et al [35], share social media content carefully with other students to avoid sharing fake content

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Problem Statement

The incorporation of social media has dramatically altered the face of education and has influenced the way how EFL students learn. In this regard, the use of social media for educational purposes brings many benefits, but at the same time presents new challenges. One of these challenges is social media content overload; EFL students are bombarded with many emails, many whatsapp group discussions, many educational Youtube channels etc. This, hence, negatively influences EFL students' academic capabilities and creates an obstacle to proceed in their educational endeavors.

3.2. Research Objectives

Based on the problem statement above, two objectives have been identified. In general, this manuscript is written with the aim of addressing the issue of social media content overload among EFL students at Moulay Ismail University in Morocco. The objectives are to:

- To determine the influence of social media content overload on EFL students' academic capabilities.
- To suggest some applicable strategies to process the flow of social media content overload.

3.3. Research Questions

This manuscript attempts to answer the following questions;

- Q1: What are the consequences of social media content overload on EFL students' academic performance?
- Q2: What are some realistic ways that can be implemented to mitigate the excessive influx of social media content?

3.4. Data Collection

This manuscript uses an online questionnaire as a research instrument to collect data. The online questionnaire targets students from Moulay Ismail University in the English department and it contains two parts: the first part includes quantitative questions and the second part includes qualitative questions.

3.5. Data Analysis

3.5.1. The Analysis of Quantitative Question

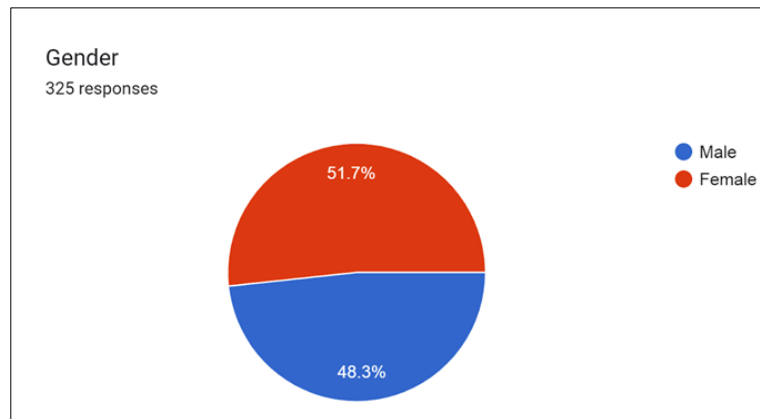


Figure 1 Participants by Gender

Figure 1 Shows that 325 EFL students from Moulay Ismail University successfully responded to the online questionnaire. 157 are males and 168 are females

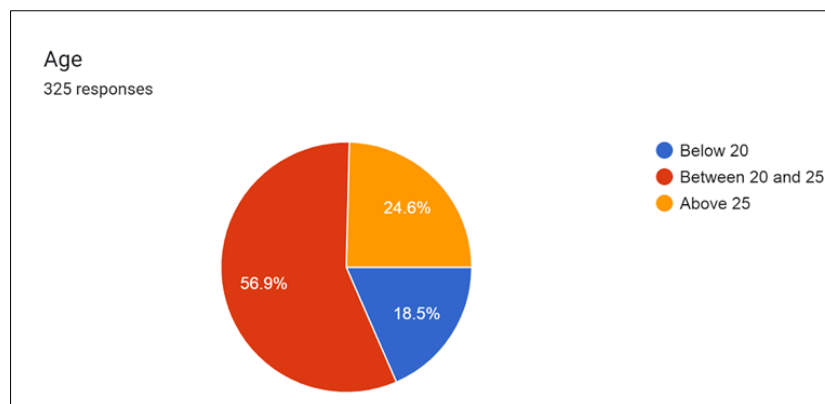


Figure 2 Participants by Age

Figure 2 Shows that participants' ages varied. 60 EFL students are below 20, 185 EFL students are aged between 20 and 25 and 80 EFL students are more than 25

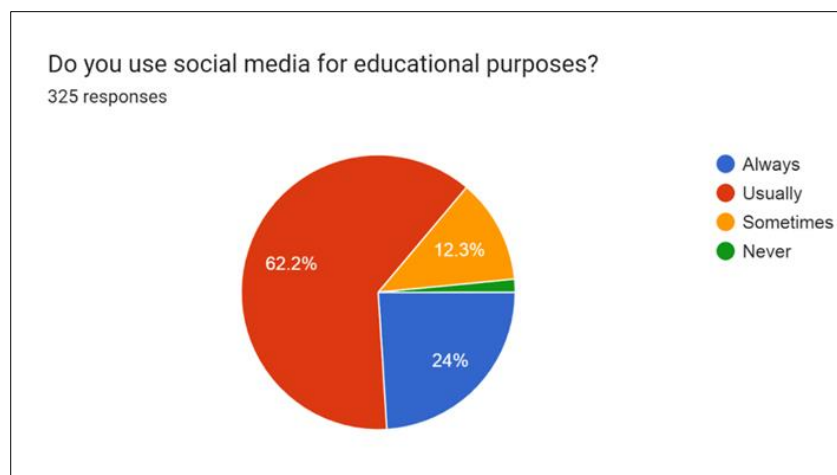


Figure 3 Participants' Use of Social Media in the Educational Sector

Figure 3 unravels that a high percentage of 62, 2 % that represents 202 EFL students usually use social media for educational purposes, 78 EFL students always use social media in the educational environment and 40 EFL students sometimes use it. There are only 5 EFL students who never use social media for educational purposes. Clearly, this tells that the majority of EFL students utilize social media platforms for learning. This, thus, can make them liable to face social media content overload.

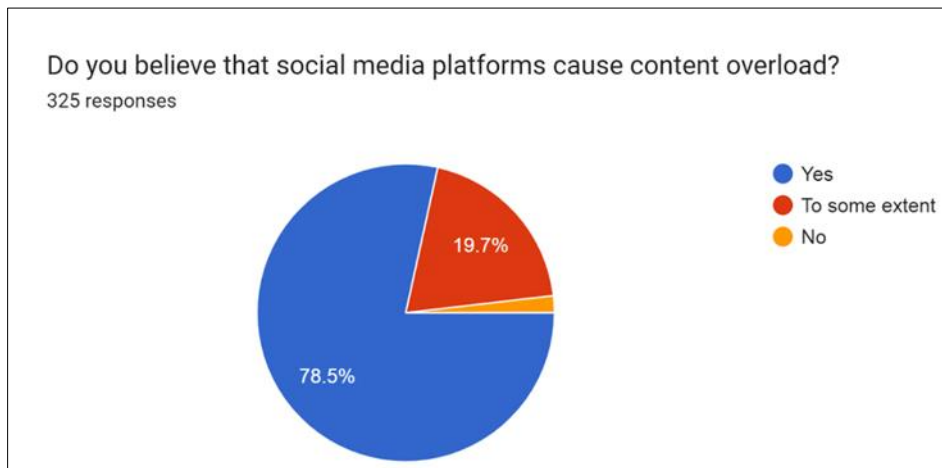


Figure 4 The Relationship between Social Media and Content Overload

Figure 4 exposes that a higher percentage of 87.5 % that includes 255 EFL students believe that social media is the main reason behind content overload and 64 EFL students see that social media can be to some extent the reason behind content overload. On the contrary, there are only 6 EFL students who do not see any relationship between social media and content overload. Lucidly, this tells that social media platforms are the main sources of content overload.

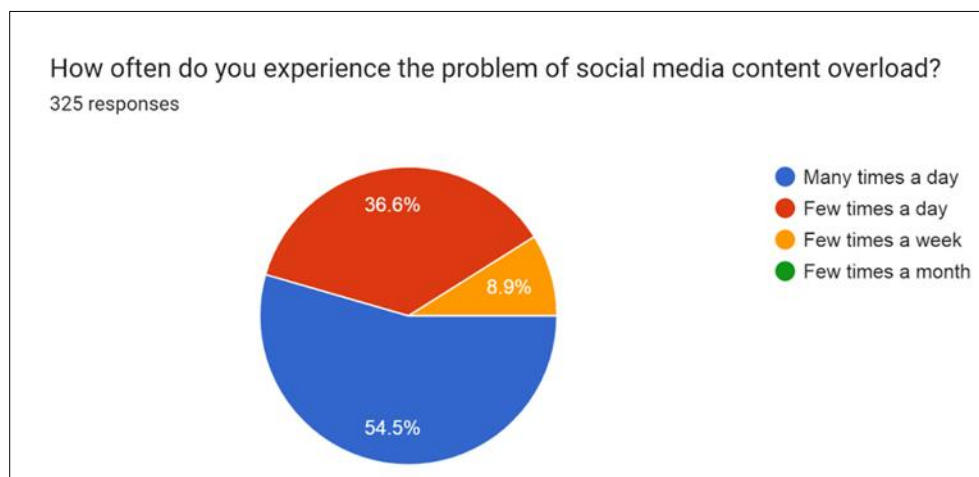


Figure 5 Participants' Experiences with Content Overload

Figure 5 shows that 177 EFL students experience content overload many times a day and 119 EFL students face content overload few times a day. There are only 29 EFL students who mentioned that they face content overload few times a week. Clearly, this suggests that all EFL students suffer from the issue of content overload with different rates.

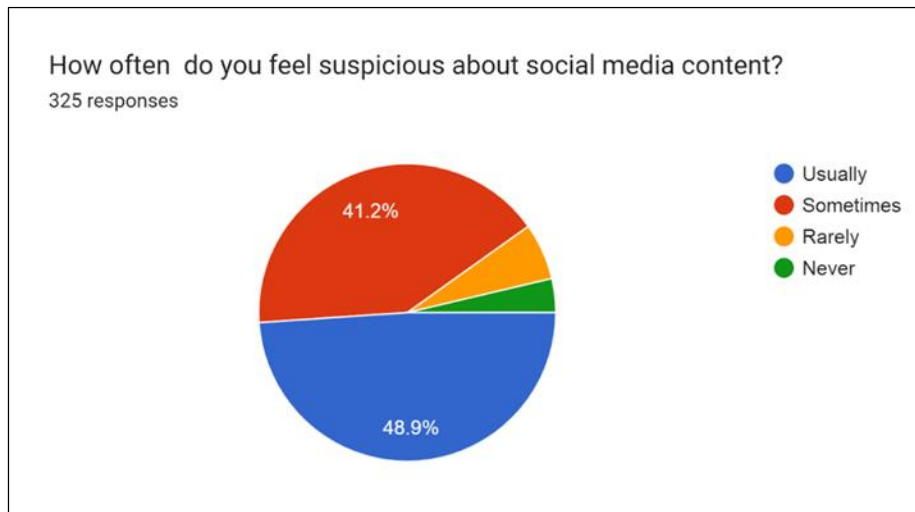


Figure 6 Participants' Suspicion towards Social Media Content

Figure 6 indicates that social media content's distrust levels differ by participants. 159 EFL students usually feel suspicious about the content and 134 EFL students sometimes feel suspicious; whereas, there are only 20 EFL students who rarely go doubtful about social media content and 12 EFL students who never. All in all, this figure shows that most EFL students do not trust social media content blindly and any content is subject to suspicion.

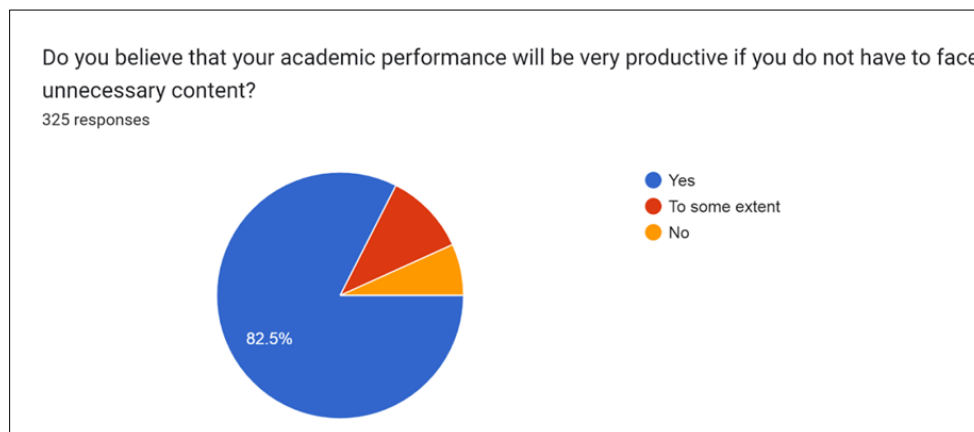


Figure 7 The Relationship between Participants' Academic Performance and Content Overload

Figure 7 shows that a higher percentage of 82.5% that represents 268 EFL students stated that their academic performance is influenced by the unnecessary social media content and 35 EFL students who mentioned that content overload partly impacts their academic performance. There are only 22 EFL students who believe that content overload has nothing to do with their academic performance. Clearly, this stipulates that content overload can negatively influence EFL students' scholastic performance.

3.5.2. The Analysis of Qualitative Questions

The rest of the online questionnaire was qualitative questions in which students were asked about consequences they experienced as a result of social media content overload and strategies they implemented to mitigate its impact. The results are as shown below:

All participants reacted negatively to the issue of social media content overload as they expressed their worries about the consequences they experienced. In this context, participants mentioned several effects that come as a result of social media content overload. The following are the most common consequences repeated by respondents:

- Low productivity: the majority of EFL students acknowledged that the excessive amount of content on social media lessens their productivity because they get distracted easily. This means that they find themselves

distracted by doing other activities while learning online such as: answering unread emails, sending messages to other students, scrolling through different social media pages to check the updates etc. Therefore, EFL students mentioned that social media content overload makes them unable to spend some good quality time doing useful activities.

- Mental fatigue: almost all EFL students stated that when they face social media content overload, mental fatigue is unavoidably followed; that is to say EFL students, via social media, have to keep up with the tremendous amount of content they have to consume. This, therefore, overwhelms the brain and causes mental exhaustion.
- Soft skills impairment: most EFL students mentioned that social media content overload exacerbates their soft skills including critical thinking, decision-making and creativity. This means that instead of using their soft skills to create opportunities to be productive, their brains are blocked somewhere due to the large amount of content that blurs the line between reliable content and unreliable content. This, thus, makes them unconfident of where to pay their attention and unable to think critically and make any wise decisions. Also, participants expressed that content overload kills their creativity because they feel saturated and there is no room in their heads left for new insights.
- Few participants added other consequences such as: depression, anxiety, stress and loss of control.

The participants also mentioned some applicable strategies that can help in reducing the impact of social media content overload. The following are the most common strategies repeated by respondents:

- Advance planning strategy: some participants acknowledged that this strategy works well with them; this points that they think in advance about the kind of content they are interested in and aspire to seek. This, therefore, helps them to determine the kind of information and ideas they want to gather and make a summary of them.
- Time management strategy: the majority of participants admitted that they use this strategy; they stated that social media content overload distracts them and discourages them to carry on learning due to the number of activities they have to get done in a timely manner. As a result, most EFL students implement a time management strategy because it helps them to organize their time and gain control over their learning velocity as they avoid feeling overloaded.
- Withdrawal strategy: the majority of participants added that the withdrawal strategy can be as helpful as time management strategy. In this regard, EFL students, via social media, have many things to do such as: responding to emails, collaborating in projects, completing tasks, watching educational YouTube videos etc. Therefore, EFL students become choosy and selective about the content; this helps to avoid unnecessary content and allocate time for things that bring benefits and add value.
- One platform use strategy: few participants confessed that they avoid the multiple uses of social media platforms and they concentrate only on one platform. This, hence, can help to reduce the excessive flow of content.

4. Result

The study found that:

- The majority of participants admitted that they utilize social media platforms as educational tools; this, therefore, makes social media to be considered as the main reason behind content overload.
- Most participants showed that social media content overload is an unavoidable issue that they face almost every day. Also, they showed a strong distrust towards social media content and any content for them is subject to suspicion.
- All participants acknowledged that content overload negatively impacted their academic capabilities and performance due to myriad consequences that come as a result of content overload such as: mental fatigue, low productivity, soft skills impairment, stress and many more.
- Participants suggested different strategies that can help in mitigating the impact of social media content overload for instance: time management strategy, advance planning strategy, withdrawal strategy and one platform use strategy.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study plainly demonstrated that content overload is a serious and indispensable issue that follows almost every EFL student. In this regard, technological advancements make all EFL students overloaded with both relevant and irrelevant content and when it comes to the content explosion, social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp, YouTube etc remain at the top. Participants of this study confessed that they consume almost every day a large amount of content that exceeds their mental capabilities. This, therefore, paves the way to hazardous consequences like stress, mental exhaustion, poor decision-making ability etc. Also, participants added that they do not have enough time to analyze everything on social media and to distinguish between useful and relevant content and irrelevant content. Hence, this can negatively impact their academic performance and achievements; this is why EFL students implement some strategies that can at least lower the influence such as: being choosy and selective about the content, focusing only on one social media platform and organizing time.

The outcomes of this study met my expectations as a researcher and social media user at the same time. We cannot deny the fact that technology in general and social media in particular have enormously changed the face of education. Therefore, social media brings many benefits to the educational environment, but at the same time presents many challenges. One of these challenges is social media content overload because content nowadays has become like an ocean which can be created and propagated easily via the use of social media channels like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook etc. The majority of EFL students feel happy about how easy they can receive information and most of them even confess the existence of content overload, but few realize how dangerous this issue can be on their scholastic achievements.

I do believe that social media content overload kills EFL students' serenity and peace of mind because the excessive amount of content creates lack of concentration and confusion in consuming facts. Also, EFL students will waste much time analyzing almost everything presented in social media; this paves the way to low and poor productivity and causes stress and anxiety. Clearly, since social media platforms are exponentially increasing, content overload will never vanish, but EFL students must take this issue into consideration and find their own ways to at least lessen the impact of this phenomenon.

The generalizability of this study is limited by the number of participants because the focus was on EFL students at Moulay Ismail University in Morocco. This means that the findings of this study are only based on EFL students' perceptions and experiences. This limitation, therefore, makes it hard to fully determine how far social media content overload influences students' academic capabilities and achievements. Also, this limitation makes it difficult to cover all possible strategies to reduce the impact of this phenomenon. This is why further research is needed to establish a tangible connection between social media content overload and students' academic performance and achievements in which future studies should take into account other departments and universities to have a clear and full picture about the issue of social media content overload.

6. Conclusion

Social media content overload remains an irrevocable issue and a sad reality that every EFL student must accept and face because we live in an evolving society and technological advancements will make this issue hard to disappear. The findings of this study clearly stipulates that EFL students are always at the risk of suffering from the huge amount of social media content that exceeds their mental capacity to process. As a result, EFL students are vulnerable to experiencing different consequences like frustration, stress, poor productivity etc; this is why finding ways to minimize the impact is highly needed. Therefore, this study can have a great contribution in understanding the issue of social media content overload, its consequences and suggesting some solutions that can be used to diminish the impact on EFL students' academic capabilities and achievements.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Statement of informed consent

The study does not involve any information about participants. All participants were completely volunteers and responding to the online questionnaire was optional.

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