

**INFLUENCE OF SMS COMMUNICATIONS IN ENHANCING SCHOOL  
ADJUSTMENT OF 1<sup>ST</sup> YEAR UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES: UNIVERSITY OF  
PORT HARCOURT EXPERIENCE**

**Njoku Chimezie (PhD)**

Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

**Prof. Princess Udochi Eke**

Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examined the influence of SMS communication in enhancing school the adjustment of 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt. The 105 Year one education students of 2016/ 2017 session in the department of curriculum Studies and Educational Technology of the University of Port Harcourt Nigeria constituted the population of the study. The design of the study was descriptive survey and the instrument for data collection was questionnaires. Data was analyzed using percentages. The results of the study showed among other things that first-year undergraduate students of the above department under study face challenges during their transiting year and SMS messages from their lecturers and academic advisors influenced their school adjustment. The researchers recommended that university of Port Harcourt and other universities in Nigeria should make use of the opportunities provided by SMS to support their 1<sup>st</sup> year students during their transition process.*

**KEYWORDS:** SMS, mobile phones, academic texting, school adjustment.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Internet and mobile technologies have afforded long distance communication which has made contact between two people more robust. Mobile phone ownership is now very high both in developed and developing world. For undergraduate students, the mobile phone and SMS is now the technology of choice and it is a service that is present on all mobile phones that allow users to send and receive short text message with a maximum of 160 characters.

Older generations are also appreciating the advantages of mobile contact, most especially because of the immediacy and intimacy of social contact afforded by mobile phones. They can be viewed or seen as the most personal form of communication. But still the potential contribution of SMS to the process of transition to higher education has received little attention.

First year of an undergraduate program is a period of transition to higher education and therefore a vulnerable year. When students transit from secondary to higher education (HE) they usually have a lot to deal with. They will need to absorb and assimilate new method of teaching and learning because of the new academic demands that is different from what they are used to.

Meanwhile, the pressures of the large population of students and other administrative activities on the lecturers make it difficult for them to keep connected with their students.

Supporting year one students through the transition to HE will require promoting and sustaining connectivity between lecturers and students, emotionally, physically and technologically. The last point is very necessary because it can be used to achieve the first and second point. The generation of undergraduates today has grown up in a world of digital technology where everyone owns a mobile device. This has provided a platform they depend on for building broad social communication networks, sometimes very foreign to their lecturers.

As a result of this we decided to explore the influence of SMS text messaging in enhancing the support provided to first-year students of the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The aim of the study is to determine how SMS text messages from lecturers' influence student school adjustment in the early stages of their degree programme.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The acceptance of giving more attention to addressing the needs of students during their transition into higher education should be given a higher priority, even though the acceptance is increasing. First year students experience and discuss differences between the level of support they received before starting their higher education and the support they receive while in higher institutions. In higher education they are expected to depend more on their own efforts. The first-year experience has been recognized as especially important because this is when most student departures occur.

Yorke (2002) noted that in the UK, around ten per cent of full-time higher education students withdraw during or at the end of their first year. Bryson (1997) noted that the unavailability of familiar structures (e.g. family, rules, regulations etc) results in a difficult transition period for students defined by uncertainty. As academic advisors at the faculty of education, university of Port Harcourt, we also noticed that most students have low GPA in their first years especially in the first semester.

In higher institutions students are placed in an academic environment in which independence and self-direction in learning are reiterated in contradiction to the approaches experienced in secondary education, many students see themselves detached and apprehensive. There is minimal or at times no interaction or personal contact with lecturers which sometimes lead to less courageous students not doing well in their first semester. Higher institutions should inculcate a sense of belonging through connectedness, engagement and involvement in their institutional practices in order to support students in their transition.

A study by Jones (2008) on the effects of out-of-class support on student satisfaction and motivation indicates that such contact establishes receptivity to students needs; shows caring;

endorses students' worth and encourages and help students cope with stressful situation. In Ferrante et al.'s (2008) study, there is a rich representative analogy demonstrating students' experience of connection and disconnection. These authors encourage higher education institutions to find connections and show that out of classroom communication between students and teachers is critical. University of Port Harcourt is characterized with very high population, poor infrastructure, low population of teaching staff and numerous other challenges just like other public Universities in Nigeria. Students that enroll in these universities come from both private and public secondary schools in Nigeria that are characterized by rules and regulations that are to be followed by students and these are monitored and enforced by teachers. When they enter higher institutions, these rules are no more monitored, and they are to figure everything out by themselves.

As noted by Tinto (1975), transiting from secondary education to higher education is a significant social transition which involves integration into the academic and social spheres of the institution. In this environment self direction and independence in learning is emphasized and students are not only required to acquire new academic skills but also to be able to construct new identity and a sense of belonging.

Some studies on students' use of different forms of communication technology shows that SMS text messaging is used more frequently than email and is the most preferred medium for receiving information from the university (Traxler & Riordan, 2003; Griffiths & Hmer, 2004; Stone, 2004). However, it is not certain what the situation is like in the university of Port Harcourt.

Therefore, the major purpose of this study, as based on a survey research method, was to examine influence of SMS communications in enhancing school adjustment of 1<sup>st</sup> year university undergraduates. The following Research questions guided the study;

1. What are the major school adjustment challenges of 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt?
2. What are student's views about the potential of SMS in enhancing school adjustment?
3. How has SMS influenced school adjustment of students?
4. What are students' impressions of lecturers and academic advisors from who they receive text messages?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Text message cell phone survey was designed to gather data about student's reaction to the use of text messages, advantages of SMS communication and its influence in enhancing school adjustment. Data was also collected on the difficulties they face in navigating the academic and the organizational structure of the university.

There were 22 likert scale items. Year one 2016/2017 set of the department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, faculty of Education of the university completed the survey. A total of 105 students completed the survey. Information gathered from the data were decoded and tallied, and the percentages determined. Tables were constructed in respect of the demands of the respective research questions Details of these analyses are presented below.

SN		SA	A	SD	D
1	Time Management issues	70%	20%	2%	8%
2	Learning in large Class size	53%	33%	5%	9%
3	Feeling Isolated	41%	32%	15%	21%
4	Feeling Home Sick	31%	38%	12%	19%
5	Challenge with trying to make sense of the new environment	55%	31%	4%	10%
6	Challenge in interacting with new people from variety of backgrounds.	25%	34%	21%	20%

**Table 1. The major school adjustment challenges of 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt.**

SN	Student view about the potential of using SMS to enhance adjustment	SA	A	SD	D
1	Getting Information	54%	36%	2%	8%
2	Providing Mutual support	36%	34%	9%	21%
3	Coordinating group work	38%	42%	8%	10%
4	Personal organization	42%	28%	10%	20%
5	Keeping in touch with my academic adviser and lecturers	60%	24%	6%	10%

**Table 2. Student's views about the potential of SMS in enhancing school adjustment**

SN		SA	A	SD	D
1	Received text messages reduced my feeling of isolation from the university community	51%	31%	6%	12%
2	Receiving text message was a fun way to get course information	50%	30%	10%	10%
3	I received very useful information through texts	53%	35%	5%	7%
4	I received rewarding and positive text messages like, how are doing, do you have any problem etc from my academic advisor	65%	35%	0%	0%
5	Received text messages offered me a sense of social connectedness	30%	42%	11%	17%
6	Receiving text messages was annoying at times	0%	0%	54%	46%

**Table 3. Student's reactions to receiving text messaging from their academic adviser and lecturers**

	How do you feel when you receive a text message from your academic advisor or your lecturers	SA	A	SD	D
1	They Care about me	44%	36%	7%	13%
2	They remember me	38%	27%	15%	20%
3	They want me to succeed	42%	38%	10%	12%
4	They are watching me	15%	19%	32%	34%

**Table 4. Students' impressions of lecturers and academic advisors from who they receive text messages**

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Mobile phones are prevalent amongst the students in this study. None of the 105 students was excluded from the study as a result of not owning a mobile phone because they all have one and text messaging is the dominant mode of electronic communication amongst our student sample.

Looking at the tables above, starting from table one; it is observed that new students in this study have similar challenges, 90% of them have problem managing their time well, 86% of them were overwhelmed with the population they met in their classes. When it comes to emotions, 73% of them felt isolated and 69% was homesick. Making sense of the new environment was also a problem where 89% spent time trying to adjust to the new environment.

Table 2 showed that 90% of the students agreed that the text messages aided them in finding information, 70% said it provided them mutual support, 80% agreed it helped them to coordinate group work better, 70% said it helped them in their personal organization and 84% of them said it helped them to keep in touch with their lecturers and academic adviser.

Table 3 tries to find out the reaction of these students when they received text messages. 82% of the students felt the messages they received reduced their feelings of isolation, 80% of them felt they loved getting information through text messages and 88% of them said they received useful information through the text messages. All the students in the study believed that positive messages like how are you doing today? Do you have any problem? Good job; etc from the academic adviser was really rewarding.

On table 4, we tried to find out student's impressions with regards to the text messages they receive, item 1 and 2 showed that 75% / 65% of the students respectively felt they were cared for and remembered, 66% of them also did not feel that they were being watched.

Text messages from the lecturers and especially academic advisors are viewed positively by the students. Text messaging is part of students' everyday social relationships and provides peer support in different ways, for example, support to help them negotiate administrative structures, emotional support etc. However, the study shows that, in both emotional support and support to navigate administrative and academic structures during the period of transition to university students need more support than that which peers or parents can provide.

In terms of navigating the formal organization, our findings reveal the degree of uncertainty many new students experience, it therefore suggests that providing administrative information in induction sessions is not enough, the students need more than that. The study revealed that the text messages sent by the academic advisor at pertinent points during the academic year were appreciated; many students said it gave them a sense of belonging to the university. Even though messages were sent out as bulk SMS they were received as if they were personal communications. This study supports Mackie, 2001 and Wilcox et al 2005 findings that strong social networks are crucial for a successful transition to the university and shows that text messaging is intrinsic to the maintenance of support networks.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the popularity of text messaging among undergraduate students, the influence of this communication technology on 1<sup>st</sup> year student's adjustment during the critical period of transition to university has received little attention. We have shown in this study that text messages can go a long way in helping new students navigate their new environment and help them adjust easily.

The apparently instrumental communications in these relationships provide students with networks of social support and aid interdependence in learning the university's academic and administrative systems. We have also shown that an application such as this can enhance the support provided to students by the university during the transition to university.



It would be a lost opportunity if universities neglect texting as an important means of supporting first-year students when these very same students are already conducting a significant part of their lives through this medium.

In conclusion it should be noted that this study has only been able to outline the influence of the use of text messaging for first year undergraduates' adjustment in the University of Port Harcourt. The limited nature of this study meant that further research would be needed to explore any relationship that might exist between these practices and student's academic achievement.

### **FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study has only been able to explore the influence of SMS communication in enhancing the school adjustment of only first year undergraduate students of the department of curriculum studies in the faculty of education in the University of Port Harcourt. The limited nature of this study meant that further research would be needed. The research could be extended to the entire faculty of education and also to other faculties in the university.

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