Online Teaching and Learning: Challenges Encountered by Online Freshmen in Pursuance of Higher Degree in Nigeria

Reginald Amadi[i]
Department of Curriculum & Instructional Technology
Faculty of Education
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
amadireginald72@yahoo.com

Abraham Oriji[ii]
Department of Curriculum Studies & Educational Technology
Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria.
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Abstract

Online education has become an in-thing, especially in the advanced worlds. The flexibility of time, space, convenience, work-life-school balance, costs, and easy accessibility to content offered by the new instructional delivery system is highly attracting more and more students on the online environment. This method of instructional delivery is steadily gaining grounds in developing countries, and with time, it is hoped that most universities will dramatically change to online environments. However, regardless of this daily increase and several attributes ascribed to it, some of the online students find the environment very challenging and unfriendly during their studies as they encounter serious problems that make them dropout of their chosen programmes. Hence, this paper examined the concept of online learning; discusses the types of online learning and some of the major challenges faced by first year online students which prevent them from successfully completing or accomplishing their online programmes/courses. The paper also looked into the future of first year online students and equally proffered solutions to some of the envisaged challenges by making appropriate recommendations for a successful online education programmes/courses for qualitative delivery.

Keywords: Distance education, Online learning, Online environment, Online teaching, Online students, Online challenges, Quality education, Economic development.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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INTRODUCTION

A new method of teaching and learning has emerged in the educational arena. The technological breakthrough which ushered in after the World War II has given a new direction to teaching and learning. Prior to this period, history has it that enrollment to colleges and universities were the privilege of few individuals who could afford the cost. Presently, the scenario has changed in view of the economic evolution, powered by technological breakthrough that followed the aforementioned period whereby analog technology of the 20th Century was replaced by the digital 21st Century with a new method of teaching and learning (Luskin & Hirsen, 2010). In addition Luskin and Hirsen (2010) asserted that it was also on record that undergraduate and graduate students in higher institutions were generally filled with unmarried full-time students between the ages of 18-23. These technological advances have made it possible for exponential increase in enrolment in schools with individuals of varying age, employment and financial status. It also enhanced equal and vast opportunity; student diversity, cost-effective course delivery with distinct advantages of location; mobility of education, and also broken barriers of time and space, and total lifelong learning in education process (Luskin & Hirsen, 2010).

Online learning is powering this pedagogical shift away from the traditional method of verbalization of lessons in the class in which students sit tight and passively listen attentively to teachers with no hope of participation in the class activities, to a more interactive approach in which students' collaborative with peers and instructors in both asynchronous and synchronous learning process. It is worthy of note that while the 20th Century students go to school, school are sent to the 21st Century students to their homes and offices (Li & Irby, 2008).

Many people today desire to acquire university education. In order to actualize this yearning, first year students sometimes referred to as "freshmen" in higher institutions all over the world usually experience overwhelming challenges as they pursue their various online careers. The movement from traditional method of brick-and-mortar method of teaching to the online platform poses a different scenario. It will be noted that at the first time of getting to this online environment, some students are full of excitements, as they explore new boundaries and testing new environments.

However, online learning demands self-directed decision. The challenges of taking responsibility for one's own study programmes and workload is one of the very big decisions to make by any first year student of online programme, which, if not well taken will cause a lot of challenges for the student concerned. The students in their first year are faced with challenges of freedom of independent study, independent decision-making or self-decision where no person directs them to read or not to read.; and where no person either directs them to do their assignments or directs them to submit assignments to their instructor(s).

These challenges are commonly full of various distractions, ranging from new teaching/learning methodology (i.e., how subjects/courses are taught), coping with assignment deadlines, personal study time management, and other new relationships, which are different from the normal ones. Most of the online students adjust easily, quickly and successfully to the challenges, while others find it extremely difficult to surmount the confronting challenges.

Consequently, these challenges must be tackled, and there is need for re-adjustment, both in character and in learning to meet up with demands of the online environment. Al-khatib, Suleman and Awamleh (2012) noted that adjustment with university life is considered one of the main indicators of success in university life as it is an indicator for the students' ability to face

the problems. On the same note, the same applies to online environments, which is quite different from the traditional mode of teaching and learning.

CONCEPT OF ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning, which is sometimes referred to "e-learning", is a type of "distance education" that takes place across distance, especially over the Internet. It is the newest and the most popular form of education in contemporary society whereby Internet-based courses are offered synchronously and asynchronously. In ideal situation, this method of education does not happen in a traditional classroom setup (i.e., on-campus classes). Online learning may adopt the same material or content with traditional format, but its presentation is quite different, because the method of interaction with the instructors and students (learners) are different from the former. This method of learning came into limelight with accessibility of the Internet in mid-1990s. This mode of learning brings educational opportunity to students (learners), who have various family demands, social obligations and demanding work schedules that live far away from the traditional institutions or campuses. Online learning provides excellent options for independent learners as it offers them the opportunity to work/study at their preferred schedules (Jones, 2013; Rabberman, n.d).

TYPES OF ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning is a comprehensive term that embraces some instructional approaches and environments. There are different ways of classifying online learning. Most scholars divide it into two major categories (i.e., Synchronous and Asynchronous), However, the third category, which combines both traditional and online mode has also emerged (i.e., Hybrid or Blended learning). Hence, it will be convenient to classify online learning into three categories of Synchronous, Asynchronous and Hybrid or Blended learning (Ololube, 2011). Let us expatiate on each of these for a better comprehensibility of the subject matter.

Synchronous E-Learning: In this write-up, synchronous e-learning will be used interchangeably with synchronous distance education. This is a type of online learning that requires the instructors and students/learners to interact through online simultaneously (at the same time). It has been defined by Arshavskiy (2013) as a type of learning that is done in real-time with a live instructor. Newby et al. (2006) defined synchronous distance education as a situation where teacher and student meet at the same time but in different places, as in a live video broadcast or an audio teleconference. Synchronous learning is similar to the traditional classroom experience where the teacher stands in front of the class and presents his/her instructions/lesson.

However, what characterizes synchronous e-learning is that learners/students can take their courses anywhere in the world and at a preferred time provided the learner has a computer that is connected to the Internet, and also has access to audio and video conferencing (Arshavskiy, 2013). In the same development, some other tools used for synchronous e-learning includes telephone, instant messaging, application sharing and polling (Arshavskiy, 2013).

Furthermore, synchronous e-learning is the technology tools that permit online learners to be in touch with each other at the same time at their own space. Examples of synchronous communication systems include Breeze (a Web-based interactive video-conferencing system), Skype (an Internet-based audio-conferencing system), and Second Life (an Internet-based virtual

world) (Chou, 2010). In this mode, instructors and learners can also interact via instant messaging, and telephone conversations.

Asynchronously E-learning: This refers to a self-paced learning experience that allows learners to go through courses as quickly or as slowly as they desire (Arshavskiy, 2013). It is also a circumstance where both time and place are different, as in the case with most web-based distance education (Newby et al., 2006). Mayadas (1997) defined asynchronous learning as "student-centered teaching method that uses online learning resources to facilitate information sharing outside the constraints of time and place among a network of people." It is a type of learning that allows both the learners and the instructors time for reflection which results to more thoughtful replies (Stevens-Long, 1999). This type of teaching and learning do not take place in "real–time (i.e., interaction is not immediate as in face-to-face communication). In this mode of teaching and learning contents are provided for learners and assignments given within a time frame to complete the coursework and examinations. This method of learning is highly effective, as it suits student/learners with family, job and social problems and other time constraints. Interaction between students' and instructors' usually take place via websites, blogs, discussion boards, and e-mails and wikis.

Hybrid/Blended Learning: Refers to learning environments that allow for both in–person or on-campus component whereby instructors and the students interact with each other (Ololube, 2014, 2015). This method combines the characteristics of both traditional classroom setting and the online distance education mode (Umunadi & Ololube, 2014). Hybrid/blended learning means that there are some times students will definitely come to campus to complete some assignments or other on-campus classroom requirements (Ololube, 2011). In hybrid courses, instructors and learners meet and interact face-to-face several times during a semester or a session (Ololube, Umunadi & Kpolovie, 2014). This method of learning is on the increase in most of the higher institutions worldwide, especially to solve some of the problems that online learning finds it difficult to address, such as laboratory practices and sports related courses.

CHALLENGES FACED BY FIRST YEAR ONLINE STUDENTS

Online learning holds many advantages; students enroll in online classes because of the need for scheduling flexibility, work-life-school balance, costs, and convenience. However, teaching and learning in online environment presents lots of challenges to first year students/learners. This is because online programme demands lots of technological skills or capabilities and a peculiar learning style which makes it very difficult for most of the first year students to cope with the chosen programme of study.

The potential drawbacks revolve around the lack of personnel for face-to-face interaction between the instructor and student, and as well as student-to-student. However, in order to have a suitable atmosphere for academic work by first year online students, let us try to identify and discuss some of these challenges and possibly proffer solutions where appropriate. Generally, these challenges could be discussed under the following headings:

Motivation: The lack of motivation has been identified as one of the challenges confronting first year online students. Motivation is often the driving force that keeps students constantly working hard when subject matter becomes monotonous and boring. Students who are new to the online environment or who have lower motivation and drive may fall behind or get confused. Fleming (2015) affirmed this in a research conducted by Eduventures' in 2015 online student survey.

First year students are usually unmotivated in view of the fact that this type of instructional mode is alien to them, at least for the first year of their study. Parker (2003) has also identified self-motivation as one of the characteristics that propel online students to success in their various courses. Once this is lacking, there is no encouragement to continue in their online programme. In the traditional setup, students are usually compelled to perform one task or the other. They are time-bound for almost every activity in school. However, online environment demands different instructional methodology. In fact, every online learner is on his/her own. Every decision to learn or not to learn depends on the learner. The learner/student chooses what to learn and what not to learn at a particular time. The decision to progress or abandon the programme depends on the learner, and if the learner is not gifted in this act, this creates a big problem.

Again, many students also lose motivation when they do not have the opportunity to observe and interact with their fellow students as they struggle to learn independently. In a face-to-face classroom setup, students get motivated when they see other students pass their assignments to the course representative or to the teacher. If they also work into the library or any of the resource centers, they see many course mates reading; this will also motivate them to read harder. This however, is not the case with online environment where a learner does not know what the other online student does.

Lack of Interactions with Peers & Faculty: Another major problem in online programme is the propensity to disregard the import of interaction. Emphasizing on the role of regular interaction with online students, (Chang, 2008) revealed that research affirmed that as the level of interaction in the course increases, so does the positive attitudes of the students in the course.

In a traditional classroom setup, students academically and socially interact with faculty and with each other. This communication normally takes place before, during and after lessons. This, they do by discussing topics to be learnt or already learnt. They ask questions on vital issues concerning their academic and social activities. Through this process, they naturally gain knowledge or experience. In online environment, this is not the case; natural acquisitions of knowledge/experience are lacking and any knowledge/experiences gained must be planned and managed by trained instructors. That is, students learn through discussion forums, from postings and online chatting. Lack of effective interaction with peers and faculty does not motivate online learners/students. Jacobs (2014) asserts that engaging students in traditional education, is important in online education, but regretted that the challenge is in developing appropriate methods for engaging online education. The scholar reports that course satisfaction is contingent upon course interaction and that the use of a computer does not insure interaction. To buttress this assertion, (Brunet, 2011) pointed out that the primary disadvantage students face in online courses is the absence of interaction between instructor and student. This, the author said can lead students to negatively view the quality of online course.

Feedback Mechanism: Online education gives access to millions of learners, thereby making it extremely difficult for instructors or facilitators to attend to each and every one within a period of time. No wonder Chawla (2015) pointed out that online education, however, has historically been terrible at providing feedback. Jacobs (2014) opined that the effectiveness of an online course depends upon students feeling connected to the instructor. The scholar further stated that such an environment is made possible by quick, pertinent, and constant feedback. Hence, the scholar advised instructors to take enough initiative to regularly communicate with students, as they feel more at ease when they feel the instructor is concerned about their progress.

Research also reveal that "students who received consistent personalized instructor feedback exhibited higher satisfaction levels and academic gains compared to those students who received strictly collective feedback" (Fish & Wickersham, 2010). Feedback mechanism is one of the factors that spur students that make them feel that the instructor cares for them. Once this is lacking, it demoralizes the students urge to learn. Moore (2013) gave credence to the above statement as the scholar stated thus, when students and instructor are in the same place at the same time, giving verbal instructions and feedback are easy and natural. The scholar affirmed that the difficulty in online feedback is due to the fact that much of the instructions given to online learners are either written, which is done through discussion boards that take longer time to compose. Or, the instruction may be mediated through technology.

Technology Skill: Some online learners claim that technology is very hard for them to use. This is more prominent among the digital immigrants who have no technological capabilities and training. Therefore, the possession of technology skill is one of the challenges facing first year online students/learners. This is more prevalent in developing countries like Nigeria, where technological skill is very low. Moore (2013) posits out that many students enjoy using different types of available technology by utilizing live and captured lecture videos and demonstrations, quizzes, seminars, forum, blogs and hyperlinks to off-site learning pages. This assertion is only true for the insignificant few learners that managed to acquire the skill. There is no doubt that many secondary school students in Nigeria today never saw a computer before graduation from their various schools. Thus, the ability to manipulate the aforementioned resources to gain online experience becomes a mirage for most online learners as most of them have no basic computer knowledge (cannot boot/start a computer). To succeed in online course, learners are supposed to be computer literate, know how to store and retrieve information from the system, and install some basic/minor programs. In addition, they should be able to manipulate most mobile devices to access the Internet and visit some social media sites as well.

Internet Skill: In addition to having technology skill, most online learners are Internet neophytes. They find it difficult to manipulate the Net to source for course materials/resources. Some websites are sophisticated and not user-friendly. Hence, they find it extremely difficult to navigate the site. The student should be able to send, receive electronic messages and download email attachments.

Lack of Time Management Skill: Online learning is an independent study programme that requires self-discipline. Time management skill is one of the most important. Online programme does not require learners to be pushed by anyone to study. Learners usually study on their own when it comes to online course. It is on this premise that Alvarez-Trujillo (2017), a Professor, affirmed that if a student could not manage his/her time very well, the student cannot cope with the coursework. The ability to effectively manage time adds much credit to the study. Most online learners do not know how to manage their time very well due to family, job and personal related issues or obligations. If a learner cannot manage his time with job, family and other social activities, he/she will find it difficult in completing the study on time.

Distractions: Distraction is a silent killer. Many scholars agree that online programmes give the learner the freedom to study without distractions. But online environment is not entirely free from distractions especially when learners are studying within their environment (home, village or community) where the learner will be required to attend/honour or chairman one occasion or the other. Personal distractions have been adduced to contribute to poor performance by online students (Fleming, 2015).

Lack of Clear Objectives: There is no doubt that some online learners have no clear cut objectives and expectations, as some see the online environment as a trial and error programme. This has been confirmed by Eduventures' research of 2015 (Fleming, 2015). According to the researcher, "High performing students said the basis for their success is having clear cut objectives and expectations at the outset. That is to say, online students without clear objectives of the indented course will definitely not cope with the study.

On-Screen Reading: On screen reading is one of the problems faced by online students/learners. Most of the online study demands learners to read using the computer screen and the like, which they were not exposed to. A student that has been used to reading textbooks will definitely find it difficult to read with computer screen. Moreover, people with reading difficulties (e.g., eye problems) find it difficult reading with computer screens.

Possession of Computers: You cannot embark on any online course without first of all acquiring a computer. Not necessarily acquiring a computer, but one that is Internet ready, and with minimum requirements that are adequate for the envisaged course of study.

Lack of Emotional Cues: Emotions usually occur when persons are close to or touches one another. This aspect is seriously lacking in online environment. This has been affirmed by Kelly (2010), when the scholar states that people learn better in the presence of some emotional connection—to the content or to other people. The scholar further stressed that this emotional connections are difficult to come by in view of the fact that most of the communication in online environment is asynchronous in nature, which the author said "lacks many of the emotional cues of the face-to-face environment." In agreement with Kelly (2015), Sant (2010), an associate professor of education at Ferris State University asserts that "One of the things we know about learning is that learning with emotion is a far deeper experience than learning without emotion. This goes to show that emotional cues are vital in the teaching and learning process.

Time Management: One of the biggest keys to academic success is proper management of time. Personal time management is a critical factor in any online environment. Freshmen, be it in-class or online environments tend to misuse their valuable time for frivolous activities, which takes the real time for academic work. Online freshmen find it extremely difficult in organizing themselves for individual studies due to environmental distractions. This may be as a result of family, job and social issues. Sometimes, the newness/strangeness of the online environment makes it very difficult to manage their precious time for academic pursuits.

Overcoming Challenges Faced by Freshmen in Online Environments

Online learning is one of the newest teaching and learning strategies in the 21st century. This method is strange or new to most of the students. Hence, a lot of decisions and deprivations are required by individual learner to succeed in any online programme. For the online students/learners to be successful in online programmers, some salient measures have to be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, the following under-listed criteria could be advanced to succeed in any online course.

Communication: Written communication is one of the basis of any online programme. In stressing the importance of communication in online learning, Baker and Robert-Woods (2005) said "Communication dynamics within the classroom environment were the critical fact in learning experience" For any student/learner to succeed in any online course, that student must know how to communicate effectively in written format, especially through the use of computers because it is the most important medium of communication.

Procrastination: One of the other decisions to take in order to succeed in online communication is to avoid procrastination. Online course demands self-determination and effort (i.e., do it yourself). No person reminds learners of their duties. Students should have the zeal and commitment to complete and pass their assigned work on time and as instructed.

Regular Interactions: Constant interaction with faculty is a must for any online course student to succeed. From a social learning perspective, it has been revealed that knowledge is constructed while individuals engage in activities, receiving feedback, and participating in other forms of human interaction in public and social contexts (Hikkinen, 2002). The role of interactions in online learning has been widely considered as central to a successful learning experience (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes 2005). For online learners, these interactions may come in different ways. It may be with the content, with other students, or with instructors (Moore, 1989; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

Jacobs (2014.) opined that regular interaction is a means to keep the student working on the course. Online learners should make attempts to communicate with other students enrolled in the same online course by making access to message boards, chat rooms and other forum, which most online providers offer their students. It has been researched that students perceive greater social interaction when creating and sharing in-depth online messages (King 2002). The students should use these media to ask questions and make comments on posts. These forums also provide avenue for students to organize online study sessions with fellow students to discuss some serious problems concerning their coursework (http://www.educationcorner. com/online-education-motivation.html). Kreijins, Kirschner and Jochems (2003) revealed that learning through utilizing the computer often lacks the social interaction necessary for the development of these critical dialogues.

Efforts should also be made to exchange email accounts with fellow students/learners enrolled in the same course, so as to interact and exchange ideas in areas of difficulty in the programme of study. Moore and Kearsley (1996) postulated that distance in online education is a matter of pedagogical and not a geographical issue. Thus, the scholars stated that this distance could be overcome through effective dialogue, that is, via instructor-student interaction and instructional design (i.e., structure). The authors stated that students feel more relieved when they consider that the instructor is concerned about their progress, especially when they received consistent personalized instructor feedback, which also make them exhibited higher satisfaction in their career choice. Therefore, instructors must take it as a duty to regularly be in touch with students in the online environment via any means.

Moore (2013) emphasized that rich and detailed feedback should be provided based on the online activities selected for the online course. The scholar revealed that this should be built into selected response quizzes, actively managing discussion boards, and administering weekly surveys by asking students to identify the concept(s) they're struggling with and then addressing the most-identified concept(s) by using a product, such as "Jing" to create and post quick video clarifications. In the same development, it has also been recommended for online students/learners to interact effectively with family associates and friends enrolled in the same programme.

Ask Questions: Online programme is a situation whereby if you do not ask questions concerning your coursework, no other person does it for you. Consequently, learners are encouraged to constantly interact with course instructors because it provides a good opportunity to ask questions arising from course assignments that need clarifications. Schwartzman (2013) also affirmed that it is easy for people to discover what they learn when they are posed with

abundance of challenging questions. This, the scholar said will likely make them stay tuned to the course of study.

Provision of Emotional Connections: Creating emotional cues have been a challenging factor in online learning. Sant (2010) posits that this is very possible to accomplish vial "learner-centered approach to teaching and a mastery of the technology that supports it." When synchronous communication is much emphasized, it will increase emotional cues that will make online students learn better.

Self-motivation & Self-discipline: Parker (2003), as mentioned earlier has identified self-motivation and self-discipline as some of the characteristics that ginger online students to success in their various programmes. The above characteristics have a lot to play in any students' career pursuit. Lack of these discourages students in their online programmes. Therefore, in addition to their personal motivation, parents, relatives and friends should try as much as possible to encourage them in order to pursue their online courses with all amount of seriousness it requires.

Everything Cannot Be Taught Online: This is an important challenge that faces online students. The premise of this is that not every course can be taught wholly on the Internet. In fact, Loxton (2016) acclaimed this to be the biggest challenge of all. This, the author however said really depends on the degree of choice. Based on this, the author said that as the scholar asserts thus: Obviously, no online student can become a neurosurgeon–it's just something that cannot be taught over the Internet. The scholar further stated that this could only be achieved via in-class and online hybrid arrangements.

Sense of Balance: There is need for students to balance every activity in online programme in order to be successful. Shanley and Johnston (2009) advised that students should balance their academics with other social life. That is, balancing the need for sleep with the need for study and fun. This, however, has to do with self-discipline; students need to itemize their desires in order to match them with their budget. They should know when to balance their independence with their freedom and responsibility.

Time Management: **P**ersonal time management is a critical factor in any online environment**.** In any endeavour, time management skill is very crucial. Any student hoping to succeed in online course must possess adequate time management skills. Time Management involves doing the right thing at the right time. It is not doing the right thing at the wrong time. Freshmen, be it in-class or online environments tend to misuse their precious time for frivolous activities, which takes the real time for academic work.

Online students are expected to spend much time in academic assignments because coursework is regularly given in larger piece. Online freshmen need to study for longer hours to meet online academic challenges knowing that online environment requires constant effective and efficient time management. Online freshmen find it extremely difficult in organizing themselves for individual studies due to environmental distractions, which may be as a result of family, job and social issues.

The only way online student can improve on time management proficiency is by creating and sticking to a viable timetable that would guide/direct them to keep track of lectures, tutorials, assignments deadlines and appointments. With these in mind, time management will not be a barrier to academic success of online freshmen in any of their chosen careers.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for the study:

- Online **f**irst-year students should know that they are no more under the guidance of their parents as in the traditional school setup. They should therefore try to be responsible for their own academic activities, and different study strategies should be employed in order to achieve set goals.
- Environmental and peer pressure distractions should be resisted.
- Freshmen should ask questions when they are faced with academic challenges. If you don't say you are there, no one knows that you are there in online environment because the instructor is nor observing your facial outlook.
- Furthermore, online students should frequently visit the website, prudently manage online course materials, regularly consult online libraries and buy books to supplement reading materials.
- Proper personal time management should be strictly adhered to.
- Effective communication is very essential because online course depends much on written commutation.
- There is need for regular interaction with instructors to keep them engaged.
- Students should be committed to their studies and complete their assignments on time and as directed by the instructor(s).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the authors have explained that concept of online learning. Based on the context, the three types of online learning were examined. In the same development, the major challenges facing first year online students in online environment and the solutions to overcoming these challenges were succinctly proffered. In addition, the authors made some recommendations to overcome the challenges. Finally, first year online students should know that the challenges of responsibility and independence rests on them as they would be held accountable for their choices, actions, decisions about studying, socialization and proper time managements of their online courses. As new students, they should take important steps to be independent and self-motivating. Online learning requires self-discipline, self-denials and appropriate time management skills to succeed in any of the chosen careers. They should know that no matter the advice given to them by family members/relatives, friends and well-wishers, the one they will advice themselves stands above all others.

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[i] **Dr. Reginal Amadi** is a lecturer in the Department of Curriculum & Instructional Technology, Faculty of Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. he can be reached via email at amadireginald72@yahoo.com.

[ii] **Dr. Abraham Oriji** is a lecturer in the Department of Curriculum Studies & Educational Technology Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria.