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# **‘La nuit porte conseil’**

## **An intersectional analysis of women’s political participation on social media in Mali**

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**Abstract:**

The world is digitalizing, and human rights such as political participation are increasingly being exercised online. To understand the role social media have in women's political participation in Mali, this thesis investigates how intersectional power relations shape opportunities for online political participation, and how women harness the properties of the digital public sphere to enhance political participation. Using Habermas' concept of the 'public sphere' and Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, I find that structural, representational, or political intersectionality each play a different role in creating unequal power relations for women on the digital public sphere in Mali. Aside from gender I find that identities such as area of residence, education and religion are important identities defining power relations on the digital public sphere. I find that properties of the digital public sphere such as the plurality of platforms, different media formats, closed groups, economic opportunities available, wide reach and anonymity available online have been harnessed by women to help navigate the intersectional power relations active on the digital public sphere and enhance their political participation.

**Key words:**

Digital public sphere, women's political participation, Mali

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# 1. Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly digital. In 2016 the UN declared the importance of the internet for human rights, given its undeniable connection to the right to freedom of expression and other basic rights (United Nations, 2018). Political conversations, campaigns, activism, and discussion spaces have increasingly moved online and digital means such as social media have altered political and democratic processes irrevocably (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Although some claim that the internet, and social media within this have given marginalized groups a unique opportunity to access political conversations and express themselves, leading to counter hegemonic movements such as #MeToo and women's mobilizations in Iran, there remain widespread inequalities in access to digital platforms (Gheyntchi and Moghadam, 2014; Caren, Andrews and Lu, 2020; Bunse, 2021; Galpin, 2022). To understand the benefits that social media could have for women, it is thus important to understand power relations governing inequalities of access and use of social media. I will look at this in the context of Mali, where women have significantly lower rates of political participation than men, and increasing use of social media could improve political participation (Wing, 2002; NDI, 2016). I argue that to understand the opportunities and challenges that social media present for improving women's access to political participation, an intersectional approach of the power dynamics underlying women's experiences on the digital public sphere is necessary. My research questions are therefore as follows:

## 1.1. Research Question:

*RQ 1: How do intersectional power relations shape opportunities for online political participation in Mali?*

*RQ 2: How do women harness the properties of the digital public sphere to enhance political participation?*

Political participation is defined in this thesis as citizen actions in a communication ecosystem that help develop political and democratic values, systems and norms (Kim and Hoewe, 2020; see also section 4). The digital public sphere within this thesis will be looked at through social media, and properties of the digital public sphere refers to facets or aspects enabled by this online environment (Sampedro and Avidad, 2018). Until now, research has mainly focused on the impact of social media for women's political participation, less on intersectional factors within this, and hardly any within the context of Mali (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux and Zheng, 2014; Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015; Chilwa, 2022). In this research, I will use Habermas' concept of 'the public sphere' and Crenshaw's intersectional framework to analyze how underlying power dynamics affect women's opportunities for political participation on the digital public sphere in Mali, and how women harness properties of the digital public sphere to enhance their political participation.

## **1.2. Outline:**

In section two I will give a backdrop of the current political and security context, describing women's political participation in Mali. In section three I will discuss existing literature about the role of social media for women's political participation. In section four I will outline my theoretical framework. I will use Habermas' theory of the digital public sphere and Crenshaw's theory on intersectionality. In section five I will discuss methodology, my decision to use in-depth interviews and qualitative data analysis, and my ethical considerations and limitations. In section six I will analyze the results of my data collection using the theoretical framework of the digital public sphere and intersectionality. Finally in section seven I will conclude and make some recommendations for future research.

## **2. Background: women's political participation in Mali amidst insecurity**

Mali gained independence from France in 1960. Since then, the country has experienced various forms of political instability, including several coups and civil wars (Ouedraogo, 2022). This instability as well as cultural and social norms sidelining women from the public space has limited political participation for women in Mali considerably (De Jorio, 2009; Gottlieb, 2016). Since 2012, Mali has faced a myriad of political, social and security challenges. Several islamist groups have caused widespread instability in vast regions of Mali, while lack of government presence in northern Mali has led to an aggregation of existing ethnic, religious, and historical conflicts (Balduino and Dially, 2020; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2021). In 2020 and 2021 Malian military organized coups, leading to the current transitional government in power (United Nations, 2023). Despite efforts by the transitional government, the security situation in the north and center of the country remains volatile, with regular attacks by armed groups against military and civilian targets (United Nations, 2023). Women are disproportionately affected by conflict situations while also being systematically underrepresented in decision making processes (UN Women, 2023). In this uncertain security and political situation, women's political participation is thus even more important but increasingly difficult (UN Women, 2023).

The legal framework in Mali guarantees gender equality and recognizes women's rights to participate in political life. The Constitution of Mali, adopted in 1992, enshrines gender equality and prohibits discrimination based on sex (NDI, 2016). Mali has also ratified international human rights instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Wing, 2002). In 2015, the Malian national assembly adopted a gender quota bill, which requires that at least 30% of the elected or appointed officials are women (NDI, 2016). Despite this, women's representation has failed to reach this standard ever since (NDI, 2016). The current transitional government for example is made up of 84% men, and has faced criticism for not meeting the 30% female quota (UN Women, 2023). In the face of rising insecurity, women's rights are increasingly being put under pressure by forms of fundamentalist Islam advocated for by extremist

Islamic armed groups (UN Women, 2023). In addition to barriers created by the current insecurity situation, women face discrimination and bias based on their gender, and they are often relegated to traditional gender roles which prohibits them from participating in public life, including politics (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022).

Women in Mali play a foundational role in political decision making, but because of cultural and social norms it is often unacknowledged (Wing, 2002). A saying in Mali goes ‘la nuit porte conseil’ (the night gives advice). The story behind this goes that when men need to make decisions in the public sphere, they take a night to sleep on it, and the right answer will ‘come to them’. In the privacy of their homes, women can then give advice to men on the right decision to make (Wing, 2002). This saying exemplifies that women hold an important role in political decision making, but it is not publicly acknowledged or accepted. Cultural and social norms that place women firmly in the private sphere continue to be a significant barrier to women’s formal political participation (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Women who do participate in politics often face harassment, intimidation, and violence, both physical and verbal (Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015). In the face of this, the digital public sphere has emerged as an alternative and complement to the physical public sphere (Diouf, 2021). In a context where the physical public space is difficult for women to participate in, the digital public sphere could offer a space for increased women’s participation.

### **3. Literature Review: women’s political participation and social media**

Most literature on social media and political participation has focused on the western world, with studies mainly on online political participation in Europe or the United States (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux and Zheng, 2014; Galpin, 2022). When looking at specific movements, mainly western movements such as the far right movement in Europe and the US, and movements such as Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter have been of particular interest (Vasi and Suh, 2016; Caren, Andrews and Lu, 2020). When looking at political participation on social media in Africa, most studies focus on Northern Africa through movements such as the Arab spring (Chatora, 2012; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Gheyntanchi and Moghadam, 2014; Skalli, 2014). Countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana and Kenya are other focuses of social media and political participation research in Africa (Chuku, 2009; Agbalajobi, 2010; Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021; Chiluwa, 2022; Kipkoech, 2022). Kipkoech for example looks at the connection between the internet, social media use and political participation, finding that there is no statistical correlation when confounding variables are accounted for (Kipkoech, 2022). This research gives a valuable statistical take but does not look deeply into contextual reasons for this correlation, or the power relations that could have caused this. I argue that a deep contextual understanding of power relations active on social media is important to fully being able to understand its effect on political participation, especially for

traditionally understudied groups such as women or minorities. Dwyder and Molony further give a good overview of how youth in different African countries are increasingly making use of digital technologies for their political participation, and governmental responses to this, but does not focus extensively on gender, nor on Mali (Dwyer and Molony, 2019). There are very few studies done specifically on Mali. In this section I will briefly outline existing research on the role of social media in political participation, first looking at literature on social media and political participation, and then focusing specifically on Mali.

There are many studies done on the dangers of political participation online. Enduring problems of online hate speech and harassment can marginalize groups and cause off-line violence, leading to more difficulty of political participation in the online digital sphere (Proctor, 2021). Furthermore, authors warn for online ‘echo chambers’ where users’ preexisting beliefs are reinforced, and ‘accidental’ encounters that promote diversity of opinion in a public sphere are minimized (Kanai and McGrane, 2021, 60). Despite this, there are also opportunities created by social media for political participation of women. The expanded form of political participation created by the use of online technologies has raised hopes for more inclusive participation of politically under-represented demographics (Correa and Jeong, 2011; Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021). The digital public sphere allows women and minorities to overcome barriers to political participation that they may face in the physical sphere, gives access to a wider range of information and creates new channels of communication for women to express themselves. (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux and Zheng, 2014; Kim and Lim, 2020; Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021; Galpin, 2022; Kipkoech, 2022; Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). These three main effects will be examined below.

Firstly, digital technologies can help women **overcome barriers to political participation** that may be faced in the physical public sphere (Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015; Kanai and McGrane, 2021). Especially barriers such as freedom of movement, costs that arise from offline political participation or cultural barriers associated with participation in the public sphere (Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015; Caren, Andrews and Lu, 2020; Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Marginalizing factors such as gender, disability or socioeconomic status that may create barriers in the physical sphere can be more easily hidden, allowing for a potential of broader expression and political participation (Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021; Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022).

Secondly, social media gives women access **to a wider range of information** (Tripp, 2001; Chuku, 2009; Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Access to this increased information helps women and minorities in building self-confidence for public participation and awareness of their power to participate in the public sphere (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux and Zheng, 2014; Bunse, 2021; Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). On the other hand, successfully negotiating the sheer volume of



information on the internet requires digital literacy skills that most people don't have, leading to belief in and propagation of fake news (Papacharissi, 2002; Chuku, 2009). Proctor further finds that the information reach from social media is not restricted to social media users online, but that online narratives rather 'spill over' onto populations without access to the digital sphere (Proctor, 2021). This shows the importance of considering the impact of social media even for areas or individuals who are not online (Chuku, 2009; Chilwa, 2022).

Finally, the digital public sphere allows for unprecedented **degrees of connectivity** and communication (Gheytauchi and Moghadam, 2014; Dwyer and Molony, 2019). Particularly in repressive regimes, such as that in Mali, social media can facilitate social connectivity, especially to marginalized groups that are traditionally left out of structured social and political movements (Maireder, Ausserhofer and Kittenberger, 2012; Dwyer and Molony, 2019).

Overall, the digital public sphere could be an alternative avenue of political participation for those who face barriers in the physical public sphere (Tripp, 2001; Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021). In addition to this, the internet opens new channels of communication for women to build networks and knowledge necessary for political participation in the public sphere and can have impacts for those not online as well (Chilwa, 2022).

There is a limited number of academic sources that can corroborate if the above findings are also applicable in a Malian context. Most sources on women's political participation online in Mali are written by research institutes or NGOs such as 'Centre Bulletin FrancoPaix' the ICCT or Center for Democracy and Development. Despite inequalities in access to technology, the number of Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter users in the Sahel has been steadily increasing since 2010 (Bako, 2022; Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Oral traditions of passing news via word of mouth or at 'grins' (little tea bars), are being reproduced on digital platforms through WhatsApp groups, audio messages and Facebook pages (Bako, 2022). In January 2023 34.5% of the population used the internet (Kemp, 2023). 77% of internet users use mobile phones and of all digital technologies, social media are increasingly used as a method of accessing news, political discussion and mobilizing (Diouf, 2021; Bako, 2022; Kemp, 2023; StatCounter, 2023). Within this however where according to Facebook's ad reach, 74.6% of users in Mali are male and 25.4% are female (*Digital 2022: Mali*, 2022).

Most recently, some research has been done on the role of social media in the lead up to the 2012, and 2021 coups in Mali. Whitehouse finds that activists used social media to reach news audiences and create wide engagement with political protests around the 2012 coup (Whitehouse, 2017). Social media was also used to circumvent restrictions on group formations and public meetings imposed by the state during protests (Whitehouse, 2017). Again however, this research does not make specific distinctions between who is able to use the social media channels. Beyond research on social media

activism surrounding the coups, research on the use of social media for political participation in Mali mainly focuses on the dangers of social media for hate speech and fake news. According to the ICCT, youth in Mali consider traditional media to be only slightly more trustworthy than social media (Vermeersch *et al.*, 2020). Four of the five top Malian newspapers are privately owned by politicians, who often sponsor narratives for their own ends (Ouedraogo, 2022). The lack of credibility of traditional news sources has thus increasingly stimulated the use of social media for news and information sharing (Bako, 2022; Ouedraogo, 2022). Studies also focus on the dangers of state censorship of the internet, where in August of 2016, both Twitter and Facebook access was restricted in Mali for the first time following demonstrations, and in the lead up to the elections in July 2018, Facebook and Twitter were similarly blocked (Vermeersch *et al.*, 2020; Bako, 2022). Most recently, reports have focused on the use of social media by armed forces for recruitment and spreading of information (Vermeersch *et al.*, 2020). Research on social media and political participation in Mali thus primarily focusses on the dangers of social media through the proliferation of fake news, and little research has been done on the wider power relations of the platform and its role for political participation of women. It is thus pertinent to examine potential opportunities social media can have for women's political participation on social media. To do this, it is important to understand women's access to and experiences of political participation online. I will dive into this niche and use an intersectional frame to unpack power relations experienced by women on the digital public sphere, as well as properties of the digital public sphere they have used to enhance their political participation. In the following section I will outline the theoretical concepts of Habermas' public sphere, and intersectionality that I will use in this thesis.

## **4. Theoretical framework**

### **4.1. Political Participation on the Digital Public Sphere**

Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory has been influential in the field of political participation (Papacharissi, 2002; Schäfer, 2015; Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Sampedro and Avidad, 2018; Angelis, 2021; Galpin, 2022). Habermas assumes that human actors have the potential for collective emancipation in a **rational** and **just** society through their social interaction (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). Some authors argue that it is because of this broad claim that theorists rely on Habermas so much, using Habermas as a base to further uncover this rational potential of social interaction (Angelis, 2021). I use this assumption as a starting point of critique by showing the application of Habermas when the unjust power relations of society are uncovered. In addition to this, Habermas' public sphere theory gives a useful framework for political participation that fits well with the communicative emphasis of political participation that I am focusing on (Kim and Lim, 2020). Given that Habermas' theory is one of the main ones used within political participation scholarship, this allows me to build on the work of other scholars. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that

Habermas remains a western theorist whose theory insufficiently accounts for different gendered, racial or class power relations (Fraser, 1990; Galpin, 2022). As such, rather than supporting Habermas' theory, I am critically engaging with him, and other scholars that use Habermas. I will use feminism and particularly Nancy Frasers work, and Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to critique Habermas's public sphere. Through my critical engagement with Habermas' public sphere, I hope to further understandings of the applicability of the public sphere concept in contexts such as Mali when 'unjust' power relations in society are accounted for.

Habermas relies on a discursive theory of democracy, based on the idea that collective communicative practices form the basis of democracy. This presupposes that anyone can take part in discourse equally (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). Although there are many things necessary for democracy, such as freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, in this thesis I focus on the broader category of political participation as prerequisite for collective communication practices necessary for democracy. Political participation refers to actions by citizens that affect politics and give rise to a communication ecosystem that helps develop democratic values, systems and norms (Conge, 1988; Kim and Hoewe, 2020; Ruess *et al.*, 2021). Participatory political behavior thus does not directly need to lead to policy changes, but could merely influence the political climate (Kim and Hoewe, 2020)'. According to Habermas, this collective communication is essential for democracy to occur in the public sphere.

The public sphere is a concept that is constantly developing, and refers to a domain where public opinion can be formed (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as a **singular space** to which everyone has **open access** for **equal participation in public debate** (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). As such, it is a communication space that mediates interests between state and society and is open to all citizens to express themselves freely (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974; Mwingenmeir, 2014). According to Habermas, this public sphere is essential to political participation and thus democracy. Fraser similarly agrees with this, arguing that "something like Habermas' idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice" (Fraser, 1990, 57). For political participation to occur successfully, this sphere thus needs to be present and accessible for everyone (Sampedro and Avidad, 2018). With the rise of the internet and digital technologies, the concept of a 'digital public sphere' has emerged. There are many different definitions of the 'virtual', 'online' or 'digital' public sphere. In this thesis I look at it as an online communication sphere that is based on the necessities of the public sphere such as being open for free participation to anyone to discuss matters of common concern (Schäfer, 2015). I will look specifically at social media within this, where social media are platforms on the digital public sphere such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok or Telegram that allow for this communication to occur (Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015).

Habermas' theory of the public sphere underlines the importance of political participation and its communicative dimension as the main expression of democracy. The rise of the internet has vastly widened our communication opportunities and given rise to new forms of political participation (Sampedro and Avidad, 2018). Kim and Hoewe show that the internet has expanded the scope of political participation to include social media engagement (Kim and Hoewe, 2020). In a study of 289 English language peer-reviewed studies on definitions and measurements of online political participation, Ruess et al. find that political participation on social media such as expressive participation or online discussions are increasingly being used (Kim and Hoewe, 2020; Ruess *et al.*, 2021). In sum, digital technologies have changed the way that political participation is done. Online political participation is shaped by the platforms on which it takes place (Ruess *et al.*, 2021). The communicative characteristics of social media have stimulated communicative political participation. Within this thesis I will focus on expressive participation and discussion on social media as main categories of political participation on the digital public sphere (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Ruess *et al.*, 2021).

## **4.2. Feminist Critiques of Political Participation in the Digital Public Sphere**

Habermas conceptualization of the public sphere is based on four main assumptions, namely that it is a space to which everyone has 1.**open access** for 2.**equal participation** in 3.**public debate** on a 4.**singular space** (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). Feminist critiques of Habermas' public sphere, however, questions these four assumptions and the democratic promise they create, showing that gendered power relations hinder open and equal participation on the digital public sphere (Fraser, 1990). I will look at feminist critiques of these four assumptions of the digital public sphere to be able to unpack the power relations experienced by women on the digital public sphere in Mali, as well as identify ways that women have harnessed the properties of the digital public sphere to enhance political participation.

### **4.2.1. Open access ?**

One facet of Habermas' public sphere is that it is **equally open** and accessible to all (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). Habermas argues that open access to the public sphere can be ensured if everyone comes together as equals and differences in status are disregarded (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). Fraser calls this into question and argues that women are often excluded from Habermas' public sphere on the basis of their gender (Fraser, 1990). The digital gender gap for example shows that women structurally have less access to the internet (OECD, 2018). Social, economic, and cultural barriers further limit women's access to technology, thus limiting their access

to the digital public sphere (Chiluwa, 2022). While this creates difficulties, it also means that different types of social media pose different opportunities of access (Ruess *et al.*, 2021). As digital technologies become more embedded in our lives, there is increasing diversification in access (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). For example, the increasing ability and widespread nature of mobile devices to access social media provides the opportunity for wider and more diverse access (Locke, Lawthom and Lyons, 2018). Chiluwa demonstrates that women use the advantages of different platforms depending on campaign objectives and targeted audience (Chiluwa, 2022). Engels and Muller also show that certain methods of political participation require certain structural conditions to enable access (Engels and Müller, 2019). This could be material resources of knowledge of languages or procedures, but could also be resources such as creativity, time, or a strong movement identity in how platforms are accessed and utilized (Engels and Müller, 2019). In the analysis I will look at how women in Mali harness the digital properties of the digital public sphere to ensure political participation despite unequal power dynamics in access to the digital public sphere.

#### **4.2.2. Equal participation?**

Habermas' second assumption is that everyone should be able to **participate equally** in the public sphere. Papacharissi applies this to the digital public sphere, arguing that while the digital space may provide a place for political participation, this does not instantaneously guarantee a "fair, representative and egalitarian public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2002, 14). Language used online and harassment experienced on the digital public sphere create unequal opportunities for participation. These will each be briefly considered below, and further analyzed in the analysis.

Firstly, Fraser finds that aspects such as the language used by people in discussions on the public sphere serve to silence some and encourage others (Fraser, 1990). Women in the public sphere are "silenced, encouraged to keep their wants incoherent, and encouraged to say 'yes' when what they have said is 'no'" (Fraser, 1990, 64). This creates inherent inequality of participation. Gheyntanhi and Moghadam on the other hand find that the unprecedented degrees of connectivity and mobilization on the digital public sphere has contributed to the 'feminization of the public sphere' (Gheyntanhi and Moghadam, 2014, 48). Maireder and Ausserhofer further underline the social side of social media, showing that by facilitating social connectivity, especially to marginalized groups that are traditionally left out of structured social and political movements, social media has the potential to change the structure of political discourse and broaden public debate (Maireder, Ausserhofer and Kittenberger, 2012). Properties of the digital public sphere such as its wide reach thus could allow for some of the barriers such as language to be circumvented.

Secondly, women online face high levels of online hate speech and abuse, sometimes even leading to offline violence (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Female politicians face more personal attacks than male politicians, and women are more often vilified in online political discussions (Galpin, 2022). Because of this, women are more fearful to participate politically online, creating inherent inequality on the digital public sphere. Other authors have identified properties of the digital public sphere that could help deal with these (Galpin, 2022). Papacharissi for example looks at how the online space can help overcome identity boundaries, thus allowing for a more equal exchange online (Papacharissi, 2002).

Because of unequal power relations, Bennett and Pfetsch argue that the digital public sphere is increasingly out of touch with Habermas' ideal of an equal and inclusive public sphere (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). Properties of the digital public sphere can play a role in overcoming these inequalities, and will be further examined in the analysis.

### **4.2.3. Public debate?**

Another component of Habermas' public sphere states that the public sphere is for discussion of "**public matters**", which he defines as "matters of the common good", and "shared interest" (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974, 102). "Private" matters should not be discussed in the public sphere, which raises the question, what is public and what is private? Habermas' theory of the public sphere is based on a separation between the 'public' sphere of work and politics (traditionally occupied by men) and the 'private' sphere of family (traditionally the domain of women) (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974; Galpin, 2022). Feminist scholarship have argued that this approach excludes contributions of women and marginalized groups, and have thus argued for a broadened view of political participation (Abrahams, 1992; Staeheli and Cope, 1994; Staeheli and Clarke, 2003; Martin, Hanson and Fontaine, 2007).

The properties of digital technologies have blurred this line between public and private on the online digital sphere. For example the huge reach and impact of #MeToo showed that experiences that may seem individual are often structural issues (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Social media allow for an immense geographical reach and through this online reach, discussions on social media normalize traditionally private topics as part of the public sphere (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Another property of the digital public sphere that creates opportunities for women's political participation is anonymity available online. The anonymity possible on the digital online space allowed users to reinvent the way they choose to present themselves, thus allowing for easier discussions on private topics and a blurring of the line between public and private (Papacharissi, 2002).

#### 4.2.4. Singular public sphere?

Finally, Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as a **singular space** to which everyone has open access. He sees the public sphere as a positive and essential component of the public sphere. The emergence of an additional public sphere is for him a sign of dangerous fragmentation of society (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). Feminist critique of Habermas questions this, arguing that in an unequal society, multiple public spheres enhance political participation and democracy more than Habermas' single public sphere (Fraser, 1990). Fraser argues that subordinate (women's) groups, will be silenced in a single public sphere by dominant groups (Fraser, 1990). Multiple parallel public spheres, that are made possible by the properties of digital platforms, are therefore more beneficial for wider political participation and democracy (Fraser, 1990). Galpin shows that digital properties on social media can provide bubbles where 'subaltern' voices can mobilize (Galpin, 2022). Kanai and McGrane similarly looks at 'feminist filter bubbles' within the digital public sphere that provide separate realms where sexist content is filtered out (Kanai and McGrane, 2021). They see these spaces as essential forms of protection for feminist debate that has become a "material necessity" for women's political participation online (Kanai and McGrane, 2021, 67). Habermas' 'singular space' is thus called into question when different power relations active on the public sphere are accounted for. Properties on the digital public sphere that can create multiple public spheres can help navigate different power relations and create opportunities for women's political participation.

In summary, feminist critiques have questioned different aspects of Habermas' public sphere, showing that he has insufficiently taken into account gendered power relations, and demonstrating ways women have come up with to overcome these barriers (Fraser, 1990; Papacharissi, 2002; Kanai and McGrane, 2021; Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Beyond gendered power relations however, there are many other intersecting power relations that dictate the digital public sphere (Galpin, 2022). Mali is an extremely diverse country ethnically, socially, religiously, and geographically (Vermeersch *et al.*, 2020). Looking at only gender as a basis for inequality will thus lead to an incomplete picture of reality. Therefore, I will build on these feminist critiques of Habermas' public sphere using the framework of intersectionality to interrogate the different power relations and digital properties that shape opportunities for women's political participation on the digital public sphere in Mali.

### **4.3. An intersectional feminist approach to political participation in the digital public sphere**

In Mali different contexts and factors such as language spoken, gender, area of residence or level of education underlie everyday interactions and opportunities for political participation in the digital public sphere. I will use Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to further unpack the different fluxes of power that shape women's experiences on the digital public sphere in Mali.

Intersectionality is rooted in black feminist and critical race theory, and was first used by Crenshaw to identify the marginalization of black women both within feminism and anti-racism movements (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality looks at how different social identities create different experiences, and thus require different understandings and approaches (Crenshaw, 1991; Brown *et al.*, 2017). It has been applied to social media activism to develop a deeper understanding of identities behind online mobilizations (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015; Brown *et al.*, 2017).

I will use intersectional feminism to further unpack the four assumptions of Habermas' public sphere (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). By applying an intersectional framework to political participation in the digital public sphere, I will develop a deeper understanding of power relations beyond only gender. Crenshaw identifies three forms of intersectionality, namely **structural**, **political**, and **representational**.

**Structural intersectionality** looks at the ways in which the structural barriers created by the location of women at the intersection of different identities makes their experiences and required interventions different (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw found that battered immigrant women in shelters in Los Angeles often faced structural barriers that limited the use they could make of the shelters unless specific efforts were made to overcome them. For example, immigrant women who did not yet have a legal status were scared to go to shelters for fear of deportation. They also often did not speak English, making them dependent on their (abusive) surroundings and limiting their access to the security providing shelters. Interventions by the shelter that did not take this into account, are thus less likely to meet the needs of women at the intersections of structural inequalities such as language, immigration status or socio-economic status (Crenshaw, 1991).

**Political intersectionality** looks at how different political agendas, such as the anti-racism and feminist politics paradoxically further marginalize women at the intersection of those identities (Brown *et al.*, 2017). Crenshaw finds that the political interests of women of color in the US are obscured by political strategies that ignore intersectional issues (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, feminist activists wanted to release statistics of domestic abuse within a minority community. From an anti-racism agenda, the representatives from the minority community fought against this because they were worried that the data on domestic abuse would be used to reinforce stereotypes of minority



communities as unusually violent and justify oppressive police tactics (Crenshaw, 1991). The political aims of the feminist agenda thus ignored the impact of racism, while the political aims of the anti-racism groups ignored the aims of the feminist agenda. Women of color, due to their dual identity as black and female are thus silenced at the intersection of conflicting political agendas (Crenshaw, 1991). This is also reflected in punishments for rape dispositions, where in Dallas for example, the average prison term for a man convicted of raping a black woman was two years, as compared to five years for the rape of a Latina woman, and ten for the rape of a white woman (Crenshaw, 1991). The anti-racism agenda within rape focuses on fighting racism against the black male perpetrator, while the feminist agenda tends to focus on the white female victims, leaving black women at the intersection of these identities excluded (Crenshaw, 1991).

Finally, **representational intersectionality** looks at the cultural construction of women through dominant narratives. Crenshaw shows how representations that may be harmful for certain identities are sometimes defended on the basis of the wider culture (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, black rappers being charged under a Florida obscenity statute for their rap lyrics objectifying black women claimed the rap was a postmodern challenge to racist sexual mythology of black people (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw argues that this defense expects black women to accept the misogyny in service of the broader agenda of anti-racism or maintaining the culture (Crenshaw, 1991).

All three of these forms of intersectionality will help unpack how power relations shape opportunities for women's political participation the digital public sphere in Mali. Although initially focusing on intersections of race and gender, intersectionality can be applied to a range of different identities (Galpin, 2022). In this thesis I will go beyond just race and gender and look at the power dynamics created by intersecting categories of gender, level of education, area of residence and religion in Mali. Although there are many other identities that create inequalities, these identities are the most pertinent in Mali (Whitehouse, 2017; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2021; UN Women, 2023).

#### **4.4. Bringing all the pieces together: the framework**

This thesis will examine women's political participation through online discussion and expressive participation on the digital public sphere in Mali. The digital public sphere is the latest conceptualization of the age old concept of the 'public sphere' (Schäfer, 2015). Feminists have questioned the extent to which the public space imagined by Habermas should be **singular**, is actually **open for everyone** for **equal participation** and what **public debate** can take place on it. Using an intersectional lens, I will further interrogate these assumptions to answer my research question:

*RQ 1: How do intersectional power relations shape opportunities for political participation in Mali's?*

*RQ 2: How do women harness the properties of the digital public sphere to enhance political participation?*

I will structure my analysis according to Habermas' four aspects of the public sphere. For each facet of Habermas' public sphere, I will look at how feminist critiques and intersectional power relations shape opportunities for political participation. I will first look at the different power relations created within each facet of Habermas' public sphere, before turning to how women harness the properties of the digital public sphere to enhance political participation within the identified power relations. To establish the power relations active in the digital public sphere, of Crenshaw's three types of intersectionality, I will focus on the main intersectional power relations in each facet, and the main properties used to enhance political participation.

## **5. Methodology:**

### **5.1. Research Design**

This research uses a qualitative abductive approach. Abduction has been explained as a "combination of inductive and deductive thinking with logical underpinnings" (Patton, 2002). I wanted my research to reflect the direction of research that the interviewees found most pertinent, while still maintaining some theoretical integrity (Creswell and Poth, 2018). I tried to maintain design flexibility throughout to ensure the open-ended nature of naturalistic inquiry (Patton, 2002). I used a case study design, using women's political participation on social media in Mali as my specific case. Through using a case study, I was able to gather a much deeper understanding of women's use of social media that can then be used to better understand broader issues (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Qualitative data was gathered from semi-structured interviews. Interviews were used to gain a personal and context specific understanding of the use of social media for social and political change in Mali (Patton, 2002).

### **5.2. Interviews and data analysis**

My analysis process started during my data collection and continued throughout the writing of my thesis with continual revisits to my data (Patton, 2002). I started the research process with a broad research question on opportunities and challenges of women's political participation on social media

in Mali. I used an interview guide (see appendix 1) to have a thematic structure during the interviews, but aside from this left it up to the interviewees to decide the direction of the interview.

I recorded all of my interviews, as well as taking notes during the interview and writing up any additional observations after the interviews. I transcribed all the interviews manually and verbatim to capture the voice of the interviewee as much as possible. Throughout my interview period I also kept a running document with recurring themes from the interviews and specific topics of interest. I created a coding scheme based on my theoretical framework and coded my interviews using NVIVO (see appendix 3 for the coding scheme). Because of overlapping patterns and the intersectional framework woven throughout, many categories were double or even triple coded.

### **5.3. Setting and Target population**

This research was conducted in December 2022 and January 2023 in Bamako, Mali. In total I carried out 22 interviews, of which two group interviews. A list with descriptions of the interviewees can be found in appendix 2. My interviewees were a mix of key informants that were experts on the topic of political participation and social media, and active users of social media for political participation. My expert interviews included a mix of expertise based on research, or work in relevant sectors. I aimed to have a balanced representation of International NGO's and local organizations for a holistic overview. The general informant interviews were held with women involved with political participation on social media in Mali, including mainly female activists, or bloggers. Through a mix of experts and active users of social media for political participation in Mali I was able to get a more complete picture of political participation in Mali. I also tried to get a mix of different social media platforms used for political participation, age of the respondents, and area of residence.

Interviews were conducted in the offices or homes of the interviewees. Given the volatile security situation in Mali, I was not allowed to travel outside of Bamako. To ensure perspectives from the rest of the country, I interviewed women who were from, or had lived in regions outside of Bamako. In addition to this, 3 interviews were conducted by phone with participants in other regions of the country. I noticed that towards the end I started getting back the same answers from participants, leading me to believe that data saturation was reached.

The interviews were conducted in French by me and took around an hour each. Before starting the interviews, I asked a friend from Mali to read the interview guide for cultural awareness and potential topics missed. Following every interview, I asked the participants for feedback and made small adjustments to the interview guide throughout.

## 5.4. Sampling method

I used purposive and snowball sampling methods to gather my interview and survey participants. Purposive sampling was used to make sure that the selected interviewees could provide in depth information to the research question (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling was used to gain access to research participants that were otherwise hard to identify, or get access to, such as activists, as well as get a more personalized account of women's political participation on social media (Creswell and Poth, 2018). All research participants had access to social media. Although my participants who did have access to social media were asked what barriers women who don't have access experience, I still acknowledge the focus only on this specific group as a limitation to this study. I asked all research participants both of my research questions to try and gain as wide a perspective as possible.

Through mapping of Facebook groups and platforms used in Mali prior to the start of the research, I identified organizations, activists and bloggers that were politically active on social media. I conducted research both on social media to find influential accounts that were politically engaged online, as well as on organizations that worked with political participation in Mali. At the time of research, I was doing an internship at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, focusing on Dutch development initiatives on the topic of digitalization and democracy. Via this internship and my own research, I obtained a good overview of organizations working on these topics in Mali and was able to contact several of them to set up my first interviews. I also conducted three preliminary interviews about the use of social media for political participation. Two of these interviews were with digitalization experts at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although they were not specifically experts on Mali, they were able to tell me more broadly about social media and political participation. Another interview was done with a Malian researcher on political participation on social media in Mali. This interview helped map out potential interviewees. These interviews are not included in this research but informed the direction of my research and creation of the interview guide. Before reaching out to interviewees, I created a table with all relevant interviewees, trying to have a diverse reach of organizations, social media platforms, focus and region of Mali. I initially reached out to 21 different people, of which 10 accepted for an interview. These 10 formed my purposive sampling, where I then used the snowball sampling method to gather 12 more interviewees via them. I recognize the limitation of snowball sampling in that the interviewees are likely to be from the same bubble. I hope to mitigate this through the mix of purposive and snowball sampling.

## 5.5. Positionality and reflexivity

Underpinning feminist qualitative methods is the important debate of how and for whom knowledge is generated (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2012). Research is embedded in wider power structures, making it important to examine my positionality within this research (Ryen, 2011). Reflexivity is important to acknowledge how characteristics could have affected the research process (Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg, 2021). This is especially important in my study because I travelled to Mali to conduct my research in a context that is not my own. I thus wanted to be even more careful and aware of my positionality on my research and research participants. As a young, white, foreign (Dutch), student there are multiple impacts that I will reflect on.

Firstly, there has been a lot of critique of European researchers 'parachuting' into countries in the global south to conduct research. Critiques include that there is a limited contextual understanding and that this creates an exploitative relationship (Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg, 2021). I was aware of this when choosing to do my research in Mali and tried to mitigate this through sensitive and intersectional methodologies. I also lived in Mali for 6 years, and my family currently lives in Bamako and so I had some contextual understanding of the country and context. This connection was helpful with connecting with research participants. Because my family lives in Mali, it is also easier to maintain relations with interviewees and return to share results, ensuring they stay updated. I will make a French summary of my thesis and share it with my participants as soon as it is completed and will return in December 2023 to share my results in person with research participants.

Faria and Mollett show the impact of 'whiteness' in research. They show that whiteness can inspire awe and signify 'success, modernity and wealth' (Faria and Mollett, 2016, 80). This is an effect that is partially true in Mali in some contexts but was not as prominent because many of my research participants were older than me, well-educated and relatively wealthy. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that there was some effect, and this is important to bear in mind in the results of my thesis. With participants that were younger than myself, I made it even more explicitly clear that they were experts, and that I was interested to learn from them via my interviews. In addition to this, the fact that I am not a native French speaker sometimes inadvertently helped my positionality. At the start of every interview, I apologized for any errors I made in French, and I noticed that this also changed power relations in the interview situation and created more understanding. Given that almost all Malians are bilingual in one or more local languages and French, they understand what it is like to speak a language that is not your mother tongue.

Arda et al., also differentiate between being an 'insider' and an 'outsider' to my research participants (Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg, 2021). Each position has its benefits, and I noticed both during my research (Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg, 2021). For example, as a woman, I was seen as an 'insider'

on topics concerning women's rights. As a foreigner, I was seen as an 'outsider' on topics regarding culture. This may have meant that research participants did not want to share information on some topics. On the other hand, many interviewees also felt safer sharing critiques about their culture or country with me. As most participants also expected me to have a limited understanding of some contextual subjects, they also explained in more detail than they may have done with an 'insider'.

## **5.6. Ethical considerations**

Each participant of the research gave informed consent to the research. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of some of the interviews, all interviews are anonymous. I deleted the recordings as soon as they were transcribed and kept all documentation of interviews anonymized. When conducting my interviews, I made sure I was sensitive to potential emotional or psychological impact and did not ask invasive or distressing questions.

I used feminist and intersectional methodologies to ensure inclusive methods that are sensitive to the different fault lines, power relations and contexts active within my research field (England, 1994). To ensure inclusive methods I kept my research questions very open and flexible to changes suggested by participants. I tried to keep the 'researchers as supplicant' approach (England, 1994). By accepting that the knowledge of the interviewee is greater than your own, I tried to equalize potentially exploitative power relations by shifting the power to the researched. In depth interviews have also been considered a way to give marginalized voices an opportunity to share their opinions (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2012).

## **5.7. Limitations**

There are several potential limitations associated with this study. Firstly, due to the safety concerns, no regions of conflict outside of Bamako could be visited in person. Although all participants had expertise or experience in the conflict regions, having in person interviews in a wider range of regions may have resulted in a more in-depth and up to date view of the situation. By conducting phone interviews with participants from other regions I tried to gain a more nuanced view. I also only included participants that used social media in my study, meaning that I may have missed barriers to political participation online felt by those who do not use social media. While I did ask all participants about barriers that women that were not online felt, this could still lead to bias. Although I tried to have a diverse group of interviewees, many of my participants were middle or upper class in Mali. This creates a bias within my findings towards the perspectives of those groups.

Since I am not from Mali myself, I could also have a lack of cultural or contextual understanding in some cases. This report also tackles a nexus of complex and nuanced factors. The scope and length of the thesis means a vast amount of information could not be addressed. In my analysis I focus on main intersectional power relations I identified, as well as main properties of the digital public sphere that my interviewees used to overcome there. Power relations of the digital sphere and digital properties to deal with these are by no means limited to those found in this thesis. I also found that political participation by women in Mali was mainly around women's rights. This limits the applicability of my thesis to other contexts, as political participation by women around other topics could give very different power relations than those found in this thesis. Some of the topics that need further research will be further discussed in the conclusion.

## 6. Analysis and Results

Building on feminist critiques of Habermas' public sphere and using Crenshaws three forms of intersectionality, I will in this section examine how intersectional traits shape Malian women's **access** to and **equal participation** on the digital public sphere, the effect of a **singular public sphere** and the **public debate** on the digital public sphere. In each section I will also examine how properties of the digital public sphere shape opportunities for women's political participation in Mali.

All results in this section are based on the interviews conducted. Where a quote is referred to, an interview number is given, while other results are based on findings from multiple interviews. The women interviewed mainly focused on women's rights within their political participation. Therefore, my analysis will mainly focus on this topic.

### 6.1. Access to the digital public sphere

In this section, I will first outline feminist critiques on Habermas' public sphere regarding **access**, and the **structural** and **representational** intersectionality that create power relations on the digital public sphere, before turning to how properties of the digital public sphere shape opportunities for women's political participation.

Habermas' assumption that the public sphere is open for access to all is questioned by feminist authors like Fraser. They argue that women are often excluded from Habermas' public sphere through effects such as the digital gender gap (Fraser, 1990). I will first look at structural intersectionality,

where different class and socio-economic conditions compound difficulties women face accessing the public sphere.

Rural women due to generally lower socio-economic statuses face multiple **structural intersectional** barriers accessing the digital public sphere. Many respondents mentioned expensive internet, phone costs, lack of internet connection, and conflict situations as obstacles for especially rural women to access social media. Others mentioned that social media is nowadays accessible everywhere.

According to them rural women just “*are not interested in social media (interview 7)*”. Despite this perception, participants do mention that rural women often have less financial independence. Access to the internet is thus often decided by husbands or male family members. In general, families are more likely to buy a phone for their sons rather than their daughters. To ensure political participation of rural women, these specific overlapping identities need to be considered (Crenshaw, 1991).

Interviewees also reported **representational intersectionality** through cultural assumptions that social media platforms encourage promiscuity among women. Social media, and especially Facebook was by some respondents described as corrupting for women and distancing them from their culture. Dominant culture in Mali, represents women as the upholders of tradition and the private sphere. Access to outside information, and participation in the public sphere are not part of this traditional cultural role, according to participants. Especially in rural areas where few people use social media, interviewees explained that some men think that women only go on social media to meet other men, and that social media lead to divorce if women use it. Participants recount more judgement using social media if they are married. As one participant puts it:

*“Some women are limited in their use of social media. There are women who are not allowed to go on Facebook, for example, because their spouse does not want them to (Interview 4).”*

For younger, urban, participants this was less of an issue. Participants also recount that Muslim women face more judgement and repercussions online. As one participant puts it:

*“There are people who call your husband and say, ‘oh you let her use social media’? They say that you are a Muslim, you are the daughter of Muslims, and you allow yourself to talk on Facebook about issues like this?? They tell you that when are a Muslim, you must not do that. So as women we are confronted with this kind of problem (participant 9)”*

Representational effects such as cultural constructions of identity thus lead to unequal power relations faced by women on social media.

The digital gender divide, and further structural and representational intersectionality create inequality of access for rural, Islamic, or married women in particular. Interviewees however showed that there



were certain properties of the digital public sphere that helped women navigate these structural and representation inequalities and thus shaped opportunities for political participation on the digital public sphere.

As Locke et al. outlined, digital technologies have become more embedded in our everyday lives, creating a diversification of platforms and technologies that allows access for different groups of people (Locke, Lawthom and Lyons, 2018). Participants mention that different women have access to different social media platforms. More video and audio-based platforms such as TikTok for example allowed for access for political participation for illiterate women, where text-based ones did not. Engels and Muller find that resources such as creativity to mobilize a platform are an important resource to ensure access to political participation (Engels and Müller, 2019; Chilwa, 2022). My interviewees show this creativity by tailoring their political outreach specifically to the access that different women have to platforms. WhatsApp messages for example, cost less internet, allowing for easier use both by poorer women, and in rural areas with less dependable internet connections. The table below shows some of the aspects that affect the different platforms accessible for women’s political participation.

**Table 1: Properties of different social media used by women in Mali (based on interviews)<sup>1</sup>**

Type of platform	Main audience that benefits	Type of message	Benefits	Challenges
Facebook	More educated women, videos can also target illiterate	political and professional platform	Private and public groups, videos can reach illiterate, wide reach	Political content is mostly written
TikTok	Illiterate women	E-commerce, self-help, informational video’s	Low barrier of access, different languages, video content, wide reach	Demands lot of internet
WhatsApp	All, used to communicate to rural population	Personal, informative, discussion groups	Low internet cost, vocal messages, private groups	Limited reach due to private nature

<sup>1</sup> Facebook was the most widespread public platform used for political participation by women interviewed. WhatsApp is one of the most widespread social media. Because of WhatsApp’s vocal function, illiterate people can use it, and it demands little internet and was thus accessible even in rural areas. Vocal messages also allow women to spread messages more easily in Peuhl or Bambara for those that do not speak French. TikTok has a very low barrier of access because you can watch TikToks without having an account, and everything is via video, meaning you don’t have to be literate, or very digitally literate to use it.

Thus, the plurality of the digital public sphere, and possibilities of lower cost and internet options helped women to navigate the structural intersectional inequalities (Locke, Lawthom and Lyons, 2018; Engels and Müller, 2019; Chiluya, 2022).

Some women mentioned that the increased use of social media for E-commerce<sup>2</sup> is also helping women overcome representational cultural barriers and allows women to participate politically on social media more easily. This is another example of how women have creatively mobilized the digital properties of the digital public sphere to overcome access barriers and ensure political participation (Engels and Müller, 2019; Chiluya, 2022). Women mentioned that when family members see that social media can be used to make money, the perception of the social media changes. As one participant puts it:

*“We can say that being able to sell our things on social media has helped a lot with relations. Now men can say that instead of wasting our time on social media when we should be caring for the children, we are making an income. (Interview 14)”*

Once family members are fine with women using social media for economic activities, they are accepting of women using social media for political participation. Unfortunately, this avenue does not work for everyone. This is either because women are not always successful in making money online, or because family members are not swayed by the use of E-commerce. As one participant puts it *“if everyone sells things, then there is no one left to buy” (interview 16)*. Thus, although E-commerce can help overcome negative cultural stereotypes of social media for some women, it does not seem to be a sustainable option for all women.

Habermas’ public sphere should be equally open and accessible to all. The interviews however showed that women’s access to political participation on the online digital sphere in Mali is intertwined with different relations of power that create unequal access. Beyond just exclusion on the basis of gender, as feminist critiques like Fraser show, women in rural areas face structural and representational exclusion leading to physical and cultural marginalization within dominant society (Fraser, 1990). Other feminist theorists such as Chiluya, Locke et al., and Engels et al., find that properties of the digital public sphere can help women overcome barriers to access to political participation (Locke, Lawthom and Lyons, 2018; Engels and Müller, 2019; Chiluya, 2022). Within interviews I found that the plurality of the digital public sphere in allowing text and video-based media, and economic opportunities available on social media allow for a way to navigate structural

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<sup>2</sup> Participants recounted that social media such as WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook are increasingly used for business ends. Women were able to easily post pictures of merchandise and sell these via social media.

and representational intersectionality's and shape opportunities for women's political participation on the digital public sphere.

## 6.2. Equality of the digital public sphere

Beyond open access, Habermas finds equal participation a necessity of the public sphere. Feminist critiques of Habermas find that online harassment and the language used online create unequal power relations for women on the digital public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Papacharissi, 2002; Galpin, 2022). I build on this to further analyze how power relations created by **structural**, and **political** intersectional factors such as gender, area of residence and level of education, create inequality for political participation on the digital public sphere.

Firstly, **structural** intersectional factors such as gender create vast inequalities in expressive participation and online political discussions. Women recount extremely high rates of online harassment and violence when engaging in expressive participation such as posting content on women's rights. All women interviewed report being insulted and harassed online, especially when engaging in political discussion around women's rights. As one participant puts it: *"There are many people who insult you and it hurts (interview 8)"*

When asked about inequality in using social media, many participants didn't mention harassment online at first. However, when asked specifically about harassment online all participants had many examples of online harassment. This could show that either they do not experience this as an inequality or might not be aware of the inequality this causes.

In addition to this, structural intersectional factors such as levels of illiteracy are far higher in rural areas and among women and compound to create multiple layers of oppression for women at the intersection of these identities<sup>3</sup>. Most political discussions on the digital public sphere in Mali are written. Structural intersectional factors such as literacy rates, and capability of analyzing information critically make a huge difference to women's equal capacity to participate in online discussions. As one participant mentions:

*"The problem is the way of using social networks is lacking, because there are many uneducated women, and it is not easy to use Facebook when you are not educated. Because of this, most uneducated women make videos, and this gives them visibility where writing cannot (interview 5)"*

Tied to the literacy rate is the language spoken. The official language of Mali is French, and official political content is conveyed in French. On social media most political discussions are also conducted

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<sup>3</sup> Women in Mali above the age of 15 have a literacy rate of 20% compared to men's literacy of 40% in 2020 (*The World Bank*, 2022). Women's literacy rates in rural areas are even lower, especially in conflict areas in the North where many schools have been closed for the past two years (UN Women, 2023).

in French. Most people who have not been to school are less likely to speak French<sup>4</sup>. Participants mention that especially rural women don't engage in written political discussions, because of their lack of knowledge of French. This is a significant structural barrier for equal political participation. If these overlapping identities are not considered, then political participation will remain difficult for women at the intersect of structural barriers.

Fraser also notes that the language used on the public sphere often serves to 'silence some and encourage others' (Fraser, 1990). Using a **political** intersectional lens, language used on the digital public sphere in Mali thus reflects a political agenda that is decided for by literate people and often serves to silence illiterate women (Crenshaw, 1991). Interviews showed that educated, elite, urban women that are usually present in Malian politics pursue a conflicting political agenda to that of non-literate, rural women. Literate participants from Bamako were negative about the influence of video-based platforms than rural participants. As one put it:

*"Videos and video men<sup>5</sup> are what have brought us in all these troubles of fake news and polarization. The government should just ban it all, and we would all be a lot safer"* (participant 20)

They called for stricter policy or even banning of platforms that spread videos such as TikTok and cited that written news sources were more reliable. Despite sharing an identity as women, illiterate women are at the detriment of this political agenda, which would only create more inequality in access to political participation for them.

Despite difficulties in power relations, properties of the digital public sphere can also help women overcome these barriers (Maireder, Ausserhofer and Kittenberger, 2012; Gheyntanchi and Moghadam, 2014; Chiluwā, 2022).

For example, participants mention that the government and international organizations are increasingly aware of the plurality of the digital public sphere and how different social media must be used to reach different groups (Chiluwā, 2022). Most participants mentioned that political discussions are mainly conducted on Twitter, or Facebook, where the majority of the content is written. But there is an increasing trend of 'Video Men' in Mali, where livestreamed videos circulate political campaigns or opinion pieces specifically for illiterate citizens. The plurality of the public sphere and the possibility of video and audio allows political intersectionality to be taken into account more easily (Maireder, Ausserhofer and Kittenberger, 2012; Gheyntanchi and Moghadam, 2014).

Papacharissi suggested the online space can help overcome identity boundaries (Papacharissi, 2002). Participants mention that properties of social media that can alter your public identity as an important

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<sup>4</sup> Only 38% of Malian women complete primary school, and the dropout rate is over 50%, meaning that women are less likely to speak, and let alone read or write French (*The World Bank*, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Online commentators that film live accounts of themselves expressing on given issues.

opportunity for equal participation on the digital public sphere. For example, one participant who created a male Facebook profile for herself said:

*"My personal female account and my male account are two totally different experiences on Facebook. I was much more listened to as a man and my posts were shared a lot more under my male identity. I am, as a 'man', no longer sexually assaulted on Facebook whereas as a woman it happened to me all the time with nude pictures and constant sexual harassment" (interview 17).*

She noticed that as a male online she was able to participate in political discussions in a much more equal way than as a woman. The same counts for race. One participant mentioned that on her 'white' profile she was taken more seriously than on her real 'black' profile. She mentions that as a black person online:

*"As a black person, people are so much more condescending to you. In a discussion with white people, I am spoken to as if I am dumb. It is a great challenge to be taken seriously in my profile as a black woman " (interview 17)*

Social media allow participants to alter their identity, and to bypass the unequal power relations created by structural and representational intersectionality.

Whereas structural and political intersectionality create unequal power relations on the digital public sphere, properties such as different media formats and the ability to change identity online create also opportunities for women's political participation.

### **6.3. Public debate on the digital public sphere**

In this section, I will now turn to the **public debate** that takes place on Habermas' public sphere. I will first look at feminist critiques and power relations created by **representational** and **political** intersectionality, before turning to how properties of the digital public sphere shape opportunities for women's political participation within this.

Habermas' public sphere creates a distinction between private matters that shouldn't be discussed on the public sphere, and 'public matters' which are the topics of debate on the public sphere. Political participation on the public sphere should revolve around these public matters which Habermas defines as 'matters of the common good' (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). Feminist critiques of Habermas have argued that traditional conceptualizations of public and private matters have often sidelined women's rights and interests as 'private' and thus not part of the political arena (Fraser, 1990; Papacharissi, 2002; Sampedro and Avidad, 2018; Galpin, 2022). This dichotomy can be clearly seen in Mali, where advocacy for women's rights challenges intersectional cultural and social

representations that place women in the private sphere, and men in the public sphere. Both women's involvement in political participation, and their increased discussion of women's rights within the public sphere has shaken the male hegemony of the public sphere. The dichotomy between private and political sphere created by Habermas is thus central in the debate about Malian women's political participation on the digital public sphere and is reflected in responses from participants.

**Representational**, and **political** intersectionality can help unpack this debate.

Intersectional **representation** creates a dominant discourse in Mali that places women, and women's rights issues within the private sphere. Issues such as gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive rights, polygamy, or divorce are heavily polarized and seen as private issues to be discussed in the household only. Interviewees recount how they are reacted to negatively when engaging in political discussion about these issues. For example, one interviewee who has a channel posting informative TikTok videos about sexual health and abortion rights has been attacked multiple times, and no longer leaves the house without a face veil and sunglasses for fear of being recognized and attacked.

Repercussions come from both authorities as well as the community itself. This includes other women who accuse women who post content on these subjects as traitors to their culture. As Crenshaw shows through representational intersectionality, women are expected to stay silent about their rights and accept misogyny in the service of the broader agenda of maintaining culture or tradition.

This links to **political** intersectionality where women's rights have become linked with western values. People associate questions of gender and feminism with international organizations and westerners that have often pushed this agenda. More recently, Mali has had an increasing anti-French (western) sentiment, stemming from (amongst other reasons), anger against previous French colonizers, and the failure of western military operations to curb insecurity in Mali. This, however, has also affected cultural aspects, where people have started revolting against 'western' ideals such as gender equality. Women who post political content about women's right are called out for being 'against their country' or 'anti-nationalistic'. As one participant puts it:

*"People say that women's rights are brought by the whites, and when we talk about them, they say we must be working for the whites. But this is not true, women in Mali have always fought for themselves, back to the earliest days women have spoken up for our rights. But now if you're not careful they will say you are anti-revolution, they will ask you why you are destroying your traditions"* (Participant 20).

One participant, for example, was employed by UNDP to disseminate information about reproductive rights. She mentioned that she was very careful not to place the UNDP logo anywhere in her video, or mention that she was working for them as this would lead to negative repercussions. As another participant mentions:

*“We try to be very smart (about political participation on women’s rights online). Not to touch topics that can hurt us. There are a lot of extra checks that we do to remove words and phrases that can shock people. For example, when we say ‘women’s health’ instead of ‘women’s rights’ it changes the whole meaning. We try to change this word to make it less sensitive. There are also some subjects that we don’t touch (interview 8).”*

The issue of women’s rights is increasingly being used as a political representation of western neocolonialism and imposition in Mali. Looking at it through political intersectionality it can thus be seen that Malian women are caught between the feminist political agendas of the west, and the independence agenda of Mali. Malian women who are at the intersection of both of these identities are doubly disadvantaged. Participants mention that women in rural areas can face even more repercussions for posting content on women’s rights on the public sphere. Interviewee 8 who lives in Bamako but works for a women’s association with offices throughout the country recounted how they must be very careful what they post online, because their colleagues in rural areas could face repercussions not only from their community but also from armed groups and Malian soldiers. She recounted that they often pass articles via a lawyer before publishing it (Interview 8).

*“When we talk about changing the family laws for women, they don’t like it. Some topics like violence by soldiers against women we don’t touch. That we can’t talk about. Everybody has questions but nobody dares to write an article. (Interview 8).”*

Representational and political intersectionality thus create power relations that make women’s ‘private’ issues unwelcome on the digital public sphere. Aside from theorizing about power relations creating inequality, feminists have also found that women have harnessed properties such as the wide reach and anonymity of the digital public sphere to enhance political participation (Papacharissi, 2002; Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022). Participants in Mali similarly mentioned the importance of these properties in creating opportunities for women’s political participation within the representational and political intersectional power relations.

Because of the wide reach of social media, a single video can reach many people and have an enduring impact. Because of this, traditionally private topics such as women’s rights can slowly become normalized to be discussed in the public sphere (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022).

As one participant put it:

*“Currently, people are more and more aware of certain subjects such as violence against women, divorce, excision and femicide. Debates are taking place on these subjects which are no longer taboo. There is an awakening of consciousness that is happening little by little (Interview 7).”*

Another respondent said that the digital public sphere offered a platform to widely engage with issues that Malian politicians did not prioritize (interviewee 18). When asked about the effect of the wider

proliferation of women's political participation via the digital public sphere, interviewee 20 responded:

*“Yes, it, has an effect on women's empowerment. Because through social networks we see women in other regions or internationally, fighting, struggling for the empowerment of women, and this gives us hope. Social media also helps us to find each other, and it allows us to gain the courage and to say that we can do like those other women participating online. We know that we are not alone, and this is very important (interview 20).”*

*“Social media helps to mobilize women, especially at our level here. It helps them to open their eyes, to know that what we suffer here, many women in the other region also suffer. (Interview 20) »*

Social media's wide reach thus allows for a normalization of traditionally private topics in the public sphere, and learning from other women internationally and trans-nationally (Salzinger, Ronceray and Shiferaw, 2022).

Social media's possibility of anonymity further blurs this line between private and public established by Habermas, and allows for an opportunity to navigate the intersectional representational and political power relations active on the digital public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). Participants recount feeling far more confident posting political content, especially on sensitive topics such as women's rights, when under an anonymous profile or fake name. Online anonymity also gave many participants greater confidence to ask questions and discuss traditional taboo topics like divorce, polygamy, abortion, or homosexuality in the public sphere. Anonymity thus allows women to defeat some of the intersectional identities that create inequalities in discussion topics that are deemed 'public'.

#### **6.4. Singularity of the digital public sphere:**

Habermas conceptualized the digital public sphere as a singular sphere where all citizens would gather in the **same space** to discuss matters of common interest (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974). In this thesis, the 'singular public sphere' refers to all openly accessible and public social media spaces, such as public Facebook posts, statuses or videos that are open for everyone to see and comment on. Closed WhatsApp or Facebook groups, or private messages are thus not part of the singular public space. Feminist critiques argue that if equal participation is not guaranteed, then a singular public sphere will only be detrimental to political participation and thus the democratic potential of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Galpin, 2022). In this section I will first look at the power relations that women face on Habermas' singular public sphere through **representational** and



**political** intersectionality, before turning to the use of multiple public spheres as a property created by the digital public sphere to enhance political participation.

Participants overwhelmingly mentioned that they did not feel safe in the singular digital public sphere. Almost all report having a lot of negative repercussions from content they publish on political topics such as women's rights. I will unpack this first through representational and then political intersectionality.

**Representational** intersectionality looks at the cultural construction of women through dominant narratives. Women in Mali traditionally are supposed not to speak out in the public space. According to participants this is even more the case for certain ethnicities and religions, where women are even more expected to stay silent in the public sphere. Films and stories in Mali often represent women's place as one in the household. Interviewees that worked for organizations trying to stimulate political participation of women recount that it is very difficult to get women to participate in political debates on public platforms. In order to change this, they use video's that show women speaking out in public and participating in political debate. As one participant puts it:

*“Women are not used to sharing their opinion with everyone like that. They are often afraid to speak up, and will say that the world of politics is for men. But when they see a video on women participating politically, they can be encouraged. (interview 2)”*

By seeing other women discussing political issues in the public sphere, women feel empowered that they can also make a change with their political participation.

*“Social media allows us to have visibility, it allows us to put the light on women activists to serve as proof to the authorities that there is really a commitment and that women really have something important to say about politics. (Interviewee 8) »*

It is important to participate as a woman in a singular digital public sphere where men are also present in order to change cultural conceptions and representations of women. She mentions that expressive participation on the digital public sphere can have a big impact:

*“We can see that the more we dare to say things publicly, things are changing. Attitudes are changing and men can start to respect you more. And it is good that it is changing because we (women) are the majority, and we will be left out if we don't decide to take a public stand and be a part of that change. I follow a lot of women who campaign on social media. I see that working together will make a big impact, and I see that being an example for women can make a big impact (interview 5).”*

Counter representations of women engaging in political discussions online can change the traditional image of women as relegated to the private sphere. Unfortunately, the current insecurity in Mali

complicates this. I will analyze the participation of women on a singular public sphere in Mali in the context of insecurity through a **political** intersectionality lens.

Political topics such as women's rights are becoming increasingly sensitive due to the proliferation of fundamentalist Islam by certain armed groups. As participants recount, armed groups are increasingly attacking, kidnapping, or even killing people due to posts on social media. Political intersectionality focuses on the needs and goals of an individual's identified group (Shields, 2008). Political intersectionality can lead to different responses of different groups to the danger of political participation. Participants mention that especially in rural areas there is increasing advocacy for women to stop participating in discussions on women's rights for their own safety. Women in Bamako, who face less immediate danger from armed groups or military, however, still emphasize the importance of advocating publicly for women's rights on the singular public sphere. This creates a tension. On the one hand, less political participation on women's rights online may keep rural women safe from danger of armed groups, but also silences expressions and discussions of their rights. On the other hand, urban women in Bamako continuing advocating for women's rights can benefit the rights of rural women but could lead to dangerous repercussions. The interest of women at the intersect of both rural and female identities is thus silenced by the political agendas from either side.

Feminist critiques of the digital public sphere show that unequal power relations can impact the usefulness of the singular public sphere suggested by Habermas. Representational and political intersectionality show that women's different identities compound into different power relations and degree to which they can participate on the singular digital public sphere. I will now look at how certain properties of the digital public sphere interplay with these power relations and shape opportunities for women's political participation. As mentioned by Fraser and Galpin, when equal participation on the singular public sphere is not possible, multiple public spheres can create a way for safer and more equal political participation of women (Fraser, 1990; Galpin, 2022). The interviews showed that closed groups on social media are an important way for women to continue participating politically on the digital public sphere.

Participants mention that online women only groups were extremely important because women feel much safer to express themselves in closed groups, rather than on the singular public sphere. Closed Facebook and WhatsApp groups allow them to discuss topics more equally and safely (Kanai and McGrane, 2021). Other participants mentioned feeling safer to discuss political topics in groups with women only from the same religion, village, or ethnicity. Kanai and McGrane's theorized 'feminist filter bubbles', where sexist content is filtered out, creating a safer space for women to engage politically, can thus also be applied to other identities (Kanai and McGrane, 2021). Participants reported that engagement from women on political topics during discussion was far lower in a mixed group with men or in on a public platform than in closed private groups. Intersectional identities such

as gender or religion thus impact the usefulness of a singular public sphere for political participation. As one participant puts it:

*“Before social networks, women would suffer violence from their husbands and in-laws without talking about it, but more and more today, they can talk about these topics in these closed women's groups. Here they dare to express themselves and ask questions about whether this abuse normal. (Interview 13).”*

Contrastingly, some participants also mentioned that they thought closed groups restricted the impact that they could have on political changes. They preferred using the singular public sphere to ensure that they could reach a wider audience.

*“It is often having the courage to say something in the first place. Once one person says something it makes other people dare to say things about taboo subjects. It's not easy to talk to some people, but you need to have the courage to do it anyway” (interview 8).”*

Women at the intersection of identities, such as rural women, are doubly disadvantaged and caught between different political agendas. Similar to Fraser's critique (1990), many participants recount that having multiple and preferably closed spheres of communication for political participation is more useful.

## **7. Summary of results**

Digital technologies have irrevocably changed political and democratic processes. Mali is no exception in this. Political conversations, campaigns and activism have increasingly moved online. Through its wide reach and possibilities of anonymity online, the internet can have a democratizing impact by giving access to marginalized groups that face barriers to political participation in the physical sphere. To ensure inclusive political participation however, it is important to be aware of the underlying power relations active on the digital public sphere that create differing access and experiences for different groups. Beyond this, the digital public sphere is a space full of potential, and it is important to look not just at challenges women face on it, but also how they have harnessed properties of the space to enhance their political participation. I used Habermas' concept of the public sphere and Crenshaws theory of intersectionality to answer my first question and identify: *How do intersectional power relations shape opportunities for political participation in Mali?* Building on this analysis I then answered my second question and looked at *how do women harness the properties of the digital public sphere to enhance political participation?*

I used Habermas’ public sphere as a framework to conceptualize political participation. Habermas conceptualized the ‘public sphere’ as a necessity for democracy, defining it as a singular space to which everyone has open access for equal participation in public debate. The digital public sphere incorporates these aspects within a digital realm. Habermas relies on a discursive theory of democracy that underlines collective communicative practices as political participation necessary for democracy. Within the context of the digital public sphere, I focused on online discussion and expressive participation as political participation. Building on feminist critiques and using Crenshaw’s **representational, structural, and political** intersectionality, I further interrogated feminist critiques of Habermas’ assumptions that the public sphere is a **singular space** to which everyone has **open access for equal participation in public debate**. In each aspect I identified the main effects from either representational, structural or political intersectionality that most came forward in the interviews. Although further research could show different effects, within my research I can conclude that these were the most important intersectional power relations. The table below summarizes my main findings.

Table 2: Summary of results

<b>Facets of Habermas’ Public Sphere</b>	<b>Feminist critique of Habermas’ public sphere</b>	<b>Crenshaw’s Intersectional power relations</b>	<b>Properties that enhance political participation</b>
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Digital gender divide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structural</li> <li>Representational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plurality of different platforms</li> <li>E-commerce</li> </ul>
Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exclusive Language</li> <li>Online harassment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political</li> <li>Representational</li> <li>Structural</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Different media formats</li> <li>Ability to change identity</li> </ul>
Public debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public vs. private topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Representational</li> <li>Political</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wide reach</li> <li>Anonymity</li> </ul>
Singularity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple parallel public spheres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political</li> <li>Representational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Closed groups</li> </ul>

Based on 22 interviews in Mali, I found that that intersectional traits create unequal power relations on the digital public sphere, leading to unequal access to and political participation on the digital public sphere. My interviews showed that structural intersectional factors such as gender and area of residence, and representational intersectionality through culture-based claims of social media having negative influence on women’s traditional status cause the greatest power imbalances in **access** to the digital public sphere. Power relations underlying equal participation on the digital public sphere are most affected by **structural** and **political** intersectional factors of gender, level of education and language. Women at the intersection of identities such as illiteracy and female are often at the detriment of political agendas on political participation online. This inequality and further

**representational** and **political** intersectional power relations created by cultural narratives and the opposing goals of certain groups mean that many women do not feel safe on the **singular** public sphere. Finally, the digital public sphere in Mali, like Habermas' public sphere, creates a distinction between public issues that should be discussed on it, and private issues that shouldn't. In Mali, **representational** and **political** intersectionality such as cultural narratives and women's rights being linked to a western political agenda thus create power relations that make women's traditionally 'private' issues unwelcome on the digital public sphere. I found that properties of the digital public sphere such as the plurality of platforms, different media formats, closed groups, economic opportunities available, wide reach and anonymity available online have been harnessed by women to help women navigate the intersectional power relations active on the digital public sphere and enhance their political participation.

## 8. Conclusion

Identifying power relations is essential to understanding how best to improve women's political participation in Mali and worldwide. Using Habermas' concept of the 'public sphere' and Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, I find that structural, representational, or political intersectionality each play a different role in creating unequal power relations for women on the digital public sphere in Mali. I show that Habermas' theory of the public sphere creating democracy is not applicable when unjust power relations are considered. I was able to build on Crenshaw and feminist critique of Habermas and go beyond their categories of race and gender to show that in Mali, intersectional factors such as area of residence (urban/rural), education and religion are as important in creating power relations on the digital public sphere. Interventions aiming to improve women's political participation need to consider all these intersectional identities to be successful. In addition to this, women themselves have already identified ways to harness properties of the digital public sphere to enhance their political participation. These properties are something that can be built on to ensure inclusive and equal political participation of women in Mali. It is important to be aware of what techniques women themselves are using to navigate power relations to ensure any additional interventions can support them in a way that is most helpful to them. A context specific and in-depth knowledge of both the power relations active on the digital public sphere, as well as the properties women use to navigate these is thus imperative to ensure political participation that is inclusive of women of all compounding identities. While this thesis focused specifically on Mali, these results are widely applicable. To ensure that digitalization does not create further inequalities in political participation of women in the world, intersectional power relations on the digital public sphere, as well as methods to cope with them must always be considered.

## **8.1. Future Research:**

The research that I conducted was limited by the number and diversity of people I was able to speak to. Ensuring inclusive political participation of women in Mali is extremely complex, and there are a multitude of other intersectional identities beyond those I identified that could affect this. Further research should aim to interview women from regions in Mali other than Bamako to gain a more diverse perspective and do more research into identities such as ethnicity. I also chose to focus only on women. This focus risks creating the incorrect impression that men do not face intersectional difficulties accessing the digital public sphere. Future research could also be inclusive of men. In addition to this, I was only able to scratch the surface of the properties created by the digital public sphere to enhance political participation. Technology is developing every day, and further research should look further into technological properties that can impact women's political participation on the digital public sphere.

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## 10. Appendices

### 10.1. Interview guide

#### **Interview Guide LUMID Thesis Research Social Media and Peacebuilding in Mali:**

Interview Question: How is social media used for political participation by women in Mali? What intersectional opportunities and challenges does social media pose for women?

*Outline of the research and what their information will be used for. Read informed consent document. Clarify that they don't have to answer the questions and can stop whenever. Get verbal consent.*

**General questions on the interviewee:** Name, occupation, age, religion, where in Mali are they from

#### **Use of social media Political participation:**

- Which social media do you use? (If you are interviewing an organization: what social media does your NGO use? And why do you do so?)
- How often do you participate politically online?
  - What type of participation?
- What impact has the use of social media for political activity had for you ?
- Do you think social media can be useful for political participation? Why/ why not?
  - Do you have an example of when you, or someone else used it for political participation?

#### **Reach/Effect of social media on peacebuilding:**

- Who do you think is reached by your political activity on social media?
  - Who is not reached ?
- What is the effect of content posted on social media?
  - Do you have an example of this?

#### **Challenges of social media for peace activism:**

- What difficulties do you experience in your use of social media for peacebuilding?
- What difficulties do other people experience?
  - Are there differences in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, class, location?

#### **Benefits of social media for political participation:**

- What opportunities does social media have for political participation?
  - Are there differences in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, class, location?

#### **Closing:**

- Do you have any advice for how to proceed?
  - Different perspectives?
  - Advice on more questions to ask/ did I miss anything?
  - Do you know of more people I can contact/ relevant studies or literature?

## 10.2. List of interviewees

No.	Expertise level	Location at time of interview and origin region	No. people	Sex	Type	Sampling technique	Notes
1	Active political participation Facebook	Bamako (from Tombouctou)	1	F	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	
2	Active political participation Facebook and TikTok	Bamako (from Bamako)	1	F	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	
3	Active political participation Facebook			F		snowball sampling	
4	Political activist	Kidal (from Kidal)	1	F	In-person	snowball sampling	
5	Women's political organization	Bamako (from Gao)	4	F	In-person	snowball sampling	
6	International NGO on online safety	Bamako (from Segou)	1	F	In-person	snowball sampling	
7	National organization on women's political participation	Bamako (From Kayes)	1	F	In-person	snowball sampling	
8	Blog writer on gender and politics	Bamako (from Bamako)	5	1 male 4 female	Focus Group	heterogenous purposive sampling	
9	Blog writer on politics	Bamako (from Koulikoro)	1	F	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	
10	National NGO on democracy	Bamako (from Sikasso)	2	1 Female, 1 Male	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	
11	National NGO on politics and democracy	Bamako (from Sikasso)	1	F	In-person	snowball sampling	
12	Women's association on leadership and sustainable development	Bamako (from Bamako)	1	F	In-person	snowball sampling	
13	Think Tank researcher on	Bamako (from Segou)	1	F	In-person	snowball sampling	

	spread of fake news on social media in Mali						
14	Women's association	Bamako (from Segou)	1	F	In-person	snowball sampling	
15	TikTok sensibilization on women's political and reproductive rights	Bamako (from Bamako)	1	F	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	
16	Womens association	Sikasso (from Sikasso)	1	F	Phone interview	snowball sampling	
17	Womens association	Segou (from Segou)	1	F	Phone interview	snowball sampling	
18	Researcher on polarization on social media in Mali	Bamako (From Segou)	1	M	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	Used for preliminary thesis research, not cited in this thesis
19	Bloggers association	Bamako (from Bamako)	1	F	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	
20	National NGO on freedom of expression and media	Bamako (From Sikasso)	1	F	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	
21	National organization on freedom of expression and media	Bamako (from Mopti)	1	F	In-person	snowball sampling	
22	Researcher on women's activism in Mali	Bamako (from Bamako)	1	F	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	
23	Government Digitalization expert	The Netherlands	1	F	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	Used for preliminary thesis research, not cited in this thesis
24	Government Digitalization expert	The Netherlands	1	M	In-person	heterogenous purposive sampling	Used for preliminary thesis research, not cited in this thesis

### 10.3. Coding scheme

