

Micro-Targeting, Macro-Effects: Re-evaluating Political Communication in the Data Era

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Abstract. Digital transformation has transformed the political campaign landscape from a mass approach to a personalized one through the use of big data. This study aims to explore and analyze in depth the effectiveness of micro-targeting advertising as a political communication medium in the digital era. Using a qualitative approach with descriptive content analysis and literature review, this study relies entirely on secondary data sources derived from digital platform advertising transparency reports, election regulatory documents, and related scientific literature. The results indicate that operationally, micro-targeting advertising has high persuasive effectiveness in reaching swing voters due to the ability of personalized messages to penetrate internet users' attention spans through the use of big data and experimental advertising trials. However, from a sociopolitical perspective, this electoral effectiveness has negative impacts in the form of fragmentation of the digital public sphere through the creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, which exacerbate social polarization. Furthermore, the hidden nature of advertising (dark ads) raises ethical issues related to the violation of user privacy and indicates a wide regulatory gap in the oversight of digital election governance. This study recommends the need for regulatory reforms that require full transparency in digital platforms' political advertising repositories and strengthen digital literacy among civil society.

Keywords: *Effectiveness, Micro-Targeting Advertising, Political Communication, Digital Campaigns.*

A. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology in the digital era has brought fundamental changes to various aspects of human life, including the political system. Social media and digital platforms are no longer simply a means of entertainment or social interaction, but have transformed into a new public space where political discourse is produced, distributed, and consumed (Anshari, 2013). Conventional political communication models, which tended to be one-way, are shifting toward more interactive, rapid, and transnational communication patterns. These changes are forcing political actors to adopt new technologies to remain relevant and maintain their influence among an increasingly digitally savvy public (Arsyad et al., 2024).

One of the main drivers of this shift in the political communication landscape is the emergence of the phenomenon of big data. Every user activity on the internet, from search history and social media posts to online shopping preferences, leaves a rich digital footprint (Islami, 2024). In a political context, this digital footprint is no longer viewed as a collection of random data but as a valuable strategic asset. This data can be processed to map the behavior, ideological tendencies, and even psychological anxieties of internet users, who also act as potential voters in elections (Alvin, 2022).

The use of this big data has given rise to a cutting-edge campaign strategy known as micro-targeting advertising (Masaaki & Akihiro, 2022). Unlike traditional campaign strategies that disseminate a single, general message to all levels of society through mass media, micro-targeting works by dividing the voter population into very small, specific segments based on their demographics, psychographics, and online behavior. Through this approach, a political

campaign team can produce dozens, even hundreds, of personalized message variations to target the specific issues that matter most to each individual voter (Harahap et al., 2025).

Micro-targeting advertising in political communication is an advertising delivery strategy that utilizes big data analysis and sophisticated algorithms to map the voter population into highly specific segments based on demographic information, geographic location, psychographics, and even their online behavioral history (Mirza, 2023). Through this approach, campaign designers no longer disseminate a single, general message to the general public, but instead produce a variety of personalized political narratives to align with the unique interests, concerns, or needs of each individual or smaller voter group (Kusumawadhana & Rizkimawati, 2022).

The urgency of using micro-targeting advertising as a political communication medium lies in its high level of efficiency and relevance. Amidst the flood of digital information, internet users' attention has become a very scarce commodity (Zuiderveen et al., 2018). General political messages are often ignored because they are perceived as having no direct relevance to voters' personal lives. By implementing micro-targeting, political actors can ensure that the messages delivered directly reach the emotional or rational targets of voters, so that the potential for these messages to influence perceptions, attitudes, and political decisions becomes much greater (King 2022).

Despite its high effectiveness, the implementation of micro-targeting in the political sphere has not escaped sharp criticism and deep ethical debate. The use of citizens' personal data without clear transparency has raised concerns about large-scale privacy violations and psychological manipulation (Zambrano, 2019). Furthermore, this strategy is feared to exacerbate social polarization because voters are only presented with information that aligns with their own biases or fears (echo chamber). This fragmented political narrative can gradually erode the quality of healthy public debate in a democratic system (Richardson et al., 2019).

Although research on digital advertising in politics has begun to gain ground, most previous literature has focused on quantitative aspects such as audience reach or advertising budget efficiency. Research that explores how micro-targeting messages are narratively constructed by political actors and how voters' psychological responses to such personalization are deeply limited. Furthermore, the ever-changing regulatory dynamics and digital cultural landscape mean that research on the effectiveness of this strategy requires constant updating and relevant context (Chester & Montgomery, 2017; Dommett, 2019; Bossetta, 2018).

This research aims to fill this academic gap by focusing on an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of micro-targeting advertising as a contemporary political communication medium. The primary focus of this study is how personalized messaging strategies are produced by campaign designers and how these messages influence the dynamics of political persuasion in cyberspace. The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to view micro-targeting not simply as a technical marketing tool, but as a complex political communication instrument involving data power relations, psychological narratives, and the ethics of digital space.

Based on the background outlined, this study aims to explore the effectiveness, message delivery mechanisms, and socio-political implications of implementing micro-targeting advertising in the digital era. Theoretically, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of political communication science, particularly in understanding the digital behavior of political actors. In practical terms, the output of this research is expected to be a reference material for policy makers, election organizers, and civil society in formulating digital campaign regulations that are more transparent, fair, and uphold democratic values.

B. METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach using descriptive content analysis and library research. This research relied entirely on secondary data sources, thus did not involve direct interaction with human subjects through interviews or questionnaires. The primary secondary data were obtained through political advertising transparency reports from digital platforms (such as the Meta Ad Library or Google Transparency Report), official election regulatory documents, previous scientific journal articles, and textual and visual documentation of political advertising samples published during the digital campaign period (Rukin, 2019).

Data collection techniques were conducted through online searches and systematic documentation of literature and advertising archives relevant to the implementation of micro-targeting strategies. Data analysis was conducted using the qualitative data analysis model of Miles et al. (2014), which includes data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Researchers analyzed secondary advertising metadata to evaluate effectiveness parameters such as audience segmentation patterns, message narrative structure, and publicly recorded digital engagement rates. Data validity and reliability are maintained through data source triangulation techniques, namely by comparing and contrasting concrete advertising document data in the field with political communication theories and research findings from credible institutions. Through this method, the effectiveness of micro-targeting is objectively assessed based on digital footprints and conceptual textual analysis.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Operational Mechanism and Persuasion Effectiveness of Micro-Targeting Advertising

The shift from mass political communication to personalized political communication marks the birth of a new era of data-driven campaigns. In the digital age, campaign effectiveness is no longer measured by the reach of physical billboards or the duration of advertisements on national television, but rather by the precision of messages in targeting specific targets. Micro-targeting advertising emerged as a logical response to the abundance of internet user behavioral data provided by major digital platforms (Chouaki et al., 2022). Through this approach, political actors no longer view voters as a homogeneous mass, but rather as a vast mosaic consisting of millions of individuals with unique preferences that can be analyzed.

The primary foundation of micro-targeting's operation is the massive collection and utilization of big data. Every time an internet user conducts a search, likes a post, or leaves a comment on social media, they are building their own digital profile. Secondary data from technology platform transparency reports shows that this raw data is algorithmically processed to map users' personalities, economic status, and even cultural affiliations. As a result, political campaign teams gain access to a much more accurate psychographic map of the public than conventional survey methods (Bakir, 2020).

The operational process continues with hyper-specific audience segmentation. In traditional campaign practices, segmentation typically focuses on macro-demographic variables such as gender, age range, or region of residence. However, through micro-targeting, these variables are combined with cyber behavioral data to produce very small subgroups. For example, an ad designer might isolate a group of "law students, urban dwellers, interested in environmental issues, and active internet users at night." This precise segmentation becomes a key element in developing a highly targeted communication strategy (Zuiderveen et al., 2018).

Once voter subgroups are mapped, the campaign team will construct varied messages for the same political goal or actor. Analysis of digital advertising archives (such as the Meta Ad Library) shows that a single political candidate can launch hundreds of variations of ad visuals and copy simultaneously. These messages are designed modularly, with narrative, color,

and diction instantly adjusted to align with the psychological characteristics of the target audience. This step ensures that no message is wasted due to a mismatch in audience interests.

One clear example of this narrative differentiation is evident in targeting young voter groups, such as Generation Z and Millennials. Secondary data shows that advertisements aimed at this segment tend to avoid the formal or rigid formats commonly found in conventional media. Political advertisements are packaged using a casual aesthetic, short video formats, and use terms popular among young people (Penney, 2017). The issues raised are very specific, revolving around inequality in creative jobs, mental health, or access to education, presented without heavy political rhetoric.

In contrast, the opposite approach is applied when advertisements target established age groups in suburban or rural areas. The political narrative is constructed formally and institutionally, emphasizing aspects of economic stability, environmental security, and the preservation of traditional values. The use of visuals also tends to be more conventional, featuring photos of candidates in formal attire or documentation of community social activities. These differences in message treatment demonstrate that micro-targeting works by exploiting the different emotional and rational sensitivities of each generation.

The high persuasive effectiveness of micro-targeting advertising is theoretically based on the concept of personal relevance. In communication studies, a message is more easily processed by human cognition if it is perceived as directly related to the recipient's life or personal concerns (Decker & Kramer, 2023). Amidst the digital information storm that limits internet users' attention span, general political ads are easily skipped (scrolled past). However, when an ad specifically addresses an issue that is of primary concern to the individual, attention span increases significantly.

Quantitative indicators of this effectiveness can be seen through comparative analysis of secondary data on user engagement rates. Digital advertising performance reports consistently show that ads employing micro-targeting have significantly higher click-through rates than mass advertising. Users not only view the ad but also take active actions such as liking, commenting, and re-sharing the content. This high level of interaction indicates that the political message successfully triggers a positive psychological response in the target audience.

The effectiveness of micro-targeting reaches its peak when used to target swing voters. Digital platform algorithms are able to detect internet users who have yet to form a firm political stance based on their neutral or varied search history. Campaign teams then flood this group's digital space with persuasive messages that are comparative and solution-oriented. By intensively influencing this undecided group in their private digital space, micro-targeting has a significant potential to shift political support in tight contests (Cho et al., 2020).

From a managerial perspective, the effectiveness of this strategy is also reflected in the extremely efficient use of advertising budgets. Conventional campaigns often incur significant costs renting media ad space for audiences that are not necessarily relevant or even eligible to vote. Through a precise digital ad auction mechanism, every dollar spent by the campaign team is guaranteed to only pay for impressions from users who meet the potential target criteria. This efficiency allows political actors with limited capital but a strong data strategy to remain competitive in the digital space.

Another operational advantage of micro-targeting is its ability to optimize in real-time. Through the ad platform's analytics dashboard, the performance of a political narrative can be monitored second-by-second. If an ad variation shows low conversion or engagement rates, the platform's algorithm or digital team can immediately stop the ad and replace it with a new narrative. This flexibility and speed of adaptation are impossible in traditional outdoor or print media, which are permanent after production.

To carry out this optimization, political campaigns are known to frequently utilize A/B testing methods. Two versions of an ad with small differences—for example, in background color, wording in the headline, or the candidate's facial expression—are distributed to a sample of the same segment. The variant that generates the highest psychological response or clicks in the shortest time is selected as the primary ad, receiving the largest budget allocation. This practice demonstrates how political communication in the digital age has shifted into a highly measurable, data-driven, experimental scientific activity.

Psychologically, micro-targeting persuasion works by amplifying emotional engagement and strengthening in-group identity. When an ad taps into a user's specific cultural values, religion, or hobbies, it ceases to feel like political propaganda and instead becomes a form of validation of the user's self-identity. This subtle emotional approach makes it easier for political messages to penetrate the defensive walls of skepticism that people usually have towards political actors' campaign promises.

2. Sociopolitical Implications, Fragmentation of the Public Sphere, and Ethical Challenges

While micro-targeting advertising offers extraordinary effectiveness from the perspective of electoral victory, its massive implementation carries serious consequences for the health of democracy. Its technical success in influencing individual voter behavior is directly proportional to the emergence of various negative impacts in the macro sociopolitical realm. When political communication no longer takes place openly in shared public spaces, but instead shifts to isolated, private digital corridors, the foundations of healthy public deliberation and discourse begin to crumble. This dark side has become a major focus of attention for media observers and political sociologists in the digital age.

The root of all ethical issues in this strategy stems from the widespread commodification of citizens' personal data. People's daily activities in cyberspace have been transformed into economic and political commodities without the full awareness of the data owners. Documents and reports from various digital rights organizations indicate that the majority of internet users do not read or understand privacy agreements when creating accounts on social media platforms. This gap in understanding is exploited by the data broker industry to collect, package, and sell people's psychological profiles to political campaigns for financial gain.

This transparent, unauthorized use of psychological profiles constitutes a clear violation of individual privacy and autonomy. Every citizen should ideally have the right to determine what information about themselves is publicly available, especially for the purpose of manipulating political preferences. When a campaign team is able to discern a voter's deepest fears, sexual orientation, or economic vulnerability through algorithmic analysis, the boundaries of human privacy are shattered. This situation places individuals in a highly vulnerable position before political actors with vast data resources.

Sociopolitically, the most visible impact of the rise of microtargeted advertising is the strengthening of the echo chamber phenomenon in cyberspace. Because digital platform algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement, political ads presented are always tailored to the user's pre-existing biases and political views. As a result, a voter is constantly exposed to information, opinions, and narratives that validate their own political beliefs. This echo chamber stifles the opportunity for individuals to encounter alternative perspectives that differ or objectively contradict them.

This situation is exacerbated by the creation of filter bubbles that subconsciously isolate each group of people. Unlike traditional mass media like newspapers or television, where everyone consumes relatively the same news, on social media, each individual lives in a

different digital reality. Two people living next door to each other might have completely different perceptions of the state of the country simply because their filter bubbles present a 180-degree difference in political advertising. This information isolation destroys the shared reality that is so essential for maintaining social integration.

The direct impact of the confluence of echo chambers and filter bubbles is the exacerbation of social and political polarization within society. Micro-targeted advertising tends to exploit even the slightest differences to create a clear divide between "us" (in-group) and "them" (out-group). Digital campaign narratives are often designed not to embrace differences, but rather to reinforce feelings of hatred or suspicion between groups in order to foster instant political solidarity. This polarization created in the digital space will gradually materialize into social conflict in the real world.

As society becomes increasingly fragmented, the quality of public debate within a democratic system is experiencing significant decline or erosion. The rational, civilized, and fact-based exchange of ideas is being replaced by emotional battles of claims taking place in closed spaces. Because micro-targeted advertising is personalized, debates between candidates no longer take place on an open stage where their validity can be verified by the public and journalists. When public debate loses its argumentative essence, the election process risks being reduced to a mere contest of large-scale psychological manipulation.

The psychological manipulation aspect of this strategy is particularly dangerous when targeting vulnerable voter groups or those with low digital literacy. Campaign designers can identify individuals experiencing economic anxiety, social frustration, or fear of specific minority groups. These vulnerable groups are then bombarded with political advertisements specifically designed to trigger their emotional anger or panic. This targeted psychological manipulation clouds voters' critical thinking, so that their political decisions are no longer based on rational program considerations.

One technical characteristic of digital advertising that raises serious ethical issues is its nature as dark ads. This term refers to digital political ads that are visible only to specifically targeted users, while the general public, political opponents, and election monitoring agencies cannot directly detect them on their social media feeds. This invisibility to the public undermines the principle of transparency in political campaigns. Without transparency, monitoring the accuracy of claims, the spread of slander, or smear campaigns becomes extremely difficult.

The lack of public oversight due to the dark ads phenomenon opens the door wide for the spread of highly targeted disinformation and hoaxes. A lie or disinformation narrative can be specifically designed to damage the reputation of a political opponent, then spread only to a group of voters psychologically predisposed to believe conspiracy theories. Because these ads don't appear in the macro public sphere, the aggrieved opponent doesn't have the opportunity to provide clarification or a balanced rebuttal. This closed pattern of disinformation dissemination poisons the election information ecosystem from within.

Ironically, the rapid development of micro-targeting technology has not been matched by adequate legal regulations, creating a wide regulatory gap. Election laws in many developing countries are still largely designed to oversee conventional forms of campaigning such as billboards, mass rallies, and broadcast media advertising. Regulations regarding limits on user data collection for political purposes, transparency of platform algorithms, and limits on digital advertising capitalization remain very vague and lag far behind the realities of existing technology.

This regulatory gap directly impacts the difficulty of monitoring campaign funding flows in the digital era. Costs incurred for micro-targeting operations are often disguised through various technology budget items or third-party consulting services, which are difficult

for election supervisory bodies to track. Furthermore, the cross-border nature of digital advertising payment systems complicates enforcement of regulations prohibiting foreign capital involvement in domestic elections. This inability to track the flow of funds undermines the principles of fairness and financial accountability in political contests.

Unregulated micro-targeting practices also create data asymmetry among political contestants. Campaign teams backed by large financial capital have the ability to purchase the highest-quality data and hire world-class foreign data consultants. In contrast, alternative candidates or new political parties with limited capital are forced to campaign using less effective traditional methods. This inequality undermines the fundamental principle of fair elections, where victory is no longer determined by the quality of ideas but by financial strength and mastery of data processing technology.

More broadly, easy access to global micro-targeting advertising systems poses a real threat of foreign interference in a country's political sovereignty. Foreign geopolitical actors or international organizations with vested interests can easily purchase advertising space on digital platforms to influence domestic public opinion ahead of elections. Past cases of global political manipulation provide irrefutable historical evidence that a nation's digital sovereignty and political stability can be shaken externally through structured, data-driven psychological operations.

The accumulation of rampant disinformation, data manipulation, sharp polarization, and regulatory uncertainty will gradually erode public trust in democratic institutions themselves. As people begin to realize that their political choices are the result of algorithmic manipulation and psychological manipulation, the legitimacy of the election process and results will be questioned. Political cynicism will flourish among citizens, which, at its extreme, could trigger mass apathy or rejection of the democratic system perceived as controlled by data oligarchs.

To prevent further damage, there is a pressing urgency to immediately implement comprehensive digital policy reforms and regulatory updates. Governments and election management bodies must formulate strict regulations requiring technology platforms to provide transparent and publicly accessible political advertising repositories in real time. Furthermore, strict limits on what types of data can and cannot be used for political advertising targeting must be enforced to protect citizens' privacy rights and psychological autonomy from political exploitation.

D. CONCLUSION

Micro-targeting advertising is a highly effective political communication medium for influencing voter behavior in the digital era. The operational advantage of this strategy lies in the integration of big data and the acuity of platform algorithms, which are capable of constructing a variety of personalized messages based on precise audience psychographic profiles. This personal relevance-based approach has proven successful in multiplying digital engagement rates and reducing information distortion, particularly in influencing the political decisions of young and swing voters. However, this electoral effectiveness carries negative implications in the form of fragmentation of the digital public sphere through the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, which exacerbate social polarization in the real world. The closed nature of its operation (dark ads) raises profound ethical issues related to citizens' privacy rights, psychological manipulation, imbalances in data power, and weak oversight accountability due to wide regulatory gaps in contemporary election regulations.

Based on these conclusions, several strategic suggestions, both practical and academic, are proposed to maintain the integrity of the democratic system in the digital space. For the government, election management bodies, and relevant authorities, there is a pressing need to

reform digital governance policies. New regulations should require technology platforms to provide transparent, real-time archives of political advertising, and limit the exploitation of sensitive personal data for political targeting. Furthermore, digital and political literacy programs for civil society need to be promoted to equip citizens with critical thinking skills in detecting cyber-persuasion. Future researchers are advised to expand the scope of their studies by using a mixed-methods approach to combine secondary text analysis with quantitative measurements of voter psychological impact, or to conduct a multi-country comparative study on the effectiveness of digital campaign advertising regulations.

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