

Quintly: the pervasive impact of political microtargeting through Social Media analytics in Mali

Map of Mali



Background

Located in West Africa, Mali is a landlocked country bordered by Algeria, Mauritania, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The Prime Meridian runs through Mali, so portions of the country fall in the Eastern hemisphere, while others lie in the Western hemisphere. Mali has a 4,500-mile-long border and an area of 478,841 square miles. Split into 10 administrative zones, Bamako is the capital district of the country. The country takes its name from the Mali Empire, which governed the area from the 13th through 16th centuries. During this period, the Mali Empire was the biggest and richest in West Africa, at its height in the 14th century. With 65% of its population under 25 years old, Mali's youth is one of its most important sources of capital. The internet penetration rate at home in urban areas is around 50.2

percent¹. The percentage rate of population coverage by mobile network technology at least 2G is 100 percent². For 3G, the percentage rate of population coverage by mobile network technology is at least 70 percent. It is also interesting to note that, as the use of Internet in Mali continues to rise, particularly through the expansion of mobile broadband, the government is actively pursuing investments to expand its reach. Data from the International Telecommunications Union 2022 report, shows that 27% of Malian citizens were using the internet in 2020 recording an increase from approximately 19%³.

An uncertain and fragile political context

This year, Malian citizens were supposed to have the opportunity to elect their representatives. However, this is not going to happen soon. In fact, the junta in power has announced rescheduling the date of the presidential election scheduled for February 2024. This election was supposed to mark the return of civilians to the power but among the reasons mentioned by the current Malian authorities regarding this change, are factors linked to the adoption of a new Constitution. Also, the junta has mentioned the revision of the lists of electors, as well as a dispute with a French company, Idemia, which they claim is involved in the census process.

In a context, where the Malian political transition was extended, electoral manipulation remained a serious threat to democracy. In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which revealed the decisive power of political targeting, the exploitation of voters data is fuelling an influential political marketing industry in Africa in general and in west Africa in particular. Numerous cases on such issues, involve some US, Europe and even Africa based firms which are linked to similar data-driven methods for political influence⁴. For instance, the company Quintly has carried out a study on Facebook, to find out, how emojis are used by internet users around the world, including Malians⁵.

¹ See <https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=MLI&c=&i=>

² ibidem

³ See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=ML>

⁴ <https://influenceindustry.org/en/explorer/case-studies/benin-political-microtargeting/>

⁵ <https://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2018/07/10/2833844-france-serait-deuxieme-pays-plus-enerve-monde-facebook.html>

It should be noted that , the former company Quintly has legally merged with another called Facelift. Since then, there has been a migration from US servers to servers now located in Germany and all contracts and obligations have been transferred automatically. Since they first appeared on Japanese mobile phones in the late 90's, emoji have been popular and in the past few years they have become a hallmark of the way people communicate. It is therefore, not difficult to understand the interest of Quintly since a real emoji politicization has begun around the world.

Emojis: a sign of the times that can improve conversations

Originally invented in the 1990s in Japan, emojis have become worldwide omnipresent in online communication across platforms and devices⁶. According to (Escouflaire 2021), emojis are used in multifaceted ways in digital communication, especially to convey emotion and add paraverbal cues to written text⁷. As pointed out by (Wei Ai et al 2017), emojis have spread around the world in recent years, been implemented in multiple digital platforms, and become part of the Unicode standard⁸. Also (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021) note that, the primary feature of emojis is their ability to convey affect and add emotional evaluation to the text by mimicking paraverbal cues⁹. (Boutet et al 2021) tell us that the emotional expression of emojis often classify them according to their emotional valence in positive, neutral, and negative terms¹⁰. Further research on political communication shows that emotions play an essential role but (Eberl et al 2020) highlight that during election campaigns, emotions facilitate the processing of complex political topics, and recipients become more involved, stimulated, and motivated

⁶ See <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/emoji-shigetaka-kurita-standards-manual/index.html>

⁷ See Escouflaire, L. (2021). Signaling irony, displaying politeness, replacing words. *Linguisticae Investigationes*, 44(2), 204–235. doi:10.1075/li.00062.esc

⁸⁸ See <https://cdn.aaai.org/ojs/14903/14903-28-18422-1-2-20201228.pdf>

⁹ See <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/14614448211032965>

¹⁰ See <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2021-25813-001>

through emotional content¹¹. For their parts, (Klinger & Svensson 2015) observe that emotionality plays an important role specially in the context of social media, where content creators are constantly competing for users' attention¹².

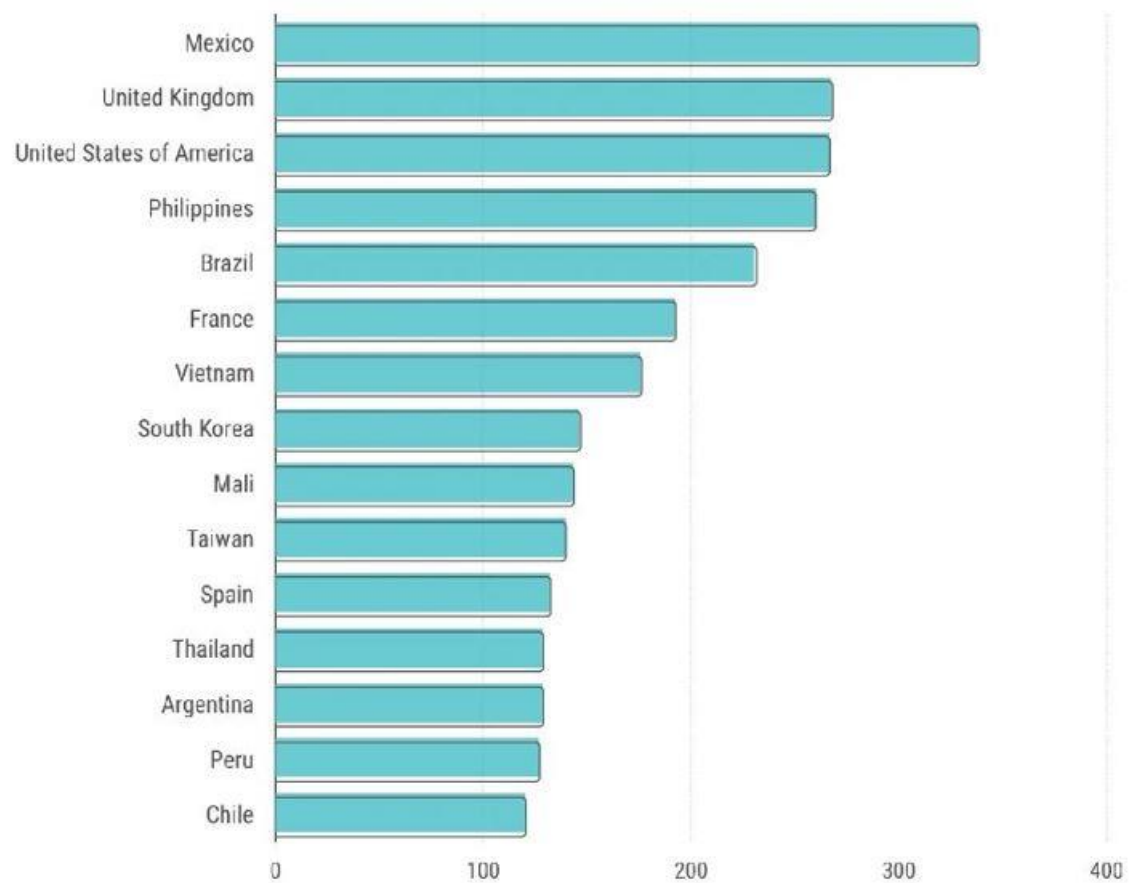
In the case of Quintly, more than 44 million interactions posted online around the use of emojis, was analysed between January and April 2018, including reactions from Malian internet users. The analysis was carried out , on more than 105 million publications from 218,289 brands , spread over 94,000 pages¹³. Emojis have been around for a while and have become a popular way for people to express themselves . However, they can also serve as a valuable tool for micro-targeting. In recent years, micro-targeting is having a rapid transformation , thanks to technological advances in Africa and the growing improvement in Internet access conditions. As a result, new players in the political communication sector have developed a bunch of sophisticated methods in this field which can be incredibly effective.

Among these methods, targeted advertising accounts for a significant proportion of digital advertising .It is however important to note that when it comes targeted advertising, it can becomes problematic for many reasons. First, because using micro-targeting is a marketing approach that exploits data and technology to deliver tailored messages to specific user segments . Second, this type of targeted advertising can lead to a breeding ground for disinformation and digital manipulation using micro-targeting to polarise debate and influence elections. Nearly 60% of disinformation campaigns in Africa are now linked to countries outside the continent. Aided by emerging technology, these foreign countries he efforts, are able to push false narratives online as they seek to spread their influence, on a contient which has more than 400 million active social media users and 600 million internet users.

¹¹ See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19331681.2019.1710318>

¹² See <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444814522952?journalCode=nmsa>

¹³ See <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20180912-emoticones-maliens-adorent>



Source : Quintly – Average Number of New Facebook reactions per Post by country

The mechanics of micro-targeting

The 2018 election in Mali is just one instance of western based digital campaigning consultants battling , in which they either test out techniques in order to bring them back to western countries or export digital services developed during african elections in the western world¹⁴.

In order to this, online data has been accumulated and interpreted by political campaigns to learn about voters' political preferences and to inform campaign strategies and priorities. To help with this process, campaign strategies is based on voter profiles on which campaign messaging is then tested. This included for instance, techniques such as digital listening and other techniques like observing, testing and analysing voters and political discussions. Traditionally, political strategists and campaigns use polls, calls and canvassing to ascertain voters opinions and to take the political temperature. Digital listening technology allows them to do the same kind of analysis as these conventional tools, but far more quickly, with fewer resources, and to study larger groups of people. When that analysis is combined with other datasets, such as lists of the users' followers or their location, digital listening can measure the public opinion of a targeted group of people, making it a valuable tool for political candidates and campaigns.

Digital listening involves two components which are data acquisition and data analysis. This method collects and analyses user data, including browsing history and search queries. Searching online is one of the key ways that users use to verify information, and for that reason, the ability to influence search results is a key tool for political campaigns looking to influence people before and during referendums, elections and other political debates. From placing ads within search results to seeking to influence the results themselves, political campaigns consider search to be a priority in their advertising strategies.

¹⁴ See <https://www.dw.com/fr/gemal-affagnon-les-medias-traditionnels-ont-%C3%A9t%C3%A9-d%C3%A9laiss%C3%A9s-au-profit-des-r%C3%A9seaux-sociaux-internet-sans-fronti%C3%A8res/audio-44871606>

Despite their apparent neutrality, search results can influence what people see and what they believe, particularly when it comes to political views. The main aim of micro-targeting is to increase the likelihood of user engagement and conversion, thereby improving the effectiveness of political marketing campaigns . This is the reason why, advertisers use this mass of data to create detailed profiles of individual users, which are then used to deliver relevant advertising that matches users's interests, needs or preferences.

Through the use of technology, automation can accelerate and scale up those two components. Digital listening is an umbrella term for monitoring and analysing what someone does or says on social media platforms such as Facebook . During digital listening practices, both the behaviour (liking, sharing an image or commenting on a post) and the content (hashtags, posts and comments) are analysed. Companies who offer these services are able to measure which topics are being discussed among users at a given time or to monitor the sentiment of the content, such as whether people feel positively or negatively towards a candidate.

In order to do so , data should be first gathered through software called scrapers. This can be done through social media posts, tweets connected to a hashtag, or from certain sets of people on Twitter or content from comments on Facebook posts. In addition, data about users behaviours can also be gathered. This precious information help to understand for instance the type of engagement through retweets on Twitter or likes on Facebook. Furthermore, these interactions can be ranked as positive or negative engagements with a topic. Next to this step, the data is analysed using algorithms to infer different pieces of information, such as whether a tweet demonstrates a positive or a negative sentiment. These elements are got by analysing the words and context in which they appear. In general, this analysis is built on recent advances in natural language processing , a kind of artificial intelligence that specialises in looking at large bodies of text. The technic of natural language processing is programmed to recognise positive and negative sentiments of certain words. In addition , natural language processing helps to better understand a linguistic context for the sentiment of a message, but also to develop

new rules as it performs more and more analysis, making it a smarter process over time. For instance, the natural language processing is used to understand how well a company, campaign or individual is viewed by the public, which can be helpful for politicians to understand how they can improve their status in the eyes of potential voters .

A knife fighting between foreign consultants during election campaigns in Mali

During the 2018 presidential election in Mali, Avisa Partners and 35°Nord, two political communications agencies, worked for politician Soumaïla Cissé to this end¹⁵. In the run- up to this election, Avisa Partners and 35°Nord were in Mali to support Soumaïla Cissé, who was challenging Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta ¹⁶. On 29 June 2018, three Serbs acting as film director, cameraman and technician arrived in Bamako¹⁷. After their landing, they were quickly arrested by the local authorities. Miksa Andelkovic, Rasko Miljkovic and Igor Turcinovic, who were actually supposed to produce campaign videos for candidate Soumaïla Cissé have been identified by the intelligence services as former soldiers and suspected them of espionage.

¹⁵ See <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1398045/politique/avisa-partners-et-35nord-du-mali-a-la-guinee-les-dessous-dun-lobbying-orchestre-depuis-paris/>

¹⁶ See <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-45155838>

¹⁷ See <https://malijet.com/actualite-politique-au-mali/flash-info/213371-mali-des-reporters-serbes-travaillant-pour-souma%C3%AFla-ciss%C3%A9-renvoy.html>

After their arrest, the three Serbs were released a week later, following an intense lobbying between Bamako and Paris by the 35°Nord and Avisa Partners teams. Between 2018 and 2020, Internet shutdowns were deployed on a number of occasions to crackdown on political opponents and civil society activists. In the run-up to the 2018 elections, it was reported for example that social media platforms and internet services were disrupted following a ban by the authorities on opposition protests for accountability and transparency¹⁸. In recent years, this sort of modus operandi is now offered in west africa, by another German company called LS Telcom¹⁹. The system deployed by LS Telcom , allows authorities to easily control the Internet, radio communications and the media. Nevertheless, during the 2018 election polling, Quintly conducted an analysis on the use of emojis by Malians , while the government further suspended internet services in Bamako, the capital city, during demonstrations to protest against the results of Parliamentary elections²⁰.

Major turning point: the Alliance of Sahel States cancel roaming fees

Introduced in 2016, Facebook emojis's reactions have literally revolutionised the way internet users are now able to express their moods. In a context where, Mali has introduced free roaming for internet data, calls and messages with Niger and Burkina , Quintly could get benefit from such innovation to make a more gainful activity. Free roaming is something citizens using mobile phones, can see and feel in their daily lives and wallets. It is a concrete benefit that makes the abstract concept of free trade real and relatable. By zeroing in on digital connectivity, the three Sahel states have recognized a fundamental thruth in the digital age where, data flows are as crucial as the flow of goods and services. This focus on digital integration merits acclaim and should be celebrated. As can be seen , this digital integration marks a major geopolitical turning point in the Sahel region. It is not only a rational response to the digital environment

¹⁸ See <https://www.accessnow.org/fighting-censorship-in-2018-elections/>

¹⁹ See <https://www.osiris.sn/ls-telcom-quelle-est-cette-entreprise-allemande-derriere-les-coupures-d.html>

²⁰ See <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200713-tensions-mali-internet-r%C3%A9seaux-sociaux-perturb%C3%A9s-jeunesse>

marked by constant evolution but also the common desire of the three countries to strengthen their sovereignty and coordinate their efforts towards a better digital future.

As this policy rolls out in January 2025, all eyes will be on Mali , Niger and Burkina because they decided that there will be no more charges for their travellers on mobile phones . It is important to highlight that the implications regarding the free roaming service withing the three states are huge. All of this is supported by the idea of the free movement of people and goods as a determining factor of relations, in a context where , states of the region have always remained interdependent.

For businesses , it means seamless communication with partners and customers across three countries. For families split across borders, it's the gift of connection without the fear of bill shock. And for the youth, it is an open invitation to create, share, and engage across a wider digital landscape. This move also sends a powerful message to the rest of Africa as these countries are ready to innovate. This free roaming memorandum also challenges perceptions of the Sahel as a region defined solely by its challenges, showcasing instead its potential for forward-thinking solutions.

On one hand, this decision will allow citizens of the three countries to communicate freely including mobile data without additional costs while traveling within the region. On the other hand, current developments within the Sahel States Alliance can also give rise to new threats. Strategically speaking, the Sahel States Alliance remains very attractive as a collective bloc characterized by important territorial (2,781,392 km²), demographic (71.5 million inhabitants according to 2022 data) and mineral resources and could be considered as an easy target. Like Quintly, many other active companies are now using tools and techniques from marketing, statistics and psychology to advance their agendas, to promote their campaigns and influence voters. These groups are now able to amass and leverage huge quantity of data on voters which can have a negative impact on democracy within the Sahel States Alliance. The public relations sphere and politics industry have long used psychology to understand and influence individuals' beliefs, behaviours and motivations. Nowadays, digital psychology is a process that can be used to gather and analyse information about an individual that exists online. Thus, a digital profile can include information about personal characteristics, behaviors, affiliations, connections and interactions. Digital profiling is used in marketing, enterprise

security, criminal justice and recruitment, among other areas. This is also a useful tool, to reach some influencers ²¹. In the Malian digital ecosystem, advertisers who decide which users an ad should be shown to, are already able to work with these influencers.

Thus, the risk exists that they aggregate data about users that will then be used to produce ads for potential consumers or audience. An intentionally malicious advertiser could leverage such data to preferentially target (i.e., include or exclude from targeting) users based on his real intention.

In a country like Mali, with high underemployment and a weak education system, these influencers have become a new category of actors in the media landscape. Thanks to their skills, they are now able to receive some proposals from brands in Mali. If things go well, and these brands can gain money through creativity and aesthetically-pleasing and fun video posted online, these influencers received more money and products, like caps and T-shirts thanks to this profitable collaboration²². Thanks to the boom of mobile internet in Africa, psychometric profiling takes a step further by mining vast quantities of personal data, which political strategists can use to tailor their communications to have greater influence on political opinions and voter preferences.

Psychometric profiling is the process by which your observed or self-reported actions are used to infer your personality traits. During the last presidential elections in Russia, leaked documents describe the Kremlin's concerted efforts to influence public opinion, using cinema, streaming series and TV programmes, to promote a narrative of Russian heroism, traditional values ²³. The leaked documents paint a detailed picture of how the Kremlin puts on a multi-billion-ruble show of civic movements in front of the public, creates government-controlled “opinion leaders”, builds a propaganda network that tries to influence every Russian, and essentially spies on its own citizens online using sophisticated IT systems.

²¹ See <https://decodingdigitalmedia.org/2023/09/15/thriving-on-tiktok-in-mali-the-generation-of-influencers/>

²² See <https://decodingdigitalmedia.org/2023/09/15/thriving-on-tiktok-in-mali-the-generation-of-influencers/>

²³ See <https://vsquare.org/kremlin-leaks-putin-elections-russia-propaganda-ukraine/>

Thus, the possibility that the Kremlin test out these techniques in Africa also exists . In west Africa for example, Vladimir Putin's regime has increasingly turned to new partnerships with the Sahel States Alliance for greater influence and economic lifelines²⁴.

Regrettably, these activities contribute to the denial of political rights and civil liberties of the citizens of Mali. Furthermore, such practices can help to manipulate the outcome of an election, a development that could open the door to breakdown in governance and further expansion of jihadist movements in the region. For instance, incumbents can hire a company such as Quintly to prevent the political opposition from competing during an election . By using such tactics, microtargeting can be used to tilt the playing field in favor of the governing party. In a fragile country like Mali, this type of modus operandi can obliterate democratic institutions and strip away people's right to choose their leaders . This subtle approach can also allow authoritarian leaders to maintain a thin façade of competitiveness for elections in which voters have in reality, already lost the freedom to choose who can govern them. Yet little in-depth research or investigation has been carried out so far into these practices. The same is true on their impact on politics in Sub-Saharan Africa. Digging deep into the data-driven practices of political campaigns in West-Africa in general and in Mali in particular, can help researchers, policy-makers and practitioners understand which practices are unique to the region, as well as what consequences these practices have for political participation. As Mali strives to improve its digital environment, it is important that the country leverage on the new and emerging technologies such as biometric data collection, and identify management systems to enhance the safety, security, and confidentiality of personal data. In the same vein, and data protection authorities in Mali, should also monitor the datadriven economy to avoid predatory or exploitative business models that lack transparency and accountability about the collection and use of personal data. Malian authorities should also undertake commendable efforts against potentially damaging practices with regard to personal data, such as : Data collection and monetization practices that distort the market and result in lack of consumer choice. The same applies to data usage practices that give rise to unmanaged risk , like Quintly which is able to accumulate and consolidate mass quantities of data into an irresistible target.

²⁴ See <https://theconversation.com/russia-has-tightened-its-hold-over-the-sahel-region-and-now-its-looking-to-africas-west-coast-228035>