The Influence of Internet Use on the Political Participation of Youth in Ikeja, Lagos

by

Victor C. Eze
viccjohnson@gmail.com,
Doctoral Student, Communication and Language Arts Department,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

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Koblowe Obono, PhD
Lecturer, Communication and Language Arts Department,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

This research investigates the influence of the Internet on the political participation of youth in the Ikeja Local Government Area of Lagos state, in Nigeria. The study was hinged on technological determinism; the data was gathered through survey and in-depth interview; through multistage sampling, questionnaires were administered on 600 youth in Ikeja. Findings show that using the Internet over a long period of time will result to some form of political participation. Thus, the youth who use the Internet for a long time are likely to explore other opportunities (like online political participation) offered by the Internet, therefore, the findings of this study will benefit civil liberties organizations, political parties, government agencies and political communication researchers; and suggests that government and political parties should engage the youth more intelligently on political matters through the Internet and make Internet access more affordable.

Keywords: Political communication, Internet, technology assessment, Internet-based, Nigeria

Introduction

Studies have revealed that the youth are not much active in politics as were their parents (Putnam, 2000; Mindich, 2005). A breakdown of this discovery shows that the situation is not related to the age of the youth but is attributable to disenchantment towards politics. This increasing attitudinal change is mainly caused by individual quest for pleasure, and lack of attention to political events in one's immediate community. In general, members of this age group are less interested in seeking political information about their community. The survey conducted by Mindich (2005) reveals that there is a long-term decreasing interest in news by youth in the USA: this group also spends lesser time on reading or viewing the news than their parents, leading to limited knowledge of politics. Thus, members of this age bracket are best regarded as possessing 'thin citizenship' (Delli and Keeter, 1996), they only follow the outlines of politics and, in many cases, do not bother to engage actively in politics. Buttressing this, the same study by Mindich (2005) indicates that the rate of voters turn-out at elections by American youth is on the decline over the past forty years from 50.9 percent in 1964 to 32.3 percent in 2000. The same pattern of voter's apathy was discovered in Canada. The trend is observable in both new democracies like Ukraine (Kuzio, 2006), and in old democracies like the United States (Bennet, 2000) and Britain (Henn, Weisten and Forrest, 2005). In Nigeria, a growing democracy, the signs of political lethargy are noticeable from studies conducted by International IDEA (2011) which shows that since 2003, voter-turnout in Nigerian elections has been declining from 69.8% in 2003 to 58.0% in 2007 and 53.7% in 2011. A current research in Nigeria has also exposed the low levels of political participation (M'Bayo, 2006 and Okoye, 2009). According to Blais, Gidengil and Nevitte (2004: 221),

> The most recent generations are less prone to vote in good part because they pay less attention to politics and because they are less likely to adhere to the norm that voting is not only a right, but also a moral duty. The decline in turnout thus reflects a larger cultural change.

This development is not peculiar to North America as similar trends are observable in Western Europe, Japan and Latin America (Niemi and Weisberg, 2001), but the EUYOPART research into political participation by the youth suggests that the young Europeans´ interest in politics might increase with their age (EUYOPART, 2006).

However, some scholars have offered different interpretations to the seemingly low political participation by youth. A group of scholars argue that the political scene is witnessing a transformation whereby young people may not necessarily belong to political parties nor take part in formal political debates but rather engage in movements and networks (Norris 2002, Della Porta and Mosca, 2005; Di Maggio, Hargittai, Neuman and Robinson, 2001).

These scholars claim that the youth are interested in politics that is slightly different from that practiced by their parents. They may not become members of political parties but are active in non-governmental groups. They may not go to general elections but will express their opinion about specific issues. These new forms of political participation shows what Castells (2001) calls 'networked individualism' –a situation whereby people do not relate to stable political groups but form transitory alliances based on dynamic interests. Indeed, networked individualism has been used to describe a new pattern of sociability and may also be used to describe transformations of political participation in modern society (Wellman, 2001). One sphere of influence that appears to offer some hope for political participation by the youth is the Internet. Several studies have been conducted as a result of the raging argument over the noticeable decline in the patterns of the youth' political participation in relation to the Internet (Calenda and Meijer, 2007; Loader, 2007).

The Internet is perceived as promising a new optimism for participation by the youth. It is a new public terrain which provides users different opportunities for expressing their political behaviour (Kann, Berry, Gant and Zager, 2007; Stanley and Weare, 2004; Wellman, Haase and Hampton, 2001; Shah, Kwak and Holbert, 2001). The Internet offers new opportunities – one can easily build a website and express opinions on key societal issue, campaigning through e-mail is a fast and cheap way to gather support. There are plenty examples on the various roles played by the Internet in politics. This is, in the main, seen in the various ways the Internet has been currently employed in modern day politics. For instance, the 2004 US presidential campaign of Howard Dean opened up new interconnection between Internet and the politics (Calenda and Meijer, 2007). One could argue that the net creates a new playground for politics. In addition, because the youth are increasingly spending much time on the Internet, it is expected that their political participation may happen in that digital environment. Thus, Kann et al. (2007) attribute recent rise in the turnout of young people at presidential elections in the USA to the online political involvement of the youth.

Earlier studies have focused on examining how the Internet influences the political participation of the youth (Kann et al, 2007; Stanley and Weare, 2004). That has resulted in scholars taking sides as to whether the Internet aids political participation or not. Nevertheless, the noticeable decline in political participation among Nigerian youth and their increasing use of the Internet establishes the need to examine how the Internet and politics play out in the lives of the youth.

Statement of the Problem

There is increasing apathy towards politics among the youth generally and Nigerian youth also manifest this noticeable political apathy. This has resulted in scholars making various efforts to revive the interest of the youth in politics. Some empirical studies have suggested that the Internet holds the answer to the discovered dwindling of interest in political participation among the youth.

While it is a well-known fact that while most youth make use of the Internet, most of them are on it for social purpose (Urista, Dong and Day, 2008). This discovery makes it difficult for anybody to totally lay claim to the fact that the Internet is a communication tool which will bring about changes in the ways youth participate in politics or even bring about increased interest in politics among the youth. Already done studies and ongoing ones have mainly been directed at measuring the effect of the Internet will have on the political participration of the youth. While some arrive at the conclusion that the Internet will increase the political participation of the youth, others disagree.

However, it is stunning to note that the Internet has been linked to such popular political movements like the Arab Spring in the Arab world in 2011 and the Occupy Nigeria in 2012, which brought about political changes (Critchely, 2012). While debates are rife as to whether the Internet influenced such movements, the role played by the Internet cannot be whittled down. This study examines how the youth, who are active users of the Internet (Internetworldstats, 2012), are influenced to participate in politics as a result of the Internet, and also how their participation in politics can result to Internet use.

This study does not undertake the usual effort to examine only the effect of Internet use on political participation which has populated literary space, rather it is a two-way study to discover how the use of Internet impacts political participation and how participation in politics leads to increased use of the Internet. Also, studies on the relationship between Internet use and political participation among group of users like the youth in Nigeria are rare. This research will fill that gap. Since Nigerian youth are increasingly making use of the Internet, hence the need for this research is situated on that fact. In the light of this, this study examines and properly situates the interplay of Internet use and political participation in the lives of youth in Ikeja, Lagos state.

Literature Review

The Youth and Internet Use

The Internet has become all pervasive in the lives of young people (Guan and Subrahmanyam, 2009:1). They employ the Internet for a lot of things. This medium represents both risks and opportunities for young people who are the most active users. A recent study conducted in South Africa shows that the youth account for nearly three quarter of total Internet users in the country (Newmediatrendwatch, 2012). According to the same report, in February 2012, 74.7% of all Internet users in Thailand were under the age of 35 (Newmediatrendwatch, 2012). These younger Internet users account for a high percentage of the web population and command an even greater share of time spent online. Also late 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project shows that the youth are more likely than others to use major social media (Pewinternet.org, 2012). In Nigeria, youth make more use of the Internet than the adults as discovered by Fasae and Aladeniyi (2012).

Globally, the Internet has become a very important tool for the youth as most of them place more value in it than visiting friends, dating, listening to music (Cisco, 2012). A recent study, which was conducted among 2,800 professionals in their 20s and college students across countries like the US, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, UK, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Russia, India, China, Japan and Australia, shows that college students and young employees surveyed admitted that the Internet is as important to them as water, food, air and shelter (Cisco, 2012).

The Internet and Levels of Political Participation

Series of literatures have tried to address the contention over whether the Internet has any impact on users' political participation—negative or positive. This has resulted in the posing of an all-important question: does the Internet help in building a more participation society or does it generate an individuated society where engagement is generally on the decline? Initially, some scholars contended that the Internet brings about decline in the levels of political participation due to the fact that it atomizes and weakens social cohesion (Noveck 2000; Davis 1999). Offering empirical support to that, Nie and Erbing (2000) submit that the Internet consume a great amount users' free time. Contrary to these views, some other scholars offered a view which holds that the Internet scarcely affects levels of political engagement (Bimber, 2002; Schuefele and Nisbet 2002). Expressing optimism, researchers like Negroponte (1996) argue that the Internet will result to a more engaged society.

However, some other authors tried to put issues in perspective by underscoring that political participation is a concept with multiple dimensions that must be understood by streamlining what can be adequately labeled as participation and what actions cannot (Krueger, 2006). It is observed that argument among scholars on the impact of the Internet on levels of participation results from this confusion. In order to clarify the question on the impact of the Internet on political engagement, Anduiza, Cantijoch and Gallego (2009) assert that there is the need to examine the effect the Internet has on three types of activities. According to them, they are activities that can only be undertaken online, those that can be done both on the Internet and the physically, and activities that can only be indulged in the real world. This will lead to the arrival of a better understanding of issue under debate (Anduiza et al., 2009).

In the first place it is a given that as a new medium, the Internet offers new ways of being politically engaged that was not there before now. A look at the new opportunities shows that some of them do not have offline equivalence (Anduiza et al., 2009). For instance, one can forward e-mails with political content and also attempt to manipulate the decisions of the government by comments posted on websites. This is a new opportunity which increases the overall amount of political engagement. The effect this new way of communication will have on levels of participation depends on the degree of usage. If there is a minimal usage, the dream of a more engaged society will not be realized. From this angle, one can add that the Internet could create room for new actions –this is not generally accepted amongst scholars.

In addition, there is no agreement among scholars that the new actions enabled by the Internet can be viewed as political participation. They continue to argue whether actions such as initiating or commenting on a political post in a website or sending emails to officials constitute political engagement or not (Peretti and Micheletti 2004). Some other scholars have cautioned that overstretching the concept to accommodate several actions would make it meaningless as a tool for analysis (van Deth, 2001). There is more demand for researchers to undertake more studies and in more countries in order to better situate what constitutes political participation and what action does not.; in addition, there is need to appropriately differentiate between offline participation and online participation (Anduiza et al., 2009).

In the second place, some activities done offline also can be carried out online (Anduiza et al., 2009). For instance, a citizen can mail a government official through snail mail or through email. Another instance is that one can petition against a policy be email, telephone or in person. The argument that may follow this situation is that it is yet to be seen whether those who carried out these actions online would have done so if they had no access to the Internet. When citizens who are inactive become active, that may not be counted as increase in participation. To lay claim to that will depend on the number of people who got engaged via the Internet. However, participation will remain the same if a citizen who would have protested through telephone decides to write an email instead (Anduiza et al., 2009). This will not be counted as an increase in the overall amount of activities.

Thirdly, there is contention as to whether the use of the Internet impacts on the level of offline participation. Three patterns of thought come up here: that the Internet increases participation, that it decreases participation or that that it does not affect participation. In other to determine which of these thought stands out, there is need to understand whether the Internet does encourage inactive members of the society to participate in the political process. Some scholars contend that it does not but offers new avenues to those who are already participating through old channels (Norris, 2002; Hill and Hughes, 1998). In other words, the participatory actions of these already engaged members of the society increase leading to inequality in participation. Other scholars attribute the perceived increase in participation to factors such as the total amount of time an individual spends online and what an individual user does online (Shah, Cho, Eveland and Kwak, 2005:541).

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on Technological Determinism. The theory shows the relationship between technology (for instance, the Internet) and social behaviour (for instance, political participation).

Technological Determinism

Technological determinism theory is a reductionist perspective which holds that technology drives the growth of cultural values and social structure in the society. The term was first used by Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), an American sociologist (Camic and Hodgson, 2010), but the theory was actually propounded by Marshal Mcluhan (Mcluhan, 1962). Technological determinism tries to establish how technology acts as the key element that drives history and social change (Kunz: 2006).

This theory has two propositions which are: (1) the development of technology follows a predictable, traceable path largely beyond cultural or political influence, and (2) technology has effect on societies that are inherent, rather than socially conditioned or produced because that society organizes itself to support and further develop a technology once it has been introduced.

This study derives it theoretical bearing from the second proposition. Technology is perceived as a key governing force in the society (Smith, 1985); the idea that technological development determines social change (Bimber, 1998). In relation to this research, the technological determinism approach holds that the level and manner of use of the Internet will influence political participation. The Internet will determine political participation. Additionally, cognitive and organizational skills acquired through the use of the Internet can be used for political participation.

Sympathizers of this perspective propose that technology (media technology) shapes how individuals in a society think, feel, act, and how the society operates as human beings move from one technological age to another. A technologically deterministic approach would say that the technology encourages a certain kind of use, and users' actions are determined by the technology they use. This means that the level and manner of Internet use will influence political participation. Kann, Berry, Gant and Zager (2007) show how patterns of Internet use can change the attitude and behaviour of young people towards politics. The implication of this theory is that technology will contribute to increased political participation of the youth. They may be more familiar with participatory culture through websites such as Facebook and Twitter, and will get accustomed to quickly gathering information on a wide range of issues. These patterns of Internet use are applied to their hobbies, social contacts and education but could also influence their online political participation.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does Internet use result to political participation among youth in Ikeja?
2. What is the relationship between length of Internet use and levels of political participation of youth in Ikeja?

Methodology

The study adopted survey and in-depth interview research methods. 600 youth (18-35 years) from Ikeja Local Government Area, who duly completed the questionnaire, were drawn as a sample size through multistage sampling technique to respond to 40-item questionnaire. In the first stage, Ikeja Local Government Area was broken down to it 10 districts which are: Oregun, Ojodu, Opebi, Akiode, Alausa, Agidingbi, Magodo, Ogba, Maryland and Government Residence Area (GRA). In the second stage of the sampling, two streets were drawn from each of the districts through balloting and a total of 20 streets were gotten. In the third stage, copies of questionnaire were purposively administered on adult residents in the fourth houses on the left side of each of the 20 streets.

For the in-depth interview, purposive sampling technique was also employed in the selection of 10 youth (18-35 years), who are youth leaders, for the interview. Correlation analysis and cross tabulation in the Statistical Package of Social Sciences were used to analyze the collected quantitative data that came from the survey. Also in the analysis, simple frequency counts and percentages were used to represent the data and various responses which were expressed as percentages of total respondents. Deductive analysis was used to analyze the data gathered from the qualitative study which came from the interview.

Data Presentation and Analysis

To what extent does Internet use result in political participation among youth in Ikeja?

To answer research question one, appropriate items from the questionnaire and the interview guide were selected in answering the question. The findings are presented below. Figure 1 shows that 98.1% of respondents use the Internet and supports the notion that youth are avid users of the Internet as underscored by Internetworldstats (2012). In other words, almost every youth in Ikeja uses the Internet.

Figure 1
Use of Internet by Respondents

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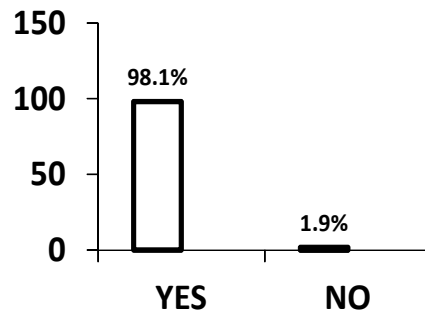
The findings from the in-depth interview support that fact. Out of ten interviewees, eight use the Internet. One of the interviewees, who is a secondary school instructor, said:

> I use the Internet every day and I am always on Facebook or any social networking websites. As a result of my mobile phone, I no longer frequent cyber café like in the past. I use it almost every day and through the whole day as I visit online newspapers and Facebook.

Table 1 indicates that although Internet use among youth in Ikeja is high, political participation through the Internet is quite low. While most of the youth (64.1%) do not enjoy reading political events on the Internet, most of them (86%) have never campaigned for a political party on the Internet.

Table 1   Political Participation of Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Read political events on the Internet		
Yes	184	35.9
No	329	64.1
TOTAL	**513**	**100**
Campaigned for a political party on the Internet		
Yes	72	14.0
No	441	86.0
TOTAL	**513**	**100**
Rate of campaigning for a political party on the Internet		
Very Often	7	1.4
Often	16	3.1
Sometimes	22	4.3
Rarely	44	8.6
Never	424	82.5
TOTAL	**513**	**100**
Used social media such as Facebook, Twitter, 2go, BlackBerry Messenger, Whatsapp and others to engage in Politics		
Yes	139	27.1
No	374	72.9
TOTAL	**513**	**100**

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Table 1 shows that 64.1% admitted that they do not read political events on the Internet. This supports the view of scholars on the declining level of political participation around the world (M'Bayo, 2006; Okoye, 2009; IDEA, 2011). In addition, most of the respondents (86%) never campaigned for any political party on the Internet. Even though the youth use the Internet avidly, their apathy towards politics still manifests online –very few respondents (1.4%) very often campaign for political party on the Internet. For the youth, the Internet appears more as a medium for entertaining themselves (Anduiza, Cantijoch and Gallego, 2009). Furthermore, most of the respondents (82.5%) have never campaigned for any political party on the Internet as against the very few (14%) who engage in that. Thus, majority of the youth manifest their lack of interest in politics on the Internet. Also very few of the youth, (27.1%), use social media for political engagement. This is buttressed by the findings from the in-depth interview where all the ten interviewees agreed that political participation through the Internet is a good development. Though they were aware of the opportunity for political participation offered by this new medium (the Internet), majority of the interviewee (seven out of ten) do not use the Internet to participate in politics. This is captured in the view of an interviewee, who is an instructor/youth leader. He said that

> Even though I have never used the Internet for the purpose of politics,
> my view about the use of Internet for political reasons is a positive one.
> It is a good development as it gives users easy access to participate in
> politics.

This still goes to substantiate what some scholars have found about the youth' tendency to employ the Internet for fun and entertainment than other purposes (Anduiza et al., 2009). They use more of the social media than other features of the Internet. Table 2 shows that many youth (67.1%) have never been influenced by their use of social media to vote during elections. In other words, social media use has never moved them to engage in politics. Also very few have been influenced by their use of Internet to participate in politics as indicated (Table 1).

Table 2   **Political Participation of Respondents induced by Internet Use**

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Influenced by social media to vote during elections		
Yes	115	32.9
No	344	67.1
TOTAL	**513**	**100**
Campaigned for political party offline due to Internet use		
Strongly Agree	40	7.8
Agree	52	10.1
Disagree	180	35.0
Strongly Disagree	140	27.2
Cannot Say	101	19.6
TOTAL	**513**	**100**
Discussed politics offline due to Internet use		
Strongly Agree	67	13.0
Agree	79	15.4
Disagree	100	19.5
Strongly Disagree	182	35.4
Cannot Say	85	16.5
TOTAL	**513**	**100**
Voted during elections due to Internet use		
Strongly Agree	77	15.0
Agree	89	17.3
Disagree	96	18.7
Strongly Disagree	180	35.0
Cannot Say	71	13.8
TOTAL	**513**	**100**

In line with the increasing use of the Internet for social and entertainment reason, Table 2 indicates that very few youth are influence by the Internet to participate in politics. This means that the use of Internet, and in extension the social media, may not necessarily lead the users of social media to participate in politics. From Table 2, it could also be seen that very few respondents (32.9%) were moved by social media to vote during elections. The social media are Internet features, which are originally tools for socializing, networking, making friends and sharing common interests. The implication is that the youth will not necessarily change their political orientation just because the Internet has offered a new opportunity – political participation. This fits the idea of reinforcement – only those with political interest will reinforce it through the use of the Internet (Kraemer, King, Dunkle and Lane, 1989). The foregoing findings from the questionnaire were also supported by data from the interview. For instance, one of the interviewees, who is an instructor/youth leader in Onigbongbo, Ikeja, said:

> The Internet has never influenced me to participate in politics. Also I have never engaged in any form of political activity on the Internet through the social media. Even though I use social media daily, I use them for entertainment purpose and not for political reasons.

While three interviewees agreed that they use the social media to participate in politics, five interviewees said that they do not use social media for political purpose. Two of the ten interviewees do not use social media at all. One of the interviewees (a journalist) who do not use social media said:

> I do not use social media. I would have loved to use the social media a lot but I do not have the needed computer skills to that effect. In the days ahead, I will learn a lot.

Furthermore, Table 2 shows that so many youth are not influenced by their use of the Internet to engage in politics. Majority of the youth (27.2% and 35%) strongly disagree and disagree respectively that the Internet has made them to campaign for political party offline. Also many of the youth (35.4% and 19.5%) strongly disagree and disagree respectively that the Internet has made them to discuss politics offline. It could also be seen that many of the youth (35% and 18.7%) strongly disagree and disagree that the Internet has encouraged them to vote during elections. It follows from these that the use of Internet does not automatically lead to participation in offline political activity neither does it result in online political participation like discussing politics online. The latter can only can happen if the user is interested in politics prior to coming online (Kraemer, et al, 1989; Anduiza et al., 2009). A correlation analysis shows that there is a weak correlation (r = .074, p>.05) between "Do you use the Internet?" and "Do you enjoy reading political events on the Internet?" Also there is a weak correlation (r = -.095, p>.05) between reading political events on the Internet and what the respondents mostly use the Internet for. There is also a weak correlation (r = 0.338, p>.05) between taking part in politics due to Internet use and campaigning for a political party after reading political events on the Internet. Other variables also indicate similar patterns of weak relationship. From the above it can be stated that there is no statistically significant correlation between Internet use and political participation. This means that increases or decreases in Internet use does not significantly lead to increases or decreases in political participation. The data here does not support the view that technology is a key governing force in the society as proposed by technological determinists (Camic and Hodgson, 2010). In other words, Internet use does not automatically lead to political participation.

What is the relationship between the length of Internet use and the level of political participation of youth in Ikeja?

This research question tries to establish the kind of connection that exists between the numbers of years/the number of days per week youth use Internet and their level of political participation. The findings are presented below. Table 3 shows the length of Internet use by the youth in Ikeja, Lagos state. The table indicates that many of the respondents have been using the Internet for a long period of time.

From Table 3, it could be seen that majority of the respondents (60.8%) have been using the Internet for 5 years and above. Also more than half of the respondents (52%) use the Internet daily. These support the fact that the youth are ardent users of the Internet (Internetworldstats, 2012).

Table 3   Length of Internet Use by Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Length of Internet use		
Under 2 years	59	11.5
3-4 years	142	27.7
5 years and above	312	60.8
TOTAL	**513**	**100**
Internet use per week		
Every day	267	52.0
1-2 days	80	15.6
3-4 days	110	21.5
5-6 days	56	10.9
TOTAL	**513**	**100**

The findings from Table 3 were strongly supported by facts from the interview. Out ten interviewees, seven of them admitted to being daily users of the Internet. An interviewee, who is a staff at Ikeja Secretariat, said:

> I am always on the Internet on daily basis. I am an avid lover of Facebook and twitter. There cannot be a day without me logging into Facebook to read updates from friends.

The second variable in the research question is the level of political participation of respondents. Table 4 captures the level of political participation of the youth in Ikeja, Lagos State. While some respondents prefer face-to-face political participation, some enjoy virtual political participation on the Internet, others enjoy participating both virtually and face-to-face while some others do not participate at any level at all.

Table 4   Level of Political Participation by Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Face-to-face political participation	105	20.5
Internet political participation	128	24.9
Both Internet and face-to-face political participation	33	6.4
None	247	48.2
TOTAL	**513**	**100**

Table 4 shows that 48.2% of the respondents do not engage in any of the level of political participation. This underscores the high level of political apathy that the youth exhibit according to various studies (EUYOPART, 2005; Cornolti et al, 2006, M'Bayo, 2006 and Okoye, 2009). Most of the respondents (24.9%) who participate in politics do so through the Internet. This is buttressed by the responses from five interviewees whose views supported the fact that the youth enjoy engaging in politics at the virtual level. For instance, an interviewee, who is a teacher, said:

> Constantly being on the Internet enables me to be highly engaged in politics as I have more political information at my disposal. I am more politically aware now than before.

In all, interviewees had different opinions about the level of politics they engage in but almost all of them participate in either online or offline. Only one interviewee does not engage in politics at all.

Table 5 is cross tabulation of the length of Internet use and the level of political participation of youth in Ikeja shows the relationship that exists between the two variables.

Table 5   Cross tabulation of the Length of Internet use and Level of Political Participation

| Length of Internet Use | Level of Political Participation | | | | Total (%) |
	Face-to-Face (Offline) (%)	Internet (Online) (%)	Online and Offline (%)	Both Online and Offline (%)	
Under 2 year	17 28.8	18 30.5	4 6.8	20 33.9	59 100
3 -4 years	39 27.5	42 29.6	12 8.5	49 34.5	142 100
5 years and above	49 15.7	68 21.8	21 6.7	174 55.8	312 100
TOTAL	**105 20.5**	**128 25.0**	**37 7.2**	**243 47.4**	**513 100**

Table 5 shows that the more respondents use the Internet, the more they are disposed to be tied to different levels of political participation. More respondents (68), who have used the Internet for 5 years and above, engage in online political participation than those who have used the Internet for a lesser number of years. The same thing is applicable to other levels of political participation. Thus, there is a strong relationship between the number of years of using the Internet and the level of an individual's political participation. In other words, respondents who use the Internet often are likely to, in the long run, use it for political reasons.

Discussion of Findings

The findings show that the use of Internet does not automatically lead to engaging in politics among the youth. This finding is in consonance with the submission of Urista, Dong and Day (2008) who found out that even though most youth make use of the Internet, a lot of them are on it for social and entertainment purposes, not for political reasons. Also, the finding is supported by the work of Putnam (2000) which holds that the Internet was originally created for entertainment and the youth are using it for that purpose. In addition, the findings uphold the position of Anduiza, Cantijoch and Gallego (2009) which affirm that the youth have the tendency to employ the Internet for fun and entertainment that other purposes. However, the finding contradicts the views of technological determinists who hold that that technology (media technology) shapes how individuals in a society think, feel, act, and how the society operates as human beings move from one technological age to another (Camic and Hodgson, 2010). A technologically deterministic approach would say that Internet use will directly lead to political participation but that is not the case here. In addition, the view of Kann, Berry, Gant and Zager (2007) that technology will lead to political participation of the youth is not supported by the findings in this study. In other words, technology does not necessarily shape how individuals in a society think, feel, act, and how the society operates. It could be said then that the individuals in the society decide on how to carry out their activities because they possess free will and mind of their own; they have freedom of choice.

In addition, the research findings show that the length of using the Internet directly impacts on the kind of activities one is likely to engage in. This supports the findings of scholars who hold that the more Internet users explore the medium (the Internet), the more they get engaged in different opportunities offered by the Internet (Anduiza et al, 2009). The data in this study support the fact that the number of years of using the Internet has a strong relationship with political participation. In all, it appears that Internet use does not lead to political participation immediately but it is a slow process that will trigger off interest in politics in the long term. This also applies to the fact that engaging in politics for long will likely result in the youth trying out new avenues for political participation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Even though studies have established that Internet use has some positive effect on political participation, the problem is to establish how substantial these effects are. The average effect is small in size. From this study, it can be stated that while the Nigerian youth make use of the Internet a lot, their Internet use has very little effect on their political life. This may not be unconnected with noticeable lack of political interest among Nigerian youth. Due to lack of interest in politics, not many youth are moved to explore the opportunities for political participation offered by the Internet. Political interest appears to be the basic ingredient that is lacking among Nigerian youth. Proper policy making on Internet availability and intelligent employment of the same medium by political agents will in the long run result to some impact on the political participation of the youth. This effect seemingly appears little but will gather momentum with time. The findings will benefit civil organizations, political parties, government agencies and political communication researchers. It was suggested that government and political parties should engage the youth more intelligently on political matters through the Internet and also make Internet access more affordable. This study recommends that future research should examine the relationship between particular forms of political participation and Internet use. Also, future studies should look at the link between political education and Internet use.

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