

Role of digital media as political communication tools in elections: A study on political science students at a public university in Ghana

Seçimlerde siyasal iletişim aracı olarak dijital medyanın kullanımı: Gana'da bir devlet üniversitesindeki siyaset bilimi öğrencileri üzerine bir araştırma

Adwoa Sikayena AMANKWAH¹



¹Senior Lecturer Dr., University of Professional Studies, Faculty of Information Technology & Communication Studies, Communication Studies Department, Accra, Ghana

ORCID: A.S.A. 0000-0002-5106-0746

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:

Adwoa Sikayena Amankwah, University of Professional Studies, Faculty of Information Technology & Communication Studies, Communication Studies Department, Accra, Ghana

E-mail/E-posta:

adwoa.amankwah@upsamail.edu.gh

Received/Geliş tarihi: 24.07.2023

Revision Requested/Revizyon talebi: 04.04.2024

Last revision received/Son revizyon teslimi: 11.06.2024

Accepted/Kabul tarihi: 12.06.2024

Citation/Atf: Amankwah, A. S (2024). Role of digital media as political communication tools in elections: A study on political science students at a public university in Ghana. *Connectist: Istanbul University Journal of Communication Sciences*, 66, 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.26650/CONNECTIST2024-1332250>

Abstract

Digital media is often understood through technical lenses that do not include the central issues of how and for what purposes they are used by citizens. Studies on social and personal factors that determine the use and outcome of digital political communication on elections are limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how individual attitudes of cynicism, political efficacy, and elaboration influence the motivations of university students to use digital media as political communication tools in elections. The study addresses this gap by employing the mixed methods approach to survey 400 students and engage 40 students through focus group discussions. Findings indicate that notwithstanding that university students experience cynicism and reduced political efficacy due to distrust of and minimal feedback from political actors on political issues, the students are motivated largely by entertainment, communication, and social utility gratifications to deploy digital media for peer-to-peer political communication on elections. The implications of the findings are that political actors must engage in symmetrical communication with young people to foster a greater sense of political efficacy.

Keywords: Digital media, cynicism, efficacy, elections, political communication

Öz

Dijital medya genellikle, vatandaşlar tarafından nasıl ve hangi amaçlarla kullanıldıklarına dair temel konuları içermeyen teknik mercekler aracılığıyla yorumlanır. Dijital siyasal iletişimin kullanımı ve seçimler üzerindeki sonucunu belirleyen toplumsal ve kişisel faktörlere ilişkin araştırmalar sınırlıdır. Bu nedenle bu çalışmanın amacı, üniversite öğrencilerinin bireysel şüphecilik, siyasal etkinlik ve ayrıntılandırma tutumlarının, seçimlerde siyasal iletişim aracı olarak dijital

medyayı kullanma motivasyonlarını nasıl etkilediğini sorgulamaktır. Çalışmada, 400 öğrenciye uygulanan anket çalışması ve 40 öğrenciyle gerçekleştirilen odak grup çalışmasını içeren karma metot kullanılmıştır. Araştırmaya göre, üniversite öğrencileri, siyasi meselelerde siyasi aktörlere güvensizlik duyması ve bu aktörlerden minimum geri bildirim alması nedeniyle hem şüphecilik hem de siyasi etkinliklerinde azalma deneyimlemektedir. Buna rağmen, elde edilen bulgular, öğrencilerin seçimlerde

denkler arası siyasal iletişim için dijital medyayı kullanmaya daha çok eğlence, iletişim ve sosyal fayda tatminleriyle motive olduklarını göstermektedir. Bulgulardan elde edilen çıkarımlar, siyasi aktörlerin daha büyük bir siyasi etkinlik duygusu geliştirmek için gençlerle simetrik iletişim kurmaları gerektiği yönündedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Dijital medya, şüphecilik, etkinlik, seçimler, siyasal iletişim

Introduction

The proliferation of digital media and their varied platforms necessitate an understanding of the social and personal factors that determine the use and outcome of behaviours (Evans et al., 2022; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Previous research suggests a likely association between political attitudes or behaviour and an individual's motivations to seek information through digital media (Masciantonio & Bourguignon, 2023), where digital media affordances influence individual attitudes and motivations. Digital media encompasses a wide range of online services and applications such as: Social media platforms, video sharing platforms, audio streaming, messaging apps, and augmented reality. The digital media employed in this study were *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok*. While some studies suggest that political chats influence political behaviours and attitudes (Bimber & Gil De Zúñiga, 2022), others proffer that political discussions online have the proclivity to influence political activities and ways of thinking about politics (Ackermann & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2022; Geise et al., 2021). Very little is known about how individual attitudes and motivations influence electoral communication online. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how individual attitudes such as cynicism, political efficacy, and elaboration influence motivations for using digital media as political communication tools in elections.

In Africa, the role of these technologies in consolidating participatory democracy is not consensual due to issues related to the structure, nature of the medium, style of communication, and unique adaptation of users (Botchway, 2018; Ngange & Elonge, 2019). Communication on digital media is often constructed through technical lenses as most studies on these technologies exclude the central issues of how they are used by citizens and for what purposes. This is a critical gap that the present study addresses. According to the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), Africans use social media platforms predominantly on mobile phones. Fifty-seven percent of tweets from Africa originate from mobile devices, whereas the youthful population ranging from 20 to 29 years comprises 60% of tweeters in Africa (Dobra 2012, p. 8). The importance of this study lies in the fact that while prior studies often focus on the use of digital media technologies for communication on elections in developing countries, what makes this study different is that limited studies exist on how individual attitudes and motivations influence university students' political engagement about elections. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how individual attributes such as political cynicism, efficacy, and elaboration by university students influence motivations

for using digital media as political communication tools in elections. The study employs a mixed methods approach using both surveys and interviews as data collection instruments to gather data from year one through to year four students from a renowned public university in Ghana. University students were sampled because they have the proclivity to use digital media.

The historical context of digital media use in Ghana

The historical context of digital media use in Ghana lies in its strategic deliberative potential. In 2003, the government of Ghana rolled out its vision for Ghana in the information age in a policy framework titled: "An Integrated Information Communication Technology (ICT) led socio-economic development policy and plan development for Ghana" (ICT4AD, 2003, p. 6). The overarching vision of the Policy was to promote the development of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural sectors of the country to enhance good governance, political stability, and democracy. This policy was geared towards harnessing digital technologies and deploying them into relevant sectors of the economy to boost economic growth and development. The general engagement and participation of people using digital media is growing and often takes the form of mobile phone calls, Short Message Service (SMS), social media, and online platforms (Ahiabenu 2013, p. 8). This is considering the fact that persons who are 12 years and older who used mobile phones represented 47.7% of the population in Ghana, while 7.8% of the population used the Internet, making it expedient to undertake a study of this nature (Ahiabenu 2013, p. 15). The Internet, on the other hand, is used primarily for social networking, followed by fact checking, research, instant messaging, and downloading music, movies, images, or watching television (Frempong 2012, p.33). Frempong (2012, p.29) indicates in the Research ICT Africa (RIA) survey that 99.1% of respondents in Ghana use mobile handsets mainly to make and receive calls. Next, the handsets are also used for 'flashing' functions; that is, to make call back requests (64.5%) and to send and receive SMS (60.5%). Digital media have served as a means to hold government and political leaders accountable to the people in addressing issues such as corruption in state institutions. The number of people using digital media technologies keeps growing daily, with a mobile penetration rate of 127.63 percent and a voice subscriber base of 35.008.387 million in December 2015 (National Communications Authority, 2016). Mobile Voice subscriptions increased from 40.35 million at the end of the third quarter of 2020 to 40.46 million at the end of the fourth quarter, representing a growth of 0.27%, while mobile data subscriptions increased by 2.54% from 25.81

million at the end of the third quarter of 2020 to 26.47 million (NCA, 2021). The major factors accounting for the growing number of people with mobile phones and internet usage include the efforts of telecommunication companies to expand their network coverage and the availability of inexpensive smart phones in China. Another reality is that social media helps politicians more effectively reach large numbers of voters in a short time and vice versa.

Political communication, cynicism, and elections

Political communication is an interactive process that involves the transmission of information among politicians, the news media, and the public. The process operates downward from governing institutions towards citizens, horizontally in linkages among political actors, and upward from public opinion towards authorities (Norris, 2001). This study adopted the upward process of political communication where the communication and opinions of university students towards politics, political actors, and institutions were interrogated. Political cynicism has been explained as a “loss of trust in government” and in communication parlance, as a “sense of powerlessness” (Euzébios Filho & Tabata, 2023; Song et al., 2020). It also connotes a belief that government and political leaders, particularly, do not care about what citizens say and do not have the latter’s interests at heart (Valgarðsson et al., 2021). This perception is deepened when the public is bombarded incessantly with negative political advertisements that denigrate others; the public eventually becomes tired of politics, withdraw their involvement, and eventually might not vote (Jayswal, 2017; Smith, 2022). Others also argue that cynicism is a stable phenomenon that is neither influenced by news nor advertisements. The framing of news about campaign coverage is also said to influence the upsurge of cynicism (Kachel et al., 2020). These authors assert that when media coverage dwells on elections, framing it as a sport and dwelling on strategies rather than the real issues of candidates, voters become disinterested and cynical.

In some cases, cynicism is purported to have positive effects. For instance, Knudsen et al. (2022) argue that a contentious relationship between the news media and the public is positive in that it challenges the status quo, and existing knowledge deepens political participation. The trend of a destructive and never-ending barrage of negative campaign information is often purported to foster cynicism and a lack of trust among citizens. Subsequently, this leads to a dwindling of civic engagement and political participation, culminating in a situation referred to as a “spiral of cynicism” (Ferreira &

Menezes, 2021). Others suggest that cynicism among younger voters highly contributes to their detachment from politics and their failure to vote (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Lariscy et al. (2011, p. 73); Grossman & Slough (2022) found that individuals with high levels of efficacy were less cynical than those with low doses of efficacy and that those who are literate in politics are often inclined to be more cynical. For other scholars, cynicism is not always negative, but it might indicate “an interested and critical citizenry” (Schuck, 2017). Another factor claimed to deter citizens from participating effectively in elections and voting is a lack of political efficacy.

Political efficacy and elections

According to Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, and Ardévol-Abreu (2017, p. 575), “political efficacy examines how evaluations of experiences in political life shape participatory behaviours”. The feeling that the level of information a person has regarding politics is sufficient to influence the political system meaningfully. The term “political efficacy” was first used by Angus Campbell and his colleagues from the Survey Research Centre, University of Michigan, in their premiere U.S. national election survey in 1952 titled: “*The Voter Decides*” (Coleman, Morrison & Svennevig, 2008, p. 773). Later, researchers modified the concept by differentiating between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ efficacy, the former meaning citizens having confidence in their political capabilities and the latter meaning citizens’ impression and experience of the “responsiveness of political institutions and actors” (Coleman, Morrison & Svennevig 2008, p. 773). Political efficacy states that information is processed at different levels based on the type of exposure to that political information (Kaid et al., 2007 Lariscy et al., 2011, p. 753).

Political efficacy is also explained as people’s belief in their ability to understand and effectively participate in local, national, and global spheres of governance (Scotto et al., 2021). Thus, feelings of political inefficacy are akin to a sense of marginalisation, detachment, or alienation that citizens feel in connexion to the activities of politicians and political institutions. Sources of information and the medium used are central to constructing an individual’s level of efficacy. For instance, prior studies found that digital media, specifically internet users, were noticeably better-informed voters than non-users. In terms of political self-efficacy, that is, the belief that one can handle challenging new situations, researchers have found that web interactivity can enhance the political self-efficacy of people. Those who have higher self-efficacy are more likely to vote or participate in politics (Bernardi et al., 2023). That notwithstanding, digital media users

are often perceived as distrustful of politicians and apathetic to politics as they do not trust the government to faithfully implement its policies (Sobieraj et al., 2020).

Coleman et al. (2008); Park (2019) also conducted a study on media use for news, political efficacy, and ways in which digital media users engage with and think of political structures and personalities within their communities. The study focused on how the interactive potential of digital media could build feelings of political efficacy between citizens and their representatives. The study was premised on earlier studies that reported a perceived lack of engagement in democratic political processes by citizens (Nissen, 2021; Sobieraj et al., 2020). In an attempt to make government, political organisations and leaders more reachable and accessible to citizens, novel communication techniques such as online parliamentary consultations, e-petitions and blogs belonging to politicians were introduced in Britain. These techniques were meant to harness the interactive potential of digital media by promoting dialogue between political actors and their constituents, thus reducing the communication chasm between them. Coleman et al., (2008, p. 775) used seven focus groups of respondents who felt politically alienated and those who felt engaged, within June and July, all in the Leeds area. Each discussion took between an hour and a half and two hours.

Earlier research indicated that citizens who felt they could affect political change either alone or together with others were more likely to be actively engaged in politics. Lu and Luqiu (2020) and Shore (2020) found that political efficacy develops as individuals engage with themselves and other political actors within their immediate localities. The findings also suggest fracturing of the link between “local attachment” and a clear sense of political inefficacy (Coleman et al., 2008, p. 786). They assert that when there is political inefficacy: politics comes to be seen as a remote, aethereal form; a culture in its own right, which does not easily translate into the daily discourse of vernacular citizenship (Coleman et al., 2008, p. 786).

They found that respondents were using the internet to seek realistic and diverse information that would enhance their civic roles; to communicate with people with whom they shared similar cultural values; and to make themselves seen and amplify issues they are passionate about to portray their marginalisation from political engagement (Dambo et al., 2022). Respondents felt that when they accessed the interactivity of digital media by sending messages to their political institutions and representatives, the latter did not respond to them. This increased their disappointment

with their leaders as they rationalised that interactions with others using these same technologies often yielded very positive findings, causing political efficacy to atrophy.

Coleman et al. (2008, p. 787) recommend that citizens be encouraged to develop “confidence-building devices” by reinforcing citizens’ conceptions of themselves in ways that would allow them to influence conversations based on their sense of morality and preferences. Deriving from the outcome of their research, Coleman et al., (2008) concluded that the development of political efficacy is a result of citizens’ experience of their interactions with authority. This is derived from their daily localised experiences and engagements with political authority.

Sperber et al. (2022) found that abysmal levels of political information efficacy did not encourage young people to vote. Other studies have found that negative advertisements are often conceived as entertaining, informative, and useful in making voting decisions (Malloy & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2016). In this vein, men showed higher levels of political information efficacy than women after exposing themselves to candidate materials. Notwithstanding that, political information efficacy increased cynicism among participants in that experiment did not reduce, implying the independence of the concept’s political information efficacy and cynicism. This study aims to determine whether political attitudes influence the use of digital media as a political communication tool in elections.

Political elaboration and elections

Political elaboration pertains to detailed communication involving political content. In a related development, Euzébios Filho & Tabata (2023b); Intyaswati et al. (2021) examined the interrelationships between the Internet as a source of political information and elaboration on political content that fosters political participation, political information efficacy, and cynicism. They compared the subject about digital natives (those born after computers were made) and older people (those born before computers). The information acquired from the Internet plays a critical role in constructing the levels of trust citizens bestow on political leaders, the extent to which citizens believe they can make a difference, and the amount of personal involvement in political processes culminating in their voting decisions (Lariscy, Tinkham & Sweetser, 2011). Zhang (2022) found that young people conceptualised political participation differently from older people. For younger people, political participation includes various individualistic online activities, such as searching for political information or reading blog content.

Aim and methodology

The study employs a mixed methods approach. It adopts both positivist and constructivist research paradigms. The positivist paradigm involves “concepts such as quantification, hypotheses, and objective measures” (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Constructivism provides reasons why people behave the way they do and uses methods such as focus groups, ethnography, and observation. This study employs surveys and focus groups. The rationale for adopting this dual research approach is to describe and explain citizens’ use of digital media for political communication during elections. Employing qualitative research would explain participants’ motivation for the adoption of digital media for political communication, while quantitative research would generate data that can be analysed to project an actual picture of respondents’ use of these technologies. The study employs systematic random sampling, which entails selecting subjects from a list of the population in a systematic order rather than a randomised manner (Walker & Baxter, 2019). Ethical approval, with the Ethical Clearance Number ECUPSA–FM–2020-003, was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Professional Studies, Accra.

Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate how individual attributes such as political cynicism, efficacy, and elaboration by university students influence motivations for using digital media as political communication tools in elections. The primary research question of this study is how digital media influences the cynicism and efficacy of university students for political communication particularly in the context of elections in Ghana. Based on the gaps identified in the review literature, the following sub-research questions guided this study:

RQ 1: What are students’ motivations for cynicism towards politics and governance when they use digital media platforms in a public university in Ghana?

RQ 2: How do students use digital media platforms to influence political efficacy and the actions of political parties that are seeking to be voted into power In Ghana?

Method

The study adopted a mixed methods research approach that employed both probability sampling techniques and non-probability techniques, particularly the purposive or judgemental sampling technique. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings regarding the research questions under investigation, a sample of 400 students from the Political Science Department of a public university in Ghana were systematically selected from the class attendance registers of year one to year four students.

A probability sample is “selected according to mathematical guidelines whereby each unit’s chance for selection is known” (Wimmer & Dominick 2011, pp. 89-90), and cases are selected in a systematic way using a table of random numbers to ensure that each unit has an equal chance of being selected. The systematic random sampling technique is an adjusted form of simple random sampling that entails selecting subjects from the population in a systematic order rather than a randomised manner (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 111). This sampling technique involves the researcher selecting the sample at regular intervals from the sampling frame or the range of cases for consideration in the sample (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 98; Saunders et al., 2007, p. 218). The universe for the study was 2,500 students from the department. A sample size of 400 was systematically selected. With a random start of two and a sampling interval of six, every sixth student was selected for inclusion in the sample. The reliability coefficient for the study was 0.834, whereas the validity coefficient was 0.467, significant at the 0.01 level. Periodicity was ensured by printing out all the students’ name lists from various year groups of the department on A4 sheets of paper and mingling the page arrangement before starting the sampling process.

The study also adopted a nonprobability sampling method that uses a purposive or judgmental sampling technique to undertake qualitative analysis. Nonprobability sampling does not use mathematical guidelines because the inclusion of a unit in the sample is not known (Wimmer & Dominick 2011, p. 89). Purposive samples include “respondents, subjects or elements selected for specific characteristics or qualities” (Wimmer & Dominick 2011, p. 94). The sample is selected intentionally in a non-random way. Purposive sampling enabled researchers to use their judgement to select cases that would best enable them to answer their research questions and meet their objectives (Neuman 2000 in Saunders et al., 2007, p. 230). The sample size for the four sets of focus group discussions (comprising ten participants per group) for this study is 40. This

information-rich set of participants was selected for inclusion in the discussions on the basis of their consistent use of digital media for political communication on elections and their orientation to the key variables hinging the objectives of the study. The purposive sampling strategy adopted in the present study is the heterogeneous or maximum variation sampling technique. This sampling technique enables the researcher to collect data and explain the key themes that can be observed.

Four sets of focus group discussions were also conducted using the purposive sampling strategy. A focus group interview relies on “interaction within a group that discusses a topic supplied by the researcher yielding a collective rather than an individual view” (Morgan, 1996, p. 9). A focus group interview clearly concentrates on a particular issue, product, service, or topic and encompasses the need for interactive discussion among participants (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2001 cited in Saunders et al., 2007, p. 339). Wimmer and Dominick (2011) recommend that focus groups should comprise a minimum of six and a maximum of ten participants who engage in semi-structured discussions on a selected subject. This study employs 10 participants per focus group.

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007, p. 376) indicate that the contrived setting of focus groups is both a benefit and a deficit. Notwithstanding their unnatural or contrived settings, they concentrate on a particular issue and therefore could produce perspectives that might otherwise not have been available in a straightforward interview (Saunders et al., 2007). Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p. 132) add that they facilitate a better comprehension of people’s attitudes and behaviour. However, critics claim that data from focus groups are difficult to analyse and that under- and over-responsiveness of some members to the discussions is sometimes challenging to handle as it has the tendency to produce unreliable data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 134; Cresswell, 2009). They augment their arguments by indicating that intragroup conflicts among members often pose challenges to inexperienced moderators (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 377). Notwithstanding these limitations, the present study adopts focus group interviews because they ensure a wider coverage of issues, save time, and produce a large amount of in-depth data that elucidates responses in a short period of time.

The focus group interview schedule for this study comprised 11 semi-structured open-ended questions that the researcher used to engage with the groups. The interviews took approximately 45 min each after the morning lectures had ended. The

focus group discussions were recorded using a digital voice recorder; notes were also taken and later transcribed for analysis. The application of focus groups to collect qualitative data for a study is not a new phenomenon as they are often used by political parties to test voter reactions to particular policies and election strategies and in market research to test reactions to products (Saunders et al, 2007).

A group of respondents made up of 100 students sampled per year group were administered with individual hard copies of the questionnaire to complete (Wimmer & Dominick 2011, p. 209). The session occurred in a natural setting, specifically in their tutorial lecture room. It took approximately 20 min to complete the questionnaires and 45 minutes to complete a focus group session. The data from the survey revealed that a quarter (representing 100) of the respondents were at level 100 (year 1 students), 93 were level 200s (year 2 students), 99 were level 300s (year 3 students), and 99 were also from level 400 (year 4 students), culminating in a total figure of 391. Although the study endeavoured to ensure representativeness in terms of number per level or year of study, the number of questionnaires that were retrieved and analysed was 391 due to missing and uncompleted questionnaires. Cronbach's alpha values of reliability tests conducted on major variables of the study based on the research objectives yielded the following values: Cynicism towards politics and governance 0.751; political efficacy 0.834; and elaboration and discussion 0.652.

The researcher encouraged respondents to be objective in their responses and reassured them that their responses would not affect them negatively as this was a study independent of their department or university. Additionally, respondents were also requested not to interact among themselves, which would make the findings biased. With the assistance of two trained field assistants, respondents appeared well-composed and excited to participate in the survey.

The study adopted this technique of questionnaire administration for the following benefits: The presence of the researcher to address any issues about the questionnaire items contributed to securing a high response rate. Furthermore, the session allowed respondents to proceed at their own pace, albeit within the time allocated for the session. Another reason for adopting this mode of questionnaire administration was that the questionnaire was longer than typical ones, such as those used in mail surveys. This was done to ensure that the research objectives had been adequately covered. Second, the group-administered questionnaires had a high response rate as the researcher was available to address problems that could arise in line with what Wimmer

and Dominick (2011, pp. 209-210) suggest. This also ensured that fewer items were left unanswered or answered incorrectly. The questionnaire involved the use of Likert scales to measure concepts that were interrogated in the study objectives. A pilot study was conducted to measure the reliability of the instruments before questionnaire administration.

Findings

Variables for the study covering three dimensions of political attitudes were adopted from Haridakis and Hanson's (2009), and Kaye and Johnson's (2002) studies. They are cynicism towards politics and governance, political efficacy, and elaboration. The subvariables tested under cynicism towards politics and governance were: the poor state of the economy, rising unemployment in the country, trust in the government, and interest in politics. The subvariables for political efficacy included how respondents' views influence the actions of the political party seeking to be voted into power, the influence of respondents' views on the actions of the presidential candidate, and whether respondents' views are heard. The subvariables for elaboration and discussion are; facilitator for political discussions, facilitator of communication with my political party, and enablers for determining issues at stake in the elections. Findings from the survey are presented first, followed by those from the interviews.

Cynicism towards politics and governance

This section presents findings on how individual attitudes namely cynicism towards politics and governance, influenced respondents' motivations for political communication on elections in terms of the economy the majority of respondents (represented by 87.7%, n: 343) variously agreed that the economy was in bad shape, while less than 10% were not sure, and three-point six percent variously disagreed. In the context of unemployment, a significant number of respondents (86.9%, n:340) variously agreed that unemployment levels in the country were rising, while less than five percent disagreed. The next subsection presents the findings on political elaboration and political discussion.

Findings appear to differ from the preceding ones on cynicism towards governance and politics in that almost a third of the respondents indicated they were unsure of their trust in the government. Further, 38.1% (n: 149) also disagreed that they trusted

the government. Only a third say they have trust in the government. Thus, more than two-thirds (70.6%, n: 276) of the respondents are either unsure of or distrust the government. This reinforces respondents' feelings of cynicism towards governance and politics. Interest in politics is presented next.

More than half of the respondents (58.3%, n: 228) indicated that the use of digital media as a political communication tool helped increase their interest in politics. Nearly a quarter is neutral and 18.1% (n: 71) disagree on the contribution of digital media to enhancing their interest in politics.

Findings from the study indicate that university students' feelings of cynicism towards politics and governance do not generally influence motivations for the use of digital media for political communication on elections, although they were dissatisfied with socioeconomic indicators of the standard of living. Unsurprisingly, over a third indicated that they were not sure they trusted the government; almost 40% (n: 156) said they did not trust the government, and just over a third agreed they trusted them. To affirm their sense of cynicism, the students shared that they joined political parties for survival reasons or to obtain party cards for travel. The next set of findings covers the subsections on political elaboration and political discussion.

Political efficacy

This dimension has three items. They are how respondents' views influence the actions of the political party seeking to be voted into power, the influence of respondents' views on the actions of the presidential candidate, and whether respondents' views are heard

Respondents were asked to indicate whether their views influenced the political party seeking their mandate. Almost a third of the respondents (33.2%; n: 130) were not sure that their views influenced the actions of the political party that they wanted to be voted for. While approximately 35% (n: 137) agreed that their views were heard by their political party, 30.7% (n: 120) indicated that their views were not heard.

Respondents were also asked to indicate how perceptible their views were to their political party. More than a third (38.8%; n: 152) of the respondents indicated that their views were not heard by their political party; a third was not sure their views were heard, while 29.9% (n: 117) indicated that their political party heard their views.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether their views influenced the action of the candidate seeking their vote. A similar scenario where almost a third of the respondents (32.2%, n: 126) indicated they were not sure that their views influenced the actions of the candidate seeking their vote. A little over another third (37.1%, n: 145) disagreed that their views were influential, while a marginal 30.7% (n: 120) agreed on the influence of their views. Overall, more than two-thirds of the respondents were unsure or disagreed on the influence of their views on political candidates seeking their votes.

In general, the study found that university students were not certain that their views were taken seriously by their political leaders nor were they sure that those views influenced the actions of political leaders. Political efficacy variables scored weak but significant associations with motivations for using digital media for political communication. The exception was political efficacy, where its correlation with social utility and communication yielded a medium positive association of 0.477. This indicates that feelings of political efficacy were associated with motivation for social utility and communication. In other words, the university students' feelings of political efficacy were a factor that culminated in their use of the technologies for political communication in elections.

Altogether, the responses strongly point to respondents' dissatisfaction with the political situation, governance, and efficacy of political leadership in Ghana. Respondents indicated distrust of the government, notable levels of political inefficacy, and a resonating concern for unemployment, corruption, and epileptic power cuts, culminating in an overall sense of diminished well-being and efficacy of the citizenry.

Political elaboration and discussion

There were three items under this category: The ability to engage in political discussions with others, the ability to communicate with respondents' political parties, and the ability to find out more about issues at stake in the elections.

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether the opportunity to elaborate on and discuss political content enhanced their political engagements and interactions with others. From the findings, 73.6% of respondents agree that when digital media are used as political communication tools in elections, they facilitate political discussions. This attests to the deliberative potential of these technologies. Less than a fifth (16.6%, n: 65) is not sure and less than ten percent disagree.

Respondents were asked to indicate how the elaborative potential of digital media facilitates communication with their political parties. While 43.8% (n: 171) of respondents variously agreed that they were enabled to communicate with their political party, more than a third (38.6%, n: 151) disagreed and a little over a quarter (27.6%, n: 108) were not sure of their ability to communicate with their parties. Altogether, the proportion of respondents who are unsure of or in disagreement with the potential to communicate with their political parties is more than those who could communicate with the party.

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they could determine more about the issues driving the elections. Most respondents agreed that when digital media was deployed as political communication tools for elections, it facilitated information provision on issues at stake in the elections. A little over a tenth was not sure, and less than a tenth disagreed.

Motivations for using digital media for political communication in elections

Generally, the study found that more than 80% (n: 313) of the students indicated that they engaged in political discussion of issues with others, while about two-thirds (73.7%, n: 288) said they were enabled to learn more about politics and elections from the discussions. Evidence from the correlational analysis shows that a correlation between political elaboration and political discussion and entertainment yielded a perfect positive correlation of one. This suggests a very significant relationship between the two variables. This indicates that university students elaborate and discuss issues of digital media influences their motivations for using digital media for entertainment.

Whereas the correlation between political information and entertainment was weak, suggesting that respondents attached seriousness to accessing political information for political communication, the perfect independence of one suggests that respondents conducted their online engagements and elaborations in a relaxed, fun-filled, exciting, and trendy manner. Thus, as much as they took the content seriously, they communicated with the content in a manner that excited and relaxed them. The study also found that how university students elaborated and discussed content did not significantly influence their motivation to use the technologies for guidance regarding election issues.

In terms of motivations for the study, mean scores of three dimensions of political attitudes; namely: cynicism towards politics and governance, political efficacy, political

elaboration, and political discussion, were interrogated. Trust in government and interest in politics dimensions soared, with the former being 3.14 and the latter having a mean score of 2.45. Varied responses to the items on trust and interest ranging from agree through neutral to disagree corroborated the mean score. It is also noteworthy that both items are personal issues that revolve around the respondent. Trust in government and interest in politics dimensions soared, with the former being 3.14 and the latter having a mean score of 2.45. This is an indication of varied responses to the items on trust and interest, ranging from agree through neutral to disagree. It is also noteworthy that both items are personal issues that revolve around the respondent.

Regarding motivations for political efficacy, a mean of 2.93 indicates that respondents are not sure that their opinions influence the actions of the political party that they want to be voted for. A mean of 3.17 also indicated that respondents were not sure that their views were heard by their political parties. The mean score of 3.12 also indicates that respondents are not sure that what they have to say influences what the candidate who wants to be voted for does. In terms of motivations, these scores indicated dwindling levels of political efficacy among respondents.

In terms of the motivations for political elaboration and political discussion, a cumulative mean of 2. suggests that respondents largely agree that digital media technologies offer them opportunities to elaborate on and discuss issues pertaining to the elections. A mean score of 2.13 for political discussions and 2.83 for ability to communicate with their political party (mean of 1.93) indicated that elaboration helped them discover more about issues at stake in the elections.

Generally, findings from the present study have little to do with political attitudes and motivations for digital media use for political communication in elections. The correlations mostly revealed weak but positive and significant associations. For instance, the correlation between motivation for cynicism towards politics and governance yielded a weak association of 0.074. This suggests that respondents' feelings about the poor state of the economy, corruption, growing unemployment levels, and frequent power cuts as well as their interest in politics do not significantly influence their motivation for deploying digital media technologies for surveillance purposes. The correlation between cynicism towards politics and governance and entertainment was also a very weak but positive figure of 0.005, suggesting that cynicism towards politics and governance was not likely to have influenced motivations for entertainment. Motivation for guidance, correlated

with political elaboration and political discussion, yielded a weak positive association of 151, suggesting that elaborations and discussions were also not likely to have influenced respondents' motivations for guidance. In other words, respondents were independent-minded and sufficiently aware of their media needs that they did not permit their political discussions online to influence their motivation for guidance on determining issues critical to the elections as well as their personal political values.

However, political efficacy correlated with social utility and communication yielded a medium positive association of 0.477, indicate that feelings of political efficacy might have influenced motivations for social utility and communication. Regarding political efficacy, respondents indicated (with a mean score of 3.086) that they were not sure they had feelings of political efficacy and that their views were not heard by their political leaders and parties nor did their views influence what the political candidates and parties did. The sense of political inefficacy and cynicism was confirmed when some students indicated that they joined political parties to obtain party membership cards for travel.

Interestingly, feelings of political efficacy did not generally influence motivations for adopting digital media technologies for political communication in elections. Thus, the university students found it useful to deliberate on issues through political communication on digital media technologies that were devoid of their feelings of political efficacy or inefficacy. Intention to vote also yielded very weak associations with the motivation variable, indicate that motivations did not really influence the university students' intention to vote.

Regarding cynicism towards politics and governance, four out of every five university students in the study agreed that the economy was in a bad state, unemployment was high, corruption was endemic, and power cuts were rampant. Two-thirds of respondents indicated their uncertainty or lack of trust in the government.

Generally, the results of the focus group discussions corroborate the survey findings. Some excerpts of the participants' responses are presented in the in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants' responses on digital media influence, political parties and their political candidates.

Views of year 1 respondents
<p>"You have quick access to the sites and politicians."</p> <p>"Other social media (such as Facebook) is crowded, so you get the sense that you are not seen. You can just 'like, comment, view, or follow' others but with WhatsApp and Instagram, you can contribute to the discussions and track them. This gives us a sense of importance."</p> <p>"On social media, politicians just shows us what they can do, not what we want."</p> <p>"We use social media features to engage online on political issues."</p> <p>"Prefer social media because traditional media takes their agenda from social media."</p> <p>"Social media air information that traditional media use."</p>
Views of year 2 respondents
<p>"No limitations, free to give comments and criticise."</p> <p>"Free to share information in the comfort of your own room without fear of attack."</p> <p>"Helps test your ideas in terms of whether your views are popular."</p> <p>"Watchdog to politicians who act on their views as they represent public opinion."</p> <p>"Know about current issues."</p> <p>"Information is viral as favourite tweet can spread."</p>
Views of year 3 respondents
<p>"Views are heard as politicians have people who monitor online discourse."</p> <p>"Obtain information from other constituencies."</p> <p>"Political party fanbearer on social media projecting party has loyalty effects and projects party as winnable."</p> <p>"You meet politicians on social media."</p>
Views of year 4 respondents
<p>"Feedback indicate others or 'collective' groups share your views."</p> <p>"Indirect links with political leaders."</p> <p>"Online media is bigger platform than rallies."</p> <p>"Some people are unwilling to speak at rallies but might speak online."</p> <p>"Go to Facebook to cheque where political party is touring, know its next messages."</p>

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study is to investigate how individual attributes such as political cynicism, efficacy, and elaboration by university students of a renowned public university in Ghana influence motivations for using digital media as political communication tools in elections. This study is novel as it unravels how university students' motivations for the purposeful deployment of digital media influence their sense of efficacy, cynicism, and elaboration on political communication on elections. Generally, the findings suggest that university students did not allow their feelings of cynicism towards politics and politicians to influence their motivations for political engagement, political elaboration, and political discussion. However, year three and four university students exhibited noticeable levels of political inefficacy when communicating on the elections, cautious of avoiding being tagged as belonging to one political party or the other when they made comments on political issues. These findings align with Haridakis and Hanson's

(2011) study, in which they found that voter cynicism among younger voters detached them from politics and deterred them from voting. Scotto et al. (2021) explain this phenomenon by asserting that feelings of political inefficacy are akin to a sense of marginalisation, detachment, or alienation that citizens feel in connexion to the activities of politicians and political institutions.

However, Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz (2016) argue that negative campaign information influences cynicism and lack of trust in political leaders. Jones-Jang et al. (2021), who found that voter cynicism negatively influences political participation share similar views. However, Song et al. (2020) discovered that media cynicism towards politics and governance produces positive effects in that it challenges the status quo, deepening people's political participation in politics. It is clear from these studies that not much has been uncovered in terms of whether political attitudes influence motivations for digital media adoption. Findings on this study hope to unravel more of the association as it discusses how political efficacy influences motivations for digital media use.

Conversely, those with higher levels of efficacy were more likely to participate in politics, and online political interactions could enhance political efficacy (Oser et al., 2022). According to Lu and Luqiu (2020) and Shore (2020), it is as individuals engage with themselves and other political actors within their immediate localities that they develop political efficacy.

Pingree (2007) offers an insightful explanation of this conundrum to the effect that expression, not reception, may be the first step towards better citizenship. Its mere expectation can motivate elaboration of media messages, and the act of message composition is often much more effective at improving understanding than any act of reception (Pingree 2007, p. 447).

Thus, the literature corroborates findings on the political elaboration of political information in which year three university students indicated that they discussed and understood content on websites and social media platforms of political leaders and their parties without solely depending on graphics. There is an implicit suggestion here that the opportunity to compose, discuss, and elaborate on content for social utility purposes facilitates understanding.

In addition, the findings indicate that university students exhibited a sense of ownership of content on digital media platforms by simplifying it to enhance understanding. It also indicates a likelihood of why, despite scant communication from political actors, students still engage in political communication. They simply like it, and as a student aptly puts it, "My world is in the mobile phone."

Notwithstanding the cynicism towards governance and politics expressed by university students, the findings indicated that they were not averse to communication on digital media platforms. In other words, the feeling of university students that government and political leaders did not care for them or have their interests at heart did not influence their motivations to use digital media for political communication in elections. As a result, they proceeded to engage with others in the elections despite their cynicism towards politics and governance.

Further political elaboration and political discussion did not significantly influence social utility and communication motives. Evidence from correlational analysis depicts weak but significant associations. This indicates that political elaboration and political discussions by university students are made independently of guidance and social utility motives. Knoll et al. 2020 argued that the opportunity to express one's view on social media foster participation. Similar views are shared by Jennings et al. (2021). They found that citizens were disengaged from democratic political processes. He et al. 2022 found that a sense of political efficacy developed as citizens engaged among themselves and with other political actors in their communities. In line with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of communication, elaborations and discussion of content on digital media epitomise symmetric communication in that the process involves transmission and sharing of information among university students. However, the findings indicated that except for the entertainment variable, political discussions and political elaboration on issues did not generally influence motivations for digital media use for political communication on elections markedly.

Notwithstanding that this section seeks to determine the influence of political attitudes on motivations, it is also crucial to determine the role of the interactivity of digital media as it facilitates political elaboration and political discussion on digital media. Earlier, findings on social utility and communication bore close to strong correlations with all three dimensions of interactivity, attesting that interactivity fosters communication and discussions on digital media (Amankwah & Mbatha, 2021). In

support of this, Ciuchita et al. (2022) argue that interactivity is at the centre of communication, discussion, and elaboration and that they offer an 'affordance that allows one to make real-time changes to the content in the medium.' Li and Chen (2021) express similar views. They assert that the five dimensions of interactivity are 'playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication.' All five dimensions of interactivity conform to social utility and communication motives and political attitudes of political elaboration and political discussion.

It is also noted that with respect to political elaboration and political discussion, the discussions and elaborations conducted by year one and year two university students influence their use of the technical interactive features of digital media. In other words, features such as emails, hyperlinks, chats, and SMS text messages serve as useful tools that support discussion and elaborations students conduct on digital media. Likewise, political elaboration and political discussion matched well with textual interactivity. This indicates that digital media users deploy content, graphics, and photographs to facilitate online discussions and conversations but do not depend solely on them for understanding. This is why the study asserted earlier that the inherent motivation and purposefulness of university students enabled them to simplify, modify, recreate, and disseminate messages on digital media. Political elaboration and political discussion correlated with cynicism towards politics and governance yielded a medium correlation of 0.523, suggesting that the opportunity for political elaboration and political discussion of digital media content might have provided an outlet for digital media users to vent their feelings of cynicism towards politics and governance.

In conclusion, this study discovered that political attitudes of university students did not generally influence motivations for using digital media as political communication tools in elections. Although they were displeased with the harsh socio-economic realities and high unemployment, as well as felt some cynicism and reduced levels of political efficacy due to limited feedback from political actors, political parties, and their social media platforms; the opportunity for political elaboration and political discussion afforded them through symmetrical peer-to-peer communication in an entertaining manner enabled them to rise above the cynicism to political efficacy and enact citizenship.

Future research could investigate how political actors could effectively deploy digital media to enhance university students' feelings of efficacy and cynicism, translating

into votes in an election. Furthermore, the sample could be made more diverse to include more students with varied demographic indicators such as gender and ethnicity from both public and private universities to determine whether there is any association between them. To achieve more depth and detail, a purely qualitative study could also be conducted to determine in detail the motivations for digital media use, individual differences, and elections.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethical approval, with the Ethical Clearance Number ECUPSA-FM-2020-003, was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Professional Studies, Accra

Informed Consent: Collected from each participant.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Etik Kurul Onayı: ECUPSA-FM-2020-003 Etik İzin No'lu Etik Onay, University of Professional Studies, Accra Etik Kurulu'ndan alınmıştır.

Bilgilendirilmiş Onam: Tüm katılımcılardan alınmıştır.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

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