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Digital fatigue: are librarians at universities in Zimbabwe spared?

Blessing Chiparausha

Bindura University of Science Education, bchiparausha@gmail.com

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Digital fatigue: are librarians at universities in Zimbabwe spared?

Blessing Chiparausha

Abstract

Librarians' work has increasingly become dominantly computer-based because of provision of library and information services online following the outbreak of COVID-19. This increased use of digital technologies is often associated with digital fatigue. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to establish the level awareness about digital fatigue, symptoms of digital fatigue displayed by academic librarians and how they managed the fatigue as they offered services to patrons. Twenty-five (25) academic librarians at universities in Zimbabwe participated in online interviews for the study. Key findings show that academic librarians in Zimbabwe suffered digital fatigue but were not fully aware of it. The study recommends that academic librarians should pay attention to the time they spend using digital technologies so that it does not have negative effects on their health and wellness.

Keywords

Digital fatigue, digital burnout, academic librarians, mental exhaustion, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019 and the subsequent proclamation of national and regional lockdowns led to decreased physical contact between individuals as nations grappled to contain the disease. This has led to increased usage of the internet as most people work from home with statistics revealing an increased use of time on spent on digital activities globally (Sharma, Anand, N., Ahuja, Thakur, Mondal, Singh, & Venkateshan, 2020). Service delivery, even in the education sector, have had to shift the way they conduct business in order to remain aloft in this new normal (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Mheidly, Fares and Fares, 2020). Service providers who previously had physical contact with customers had to find alternative means of delivering service and where possible, physical contact was completely. For employees, working from home and teleworking were voluntary but since the outbreak of COVID-19, this has become mandatory to many employees (Carvalho, Santos, Ribeiro & Chambel, 2021). Following the outbreak of COVID-19, educational institutions had to close down and adopted online technologies to reach out to their students; the shift was associated with both excitement of the new experiences and fears that some things would not work out as expected (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Sharma *et al.* (2020:171) report that there has been a remarkable rise in the use of digital platforms for offer video-conferencing, social interaction and entertainment leading "*more people to spend nearly all waking hours online during COVID-19 lockdown.*" Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020) also report that there was record increase in enrolments for massive online open courses (MOOCs) during the lockdown period.

There was an abrupt suspension of face to face teaching and learning following the outbreak of COVID-19 and sudden substitution of this traditional mode of education to

electronic learning (e-learning). In the past, e-learning was not a substitute for face to face learning but rather a mechanism to “*facilitate the continuity of teaching and learning*” (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020: ii). Online platforms such as Skype, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, FaceTime, GoToMeeting and Webex became popular as they facilitated online classes, meetings, conferences and telemarketing (Lieux, Sabottke, Schachner, Pirtle, Danrad & Spieler, 2021; Bui, Luong, Nguyen, Nguyen & Ngo, 2020; Mheidly, Fares and Fares, 2020). The switch from face to face education emergency remote learning was done expeditiously with most educational institutions adopting remote teaching and attempting to replicating all feature of face to face, a move described by Bozkurt & Sharma, (2020: ii) as a “*chief educational error*” and “*metaphorically an educational sin*” because there is no way the online environment can be unequivocally imitate the face to face environment. For instance, Sharma *et al.* (2020:171) argue that:

online meetings require more attention in comparison to face-to-face meetings as one needs to be attentive and focused throughout the meeting for verbal and non-verbal components from all individuals participating at the meeting.

To some extent, it is therefore ill-advised to simply instruct employees to expect switch from routine physical or face to face work practices to the online environment and expect the same performance and work output from them.

Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020) report that there was rise in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as more people spent more time facing screens, tablets, and smart phones following the COVID-19 and subsequent imposition of lockdowns worldwide. However, excessive use of ICT gadgets may negatively affect an individual's health and wellnesses. Sharma, Anand, Roopesh and Sunil (2021) cite over-use of social media, online gambling, webinar fatigue, digital burnout, doom surfing, and doom scrolling, cyber bullying among some of the problematic digital behaviours associated with excessive use of online technologies. It would, therefore, be not surprising that there could be a correlation between the increased use of online platforms due to COVID-19 limitations and digital fatigue.

The definition of fatigue varies in the literature and there is terminological difficulty in defining the term. While a variety of definitions have been suggested, this paper will use the definition proposed by Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020). The term is also regarded as synonymous with burnout, a term that is described by Sharma *et al.* (2020:171) as “*an occupational phenomenon rather than as a medical condition*”. Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020:2) describe burnout as,

a mental health state that results from work-related distress, involving a continuous reaction to persistent interpersonal stressors.

The authors attribute burnout to “*overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment*” associated with the use of ICT gadgets (Mheidly, Fares and Fares, 2020:2).

Rudroff, Fietsam, Deters, Bryant & Kamholz (2020) acknowledge that fatigue can be caused by multiple factors that include:

change in neurotransmitter levels, inflammation, psychological disorders, stress levels, cognitive dysfunction, and substrate metabolism/availability.

Digital fatigue is defined as *“the physical discomfort that is experienced after prolonged exposure to a digital screen such as a laptop, computer, mobile phone, e-reader or tablet.”* (Empire Retina Consultants, 2016). Lixar (2021) describes digital fatigue as,

the state of mental exhaustion brought on by the excessive and concurrent use of multiple digital tools, such as apps and screens.

Digital fatigue is becoming a global concern, for instance, Empire Retina Consultants (2016) estimate that 65 percent of Americans report symptoms of digital eye fatigue.

With people spend more time online, digital stress is on the rise as they try to cope with information overload and internet multitasking (Sharma *et al.*, 2020). Individuals are receiving loads of news and information some of which is fake as well. There is need for the individuals to sift through this information in order to ascertain its authenticity and usefulness in their own lives. At the same time, an individual is expected to multitask as they also use the internet for work, social networking, etc. This has been stressful to individuals leading to *“negative psychological outcomes such as lack of satisfaction, decrease in productivity, exhaustion, and burn out.”* (Sharma *et al.*, 2020:171).

A study by Sharma *et al.* (2020) suggests that digital fatigue or burnout manifest in three dimensions related to work namely, exhaustion; negativism or cynicism, and reduced efficacy. The same study attributes burnout to increased use of smartphones, laptops and tablets which has been even more compulsive during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020:1) equally agree and point out that excessive use telecommunication facilities *“lead to increased levels of stress and burnout as a result of increased on-screen time.”*

Some eye problems are associated with computer use (Al-Abdullatif & Gameil, 2020) because continuously staring at digital screens can strain the eyes and cause headaches (Rossa, Pechenkinab, Aeschlimanb & Chase, 2017). Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020) also point out that psychological, cognitive and musculoskeletal impairments are some of the signs of digital burnout. The authors reiterate that digital fatigue is often associated with disturbed sleep cycles, increased depressive symptoms, neck pain, changes in eating habits, increased intake of tobacco and alcohol and difficulties in concentrating (Mheidly, Fares & Fares, 2020). Empire Retina Consultants (2016), Halupa & Bolliger (2020) concur as they list headaches, stiff shoulders, eyestrain, sore or irritated eyes, dry or watery eyes, blurred or double vision, sensitivity to light, pain in the neck, shoulders and back, difficulty sleeping, depression, decreased productivity, dissatisfaction with work and anxiety among the most prevalent indicators.

As Sharma, Anand, Roopesh and Sunil (2021) suggest, there is need for individuals affected by digital fatigue and associated challenges to develop digital resilience as a mechanism for overcoming the problem. Individuals are expected to introspect and take bold decisions to walk away from the dilemmas of excessive use the internet. Just like overcoming addictive tendencies, the process may be difficult to achieve.

In order reduce risks associated with continued use of digital gadgets such as eye fatigue, Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020), Al-Abdullatif & Gameil (2020) recommend that individuals should make sure that they maintain recommended session lengths, appropriate distance from the screen and properly aligning eyes with the computer

screen. Sharma *et al.* (2020:172) make reference to “*digital hygiene*”, a concept whereby individuals should exercise good practice by,

taking frequent breaks from the screen use, structured hours for online office work, demarcated time for online leisure activities, engagement in indoor physical activities, secure time spent for offline communication with family members, stopping use of digital devices and use of online activities one hour before sleep time, and avoiding caffeine use to delay sleep time ...

Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020:5) recommend that wellness campaigns aimed at increasing awareness on the “physical and emotional consequences of increased online time” would be useful in addressing the dilemma. The authors also suggest that podcast-based communication and learning should substitute online visual encounters that are strenuous to the eyes. Podcasts, instead, substitute eyes for ears thereby easing the strain and stress associated with continued visual “*fixation on screens and tablets*”. In addition, Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020:5) recommend “*cutting down on unhealthy habits that further increase stress levels, such as smoking and caffeine intake.*” The authors observe that “*cutting down on these bad habits can decrease their additive effect on online-associated stress and burnout.*” In addition, Empire Retina Consultants (2016) encourage individuals to use proper lighting, minimize glare, use appropriate, or adjust display settings of digital screens, blink more often and exercise their eyes more often as some of the effective tips for reducing visual digital fatigue.

Loos (2017:37) provides tips that individual can consider to avoid disproportionate use of digital gadgets and in turn avoid digital fatigue; the author advises individuals to:

- Be mindful of the number of times they go online;
- Avoid going online unnecessarily;
- Set aside time to be completely offline (digital fast);
- Limit multitasking when online;
- Spend time in nature so that free time is not spent online;
- Have face-to-face conversations and avoid using the virtual platforms whenever possible;
- Turn devices off one hour before bed; and,
- Get enough sleep each night.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to determine whether academic librarians at universities in Zimbabwe were experiencing digital fatigue following the increased usage of ICT gadgets necessitated by the outbreak of COVID-19. The specific objectives of the study were to answer the following research questions:

- i. What is the level of digital fatigue awareness among librarians at universities in Zimbabwe?
- ii. What symptoms of digital fatigue have librarians at universities in Zimbabwe encountered?
- iii. How are librarians at universities in Zimbabwe managing digital fatigue?

Methods and materials

The study adopted a qualitative approach in which online interviews were used to gather data from the participants. Twenty-five (25) academic librarians at universities in Zimbabwe participated in the online interviews. The researcher conducted a literature review on digital fatigue and the literature review was used to develop the interview guide. The participants were anonymized in order to protect their identities; the 25 participants were therefore randomly coded Participant A to Participant Y.

The researcher had to use online interviews in order to mitigate against the COVID-19 risks associated with conducting face to face interviews as this would expose both the researcher and the participants. Besides, the interviews were conducted when face to face meetings and intercity travel had been suspended as part of the health measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. The interview questions were open-ended; emerging themes were generated from interviewees' responses during data analysis. The participants were asked to provide their understanding of digital fatigue and its relationship with increased use of ICT gadgets following the outbreak of COVID-19. The participants were further asked to explain how they were managing the fatigue as individuals and how they possibly assisted their colleagues facing similar challenges.

Results

Level of digital fatigue awareness among librarians at universities in Zimbabwe

Participants expressed good knowledge of digital fatigue as they managed to define the term and also outline some of the causes and symptoms of digital burnout. As examples, some participants aptly defined digital fatigue as follows:

Participant B: *"The physical discomfort that is experienced after prolonged exposure to a digital screen such as a laptop, computer."*

Participant E: *"It is burnout caused by continued use of digital gadgets such as computers and smart phones."*

Participant H: *"... discomfort that one experiences after the exposure to laptops, cellphones, computers, or tablet."*

Participant J: *"It refers to a discomfort experienced when one has used digital technology for a long time. This includes computer screen or mobile phone."*

Participant L: *"Getting tired physically and mentally due to the continuous use of digital devices such as cell phones, laptops and television."*

Participant T: *"Unpleasant feeling/behavior as a result of continuously using digital gadgets."*

Participants A, Q, and I, respectively, provided explanations of some of the causes of digital burnout as *"excessive use of ICT gadgets that will result in drowsiness"*, *"burnout or reaching your limit in using digital technologies"* and *"eye discomfort experienced after using a computer or cellphone for a long time."* Participants A, D and J ably pointed out that drowsiness, tiredness and discomfort were some of the symptoms of digital burnout respectively.

Perceived causes digital fatigue amongst academic librarians in Zimbabwe

Academic librarians interviewed were in agreement that digital fatigue is caused by spending excessive time using digital gadgets. Participant A pointed out that “*straining of the mind due to researches and reading*” led to digital fatigue, Participant D agreed with Participants L and M that spending too much time on gadgets significantly contributed to digital fatigue. In agreement, Participant T said,

Almost all the library work [is] now done on computers or smart phones ... Participation on social media [for] personal and work-related activities ... [went up and there was] ... increased attendance of webinars.

Participant E reiterated that “*excessive use of digital gadgets without taking breaks*” exacerbated the problem. According Participant F, digital fatigue was further exacerbated by “*addiction to social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube.*” Participant F highlighted that some academic librarians in Zimbabwe were so obsessed to an extent of spending too much time on social media. Participants also attributed digital fatigue to the increased time academic librarians spent online assisting library patrons following the outbreak of COVID-19. COVID-19 led to a surge in the use of online platforms following the reduced physical contact time between librarians and their patrons. The participants also highlighted that nonadherence to ergonomics significantly contributed to digital fatigue among academic librarians in Zimbabwe. For instance, Participant E reported that, “*poor lighting on the gadgets ... [and] ... poor sitting posture when using gadgets*” led to digital fatigue. Participant H equally agreed and said, “*Bright light from computers, phones and laptops uncomfortable chairs too much typing too much reading.*”

Symptoms of digital fatigue experienced by librarians

As indicated earlier, academic librarians interviewed expressed awareness of the symptoms of digital fatigue. Behavioural patterns, disinterest in ICT and inability to cope with work were cited as some of the symptomatic pointers of digital fatigue among academic librarians in Zimbabwe. Participant C acknowledged observing some academic librarians expressing “*inertia towards use of ICT technologies.*” Participants also noted that behavioural anomalies such as distorted sleeping cycles, lack of concentration leading to making too many typing errors, failure to attend some online meetings such as webinars, failure to respond or even open some e-mails and inability to meet task deadlines were some of the easily identifiable symptoms of digital fatigue.

The interviewees indicated that digital fatigue could be determined by physically assessment; to this end, the participants pointed out that digital fatigue among academic librarians could be confirmed by strained eyes, sleepy eyes, watery, dry eyes, blurred vision or other related eye sight problems. Similarly, back aches and neck problems were also cited among the postural problems associated with digital fatigue.

Digital fatigue experiences encountered

Academic librarians interviewed confirmed experiencing digital fatigue in many instances. The fatigue was attributed to spending excessive time on digital gadgets doing studies, and serving patrons. Participants confirmed experiencing physical and mental emotional

exhaustion. Prolonged use of computers especially in cases when the academic librarians had to assist patrons in literature searches, providing information literacy skills training and providing research support services online led to tiredness, sore and watery eyes, back aches and discomfort whenever one was using digital gadgets. The fatigue was further worsened by torturous experiences academic librarians went through which, Participant F described as,

... continuous exposure to COVID-19 information on social media ... some of which is fake information can cause digital fatigue.

Participants also felt that working from home disregarded the normal working shift and this led to what Participant B described as *“prolonged service delivery.”* In agreement, Participant H bemoaned that library patrons’ requests overwhelmed library staff to an extent that *“the clients are not giving you a break.”*

How librarians at universities in Zimbabwe are managing digital fatigue

Despite being a problematic issue, academic librarians in Zimbabwe expressed preparedness and commitment to managing digital fatigue. Participants provided some solutions such as taking breaks from using technology, avoiding using too many applications simultaneously, scheduling online activities, conducting physical meetings instead of virtual meetings and selecting what to attend to online as some of the strategies to manage digital fatigue.

Participants proffered various solutions for preventing digital fatigue. Interviewees were in concurrence that excessive use of ICT gadgets should be avoided, librarians should take turns to attend to duties that require use of ICT gadgets and taking breaks to refresh was important, training and raising awareness on the about digital fatigue is important. In addition, Participant T reiterated that, *“ergonomics at the work place should be taken seriously”* and this was further elaborated by Participant F who suggested that, *“staff need to be provided with computers that do not strain eyes and their fingers as they type.”*

Discussion

It is evident from the responses from participants that academic librarians in Zimbabwe are aware of what digital fatigue is. The participants appropriately defined what digital fatigue is and also managed to show that terms ‘digital fatigue’ and ‘digital burnout’ are synonymous as Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020) suggest. Definitions and descriptions of digital fatigue provided by Lixar (2021), Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020), Sharma *et al.* (2020), Rudroff *et al.* (2020) and Empire Retina Consultants (2016) were correspondingly made reference to during the interviews conducted. This infers that academic librarians in Zimbabwe have good knowledge of digital fatigue.

Additionally, academic librarians interviewed competently managed to give explanations of the causes of digital fatigue. Findings from this study concur with Lixar (2021), Al-Abdullatif & Gameil (2020) Sharma *et al.* (2020) and Empire Retina Consultants (2016) that digital fatigue is mostly caused by factors such as spending excessive time using digital gadgets and failing to take breaks without taking breaks when using the gadgets. These two causes are further by addiction to social media platforms and increased time academic librarians spent online assisting library patrons following the outbreak of

COVID-19 because patrons are no longer easily accessible in person, a factor cited by Sharma *et al.* (2020) and Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020), Sharma, Anand, Roopesh and Sunil (2021). Nonadherence to ergonomics, a factor cited by Al-Abdullatif & Gameil (2020) and Empire Retina Consultants (2016) also relatively contributed to digital fatigue among academic librarians in Zimbabwe. The outbreak of COVID-19 has, therefore, inadvertently influenced library operations and the wellbeing of academic librarians.

The study findings buttress earlier reports by Empire Retina Consultants (2016), Halupa & Bolliger (2020), Mheidly, Fares & Fares (2020) that behavioural patterns, disinterest in ICT and inability to cope with work are symptoms of digital fatigue. In addition, the results of the study also confirmed that eye and postural problems are associated with digital fatigue as earlier reported by Empire Retina Consultants (2016) and in a later study by Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020). However, none of the participants interviewed made reference to other behavioural tendencies such as increased smoking, alcohol and drug abuse mentioned by Mheidly, Fares & Fares (2020). among the symptoms of digital fatigue. This could be so probably because fewer academic librarians in the country consume alcohol and other similar substances.

The study findings denote a proactive approach to digital fatigue prevention and management by academic librarians in Zimbabwe. Solutions proffered from previous studies by Mheidly, Fares and Fares (2020) and Loos (2017) were also mentioned by study participants. The solutions include, taking health breaks from using technology, avoiding using too many applications at the same time, scheduling online activities, and conducting physical meetings. Adhering to ergonomics recommended by Al-Abdullatif & Gameil (2020) and Empire Retina Consultants (2016) was also reaffirmed in this study.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study findings confirm that academic librarians in Zimbabwe are not spared from digital fatigue. It evident from the findings that academic librarians in Zimbabwe are aware of what digital fatigue is and are taking precautionary measures to manage it. Findings from the study suggest that the outbreak of COVID-19, to some extent, exacerbated already existing problems relating to digital burnout among academic librarians in Zimbabwe.

Behavioural patterns mostly disinterest in ICT and inability to cope with work alongside physical indicators such as eye and postural problems were cited as the key symptoms of digital fatigue among academic librarians in Zimbabwe. Substance abuse, such as increased smoking, alcohol and drug intake were not associated digital fatigue among academic librarians in Zimbabwe. The participants recommended good digital practices and appropriate ergonomics as measures to alleviate digital fatigue challenges. The study recommends development of standard operating procedures as a yardstick to guide academic librarians on the use of digital gadgets. Self-discipline and routine health checkups are also recommended so that digital fatigue is nipped in the bud.

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