

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CIVIC DISCOURSE AMONG STUDENTS OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

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DECLARATION

I, Frank Kofi Boadi, hereby declare that with the exception of references to scholarly works of other persons that have been accordingly acknowledged, this work done under the supervision of Professor Linus Abraham is my original work. I further affirm that this work has never been submitted to any educational institution, in part or in whole for a degree or diploma.

.....
Professor Linus Abraham

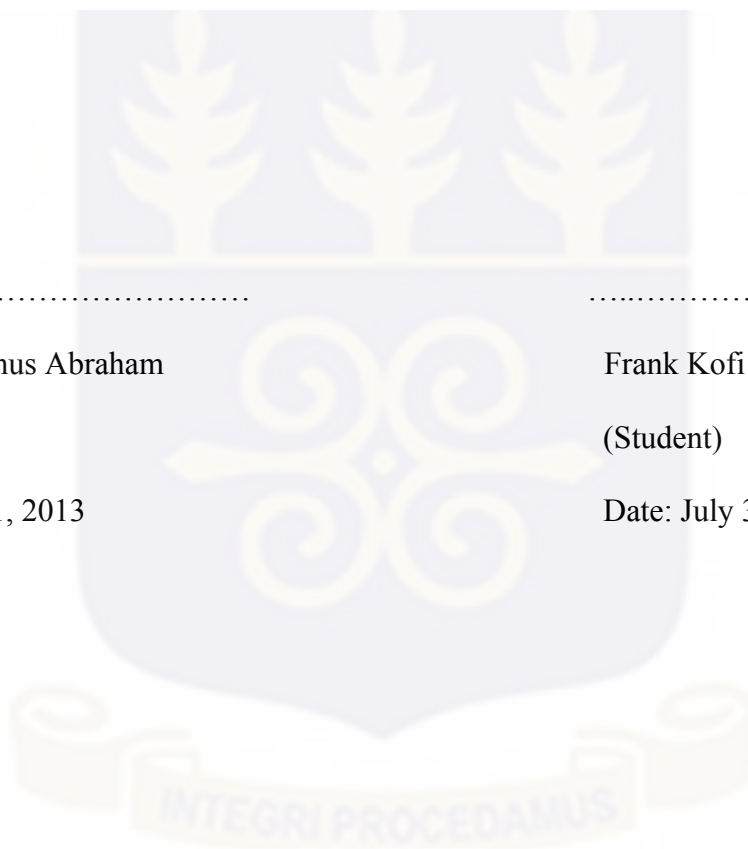
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ABSTRACT

In many advanced democracies, the impacts of new media technologies are well documented. Literature on these modern age phenomena provides an understanding of the several dimensions to how these technologies are influencing such societies. The evidences of Internet and social media use, reflected in findings from western societies, show that these new media tools have both positive and negative impacts notably towards facilitating political communication and civic engagements. On the other hand, while access to and uses of the Internet along with its adjunct tools grow in Ghana, academic literature supporting these occurrences are in an emerging phase. As is the case of the western societies, it is necessary to understand the nature of use of the Internet generally and social media in particular since its use is gaining ground in private and corporate spheres.

This qualitative study explored social media use among students of the University of Ghana for political communication relying on the Social Capital and Deliberative theories to explain what was found. Findings were reached following observation and interpretation of the posts and interactions gathered from a Facebook group page created by a group of graduate students at the University. The study also gathered secondary data from a previous study, which identified uses of Facebook by students of the University of Ghana. The findings suggest that social media may be fostering civic and political discourses and gives indications that these are possibly occurring because of the bond of friendship created among the participants in the group. Also the findings suggest that the group members, in the few instances of civic discourses occurring, engaged in deliberation.

The recommendation for further studies that go beyond exploring what may be happening in online social media groups is encouraged, particularly because such studies will provide deeper knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon.



DEDICATION

This is specially dedicated to my parents Ronald and Mary Boadi,
My dearies Fafa Tchorly- Boadi and Obaapa Maame Gyamfua Boadi

And also to my siblings Quddus, Badi and Sweetie,

Without you, this would not have been possible.



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This axiom “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a step” resonated when I completed this thesis. It marked what I believed is the first steps towards a dream career in academia. Having come this far and being a firm believer in God, I give the Almighty Father all the praise for His grace on this journey.

I am also abundantly thankful to my family for their invaluable support. Each person in my nuclear family as well as my immediate extended family has made a significant contribution towards this work. My sincere gratitude goes to my parents for believing in my abilities, showing interest and encouraging me to walk this path, and especially for the financial support. I also extend my profound appreciation to my dear wife for her forbearance. The periods may have taken away some of the best times we could have shared together. However your understanding and maturity motivated and kept me going even during moments I felt like giving up. To my siblings a hearty thank you for being there.

I cannot overlook the enormous contributions of my supervisor, Professor Linus Abraham. I owe him this work. His direction, patience and support has manifested in the creation of this piece of work. Even in his tight work schedules, Professor. Abraham still made time to explain, offer constructive criticisms and provided solutions to how I could make the work better. I am also grateful to Professor Isaac Blankson for his contributions towards building up the quality of this thesis. To Dr Margaret Amoakohene, I say thank you. Professor Ansu-Keyeremeh, Professor Audrey Gadzekpo, all faculty and staff of the School of Communication Studies, your contributions and support towards this work are very much appreciated. A big thank you goes out to you all.

Finally to the friends I made at SCS, especially students of the 2011/12 batch, this piece of work is partly yours. You allowed me to study your online community with no reservations. Now we can share the knowledge gained from your virtual world. To Benjamin Joe Danso (Benjy) who I also affectionately call my learned friend, thank you for being my proof reader and ensuring that I meet my deadlines. And also to all who have made contributions yet not mentioned, your support is very much appreciated.

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Chapter One

1.0 Introduction

Social media is a growing phenomenon in the present information age. For many persons, particularly the youth, social media and other new media tools provide the platform to create, disseminate and share information among groups and in other cases consolidate existing connections (Lind & Zmud, 1995; cited in Haythornthwaite, 2002). The power and influences of the social media phenomenon in shaping the world today cannot be overlooked.

Social media is believed to have enhanced cultural exchanges (Grincheva, 2012), created, maintained and deepened social ties in a significant number of social settings (Haythornthwaite, 2002). In commerce, its impact is profound. Corporate entities are increasingly losing control over the management of the reputation of their brands, products, and services (Bullas, 2010). Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) suggest that as consumers are able to create, modify, share as well as discuss online content, some of which may be content generated by firms, these activities have implication for a firm's reputation and survival. In health, social media applications have helped to provide adolescent reproductive health information and education to teenagers with research suggesting that youths who are regular users of the technology and have many friends have good relationships with their parents and are happy at school (California Health Organisation, 2011).

Social media also poses a threat to journalism as all manner of persons gather and disseminate newsworthy information and publish them outside the traditional media channels (Overholser, 2009). The impact of social media on politics is witnessed in its use as a coordinating tool for a significant number of the world's political movements. The angry protests that pushed the removal of Philippine President Joseph Estrada (Shirky, 2011; Safranek, 2012) and the political revolutions that took place in the Middle East commonly referred to as the Arab Spring are but some examples of the potency of the social media in empowering citizens and projecting their will (Safranek, 2012; Pfister & Godana, 2012). Again in political campaigning, social media is credited to have contributed significantly to the electoral success of then candidate Barak Obama. The adoption of the technology facilitated his reach to and garnering support from many young voters, to support his fundraising during the 2008 American presidential elections (YouTube and the 2008 Election Cycle in the United States, 2009; Haley, 2011/12).

While social media facilitates political communication, its influence on civic engagements has been the focus of some scholarly works (Smith, 2013; Byrne, 2007). These academic works have sought to identify social media's role in facilitating civic engagements to counter suggestions of less civic engagements among the youth in many western nations (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010).

Evidences of social media impact in Ghana are witnessed in its appropriation in business and in political activities. Despite social media scholarship being in its emerging phase in Ghana, a cursory search shows that the technology is used by advertisers, marketers as well as other businesses and brands in the country to facilitate interactions between themselves and the audiences they seek to reach (e.g. Tigo, Vodafone, Multimedia

group). The trend in this means of communication is not much different from what is happening globally. Politically, various political candidates adopt social media as a viable channel to place their campaign messages and to solicit votes from the electorates (Akufo-Addo, 2012; Mahama, 2012; Ablakwa, 2012).

The Internet drives social media. It is defined as “the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval” (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001, p. 307). The Internet, globally directs the manner in which efficient means of communication is carried from place to place, person to person and culture to culture. It also allows users to contribute knowledge, gain information from it, and also customise the information to suit their needs (Dalberg, 2013).

Following its development, primarily as a military device during the periods of the cold war and later opened up to commercial and private access, the Internet has been touted as being a revolutionary technology. Its ability to handle “behind the scenes work” and become the finished product as in the personal digital assistants (Hoggatt, 1999), take away obstructions of time and space, change the balance of power and provide equitable opportunities to communicate in the mass media are but examples of the revolutionary credentials of the Internet (Nag, 2011; Hoggatt, 1999). In everyday life, the Internet’s revolution is witnessed, conveyed and felt through devices found in homes and offices, in educational institutions and libraries, in portable devices carried about from place to place, and in government institutions as well as processes of government. The Internet, coupled with other hardware devices that deliver it, has remodelled how communication

takes place, how work is done, and repackaged information as a commodity and facilitated its trade. It is a valuable medium for social discourse.

According to the ITU (2014), nearly three billion of the world's population will be Internet users with about two-thirds of this population living in developing countries. The ITU's projection shows a global growth of almost 680% from the year 2000 to the year 2014. Table 1 below illustrates the global distribution of the Internet population. Evidently, majority of Internet users are in developed countries. The table also provides statistics on the growing Internet population in the developing world. Africa has the least number of the online population with a little over 20% of the continent's population online. However, in the last decade, the continent has recorded the highest Internet growth at a rate of over 300%. It is estimated that over 110 million people on the continent use the Internet regularly with nearly 10 million new users every year (Sanneh, 2013).

Nigeria has the largest population of Internet users in Africa (refer to figure 1 on page 6). Africa's most populous nation has close to 70 million Internet users. From the graph, it is quite apparent that there is a fairly even distribution of Internet growth across the regions in Africa. The northern, southern, eastern and western regions are all equally represented among the top 10 countries with high Internet populations.

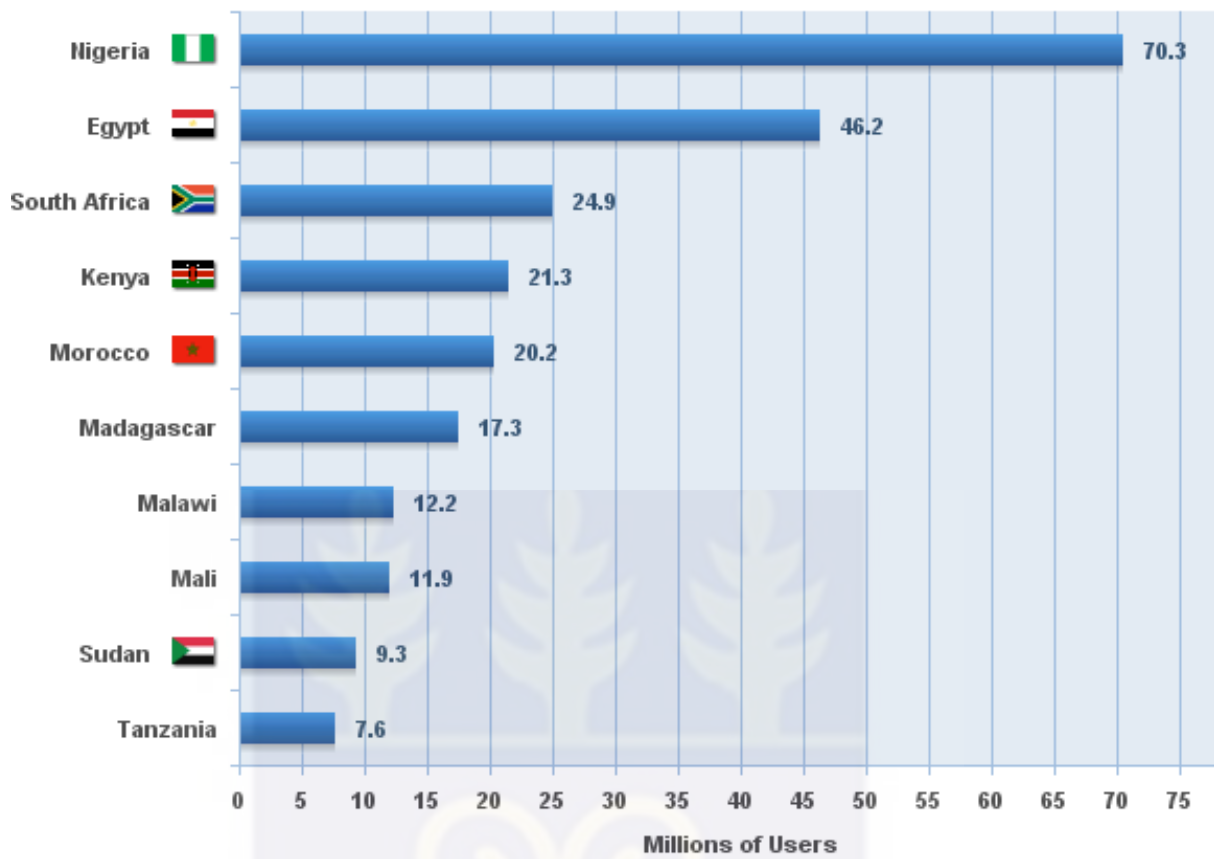
There are expectations that the Internet will become ubiquitous (Rao, 2012) therefore as more people across the globe get connected to the technology, use and exploit its potential this expectation is being met.

Table 1: Global Internet statistics as at December 2012

World Regions	Population (2014)	Internet Users Dec. 31, 2000	Internet Users 2014	Penetration (% of Population)	Growth 2000-2014 %
Africa	1,125,721,038	4,514,400	240,146,482	21.3	5,219.6
Asia	3,996,408,007	114,304,000	1,265,143,702	31.7	1,006.8
Europe	825,802,657	105,096,093	566,261,317	68.6	438.8
Middle East	231,062,860	3,284,800	103,829,614	44.9	3,060.9
North America	353,860,227	108,096,800	300,287,577	84.9	177.8
Latin America/ Caribbean	612,279,181	18,068,919	302,006,016	49.3	1,571.4
Oceania/ Australia	36,724,649	7,620,480	24,804,226	67.5	225.5
World Total	7,181,858,619	360,985,492	2,802,478,934	39.0	676.3

Source: Internetworldstats.com, 2014

Figure 1: Chart of top 10 Internet countries in Africa



Source: Internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm, 2014

1.1 Functions of the Internet

The Internet is said to perform a number of functions including as source of information or store of data, as a means of communication, a medium to conduct business and as a means of entertainment. These functions cut across the appropriation of the technology in diverse social fields.

Internet as a source of information

As a source or store of information the Internet provides its users access to innumerable store of data covering diverse fields. Data stored on the Internet is available each time of the day and free to access in many cases though some are available only via subscriptions

or payment of fees. Internet data is available to users via popular search engines such as Google, yahoo and Bing. Globally, there are about 673 million active websites (Popescu, 2013) and this translates into the amount of possible locations where data can be sourced. Information on the Internet may be printed versions of existing publications, or online publications as printed versions are created (Cortada, 2001). They may also exist as solely online publications. Scores of specialized journals, newspapers and magazines have presence on the Internet. Publications of these materials appear concurrently in electronic and print versions, even though the electronic editions may have additional information and updated more frequently.

The Internet has surpassed traditional media as the most popular source of information among Americans (Reuters, 2009; Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell, & Rainie, 2011). The technology has outperformed newspapers as the source for national and international news (Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell, & Rainie, 2011). It is the immediate source for information on entertainment places, educational institutions, news about job openings or listings, housing and real estate. Also, the Internet is a key source for peer-generated information particularly among persons between the ages of 18-29 (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). The Internet is also appealing as the preferred online news source because it enables people who use it to ask questions, make comments or proffer their opinions, engage in debates or interact with other online readers.

The Internet is seen as a blessing for researchers; it congregates scattered information on scholarly works from different online libraries and brings them to the reach of the researchers (Khare, Thapa, & Sahoo, 2007). Cruz and Jamias (2013) say that when scientists understand how to use social media tools they are likely to use social media in research. Indeed this study has benefitted immensely from access to countless related literature available online.

Internet as a means of communication

The Internet makes available to its users various means of communication and also enables diverse forms of communication (from interpersonal to mass communication) to take place at a go. The technology's power to draw persons of shared ties closer, otherwise difficult to reach due to geospatial limitations, fosters interactions and enables people to stay connected. This is possible through chats, video calls or emails utilised by family relations, corporate or organisational institutions. It also gathers people with similar views to act on issues of common interest; offers support to fellow sufferers or finds people with similar interests (Preece, 2001). Among students in tertiary education the Internet facilitates communication with professors and colleagues.

Communication is more frequent now with the dawn of the Internet (New Media Consortium, 2007; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006) than during the periods when sending letters was the main mode of exchanging messages. This communication function of the Internet has culminated in concepts such as online communication, which refer to reading, writing, and communication by networked computers (Warschauer, 2001), and computer mediated communication which is "any human symbolic text-based interaction conducted or facilitated through digitally-based technologies" (Spitzberg,

2006, p. 630). Online communication may be delivered either in complex forms, which integrate interactive multimedia formats such as texts, audio and video or simple one-way text only formats (Bubas, 2001).

Internet as a means of entertainment

The Internet offers its users a vast and diverse store of content appropriated for personal gratifications. There are many Internet sites which provide information as well as other kinds of material with which people across the globe have access to ever-popular entertainment themes. The availability of all kinds of entertainment needs on the Internet has made it one of the most popular methods of relaxing for people who spend most of their time online. The various kinds of entertainments provided by the Internet are:

Musical entertainment: The Internet provides its users with collections of music from all genres via free downloads or live listening. Users are also able to visit web sites that serve as music stores for the purchase of full album or single music files on the latest songs or those of years gone by. Aside music users also have access to full-length movies or video clips.

Computer games: Online gaming is the next most popular Internet entertainment source. There are many global providing free Internet games for free. Some of the games online are designed to foster civic learning and engagements among children (Bers, 2008).

Social Networking: Social networks facilitate connections with persons across the globe and also provide forums for entertainment. The Internet is said to support lonely people manage or do away with their loneliness by providing them with people to have interactions with (Morahan- Martin and Schumacher, 2003 in Whitty & McLaughlin, 2007).

The Internet as a means of commerce

The Internet today, through WWW, is taking the conduct of commerce to new heights. It is changing the way businesses operate as well as how they are set up (Heerwagen, 2010). The concept of e-commerce associated with the adoption of the Internet and other digital technologies to facilitate commerce has become incorporated in the language of commerce. The use of the Internet to facilitate e-commerce opens new possibilities for businesses in the areas of customer service, customer retention, lower transaction costs and marketing. With regard to customer service, consumers have access to a broader array of products and services while still in their personal spaces, in that way saving on related costs to procure the services or products they require. Since the Internet offers such qualities as speed, flexibility and efficiency many corporations and businesses across the globe are increasingly adopting the technology to transact daily businesses (Ernst, 2001). In the field of advertising, advertisers have found and accepted the Internet as a new medium through which to communicate with customers.

The Internet functioning as a means of commerce has contributed to evolutions in business models, i.e. from the way organizations procure goods and services to how they collect revenues (Zott, Amit, & Massa, 2010). Some business models compliment traditional ones while others are new models in themselves. E.g. click and mortar models developed around the concepts of brick and mortar. There is also the direct selling model in which middle men are eliminated hence presents and sells products and services directly to consumers. Within the domain of organisational management structure, the Internet is adopted to facilitate the virtual organization of human resources where virtual teams are composed of members dispersed around the world (Shachaf, 2008).

The Internet has enabled trans-border data flow, which is the transfer of information around the world almost instantly. Trans-border data flows are increasingly prevalent in modern commerce. Businesses and governments through the Internet are outsourcing their activities overseas into regions where costs of undertaking such tasks are relatively cheaper.

1.2 Political communication, civic discourse and the Internet

Until the arrival of the Internet, traditional media served as a major conduit for political communication. The education of citizens on what is civically and politically relevant was a function of professional journalism (Akilah, 2012). The traditional media spaces, as well as the salons and coffee houses, constituted the public sphere where civic discourses occurred.

Civic discourses are “purposeful communication carried out among citizens dedicated to sharing perspectives and constructing possible actions on issues that matter” (Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy, 2006). Sunstein (2001) according to Bers & Chau (2006) identified two types of discourse:

1. Conversation that is based on information-sharing and does not require participants to alter their own opinions, and
2. discourse that takes the form of a deliberation, requiring participants to first exchange information and then move beyond one’s egocentric view to reach a publicly deliberated opinion or decision (p.756).

Civic discourse is an important measure of active citizen participation in the public sphere since such discourses expose citizens to different information and opinions, and creates a more diversified and informed public (Bers & Chau, 2006). Evidences of civic discourses are in the newsprints, which published stories articles, letters and rejoinders on social matters. Radio and television broadcasts provided opportunities for interactive and intimate deliberation on issues that affect community than the newsprints provided. However, with such factors as a media economy driven by profits and political controls, consumers of traditional media have only become passive rather than active in their civic discourses and other political activities (Dahlgren, 2006).

The Internet significantly has configured the traditional communicative spaces through which citizens express themselves. It has extended and pluralized the public sphere in a number of ways such that citizens are able to engage in political activities more freely. The Internet is believed to have gradually reduced the obstacles to free flow of information between political decision-makers and citizens (Emruli & Bača, 2011) in such media where communication is only one-way. Bulletin board systems, chat groups, listservs, e-mail, and multi-user domains represent a new public sphere available to citizens to deliberate on matters affecting their community life and how they are governed. Social media tools also compliment traditional media tools as avenues through which issues of the public may be placed and accessed.

The Internet has also influenced the interactional dimension of political communication. Civic interactions have moved into cyberspace and compliment real life civic activities. The Internet connects people to each other and is shown to have fostered renewed citizens' participation in democratic practices and ignited a sense of community

(Rheingold, 1993 cited in Fisher & Wright, 2001). The Internet is believed to be fostering civic engagements among a younger generation believed to be less civically engaged than generations before them (Bennett, 2008).

1.3 Social media and networked society

The Internet, in one way, is felt through its creation of the networked society and it providing the platform to drive social media. Social media has become popular in recent years and has received much attention within academia (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The technology is used for all manner of interactions including political communication (Simon, 2007).

Much of social media's popularity has been attributed to its recent roles in the events of the Arab Springs and its adoption by then candidate Barak Obama in winning the 2008 US Presidential Elections. Despite its recent popularity, social media is believed to have existed in 1997 following the launch of the website SixDegrees.com (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media can include both web-based and mobile technologies.

Social media is not easy to define (Enli & Moe, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Enli and Moe say definitions of the phenomenon have been varied with some listing particular services or web genres such as Facebook and blogs as their definitions while others connect social media to web 2.0 technologies. Other definitions have also been based on using the term interchangeably with social networking. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) say, "social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User

Generated Content”(p.61). Howard & Parks (2012) on the other hand define social media as consisting of:

- (a) information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values;
- (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, that becomes cultural products; and
- (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume both the tools and the content.

Bechmann and Lomborg (2012), cited by Enli and Moe (2013), provided three features with which to define social media: a) the ability for users to make, contribute, filter and share content, b) users seen as producers and participants and c) the communication between users and their shifting roles is described as ‘interaction and networked’

Social media can be found in various forms such as social networks, blogs, wikis, podcasts, forums, content communities and micro blogging. These forms are categorised based on the unique character each presents. Social networks sites according to Boyd and Ellison (2007) are:

- web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Social networks appear to be the most popular of the social media forms. Facebook is by far the most popular social media application (eBizMBA, 2012). Social network sites

present unique features that support users to articulate and make visible their social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Examples of social networks include Facebook, Myspace, bebo and Academia.edu.

Blog is the shortened form of web log (Williams, 2004). This social media tool is designed as an online journal which presents in reverse chronological order posts of news items almost always with hyperlinks to third party sites. Readers of blog content have the opportunity to post personal responses to the articles. Blogs posts may be composed with texts and multimedia formats.

Leuf and Cunningham, creators of this social media form, explain wikis as “freely expandable collection of interlinked webpages, a hypertext system for storing and modifying information – a database, where each page is easily edited by any user with a forms-capable Web browser client” (Schwartz, Clark, Cossarin, & Rudolph, 2004, p. 1). Wikis are asynchronous and are characterised with hypertext authoring systems (Désilets, Paquet, & Vinson, 2005). Wikis have been compared to blogs in that both are chronological online journals written by individuals. The difference between the two, according to Mattison in Schwartz et al. (2004), lie in how users get notification of new content, editing format and structure. Boulos, Maramba, and Wheeler (2006) say:

Wikis can be used as a source for obtaining information and knowledge, and also as a method of virtual collaboration, e.g., to share dialogue and information among participants in group projects, or to allow learners to engage in learning with each other, using wikis as a collaborative environment to construct their knowledge or to be part of a virtual community of practice (p.2).

Podcasts together with wikis and blogs are described as “collaborationware” tools because they provide the opportunity for information sharing and ease of collaboration (Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006). Podcasts are audio and video files of programmes online usually updated at regular intervals and can be downloaded to portable media gadgets (SZE, 2006). The essence of podcasting is making available music or video content for an audience to listen to when they want, where they want, and how they want (Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006)

Forums existed before present forms of social media (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media forums are online spaces created for online discussions mostly relating to specific topics and interests. In effect forums facilitate creation of communities around shared interests

Content Communities organise and share particular kinds of content. The most popular content communities tend to form around photos (flickr), bookmarked links (del.icio.us) and videos (YouTube).

Micro blogging is a form of blogging where users are restricted to write short but concise text updates of up to 140 characters and to publish this information so that a network of followers can view and comment on the information (Rutsaert et al., 2013). Micro-blogs are also referred to as status update services. Twitter is the most popular in the field of microblogging

1.4 The Internet in Ghana

Ghana was one of the first African countries to get connected to the Internet by 1990 (Internet World Stats, 2012; Foster, Goodman, Osiakwan, & Bernstein, 2004). Internet services then were provided via fixed line infrastructure in the form of dial up services. At its introduction, Internet penetration in Ghana was very low with about 5.3 of 100 inhabitants having access to the resource (Fosu, 2011). The low rate of usage was attributed to the underdevelopment of the telecommunications infrastructure in the country. Telephone services were few in homes but common in corporate organisations. As at the year 2007 just over one fixed line existed per 100 inhabitants (Sey, 2011). Another factor was the high costs associated with procuring personal computers and residential Internet access. As a result, the Internet was usually accessed at the work place and normally during work hours. Internet cafes also provided access, which in many areas delivered more time to use the technology than many users would have had time to when at the work.

Despite being an early adopter of the Internet technology, Ghana is outside the top 10 (refer to Fig.1 on page 5) Internet using nations in Africa lagging behind countries such as Zimbabwe-15.7% and Sudan-19% (Internetworldstats.com, 2012; Fosu, 2011) In the past decade, Ghana's population of Internet users has risen steadily following liberalisation of telecommunications, which began in the early 1990s (Frempong, 2002). In the year 2000 (refer to table 2 below), Internet users in Ghana were estimated at 30, 000 which was about 0.2% of the country's population. By 2006, Internet users were a little over 400,000 (3.8%) out of a national population of almost 22 million. In 2009, 4.2% of almost 24 million Ghanaians used the Internet (Internetworldstats.com, 2009). In 2012, 14% of

Ghanaians had become Internet users, up from 10 per cent in 2010 (International Telecommunications Union, 2012).

The liberalisation of the telecommunications sector resulted in private entities investing and delivering telecommunication services including the Internet at competitively low charges. This, coupled with the advent of cheaper Internet enabled mobile phones and modems, has driven recent growths in Internet usage (Daily Graphic, 2012). The ITU (2012) says mobile-broadband penetration in Ghana has more than tripled and stood at 23 per cent in 2011, while mobile phone penetration is almost 90 per cent of the population (Myjoyonline, 2012). Latest data by InternetWorldStats (2014) illustrates that the present population of Ghanaian Internet users is about two per cent of the total Internet population in Africa.

Table 2: Population and Internet Users Statistics on Ghana (2013 Q4)

Population (2014 Est.)	Internet Users 31-Dec-2000	Internet Users 31-Dec-2013	Internet % Africa
25,758,108	30,000	4,378,878	1.8

Source: Internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm, 2014

Ghana has developed an ICT policy in line with its developmental goals. The nation's ICT for Accelerated Development Policy (ICT4D) states as its objective "to accelerate Ghana's socio-economic development process towards the realization of the vision to transform Ghana into a high income economy and society that is predominantly information-rich and knowledge based within the next two to three decades or less" (Republic of Ghana, 2003, p. 14). This thus gives an indication of how crucial the Internet and its expected role towards the development of Ghana.

Internet use in Ghana

The Internet at its introduction in Ghana was used for storing and communication purposes. The network was based on store and forward e-mail and bulletin board systems (Foster, Goodman, Osiakwan, & Bernstein, 2004). The technology now is appropriated to businesses and community development.

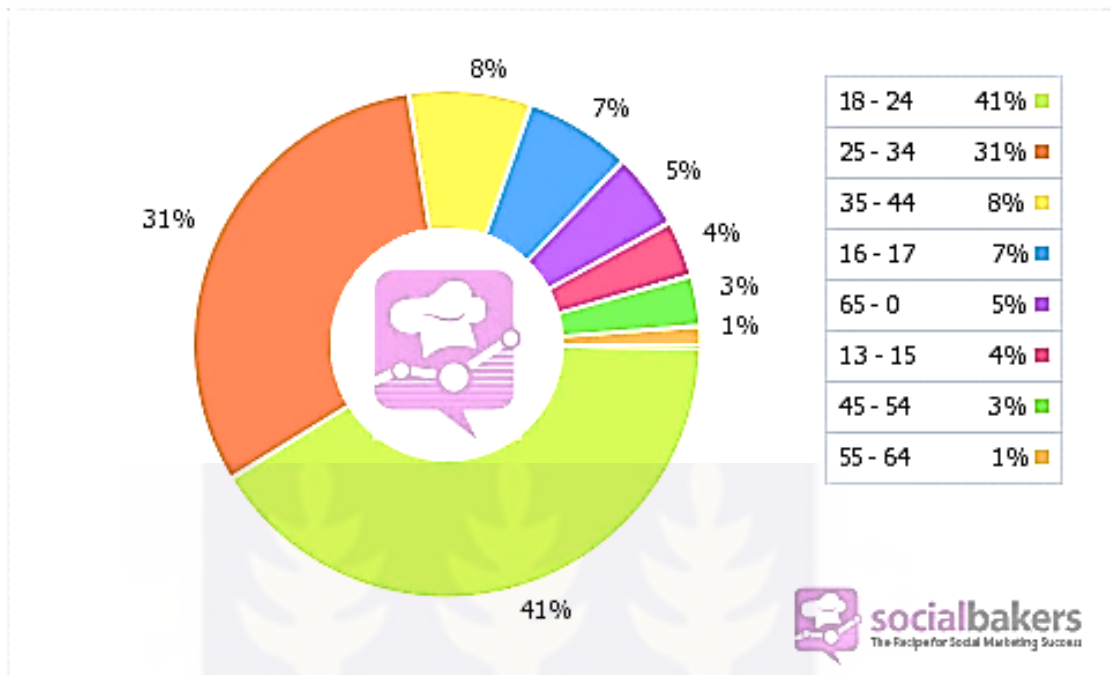
For some Ghanaians the Internet serves as an "escape" mechanism to "connect with the western world as a poverty reduction strategy (Sey, 2011 citing Slater & Kwami, 2005)". The Internet provides a means to connect with people in developed countries who are seen as prospective sources of financial aid for their migration out of Ghana. Those with no intent to physically leave the country enjoy Western life, indirectly, through foreign content available on the Internet. Other uses of the Internet include sending e-mails, finding and communicating with penpals, applying to schools abroad, watching movies, listening to music, and playing games (Alhassan, 2004; Burrell, 2009; Daily Graphic, 2003; Slater & Kwami, 2005; Cited in Sey 2011).

Political parties have also embraced the new media technology and are using social media particularly to grasp the attention of young people. As the 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections draw close, civil election monitoring is being promoted via mobile telephony. Some political parties are raising funds for their political activities through the use of SMS systems (Ameqa-Selorm, n.d). The African Elections Project used the Internet to support Ghana's electoral process enabling mobile phone users to be part of the election reporting and monitoring (GNA, 2012).

1.5 Social media in Ghana

Social media has caught on in Ghana, though still far behind the population of users in other parts of the world. Facebook, as is the case globally, is by far the most popular social media in Ghana (eBizMBA, 2012). There are about 1.6 million users of Facebook in Ghana (Internetworldstats.com, 2012). This statistics ranks the country at number 69 in global rankings and number 8 on the African continent (Socialbakers, 2012). Data on the age distribution of Facebook users in Ghana depicts that, similar to patterns in the western world, a lot of Ghanaian youths are on Facebook. Over six hundred thousand of the population of Facebook users in Ghana are between 18 and 24 years. This represents about 41% of the Ghanaian populace (refer to Fig. 2 below). This is typically an age group that can be found beginning university education or exiting into the professional world. Because Facebook is the most widely used social media tool in Ghana, this research was designed to study its uses for political communication among students.

Figure 2: Ghana's Facebook user age distributions as at July 2012



Source: Socialbakers.com 2012

Uses of social media in Ghana

Despite scholarship on social media being in its emerging phase, evidences of how social media is being used in Ghana are presented here based on observations and limited literature available. Within the field of journalism, many of the local media houses use social media to gather comments on news topics, which are then incorporated in the programming (Joy news at Mid-day, 2013). Journalists also rely on social media tools for their news gathering sources. In this regard, social media was used extensively to cover the 2012 elections (Morris, 2013).

Politically, social media has also been used by various political figures to support their political campaigns. In the run-up to the 2012 elections, political candidates like John Mahama, Nana Akufo-Addo and Papa Kwesi Nduom used the social media to update

their supporters and engage citizens on their political campaign messages. Social media was valued as creating a better communication channel between the political party and voters. An official of the National Democratic Congress is cited as saying that social media's interactive character facilitates incorporating feedback from voters into the party's decision-making processes (Boakyewaa & Pokua, 2011). The African Election Project also relied on social media to promote transparency during the elections. The Constitutional Review Commission, set up by a Constitutional Instrument 2010 (C.I.) 64 as a Commission of Inquiry to conduct a consultative review of the Constitution by the late President John Evans Atta Mills, used social media intensely (PeaceNexus Foundation, 2010) to solicit views on what reviews to make to the Constitution.

Other uses of social media include promoting brands and corporate services, serving as online shops for trade (examples are Tigo Ghana (<https://www.facebook.com/tigogh>), and AfroChic (<https://www.facebook.com/AfroChicGhana>). Various media houses in the country have created social media platforms to share their news content as well as also solicit public opinions for their stories and programme content.

1.6 Problem statement

The Internet is perceived as a social technology. It has become part of social life globally and is adopted for almost all daily undertakings. The influences of the Internet are evident in all facets of social activity including commerce, science, education and politics. Owing to its impact on these fields many advanced nations are studying ways to take advantage of the possibilities the technology presents, especially in promoting governance.

Scholars (Dahlgren, 2006; David, 2013; Im, Cho, Porumbescu, & Park, 2012; Groshek, 2009) have studied the Internet's influences on political communication. Some of the studies have bordered on issues pertaining to the Internet's configuration of the public sphere, its democratic effects, its use with other ICT tools for political engagement among the youth, the levels of citizens' trust in governance and compliance. Others (Safranek, 2012; Utz, 2009) have also studied social media's role in fostering political communications, by examining the technology's contributions in strengthening citizen-government relations as well as helping revitalise civic culture.

Notwithstanding the trends in social media use in Ghana, understanding the technology's appropriation for political communication is a plausible venture to both academia and the larger Ghanaian society. At a period when a number of historic events occurred in Ghana, among which include the death of President John Atta Mills, the campaigns and other electoral events that preceded Presidential and Parliamentary elections in December 2012, the vetting of government ministers and their deputies which began in January 2013. These events offer an opportunity to determine the likelihood of political and civic discourses about them on social media as pertains in other jurisdictions.

Many of the studies about the Internet and social media, which are perceived to be powerful tools, have been conducted in contexts outside of Ghana. While Internet access and usage among Ghanaians is growing (Daily Graphic, 2012), scholarship on the technology and its adjuncts is in its formative phase in Ghana. There is not much literature particularly on how social media is used in the field of political communication or to explain online civic engagements among Ghanaian youths. Owing to the fact that research explaining social media and Internet is more dominant in western cultural

contexts, it is important to understand the nature of its uses within the Ghanaian context. The study therefore sought to contribute to understanding the political and civic uses of social media amongst Ghanaian youth.

1.7 Purpose

The purpose of the study was to identify the use of social media for political communication more especially towards civic discourses.

1.8 Objectives

The study had the following objectives:

- To identify the uses of social media for political discourses within a social media group
- To identify the use of social media for civic discourses within a social media group
- To ascertain the nature of political and civic discourses taking place within the social media group
- To identify gender differences in the political and civic discourses that take place on the social media group

To arrive at the research objectives, answers were provided to the following research questions:

1. Are students in a social media group engaging in political discourses on their Facebook group page?
2. Are students in a social media group engaging in civic discourses on their Facebook page?

3. What is the nature of political and civic discourses that take place on the Facebook group page?
4. What gender differences are evident in the political and civic discourses that take place on the Facebook group page?

1.9 Significance of the study

This study is significant in that its findings can support the formulation of policies to drive social media usage towards political communication gains. It is envisaged that this work will shore up the literature on the social media phenomenon in Ghana. Finally the study is significant as recommendations may direct the path of future studies in this area.

1.10 Structure of the thesis

The study is presented in seven (7) separate chapters. In each chapter an introduction of the chapter and details are presented. The first chapter sets the context of the study by introducing the place of social media in our world today. It further presents patterns of understanding the Internet technology on which the social media application is delivered. An overview of new media technologies is also presented situating the nature of use in the Ghanaian context. The aim of the study, research questions and significance are all placed in this chapter.

Chapter Two (2) presents the theoretical framework for the study. Two theories underpin this study: a) Social Capital Theory and b) Deliberation Theory. Chapter Three (3) presents a review of some scholarly works conducted around the use of online technologies and tools for civic or citizen conversations and participation in decision making processes. Chapter Four (4) details the methodology used for the study. A detail

description of the design, data gathering procedure and analysis of the data are explained. Chapter Five (5) presents findings from the study from which interpretations and discussions are provided in Chapter Six (6). Chapter Seven (7) concludes with summarises of the results, limitations of the study and recommendations for further studies in the subject area. A list of sourced work is presented in the appendices section. The section also includes data gathering tools used for the study.



Chapter two

Theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

A study of this nature would benefit from enumerable theories available to the diverse fields of social science. This notwithstanding, a significant number of academic research which have explored the Internet and social media's contribution towards promoting democratic ideals have grounded their findings either on the Deliberative Theory or Social Capital Theory. Both theories are affiliated to studies in political science and sociology, though also used in other academic fields. This study likewise adopts the deliberative and social capital theories to explore civic discourse on social media, an increasingly popular space where Ghanaians engage in all manner of discourses.

2.2 Social capital theory

Social capital theory is used to the field explain individual and communal relations within a social setting. The theory has been often associated with concepts such as social networks, trust, community and civic engagements. Social capital theory reinforces a position of sociology, which suggests that individuals' involvement and participation in groups are likely to deliver positive consequences for themselves and their communities (Portes, 1998). An instance of such benefits is demonstrated by Lyon (2000) who found that resource poor farmers and traders in Ghana draw on their existing networks in order to enter into new markets to increase their incomes. Brian (2007) said that Social capital binds societies together while Kawachi (1999) emphasized that it plays a role in the smooth functioning of democracy, governance and community life. Grootaert and

Bastelaer (2001) contributed to the discourse on the importance of social capital by claiming that a society's social capital includes "the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development" (p. 2).

Emile Durkheim posited, according to Portes (1998), that social capital theory not only address social instability and personal unrest created consequently from the breakdown of standards and values in communities, but also to counter Marxist theory on social classes being atomised. Lydia Hanifan has also received credits for her publication in 1916 in which she presented social capital as intangible assets such as "goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among individuals and families who make up a social unit" (Brian, 2007, p. 102). Besides Durkheim and Hanifan, others have presented various scenarios of the concept in other fields but three scholars Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam have received mentions for their seminal contributions to the development of the theory.

Bourdieu (1985) provided a description of social capital "as the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p.248). The definition highlights the benefits that accrue to individuals in deliberate creation of friendships and participation in groups. In this context social capital can be analysed first according to the social relationships of individuals which allows them to have access to resources possessed by their associates and secondly the amount and quality of the resources (Portes, 1998). Smith (2009) explains that Bourdieu's description of social capital was developed on a Marxist structure.

Bourdieu distinguished between three forms of capital (economic, social and cultural), how the forms contribute to the uneven access to resources and power variances and how they feed into elitism. Sobel (2002) interpreted Bourdieu's analysis as that an individual's access to resources depends on the person's connections, which may be by whom they know, and through their common group membership. Furthermore, the volume of resources accessed is determined by the strength of the connections and the resources available to these connections. Since individuals may choose what groups to belong to in some respect, one's choices can to some extent determine the strength and extent of connections.

Siisiäinen (2003) claimed that Bourdieu's social capital theory was founded on group membership and social networks and further highlighted a criticism of the theory, i.e. its association with elitism:

membership in groups, and involvement in the social networks developing within these and in the social relations arising from the membership can be utilized in efforts to improve the social position of the actors in a variety of different fields (p. 17)

Coleman (1994) on the other hand presented a functionalist perspective of Social capital claiming it as an aspect of social structure, which facilitates certain actions of individuals in that structure. He moved away from Bourdieu's position on the concept being applicable to elitists and included non-elitists. Coleman identified that some institutions (e.g. the family and religious institutions) found in the social structure are better than others at cultivating social elements of trust, reciprocity and individual action (Smith, 2009). He also identified three components of social capital. These are obligations and

expectations (which depend on trustworthiness of the social environment), information-flow capability of the social structure, and norms accompanied by sanctions. Coleman's functionalist description of social capital has not been without criticism, particularly from Portes (1998) who believes that Bourdieu's analysis of what constitutes social capital is the most theoretically refined relative to contemporary dissertations presented on the concept.

Putnam's work on social capital put forward other crucial dimensions of the theory and is believed to be the best contemporary analysis of the concept (Jackman & Miller, 1998). Putnam's definition reflects Bourdieu and Coleman's conceptualisation of social capital but goes further to place emphasis on the significance of the relationship between association and civic community. In his seminal work *Bowling Alone*, social capital is discussed as:

... connections among individuals- social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue". The difference is that social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense of network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individual is not necessarily rich in social capital (Putnam 2000; p 19 cited in Smith 2009).

In Putnam's analysis social capital generates benefits not only for individuals but for the larger community and thus social capital is both private and public.

Siisiäinen (2000) asserted that Putnam's concept of social capital has three components similar to Coleman's constituents of social capital. However, Putnam emphasises that social capital is built around people belonging to voluntary groups as a means to foster civic engagement. Putnam's communitarian approach to social capital sees him make distinctions between two forms of social capital: bridging and bonding.

Bridging is explained as outward looking heterogeneous networks of people. Such connections (ties) are considered to be weak and are characterised by information exchange and consensus building towards a common interest. Bonding on the other hand is inward looking, homogenous and bound to possess strong network ties that deliver emotional support to its members when needed. Bonding ties exist within families and such groups of similar kinds of people. Woolcock (in Smith 2009) differentiated a third form of social capital as being those connections with unlike persons outside one's community yet provide far wider range of resources than are available in one's community.

Notwithstanding the diversity in definition presented by the three principal proponents, the fundamental tenet of social capital theory is that relationships are important and therefore the networks or ties people form are valuable assets. The potency of such networks lies in the goodwill accrued from social relations and the possibility to mobilise them for action (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Social networks may be fostered through civic, religious and work-related engagements and are constituted of formal and informal ties. Adler and Kwon (2002) cited Putnam (1995) in declaring that social capital fosters the pursuit of common purpose and vision in a community.

The primary criticism of social capital theory has been with its conceptualisation. Critics say its lack of coherence in conceptualisation breeds diverse meanings in different fields of social science. Definitions either present the theory as an outcome or an attribute therefore driving an assumption that social capital only breeds positive outcomes (Durlauf, 1999). Social capital is hence likened to cholesterol with its good and bad types. Another criticism is the use of the word “capital” to qualify the value derived from social networks. Smith (2009) citing Cohen and Prusak emphasised that “capital” was polysemic and did not always connote something of value. Capital may also ignite thoughts of capitalism.

This study relied on Putnam’s conception of Social Capital considering two primary reasons. Principally because he presents a more contemporary assessment of the theory and secondly because his definition reflects Bourdieu and Coleman’s conceptualisation of Social Capital even though Putnam goes further to place emphasis on the significance of the relationship between association and civic community.

2.2.1 The Internet and social capital

Technology, social and economic advancements have been ascribed as factors which contribute to social transformations. Social transformations have included the fragmentation of groups into networks. Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004) traced the alterations to community life and social capital to urbanisation and commercialization while Putnam (1995) criticised the emergence of television as having created wider and shallower communities. However with the advent of the Internet, the technology has been perceived as an extension of society and not a threat to how society or societies are physically organised.

The Internet's impact on the traditional concept of social organisation is noticeable in the alterations it has made to social life and the communication processes therein. There are scholars who believe the Internet has fostered changes and redefined what traditionally constituted community arguing that the technology has become embedded in social life (Wellman et al., 2003). Wellman (2001) argued that the ontology of computer networks in itself posits a creation of community in cyberspace and articulated this notion saying "computer networks are inherently social networks, linking people, organizations, and knowledge" (p.2031). In effect as humans and computer applications connect a social relation is generated.

The concept of networked individualism according to Wellman (2004) introduces a new form of community where "each person becomes a switchboard between ties and networks. They remain connected, but as individuals available for contact anywhere and at any time, instead of being rooted in home, café and workplace" (p.29). By this concept, the construction of community thus goes beyond borders and geographic boundaries and is created and managed by individuals and keeps social capital intact.

A study by Boase, Horrigan, Wellman and Rainie (2006) confirmed that the Internet is crucial in sustaining dispersed social networks. The technology aids people to maintain active contact with sizable social networks irrespective of the proximity of the persons within the networks. Bauernschuster, Falck and Woessmann (2011) investigated the relationship between the Internet and social capital in Germany and found no reason to believe the Internet undermined social capital. Rather their experiment showed noteworthy positive effects among the children studied. Giddens (in Tettey 2004) hailed the Internet's model of community and highlighted that the technology provided an

opportunity for the creation of a single world, which shares collective problems and issues.

2.2.2 Social media and social capital

A definition of social media suggests an online community of individuals tied and connected by the Internet where each potentially generates and shares information. This is true with social network sites. Empirical studies imply that social networks sites fundamentally support established social relations.

The appropriation of social media by individuals, groups and organisations, especially social network tools, shows to some extent furtherance of the forms of social capital. Boyd & Ellison (2007) citing Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) indicate that Facebook is appropriated to sustain or solidify present relationships in the material world rather than to meeting new people. Historically, Facebook was created to promote greater ties between college students. Maintaining such connections hold possibility to strengthen bonding in social capital.

Link between theory and present research

Social capital theory has been used as a conceptual tool to analyse the vitality of social groups and societies. Within such analyses are measures on how people participate (whether actively or passively) in community life that constitute civic engagements, as well as the communication patterns within social groups. This study thus draws on these connections between social capital and civic engagements to explore and provide an understanding of social media's role in fostering civic discourses among university students in Ghana.

2.3 Deliberative Theory

Contemporary political theories suggest democracy as the best or most ideal system of governance. Within the democratic ideal a normative deliberative framework (Kahane, Weinstock, Leydet, & Williams, 2010) has been advocated (Bessette, 1994; Bohman, 1998; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Its advocates demand democratic systems that give opportunities for citizens to be more involved in decision making processes (Mendelberg, 2002) such that citizens are not only heard actively through their participation in the processes but also given room for divergent views to be heard such that decisions arrived at have legitimacy and are more reflective of the will of citizens (Bohman, 1998; Tschentscher, 2004).

A single definition for what constitutes deliberation in democracy has not been easy to make considering the different presentations of the theory by its proponents (Mendelberg, 2002 citing Macedo 1992; Chambers, 2003; Thompson, 2008). Earlier definitions formed out of abstract principles of rationality, equality and liberty have been revised after criticisms of deliberation holding possibility to further marginalise disadvantaged groups than it promises (Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amenugal, & Gastil, 2006). A reason for the diversity in definitions is also given as the lack of a coherent conception of the theory (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002), perhaps because democracy in itself suffers criticism as an unattainable ideal.

Some definitions place deliberation as “the group activity that transforms individual preferences and behaviour into mutual understanding, agreement and collective action” (Ralston, 2010, p. 235). Gutmann & Thompson (2004) explain that deliberation affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representative suggesting that the

deliberative process demands a mutual provision of reasons behind decisions by citizens to their representatives and vice versa. Bohman (1998) and Tschentscher (2004) further explain that reasoning or reason provide the legitimacy for which decisions arrived at are collectively accepted. In these definitions, as with Habermas' (1991) cited in Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amenugual, and Gastil (2006) deliberation is the presence of discussion reason and consensus building in the discourse process.

However, more recent definitions move away from the prescription of deliberation requiring consensus building and reasoning (Chambers, 2003). Gastil (in Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amenugual and Gastil 2006) describes deliberation as discussion involving thoughtful argument, critical listening and serious decision making. Burkhalter, Gatsil and Kelshaw (2002) define deliberation in relation to small group interactions, though can be extended to online forums, as involving "careful weighing of the possible consequences of various approaches to a problem against all that people consider valuable" (p. 400). New definitions also accept good emotional interaction alongside good reason giving as part of deliberation.

Although presented as a contemporary theory, propositions for deliberation in societies and democratic dispensations are traced to Aristotle with scholars such as Rousseau, Dewey and Arendt also receiving credits for their contributions to the theory, which is viewed as a reformist theory (Bohman, 1998).

Jürgen Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* suggests a proposition for a deliberative society defined by "inclusive critical discussion, free of social and economic pressures, in which interlocutors treat each other as equals in a cooperative

attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common concern” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011). Bohman (1998) credits Joseph Bessette with the recent state of deliberative theory. Bessette’s work opposes what is described as an elitist interpretation of the American Constitution (Bohman, 1998).

Chambers (2003) explains that the deliberative principle presents a more just and true democratic system capable of catering for the diversity in contemporary societies and opposes the aggregative ideas of democracy associated with capitalism. Democracy, as is practiced now, is founded on the aggregation of votes of the majority, which determine decisions taken or to be taken. This system induces competition in the democratic process hence generating decisions that may not necessarily be representative of citizens but of power blocs and interest groups. Consequently, instead of the “vote-centric” system the proposal for a “talk-centric” system, a process of opinion and will formation secured on the principles of discussion and accountability is mooted as more ideal (Chambers, 2003). The concept of “the forum” whose objective is consensus building against “the market place” espoused by pluralism where decisions are arrived at through bargaining and compromise (Bohman, 1998).

Advocates of deliberation urge that participation in the process should be guided by a sense of civic mindedness, i.e. participants must enter the deliberative space with no fully formed conceptions of the positions they will eventually pursue but rather allow themselves to be swayed by the arguments of others. Their view of decisions being taken should be of that which embraces the interests of all citizens (Kahane, Weinstock, Leydet, & Williams, 2010). In this regard deliberation will ultimately yield a community of citizens engaged and active in civic affairs (Barber, 1984 cited in Mendelberg, 2002).

Studies to provide empirical evidences for deliberation and deliberative activity in democratic practice have been growing. Xenos (2008) examined mediated public deliberation in how blogs and newspapers covered the nomination and confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court of Samuel Alito. The study found that blogs may increase and complicate processes of mediated deliberation, and concluded requesting future research to ascertain the definite nature of the dynamics. Min (2007) in an experiment with university students compared the effects of online and face-to-face deliberation. The study suggested that online and offline face-to-face deliberation is able to increase people's knowledge of issues, political efficacy, and will to participate in politics. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) evaluated social media's potential to foster democratic deliberation by studying the types of discussions citizens held on Facebook and YouTube, two widely used social media channels by the White House. Their findings confirmed Facebook had more democratic distribution of comments between discussants and higher level of politeness in their messages.

Criticisms against the deliberative theory have included challenging its fundamental position of guaranteeing equal discursive opportunities to participate in group decisions thereby improving the quality of opinion and decisions reached. Brown (cited in Price, 2009) questions this position of deliberative theory pointing out that group discussions are known to have tendencies to produce polarised opinions and reticence on the part of persons whose views are in the minority. Such reticence, besides pressured into submitting to dominant views, may be as a result of a lack of capacity to articulate views. As a result such decisions may not reflect the preferences of group members.

Aside the criticisms, online technologies deliver features such as anonymity, synchronicity and presents all communication formats (voice, image and texts) at an instance. These features help curb challenges associated with face-to-face group discussions such as: 1) reducing patterns of individual dominance and increasing contributions by low-status participants through anonymity, 2) generating more open exchanges of ideas as information on subject discussed is readily available at the same time and presented in all communication forms appreciable by group members.

Relevance of theories

Deliberative theory and Social Capital theory have been used in quite a significant number of studies (Bers & Chau, 2006; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amenugual, & Gastil, 2006; Xenos, 2008) to contextualise findings on the Internet and social media facilitating civic engagement.

Despite the criticisms presented against both theories they have been used because they offer plausible explanations that aid in understanding group behaviour. As already indicated, research around the subject have used the theories to explain the Internet and Social Media's role in deliberative democracy. It is being used in this study as a measure to explain the nature of the discourse within the online group. Hence help answer whether social media facilitates deliberative processes. Secondly, the theory is used because it was appropriately used in other research that explored social media use for civic discourse.

2.4 Summary

The chapter presented the theories that guided the study. The Deliberative and Social Capital theories were each explained with examples of research work conducted or supporting them. Criticisms against each theory were also presented. Discussion on each theory was also done with respect to Internet and social media use.



Chapter three

Literature review

3.1 Introduction

Scholarship in the field of communication is growing especially within the area of new media studies. With the rapid development of online tools for social engagement and other veritable uses, research on the Internet and social media is being conducted in many academic fields. This chapter presents works generally pertaining to the Internet and social media and their uses in civic engagements.

3.2 Impact of social media

Politically, social media is asserting itself as a facilitative tool in expanding the frontiers of the public sphere and promoting the civil liberty of free expression (Papacharissi, 2009). Social media tools enable citizens to engage in civic and political discourses, which are key components of democratic governance.

According to Choney (2012) social media have become coordinating tools for political movements and civil activism. The examples from events such as the Arab Springs and the Kony 2012 saga display the power of social media to reach and garner global support than any medium can do within minutes. Social media sites supported response efforts to global emergencies such as the earthquake in Haiti (Li & Goodchild, 2010). Again, social media enable individuals to share knowledge, experiences, opinions, and ideas among each other. With regards to the political sector, social media enable individuals to share knowledge, experiences, opinions, and ideas among each other. With regard to the

political sector, social media can be an enabler for participation and democracy among citizens. The 2008 U.S. presidential election campaigns showed how political actors effectively applied social media platforms such as social network sites (SNSs), microblogging services or weblogs to disseminate information to voters as well as to contact and discuss issues with them. An exploratory survey by Stieglitz, Brockmann and Xuan (2012) on use of social media in political communication in Germany found that German citizens were increasingly engaging political parties on social media. The study also identified a strong growth in the use of social media usage by German politicians in the last few years, especially left-leaning parties. Further to this finding, the authors suggested that majority of German politicians were eager to engage their constituents more on social media. Social media characteristics such as virality and interactivity make it imperative for political parties and politicians to incorporate social media in their campaigning.

Notwithstanding these positive impacts are dystopian views about social media's threat to destabilizing social order. The first is that the tools are themselves ineffective, and the second is that they produce as much harm to democratization as good, because repressive governments are becoming better at using these tools to suppress dissent

3.2.1 The Internet, civic and political participation

Democratic theorists advocate for citizens to have an active civic life as a means to sustain democracy. This may have been the premise from which Keeter, Zukin, Andolina and Jenkins (2002) ascertained the civic and political health of the American society. The authors sought to determine what American citizens, particularly youth ages 15 to 25 were doing as well as how often they did what they were doing. A total of 19 core

activities, which included voting, volunteering, signing petitions and other political attitudes and behaviours were measured to ascertain the civic and political health of the American society. The authors collected data primarily using telephone surveys and reached a nationwide sample of 3,246 respondents categorised under the following generational classifications; DotNet generation (born between 1977 and 1987), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1976), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), and the Matures (born in 1945 and before). youth (15-25 years) and adults between April and May, 2002. The two youngest units, DotNets and GenerationX, were oversampled because of the study's particular interest in the youth. Findings from showed that younger citizens were engaged more civically than politically unlike the older cohorts who were more attentive to public affairs and in electoral participation. The study also found that many citizens chose to walk only one path, either on the civic or political path, and there was clearly a wide generational split in the choice of path they made. Keeter et al. (2002) delineated civic engagements from political engagements in their work, which were useful to this very study. This study relied on the codes provided by Keeter et al. (2002) to differentiate between and describe civic discourses and political discourses.

Lin, Cheong, Kim and Jung (2010) provided evidences of civic actions occurring online in their exploration of youth uses of new media for civic activities in five cities in East Asia. The researchers collected data from an overall survey sample of 1,875 students in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Seoul, Taipei and Singapore. The students were drawn from schools in the five cities that had various levels of school resources. Lin et al. (2010) established that Asian youths, aged between 12 and 17, were increasingly adopting communication technologies and appropriating them for civic engagements. From the analysis of the youths' visits to civic websites, reading news, voting and signing petitions, as measures of

civic activities, the Internet was regarded as possibly facilitating citizenship among the Asian youths. Lin et al. (2010) showed that various youths, irrespective of their economic standards and environment, were likely to use the Internet for their civic engagements. The findings from the study support the view of the Internet as a social equaliser, levelling the field for children with different economic backgrounds to have access to the same information.

A study to demonstrate the Internet's role in enhancing political participation was conducted by Bachmann, Kaufhold, Lewis and Gil de Zúñiga (2010) in America. The authors sought to ascertain what influences Internet use had on political participation. The study thus compared the effects news got through online or offline sources had on political participation. It also determined whether such effects varied among young and older adults. The study analysed secondary data from another study conducted by the Pew American Project, which had concluded that likings for online or offline news sources, to some extent, explained the differences in people's political participation, both online and offline. Bachmann et al. (2010) relied on data sample composed of 5,721 cases and only looked at the use of the Internet for issues pertaining to the American midterm election held in November 2006. Online political participation was analysed along five activities: (1) contributing money online to a candidate running for public office; (2) posting personal political commentary or writing to an online news group, Web site or blog; (3) forwarding or reposting someone else's political commentary or writing; (4) a person creating and posting their own political audio or video recordings, and (5) forwarding or posting someone else's political audio or video recordings.

The results indicated that online media preferences were considerably stronger for young adults than for older adults and concluded that a preference for news online matters far more for younger adults than for older adults, therefore the Internet may be narrowing the gap in political participation between the age groups. Given that Internet users are dominantly young people, this finding significantly promotes arguments that the Internet is likely to enhance the political activities of younger people otherwise noted to be less politically engaged. Not only did the studies by Bachmann *et al* (2010) and Lin *et al* (2010) support justification for this study, the works also influenced which activities to consider in analysing discourses as civic and political engagements.

Lei (2011) studied the effects of the Internet in China. With several of the studies on the Internet and its impact on the society having been done in Western contexts, particularly in the U.S., Lei's (2011) work provided a different contextual understanding from China. In this case, the study, using a survey sought to ascertain the political consequences of the Internet following its birth among Chinese citizens. Relying on the Internet's credential as a democratizing technology Lei (2011) sought to identify changes the Internet had brought to a country where state control over traditional media was strong. Analysis of a national survey data set considered representative of the character of the country's population drew three classifications of Netizens (persons who use the Internet as their sources of information even though they may use traditional media sources), traditional media users (whose source of information is from television, radio and newspapers) and non media users who use neither the Internet nor traditional media sources.

Lei (2011) found that the Internet had brought about political and social change to the Chinese society. The netizens were more politically opinionated, likely to support

democratic ideals and critical of the Chinese system of governance than those of the other classes. The netizens were also described as potentially engaging and becoming active participants in collective action. Lei (2011) concluded that irrespective of the potency of the authoritarian state system of governance practiced in China the Internet had facilitated changes in China's media system. Lei (2011) clarified this finding by claiming that though there were still restrictions in China's media system, the media had taken on a new role as a communication institution of the society and that China's netizens had become a new social force that challenged authoritarian rule.

Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) provided yet another evidence of the new media tools, particularly the Internet and mobile phones providing alternate pathways to democratic participation in the politically tensed nation of Columbia. Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) randomly sampled respondents from a national survey data which covered ten cities in the country. The research sample was drawn using a multi step stratified random sampling technique such that it represented Columbia's adult urban population. An 83% response rate was assigned to a total of 1,033 face-to-face administered questionnaires. Findings from the study suggested there was significant relationship between Internet and mobile phone use, and citizens' expressive participation in online spaces. The tools were used by citizens in their mobilisation efforts and contributed to a myriad of participatory political engagements offline. Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) concluded that the Internet and new media technologies provide alternate pathways to democratic political engagement.

Propositions by deliberative theorists suggest that access to information contributes to improved deliberation. Further to this proposition, online deliberative theorists believe that the Internet is expected to solve two longstanding problems associated with citizen

decision-making processes. Polletta, Chen and Christopher (2009) in a study on whether information improves deliberation tested two problems associated with citizen decision-making. That in deliberative forums established inequalities are rather reproduced than lessened, and also that citizen decision-making processes lose the benefits of expertise. The study makes assumptions that persons engaged in deliberations online can access information during their discussion and therefore online processes of deliberation should be more informed and more equal. In testing this assumption, Polletta, Chen and Christopher (2009) quantitatively analysed the posting of URL links as a form of information sharing in an online deliberative forum. They specifically examined how people shared URL-links and the responses generated from them in 25 deliberating groups with varied demographic characteristics. These groups had a facilitator and were conversational in context. The results showed both positive and negative outcomes. Positively, participants engaged in more informed interaction than just ordinary presentation of opinions. On the negative side, the findings demonstrated that the Internet heightened the inequalities associated with deliberation by revealing that the availability of online information could give additional advantages to already advantaged groups. Specifically, it found that the chance to access online information may have favoured groups who were already advantaged. Again the availability of online information is believed to have fostered discussions, in some instances, that were more opinionated than informed. The study concluded that though the Internet provides accessible information it is also politicized in unknown ways. The accessibility to online information possibly fostered discussions, which in some occurrences were more opinionated than informed.

Stromer-Galley (2003) joined the debates on a social effect of the Internet; whether the technology unites people by aggregating all manner of persons to form a heterogenous

group or polarises by creating several homogenous groups. The discussions are premised on an online behaviour that persons who go online or participate in online discussion groups tend to search for information on topics they are already familiar with, engage in arguments or look out for opinions on matters to which they are sympathetic, and seek other discussants who share their viewpoints. Such arguments are rooted in the sociological concept of homophily. However, contrary to such views, Stromer-Galley (2003) contended that persons who participate in political group discussions online generally enjoyed and appreciated the diverse opinions they encountered in such spaces and concluded that people appreciate the diversity of opinions available online. Stromer-Galley (2003) also found participants disliked the racist or xenophobic perspectives on issues discussed in such groups. The study arrived at these conclusions following in-depth interviews with 69 people engaged in publicly accessible online discussions in social media spaces (Usenet, real-time chats and message boards).

3.2.2 Social media and civic participation

Dhaha and Igale (2013) investigated uses of Facebook among Somali youth. They found that the social network site served a number of functions namely: as a source of entertainment, a platform which provided virtual companionship, the opportunity to express themselves and seek information, and for passing time gratifications. Perhaps of political relevance is the use of Facebook as means through which the youth could promote their country. The findings were from an online survey involving 311 respondents. Dhaha and Igale (2013) concluded that Facebook could be used as a promotional tool for a country especially when such countries are in chaotic situations. Not only do Dhaha and Igale (2013) affirm the widely known functions of the social media tool, they also contribute to academic knowledge by presenting contextual uses and

functions of Facebook especially of societies in political turmoil. Their work is also relevant as it contributes to shore up literature and understanding of the relevance of social media in africa.

Baumgartner and Morris (2010) surveyed the political uses of social networking websites by young adults during the initial stages of the 2008 American presidential primary season. Over 3,500 respondents, with ages ranging from 18 to 24 described as young adults in certain contexts were contacted just prior to the Iowa caucuses. The study proved that social network sites are recognized by the youth as a possible source of news with many receiving some of their news from these sites. However, the types of news collected probably do little to inform them or add to their democratic discourses. Also, the study showed that in spite of the promise social network sites hold for increasing political interest and participation among a highly disengaged group, users of these sites were no more disposed to participate in politics than users of other media. Baumgartner and Morris' (2010) study in some measure confirm a pattern of American youths use of Internet technologies in much similar ways as their counterparts in Asia demonstrated by Lin et al. (2010).

Bakardjieva (2011) demonstrated the relevance of social media tools like blogs, and text messaging in political communication towards civic agency in Bulgaria, where civil society is labelled as weak. The study described how blogs and bloggers facilitated civic actions against a decision by the country's Supreme Administrative Court to strip a territory in the southeast of Bulgaria of its status as a protected natural reserve. Bakardjieva (2011) adopted Schneider and Foot's (2005) web sphere analysis method for her study. Data was collected from two sources, i.e. interviews with key actors in the

action (bloggers, journalists, activists, civic leaders and politicians) and from a website (BlueLink) that had aggregated links to all kinds of publications concerning the issue. The analysis looked at several standpoints on the matter while paying attention to common connections and references. A significant finding in Bakardjieva's (2011) study is online media's role in getting young adults (20 to 30 year-olds) to be involved in the civic agency. This finding highlights notions that the new media tools facilitate civic agency amongst the young generation. Despite cautioning over attempts to generalise findings from the study to the democratizing promise of new media, Bakardjieva (2011) concluded that the success of the civic action from the case is enlightening.

Byrne (2008) explored whether participants on BlackPlanet.com used the site's discussion forums for civic engagement and the ways they did that. Using participation analysis, content analysis, and thematic analysis, the researchers analysed public discussions on the site's community forums. The data collected was limited to threaded discussions on community forum because there appeared to be more members on the network contributing to this area on a daily basis than to all of the other communal areas on the website. The findings indicated that participants were deeply committed to on-going discussions about black community issues, however, no discussion moved beyond discursive levels of civic engagement. The implications of Byrne's findings suggested that the potential to mobilize through social networking online had not yet been realized among blacks in America, despite the traditional orientation to community service.

Zhang, Johnson and Bichard (2010) studied the influences of social network sites on political attitudes as well as citizen participation. The study, conducted in 2008 which was an election year, measured the extent to which reliance on social network sites like

Youtube, Facebook and MySpace held civic and political attitudes of citizens. A random sample of 998 respondents drawn from the database of residents of Southwest America was reached via a telephone survey. The survey adopted the political measures of efficacy, political interest and ideology to control four demographic variables which were age, gender race and education. The findings from the research suggested that reliance on social networking sites had a significant relation with increase in civic participation. However there was no indication of social networking sites fostering political participation. This, according to Zhang, Johnson and Bichard (2010), is because social networking sites were developed to maintain relationships. These relationship may then stimulate one's involvement in community. They also found that interpersonal political deliberations showed significant relations to civic and political participation. This finding Zhang, Johnson and Bichard (2010) say affirms studies that suggest that political participation is enhanced by interpersonal political discourses resulting in citizens ability to decide on different policies.

The popularity of Facebook and other social network sites among the young generation in the U.S motivated Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009) to research into whether the use of these sites had any relationship to the attitudes and behaviours that augment individuals' social capital. The authors tested six hypotheses that were generated from two main research questions. The hypotheses measured individual and group uses of Facebook against variables such as life satisfaction, civic and political participation and social trust. A web survey method was used and a random sample of 2, 603 students was drawn from two public universities, one rural and the other metropolitan in the state of Texas. Findings showed evidences that suggested that the amount of Facebook use had a relationship with values such as social trust, civic engagement, life satisfaction and

political participation. The relevance of the study lies in its demonstration that contrary to fears that Facebook has mostly negative effects on young adults, there were rather positive and significant associations between Facebook variables and social capital even if the relationship were small.

Halpern and Gibbs (2013) examined a total of 7,230 messages on Facebook and YouTube sites managed by the US' White House to measure the prospect of social media serving as a channel to advance democratic deliberation. The researchers examined the discussions on these sites based on indicators (identifiability and networked information access), which serve as conditions of deliberation derived by Jürgen Habermas. The White House managed sites were chosen, among other reasons, because the government agency did not moderate the discussions that took place on their sites, which was not the case with the other government agencies. The study relied on the Network theory and the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) model. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) predicted that the Facebook site was more likely to show patterns of democratic and open-minded opinions in the political discussions that took place and also that discussants would be more polite in their messages than those exhibited on YouTube. These predictions were made because identities on Facebook are less anonymous than they are on YouTube. A total of 32 conversations, comprising 16 Facebook threads of 3,500 messages and 3,730 on YouTube were analysed. The posts were coded relying on Krippendorff's (2004) coding steps. Two independent coders also tested the codes to ensure inter-coder reliability after the coding had been done by researchers.

Halpern and Gibbs (2013) found about 23% of messages on Facebook impolite against a relatively higher level on YouTube (32.7%). The impolite messages were found in discussions that bordered on highly sensitive subjects. The study also found that most of the messages were from individuals who commented only once. The researchers inferred from this finding that there was “a more egalitarian participation due to the greater level of information access to users’ broader social networks” (p.1165). The results hence showed consistency with the identification/deindividuation (SIDE) theoretical framework, which guided the study. It also showed evidences of criticisms against the Internet and social media sites being places for uncivil and flaming discourses.

Kushin and Kitchener (2009) also examined the nature of uncivil discourse behaviour in online political spaces by exploring the use of Facebook for political discussion. The study intended to expand on other previous works on the political uses of social network sites. The study analysed the discussions in a Facebook group page that they chose randomly out of a shortlist of ten similar groups. The preselected groups met the research criteria, which required that, (1) it was a public group type and thus not closed to only its members. This would facilitate access to the group and the information therein; (2) the subject matter the group was discussing related to torture. The reason being that the topic was the prevailing debate in the United States at the time of the study; (3) the group had more than 100 members so as to ensure greater diversity in the discussions; (4) had been active with discussion postings within 30 days prior to the study and, (5) total discussion postings exceeding 50.

Kushin and Kitchener (2009) conducted the study using the method of computer-mediated discourse analysis to reach their findings. Their dataset was subjected to a coding and counting process, and found that flaming was prevalent in the discussions and consistent with other findings poses an issue associated with online political discussions. Despite its presence, persons who sought to engage in civil interactions went on to express their views and were not driven out of the discussions. The finding hence contradicted previous conclusions that persons who sought to engage in civil discussions online were often discouraged from doing so because of the presence of flaming in such online spaces. Kushin and Kitchener (2009) also provided another perspective to the trends of flaming that occur in online political discourses. According to them there is the likelihood to have persons who are loudest within these online discussion spaces. Identifying such persons is by the frequency or the pluck of their posts. The limitation to this study is that it analysed an open group and therefore does not generalise its findings to closed or secret groups. In this regard, this research on social media and civic discourse among students of the university of Ghana attempts to offer some understandings of the nature of political and civic discourses within a secret group.

Not only does Facebook allow individuals to create connections with persons of shared ties, it also allows people to create groups where these people come to exist as a community. Studies on Facebook have examined benefits of Facebook use on individuals but not on group users' gratifications. Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) thus examined Facebook Group users' gratifications and the relationship between users' gratifications and their political and civic participation offline. To ascertain this, Park, Kee and Valenzuela (2009) conducted a web survey involving 1,715 college students and found that the motivations for joining or staying in Facebook groups were for socializing,

entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. They also found that these gratifications varied along demographic variables such as gender, school year and hometown. The research also suggested that Facebook groups are likely to promote civic and political action than merely serving as conduits for recreational purposes.

Similarly a study by Feezell, Conroy and Guerrero (2009), which contributed to on-going discussions on the political usage of the Internet and civic engagement, concluded that online groups produce much the same positive civic functions just as those offline. The conclusion was informed by a multi method research approach, which included a content analysis of political group pages and a survey sample of 455 undergraduates. The researchers assessed the quality of online political group discussions and the effects of online group membership. Political engagement was measured through political knowledge and political participation surrounding the 2008 election. OLS and 2SLS multivariate regression analyses were used and these revealed that by engaging members online, participation in online political groups strongly predicted offline political participation.

3.2.3 Gender, social media, civic and political engagements

Baker (2009) in a study to assess older adolescents' motives for their uses of social network sites presented findings which showed gender variances in the adolescents' uses of social network sites (SNS). The study surveyed 703 adolescents, most of who were aged 18 years, and hypothesised that these persons would most likely use SNS for entertainment, passing time, social identity gratifications and virtual companionship. Communication with peers appeared to be the most important motivation for the

adolescents' use of SNS. Participants high in positive collective self-esteem were strongly motivated to communicate with peer group via social network sites (SNS).

Baker (2009) also found that female participants recorded greater levels for group identification, passing time, and entertainment and also were more likely to report high positive collective self-esteem. Their male colleagues however were more likely to convey negative collective self-esteem. Negative collective self-esteem correlated with social compensation, suggesting that those who felt negatively about their social group used SNS as an alternative to communicating with other group members. Males were more likely than females to report negative collective self-esteem and SNS use for social compensation and social identity gratifications.

Kapidzic and Herring (2011) contributed to understanding gender differences in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) by examining such distinctness in online environments. The study gathered data from five popular English language based teen chat websites. Discourse and content analysis methods were employed to analyse data collected from the text messages and user profile pictures on the sites. The findings affirmed some generally held gender stereotypes, which were evident in the tone of messages, in speech acts, photos including profile posted by them.

Kapidzic and Herring (2011) analysed the linguistic features of 1,000 messages generated from the group chats using the free online version of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) programme developed by Pennebaker, Booth and Francis (2001). The analysis showed that even though generally there were no strong differences between male and female word usage, boys tended to use more self-reference words, social words,

articles and big words in most of the samples while girls tended to express more negative emotions than positive emotions. Kapidzic and Herring (2011) thus concluded that some gender patterns are reinforced in the online spaces.

Gender differences are equally evident in male and female participations in civic and political engagements. A report by the European Parliament (2013) cited findings from a survey by the EU's Electoral Commission (2004) revealed that women are likely to be more engaged in cause-oriented campaigns than men, mainly those involving signing petitions. Significantly, they are less likely than men to contact a politician and donate money to, or be members of a political party. The study also highlighted women being slightly less active than men in civic orientated participation, with the most significant difference being in campaign activities. The European Parliament (2013) also found in their study after a focus group interaction with a diverse group of women recruited from the general public; an in-depth twitter-enabled survey, and an in-depth semi-structured survey of members of an international professional women's network that new media can be used in diverse ways to either directly or indirectly engage women in political discourse.

On the other hand, Jenkins (2005) suggests from her analysis of secondary survey data drawn from the National Citizen Engagement Study (NCES) that young American women appear to be slightly more civically engaged particularly in helping solve social problems. They do this through volunteerism with a variety of organizations. The NCES is a nationally representative telephone survey of 3,246 respondents aged 15 and older conducted in 2002. The analysis demonstrated that 45% of all young women of ages between 15 and 25 (N = 1001) report volunteering for at least one non- political group in

the past 12 months. Compared to young men, 36% who said they had volunteered for a non-political group in the last 12 months. About 20% of both young women and men report that they had worked informally with others to solve a community problem.

The reviewed works informed this study in diverse ways. They indicated areas germane for observation and analysis for the present research. They also presented the different arguments and notions about the Internet and social media impacts on various forms of social life. These provided backgrounds and points of reference for the discussions presented in chapter six of this thesis.

3.3 Chapter summary

Academic literature on the Internet and social media is ever growing. Considering the enormous impact the technologies have on society, with no indication of when they would become less significant in society, there is continuous interest in the Internet.

The literature reviewed in this chapter covered works conducted in the realm of political communication. These were presented under thematic headings social media and political participation, gender and social media. The reviewed literature provided an understanding of the various discourses surrounding the Internet and social media and their appropriation in different social contexts. It gave indications of the utopian as well as dystopian impacts of the new media technology.

Chapter four

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The study intended to provide an understanding of social media use among university students, particularly its uses for civic discourses. However, because social media scholarship is in its emerging phase in Ghana, the study was designed to be exploratory. It tried to identify the use of social media for political communication more especially towards civic discourses

Exploratory research tends to be more qualitative than quantitative (Stebbins, 2001) and according to Davies (2006) it is primarily concerned with the discovery and generation or building of theory. Exploration suggests an examination of a phenomenon and thus paves the way for further research on the subject about which there is uncertainty, ignorance or no understanding. Tukey (1986) in Wimmer and Dominick (2011) says exploratory research responds to the question: What appears to be going on? By this notion, exploratory research has become synonymous with pilot or feasibility study. Kushin and Kitchener (2009) used an exploratory approach in their study of political discourse on Facebook and cited limited academic literature on the phenomenon as justification for the approach.

While this very study is designed to be exploratory it is guided by an associated research approach called grounded theory. According to Charmaz, (2006) grounded theory method involves a researcher systematically and flexibly developing guidelines to collect and

analyse qualitative data from which theories founded on the data are generated. Charmaz (2006) however emphasises that grounded theory complements other research methods in a study and may not necessarily yield a theory. In a grounded theory research approach, data collection may be done via ethnographic methods.

Because this study is about subjects in a virtual world, the research method adopted for the study was online ethnography (also referred to as virtual ethnography). Online ethnography is a transfer of traditional ethnographic research instruments into the social spaces on the Internet. According to Escobar (in Hine, 2000) the Internet and its related developments provide a field for ethnographic research. This is not only because the Internet has been conceptualised as constituting culture and cultural artefact, but also as a result of the acceptance of the Internet's ability to create online communities (Hine, 2008). This therefore makes it possible to transfer research methods peculiar to various fields of social science to research work on the Internet thus serves as an appropriate method for this very study. Several other research works, including those by Al-Saggaf (2006), Catterall and Maclaran (2006) and (Bosch, 2009), all used virtual ethnography as the methodology for their work.

4.2 The study site

The study site for this research was the Facebook group page created for the 2011/12 Master of Arts class of the School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana. The group page is named *SCS 2011/12 Class*. It is a group which is set to exist as a secret group on Facebook therefore only its members see who is in it and what members post. The members in the Facebook group consider themselves as belonging to a family. This

sense of community is highlighted on the group's homepage under the feature named *About Us*. The description reads:

From different work backgrounds, cultures, and parts of the country, we came together for a Master of Arts degree in Communication Studies. Four months down the line, we have become a family. We intend to keep this bond of friendship and love to the world of work (SCS 2011/12 Class).

The group page was created in December 2011, though the Class had been together since August of the same year. At the time it was created almost all of the members had Facebook accounts. Members who were already friends with other members on Facebook (i.e. connected as friends on the social media platform) in the class added them to the group page while those who had no prior Facebook connections were informed about the new group and were added to the group with their consent. A member of the class who hitherto had no Facebook account and thus was not on Facebook was encouraged to have Facebook presence hence created a profile in order to be part of the group. There was only one person in the class who was not in the group. This individual did not have a Facebook account and did not intend to have one. The individual explained that the limitation in IT skills made it a disincentive to be present on social media. The group page from the day it was created could be described as being active. Members put up at least a post on the page each day during the period of the study.

The Facebook page was created, among others, to facilitate interactions between the students and also create stronger friendship ties. The group page had existed some months

prior to the researcher receiving approval from the University of Ghana's Graduate Studies Academic Board to conduct the study.

Demographics

The online group is made up of twenty-five members out of the total class population of twenty-six. The group is composed of twelve males and thirteen females with ages ranging from twenty-five to fifty years. Because all members of the group were pursuing Masters degree programme, they all had at least a Bachelors degree certificate. The make up of the membership within the group, represented at least six of Ghana's ten regions.

The main language of communication on the group page was English, even though some local languages appeared infrequently. Almost half (12) of the members in the group were married. Six males were married and the remaining females. The group also had members who were in full time employment or had adjusted their contracts because of the Masters programme.

4.3 Sampling

Two criteria were developed for selecting the sample for the study. The first criterion was on accessibility. The online group had to be easily accessible, meaning that one could visit the page easily without any form of hindrance and would be able to collect information pertaining to the group's activity. Accessibility therefore facilitated data collection. The other criterion required that the group page was active. An active page is

one that had regular posts by members on at least a daily basis. Kushin and Kitchener (2009) used these as part of the selection of a group for their research on online political discourses on Facebook.

In choosing a sample for the study, a list of possible civic groups on the University of Ghana campus was generated based on the researchers knowledge of existing groups at the university. A search on Facebook, using the names of the groups was done to determine their presence on the social media platform. The search results showed that there were a significant number of group pages created by students of the University of Ghana on Facebook. Some of the groups were old students of senior high schools, campus branches of political parties, class groups as well as faculty or departmental associations.

Some groups were opened to all persons, others were closed and therefore required a process of authentication before acceptance into the group while others were labelled secret groups with restrictions on identifying the members in the group. Closed and secret groups were regulated by privacy settings that controlled access to these groups by non-members or unapproved persons. A list of 10 open groups was generated as these groups met the first criterion of accessibility. However, the selected groups were found to be inactive. Many of these groups either had scanty posts or had little evidence of conversations taking place. The researcher thus had to settle on a group that could easily be accessed, was active and therefore had enough data for the research.

The *SCS 2011/12* group page consequently was chosen purposively because it met the set criteria and was convenient to the researcher. The researcher had created the group and was a member. Exploratory research permits purposive sampling. Oduro (2011) used the sampling technique in her study of the use of Facebook by students of the University of Ghana.

4.4 Data collection method

Participant observation was used as a data collection tool in this online ethnographic study. This involved the researcher participating in the interactions, which took place on the page while collecting data from the Facebook page. Baym (2007) used online participant observation to study online community fandom. It was also used by Kanayama (2003) to study the experiences of Japanese elderly persons online. The researcher's participation began with the creation of the group page for the students in the MA Mass Communication class and participated in the interactions that ensued on the page. At the time the group page was created, there was no intention to use it as a research site. In order not to influence the study's data or its outcomes, the researcher though still part of the group, withdrew from actively participating in the interactions after receiving approval from the graduate academic to study the research site.

Data for the study was collected both manually (i.e. physical note taking) and with the aid of computer (i.e. word processing). The significance in using observation was to help identify what interactions were actually taking place on the group page, which classes or codes could be assigned to the pattern of interactions that took place on the group page. Technology aided with the retrieval of the data from the online site and sorting for easy identification and categorisation.

The researcher began observing the group page in the year 2012. Data collected and used for the study was from April 2012 to April 2013. This was when the researcher has received approval from the Graduate Academic Board to carry out the study and had become less active within the group. A common feature with many social media sites is the ability to retrieve information or content stored on the various pages over a period of time. Facebook categorizes and stores user generated content on the site into months and years, hence it was possible to collect data from every month of the year. However, it does not provide data on all daily content or activity, therefore the data collected from the group page was only limited to what was available and retrievable from webpage.

As a member of the group, the researcher received notifications on new posts or a group member's activity on the page. This notification alerted the researcher to visit the page to observe what had been done and take notes. By this activity, the researcher became familiar with the nature of the content on the group page.

Facebook group pages allow members to upload videos and photos, post or share information from other sources including weblinks (URLs), tag members to associate them to information or comments, comment on posts made by others and conduct polls, which is a special feature to group pages. These Facebook features thus were the bedrock from which data was collected.

Data collection was aided by the use of the copy and paste feature on Microsoft Word. The technique allowed for data to be transferred in almost the same way, as it is online onto a format that is easier to organise. The method also enabled the researcher to collect

posts made by group members before they got deleted or removed or became unavailable as a result of Facebook's content policies.

The process of data collection involved opening up all minimised sections on the group page and then using the highlighting feature to mark all texts as they appeared on the group page. Highlighted texts were then copied and transferred onto the MS Word sheet. The texts appeared with hyperlinks (a feature of the Internet). The hyperlinks, once they were clicked on, opened the Facebook page and allowed the researcher to go back directly to the original texts as they were on the group page to verify the data that had been transferred. The MS Word programme helped sort and organize the data collected for easy analysis. This data collection process had been used by Al-Saggaf (2006), however an MS Excel Spreadsheet was used instead.

The written texts, images, videos and URL links posted on the group page after their transfer to the MS Word programme generated seventy-seven pages of data. However, because online pages have unique formatting systems embedded within them, it was necessary for the researcher, in organising the data for easy use, to format the data acquired. The researcher reduced the spacing between the texts by formatting the whole document to single spaced material and also deleted the researcher's comment box that appeared between texts.

The data was also organised separately in another MS Word document. This data was composed of all original posts and comments made by males and females in the group. Original posts were considered to be written texts originally composed and posted on the group page. Such posts are not reposted texts or borrowed texts from other sources.

Comments referred to the responses by members to posts made by any group member. These were identified by Facebook's default classification of such posts as comments¹. All the original posts and comments were first copied together with the identity of the persons who made the comments and pasted to the MS Word document. These were later sorted and grouped under male and female texts. This classification helped in answering research question four which sought to identify activities that suggest gender differences on the page.

4.5 Data analysis

The analysis in this study began while still observing and taking notes on the interactions as they happened on the page. At this phase, emerging themes based on the general concepts were identified and coded. The codes guided the identification of texts that provided answers to the research questions posed in the study.

Elements of the coding and counting approach, developed by Herring (2004), were used in some aspects of the analysis in the study. The coding and counting approach is used in computer mediated communication research to analyze interactions in an asynchronous environment such as in a Facebook group. The process of analysis involved repeated examination of the data to allow for coding categories to emerge from the analysis process. The researcher read the data set again in order to become more familiar with the data. The researcher then identified emergent trends based on the research questions through repeated analysis. Guided by the definitions of civic discourse by Sunstein (cited in Bers and Chau, 2006) and Keeter et. al's (2002) delineation of civic and political engagements codes were developed and emerging trends were categorised under these

¹ Facebook organizes all comments made under each post. It also indicates the number of comments made under each post. Illustration provided in appendices.

based on the operational definitions. A final comparison of the analysis with the data and the operational definitions was done to ensure accuracy. This method was used by Kushin and Kitchener (2009) who explored the nature of online political discussions in a political group on Facebook.

Herring (2011) shares an understanding on the conceptualisation of conversation in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). This was considered in coding what constituted discourse, as broadly defined by Sunstein (2001) to include conversation. The study conceptualised conversation in CMC environments as text exchanges and according to earlier conceptions that explained conversations as having dealings with others (Herring, 2011).

The analyses were done under the following thematic headings: political discourses, civic discourses, other conversations on the page, nature of civic discourses, gender differences in political conversations, gender differences in civic discussions and type of posts. These are explained in the next sub-sections. The coding and counting analysis technique was used in the analysis of gender differences.

4.5.1 Political discourses

In this study, conversations on the page that bordered on political processes and events such as manifestos, political candidates etc. were interpreted as political discourses. The analyses of such conversations or posts as political discourses were guided by the indices generated by Keeter et al. (2002) who delineated activities such as campaigning, voting and other electoral processes as political engagements. Actors and events were also used

to identify political discourses. This is concept for coding political discourses is consistent with a definition by van Dijk (1997).

Nature of political discourses

Having identified conversations that can be categorised as political discourses, a further analysis to provide more understanding on the discourses was presented under this sub heading. The nature of political discourses explains what type of political discourses occurred and the frequency of political discourses on the page.

4.5.2 Civic discourses

Activities relating to identifying or helping address social or communal issues (including participating in a fundraising walk or volunteering for a non-electoral organisation) were perceived to be civic activities. Therefore conversations about these were operationalized as constituting civic discourses. Similarly, Keeter et al's (2002) indices of civic engagements informed the codes used to identify civic discourses in this study. An analysis of the nature and frequency of posts considered to be civic discourses were also done.

Nature of civic discourses

Having identified the themes or subject matters analysed as civic discourses, the analysis on the nature of civic discourses sought to identify the types of civic discourses and the frequency with which they occurred on the page. The nature of civic discourses also goes further to provide analysis on the attempt to engage in deliberation. Because this study is particularly interested in civic discourses within the online group, identifying instances of deliberation is of particular interest since deliberative practices are associated with group

decision-making processes. Thus analyses from the interactions on the page were done considering; moments of deliberation, references to information sources during deliberation, staying to issues under deliberation, Civility of the deliberations.

Other discourses

Conversations that were not coded as constituting neither political nor civic discourses were coded as other conversations.

4.5.4 Gender differences

Analysis of gender differences was to ascertain possible dissimilarities in the posts members made. One assessed the pattern of posts on the webpage. This analysis ascertained who, between males and females, was more active in putting up posts, what they posted about and which discourses males or females engaged in the most. This analysis was done to confirm or otherwise suggestions of gender differences in civic and political discourses.

4.5.5 Type of posts

A significant number of academic studies suggest many uses of Facebook. These have been determined using the uses and gratifications theory. Facebook uses include entertainment, information sharing, staying connected with persons of shared ties, educational purposes and for having conversations. Posts identified and categorised under these heading using the associated codes.

Entertainment: During the analysis of the contents on the page all texts that evoked laughter or generated excitement among the members were coded as under entertainment uses. In this regard, jokes, words such as “lol” (laughing out loud),

“hehehe”, “hahaha” were placed under this category. Also, a member “liking” a joke was counted under entertainment.

Source of information: Posts deemed to provide information were placed under this category of Facebook uses. Posts that sought to or provided information about relevant events and conditions in the immediate surroundings, society and the world were considered. Others that sought advice on matters or opinion and decision choices were also analysed under this theme.

4.6 Limitations of the study

As with any scholarly work, this study also has its limitations. A notable limitation lies in the use of a qualitative research approach.

Size of sample and group: The small number of members in the group studied poses another limitation particularly the generalizability of the findings. Consequently, the findings are limited to the group with recommendations for further researcher made on account of what has been found. Nevertheless the group proved to be the most ideal considering the criteria used for selecting samples and time constraints within which the study was to be conducted. The group was also chosen because it satisfied the exploratory context under which the study was being done.

A grounded theory approach suggests the construction of a theory from the research findings. While this study adopts the grounded theory method in data collection and analysis, it stops short of constructing a theory from the research data and findings. The use of the methodology is limited to satisfying the goal of the research, which only seeks to provide an understanding of social media use for civic discourses by students of the University of Ghana.

A criticism against qualitative research is its natural tendency to be subjective hence posing challenges to the measure of reliability and validity of findings from its use. Some scholars (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Leininger, 1994) have however downplayed the relevance of reliability and validity in qualitative research claiming it is more useful in quantitative studies. In an attempt to address the criticism of subjectivity, the researcher adopts and relies on concepts of civic and political discourses used in both quantitative and qualitative research studies. These guided the codes used in the analysis of data.

Ethical issues

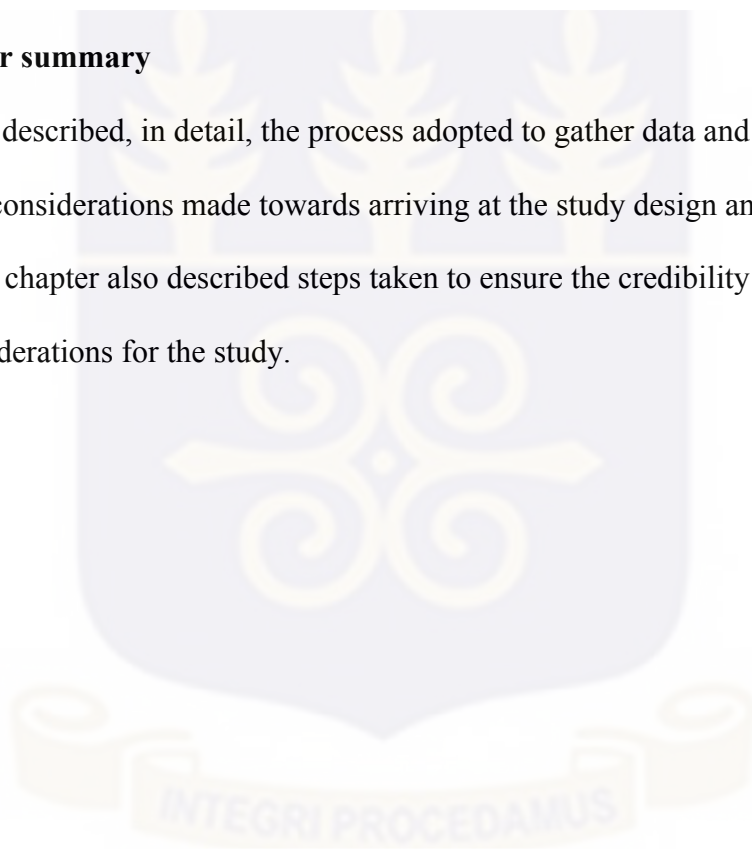
Academic research requires that researchers adhere to ethical principles, which are particularly necessary when conducting studies involving humans. To the extent possible, the study followed ethical guidelines espoused by Eynon, Fry and Schroeder (2008). They proposed that online researchers must ensure confidentiality, have obtained informed consent from the participants being studied, understand that it is good practice to identify oneself as a researcher as this ensures transparency. These were followed to the extent that group members were notified of the study. Members had become aware of the likelihood that the group would be studied because they had been present during a presentation by the researcher while seeking approval for the research topic. No group member openly declared objections or dissatisfaction to the researcher studying the group. The identities of individuals and their personal information have not been presented anywhere in this thesis.² Al-Saggaf (2006) citing Ess & AoIR Ethics Working Committee (2002) says doing these follows the ethics governing human subjects in online research.

² Persons have been identified by codes generated by the researcher. Where necessary a person is identified as **PART** and a number assigned to that person

The researchers' participation in the group: There is the potential to raise ethical questions about the possibility of the researcher influencing the group's interactions to suit the study while being a participant of the group. This ethical concern was addressed by the researcher's disclosure of the conditions for selecting the study group (site), the fact that the group had existed and was not created intently for the study. Ultimately, the researcher's withdrawal from an active participant to an observant participant is intended to address such ethical concerns.

4.7 Chapter summary

This chapter described, in detail, the process adopted to gather data and analysis. It highlighted considerations made towards arriving at the study design and sampling method. The chapter also described steps taken to ensure the credibility of the as well as ethical considerations for the study.



Chapter five

Findings

5.0 Introduction

This section presents the findings of the study. The analyses of the data collected have been conducted using observational and interpretive analysis of a group page on Facebook. The findings are presented largely in a narrative form with illustrations and supporting texts provided where relevant.

5.1 General findings

Between April 2012 and April 2013 a total of 309 posts recorded. During the period of the study were no fewer than two posts each week and no less than five posts a month. The analysis revealed that the group page remained quite active with regular posts when members had congregated in class attending lectures and also when they finished their course work and were individually working on their dissertations. The activeness of the group page slightly waned by April 2013. By this period, per the University of Ghana academic calendar, it was expected that almost all the members expecting to graduate with Master of Arts degree in Communication Studies would have completed their dissertations except two who had been admitted into the Master of Philosophy (MPhil) programme.

The analysis also revealed that all posts on the page, on the average, would have been seen by all but two group members. Even though many of the members saw the posts made on the group page fewer of them commented either by posting responses to the

posts or liked the posts. However, there were fewer instances of people liking posts than commenting.

The members mostly posted written texts with relatively fewer images and videos. More than half of the over three hundred posts recorded on the group page were written texts. Many of the written posts were links to other webpages and served as sources of information. These kinds of posts were accompanied by the images or videos associated with those pages. There were fewer posts by members that were either only texts with no accompanying images or links, or only images. More often, members appeared to provide links to other pages.

The findings from the observational analysis also revealed that members' participation or activeness in the group in terms of their contribution to the creation of content, which included the discourses that took place on the group page, was varied. The participation of the group members can be categorised in four classes. These are the active, moderately active, passively active and inactive participants. Refer to table 3 below for the breakdown of the various categories.

- ***Active participants*** were members who posted regularly on the page and also were more likely to be exposed to or would have seen the posts of other members. These participants were involved actively in initiating conversations or sustaining them on the page. They put up posts that initiated conversations, shared information with other members or made comments to posts by others. They were also more likely to see posts made by others even if they did not comment on them.

An active member had made up to or more than fifteen posts during the period of study. These were either posts from them that started off or tried to start a conversation or comments to other posts. They were also more likely to be the ones to have seen all the posts on the page, at least within the one-year period of data collection. These members visited or were more likely to visit the group page on a daily basis and put up two posts in a week. Active participants, eight in number, had collectively made 212 posts out of about a total of 309 on the page at the time of data collection.

- ***Moderately active participants*** were group members who had made over ten posts but fewer than fifteen. Like the active members they were likely to have seen or read as many posts as there were on the page or contributed in generating as many as there were but yet fewer than their active colleagues. Moderately active members visited or were likely to visit the group page every other day and would have posted once in a week. The five moderately active members had collectively made about 65 posts at the time of data collection.
- ***Passively active participants*** occasionally saw or read posts and had only made fewer than ten posts during the whole period of the study. Many of the passively active participants or group members had seen or were likely to have seen more of the posts on the page but were not inclined to comment on them. These shared some characteristic of active participants in terms of their visits to the group page and therefore saw and were aware of activities on the page. However, because they rarely made any posts either by putting up texts, which initiated or contributed to the content on the page or commented on posts by others, their presence in the group was rarely felt. Collectively, passive participants though few

(four in number), had contributed 17 posts on the group page at the time of data collection.

- *Inactive participants* collectively contributed the least to the discourses and activities on the group page. These persons individually barely had five posts on the page, either by posting texts that generate conversations or shared information or made comments on posts by other people. Though they number as much as the active participants their contributions were very minimal. Fewer of them saw the anything put on the page and none made more than three posts on the page.

Table 3: Distribution of group members in various classes

Classification	Number of Males	Number of Females
Active	6	2
Moderately active	3	2
Passive	3	1
Inactive	0	8
Total	12	13

5.1.1 Nature of conversations on the page

Many of the posts on the page had responses to them. About two thirds of all 309 posts had group members posting responses to the posts. Majority of the responses were in the form of comments, while a few were found to be likes to the posts that had been made. Responses to the posts were either single comment posts or threads of messages. Generally, there were more posts, estimated to be

In many instances members commented more than once on a post. This was particularly with that had generated more responses or comments. With such posts, active group members posted no less than two and not more than five posts in the thread of responses to the post. The post with the highest thread of comments had 36 comments in total. Very few posts had an average of 15 or more thread comments to the post. Majority of the posts, averagely, received five to ten comments with a group member contributing more than once to the post.

Members generally commented on posts relating to their academic work and other unrelated events. Unrelated events were usually those that involved some members getting together for reasons other than studying and those events that had been recorded or reported in the larger real world. Almost all unrelated events pertaining to members getting together were communicated through photos taken at that event. These usually got some members to ask about those events or pass suggestive comments especially when there were more females than males. The other unrelated real world events were usually news reported about some public event. The news reported were either political in tone or raised other concerns which were considered to be of civic nature. However posts relating to academic work were usually communicated through written texts.

Significantly, the study found that group members commented more on posts which provided information or generated conversations about their school work and about their colleagues which was unrelated to their school work than they did about events reported in the news. News events received very little commentary or responses although they carried themes suggestive of constituting political or civic discourses. It appeared that issues concerning academic life and about members themselves generated an equal measure of responses although the post which generated the highest responses or comments was more personal and related to a photo of a male group member and a female unfamiliar to majority of the group members. The post recorded 36 responses and was seen by 23 members (see SAMPLE 1).

SAMPLE 1

[Seen by 23](#)

[View 36 more comments](#)

PART 11: Hahaha @PART 13 azui means imbecile.

[9 July 2012 at 16:51](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#)



PART 7: Hey PART 11 prepare to meet my lawyers in court. He enticed you to insult me indirectly, abi?

[9 July 2012 at 17:04](#) · [Like](#)

PART 11: Tell your lawyers to get a life.

[9 July 2012 at 17:24](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#)



PART 7: The Bible says it. Make peace with your accuser before he hands you the the judge. You either listen to that advice or....

[9 July 2012 at 18:53](#) · [Like](#)



PART 6: PART 7!!! it's been two solid days and i just heard Awuni is synonymous to lol

[11 July 2012 at 09:51](#) · [Like](#)

PART 9: Hmmm, some funny rantings going on here, but if i may ask, if an old student of kete krachi shs meets that of AGISS, who'll be endorsing whom? I asked a small boy in Abirem abt both schools and he laughed and asked (referring to the former) "is that the name of sch?" Who born dog? Please leave AGISS out and u'll be free! A word to the wise is in Bongo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

[11 July 2012 at 11:31](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#)



PART 7: I refuse to get angry. [11 July 2012 at 14:48](#) via [mobile](#) ·

[Like](#) · [1](#)

5.2 Political discourses within the group

The study found very minimal conversations that were considered to be political discourses from the data gathered between April 2012 and April 2013. Majority of the posts or conversations were on matters relating more to the group's academic and personal lives. These are presented under the sub heading Other Conversations on page. Out of the 309 posts analysed 10 were found to constitute political discourses. It was found that most of the political discourses were trending political matters in the real world and had been carried by various traditional media outlets.

An active group member was found to have started or put up nearly all the political discourses on the page. Of the ten posts found to constitute political discourses, the member put up five while three other active group members posted the rest.

Nature of political discourses

The political discourses were mostly about political activities that preceded Ghana's general elections in December 2012. These were largely discourses on the campaign activities of the two main political parties in the country. For instance the New Patriotic Party (NPP) candidate's pledge to build hostels for female street and market porters (*kayayeis*) was shared on the page. 23 group members viewed this post (see sample 1 below). The post was an online link to a news website which had carried the story.

Sample 2



PART 6

<http://edition.radioxyzonline.com/pages/politics/10222012-1305/7069.stm>

[NPP to build hostels for Kayayei - Nana Addo | Radioxyzonline](http://edition.radioxyzonline.com)

edition.radioxyzonline.com

[Flagbearer of the New Patriotic Party \(NPP\), Nana Akufo-Addo has promised to build hostels for female porters \(Kayayei\) and the most vulnerable in society as part of his plans to promote the Ghanaian housing sector. Nana Addo made this promise when he met officials of the Ghana Real Estate Developer...](http://edition.radioxyzonline.com)

[Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · [Share](#) · [23 October 2012 at 21:41](#) [Seen by 23](#)

The controversy surrounding Pastor Mensah Otabil (a renowned Ghanaian religious leader) who was purported to have preached a sermon that seemingly ridiculed the NPP's campaign promise to provide free education to Ghanaians was posted on the page. The controversy was a major topical issue leading to the general elections (See sample 2).

Figure 3 (Sample 3): A participant's post of political discourse relating to the 2012 General elections



³PART 6

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36UUidacQYQ&feature=plcp>



[Pastor Mensa Otabil - Education can never be free](#)

www.youtube.com

[Ghana Politics and Entertainment News and Videos.....Subscribe to stay posted...](#)

[Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · [Share](#) · [2 November 2012 at 10:25](#) [Seen by 23](#)

Besides the campaign activities, which appeared to dominate the political discourses on the page, a post relating to the death of former president John Atta Mills was also found on the page. The president's death was a major political highlight in the year and it generated a lot of public discourses across the nation. Intriguingly, two of the five reactions to the post appeared to respond to the subject matter of the post.

³ The image has been left because it does not reveal the group member's identity

Figure 4 (Sample 4): A post on trending local political discourse

PART 7

"When you told your "Atta Mortuary Man" joke at our Tamale Congress, people think it was too insulting for my personality. But All of a sudden, I'm in the hands of mortuary man who utters disdainful words. "His Excellency John Evans Atta-Mills" was my name a few days ago. But the mortuary attendant contemptuously refers to me as "the body."



Savannah View: Prez. Mills' last letter to Rawlings

Savannah View: Prez. Mills' last letter to Rawlings

[Like](#) · [Share](#) [Seen by everyone](#)

PART 12: idiot, check ur syntax! anyway, good piece [7 August 2012 at 13:11](#) ·

[Like](#)



PART 6: lol, **PART 7**, it's been a while, i believe u r fine [7 August 2012 at 20:47](#) · [Like](#)

PART 9: Hmm, read it on peacefmonline. No comment [7 August 2012 at 20:53](#) ·

[Like](#)

PART 7 It's a slip of hand. I only realised it after it was published. [11 August 2012 at 21:25](#) · [Like](#)

PART 21: so blame the lazy journalists who failed to see it. [13 August 2012 at 14:46](#) · [Like](#)

The political discourses were not only limited to political activities or actors in the Ghanaian space but were also included notable political figures on the world stage. International political actors like Barack Obama President of the United States of America (See Sample 5), Tony Blair, former Prime minister of Great Britain and former US president George Bush. Obama's post related to the upcoming Presidential elections in the USA while the post about Tony Blair and George Bush (see sample 6 below) was a video describing the political relationship between the two former heads of state as an endless love relationship. This entertaining post sought to reflect what was perceived to be an enduring relationship between the two former world leaders.

All but one of the posts put up as political discourses were web links to web articles or websites. The links enabled members to go back to the primary source of the information. The only post found to not have a web link related to an image of some presidential candidates contesting the 2012 general elections. The image was a widely circulated photo of the candidates who had participated in the presidential debate organized by the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA). See sample 5 below.

Beyond it being about the political figures that took part in the presidential debate, the image was significant because it carried a message of peace. There were concerns about whether Ghana could hold peaceful elections and be able to sustain the political stability after the elections. This was a major political discourse offline in the periods leading to the elections.

Figure 5 (Sample 5): An example of a group participant's post on political discourses in the USA

PART 24



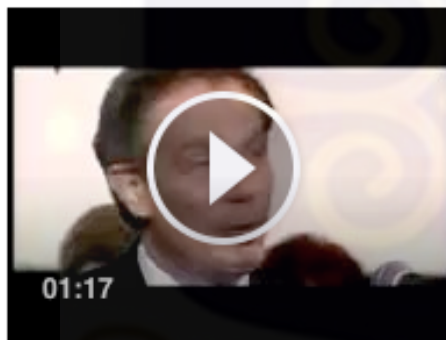
Zakaria: Obama has the wrong campaign theme
By Fareed Zakaria "This pudding lacks a theme," Winston Churchill once said of his dessert. The same might have been said of Barack Obama's election campaign, which started strong with his State of the Union address in January and then...
GLOBALPUBLICSQUARE.BLOGS.CNN.COM

Like · Comment · Share

✓ Seen by everyone

Figure 6 (Sample 6): A participant's post illustrating international political discourse

PART 2



Like · Comment

✓ Seen by everyone

PART 3 Endless love.

[10 May 2012 at 23:06](#) via [mobile](#)

Figure 7 (Sample 7) : A Participants post on political discourse



PART 6 with **PART 9** and 3 others [14 November 2012](#)

What's with Nana's left hand, looks funny



[Like](#) · [Seen by everyone](#)



PART 6 Can I say Nana's right is twice the length of his left? [14](#)

[November 2012 at 15:17](#) · [Like](#)

PART 21 No you can't [14 November 2012 at 15:21](#) · [Like](#)



PART 6 thanks, so what can i say [14 November 2012 at 15:24](#)

[Like](#)

There were no posts found on the experiences members encountered as they cast their votes on the day of election. After the elections, the only political event that received some attention on the group page was the parliamentary vetting of ministerial appoints.

5.3 Civic discourses

Very few posts were found to constitute civic discourses. There were no more than 10 main posts out of 309 found to make up civic discourses. The posts were mainly links to websites that provided information on social issues, other than politics, which were being discussed offline initiated civic discourses. Another way in which the members held civic discourses was in their attempt to agree on what project to undertake for their school and how to raise funds to undertake that project. This generated the most thread of comments, 17 in total, among the posts categorised as constituting civic discourses (see Sample 8). There was also a picture about the ill conduct of some policemen

Figure 8 (Sample 8): Facebook post showing members' use of the voting tool on the social media site for civic discourse

PART 1: These are the main ideas suggested so far. Please indicate your preference for our Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative to the school.

The image shows a Facebook voting tool interface. It features three radio button options for voting on a project. The first option, 'Split Ac for the TV room plus carpet', is selected with a blue dot. The other two options, 'A Hoover for the School' and 'Set of furniture for the tv room', are unselected. Below the options, there are interactive elements: 'Like · Comment', a checkmark indicating 'Seen by everyone', and a button to 'View 17 more comments'.

PART 9: Since we have 12 outstanding votes, which can alter the pattern as it stands now, i suggest we wait another week for them to decide.

[18 June 2012 at 14:41](#) · [Like](#)

PART 7: I voted foolishly. Why I followed the crowd before I had time to think through it. Anyway, let it stay that way. It's sometimes embarrassing to receive a visitor in XXX⁴ room. The Rector of Bolga Poly one day passed by to say hi to me and I felt ashamed hosting him there.

[9 July 2012 at 16:34](#) · [Like](#)

PART 19: How can adults, about to qualify for A4 size MA certificates be so undecided? embarrassing indeed! [9 July 2012 at 19:15](#) · [Like](#)



PART 7: Who is undecided? **PART 19,** come again and let the world know you're not referring to me. [9 July 2012 at 19:52](#) · [Like](#)

The analysis of the posts showed that civic discourses were mainly posts and shares⁵ of web links on the group page that related mainly to two broad themes, health and gender. The posts on health mainly related and reflected discourses, held in spaces outside the group, on maternal and child health issues. There was also a onetime video post on anorexia (sample 9) and a photo of what appeared to be the inappropriate arrest of a taxi driver by personnel of the Road Safety Management Task Force (RSMT) who assist the police in promoting road safety and security. Civic discourses held along gender themes highlighted gender discourses on women's representation in the media (refer to sample 10 below).

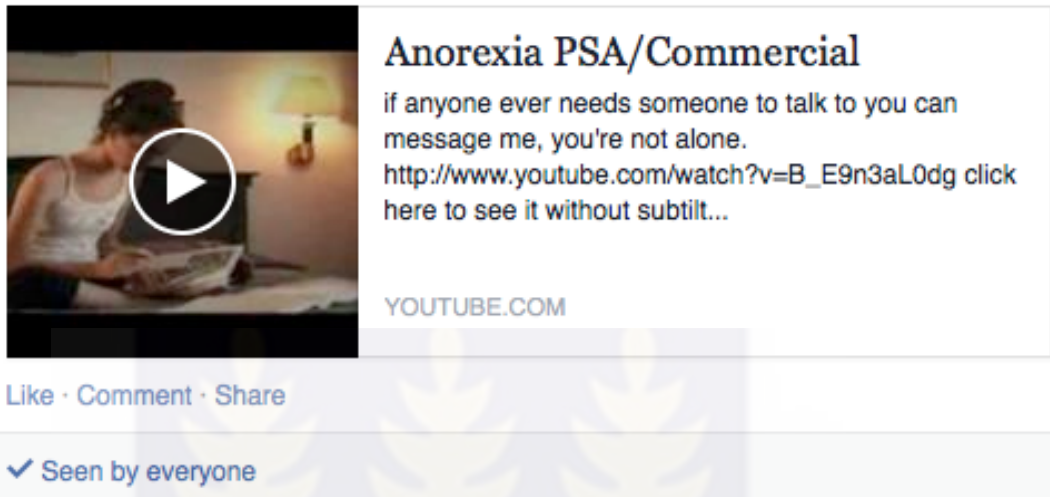
⁴ XXX used to conceal the identity of the individual mentioned in the post.

⁵ A feature of social media (including Facebook) that allows users to share content generated by other users in different social network groups with members in another social network group.

Figure 9: (Sample 9) A group member's post initiating health related discourse.

PART 6:

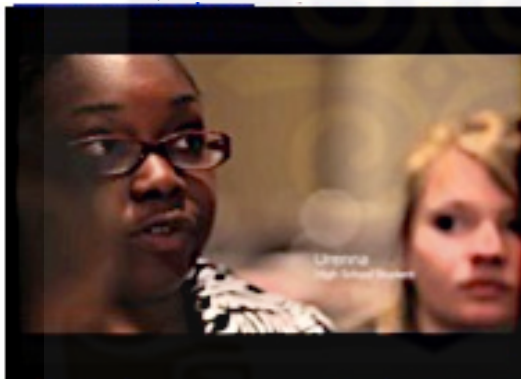
it's dat serious



The screenshot shows a Facebook post. On the left is a video player with a play button icon. The video title is "Anorexia PSA/Commercial". Below the title is the text: "if anyone ever needs someone to talk to you can message me, you're not alone." followed by a URL: "http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_E9n3aL0dg click here to see it without subtitl...". Below the video player are the options "Like · Comment · Share". At the bottom of the post, it says "✓ Seen by everyone".

Figure 10 (Sample 10): A members' post on a gender related theme

PART 18: so, in the Ghanaian context....



www.youtube.com
Trailer Courtesy of Girls' Club Entertainment. Like drawing back a curtain to let bright light stream in, MISS REPRESENTATION uncovers a glaring reality we...
Like · Follow Post · Share · 27 April 2012 at 10:49
Seen by 23

As has been the pattern with members' participation in the other uses of the group page, only five group members were observed to have participated in sharing information considered to constitute civic discourses. Two out of the five were observed to seemingly share civic discourse content which was related to their occupational life. **PART 7** who

works as a journalist shared his articles covering gendered themes while **PART 21** who worked in a civil society organisation involved in advocating for better maternal and child health issues tended to share content from his work (see SAMPLE 11). These two examples of group members sharing information about issues arising from the work they revealed that some persons in the group were likely to share experiences and information they had gained in relation to their occupational life. Of the other two, **PART 18**, who has indicated her interest in gender issues posted videos which carried social stereotypes of women while **PART 6** seemed to have put up a random post on anorexia. The fifth, **PART 2**, seemed to have carried his discourse through a video meant to entertain members but carried a gendered theme (see SAMPLE 12).

SAMPLE 11

PART 21: Today being World Malaria Day, read this to edify yourself!

Community participation: lessons for maternal, newborn & child health | Ghana

www.mamaye.org.gh

[This article was published in the Lancet in 2008. It presents findings from pilot projects and studies which demonstrate that reductions in newborn and maternal mortality are more successful in communities where women, women's groups, community members and community health workers are all involved i...](#)

[Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · [Share](#) · [25 April at 11:11](#)

[Seen by 14](#)

The study found that members contributed no responses in any form to civic discourses relating to health issues affecting women and children even though the posts containing such discourses had been seen by majority of the members on the page. None of the ten posts, which incidentally constituted the highest count of civic discourses on the page, received a response. However, the gendered discourses received comments even though these were done by a few of the group members.

Figure 11 (Sample 12): A participant's post initiating discourse on a gendered theme



 [Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · [6 June 2012 at 15:01](#)

[Seen by 23](#)



PART 7: Next time she should not walk with him at all. [8 June](#)

[2012 at 19:41](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#)

The other instance of civic discourse, identified was group members attempt to undertake an activity to help improve conditions at school, had more members participating. Two group members, who were identified to be active and moderately active participants in the group, moderated the discourses. The discourse occurred via various modes of participation. The process allowed for members to share their opinions by suggesting what project could be undertaken (See SAMPLE 16). The motivation behind this act was primarily to follow what seemed to have been a pattern of donating something to the

School when students were about finishing their programme. It was also intended to make the school more comfortable than the group had experienced.

SAMPLE 13

PART 16: People, Still tossing ideas about as to what we could get for SCS. How about drapes (curtains), or a new carpet for the seminar room, or a Hoover for the School?

[Like](#) [Unfollow Post](#) · [24 May 2012 at 12:04](#) [Seen by 23](#)

[View 5 more comments](#)



PART 19: who will take care of your school kids for you, Andy?

[25 May 2012 at 10:59](#) · [Like](#)

PART 1: I think these are good ideas. If there aren't anymore, can we start a poll to decide which and what to do?

[28 May 2012 at 10:26](#) · [Like](#)

Figure 12 (Sample 14): A group member's post on actions of traffic wardens illustrating some civic discourses on the page

PART 24



[Like](#) · [Comment](#)

✓ [Seen by everyone](#)



PART 5: What at all did this driver do wrong? [13 April 2012 at 16:48](#) ·

[Like](#) · [1](#)



PART 24: It is in the Bible; he failed to give the zoom police their due.

[13 April 2012 at 21:44](#) · [Like](#)



PART 5 PART 24 u are right, the driver should read Matt 5:25 and act upon it quickly. [15 April 2012 at 11:49](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#)

5.4 Nature of civic discourses on social media

In the few instances where members engaged in civic discourses, these were carried out in a deliberative manner. This was particularly so as members tried to agree on what to do for the school. The discussion had started outside Facebook but a lot of it was done online.

Members were given equal opportunity to express their views and to proffer suggestions on what can be done. A group member who could be described as the moderator started the discussion. Sample 15 provides evidence of the first attempt to deliberate on the matter. The post garnered seven responses even though 23 members had seen it. However, when the opinions thus far gathered were put out in a poll and members asked to vote on them, there were more responses from all categories of members than there had been in the previous posts.

The group also discussed which choice of gift to present to a visiting lecturer at the school who was to leave for his home country. The members thought it their duty to present the lecturer with something that represented Ghana. This civic activity, also appeared to have received more participation in responses from members who were largely either moderately or passively active (see Sample 17).

SAMPLE 15

PART 1

People I got no response from you on the announcement about putting contribution together for ***. Anyway, I guess its late to do something now.

[Like](#) · [Unfollow Post](#) · [18 May 2012 at 14:49](#)

[Seen by 23](#)

[View 7 more comments](#)



PART 6, PART 10, and PART 20 u shud call **PART 5** and find how to get the money to her asa first thing tmrw - I am sure she will be on campus [19 May 2012 at 00:44](#) · [Like](#)

PART 13: I also suggest the citation because he's toured most parts of the country and may probably have bought a smock for himself. We can't go wrong with a citation. [19 May 2012 at 07:11](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#)

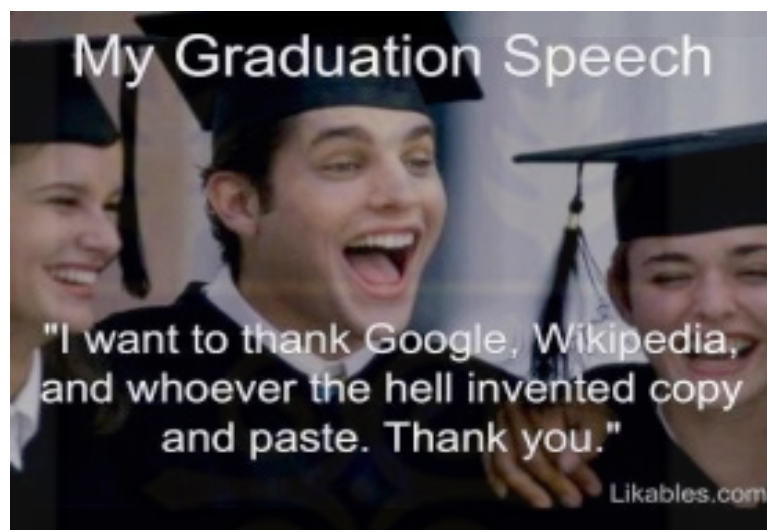
5.5 Other conversations

There were conversations within group page which were found could not be categorised as either political or civic discourses. These types of conversations were the dominant discourses within the group. The analysis of the conversations produced conversations, analysed as serving purposes of entertainment, information sharing and educational.

5.5.1 Entertainment

Some posts on the page, though few were found to be inherently entertaining. These posts appeared to have caused some members to put up posts that expressed laughter. The expression of laughter was evident in the thread of comments that followed the main posts. Laughter was depicted in the use of words such as *hahaha*, and *lol* (laughing out loud). The entertaining posts were usually in written texts and images (see SAMPLE 16).

Figure 13: (SAMPLE 16) A post on the group page illustrating the entertainment uses of the Facebook page



[Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · [30 April 2012 at 19:14](#)

[Seen by 23](#)

PART 24 likes this.

PART 13: Hahahaha. Good one!

[30 April 2012 at 19:16](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#)

PART 24: lllloooooo!!!!

[30 April 2012 at 22:04](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#)

From the observational analysis, it appeared that very few persons in the group put up entertaining posts. Two persons appeared to have been quite consistent in putting up entertaining posts. These two (a male and female) however showed dis-similar patterns in the manner of their posting. One appeared to consistently put up posts that were more written texts than visual texts while the other put up videos and images.

Some of the posts beyond being entertaining were found to serve other uses. The posts informed and carried messages wrapped around political and civic issues. Such posts were also considered as constituting political and civic discourses. Themes in these entertaining posts related to the [political jokes](#) that describe former US President George Bush and the former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair as having an endless love relationship, teacher/pupil relationships (educational issues) and gender issues. Some entertaining posts triggered commentary on other matters unrelated to the main themes embedded in them (see SAMPLE 17).

Figure 14 (Sample 17): An entertaining post on the group page that generated unrelated comments



[GUYS BE CAREFUL WITH THE TYPE OF GIRLS U STOP ON THE](#)

[STREET TO...](#) Length: 1:14

[Like](#) [Unfollow Post](#) · [26 November 2012 at 12:34](#) [Seen by 23](#)

[View 6 more comments](#)

PART 18: [PART 19](#), its so u dont forget them. [27 November 2012 at](#)

[08:22](#) · [Like](#)



PART 19 so that those of us who write will be forgotten? Whoever is managing this sit up or rather sit down!!![27 November 2012 at 13:46](#) ·

[Like](#)

5.5.2 Information sharing

The findings also showed that the group page was used frequently as a source of information among members. [Members sought and provided information related to their studies, events unrelated to their studies and about colleagues on the page.](#) The members also shared information about their personal activities through images.

Information concerning members' studies was of two fold; those that were for the entire group and those directed at specific members. Information targeted at specific persons was easy to find and obvious to the other group members since the intended recipients were identified in the texts posted (see SAMPLE 18). These posts were all written texts.

SAMPLE 18

PART 17: people, to borrow **PART 14's** term, this is for prof's supervisees. he says u should do the literature review and methodology extensively like in the actual dissertation while still maintaining all other components of the proposal. u have one week to do this then he will meet us.

[Like Follow Post](#) · [18 June 2012 at 16:20](#) [Seen by 23](#)

PART 19: One week? Oh prof! I no start yet oooooo!

[19 June 2012 at 19:16](#) · [Like](#)

The information intended for all group members, also written texts, were usually about class activities. Such information either required members to perform tasks related to their studies or required clarification on some issue or directive that may have been discussed in class.

SAMPLE 19

PART 17: dearly beloved rumour has it that **aunty S** said we are not writing law exams. i need confirmation or otherwise. worried girl, scs

[Like Follow Post](#) · [18 May 2012 at 23:51](#) [Seen by 23](#)

PART : PART 17, anytime i hear the words dearly beloved its either at a wedding or funeral, it goes like "dearly beloved, we are gathered here..." lol, so use something else ah, nyways as far as im concerned and aware media law was never to be part of the exams, its just the term paper [19](#)

[May 2012 at 11:43](#) · [Like](#)

PART 17: i hear u but do u know if i want to become an)s) after here.

[#!19 May 2012 at 17:11](#) · [Like](#)

Members also shared information about others who had accomplished feats and had brought joy and pride to the others (see SAMPLE 20). Notices were also given when a member suffered [a loss as in the](#) case of **PART 22** who lost her baby some months after completing her exams (see SAMPLE 21). **PART 24** also lost his dad during their course work.

SAMPLE 20

PART 10: The Bongo Krachi did it this year. Cudos Serwaa's boyfriend.

You've made your classmates, SCS and above all *** proud. Hey my wife

⁶ The symbol # has been used to hide the original letters placed there since it could possibly aid in identifying the personality/ participant being addressed.

predicted this day BUT SAID ONCE YOU BECOME *** YOU HAVE TO STOP USING THAT BIKE OF YOURS ⁷

[Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · [26 August 2012 at 00:42](#) via [Mobile](#). [Seen by 23](#)

PART 16: yea rite! of course! congrats, buddy...more ink to ur pen!

SAMPLE 21

PART 1: I have been given the official duty to announce that **PART 22** sadly lost her baby. She is doing well now and wants to share this with you all because you were all joyously expectant as her family and other friends were too.

[Like](#) [Unfollow Post](#) · [8 January at 11:53](#) [Seen by everyone](#) [View 23 more comments](#)

PART 22: Thanks **PART 25**. @**PART 24** that's fine. Thank you too. [19 January at 08:38](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#)

PART 23: **PART 22**, that's so sad to hear. But take heart cos God is in control. He shall make it up to you and that will be veery soon. Say Amen! [19 January at 13:51](#) [Like](#)

5.6 Gender differences in discourses on social media

The findings showed gender differences in group participation generally and specifically with the discourses which took place on the page. Despite the group having more females than males, the findings suggested that males dominated in the activities that took place

⁷ The portion marked *** had the identity of the poster. This has been taken out and replaced with the mark because it could reveal the identity of the person referred to in the sentence.

on the page. These were evident in the number of posts and the nature of participation on the page.

Posts and Participation

Males put up more posts on the page than females did, and they also seemed to post more regularly than their female counterparts. Out of every ten posts, males would have made seven posts. Despite the differences in the number of posts by the two there were no significant differences on the kinds or nature of posts put up by both males and females. Both posted texts which entertained, informed or educated members on both internal and external issues that affected them all and were all participants in conversations on any issue presented on the page.

Again both males and females put up posts that were either political or civic discourses. Males, however, appeared to be the ones who initiated most of the posts with females only commenting on them. The clear difference lay in the number of males and females who participated in the activities on the page.

Males were also found to be more active in the discourses on the page than females. In this regard there were more males in all but one of the four classes of group members' participation on the page. The number of males classified as active, moderately active and passively active were more than the females who were found in the same classes. There were more inactive female participants than in any of the other three classifications (see table 3 above). There was no male in the group who was inactive. Half of all males in the group were active. On the other hand, the number of females who were inactive was more than the number of active males.

5.7 Summary

Findings from the analysis on the uses of the Facebook page for civic and political discourses suggested that while there were instances of these occurring, they were not dominant discourses on the page. Members used the page mainly to share information. Other conversations were found to entertain and discuss matters about members' education rather than engage actively in civic and political discourses. There was an attempt to deliberate on the civic issues that had members actively make responses to.



Chapter six

Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

6.1 Introduction

This study explored the uses of social media for political and civic communication in Ghana. It observed how a group of graduate students of the University of Ghana used Facebook, the most popular social media tool in Ghana, to facilitate civic discourses among its members.

The study generally found that with the small number of 25 members not everybody in the group participated in the discourses that took place on the page. There were more inactive participants than active participants. Despite their being inactive, such members were found to have possibly received as much information as those who were active and could therefore have engaged in the discourses as well. Males were more active than females within the group despite females outnumbering males by one. While there were some instances of civic and political discourses occurring, these were hardly dominant in the posts and conversations on the page. Majority of the posts identified as civic or political discourses were simply links to articles and news stories.

Having presented the results of the study, this chapter interprets and discusses how the findings relate to the theoretical framework and other related studies.

6.2 Social media and political communication

Evidences of political communication were found in the few political discourses that occurred. It was quite apparent from the findings that group members rather engaged more actively on matters which were non political in nature and were rather about their school activities and their social life. There were evidences of political communication in the conversations categorised as entertaining and these occurred in very few instances as well.

Political discourses were about matters that had been reported both in traditional media channels as well as in online spaces. A similar pattern was observed with regards to the interactions examined as constituting civic discourses. While members may belong to or show sympathy towards a political party, it appeared that no one put up posts that tended to sway or garner support for their party of preference. The posts of links to news articles and stories on the group page indicated an engagement in political discourses as explained by Sunstein (cited in Bers & Chau, 2006) who suggested that political discourses occur when people share information which is political in nature. Web links to stories on the impending general elections as well as the controversies surrounding the campaigning process in the least satisfy the sharing of information that is political in nature.

Again the findings are supported in Smith (2013) who identified reposting of content related to political or social issues as constituting civic behaviours online. Smith's (2013) study, commissioned by the Pew Research Center in America on *Civic Engagement in the Digital Age*, also indicated that as adults in America posted their thoughts or commented on political or social issues, they had exhibited civic behaviour. These uses are also witnessed in larger Ghanaian social media spaces where more and more citizens seem to

turn to these tools to contribute to political and civic discourses moderated by traditional media channels (e.g www.facebook.com/joy997fm). Within the group studied it was quite apparent, though in very limited situations, that some members ostensibly shared their thoughts by reposting links to web pages that published political or civic matters.

Facebook looks like a space where people, organised as groups, without any influence from external actors, may initiate and express themselves freely on civic and political matters that affect them as shown by the findings. The SCS group appeared to share information and communicate their views on matters they considered were of interest to the individuals who posted them and perhaps to other group members. Therefore, in about the same way as with their western counterparts, and in line with suggestions by Smith (2013), social media tools like Facebook and Twitter as popular social network sites for American adults may have assumed the role of providing pathways for them to exercise their civic behaviour.

A theoretical explanation of this phenomenon is found in Putnam's connection of Social Capital to civic and political engagements. Putnam (1995) argued that people's interactions in small groups, which may have been formed with an intent to provide support to one another, is a way of fostering civic engagement among citizens. He identified that casual conversations were avenues for people to learn about politics and thus become more informed politically. This is also true about civic matters, which in this study have been differentiated from political discourses. Therefore similarly, as people engage in conversations, they are likely to be informed or more informed about civic matters. Evidently, the group's page which exists as an online space has demonstrated the plausibility of Putnam's argument. The findings from this research has provided some

evidences of a discursive behaviour pattern which can be explained under Putnam's concept of casual conversations. The group's political and civic conversations had no formalities and were initiated without request. Active group members shared information by their volition, informing other group members who may have had no information about the matters that had been posted on the group page.

The group members, in the few instances of civic discourses occurring, appeared to do a little more than just post web links but also expressly share their opinions about the issues raised in the posts. A character of Facebook, and generally also associated with social media, is the perception that the tool provides equal opportunities for all persons to contribute to public discourses. Deliberative theorists such as Bessette (1994), and, Gutmann and Thompson (2004) advocate for equality in deliberative processes. This is where an opportunity for all participants' voices to be heard exists. There were no instances, observed, in the discourses to suggest that a member of the group was being prevented or suppressed from participating. The discussions thus showed semblance of the deliberative principle where equal opportunity for all members to participate in the deliberations it is understood, yields legitimacy in the decisions arrived at.

While admitting that social media had possibly facilitated a condition for equal discursive opportunities (no evidence of rules or posts barring any particular member from participating in the discourses were found anywhere on the page), evidence of criticisms that challenge the fundamental position of deliberation guaranteeing equal discursive opportunities were quite apparent. The study categorises group member participation largely into active and passive members and provides features of active members likewise that for passive participants. The nature of group members' participation in the discourses

tend to suggest that while there may have been an equal opportunity for all group members to participate in the discourses, what truly took place could not necessarily be described as being equal. Males dominated the discussions even though their population in the group was slightly fewer than females. Evidently, decisions arrived at will likely be skewed towards male interests.

The principle of civility, which is associated with the deliberated process, was also present in the study. The discourses among group members were devoid of uncivil language. No instance in the group discourses analysed was coded as constituting uncivil language. Considering that the group was small and made up of members who shared a common space in real life and thus were known to each other, members may have tended to restrain from being abusive to each. Such behavioural pattern appears consistent with Halpern and Gibbs' (2013) finding that online platforms where the identity of discussants were known are likely to exhibit civility in the discourses that take place there. These findings lend support to utopian conceptions that the Internet and social media may foster civility in online political discourses

While these findings show some positive notes of social media fostering civil political communication, evidences of criticisms against lofty ideals of the Internet and social media promoting equal participation in the democratic space are also present. Male dominance in the few civic and political discourses on the page was recorded by this study. Females showed evidences of inactiveness in group discourses. These evidences raise dystopian views on the possibility of such tools being hijacked by one set of minds.

6.3 Chapter summary

The chapter has explained the findings of the study in the context of the theories that guided it. The interpretations given illustrate that students have used their Facebook page for discussions that can be described as comprising political and civic discourses. However these discourses have not been the dominant interactions on the page. They are most likely to be the least matters discussed. Notwithstanding, the group page has been utilized to foster social capital ends and also promoted deliberative approaches in group relations.



Chapter seven

Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This study primarily set out to explore the use of social media for civic and political communication among students of the University of Ghana. It focused on the uses of Facebook, which according to social media marketing company Socialbakers is believed to be the most popular social media tool in Ghana for civic discourses for civic discourses. The research sought to provide an understanding of how students were using social media to engage in interactions deemed to be civic in nature hence facilitating their civic and political engagements. This qualitative study was designed to be exploratory and thus did not seek to test any hypothesis but to only report what had been observed and interpreted from the data gathered. The conclusions on the study from the findings have been summarily presented in this chapter.

7.2 Summary of results

The study generally found that not all members in the small group of 25 students were active participants in the group discussions that took place on Facebook. There were as many active participants as there were inactive ones. Inactive group members were exposed to much the same amount of information as those who were active.

Study results showed some little evidences of Facebook being used towards supporting civic and political participations among the group members. Civic and political discourses were largely posts of weblinks to news stories as well as images and videos rather than original posts by a member or members on a civic or political matter.

There were also evidences of gender differences in the group communications. Males dominated as active participants in the discourses even though there were more females, than males in the group.

The group also exhibited traits of members leveraging on the benefits they accrued by creating and belonging to a community in the virtual world. From the analysis it seemed that members exhibited, to an extent, bonding and bridging ties even though the researcher did not measure these. Bonding ties were exhibited in members providing emotional support to each other. This was demonstrated in the sharing and show of joy at a member's success and attempt to rally support for others who suffered unfortunate incidences. Bridging ties were displayed in members' habit to freely offer and share information that was thought relevant to all members. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) suggested that social media solidifies relationships in the material world. This study draws a similar conclusion and also agrees with Byrne (2008) that despite the social media fostering civic and political engagements, through civic discourses these are not necessarily carried out beyond conversations into action.

The study also found gender disparities in the group activities and concludes that the Internet and social media mirror gender stereotypes of the real world. While social media seemed to provide equal opportunities to both males and females to participate in the group, evidences showed that males and females do not show the same commitment to group discussions. There were indications that female voices were almost non-existent in discussions about political themes. The findings suggest that males are more likely to be the dominant voices in group interactions and discussions than females would, especially when the subject is political in nature. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that

despite having fewer numbers, male group members were more active members compared to the number of females recorded as being inactive. Males and females participated in generating content on the group page and made their contributions towards discourses on the page. However males dominated in members' activeness on the group page. Males posted more, initiated and contributed more to the discourses than females did. Both males and females engaged in political discourses even though these discussions were infrequently held. However males' domination of the discussions tended to support notions that females were uninterested in political subjects. This study sought to identify whether the Internet equalised male and female relationships online. It concludes from the evidences gathered that this may not so much be the case as there is still male dominance even where both males and females have equal opportunity for participation.

Consistent with Halpern and Gibbs' (2013) study of civility in online platforms, it is possible to conclude that social media groups formed by members who share close ties in real life are more probable to be devoid or exhibit no signs of uncivil language. This conclusion may be more justified when the use of uncivil language is not a common character in the group's real life engagements.

Conclusion

Social media possibly is fostering civic actions in developed societies and has shown, from various studies in western jurisdictions, that in places where college or university youths' civic engagements are low it can contribute to enhancing them. There are glimpses also that in Ghana social media can serve as an avenue for students to be civically active even if in discursive forms. Among a group of students, who beyond their

real life interactions also have online discourses on Facebook, the technology appears to offer pathways to have civic discourses as well as political engagements. However, these are bound to occur minimally, especially when the purpose of the group's formation is not intended for such interactions. In the minimal discourses that occur, these are likely to be dominated by males and mostly initiated by links to websites that speak or carry information on the subject matter.

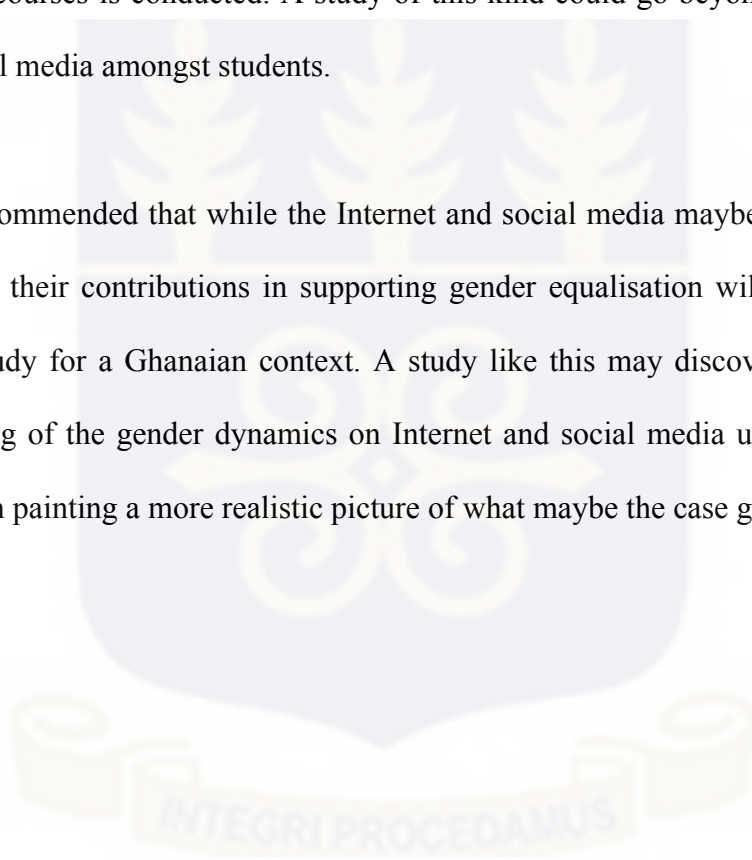
The findings and conclusions drawn from the study are not generalised and hence do not represent or describe the application of social media, particularly Facebook, for civic discourses in Ghana. The design and methodology of the study does not give room to make such generalisations. Rather the conclusions are limited to an exploratory understanding of what some university students with an online group to further their offline relationships. Despite the limitation, the conclusions however give a glimpse of what is plausible and together with the recommendations offer direction for how the technology can be utilised to enhance civic and political engagements among university students.

7.3 Recommendations

The study recommends that the various facets of Internet and social media discourses occurring in academia, which are informed by evidences in western social contexts, should be researched on within a Ghanaian context. This is expected to provide locally contextualised evidences that can inform policy directions on the appropriation of new media tools in Ghana. This is particularly necessary because various societies present diverse cultural and behavioural traits and therefore chances of differences in the context of uses are possible.

Considering that social media is increasingly becoming a relevant tool for many Ghanaians, though seemingly popular among the young, and its uses surpassing facilitating connections between persons of shared ties to supporting forms of participatory democratic governance, it is imperative that research in this field is carried out beyond an explorative venture. Exploratory studies only provide excerpts of what may be happening but not deeper knowledge of the phenomenon. Therefore it is recommended that further research that describes and provides advance explanation of social media use for civic discourses is conducted. A study of this kind could go beyond identifying such uses of social media amongst students.

It is also recommended that while the Internet and social media maybe facilitating social equalisation, their contributions in supporting gender equalisation will be a noteworthy academic study for a Ghanaian context. A study like this may discover and provide an understanding of the gender dynamics on Internet and social media use in Ghana while supporting in painting a more realistic picture of what maybe the case globally.



APPENDIX

Analysis Guide

Uses of Facebook

1. Entertainment:

Content which pokes fun and excitement

Words such as hahaha, lol, emoticons

Jokes posted on the page

Funny videos, photos

2. Source of information

a. Links to other sites

b. Relating to academic life

c. News

d. Other

3. Communication

a. Discussions on any subject matter

b. Identify the themes of discussions

c. How many are involved in the discussions

R2. Discourse

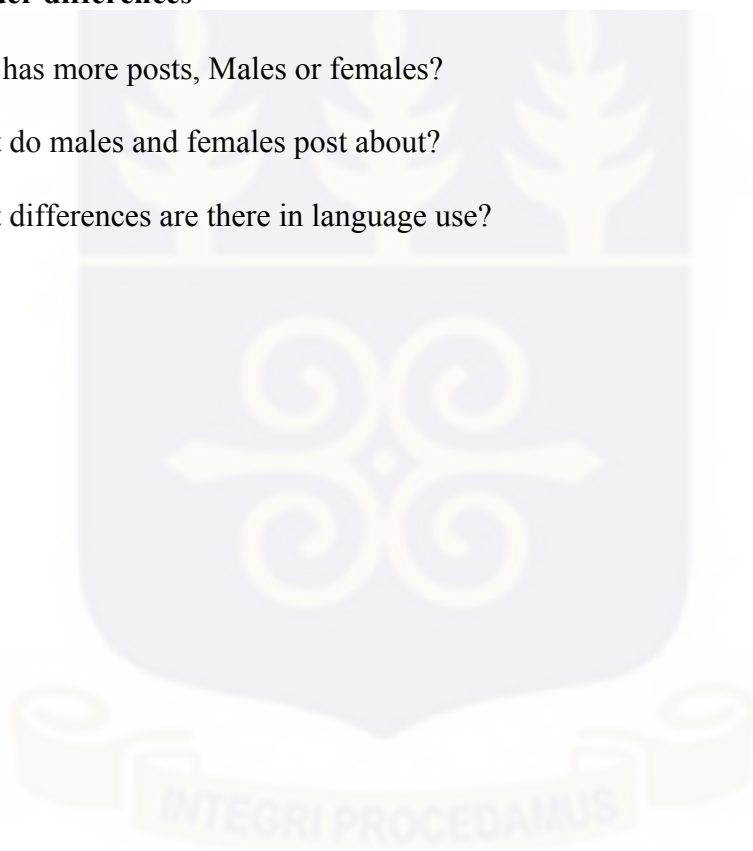
- What political conversational themes emerge?
- What civic conversational themes emerge?

R3. Nature of civic discourse

- Attempt to deliberate
- References to information sources
- Deviations from discussions or personal attacks
- Civil discourses or uncivil discourses

R4. Gender differences

- Who has more posts, Males or females?
- What do males and females post about?
- What differences are there in language use?



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