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Information Overload and Attention Crisis Among Administrative, Technical, and Service Personnel at Cheikh Anta Diop University: A Descriptive Analysis

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Abstract

In Senegalese public universities, particularly Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) in Dakar, administrative, technical, and service personnel (PATS) face intensified information flows, leading to information overload and an attention crisis. This study, based on a questionnaire administered to 450 PATS with a 72% response rate ($N = 325$), examines perceptions and management of these flows. Results indicate that over 60% of respondents receive more than 10 messages weekly, with 41% reporting frequent overload. Division heads (66%) and experienced agents face higher exposure. Drawing on psychodynamic theories (Dejours, 2009; Clot, 2010), sociological perspectives (Lipovetsky, 2005), and communication theories (Méadel, 2013; Stiegler, 2010), the study frames these challenges as an institutional attention crisis. The UCAD Strategic Plan (2019–2023) aims to modernize governance through ICT, yet inadequate training and infrastructure exacerbate overload. Recommendations include prioritizing clarity, reducing redundancies, and implementing AI-assisted tools to streamline communication.

Keywords: information overload, attention crisis, university organization, digitalization

Introduction

Public organizations worldwide, particularly in higher education, are navigating the complexities of digital transformation. At Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD), Senegal's largest public university with over 80,000 students and a significant administrative workforce, the administrative, technical, and service personnel (PATS) are at the forefront of managing intensified information flows. These flows include emails, service notes, directives, and meeting schedules, driven by digitalization and increasing administrative demands. However, the lack of adequate resources, training, and infrastructure often results in information overload, defined as an excess of information surpassing cognitive processing capacities (Eppler & Mengis, 2004). This overload contributes to an attention crisis, where the ability to focus on critical tasks is compromised (Stiegler, 2010; Citton, 2017).

The UCAD Strategic Plan (2019–2023) emphasizes digital tools to enhance governance, pedagogical quality, and

research output. Key initiatives include integrating information and communication technologies (ICT) for management, promoting international collaboration, and improving administrative efficiency. However, these reforms have inadvertently increased the volume and complexity of information flows, particularly for PATS, who serve as the operational backbone of the university. Without clear protocols or sufficient training, digital systems often generate redundant or fragmented communication, exacerbating overload.

This study descriptively analyzes the perception and management of information flows among UCAD's PATS, drawing on a questionnaire distributed to 450 agents (72% response rate, N = 325). It explores the interplay between institutional ambitions and operational realities, highlighting contradictions in UCAD's digitalization efforts. By integrating psychodynamic, sociological, and communication theories, the study frames these challenges as an institutional attention crisis, offering insights into the broader implications for African higher education.

Literature Review

Psychodynamics of Work and Suffering Christophe Dejours '(2009) psychodynamic theory of work posits that workplace suffering arises from contradictory injunctions, where workers face competing demands without avenues for resolution. At UCAD, PATS are tasked with processing high volumes of administrative communication while adhering to rigid bureaucratic protocols, often without adequate tools or training. This creates a state of cognitive and emotional exhaustion, as workers develop adaptive strategies to cope with overload but lack institutional support to address underlying issues. Yves Clot (2010) further argues that the absence of collective spaces for debating "real" versus "prescribed" work aggravates psychosocial risks.

For UCAD's PATS, ad-hoc task assignments—such as responding to urgent emails or reconciling paper-based and digital records—create a disconnect between institutional expectations and daily realities. This misalignment contributes to burnout and reduced job satisfaction, as workers struggle to prioritize tasks in an environment of information saturation.

Sociological Perspectives on Hypermodernity Gilles Lipovetsky's (2005) concept of hypermodernity critiques the information-saturated nature of contemporary societies, where excessive communication dilutes meaning and erodes trust. At UCAD, the proliferation of circulars, service notes, and emails mirrors this trend, as PATS report receiving repetitive or unclear directives. This fragmentation undermines

organizational cohesion and fosters a sense of disorientation, as workers struggle to discern critical information from noise.

Communication and Overflowing Devices Cécile Méadel (2013) and Michel Callon (1998) describe communication tools as "overflowing devices" that generate inefficiencies when poorly implemented. At UCAD, the coexistence of paper-based and digital systems creates redundancies, as PATS navigate overlapping workflows.

For instance, directives issued via email may duplicate physical memos, requiring additional time to reconcile. This inefficiency is compounded by uneven ICT adoption across UCAD's faculties, where outdated infrastructure limits access to digital tools for some workers. Attention Crisis in a Digital Age Bernard Stiegler's (2010) concept of a civilizational attention crisis highlights how digital capitalism fragments attention, reducing productivity and well-being.

In the context of UCAD, PATS are bombarded with notifications and tasks, diverting focus from strategic priorities. Yves Citton's (2017) ecology of attention further emphasizes the need for intentional resource allocation to preserve cognitive focus. The constant demand to process information in real-time leaves little room for reflective decision-making, a critical issue for administrative efficiency.

African Contexts and Digital Inequalities Francis Nyamnjoh (2016) argues that imported digital systems often exacerbate inequalities in African contexts, as they are implemented without sufficient cultural or structural adaptation. At UCAD, uneven access to reliable internet, outdated hardware, and limited ICT training disproportionately affect lower-level PATS, who may lack the skills to navigate digital platforms.

This creates a digital divide within the workforce, where division heads with better access to resources face overload due to higher responsibility, while subordinates struggle with basic access. Synthesis The literature underscores a multifaceted crisis at UCAD, where psychodynamic, sociological, and technological factors converge to create information overload and an attention crisis. These theories provide a framework for analyzing the empirical data, highlighting the need for institutional reforms that address both structural and human dimensions of the problem.

Method

The study targeted 450 PATS at UCAD, with 325 respondents completing the questionnaire (72% response rate). The sample comprised 58% women (n = 189) and 42% men (n = 136).

Approximately 40% were division or bureau heads (n = 130), while 60% were technicians or subordinate agents (n = 195). Seniority distribution was as follows: <1 year (9%, n = 29), 1–3 years (27%, n = 88), 3–5 years (25%, n = 81), and >5 years (39%, n = 127). This diverse sample ensures representation across gender, hierarchical levels, and experience, reflecting the broader PATS workforce.

Table 1: Number of Messages Received per Week among Administrative, Technical, and Service Staff (PATS) at UCAD

Messages per Week	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
≤ 10	130	40
11–20	130	40
> 20	65	20

Procedure Data collection occurred between January and March 2024 using a 25-item anonymous questionnaire distributed via email and in-person to accommodate varying access to digital platforms. The questionnaire assessed the frequency and volume of information flows, perceptions of overload, information quality, and associated challenges. Questions were designed to align with the study’s theoretical frameworks, incorporating Likert-scale items (e.g., frequency of overload: never, occasional, frequent) and open-ended prompts for qualitative insights. Ethical standards were upheld, with informed consent obtained and anonymity ensured to encourage honest responses.

Analysis Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were calculated to summarize the data, while cross-tabulations with chi-square tests examined relationships between variables such as gender, position, and seniority. SPSS 26 was used for quantitative analysis, ensuring robust statistical interpretation. Qualitative responses were thematically analyzed to identify recurring challenges, such as redundancy and lack of prioritization, complementing the quantitative findings

Results Descriptive Findings

The survey revealed significant information overload among UCAD’s PATS. Over 60% of respondents (n = 195) reported receiving more than 10 messages per week, with 20% (n = 65) receiving over 20. While 74% (n = 241) found the information useful, only 48% (n = 156) rated its quality as satisfactory, citing issues like redundancy (65%, n = 211) and lack of clarity (60%, n = 195). Frequent overload was reported by

41% (n = 133), with 34% (n = 111) experiencing it occasionally.

Key challenges included time management difficulties (73%, n = 237), redundant information (65%, n = 211), and unclear priorities (60%, n = 195).

Cross-Tabulation Analysis Cross-tabulations revealed significant differences in overload exposure by position ($\chi^2 = 12.45$, $p < .01$). Division heads reported frequent overload at a rate of 66% (n = 86), compared to 29% (n = 57) for subordinate agents.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Gender, Position, and Seniority at UCAD

Variable	Category	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	189	58
	Male	136	42
Position	Division/Bureau Heads	130	40
	Technicians/Agents	195	60
Seniority	< 1 year	29	9
	1–3 years	88	27
	3–5 years	81	25
	> 5 years	127	39

This disparity reflects the higher administrative responsibilities of division heads, who often serve as communication hubs within UCAD’s decentralized structure. Seniority also influenced perceptions, with agents having >5 years of experience reporting higher overload (48%, n = 61) compared to those with <1 year (20%, n = 6) ($\chi^2 = 8.32$, $p < .05$). Gender differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.14$, $p > .05$), suggesting overload is a universal challenge across the workforce.

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Table 3: Main Challenges Reported by Administrative, Technical, and Service Staff (PATS) in Managing Information at UCAD

Challenges	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Time Management Difficulties	237	73
Information Redundancy	211	65
Lack of Priority Clarity	195	60

Table 4: Perceived Frequency of Information Overload among Administrative, Technical, and Service Staff (PATS) at UCAD

Overload Frequency	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Never	51	16
Occasionally	111	34
Frequently	133	41
Always	30	9

compared to those with <1 year (20%, n = 6) ($\chi^2 = 8.32$, $p < .05$). Gender differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.14$, $p > .05$), suggesting overload is a universal challenge across the workforce.

Table 5: Weekly Distribution of Messages Received by Administrative, Technical, and Service Staff (PATS) at UCAD

Messages per Week	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
≤ 10	130	40
11–20	130	40
> 20	65	20

Table 6: Exposure to Frequent Information Overload by Hierarchical Position at UCAD

Position	Frequent Overload (n)	Percentage (%)
Division/Bureau Heads	86	66
Technicians/Agents	57	29

Alignment with UCAD Strategic PlanThe UCAD Strategic Plan (2019–2023) emphasizes ICT integration to enhance governance and efficiency. However, the survey highlights a gap between these ambitions and operational realities. Digital systems, intended to streamline communication, often generate redundant messages, as PATS navigate overlapping platforms. For instance, 52% (n = 169) reported receiving identical directives via email and physical memos, underscoring inefficiencies in hybrid systems. These findings suggest that UCAD’s digitalization efforts, while visionary, lack the infrastructure and training necessary to mitigate overload.

Discussion

Theoretical ImplicationsThe findings align with Dejours’ (2009) psychodynamic framework, as PATS face contradictory injunctions to process high volumes of information while maintaining efficiency in under-resourced conditions. This tension fosters adaptive strategies, such as prioritizing urgent tasks, but also leads to exhaustion and burnout, as Clot (2010) predicts. Lipovetsky’s (2005) hypermodernity critique is evident in the dilution of meaning caused by repetitive and unclear communication, which undermines trust in institutional directives. Stiegler’s (2010) attention crisis framework is particularly relevant, as fragmented focus among PATS compromises their ability to perform strategic tasks.

The constant influx of notifications and ad-hoc assignments diverts attention from long-term goals, such as those outlined in the UCAD Strategic Plan. Citton’s (2017) ecology of attention suggests that UCAD must prioritize cognitive resource allocation to restore productivity. Nyamnjoh’s (2016) critique of digital inequalities highlights a critical issue: UCAD’s uneven ICT adoption exacerbates disparities within the workforce. Division heads, with better access to digital tools, face overload due to their central role in communication flows, while subordinates struggle with basic access, creating a two-tiered system of exposure. This paradox reflects broader challenges in African higher education, where digitalization promises modernization but often amplifies existing structural weaknesses.

Institutional ContradictionsThe UCAD Strategic Plan (2019–2023) envisions ICT as a tool for modernizing governance and enhancing efficiency. However, the survey reveals that digital systems often contribute to overload rather than alleviating it. The hybrid nature of UCAD’s communication—combining paper-based and digital workflows—creates redundancies and confusion. For instance, PATS reported spending significant time reconciling conflicting directives, a challenge

compounded by unreliable internet and outdated hardware.

Moreover, the Plan's emphasis on international collaboration and research output places additional administrative burdens on PATS, who must manage increased correspondence without adequate training. This misalignment between strategic ambitions and operational capacity underscores the need for structural reforms, such as standardized communication protocols and enhanced ICT infrastructure. Broader Implications for African Higher EducationThe findings have implications beyond UCAD, reflecting systemic challenges in African universities transitioning to digital systems. The promise of modernization through ICT must be balanced with investments in training, infrastructure, and culturally sensitive implementation. Without these, digitalization risks exacerbating inequalities and overloading already strained workforces. UCAD's experience serves as a case study for other institutions navigating similar transitions, highlighting the importance of aligning technological reforms with human and organizational realities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirms that information overload and an attention crisis are pervasive challenges for UCAD's PATS, driven by intensified information flows and inadequate resources. The findings highlight a disconnect between the UCAD Strategic Plan's vision of digital modernization and the lived experiences of PATS, who face redundant communication, unclear priorities, and fragmented focus. These challenges reflect broader issues in African higher education, where digitalization must be accompanied by structural support to avoid exacerbating inequalities. RecommendationsClarify Communication Priorities: UCAD should establish clear protocols for prioritizing and streamlining communication, reducing redundancies in emails and memos. A centralized communication platform could consolidate directives, minimizing overlap between paper-based and digital systems.

Implement AI-Assisted Tools: AI-driven filtering systems could categorize and prioritize messages, reducing cognitive load for PATS. For example, natural language processing tools could flag urgent directives and archive redundant ones, aligning with the Strategic Plan's ICT goals.

Enhance ICT Training: Institutionalized training programs for PATS, tailored to varying levels of digital literacy, would improve efficiency and reduce overload. Training should focus on navigating digital platforms and managing information flows effectively.

Upgrade Infrastructure: Investments in reliable internet and

updated hardware are critical to ensuring equitable access to digital tools across faculties and divisions.

Foster Collective Debate: Drawing on Clot's (2010) framework, UCAD should create forums for PATS to discuss workload challenges and propose solutions, fostering a sense of agency and reducing psychosocial risks.

Align Monitoring and Evaluation: UCAD should implement regular assessments to ensure that ICT initiatives align with strategic objectives, addressing gaps between vision and practice.

Future ResearchFuture studies should explore longitudinal impacts of overload on PATS' well-being and productivity, incorporating qualitative interviews to capture nuanced experiences. Comparative analyses with other African universities could further contextualize UCAD's challenges, informing broader policy recommendations.

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