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Interactivity gratifications: Millennials' motivations in using new media technology for political communication about elections

ABSTRACT

The study explored how the interactive attributes of new media technologies influence the gratification-seeking behaviour of millennials. Using a mixed methods approach, it employed a survey and focus group interviews to collect data from university students. From a population of 2 400 university students from the Political Science Department of a renowned public university in Ghana, 400 students were systematically sampled for the survey, while 40 students were purposively selected for focus group discussions. The findings indicate that the interactive features of the technologies produced emerging social and psychological gratifications in millennials by projecting them as purposeful, and active in deploying symmetric political communication repertoires. The practical implication of this is that political leaders need to invigorate their electoral communication repertoires both in substance and in depth by deploying the heuristic attributes of the new technologies to facilitate the awakening of visceral responses in millennials and get them to engage in e-politics.

Keywords: New media technologies, interactivity gratifications, motivations, political communication, elections

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INTRODUCTION

Ghana has been touted as a trailblazer of democracy in Africa by the international community following two peaceful transfers of power. In the past two decades, Ghana has organised six previous elections with minimal incidents of electoral violence (Penplusbytes, 2016; Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2016). However, the 2016 elections were critical in that presidential aspirants of the two major political parties in Ghana, namely Nana Addo Dankwa Akuffo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) had been three-time candidate and had the last opportunity to be elected due to his advanced age while John Dramani Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) was seeking re-election for a second term in office as incumbent president having previously served as vice-president for almost two successive terms under his predecessor, the late Prof. John Evans Atta Mills. Both candidates and their parties deployed contemporary political campaign strategies through traditional media such as radio, television and newspapers, together with new media, particularly social media, to reach out to voters.

Further, in previous elections, issues of social reality and identity had influenced voter behavior, while elections had been won through campaigns that micro-targeted interests and concerns such as health, unemployment and education of demographic categories including youth, women and children (CDD, 2016; Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2016). Available data indicates that the youth comprise 58% of Ghana's population, and people between the ages 18 and 35 have constituted the majority of Ghanaian voters in previous elections and comprised over 65% of voters in the 2016 elections (Penplusbytes, 2016). This makes it compelling to interrogate the online electoral discourses of young people, particularly university students (most of whom fall within the given age bracket). Because they are millennials and future leaders, it is interesting to interrogate why they engage in political communication on elections with political actors.

Increasing internet penetration in Ghana is another indicator of the need for this study. Ghana has had a growing internet penetration rate for the past decade. As at January 2020, 14.76 million (48%) of the total population of 30 million people had access to the internet, while 39.97% had access to mobile connections (Kemp, 2020). Global Internet statistics on Ghana indicate that between February 2019 and February 2020, 46.61% of the population used Facebook, followed by 21.33% using Twitter, while Pinterest had 18.17% (Kemp, 2020).

The youth, particularly university students in Ghana, like elsewhere, are avid social media users (Ahiabenu, 2013; Nielsen, 2013; Alec, 2014). Previous studies suggest that young people deploy new media technologies and associated social media for purposes such as building social networks, for entertainment and gratifying informational needs, including navigating the political arena (Ohme, 2019; Evins, 2017; Skoric, 2015; Gil de Zuniga & Shanin, 2015, Nielsen, 2013). However, it is not known why university students deploy the interactive features of new media technologies for political communication on elections.

New media technologies can be used to interrogate citizens' responses to policy decisions of

governments and as conduits to garner “ideas and impulses, thereby creating possibilities for more direct forms of participation than polls and four-year-voting routines allow” (de Bastion, Stiltz & Herlitz, 2014:3). According to Evins (2017:6). new media has given rise to millennials who are “connected to the political process”, have “voices that communicate beyond the ballot box” and are enabled to reach out to an unconstrained political community. Barassi (2016) argues that political communication is reconstructed through interdependence on personal networks to mobilise, share and organise information. Deriving from this, political science students, more than other students of universities in Ghana, are likely to use new media technologies for direct political communication about elections to determine the stance of politicians regarding unemployment, education, or political ideology, and also to reinforce their own sense of political efficacy. However, little is known of the motivations that influenced young Ghanaians particularly university students, to deploy the interactive features of new media technologies to construct dialogue on the 2016 elections in Ghana. Thus the study sought to use an explanatory research approach to answer the research question: How does interactivity influence university students’ motivations to use new media technologies for political communication about the elections? In other words, do university students use new media for the purpose of having interactive exchange with political actors or are there other purposes?

1. CONTEXTUALISING NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

Over a decade ago, Castells (2007:248) aptly described new media technologies in the following words:

We are indeed in a new communication realm, and ultimately in a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive. True, the medium, even a medium as revolutionary as this one, does not determine the content and effect of its messages (Castells, 2007:248).

In consonance with Castell’s explanation, new media is an evolving and revolutionary term referring to interactive forms of communication that use the Internet, including podcasts, blogs, social networks, text messaging, wikis, virtual worlds and all other computer-aided communication formats available online (Logan, 2010; Alec, 2014; Gil de Zuniga, 2015). Thus, while new media offers innovative prospects for networked communication technologies through the distribution of unfiltered content on digitised computer technologies enabling users to depend less on information from traditional media (Norris, 2001). new media technologies refer to a varied number of devices, channels, and venues on those platforms that enable users to interact through the Internet and to communicate with other people (Sundar & Limperos 2013:505)

Thus in the context of this study, new media technologies are used to refer to Internet-enabled communication formats such as websites, blogs and social media, together with devices such as smartphones that allow citizens to have unhindered access to mass democracy through platforms that foster expression, participation and political activism, thereby promoting transparency, a public-oriented communication process and citizen interactivity (Ohme, 2019; Feenstra & Casero-Ripolles, 2014). Although it is argued by some that new media technologies could contribute to distraction and apathy through entertainment media or information overload, as well as foster mis- and disinformation, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp offer platforms which may enhance mass democracy by providing information for citizens and channels for incisive discussions in the online public sphere (Amankwah & Mbatha, 2019; Dzisah, 2016; Skoric, 2015; Gil de Zuniga & Shanin, 2015). Ohme (2019) avers that social media platforms provide political information, thereby enhancing engagement with campaign topics and subsequently political participation.

In Africa, mobile or smart phones are increasingly being seen as a suitable technology for the promotion of e-democracy. Many young people access information using internet-enabled smartphones. They contribute to consolidating the political communication of African culture (Willems, 2010). Wasserman (2011:147) notes that mobile phones are a “force for social change” because they have “1,001” uses and they enhance speedy and cheaper communication in that they do not need a network of landlines (Etzo & Collender, 2010:659; Wasserman, 2011:147).

2. THE CASE FOR THE USE OF NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES IN GHANA AND ABROAD

In Ghana, political communication on elections is often conducted through the traditional media, as well as mobile phone calls, SMS, social media applications and other virtual outlets (Ahiabenu, 2013:8). However, dating back to the 2008 elections when biometric verification was introduced to enhance election credibility, various forms of new media such as SMS and blogs such as GhanaDecides were deployed to monitor the 2012 elections (De Bastion, Stiltz & Herlitz, 2014). New media technologies generally and social media in particular were used by the Electoral Commission, political parties and candidates as tools to mobilise citizens, particularly the youth to vote in Ghana’s 2016 elections (Penplusbytes, 2016; Ahiabenu, 2013). Civil Society groups such as the Coalition for Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) used social media to educate Ghanaians on the 2016 limited voters’ registrations and other related projects, and a blogging election project dubbed GhanaDecides used its online platform #iRegistered campaign to encourage eligible Ghanaians to register in the 2016 limited registration exercise (Penplusbytes, 2016). Candidates of the two major political parties deployed party websites and individual social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to engage with the youth in consonance with practices in western advanced countries.

In Africa, the deployment of new media technologies by citizens for political communication on governance and elections reached a climax during the North African uprising when citizens deployed social media and user-generated content to ventilate their displeasure with the then existing political systems that resulted in political transformation in Syria, Tunisia and Libya among others (OECD, 2014). According to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in Tanzania, in the online space, “the megaphone is replaced by the keyboard, where votes hinge on hashtags, “likes” and retweets. It may not yet be vital to success, but social media is playing an increasingly important role in sending messages to a wider audience” (IPPR, 2014:3).

The relevance of investigating the interactive features of new media technologies lies in their increasing contribution to campaign success in advanced countries such as the USA, Germany, Italy, Spain, Britain and Australia (Nielsen, 2013, 2014; Chadwick & Stanyer, 2010; Gilmore & Howard, 2013; Ceron & d’Adda, 2015). Many of the studies focus on how political candidates and actors deploy new media technologies to gauge citizen interest and perception of campaigns, manifestoes as well as programmes of political actors and their parties; others interrogate the online engagements and content of political messages by political actors (Nielsen, 2013; Gil de Zuniga, 2015). However, it is unknown why university students deploy the interactive features of new media technologies to communicate on elections and whether interactivity influences their motivations for symmetric political communication, producing expected gratifications.

According to Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2018). during the 2016 elections in the USA, amidst various contestations of factors that might have precipitated former President Donald Trump’s victory, his campaign deployed social media to target compelling online messages and tweets to the citizenry. In the case of the 2015 Danish elections, Ohme (2019) found that more than legacy media (radio, television and newspapers) and online news sites, young people predominantly receive non-commercial posts and videos more positively from politicians. Thus the prospects of direct political communication with politicians is another motivating factor influencing new media use.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature on how interactivity is conceptualised and links it to related empirical works.

2.1 CONCEPTUALISATION OF INTERACTIVITY

Conceptually, the study adopts Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese’s (2007) three-way model of interactivity that categorises interactivity on two axes, namely, high interactivity and low interactivity, applied to one-way, two-way or three-way communication. This study uses this

model as a parallel to determine whether three-way symmetric communication takes place among university students and political actors and also to determine how the interactivity of new media technologies influences university students' motivations to use new media for political communication on the elections. However, Ferber et al's. (2007) model of communication only illustrates the concept of interactivity. To operationalise the concept, interactivity has been explained in the definition below.

Interactivity has been defined as a multidimensional concept that includes the amount of choice provided to users, the amount of effort users must make in order to access information, how actively responsive a medium is to users, the potential to monitor system use, the degree to which users can add information to the system that a mass undifferentiated audience can access, and the degree to which the system facilitates interpersonal communication between specific users (Heeter, 1989; Ruggiero, 2000; Hand, 2008). Embedded in the definition and Ferber et al's. (2007) model of interactivity are concepts such as choice, access, responsiveness, monitoring, message creation, dissemination and ease of interpersonal communication.

In the three-way model of interactivity shown below, monologue represents one-way asymmetric communication characterised by information provision solely with no feedback options. It may be interactive due to availability of choice over access. There is also feedback through asymmetric tools such as emails, contact forms or a collection of frequently asked questions thereby aligning it to non-public communication. Two-way symmetric communication is characterised by mutual discourse where there is engagement or at the least responsive dialogue and feedback among two participants. With the two-way symmetric communication, moderators frequently forward participants' comments to the site (Ferber, et al., 2007). Then there is three-way communication characterised by public discourse. This represents symmetrical public communication between many participants who generate content, freely exercise control of it and participate publicly in creating the content. Three-way communication enables hitherto unknown and unidentified parties to receive the message, making it a publication. At the low end of three-way interactivity is controlled response. It is where two site users or participants can patronise the site but the site is controlled.

An instance of public discourse is found in Lilleker and Jackson's (2010) study of content analysed messages, features and style of websites used by presidential candidates in the 2010 elections in the United Kingdom (UK). They found that party websites were well patronised and that websites of all the six UK parties had a partisan posture. Hyperlinks were employed to direct visitors to various branches of the party. There were also features designed to mobilise party supporters in their communities through the I-phone application, which consolidated the win-win objective to gratify both party and the online audience.

	One way	Two way	Three way
High	<p>Feedback</p> <p>S R</p>	<p>Mutual discourse</p> <p>P P</p>	<p>Public discourse</p> <p> P</p> <p>P P</p>
Low	<p>Monologue</p> <p>S R</p>	<p>Responsive discourse</p> <p>S R</p>	<p>Controlled response</p> <p> S</p> <p>R P</p>

Figure 1: Three-way model of interactivity

Source: Ferber et al's (2007) six-part model of cyber-interactivity (S = Sender, R= Receiver; P = Participant; Sender and receiver roles are interchangeable)

Thus to facilitate analysis from a user perspective and to holistically categorise the concept of interactivity as defined from Ferber et al's (2007) model, the study adapted Williams and Serge's (2011) dimensions of interactivity, namely, general, technical and textual interactivity. General interactivity refers to attributes of new media technologies that facilitate use such as access, choice, control, message creation, production and dissemination. Technical interactivity refers to tools such as emails, hyperlinks, hash tags, chat rooms, SMS and related new media applications that facilitate the smooth functioning of the technologies, while textual interactivity involves content, text, photographs, graphics and cartoons.

The technical interactive features of new media technologies such as emails, chats, SMS and hyperlinks have been instrumental in facilitating online deliberations. For instance, in the 2008 US elections, emails, SMS, interactive chats and discussion boards were used to enhance interactions between political candidates and citizens thereby promoting two-way communication (Smith 2009; Williams & Serge 2011; Skoric 2015; Williams et al., 2005). Foot et al. (2003 cited in Williams & Serge 2011) found that candidates had effective hyperlinks to external information that facilitated forwarding of e-mails regarding political mobilisation efforts, thereby authenticating the information. Trammell et al. (2005) argue that hyperlinks enable users to technically interact at three different levels; namely "user-to-system, user-to-user and user-to-document" (Williams & Serge 2011:47). From Ferber et al.'s model (2007). the parallels of these levels are one-way asymmetric communication and two-way symmetric communication.

Further, hyperlinks could improve users' attitudes towards political candidates (Hendricks & Kaid, 2011; Sey, 2011; Quan-Hase & Young, 2010). The web promotes textual interactivity by making content available and disseminating it (Stromer-Galley, 2003). Textual interactivity can also promote users' evaluations of candidates' qualities and policies by projecting political candidates as humane, responsible and trustworthy individuals (Alec, 2014; Hendricks & Kaid, 2011). They are useful for modernising party communication strategies and strengthening civic engagement in direct democracies (Fraefel et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2005). They also promote recall of the issue stance of candidates and prolong user engagement with websites of candidates (Warnick et al., 2005). According to Trammell et al. (2006), user engagement with content and the acquisition of political information is sustained through a variety of textual interactive message strategies such as candidates directly addressing the audience, calling for action and inviting them to participate in political party activities.

The above studies recount the benefits of interactivity but it is unclear how interactivity influences university students' motivations for deploying new media technologies as political communication tools in elections. The study now considers the potential of new media technologies to promote symmetrical political communication.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents the uses and gratifications theory as the underpinning approach to determine how interactivity influences motivations for university students engaging in symmetric communications.

3.1 USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY

The uses and gratifications (U&G) approach can be traced back to Harold Lasswell's (1948) linear model of communication premised on "who says what through which medium and with what effect?" In 1974, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch conceptualised the uses and gratifications approach as comprising: (1) The social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media and other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (Papacharissi 2009:138).

Scholars have expanded the theory citing five basic assumptions that undergird the uses and gratifications approach (McLeod & Becker, 1981; Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Rubin, 2009) as follows: First, the purpose and motivations of individuals propels their communication behaviour. Second, people are relatively active in that they are aware of their media needs and they can select the media and content to consume. In effect, people can rationalise their reasons for using the media. Third, social and psychological characteristics of individuals, structure of society, groups within it, existing relationships as well as personal involvement influence communication behaviour and effects. Fourth, various media compete with each other

(functional alternatives) to be selected, attended to and used. Finally, interpersonal effects are more influential than media effects.

Uses and gratifications (U&G) theory has been applied to the study due to the fact that motivations for new media use results in communication behavior and in the present context, political communication. Second, socio-psychological characteristics of individuals influence communication behaviour in relation to other functional alternatives. Third, activity deriving from individuals' rational and purposeful selection, exposure and consumption of new media technologies is a component of interactivity. Thus, individuals choose particular (new) media based on certain needs and expectations that culminate into motives for media consumption and gratifications (Papacharissi, 2009; McQuail, 2008; Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009; Kaye & Johnson, 2002). Moreso audience activity is a viable dimension of new media interactivity and the processes of media consumption are analogous to that of new media consumption (McQuail, 2008; Park et al, 2009). Deriving from this, Papacharissi & Rubin (2000) add that individuals can articulate the factors that culminate into producing motives together with the media-use induced outcomes. In this regard the study interrogates why university students deploy interactivity of new media technologies for political communication on elections.

4. METHODS

The study adopts explanatory research design to interrogate the influence of interactivity on motivations for new media technology use for political communication on elections. Using the mixed methods approach comprising surveys and focus group discussions, the study sampled the perspectives of students of the Political Science Department of the University of Ghana – Ghana's premier university.

A systematic sampling approach was adopted where four hundred students were sampled from a population of 2,400 students from the list of registered students of the Department of Political Science of the University of Ghana. Using a random sample of n , every sixth student was selected for inclusion in the sample, giving a total of 400 hundred students. The survey was conducted two weeks to the start of the general elections in December 2016.

The measures used were interactivity (categorised as general, technical and textual interactivity). and motivations which tested for guidance, surveillance, social utility and communication and entertainment variables. The question wordings included the following: How does general interactivity influence motivations for political communication on elections? How does technical interactivity influence motivations for political communication on elections? How does textual interactivity influence motivations for political communication on elections? Thus the interactivity measures were tested with each of the motivations variables to determine their means. Further, Pearsons correlations test was employed to determine levels of association between the variables. The survey employed semi-structured questionnaires to collect the

data. Using the SPSS software, descriptive statistics indicating the means of various variables as well as Pearson correlations were extricated and subsequently analysed to determine the association between interactivity and motivations. The qualitative aspect was measured using focus group discussions. Forty students with 10 students in each group were selected for inclusion in the focus group discussions. Participation was voluntary, based on the participants' proclivity to effectively engage with political content. Results of the focus group discussions were analysed using thematic categorisation in line with the research question for the study. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings are presented subsequently.

5. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study. Measures on motivations for the use of new media technologies for political communication on elections ranged from guidance, surveillance, social utility and communication as well as entertainment, while variables measuring interactivity included general interactivity, technical interactivity and textual interactivity. A nominal Likert scale range from 1 = strongly agreed, 2 = agreed, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagreed and 5 = strongly disagreed was deployed to ascertain data from the respondents.

5.1 GENERAL INTERACTIVITY AND MOTIVATIONS

General interactivity consisted of seven variables namely: Intentionality, choice, participation, ease of access, monitoring, control, information creation and dissemination. In table one below, respondents agreed cumulatively (-2.0) that motivations for using new media technologies are due to the technologies' general interactive features. Levels of agreement ranged from means of 1.57 to 2.30.

Correlational analysis conducted between general interactivity and motivations variables revealed that all the relationships were significant at the 99.9% level of confidence. General interactivity motivated respondents to relate with their political parties, have their concerns addressed and provide subjects of conversation with their peers and to persuade undecided voters to vote for students' political parties. However, respondents were not sure interactivity fostered communication with their political leaders.

Table 1: General interactivity and motivations

General interactivity	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
I intentionally use new media technologies	391	1	5	2.21	1.181
It helps me have a variety of information to choose from	391	1	5	1.57	0.802
It helps me participate in online discussions on the elections	391	1	5	2.17	1.018
It is easy to access information there	391	1	5	1.57	0.829
It enables me monitor the technology I use	391	1	5	2.30	1.095
It helps me create information that others can access	391	1	5	1.87	0.910
Valid N (listwise)	391				

Source: Field study 2016

5.2 TECHNICAL INTERACTIVITY AND MOTIVATIONS

The second sub-variable under interactivity that was tested is technical interactivity. Technical interactivity measures comprised five items namely: SMS facilitating message transmission; chat with others of similar political interests, ability to send emails to political leaders, receive emails from political leaders, and hyperlinks facilitating forwarding of messages. An aggregate mean score of 2.44 suggested that respondents largely feel that technical interactivity of new media technologies influenced their motivation to use the technologies as political communication tools on the elections.

Table 2: Technical interactivity and motivations

Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
SMS facility helps me send messages to others	391	1	5	1.52	0.853
It helps me chat with others who have similar political interests	391	1	5	2.01	1.065
I am able to send emails to my political leaders	391	1	5	3.14	1.340
It helps me receive feedback from my political leaders	391	1	5	3.04	1.308
The hyperlinks in online campaign messages enable me to forward them to others	391	1	5	2.40	1.280
Valid N (listwise)	391				

Source: Field study 2016

The sample means of three of the individual items within technical interactivity corroborate this assertion. The items are SMS as facilitator for message transmission ($X = 1.52$); chats as tool to connect with others of similar political interests ($X = 2.01$) and hyperlinks facilitate online forwarding of messages ($X = 2.40$). Sample means of the other two variables suggested that respondents were neither sure technical interactivity motivated them to send emails to their political leaders ($X = 3.14$) nor motivated them to receive feedback from political leaders ($X = 3.04$).

In considering correlations between technical interactivity and motivations for guidance, it was noted that technical interactivity also registered weak positive correlations with motivations for guidance (0.307) and surveillance was .303. The correlation of .561 suggest that technical interactive features of new media technologies such as SMS, chats, emails and hyperlinks facilitated respondents' interpersonal and relational competencies motivating them to communicate with their peers on the elections. However, they did not motivate respondents to use them for guidance on how to vote and perceptions of political candidates.

5.3 TEXTUAL INTERACTIVITY AS MOTIVATION FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Textual interactivity was tested with motivations along five dimensions namely; appeal of

graphics on political party websites, appeal of content on political party websites, ease of comprehension of messages on political party websites, ease of comprehension of messages on social media platforms of political candidates and ease of understanding on neutral websites.

Table 3: Textual interactivity and motivations

Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
SMS facility helps me send messages to others	391	1	5	1.52	0.853
It helps me chat with others who have similar political interests	391	1	5	2.01	1.065
I am able to send emails to my political leaders	391	1	5	3.14	1.340
It helps me receive feedback from my political leaders	391	1	5	3.04	1.308
The hyperlinks in online campaign messages enable me to forward them to others	391	1	5	2.40	1.280
Valid N (listwise)	391				

Source: Field study 2016

The findings suggest that textual interactivity influenced and guided the perceptions of university students about political candidates (correlation of 0.409) and the capacity of students to campaign for their parties but it did not influence them in terms of which candidate to vote for. The correlation of these variables is also significant at the 0.01 level. A Pearson's Correlation matrix between interactivity and motivations has been provided in Table 4 below to illustrate the association.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix between interactivity and motivations

	Guidance	Surveillance	Social Utility & Communication	Entertainment
G e n e r a l Interactivity	0.291	0.399	0.422	0.439
T e c h n i c a l Interactivity	0.307	0.303	0.561	0.113
T e x t u a l Interactivity	0.409	0.325	0.426	0.194

Source: Field study 2016

5.4 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Items tested in the focus group discussions were derived from the major variables of the study; namely motivations and interactivity. An interview guide comprising semi-structured questions were administered to the groups and excerpts that speak to the research questions were captured.

Qualitative data on motivations and general interactivity from focus group discussions indicated that the participants were motivated to deploy new media technologies as political communication tools because it gave them a sense of control and ownership of the content, the technology and the substance of the information.

For instance, a level 200 student makes this phenomenal statement that: *“My world is in the mobile phone. I chat on it, read and express my emotions using the emoticons.”*

Another participant says; *“it is the technology we have, it is ours.”*

On access and participation, a participant says that *“social media offers opportunity for interaction not readily available on radio and television”.*

On the possibility of direct communication with politicians and potential voters and as a campaigning tool, a level 300 participant proffers that:

“Facebook is more for one-way communication from politicians to us as they track likes and followers but WhatsApp gives us opportunity to respond to posts and for leaders to act on, rather than respond to them.”

Regarding ease of use, a level 300 student asserts that new media technologies enable them break information down into simpler, understandable and playful units.

“I am able to break the information down into understandable and playful units.”

Technical interactivity was measured in terms of the use of hyperlinks, emails, chats and SMS on new media platforms. Results of the focus group discussions revealed that respondents use SMS and chats more regularly than all the other technical interactive tools indicated. Participants indicated they use hyperlinks to forward emails of interesting political content to their peers. They also employed the hashtag tool to tweet messages they want to go viral and thereby influence policy that had the potential to affect them. For instance, a level 100 student indicated that when the then National Democratic Congress (NDC) government indicated it wanted to introduce utility bills for university students three months to the 2016 elections, they protested with the aid of screenshots and hashtags such as “yentua” – vernacular for “we shall not pay”. Their protests went viral, caught the attention of the political party in power and the government then rescinded its decision. Other participants indicated they sent SMS to their friends and political parties. Reinforcing the use of WhatsApp as a broadcasting tool, students indicated they used it to disseminate information to their friends because political leaders were nonresponsive to their communication on Facebook and Twitter, when they did it was only for informational or publicity purposes.

Regarding textual interactivity and motivation, participants in the focus group discussions indicated that they were not interested in long stories but in pictures and videos because images have more impact on them and animations release the pressure of elections from them. They added that the images motivated them to find out more about the political parties. For instance, emotive signs enhanced message comprehension. Content also facilitated use of websites, enabled fact-checks of manifestoes against programmes and the reality and fostered monitoring of followers of political candidates. Level 400 students also indicated that the colour design strategy of websites of political candidates was a means of attracting visitors to the site. Instagram gave students a sense of getting heard and enabled them have live feeds of campaigns.

6. DISCUSSION

University students in Ghana indicated that the general interactive features of new media technologies gratified their need for psychological and social empowerment. From a surveillance perspective, students were motivated to deploy the technologies to scan the political environment for information that armed them with peer-to-peer conversational topics and campaign agendas aimed at persuading undecided voters to vote for their political leaders and for updates on specific political information of interest to the students. This finding is supported by Ohme (2019), who avers that social media platforms facilitate engagement with

campaign topics and trigger political participation. In support of this, Barassi (2016) argues that it enables users to assume ownership of the technology when political communication is reconstructed through interdependence on personal networks to mobilise, share and organise information. Second, individuals are enabled to redefine their identities and become more visible by employing a narrative through political posts, comments and graphics (Barassi, 2016).

Qualitatively, effective deployment of new media technologies gave university students a sense of control and ownership of the content, the technology and its varied applications. This is in line with the study by Moeller et al. (2013) on how news use and civic messaging influences the growth of internal efficacy among young voters, where they found that millennials are best informed through the Internet on condition that they actively engage in the communication process through message construction, discussion or forwarding of messages to their peers.

The purposeful deployment of the interactive features of new media technologies by university students points to active and rational users who access the technologies for direct communication and also for serious opinion-forming content. The findings indicate that students are motivated to access candidate and party websites that have succinct content to conduct fact-checks of manifestoes against programmes to gauge the reality and monitor followers of political candidates.

Our findings also project university students as perceptive in that they do not rely on the interactive features of new media technologies for guidance on their voting patterns. Neither do they allow the platforms to determine their perceptions of political candidates. In support of this, Williams and Serge (2011:46) argue that the content provided by new media technologies fosters interactivity as they have the potential to improve citizens' evaluations of political candidates' attributes such as their "sensitivity, responsiveness and trustworthiness". Thus university students form independent opinions of political actors based on objective information on candidates' or parties' websites. The findings above echo Rubin's (2009:167) assertion that gratifications are born out of individuals' "expectations and desires that emanate from, and are constrained by personal traits, social context and interaction." University students are active, rational and purposeful users, who simplify the content of messages on websites of political leaders, enabling them to own and understand the messages.

The students were not sure, however, of the capacity of interactivity to provide them with guidance and surveillance on their political communication repertoires relating to voting patterns and candidate credibility. Students were categorical that the technical features of new media technologies did not influence entertainment motivations of university students, thus projecting themselves as serious. This is in accord with the three-way model of communication of Ferber et al. (2007) where symmetrical public communication takes place between many participants who generate content, freely exercise control of it and participate publicly in creating the content.

From a textual interactive perspective, focus group participants indicated that photographs, graphics and videos appealed to them more than long stories did, and relieved them of the anxiety of anticipating the likely winner of the elections. Thus these aspects provided guidance for students on candidates' policies but did not influence whom they voted for. In line with this Alec (2014) and Hendricks and Kaid (2011:4) proffer that textual interactivity can also promote users' evaluations of candidates' qualities and policies by projecting political candidates as humane, responsible and trustworthy individuals. For instance, emotive signs enhanced message comprehension, while photographs served as reference point for accountability, and the colours of banners, T-shirts, graphics and other colourful paraphernalia on party websites had the capacity to attract even illiterates.

From the foregoing, interactivity serves as a crucible that facilitates a conversational form of communication that is fluid and spontaneous among university students on one hand and erratic and unpredictable between students and political actors owing to university students' perception of politicians as preoccupied with publicity and information transmission rather than symmetric communication with them.

Further, university students mainly deployed technical interactive features such as SMS, emails, chats and hyperlinks for social utility and communication purposes. This strongly motivated them to engage with each other (correlation of 0.561) by facilitating their interpersonal communication and relational experiences with peers, consolidating their sense of social significance. In support of this, Drageset (2014) asserts that symmetrical communication is reciprocal and is fostered through the use of tools such as SMS, chats, emails, hashtags and hyperlinks. Students use SMS and chats more regularly than all the other technical interactive tools indicated. They use hyperlinks to forward emails on interesting political content to their peers. They also employed the hashtag tool to tweet messages they wanted to go viral, thereby influencing policy that had the potential to affect them. In line with the U&G theory, university students are depicted here as active, creative and aware of factors to exploit within a communication situation to gratify their needs (Grunig, 2009; Gil de Zuniga, 2015). For instance, a level 100 student indicated that when the then National Democratic Congress (NDC) government indicated it wanted to introduce utility bills for university students three months prior to the December 2016 elections, they protested with the aid of screenshots and hashtags such as "*yentua*" – "we shall not pay". Their protests went viral, caught the attention of the political party in power and the government then rescinded its decision. This suggests a "subculture characterised by a discourse that is not easily translated into vernacular citizenship" (Coleman et al., 2008:786).

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study contributes to the advancement of the new media and political communication field and specifically in the development of the uses and gratifications approach by re-conceptualising the millennial new media user as active, rational and purposeful in

deploying the interactive features of new media technologies for political communication. Further, it proposes that emerging gratifications that have not received much scholarly attention in the new media terrain, namely the development of social and psychological gratifications, require more interrogation in future studies. It posits that these are compelling inherent factors that motivate millennials to access the technologies. Finally, the study accentuates how peer-to-peer symmetrical political communication takes place on new media platforms using emerging social media platforms such as WhatsApp in addition to known ones such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Practically, it calls attention to the need for political actors to invest in communicating directly with university students as from the findings and elections data proffered earlier on, it promises electoral gains.

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