(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

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Social media usage and civic engagement among communication students

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Abstract

This study through a quantitative survey and a purposive sampling approach examined the use of social media for civic engagement among 200 students at the Ghana Institute of Journalism, National Film and Television Institute and the African University College of Communications. Data for the study were gathered from primary and secondary sources. The study revealed that there is a strong positive correlation between social media usage among communication students and civic participation. The study revealed that majority of students are active users of social media with Facebook being the most preferred choice. This research contributes to the active use of social media in civic engagement and highlights the essence of political actors capitalising on the numerous advantages provided by social media in reaching out to a larger group of citizens for political engagement.

Keywords: Social media; Civic engagement; Communication; Students; Platform

1. Introduction

Previously, writing letters to editors and crafting op-eds were ways to show one's satisfaction or dissatisfaction about happenings in society. This can take days, and sometimes months before such issues are seen or heard in the public domain. Sometimes, they never see the light of day. Active engagement by citizens is often seen as a pillar to the democratic process whose functioning relies to a great extent on contributions from their citizens. Political participation refers to activities that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people [1].

The power of social media and its ability to cause social changes is becoming very prevalent throughout the world. Social media has been regarded as not just a converging ground for building relationships or for entertaining purposes, but it is becoming a critical tool for governance, both the governed and the governors. Citizens are now empowered with social media tools to force people, particularly the government, to listen to what they care about and to demand accountability and good governance [2].

Nielsen [3] defines social media as computer-mediated technology facilitating the growth and sharing of ideas, awareness, career interests, information, and other methods of expression through social networks and virtual communities. Social media platforms are highly interactive, and this interactivity is made possible because of an application or technique called Web 2.0. These social media sites allow users to create personal profiles and connect to other users.

The use of social media has become ubiquitous [4], with an estimated 3.8 billion active users worldwide [5]. Almost 70 percent of Americans now get news on Facebook, with 10 percent getting news on Twitter or YouTube. There is a

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consensus among scholars that one of the most popular Internet activities among university students is social media use as confirmed by Smith and Caruso [6] who found that 90% of 36,950 university students drawn from 126 U.S.A and Canadian universities use social networking websites. Cookingham and Ryan [7], argue that the adolescent period is a time of self-discovery, increased social independence and transformation into a unique individual, and they go on to say that for most adolescents in the United States, the use of social media is an integral part of daily life. Cookingham and Ryan [7] further note that social media has become an important part of today's culture and have helped define the latest generation of youth.

Students use social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace to create and sustain relationships with others [8]. In Ghana, the use of social media has increased exponentially, with platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram widely used for communication and social networking among university students [9]. The interactive nature of social media can be maximized by communication students in Ghana by participating in public debates and discussions on pressing issues that affect them. Even student's activisms could be done easily with the use of social media. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) emphasises the notion that adults know best and act in the best interests of children contributes to the failure of adults to listen to children, and when children are excluded from participation, they are denied their fundamental right to be listened to and taken seriously [10].

Social media platforms are having a profound impact on civic engagement and democracy. The scale of the impact is evident globally. But while the scale is evident, the nature of their impact is not yet clear—in large part, because, these platforms have, to date, shared little data about how their technologies are affecting society and democracy. This is happening at a time when one of the most difficult problems facing democracy in the Western hemisphere is the decline in citizens' participation in politics [1]. This potential has been vested with hopes that social media can help reinvigorate extra-parliamentarian political participation and thus strengthen democratic accountability at national and international levels [2].

Social media in recent times have become the convergence ground for millennials which is mostly used for communication and entertainment. However, not many scholars have paid attention to how young people use social media for civic engagement. Research published by Ngai et al [11] on social media effects on fostering online civic engagement and building citizen trust in institutions sampled 502 citizens. The study showed that using social media for civic engagement has a significant positive impact on trust propensity and that this trust had led to an increase in trust towards institutions.

The 2015 survey conducted by the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA) found that 63% of Internet users in Zambia spend their time online on social networking sites while about 71% of those that own smart phones use their devices to access WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, Skype and Twitter for communication using instant messaging or voice calling [12].

Akakandelwa and Walubita [13] conducted a survey into students' social media use and its perceived impact on their social life at the University of Zambia. The two authors sort to examine the type of social media platforms commonly used by students, the amount of time students spent on social media, the purpose for which students used social media and to examine the perceived impact of social media use on students' social life. Their study discovered that social media helps in giving everyone a voice and communication students must take advantage of this to make their voices heard on issues that affect their lives.

In the absence of any previous research on how communication students in Ghana use social media for public discussions and to voice out issues that affect them, this study seeks to bridge the intellectual lacuna which manifests in the body of knowledge; which most academic writings have neglected. The aim of the study is to find out how communication students in the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ), National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) and the African University College of Communications (AUCC) are taking advantage of the opportunity social media present to students in civic activities. To meet the objectives, the following research questions were posed.

- What is the preferred social media sites of students of GIJ, AUCC and NAFTI for civic engagement?
- What is the relationship between social media usage and civic participation among students of GIJ, AUCC and NAFTI?
- What is the relationship between social media usage and election campaign among students of GIJ, AUCC and NAFTI?

2. Material and methods

This cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted using data collected from student at GIJ, AUCC and NAFTI from January to March, 2023. According to Wimmer and Dominick [14], the survey method allows a large number of data to be collected with ease and it also helps the researcher to examine many variables such as demographics, attitudes, lifestyle, and motives among participants. A sample size of 200 students was drawn from the population for this study with 119 (59.5%) from GIJ, 43 (21.5%) from NAFTI and 38 (19.0%) from AUCC. The criteria used in selecting the number of respondents from each institution was that of the convenience sampling technique where the respondents' availability and accessibility is considered [15]. The study commenced after getting formal approval from Ethical review committee of the above institutions.

Data for the study were gathered from primary and secondary sources. Secondary data was collected from books, journals, articles and websites of the institutions as well as the internet. Primary data were gathered from the participants using structured close-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire was self-administered because participants could read and understand. The questionnaire was pre-tested to avoid unnecessary mistakes and ambiguity. Students were given ample time to fill the questionnaires and return them.

After completion, responses were carefully analysed to ensure that they were properly done and that the right information had been obtained. Once the piloting phase was over, 200 questionnaires were then distributed to the sampled students which were drawn from the wider population. Participants were given some time to fill the questionnaires. The questionnaire was distributed to 250 students from the selected institutions. However, duly filled questionnaire were returned by 200 students at a response rate of 80%. Data was analysed using SPSS version 22. Descriptive statistics such as cross-tabulation, percentages and frequencies were used to describe the data. Charts and tables were used to help in the explanation of the responses.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Key demographic variables such as gender, age, tertiary institution and working experience were studied.

Table 1 Gender distribution of the respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	107	53.5
Female	93	46.5
Total	200	100.0

From Table 1 above, majority of the respondents (107) sampled for the study were males. This represents 53.5% of the total number of respondents. 93 out of the total number of respondents were females which represent 46.5%. This implies that majority of the respondents from the three institutions were males. This result further indicates that the population structure in the three institutions is non-uniform and may be a sign of gender imbalance in most of the tertiary institutions in Ghana. This means that there may be a high number of males offering communication-oriented courses than the number of females.
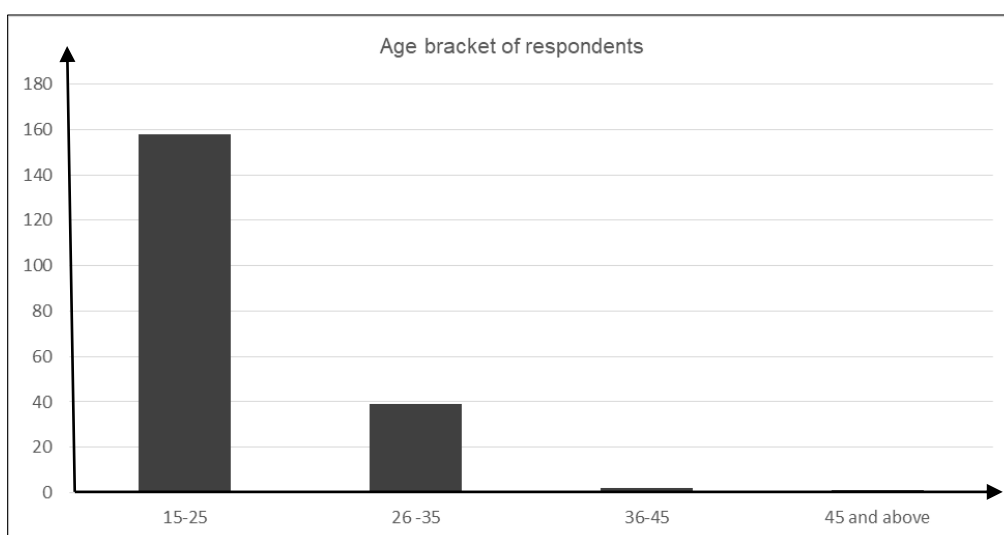
3.2. Age of respondents

The results of the analysis of the age of the respondents are presented in Table 2

The above results show that out of the 200 responses elicited, majority, thus 158 (79.0%) of the respondents fall between the ages of 15 and 25. 39 (19.5%) of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35 representing 19.5%. Two (1%) of the respondents were between 36 years and 45 years. Only 1 respondent was 45 years and above which represent 0.5%.

Table 2 Age bracket of respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
15-25	158	79.0
26-35	39	19.5
36-45	2	1.0
45 and above	1	0.5
Total	200	100.0

From the result, it is evident that a significant proportion of the respondents who were sampled are below 30 years. Hence, a considerable number of students in all the three communication institutions (GIJ, NAFTI and AUCC) are youth who in most instances have a better understanding of social media and perhaps are social media savvy. The result of the finding is further illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Age bracket of respondents

3.3. Tertiary institution

Table 3 Tertiary institution of respondents

Tertiary Institution	Frequency	Percentage (%)
GIJ	119	59.5
AUCC	43	21.5
NAFTI	38	19.0
Total	200	100.0

From table 3 above, majority (119) of the respondents were students from GIJ. This represent 59.5% of the total number of respondents. 43 of the respondents were students from AUCC while 38 were students from NAFTI, representing 21.5% and 19% respectively.

3.4. Social media usage and civic participation

The first objective of the study sought to examine the relationship between social media usage and civic participation amongst students at GIJ, AUCC and NAFTI. The respondents were first requested to identify what they use social media for and the extent to which their social media usage helps in their civic participation. A correlation analysis was done to

ascertain the relationship between these two variables (social media usage and civic participation). The result of the correlation test as well as the descriptive statistics of the test is presented in Table 4 and 5 below.

Table 4 Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Social Media Usage	1.02	0.23377	200
Civic Participation	8.07	2.88212	200

Table 5 Relationship between social media usage and civic participation

Correlation			Social Media Usage	Civic Participation
Social Media Usage	Pearson Correlation		1	**0**.072
	Sig. (2-tailed)			0.003
	N		200	200
Civic Participation	Pearson Correlation		0.072	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.003	
	N		200	200

The results indicate that there is a positive correlation between social media usage and civic participation as indicated by the positive value of the Pearson's Correlation coefficient of 0.72. The correlation coefficient also indicated a strong or large significant relationship between the two variables that is social media usage and civic participation at a 0.05 level of significance.

The positive correlation implies that when the use of social media increases or perhaps decreases, civic participation also follows in the same direction. This finding corroborates with the study of Kelly et al [16] who agree that in recent years, social media is transforming the way students interact with each other, influence public discourse and provide new opportunities for participation in political and community affairs. As a result, people turn to social media to participate in order not to be left out in their civic responsibilities. This explains why Verba et al [17] postulated that most people use social media for civic participation to develop their civic skills, establish politically useful social networks and increase opportunities for recruitment into political activities. This view also affirms findings of this study.

3.5. Social media usage and election campaign

Respondents were requested to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale, their level of agreement to the statements indicating their social media usage and how it influences their overall political choices during campaign and election periods. This helped the researchers to answer research question two. The results of the findings are indicated in Table 6.

Table 6 Social media usage and election campaign

Social media and election campaign	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree/disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I use social media to comment on political discussions that affect me	14	23	2	79	59
I use social media to campaign for or show support to my favourite candidate in student elections	20	23	25	60	72
I look up information on political rallies	16	20	38	92	34
I use social media to participate in opinion polls	14	17	39	85	44

A sample T-test was employed to examine the influence social media usage has on respondents' choices during campaign and election. The result of the findings is presented in the tables below.

Table 7 Descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Social media usage and election campaign	200	2.3938	0.97759	0.06913

Table 8 One sample T-test

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Social media usage and elections campaign	8.770	199	0.000	0.60625	0.7426	0.4699

The result of the one sample t-test above indicate that social media positively influences respondents' election campaign choices (t = 8.770). With a P value of .000, social media usage has a significant positive influence on student's election campaign choices. This is because the P (.000) value of the test is statistically less than 0.05. This finding resonates with the study of Baker [18] that the advancement in technology especially media technology and other interrelated technologies like the internet has resulted in a significant change in the way by which students connect and share information.

This advancement has made students get easy access to political information and has helped users to create networking structures that enable them to join interest groups, interact with each other and engage in political debates. With students being one of the key groups of people that use social media as a communication tool, there is a high possibility that aside communication, students use social media to engage in election activities.

Tolbert and Mcneal [19] affirm the above view that social media has influenced electoral behaviour. They further argued that the structure of social media network makes it possible to enhance democracy in that, it merges the different components of audio-visuals and traditional media like newspaper and television with interactivity and speed of telephone and mail which makes it possible for users to use in partisan politics.

3.6. Preferred social media sites of students for civic engagement

Table 9 Ratings for respondents' preference for social media networks

Social media networks	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Facebook	175	87.5
Twitter	123	61.5
Instagram	147	73.5
Skype	3	1.5
Snapchat	13	6.5
LinkedIn	48	24.0
Google+	2	1.0
You tube	4	2.0

Respondents were requested to indicate the social media networks they prefer and use most. These social media networks were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, Snapchat, LinkedIn, YouTube and Google+. This helped the researchers to answer research question three. The results of the findings are indicated in Table 9.

Table 9 above indicate respondents' preference for social media networks for civic engagement. From the table, Facebook (175) is the most preferred social media network for civic engagement among students. This represents 87.5%. This is followed by Instagram (147), Twitter (123) and LinkedIn (48). Respondents' preference for social media networks like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for civic engagement may be as a result of these networks' characteristics. These social media networks may be seen by respondents' as easy to navigate, very user-friendly, provides greater opportunity for users because they can do a number of things including the ability to upload information especially pictures and videos, chat with friends, get updates from friends' activities and easy to connect with people who have similar ideological backgrounds. The findings of this study is in line with the study of Nagel et al [20] who aver that the use of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter offer the best opportunity for students to chat and connect with friends and engage in other activities. Owan and Robert [21] also support the above findings indicating that university students' utilisation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for several reasons is generally high. For social media networks like Snapchat (13), YouTube (4), Skype (3) and Google+ (2), the small number of preference indicate that respondents do not mostly use these networks.

For networks such as YouTube, LinkedIn, Skype and Google+, respondents may not like using them because they are predominantly used for professional and career-oriented purposes. Hence, respondents may not necessarily see them as part of the social media networks that they can use for civic engagement. This finding also resonates with that of Kereke and Lucky [2014], who discovered that Snapchat, YouTube, Skype and Google+ are not often used by students in their interactions.

It is noteworthy that there are some limitations of this study. First, generalisation of the findings should be addressed with care as purposive sampling technique was used in this study. Second, there is a methodological deficiency as this study is only carried out using a quantitative method. Despite these limitations, this study provides some original findings on the use of social media for civic engagement by communication students at GIJ, AUCC and NAFTI.

4. Conclusion

The study sought to examine the use of social media for civic engagement by communication students at GIJ, AUCC and NAFTI. Findings of this study shows that there is a positive correlation between social media usage and civic participation. Thus, social media usage is associated with higher levels of civic engagement or involvement in public affairs. Individuals who use social media more frequently are more likely to participate in civic activities such as volunteering, attending community events and engaging in political discourse. This finding implies that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram can serve as effective tools for mobilizing individuals and fostering active citizenship by allowing people to express their opinions, share information, and connect with like-minded individuals or causes. The positive correlation suggests that social media can help overcome traditional barriers to engagement, such as geographical limitations or lack of information.

The study contributes to the scientific literature by advancing theoretical understanding and generated new knowledge on how communication students' social media use affects their civic engagement. As a result, researchers can develop guidelines and recommendations for communication educators to incorporate social media into their curriculum to encourage civic engagement. This research also contributes to the active use of social media in civic engagement and highlights the essence of political actors capitalising on the numerous advantages provided by social media such as networking, wider reach and bypassing traditional gatekeepers in reaching out to a larger group of citizens for political engagement.

We recommend firstly that political actors take advantage of the numerous prospects social media has to offer to enable them reach out to a larger group of citizens for political engagement. Secondly, we recommend that since not much research has been done with respect to social media and its impact on civic engagement as far as political and civic campaigns are concerned, more studies should be conducted in that area to find out if civic and political campaigns on social media influences people's behaviour. In addition, researchers can conduct a comparative study to find out the correlation between social media and traditional media in relations to their level of influence on people's civil behaviours. The study also proposed that a replication of the study amongst non-communication students is undertaken to ascertain any similarities or otherwise in the outcome.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest in the execution or outcomes of this study.

Statement of ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the Research Ethics Committee of the three institutions.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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