



AN EXPLORATION OF THE PROS AND CONS OF THE TEXT MESSAGE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Samson Olasunkanmi Oluga

*Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman Kampar/Perak Campus
Malaysia*

Halira Abeni Litini Babalola

Chief Lecturer/Deputy Rector the Federal Polytechnic, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The text message communication system is one modern electronic medium of communication that is systematically transforming written communication. It has both the positive and the negative sides just like that of the electricity current. The positive side of the text message communication simply refers to its pros, that is, its advantages, merits or benefits. The negative side of the text message communication refers to its cons, that is, its disadvantages, demerits or shortcomings. This paper explores the pros of text message communication by analysing how it saves time, reduces cost, aids articulate feedback, ensures convenient response, serves as legal evidence, encourages bold reply, functions as a forensic tool, represents a more health-friendly medium and guarantees confidentiality. The paper equally examines the cons of text message communication by explicating how it can aid crime, be used to defraud, implicate message sender when not deleted, be vague/ambiguous because of its abbreviated language, be delivered late when events have overtaken message sent, be reduced in length and rendered incomplete when message is lengthy, be limited in use to literate people only, be used to perpetrate examination malpractices and be responded to late when the receiver has a busy or tight schedule.

Keywords: Text messaging, Written communication, Electronic communication, Human communication, Modern telecommunication.

INTRODUCTION

The mobile phone text message communication system otherwise called the cellular phone text message communication system is a modern telecommunication system/ aspect of Information Communication Technology (ICT) that is systematically revolutionizing human communication system the world over (Atanda and Umar, 2006; Oluga and Babalola, 2012). It is therefore a

significant technological improvement over and above the land line telephone communication which Wood (2012) simply refers to as telephonic communication and identifies Alexandra Graham Bell as the one who invented this in the mid 1870s. Information Technology according to Odeniyi *et al.* (2007) is a broad based technology needed to support information system involving the creation, storage, manipulation and communication of information.

The mobile phone communication system as a form Information Communication Technology, and just as is characteristic of human communication, has the vocal or speech form of communication as well as the written form of communication. The former form of communication is usually through oral communication of messages via the in-built speaker/microphone of the intended recipient whose number is dialed, whose phone rings and who picks and receives the oral message of the caller. The latter form of communication is usually through the communication of a composed message or a piece of information typed using the phone's alphabetical keys which is then sent to the intended recipient who reads the visual written message or information. This second form Vivian (2013) describes as texting that involves using "a mobile phone telephone keypad to tap messages that a recipient with a mobile phone can read on a tiny screen, either live or later."

It is axiomatic that the mobile phone communication system is an exceptional landmark telecommunication breakthrough that has become part and parcel of many people (Ajala, 2007). This is not just because it makes it easy for vital messages /information to be transmitted most conveniently and responded to in double-quick time or because it is embraced by and accessible to virtually all and sundry irrespective of their societal strata. This is mainly because it has positively impacted on virtually all areas of human endeavours thereby bringing speedy transformation and accelerated growth and development (Adenegan, 2009). It has, together with other forms of information technology, succeeded in reducing the whole wide world into a small global village and because it is not a static technology it has continued to grow to the extent that the so called/made information technology/telecommunication aided global village has been further reduced to a global room as put by cited in Ige (2004).

It is however important to point out straight from the shoulder and from the word go that the mobile phone text message communication which is the written communication version of the mobile phone speech communication is not absolutely impeccable because it has its strengths as well as its weaknesses. The strengths of the mobile phone text message communication system are the distinctive qualities, sterling features, positive sides or the advantages of this form of communication that will be explicated as the pros of the mobile phone text message communication system. The weaknesses of this form of communication are the various butts, shortcomings, challenges, negative sides or disadvantages of mobile phone text message communication system which will be explicated as the cons of the mobile phone text message communication system. The various points discussed as the pros and cons of the mobile phone text

message communication system basically emanate from the writers' observations over the years as users of the mobile from inception which have been corroborated by some contemporary works. These are equally in line with relevant facts advanced by some graduating students of the Federal Polytechnic Ede, Osun State, Nigeria offering Communication in a given essay on the good and the bad sides of the mobile phone communication.

The Pros of the Text Message Communication System

There are some fundamental points that are easy to recapitulate in relation to explication of the pros of the mobile phone text message communication system. Ten of these points which represent the strength or positive side of the text message communication system are discussed below:

Mobile Phone Text Message Saves Words: This is brevity or economy of language use. It is a fundamental characteristic or quality of a good human communication which has to do with conciseness or preciseness of communicated messages or information. The mobile phone text message communication makes this possible because it allows the use of abbreviated language which involves the use of short or contracted forms of basic words and expressions used in text message communication. The brevity of text message communication is essential in that it is in line with the Shakespearean expression "the fewer, the merrier". It will enable communicator to go straight to the point, avoid unnecessary digression, prevent the inclusion of unwanted details and hit the nail on the head using comprehensible abbreviated language. For example 'u' for 'you', '4' for 'four' and 'for', 'dt' for 'that', '2' for 'to' and 'too', 'pple' for 'people', 'bcos' for 'because' etc

Mobile Phone Text Message Saves Time: This has to do with economy of time which means a lot to communicators who believe time consciousness. It is not unrelated to the above discussed point which has to do with economy of language used in text message communication. Text message communicators who make effective use of comprehensible abbreviated language in disseminating vital messages or information will be able to save a lot of time that could have been spent composing lengthy messages and reading lengthy messages sent without the use of abbreviated forms of words characteristic of the abbreviated language of mobile phone text message communication. The text message allows sender to say just what he or she want to say unlike the mobile phone vocal or speech communication where the receiver may elongate discussion by asking or saying some other things and courtesy may not allow the caller to cut short the discussion. [Atanda and Umar \(2006\)](#) also confirm the fact the mobile phone text messaging ensures speedy appointment, quick clarification and short interviews especially by journalists.

Mobile Phone Text Message Saves Money: This has to do with economy of cost of communication and therefore stems from the above discussed economy of language and economy of time which the abbreviated language of mobile phone text message communication guarantees. Using the abbreviated language of the mobile phone text message communication a message that

ordinarily could have extended to a second page could be contracted into just a page which means reducing the cost by half. The cost of communicating exactly the same message via mobile phone speech communication could be more because it is usually charged per second and what is communicated could illicit some questions that would need some answers and there could be some logical or illogical / relevant or irrelevant digression which in line with the basic communication principle would be entertained and probably responded to. There may even be the request to say hello to some people on the other end which would be reluctantly granted or the need to hold on for the call recipient to quickly attend to something urgent before eventually rounding off discussion. The mobile phone text messages save communicators from those airtime consuming factors or situations and equally save some money altogether.

Mobile Phone Text Message Can Be Saved and Reproduced: This is one good thing about the mobile phone text message communication system as its communicated messages or information is usually saved in the inbox for received messages and outbox or sent mail box for disseminated messages depending on the memory of the phone used. This enables the recipients of messages to keep some messages of interest for as long as they want. Such messages can be referred to by the recipients to confirm the exact contents of the messages or to be sure of the information conveyed before taking vital decision or making vital moves based on such messages. The saved mobile phone text messages can also serve a forensic purpose as they can reproduced as evidence in the course of an investigation since they will show the exact communicated messages, the senders' numbers, the dates and times the messages were sent. This may not be very easy to do in the case of the mobile phone speech communication which may be recorded with some phone when the recipients had the premonition or foreknowledge of what would happen. However, the service provider can be contacted to retrieve even the speech communication between mobile phone users on special request following some laid down procedures and conditions.

Mobile Phone Text Messaging Ensures Simplicity: This is another distinctive feature of good communication which is also characteristic of typical mobile phone text message communication due to the use of abbreviated language. The mobile phone text message communication does not give room for unnecessary display of jaw-breaking vocabulary characteristic of a grandiloquent style. Rather, the mobile phone text message communication gives room for simple, easy to abbreviate comprehensible words and not necessarily the ones that a line of the page of the text message will not contain or that will require an encyclopedic dictionary for an encoder to get its correct spelling or for the decoder to get its intended meaning. It is against this background that a text message communicator who is space and cost conscious will prefer simple words like 'timid', 'lust', 'unhealthy', 'shocked', 'pompous', 'disgrace', 'caution', 'error', 'misery' and 'great' to the following grandiloquent or jaw-breaking alternatives 'pusillanimous', 'concupiscence', 'valetudinarian', 'flabbergasted', 'magniloquent', 'opprobrium', 'circumspection', 'misapprehension', 'parsimonious' and 'gargantuan'. Little (1983) discourages such verbosity which some have described as unnecessary verbal gymnastics and the users as verbal gymnasts.

Mobile Phone Text Message System Permits Multiplicity: This is another advantage of the mobile phone text messaging over and above the mobile phone speech communication system. This is because of the possibility of using the mobile phone to send a given text message to as many recipients as possible at same time. For example, some can send new month/year wishes to as many as thirty people on the first day of the month/year by just clicking/ keying their numbers and sending the messages at once. This saves a lot of time or energy that could have been expended by the same person if he/she were to call the thirty intended recipients one after the other. The multiplicity of the mobile phone text message system has been of great help to people who want to canvass for votes, who want to advocate a given cause or who need to reach out to as many people as possible in double-quick time so as to make their interest or position known. Using the mobile phone speech communication would not have been as convenient and prompt as the multiple mobile phone text messages especially in such a situation.

Mobile Phone Text Message Ensures Relative Confidentiality: The mobile phone speech communication has subjected a number of communicators to some unfortunate happenings just because of the problem of confidentiality in communicating messages orally in public or within the crowd. Some have mistakenly divulged vital information while discussing on phone in the taxi, supermarket, restaurant, at a party or even while alone where some people were eavesdropping. As a result of this, armed robbers have got the information used to trace some people and to snatch their money or other valuables. Some have been duped by fraudsters because of the information released to fraudsters while making phone calls. Some have even lost their precious lives while trying to make calls when visited by men of the underworld to alert security operatives. The mobile phone text message communication helps a great deal in this respect because messages can be sent via this medium even in the public or within the crowd without the communicated information getting to wrong persons. The feedback to the information sent can also be received without this getting to the knowledge of any fraudsters or robbers. [Afolabi et al. \(2008\)](#) confirm the confidentiality or privacy of the use of the mobile phone text messaging and its effectiveness in communicating health information between some Nigerian pharmacists and those attending HIV/AIDS clinics.

Mobile Phone Text Message is More Health Friendly: Many phone users are stressed because they make phone calls and respond to phone calls over and over at home and at work. This is true of many business or organizational executives who sometimes move about with three or more phones with different lines of different networks. Many of such people eventually get stressed as their phones become stressors making them to be engaged in discussion almost all the times. As a result of this they may be exhausted and easily breakdown which is not good for their health. Worse still, studies have shown that some people who have used mobile phones to make calls for unusually long period of time have damaged their ears or organs within their ears. We have even heard of cases of people who have died because they have been using the mobile phone too frequently. However, the mobile phone text message helps in this regard because messages can be

composed without bringing the phone too close to any of the sensitive organs of the body like the ears, the brain or the heart. It therefore has health advantage over and above the mobile phone calls and this is significant because health is wealth.

Mobile Phone Text Message Delivery Cannot Be Easily Hindered: It has been observed that a lot of deceptive communication has always emanated from the plan or intension of some people who want to hinder some phone call messages or who do not want to hear from callers not to talk of receiving their messages. Some would refuse to pick calls as soon as they see the callers' numbers, Some cut the calls as soon as their phones ring and they see the callers' numbers. Some pick the calls may be because the callers' numbers do not show but as soon as they identify the callers by their voices they pretend they can not / not to hear what the callers are saying and will be saying 'hello' repeatedly. The mobile phone text message is different in this regard in that the message can not be easily blocked or hindered. Once the message is composed and sent it will get to the intended recipient if there is no network problem and as soon as the message is delivered the recipient will be notified especially for a phone with this facility or function. If the message hangs because of network problem or because the intended recipient has switched off his/her phone, it will not be delivered then but immediately the network problem is solved and the message is re-sent or the intended recipient's phone is switched on again, the message will be delivered.

Mobile Phone Text Message Helps Hearing-Impaired Literate Communicators: The mobile phone call system just as the landline phone system which existed before the advent of the mobile phone system could not be used by those with hearing impairment whether or not they are literate people who can write and read. With the old landline telecommunication system this category of challenged people were sidelined or alienated from the telecommunication system. The mobile phone system however, is an improvement on the old telecommunication system because it is a balanced system. Just as those with visual impairment can easily make use of the mobile phone to make calls and identify callers by their voices, those with hearing impairment can also use the mobile phone text message system to send and receive messages in as much as they are educated/literate and can write read using the language of communication.

The Cons of the Mobile Phone Text Message Communication System

It is interesting to know that as good as the mobile phone text message communication is, as already discussed, it is not without some butts or flaws. These of course are the challenges of the mobile phone text message communication system which are explicated below as the cons of text messaging.

Mobile Phone Text Messaging is Meant for Literate People: This means the mobile phone text message system can only be used by those who can write and read the language of communication whereas even illiterate people who can not read and write but speak and understand the language of communication can make phone calls with the mobile or cellular phones. This but of the mobile

phone text message communication can not be overlooked because there are people in the developing nations of Africa and Asia, the great market of the mobile phones, who can not read or write. Such people therefore can not benefit from the various advantages of the mobile phone text message communication system. In a similar vein, some of the messages often sent by the service providers like season's greetings, sales promotion, network difficulties etc will elude such phone users and unfortunately there is no recorded voice version of such messages meant to take care of the interest of such non-literate mobile phone users.

The Abbreviated Language of Text Messaging Affects Writing Skill: The use of short or condensed form of words and expressions that is characteristic of the mobile phone text message communication usually affects the continuous writing skill of some users/learners negatively (Oluga and Babalola, 2012). It affects the spelling system making it difficult for them to get the correct spelling of words as they are used to spelling incorrectly in text messaging. They also use abbreviated forms of words unconsciously even in formal written communication like application letters written for employment purpose, essays written for examination purpose etc. Therefore, words like 'that', 'this', 'what', 'because' and 'people' are mistakenly written as 'dat' or 'dt', 'dis', 'wot' or 'wt', 'bcos' and 'pple' respectively (Babalola, 2012). Such a mistake as far as application letters are concerned give a bad impression of the writer as a carefree or lackadaisical person. Such mistakes in examinations are usually penalized by examiners. Those who are used to the very short text messages become lazy writers and may not find writing error free or undiluted continuous writing like letters, essays, reports or feature easy again.

Mobile Phone Text Message Can Indict: This is in respect of those who usually compose and send sensitive messages and who unluckily forget to delete such composed or received messages. For example, a man who sends a message to his girlfriend / mistress or receives a message from his girlfriend / mistress without deleting it and who carelessly leaves the phone where his wife can see it can create problem for himself. Somebody involved in a coup planning and who leaves his/her phone with some of the messages relating to the coup being planned could be easily indicted. People who are suspected of perpetrating some mischievous acts are usually asked to surrender their phones and when their inbox and sent mails are scrutinized some indicting messages relating to the allegation leveled against the perpetrators are usually found. Therefore, the mobile phone text messages have helped to unraveled miseries like exposing insincere spouses, nailing perpetrators of criminal acts and many of such people have been brought to book because of the text messages on their phones which indict them. This according to Odeniyi *et al.* (2007) is because this information system is for creation and storage of information among others.

Mobile Phone Text Message May Be Misrepresented: This has to do with a situation where the text message intended information is not the exact information communicated and there may be reasons for this. For example, If somebody is writing a text message when he/she is very dizzy or stressed, there may be omission of important words which are needed to have the complete

meaning of the text message communicated. It may also be as a result of trying to compose or respond to a message while busy doing some other things like driving, watching a TV programme or listening to the news on the radio. As a result of this the sender may forget to put a word that will enable him or her communicate exactly what he or she has in mind. For example, the omission of the word 'not' in the expression "I am (not) interested in the matter" only communicates the negative of what is intended. There may be problem except there is what [Moulton and Robinson \(1982\)](#) call the context-dependent-pragmatic information given linguistically or non-linguistically. [Gerson and Gerson \(2012\)](#) also point out the importance of text messages that are clear, accurate and that address the information need of the target audience/ intended recipient.

Text Messages Wrongly Sent Have Little or No Remedy: It is a known fact that just as wrong calls are sometimes made or wrong numbers sometimes dialed, messages could also be sent to wrong numbers. When wrong numbers are dialed /called in the course of mobile phone communication, such calls could be quickly terminated when this is noticed or when told by the unintended recipient that a wrong number has been dialed / called. However, this is not the same in the case of a text message sent to a wrong number/person because the message will be delivered as sent and the content would be seen by the unintended recipient. For example, the sensitive message meant for a friend who answers 'Tunde' may be wrongly sent to a hostile colleague or neighbour who answers 'Tunde'. The content of the message would have been divulged even before the senders knows this and such information may be fundamental to the activities of a given family, organization or nation.

Text Messages of the Mobile Phone System Can Hang: It is possible for the mobile phone text message already sent by the communicator not to get to the intended recipient if the message hangs. This means such a message has left the source or sender of the message but has not got to its destination and it is therefore in between the message encoder and decoder. The good thing about mobile phone text messages that hang is that the cell phone will usually indicate on the phone screen that the message is hanging or yet to be delivered. One bad thing is that the phone does not usually show whose text message is hanging or else the intended recipient could use another means, may be phone call, to reach the sender of the message so as to know what the hung message is all about. Another bad thing about the message that hangs is that some message may be belated if it takes so long a time to deliver as events might have overtaken the information communicated via the text message. Delay can be dangerous as it is usually said like where somebody sends a distress message that needs urgent attention or is trapped where he / she can only be saved in double-quick time. Delay as far as the legal profession is concerned defeats equity just as justice delayed is believed to be justice denied.

Mobile Phone Text Message Aids Fraudulent Communication: It has been observed that deceptive cum fraudulent communication aimed at swindling innocent people is more frequently done via the mobile phone text message communication system especially in the not-too-rich

developing countries of Africa and Asia. This is because fake claims made via phone calls can be easily debunked by receivers who are already used to the voices of close associates/relations and regular callers. However, the mobile phone text messages become the better alternative to such fraudulent communicators as they have discovered that people fall easily for written mobile phone text messages. It is against this background that many people have been duped via text messages that claim they have won in the course of a bonanza asking them to send air time of N5000 to N10000 in lieu of the processing fee. The most recent of such is the fake text message of credit alert showing that an amount of money has been paid into somebody's account in respect of goods to be bought. Such goods are often released and taken away by the fraudulent customers only for the victims to get to the bank and be told that no such amount has been paid by anybody into their bank account.

Mobile Phone Text Message Has Space Limitation: Many business people who are not time bound do make phone calls for as long as possible without any hindrance. The same goes for those enjoying free weekend or bonanza calls who want to exhaust their air time by calling loved ones at home and abroad for a period up to an hour or more. They can even hold a particular call to attend to another call coming through another mobile phone which will also last for sometime before going back to the previous call. That is when callers will be thinking of who and who could be called even if they do not have serious messages to pass across to them than to greet and say hello to them or worse still say even what ought not to be said. The mobile phone text message is different in this regard because there is a limit to the number of characters or words allowed per message, usually 140 characters or 30 words per message (Vivian, 2013). This has economic benefit really but may not enable those who do not have any economic constraint to enjoy the almost endless communication they enjoy having especially when they have the luxury of time.

Text Messaging Behind the Wheel is Dangerous: Making and receiving phone call while driving has been discouraged because it makes drivers prone to preventable accidents on the roads. It is in the light of this that traffic laws against making and receiving phone calls while driving have been made by appropriate authorities in different places. It is important to point out however, that even mobile phone speech communication behind the wheel is not as dangerous as mobile phone text messaging behind the wheel. This is because the former only divides the attention of callers behind the wheel as they can see almost clearly but can only use one hand to hold the steering wheel and to change the gear. The ear piece now used by some drivers who have to make/receive calls while driving reduces the danger of road accident a great deal while putting mobile phones on voice mail reduces the danger to the barest minimum. Sending and receiving mobile phone text messages while driving is most prone to road accident because it is not just dividing but distracting the attention as the drivers look away from the direction of the vehicle and at the same time hold the steering wheel with just one hand so as to hold the mobile phone in order to read messages received and to compose messages to be sent to intended receiver or recipient.

The Abbreviated Language of Text Messages Can Be Vague /Ambiguous: One thing that is characteristic of the abbreviated language of mobile phone text messages is the vagueness /ambiguity of some of the abbreviated words or expressions used. Vagueness and ambiguity however, are only related but are not synonymous linguistic terms or concepts. Vagueness has to do with lack of explicitness while ambiguity has to do with the susceptibility of a given word or an expression to double or multiple semantic interpretations (Oluga, 2010). (Samovar *et al.*, 2013) see ambiguity as a peculiar problem of non verbal communication. As for text message language vagueness some people use words that are difficult to decipher by some other people may be because there is no general acceptability or common knowledge of some abbreviation while some are local or esoteric abbreviation known only to people within a given group or place. As for the text message language ambiguity, a numeral abbreviation like '2' can refer to 'two', 'to' or 'too' while '4' can also stand for 'for', 'four' or 'fore'. However, there will not be much semantic problem where there is a sort of meaning-aiding contextual information.

CONCLUSION

It is crystal clear from the discussion so far on the mobile phone text message communication system that there two sides to this landmark technological breakthrough that has systematically revolutionized information communication systems the world over. This is simply because the mobile phone text message communication system has some outstanding areas of positive impact. It saves time, money and words. It aids confidentiality, simplicity, multiplicity and reproduction of messages. It is health- friendly, easy to use by those having hearing impairment and its message delivery can not be easily hindered. The mobile phone text message communication system also has some flaws or challenges that have been identified. It is meant for literate people only. It can negatively affect writing skill. It can indict users when used as evidence. It can be misrepresented. It can be mistakenly sent to a wrong recipient. It can be used to aid fraud. Its message can hang. It has space limitation. It can cause accident when used while driving. Its abbreviated language can be vague or ambiguous. It is however important to point out the fact that all that the mobile phone text message users need to do is to maximize the benefits of the text message system and minimize the butts of the system. This is the only way the positive side of this system of communication will overshadow the negative side of the system which can still be redressed to get the best of the mobile phone text message communication system.

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