THE ADOPTION OF DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES DURING THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES AND NON-PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

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ABSTRACT

Social media play a key role in the political communication of candidates in an election campaign (Gibson et al., 2017; Blassnig et al., 2021). They influence the voting behavior of citizens (Umbreen et al., 2014; Kovic et al., 2017). Through digital political communication, the candidate for elections can convey characteristics related to his personality and his aptitude (Clementson et al., 2021). Thus, first the author is based on theory and presents the digital political communication strategy, the effectiveness of social networks (FB and Twitter) and the indicators of a presidential candidate. Secondly, the author presents the results and analyzes of two qualitative studies. This paper combines two strategic perspectives, the one of election candidates and the other of the voters, into the same study in order to identify managerial implications in the third place by proposing a successful digital political communication strategy based on the indicators of a presidential candidate.

Keywords: Communication Strategy, Political Marketing, Brand Image, Candidate, Social Networks, Digital Communication, Election Campaign.

INTRODUCTION

Of the 8 billion people in the world, 4.66 billion are connected to the Internet (59.9%) and 4.20 billion are active on social networks (53.6%), we are well into the digital era. Beyond the numbers, internet has resized the world and changed the nature of human interactions and decisions, from the simplest to the most complex. New technologies continue to gain ground every day, transforming communication practices and possibilities like never before. Internet has removed all communication barriers in all sectors. Conventional constraints of space and time are disappearing and the range of communication possibilities is dizzying. Education, health, commerce, industry, service and politics are determined by the massive evolution of technology and data.

Citizens are increasingly digitized. In fact, social demands are being expressed more than ever, human rights battles are getting the attention they deserve. Revolutions erupt in a blink of an eye and most political campaigns are won (or lost) online (Safiullah et al., 2017). Thanks to internet and especially social media, citizens have the freedom to express their wants, needs and opinions more than ever before. Internet has given citizens of the world the freedom to influence the leaders of their countries making good old- fashioned politics a cyber-democracy. "*The people have never had as much power as they do on the Internet.*"

The role of social networks in politics was established and reinforced in 2008 in the campaign of the winning U.S. presidential candidate, Barack Obama. Since then, politicians have gradually integrated digital marketing into their communication policies (Maarek, 2014). Websites, mobile applications, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and even TikTok have become essential tools for political communication.

In the Arab world, the chain of events began in 2011 with the Tunisian revolution. In this historic event, Facebook played a major role in transmitting the revolutionary flame across the country first and across the Arab world later. Since that year, many Arab countries have moved from the era of oppression and tyranny to the era of free speech, democracy and cyber democracy.

"Social networks have for the first time given activists the ability to rapidly disseminate information while circumventing government restrictions". After the Arab revolutions' series, Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria were able to regain stability to some extent. However, Libya was ruled under the total chaos of a civil war, political divisions, foreign interventions and pandemics for ten years. Now, after a decade of instability, Libya may have a chance for stability and democracy. For the first time in the country's history, presidential elections were scheduled for December 24, 2021, (except that the electoral legislation was not ready). That said, Libyans have had the chance to exercise their cyber democracy and candidates have conducted a real full-scale political campaign where the Internet and especially social networks had played a major role. In this regard, our central question is: What is the digital political communication strategy that can guarantee the electoral success of a candidate?

Then, this study presents four contributions. First, it presents the approach of digital political communication in an electoral campaign; second, it measures its effectiveness. Third, it lists the traits that a presidential politician must have. Fourth, it proposes a strategy of digital political communication based on the expectations of citizens.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Digital Political Communication Strategy

Any electoral campaign should be based on a communication strategy (Newman 1994, Maarek, 2014) which is fundamental to guarantee success in elections (Blassnig et al., 2020). It allows direct interaction between candidates and voters and stimulates their participation in the electoral campaign. Moreover, this interaction favors the voters' perception of candidates by exploring their human side, skills and words (Harris & Harrigan, 2010; Harris & Lock, 2001; Tziagkidi, 2019). Then, digitization of communication helps to attract voters whereby "attention is paid more to politicians who are active on social networks.

However, digitization can be beneficial for the candidate as it can be unfavorable, a digital strategy is then very necessary (Sampugnaro and Montemagno, 2021).

Importance of Social Networks

Social media play a very important role in political communication in an electoral campaign. With such media, politicians can attract new members to their parties (Gibson et al., 2017; Gibson, 2015) and positively affect voters' intentions (Kovic et al., 2017).

The Communication Strategy Approach

Any thinking about a communication strategy should be based on the following questions of Assaäl and al (2020):

1. Who is the sender?
2. What is the message to be disseminated?
3. To which audience(s)?
4. Through which channel?
5. What effects are expected?
6. In what context do we place ourselves?
7. What is the problem that the communication must solve?
8. When should it be used?
9. At what cost?

Thus, it is important to take into consideration:

1. The situation and analysis of the candidate's environment
2. The objective of communication
3. The target of communication
4. The message
5. The themes
6. The digital communication channels
7. The cost, which represents in this context the engagement of Internet users.

Performance of Posts on Social Networks

Social media KPIs are used in electoral campaigns to measure the success of political candidates' posts or parties' success on social networks.

✔ Facebook KPI: number of fans, percentage of posts/month, number of interactions (likes, comments and shares), engagement rate.
✔ Twitter KPI: number of followers, percentage of posts/month, number of interactions, engagement rate.

Likes, shares, or comments are known as the "popularity index" (Porten et al 2018; Blassnig et al., 2021).

Traits of a Presidential Candidate

What positively impacts voter behavior is the candidate's brand image (Clementson et al., 2021). Presidential image is also influenced by rhetorical verbal communication. Branding, or building one's brand (Smith 2001, 2005), is an important component of a campaign. The image and performance of the politician is widely discussed in the literature (Clementson et al., 2021).

According to Clementson et al. (2021), the concept of presidential-like or non-presidential-like is measured by the personality and ability indicators of a person. The authors distinguished three personality traits and four ability traits to be presidential-like. These traits affect voter behavior.

Personality Traits:

The three personality traits that portray a presidential candidate are as follows:

1. Being sincere,
2. Being articulate
3. Being witty
4. Also seriousness can be taken into consideration

The ability traits are as follows:

1.   Be able to
2.   Be knowledgeable
3.   Responds to constituents' needs
4.   Offers realistic solutions

Cues that can affect presidential votes are, party, physical attractiveness, speech, experience, and communication strategy (Clementson et al., 2021):

- The President's Party: Historically, parties have controlled the election campaigns of their members highlighting the party's core ideas and ideology. However, since the 1960s, the candidate has increasingly become the master of his or her own campaign and the role of parties has diminished. The parties have an influence on elections when presenting themselves as partners of the candidates. The role of the party has become one of relational, financial, and informational support. This latter assumption is inconsistent with Davies & Mian (2010) whoassumed that political parties do not affect a candidate's campaign.

- Physical attractiveness: In particular, the impression made by the physical appearance of the presidential candidate is very important. Indeed, the appearance of Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of Great Britain (1979-1990), had changed several times throughout her political career (De Landheer, 2004). Berlusconi, former Prime Minister of Italy (1994-1995), (2001-2006) and (2008-2011), ran in 2004 with a face-lift and a new program (Ginsborg, 2004; Grusell & Nord, 2020). In the literature, several other examples that prove that voters give personality traits acute importance starting from the candidates' physical traits. For voters, these traits are indicators of political competence and efficiency (Caprara et al., 2002; De Landtsheer & Feldman, 2000; Furst & Oehmer, 2018).

Indeed, in order for a politician's brand to be well recognized, it is important for them to put onthe "politically desirable" codes of physical appearance (De Landtsheer & Feldman, 2000).

Political Topics (Speech): Verbal communication is one of the factors that determine voters' perceptions. In this regard, the first to have analyzedpoliticians'verbal style is Hart (1985;1997;2000) by examining hundreds of presidential speeches delivered by different U.S. presidents from Harry Truman to Reagan followed by B. Obama and D. Trump (Ricardo 2018). Hart, (2000) confirms that candidates' choice of words during a presidential campaign has a great significance on their image. In addition, political speech does not only consist of themes and topics addressed, but also, candidates' language style. Indeed, their use of metaphors (Sopory and Dillard, 2002; Topona, 2019), parallelism (Hosman, 2002) and rhetorical questions (Zillmann 1972) makes them more real and closer to their public.

Then, what the candidate decides to say or not to say in their statements, positions on and vision of the economic, cultural, social, military and political environment define the message of their campaign and their positioning against other candidates.

Themes in political speeches represent their partisan affiliation and personal statements (Benoit, 2022). Politicians give a better impression when they choose to talk about current issues and give opinions that are in line with those of the majority of the public.

Experience: Studies have shown that talking about one's own plans is more beneficial to a politician's image than calling others to action. The use of evidence and arguments enhances the credibility of the speaker and makes the speech more persuasive (Reinard 1988). However, an abusive use of evidence can damage the speaker's image because they can be perceived as a "narrow-minded technocrat" (Levasseur & Dean, 1996).

EMPIRICAL DESIGN

Context of the Study

The context of the study is the first election period in Libya's history, in December 2021. Libya is an African country of 7 million people that is part of the Maghreb. It experienced a revolution in 2011 and since then it has not been politically stable. The presidential elections, the first in their history scheduled for February 2021, did not take place, nevertheless election campaigns were held and the number of registered voters is 2 865 621 citizens. We recall our central question, what is the digital political communication strategy that can guarantee the electoral success of a candidate Tables 1-5.

From this central question, the following research questions arise:

	Table 1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Q1	What is the importance of social networks in an election campaign?
Q2	What is the importance of a digital communication strategy?
Q3	What is the performance of a communication strategy on social networks?
Q4	What are the traits of a presidential candidate?

METHODOLOGY

Our qualitative methodology rests on a netnography analysis, best suited to answer our research questions. The data collection method chosen is that of Kozinets (2002) namely, input, collection and interpretation. This method was conducted on two samples, the candidates and Libyan Internet users. Our study aims on the one hand to identify the factors that make a person presidential-like and the communication strategy to adopt. Data processing is carried out by the NVIVO12 software (Lawssel, 1948; Libaert &Westphalen, 2015). The targeted digital tools are the candidates' Facebook and Tweeter accounts.

The first analysis focuses on 121 posts from 1/05/2020 to 31/05/2021 and the aim is to:

✔ Identify the digital performance of social networks in terms of content,
✔ Analyze politicians' community engagement. This will allow us to identify which types of content are more appreciated and more attractive to them,
✔ Identify the communication strategy adopted by the candidate.

The second study focuses on 208 comments posted by Libyan internet users on the candidates' posts and speeches on FB and Tweeter during the same period.

The choice of FB and Tweeter is based, firstly, on the review of the literature, which shows that these two social networks are the most used in an electoral campaign and secondly, on the empirical side, these are the media most used by presidential candidates choose.

Entry into the Virtual Communities

Sample 1: Election candidates:

From the ten candidates who ran for president, the author chose the five most active on social networks. The choice of the sample is by convenience. 206 comments on the candidates' social networks (data saturation).

Table 2
LIBYAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

Candidates	Age	Gender	Years in politics	Party/independent
C.A	50 years	M	Since 2014-post politics	Independent
C.B	59 years	M	Since 2011	Independent
C.C	61 years	M	Since the 90s	Political party
C.D	78 years	M	Since 1969	Independent
C.E	59 years	M	Since 2011	Political party

Sample 2- Libyan internet users, active on social networks:

Libya had about 7 million people in 2021. 86.6% of the Libyan population is active on social networks. This is about 6 million people connected. These internet users connected on social networks represent the universe of digital communication segments of the politician. There are several tribes in Libya and they are distributed as follows:

Table 3
TRIBES DISTRIBUTION IN LIBYA

West	East	South
Warfala	Al Awaguir	Awlad Suleiman
Tarhuma	Barassa	Touerg
Zintata	Al Abidat	Tebbou
Misrata	Al Mgharba	
Warshmana	Al Masamir	
Al Khadhadhfa	Al Zwaya	
	Al Forjen	
	Al Arafa	
	Tobruk	

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

First Results: Performance of Candidates' Posts

In order to identify political competition on social networks, we conducted a digital competitive intelligence analysis which consists of an evaluation of the presence of competitors on social networks. A Netnographic analysis of their content is conducted in order to identify their digital communication strategies.

Then, we extracted all KPIs (key performance indicators) statistics via the Fanpage Karma platform, which is a platform dedicated to the analysis of performance on social networks.

The table below shows the KPIs of the candidates for the month of September.

Table 4
PERFORMANCE OF CANDIDATE 'DIGITAL PRESENCE

Social network	Candidate				
Facebook	C.A	C.B	C.C	C.D	C.E
Number of fans	280 K	88 k	290 K	70K	100 k
Content (% of total posts /month)	9.5 %	15.9 %	59.5 %	6.4%	8.7%
Interactions (engagement) (likes, comments, shares) /month	55 K	643K	270 K	45 K	3K
Twitter	C.A	C.B	C.C	C.E.	C.F
Followers	95 K	250 K	250 K	90 K	70 K
Content (% of total posts /month)	4.7%	62.3 %	16 %	0%	17%
Interactions (engagement) (likes, comments, shares) /month	1K	15K	50 K	0%	1%

On both social networks Fb and Twitter, we see that the content is identical. We chose to examine the two posts with the most interactions on FB. The aim is to identify the elements of the communication strategy.

Second Results: Presence of Digital Communication Strategy

The results identified the digital communication strategies of the candidates. Candidate A does not have a clear strategy, therefore we retained only 4. We present next the different digital communication strategies of the candidates following the approach of Assaâl and al (2020).

Digital Political Communication Strategy of Candidate C.B:

Table 5 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF CANDIDATE C.B	
Communication channels	**Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.**
Target of communication:	Tribes :western tribes (in addition to the eastern) Age: Young andadults Gender: women (a minority) Education: Literate Political affiliations: Libyans who support the movement and those who support the military regimes (Eastern tribes)
Communication objectives	Primary objective: Acquire new supporters: women, eastern tribes and youth Secondary objective: Retention of acquired supporters
Communication themes	The importance of law and order Achievements within the movement. Diversification in news topics (economic, political, military and social)
Language andstyle	Language: Formal Arabic Political and professional language
Slogan	There is a slogan
Type of content	Shootings and real photos Photo collages of slogans and quotes Real videos Video editing
Graphic design	Elements: Flag of Libya, symbols of law Colors: Use of three colors, the one that reflects, purity, horizon, future, strength and order also the one that reflects honesty and integrity; and the one that reflects strength of character.

Digital Political Communication Strategy of Candidate C.C:

Table 6 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF C.C	
Communication channels	Facebook (2 pages: as a candidate and as a political leader) Twitter, Instagram
Target of communication:	Location: West (Major cities) Age range: Youth and adults Education: Literate Political affiliation: Supporters of the movement.
Communication objectives	Retention of acquired supporters.
Communication themes	Official statements as a political leader, achievements
Language and style	Language: Formal Arabic Political -professional language

Slogan	There is a slogan
Type of content	Shootings and real photos Photo of official releases Real videos
Graphic design	Elements: Logo of his movement, flag of Libya, text (in Arabic, Amazigh and English) Colors: which reflect nobility, order, respect and righteousness. Also an official color of the logo of the movement, and third color that indicates honesty, integrity, peace and purity.

Digital Political Communication Strategy of Candidate C.D:

Table 7 DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF CANDIDATE C.D	
Communication channels	Facebook
Target of communication:	Tribes: mainly eastern tribes Political affiliation: Libyans who support the party and Libyans who oppose the Islamist regime.
Communication objectives	Retention of acquired supporters.
Communication themes	Achievements A focus on his image with emphasis on his political status.
Language and style	Language: Formal Arabic Style: Military, to remind people of law and order.
Slogan	No slogans
Type of content	Posting of real photos on a Libyan flag background Video editing
Graphic design	Elements: Uniform of his status, symbol of his status and flag of Libya. Colors: a combination of the colors of his uniform and the Libyan flag

Digital Political Communication Strategy of Candidate C.E:

Table 8 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF CANDIDATE C.E	
Communication channels	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Target of communication	Targeting strategy is absent in social networks
Communication objectives	To be known by Libyans
Communication themes	Political Vision Foreign Relations: A focus on political vision
Language and style	Language: Formal Arabic Political language
Slogan	No slogans
Type of content	Real photos of the politician with other politicians Real videos of the candidate
Graphic design	Elements: The politician, the logo of his political party Colors that symbolize order and good organization also inspires honesty and integrity.

Third Results - Traits of a Presidential Candidate According to Libyan Internet Users

According to the netnographic study, three themes and eleven sub-themes are identified. There are positive and negative traits for each sub-theme on the traits of a presidential candidate. Below are the themes and verbatims.

Table 9			
THEME 1- TRAITS OF A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE ACCORDING TO LIBYAN INTERNET USERS			
Theme	**Sub-theme**		**Verbatims**
Traits of a Presidential Candidate	Leadership	Positive traits (Presidential-like)	*statesman*
			Courageous
			Patriot
			Strong personality
			Leader
		Negative traits (Non presidential-like)	*Non-diplomatic*
			Don't know how to do politics
			Attached to power
			Does not prioritize the interest of the people
	Integrity	Positive traits (Presidential-like)	*"A real man"(symbol of courage and ability)*
			Respectful
		Negative traits (Non presidential-like)	*Corrupt*
			Thief
			Opportunistic
			Cameleon-like
	Words	Positive traits (Presidential-like)	*Educated*
			Franc
		Negative traits (Non presidential-like)	*Liar*
			Hypocrit

Table 10			
THEME 2- THE POLITICAL PAST OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE			
Theme	**Sub-theme**		**Verbatim**
Political history of the candidate	Performance as a government official.	Good performance (Presidential-like)	*Put an end to the war*
			Achieved the national agreement
		Poor performance (Non-presidential-like)	*Did nothing when serving his term*
			Destroyed the country
			Failed
	Integrity when serving.	Corruption (Non-presidential-like)	*Stole money*
			He was corrupt
			He served his own interests
	No political background	Success in his career (Presidential-like)	*No link with previous policy*

Table 11 THEME 3- THE DISCOURSE OF A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE			
Theme	**Sub-theme**		**Verbatim**
Discourse	Discourse Integrity	Discourse with integrity (Presidential-like)	*Honest*
			Frank
			Tells the truth
		Lying discourse (non-presidential-like)	*Lies*
			Propaganda
	Discourse coherence	Logical discourse (Presidential-like)	*Logic*
			Valid
			Realistic
		Illogic discourse (non-presidential-like)	*Nonsense*
			Contradictory
			It is not logical
	Discourse boldness	Bold discourse (presidential-like)	*Bold*
			courageous
			Tells the truth

Analysis of Results

According to Libyan Internet users, the traits of a presidential candidate depend on the attributes of his personality, his past background and his discourse:

Personality traits of a candidate:

✔ Non-presidential candidate: for leadership, "non-diplomatic, does not know how to do politics. For integrity: Corrupt, Thief, Opportunistic, Cameleon-like. For words: Liar, Hypocrit, Bold.
✔ Presidential candidate: for leadership, "A statesman, Courageous, Patriot, Strong personality, Leader. For integrity: A real man, Respectful. For words: "educated, Frank".

Political past of a candidate:

There are two profiles: the one who is already on the political scene and the one who has just begun:
✔ Non-presidential candidate: for integrity, the one who "stole, was corrupt, served his own interests, did not hold his position with integrity". For performance, one who "did nothing in office, destroyed the country, failed".
✔ Presidential candidate: for performance, "ended the war, achieved the national agreement". For the candidate who has just begun politics, he is presidential-like if "has success in his career and no connection with politicians".

Candidate's discourse

✔ Presidential candidate: "must be honest, discourse that reflects the truth and reality of the country, logic in his thoughts. Moreover, there is boldness in his words.
✔ Non-presidential candidate: "presents false figures, hides the reality of the country, nonsense, contradictory to his actions, criticizes the former government while he was in charge in this government, proposes solutions that are not real".

Libyans look for the following traits in their future president: leadership, integrity, non-involvement in their past sufferings, and competence, four dominant traits for a presidential candidate.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The implication of this study should interest politicians who wish to run for president also to communication agencies that have a communication strategy for politicians. Table12.

Table 12 PROPOSAL OF A POLITICAL DIGITAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE	
Digital communication strategy of candidates	Proposal
Communication typology	For known candidates: a communication of conquest is necessary For unknown candidates: a communication of notoriety is needed
Communication channels	Keep FB and Twitter and Instagram channels Engagement rate on SNs should be greater than or equal to 1.
Target of communication	We notice, the targets are not well defined, what is needed: Conquer the fragile target To address the youth (18-35 years old, 30% of the population) Consider women (according to the Libyan High Electoral Commission, the number of women registered for the elections is 981,599 against 1,390,247 men, i.e. 41.4% against 58.8% of the voters). They represent 34% of the active population Involving uneducated Libyans (and the lower social class) Targeting unemployed youth (24% of the population) Win over undecided supporters by presenting them with their will Retain the acquired supporters (loyalty-building strategy)
Objectives of communication	For the attitude of Internet users: *Cognitive objective*: To make the candidate known to new targets present on social networks, if he is unknown, and to improve his image with the public opinion if he is known and badly perceived. *Affective objective* - known and appreciated: To keep the new targets loyal by getting closer to them and by reinforcing the image. - If he is known and not appreciated: It is necessary to emphasize communication on: leadership, patriotism, integrity, solidarity (themes identified by Internet users) and improve the image of the politician. *Conative objective* known and appreciated: push the targets to vote for him in the elections. To elaborate a program in accordance with the expectations of the different identified targets
Themes	- Choosing themes that meet the needs of Libyans and take into consideration the traits of a presidential candidate according to Libyans such as integrity, honesty, courage, boldness, patriotism: stability, no ties to the past. - Libyans are affected by the personal life of the candidates.
Language and style	formal Arabic and Libyan accent
Slogan	Words that affect the majority of Libyans like patriotism
Type of content	To get more engagement and awareness you need a combination of photos+ videos+ posters+text
Graphic design	Given the context of the country, it is advisable that candidates use the following colors: White to indicate peace Blue, to indicate union, loyalty, order, authority. The promise of a better, safe and positive life Also recall the flag of Libya which will help to communicate patriotism and love of the country to the candidate.

CONCLUSION

Our study examined the digital political communication strategy and the traits of a presidential candidate. It presents a theoretical contribution to the literature and to political marketing. To our knowledge, no previous study has jointly dealt with digital communication strategy, its performance and the traits of a presidential candidate. This study presented rich results with recommendations to presidential candidates and communication agencies that deal with politicians' campaigns. This study tried to complement the literature by presenting other measures of a presidential candidate such as Leader (statesman, courageous, patriotic, strong personality), Integrity (respectful, educated), Good speech (frank and common sense), Political background (if there is a background, he must have achieved good results). We notice that the word integrity was mentioned in the attributes, the discourse and even the past.

Thus, for future studies, two lines of research can be pursued. The first tests the impact of digital communication strategy on voting results and the second validates a measurement scale of the traits of a presidential candidate.

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