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# The relationship between online campaigning and political involvement

Online  
campaigning  
and political  
involvement

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the causal relationship between interactive and personal campaigning on social media and political involvement, and the mechanisms that explain the effects. Specifically, this study examines whether personal and interactive communication on Twitter increases political involvement among citizens through social presence and perceived expertise.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An experimental design – a 2 (low vs high interactivity) × 3 (depersonalized vs individualized vs privatized communication) between-subjects design – is used.

**Findings** – The findings show that interactive communication leads to a stronger sense of social presence and source expertise, which positively affect involvement. The effects of personal campaigning differ. Individualized communication positively affects involvement via source expertise. Interestingly, privatized communication positively affects involvement via social presence, but negatively via source expertise.

**Originality/value** – Although a growing body of work examines the political consequences of social media, there is still very little understanding why social media affect citizens. The current study fills this void by investigating how the use of social media affects political involvement among citizens.

**Keywords** Experiment, Interactivity, Social media, Political campaigning, Social presence, Source expertise

**Paper type** Research paper

To reach voters, political candidates and parties increasingly use social media. The internet, and especially social media, offers political candidates and parties the opportunity to communicate directly to citizens and it allows them to disclose personal information (i.e. personal campaigning, Vergeer *et al.*, 2013). For citizens, social media offers a platform to come in contact with candidates and discuss politics directly with others. Because of the possibility to communicate in a more personal (Lee and Oh, 2012) and interactive manner (Kelleher, 2009), and because almost every politician and party uses social media, it is often believed that the internet is an important tool for democracy (Ward and Vedel, 2006) and a crucial element for a successful election campaign (Wagner and Gainous, 2009).

Online political campaigning via social media has also received increased academic attention (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2009, 2015). Although scholars differ in their beliefs about the impact of citizens' internet use, there seems to be a growing body of research that shows beneficial effects. Several researchers have demonstrated that internet use has positive effects on citizens' involvement in politics and this, consequently, contributes to the quality of democracy (see, e.g. Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Shah *et al.*, 2005). Recently, studies demonstrated that the uses of social media for political purposes during election campaigns have an important political impact



(e.g. vote intention, Bond *et al.*, 2012; Spierings and Jacobs, 2013). Particularly the content characteristics (i.e. interactive and more personal communication) have positive consequences for citizens' involvement into politics (Lee and Shin, 2012; Lee and Oh, 2012; Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2013; Utz, 2009). Political involvement is important and desirable for a healthy democracy. When citizens are participating in political activities or feel connected to societal and political issues, they can create an association with their representatives. If citizens feel more connected to and interested in politics and their representatives, they are more likely to engage in political activities, such as becoming members of political organizations, voicing their opinions, and voting (Strömbäck, 2008).

Despite the increase in interest in the effects of social media use, only a few scholars examined why social media is an effective media tool for getting citizens involved. Although a few important attempts have been made to investigate which mechanisms explain the beneficial effect of social media use (Lee and Shin, 2012; Lee and Oh, 2012), there is still very little understanding of why social media affects citizen involvement (Aharony, 2012). The current study tries to fill this void. Specifically, this study will focus on two key style characteristics of social media: interactive and three different dimensions of personal (i.e. personalized) communication. An interactive communication style refers to direct reciprocal communication between politics and citizens. Personal campaigning refers to a communication style that is more focussed on the individual politician and his or her private life, than on the party the politician represents. It is examined how these key style characteristics of social media affect political involvement and which underlying processes mediate such a relationship. This study examines two underlying processes simultaneously; source expertise and social presence. The latter mechanism is especially important as recent studies call the attention to the importance of especially social presence theory as an important psychological process that explains positive effects of social media (Lee and Oh, 2012; Lee and Shin, 2012; Lee and Jang, 2013).

This study contributes to the existing literature in various ways. Previous work on the consequences of social media focussed on the effect of social media use in general (see, e.g. Dimitrova *et al.*, 2011). Although it is important to study social media effects in general, to advance theoretical understanding of the effects of social media, it is also important to investigate how citizens use the internet (Shah *et al.*, 2005). By focussing on specific style characteristics (i.e. interactive and personal communication), or the attributes of social media (Eveland, 2003), it is revealed which communication characteristics of social media actually affect political involvement. While some research has been done to examine the effects of different attributes of social media on citizen involvement (see, e.g. Lee and Shin, 2012; Lee and Oh, 2012), no study has yet combined these attributes and examined the effect of two different key attributes of social media simultaneously. This is especially important, as social media is multidimensional. Examining the mix of content characteristics of social media will give us more understanding into the question why social media affect involvement (Eveland, 2003). In addition, this study investigates to what extent two different psychological processes (i.e. social presence and source expertise) explain the relationship between interactivity and personalization, and citizens' involvement. The central question is: does an interactive and personal communication style lead to a stronger sense of interpersonal contact (i.e. social presence, Lee and Jang, 2013) and perceived source expertise, and does this, in turn, lead to increased levels of political involvement? Third, as the consequences of political personalization are rarely studied,

this study examines which dimension of personalization is most effective in increasing political involvement. Thus, the current study also answers the question: how personal should personal communication be to be beneficial? As previous studies mainly focussed on the effects of one dimension of personal communication, this study includes three different dimensions of personal communication (focus on a politician vs focus on a politician's private life).

### **Interactivity and political personalization: two key style characteristics**

Interactivity is often considered the most important style characteristic of social media, and is generally believed to be a key variable when studying the effects of new media (Sundar *et al.*, 2003; Sundar, 2007; Fortin and Dholakia, 2005). Interactivity is a multidimensional construct; researchers use different conceptualizations to define interactivity (Fortin and Dholakia, 2005). The rich body of interactivity research commonly defines interactivity as two-way communication (see, e.g. Sundar *et al.*, 2003; Tedesco, 2007): an interaction between two people – one person can communicate directly to another person and vice versa. The reciprocal communication can be horizontal (between citizens) and also vertical (between e.g. politicians and citizens). This notion is supported by Stromer-Galley (2004), who argues that interactivity is both a product and a process. Interactivity-as-product is communication between people and computers, while interactivity-as-process entails communication between people themselves (e.g. between a politician and citizens). This study focusses on interactivity as a process and operationalizes interactivity as two-way communication.

Interactivity makes social media different from traditional media. Generally, traditional media send out information without receiving immediate response (i.e. one-way flow of information, Ferber *et al.*, 2007), while interactive communication is the main feature of social media. For instance, Twitter is designed to facilitate interactive communication, as it enables it users the opportunity to send, read, respond, forward and repeat (retweet) messages directly to others, which offers possibilities for reciprocal dialogues between two or more users (Boyd *et al.*, 2010). In addition, such dialogues are also visual and observable for a broader audience, even if users do not participate. Reading these dialogues can influence them.

Studies focussing on the effects of interactivity in a political context point toward positive outcomes: exposure to interactive websites increases recall (Warnick *et al.*, 2005), and positively affects political attitudes (Song and Bucy, 2007; Tedesco, 2007) and evaluations of politicians (for social media, Utz, 2009). Likewise, exposure to interactivity on a political blog influenced positive attitudes toward the website, candidate evaluations and voting intention (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006). Furthermore, exposure to an interactive Twitter page and exposure to a social networking site that was similar to Twitter (instead of a newspaper) leads to more positive candidate evaluations and a stronger voting intention, but only for people who usually avoid social interaction (Lee and Jang, 2013).

Another key characteristic of social media is personal communication. Personal communication (or political personalization) refers to the shift of focus from parties and institutions, to politicians and their private life (Adam and Maier, 2010; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Van Aelst *et al.*, 2012). This shift seems to be present in social media (Van Santen and Van Zoonen, 2010), as politicians are using social media individually to communicate to voters. Social media is suited for personal campaigning and politicians frequently use social media (especially Twitter) for self-promotion (see, e.g. Jung *et al.*, 2007), to talk about themselves and to refer to information about, for example, facts,

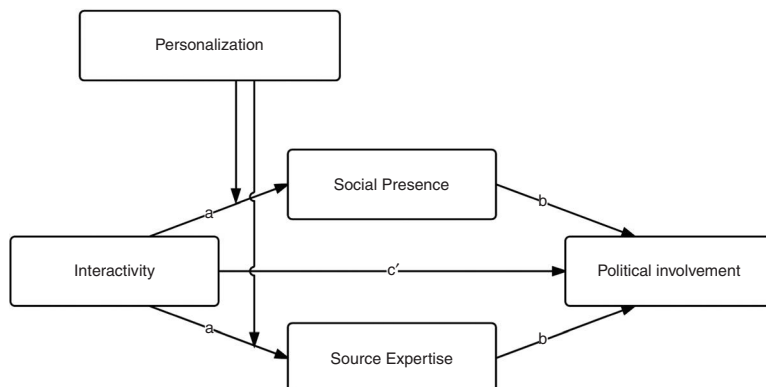
opinions or links to articles (Golbeck *et al.*, 2010). In general, personalization has two distinct dimensions; the first is individualization and the latter privatization (for an overview of the conceptual definitions and dimensions see Van Aelst *et al.*, 2012). Individualization refers to a focus on individual parties and candidates. Individualization is especially present in social media, because politicians increasingly use personally kept online media platforms to communicate with their electorate, such as Twitter and Facebook. Privatization refers to a focus on private life and personal interest of politicians. Privatization is also present in social media; the communication by politicians is often characterized by sending messages about her or his emotions, thoughts and private issues (Vergeer *et al.*, 2013).

Despite the increasing interest in political personalization, little is known about the effects of personalization, especially in social media. There are scholars who argue that personalization has positive effects, because “politicians then lend their party’s policies a face and a voice” (Brettschneider, 2008, para. 8). In other words, a focus on politicians makes politics easily approachable. Han (2009) demonstrates that disclosing personal information has positive effects on policy support. Others show that personalization on political websites positively influences psychological involvement (Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2013; Lee and Oh, 2012). Other scholars are more skeptical and argue that a focus on politicians, and specifically their private life, distracts voters from important political processes and the bigger political picture (for more information see Adam and Maier, 2010). Others found that privatized information generates political cynicism (Jebril *et al.*, 2013), distrust in politicians (Otto and Maier, 2013), and campaign loss for political candidates (Parmelee and Bichard, 2011).

To sum up, despite the growing literature, there have been few empirical investigations that identify different psychological processes that explain the relationship between interactive and personalized communication, and political involvement. This study examines two underlying processes simultaneously that might explain the effects: social presence and interactivity (see Figure 1).

### Social presence

Social presence, a concept that is often used to explain interpersonal communication effects in computer-mediated communication (Short *et al.*, 1976; Tanis, 2003; Biocca *et al.*, 2003), can be defined as “a sense of being with another” in a computer-mediated environment (for an overview of the literature, see Biocca *et al.*, 2003, p. 460). The social



**Figure 1.**  
Visualization of the moderated mediation model as described in *H7* and *H8*

presence theory explains that the effect a medium has depends on the “social presence” (or perceived intimacy) it conveys (Tanis, 2003, p. 5). Hence, social presence increases when “a person feels as if he/she were ‘with’ the communication partner, engaging in a direct, face-to-face conversation” (Lee and Shin, 2012, p. 516). It is assumed that interactive communication positively influences social presence. This view is supported by Thorson and Rodgers (2006), who argue that “providing an opportunity to interact with the candidate, encourage a sense of intimacy between the participants and candidate, creating a facsimile of an interpersonal relationship” (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006, p. 47). The sense of being in an interpersonal relationship could thus foster perceived closeness with the communicator (Lee and Oh, 2012), which, in turn, may have a positive influence on the evaluations and intention to vote for the communicator. It is, therefore, expected that people, who are exposed to a dialogue on Twitter, have a heightened sense of interpersonal contact, than people who read a Twitter page without such conversations (Lee and Jang, 2013; Lee and Shin, 2012). Consequently, it is assumed that this conveyed sense of interpersonal contact has a positive effect on political involvement, because heightened presence with the political communicator instigates political involvement:

*H1.* Exposure to interactive (vs non-interactive) online communication styles in social media positively affects political involvement via social presence.

Likewise, personalized communication might also influence feelings of social presence, as personalized communication gives the impression of an informal personal conversation. Communicating with an individual politician makes identification with the communicator easier, than communicating with a political party. The perception of being in contact with a communicator (i.e. an actual person) mimics a real experience and helps readers to draw a “vivid picture” of the communicator. Readers can create imagined intimacy and emotional closeness (i.e. social presence) with the communicator (Lee and Oh, 2012). There is, to our knowledge, only one scientific study that examines the consequences of personalized (online) communication (Lee and Oh, 2012). This study shows that personalized tweets heighten perceived presence for people who are positive about social interactions. Although this study shows important findings, it does not take into account the differentiation between the different dimensions of personal communication. It can be expected that differential effects exist for these distinctive dimensions of personalization.

First, based on the aforementioned studies, social presence is an important mediator that explains the effect of “individualized” communication (i.e. communication stemming from an individual politician) on political involvement. Second, when the communication is also privatized (thus contains private information about a politicians’ private life and personal ideas), the perceived intimacy will be even higher. Readers identify even more with the communicator when more privatized information is enclosed; the communicator becomes “real” by creating an emotional bond (Lee and Oh, 2012). In other words, the perceived social presence will have a stronger explanatory role in the effect of personalization when the communication is privatized. It is again expected that this conveyed sense of interpersonal contact has a positive effect on political involvement:

*H2.* Exposure to individualized (vs depersonalized) communication styles in social media positively affects political involvement via social presence.

*H3.* Exposure to (a) privatized communication (vs individualized) styles in social media positively affects political involvement via social presence, (b) and the effect will be stronger than the effect of individualization (vs depersonalization).

**Source expertise**

Another explanation for the effects of interactivity and personalization on political involvement can be found in the source credibility literature. Source expertise (a subdimension of credibility) has often been studied as a psychological mechanism of persuasion. It can be defined as the extent to which the communicator is regarded as professional and competent (Ohanian, 1990). Studies show that competence, integrity and reliability are important personality traits whereupon voters evaluate politicians (see, e.g. Miller *et al.*, 1986). Following Sundar (2008), interactive communication is likely to affect expertise, because interactive communication creates goodwill regarding the communicator on the side of the reader. More specifically, interactivity suggests that it is possible to engage in a conversation and this opportunity gives readers the idea that the communicator has an open mind (Hwang, 2013; Sundar, 2008). Moreover, making use of the communication tool in an advanced way (i.e. communicating interactively) makes the communicator appear experienced and skilled (Hwang, 2013). Such professionalized skills are desirable qualities in a political communicator (Sundar, 2008). Subsequently, the accumulation of these skills leads to positive evaluations of the political communicator (Hwang, 2013). For example, expertise of the source is found to have a positive effect on opinion agreement (Horai *et al.*, 1974). Likewise, a survey study found that favorable evaluation of politicians' Twitter use leads to positive perceived credibility, which had subsequently a positive effect on how people evaluate the politician (Hwang, 2013). Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- H4.* Exposure to interactive (vs non-interactive) online communication styles in social media positively affects political involvement via source expertise.

Personalized communication on Twitter might also enhance perceived expertise. More specifically, Langer (2007) argues that humanizing a private persona gives someone experiential authentication. It is, therefore, expected that individualized communication fosters the feeling among readers that an actual person or human voice is behind the tweets (Kelleher and Miller, 2006). This will enhance the impression that the communication is more professional. The communicator does not hide behind the party, but tries to be open for communication and transparent. In other words, by communication as a person, instead of a party, the communicator shows that (s)he is personally responsible for the communication that is sent out.

In contrast, source expertise might also explain the negative effects of personalization. Following Jebril *et al.*'s (2013) line of arguing, it is expected that privatized news has a negative effect on source expertise, because a focus on private life distracts readers from political content. Greater focus on private life, means less focus on political issues. This may affect the communicators' expertise. Readers could then think that the communicator believes that private issues are more important than politician issues. Dispersing information about one's private life makes the communicator, therefore, less competent in the eyes of the reader. Taken together, it is hypothesized:

- H5.* Exposure to individualized communication (vs depersonalized) styles in social media positively affects political involvement via source expertise.
- H6.* Exposure to privatized communication (vs individualized) styles in social media negatively affects political involvement via source expertise.

### Interaction effect of interactivity and personalization

As proposed by the mix of attributes approach (Eveland, 2003), the key attributes of social media might also interact with one another. Both key characteristics might indeed be simultaneously present in online communication. Since it is hypothesized that both interactivity and personalization (i.e. individualized communication) enhance presence with and expertise of the source, and consequently, political involvement, it is expected that when these characteristics are combined, this might have an even stronger effect on citizens' political involvement.

There is one study that combines the two key characteristics. It demonstrates that the conjoined effects of interactive and personal communication on political involvement are indeed stronger (Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2013). This is particularly true for the indirect effect via social presence. Interactive and personal communication styles (both individualized and privatized) provoke higher levels of perceived intimacy with the communicator. It is not surprising that combining these characteristics will probably activate even higher levels of perceived social presence. This will, in turn, affect political involvement. For the indirect effect via source expertise, similar results might be found. Interactive and individualized communication both enhance perceived source expertise, which, in turn, positively affects political involvement. Since privatized communication negatively influences source expertise, it is unlikely to find a conjoined effect of privatization and interactivity. Everything considered, the following hypotheses are proposed (see Figure 1):

- H7. Personalized (both individualized and privatized) and interactive communication styles on social media strengthen each other in their effect on social presence, which in turn, positively affects political involvement.
- H8. Individualized and interactive communication styles on social media strengthen each other in their effect on source expertise, which in turn, positively affects political involvement.

### Method

#### *Procedure, participants and design*

To test our hypotheses, an online experiment was created. In the experiment, personalization as well as interactivity was abundantly manipulated in six political Twitter accounts. The accounts were based upon the actual Twitter accounts of a Dutch political party and politician (i.e. Democrats 66 and their political leader: Alexander Pechtold). D66 is a liberal progressive party in the middle of the political spectrum. By using an existing Twitter account, stimulus materials will be more realistic. Additionally, two pre-tests (respectively,  $n = 59$  and  $n = 42$ ) were conducted, with the aim to establish the effectiveness of the manipulations of interactivity and personalization. The results of the pre-tests demonstrated that both personalization and interactivity were effectively manipulated (e.g. "did you feel that the tweets were posted by the party or by a politician and were the tweets interactive"; specific results can be provided upon request). A 2 (interactivity: low vs high)  $\times$  3 (personalization: depersonalization vs individualization vs privatization) in between-subjects design was used.

The experiment was conducted among younger citizens who often use social media, especially Twitter (Brenner and Smith, 2013). Social media has thus an added value for youngsters: they are heavy users of social medium. Furthermore, because this study is primarily interested in underlying mechanisms, it is necessary to include participants

(i.e. younger citizens) who recognize interactivity and are used to or can interpret interactive features on social media. Only including Twitter users might lead to familiarity bias, because Twitter users might be positive toward communication on Twitter in any case. Therefore, this study targeted younger citizens. Hence, participants who completed the questionnaire were 243 college students (79.4 percent female) with a mean age of 20.72 (SD = 2.00). Participants were recruited via an online message board of the university. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions and received five euro or course credits for their participation. Data were collected in the winter of 2013.

### *Stimulus material*

The actual content of the Twitter account of Alexander Pechtold and D66 was downloaded and then modified for the experiment (see Table I). The stimulus materials consist of the first page of a Twitter account (see Appendix). The three personalization dimensions were manipulated in line with studies conducted by Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2010) and Van Aelst *et al.* (2012). The personalization dimensions were manipulated in two different ways: the source of the tweets was manipulated and the reference to private life. In the “depersonalization” condition, the political party was the source of the tweets and tweets covered no information about the private life of the politician used in the experiment. In the “individualization” condition, the politician was the source of the tweets and tweets contained no reference to private life. In the “privatization” condition, the politician was the source of the tweets and the politicians’ private life was mentioned in a few tweets. The level of interactivity was manipulated in line with previous studies that studied the effects of interactive political communication on websites (Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2013) and on Twitter more specifically (Lee and Shin, 2012). In the “high interactive” condition, the Twitter account had tweets that contained mentions. Twitter users use the @ characteristic to communicate to other Twitter users. Posting a tweet that includes a mention, the @ characteristic, which is followed by a name, indicates that a one Twitter user directly sends a text message to another Twitter user (Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012). In other words, @mention calls for the other Twitter user’s attention, and this is an important prerequisite for a conversation to emerge (Boyd *et al.*, 2010). In the “low interactivity” condition, such mentions were not present. The tweets used in the low interactive condition were presented as one-way communication. The tweets were only used to send information (i.e. no dialogue). Between conditions, the amount of information was kept equal.

**Table I.**  
Operationalization of  
personalization and  
interactivity in the  
manipulated Twitter  
accounts

	Depersonalization (Focus on party)	Individualization (Focus on politician)	Privatization (Focus on politician and private life)
<i>Low interactivity</i>			
Source	Party	Politician	Politician
Communication	Sending information	Sending information	Sending information about private life
<i>High interactivity</i>			
Source	Party	Politician	Politician
Communication	Reacting by using mentions	Reacting by using mentions	Reacting by using mentions and posting information about private life

### Measures

As “[p]olitical participation arises from the interaction of citizens and political mobilizers” (Rosenstone and Hansen, 2003, p. 36), social media can particularly influence offline as well as online political behavioral intentions. The latter form of participation is also important, as online participation could translate into offline political activities, which has been shown in previous research (Gainous *et al.*, 2013; Towner, 2013). Therefore, in this study, political involvement was operationalized as online and offline political behavioral intentions. Political talk refers to citizens’ intended behavior to discuss politics or Twitter use with friends, family and colleagues. The variable was measured on a seven-point scale (1 = “totally disagree” and 7 = “totally agree”) using two items (i.e. “After reading the tweets I am more inclined to talk about [Twitter/politics] with friends, family and colleagues”;  $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ; inter-item correlation = 0.73). Twitter behavior intention refers to the intention to revisit the Twitter account in the experiment, other politicians’ or parties’ accounts and intention to follow politicians or parties on Twitter. The variable was once again measured on a seven-point scale (1 = “totally disagree” and 7 = “totally agree”) using four items ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). The factor analysis revealed that the items load on one dimension ( $EV = 3.43$ , explained variance 85.9 percent; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Intention to vote for the party was measured with one item (seven-point scale, 1 = “totally disagree” and 7 = “totally agree”;  $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). Intention to vote for the politician was also measured with one item (seven-point scale, 1 = “totally disagree” and 7 = “totally agree”;  $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). Social presence items were derived from previous research (Lee and Nass, 2005; Biocca *et al.*, 2003; Lee and Shin, 2012) and adapted to this study. (Perceived) social presence was tapped by using three items (e.g. “I got to know the source of the tweet better”). Answers were coded on a seven-point scale where one equals “totally disagree” and seven “totally agree” ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). A factor analysis revealed that the three items load on one dimension ( $EV = 2.24$ , explained variance 74.6 percent; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.83$ ). Source expertise was derived from the dimensions of source credibility (Ohanian, 1990). One dimension of source credibility is used; expertise. Expertise was measured using four items on a seven-point semantic difference scale (e.g. “professional”;  $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ). A factor analysis revealed that the four items load on one dimension ( $EV = 2.97$ , explained variance 74.3 percent; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Two control variables were included in all our analyses to test familiarity bias: “likelihood of voting for D66” and “likelihood of voting Alexander Pechtold.” Answers were recorded on an 11-point scale where one equals “I would never vote for this party/politician” and eleven equals “I would certainly vote for this party/politician” ( $M = 7.08$ ,  $SD = 3.13$ ;  $M = 6.49$ ,  $SD = 3.15$ , respectively).

### Results

To test our hypotheses, multiple (moderated) mediation bootstrapping analyses with 1,000 resamples were used, using Hayes’ PROCESS macro for SPSS (Models 4 and 9 in Process, Hayes, 2012). Analyses revealed significant positive indirect effects of high interactivity (vs low) on different aspects of political involvement through social presence (for all the results see Table II). For example, the use of interactive tweets (vs no use of interactive tweets) had a positive effect on the perceived social presence of the source (unstandardized  $b$  coefficient = 0.57,  $p < 0.001$ ), and social presence had, in turn, a positive effect on the intention to vote for the politician ( $b = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In other words, the effect of interactivity on the intention to support the politician after reading the tweets is mediated by social presence, even when controlled for initial intention to support the politician or party,  $b = 0.18$ , 95 percent bias corrected confidence interval [0.08; 0.34]. Thus,  $H1$  was supported.

**Table II.**  
Indirect effects of  
interactivity and  
personalization on  
political involvement  
via social presence  
and source expertise

Independent variable ( <i>X</i> )	Mediating variable ( <i>M</i> )	Dependent variable ( <i>Y</i> )	Effect of <i>X</i> on <i>M</i> ( <i>a</i> )	Effect of <i>M</i> on <i>Y</i> ( <i>b</i> )	Direct effect ( <i>c'</i> )	Indirect effect ( <i>ab</i> )	95% BC CI Lower; upper	Total effect ( <i>c</i> )
<i>High interactive (ref. low)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Political talk</i>	0.57***	0.26***	-0.43**	0.15	0.05; 0.27	-0.16
<i>High interactive (ref. low)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Political talk</i>	0.40***	0.31***	-0.43**	0.12	0.05; 0.24	-0.16
<i>High interactive (ref. low)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Behavior Twitter</i>	0.57***	0.21**	-0.37*	0.12	0.04; 0.24	-0.04
<i>High interactive (ref. low)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Behavior Twitter</i>	0.40***	0.51***	-0.37*	0.20	0.10; 0.40	-0.04
<i>High interactive (ref. low)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Vote party</i>	0.57***	0.34***	-0.37*	0.20	0.09; 0.38	-0.02
<i>High interactive (ref. low)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Vote party</i>	0.40***	0.39***	-0.37*	0.15	0.06; 0.30	-0.02
<i>High interactive (ref. low)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Vote politician</i>	0.57***	0.32***	-0.31****	0.18	0.08; 0.34	0.04
<i>High interactive (ref. low)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Vote politician</i>	0.40***	0.42***	-0.31****	0.17	0.07; 0.33	0.04
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Political talk</i>	0.28	0.25***	0.02	0.07	-0.03; 0.20	0.20
<i>Individualization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Political talk</i>	0.42**	0.26**	0.02	0.11	0.03; 0.24	0.20
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Behavior Twitter</i>	0.28	0.21**	-0.07	0.06	-0.01; 0.16	0.18
<i>Individualization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Behavior Twitter</i>	0.42**	0.48***	-0.07	0.20	0.08; 0.39	0.18
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Vote party</i>	0.28	0.32***	0.35****	0.09	-0.03; 0.23	0.57*
<i>Individualization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Vote party</i>	0.42**	0.32**	0.35****	0.13	0.04; 0.31	0.57*
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Vote politician</i>	0.28	0.30***	0.26	0.09	-0.04; 0.23	0.50*
<i>Individualization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Vote politician</i>	0.42**	0.36***	0.26	0.15	0.06; 0.34	0.50*
Privatization (ref. individualization)	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Political talk</i>	0.57**	0.25***	-0.15	0.14	0.03; 0.30	-0.08
<i>Privatization (ref. individualization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Political talk</i>	-0.25****	0.26**	-0.15	-0.07	-0.18; -0.01	-0.08

(continued)

Independent variable (X)	Mediating variable (M)	Dependent variable (Y)	Effect of X on M (a)	Effect of M on Y (b)	Direct effect (c')	Indirect effect (ab)	95% BC CI Lower; upper	Total effect (c)
<i>Privatization (ref. individualization)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Behavior Twitter</i>	<i>0.57**</i>	<i>0.21**</i>	<i>-0.11</i>	<i>0.12</i>	<i>0.02; 0.26</i>	<i>-0.11</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. individualization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Behavior Twitter</i>	<i>-0.25***</i>	<i>0.48***</i>	<i>-0.11</i>	<i>-0.12</i>	<i>-0.31; -0.02</i>	<i>-0.11</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. individualization)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Vote party</i>	<i>0.57**</i>	<i>0.32***</i>	<i>-0.21</i>	<i>0.18</i>	<i>0.05; 0.37</i>	<i>-0.10</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. individualization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Vote party</i>	<i>-0.25***</i>	<i>0.32**</i>	<i>-0.21</i>	<i>-0.08</i>	<i>-0.22; -0.01</i>	<i>-0.10</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. individualization)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Vote politician</i>	<i>0.57**</i>	<i>0.30***</i>	<i>-0.18</i>	<i>0.17</i>	<i>0.04; 0.34</i>	<i>-0.10</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. individualization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Vote politician</i>	<i>-0.25***</i>	<i>0.36***</i>	<i>-0.18</i>	<i>-0.09</i>	<i>-0.22; -0.01</i>	<i>-0.10</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Political talk</i>	<i>0.85***</i>	<i>0.25***</i>	<i>-0.13</i>	<i>0.21</i>	<i>0.08; 0.40</i>	<i>0.12</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Political talk</i>	<i>0.16</i>	<i>0.26**</i>	<i>-0.13</i>	<i>0.04</i>	<i>-0.02; 0.15</i>	<i>0.12</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Behavior Twitter</i>	<i>0.85***</i>	<i>0.21**</i>	<i>-0.18</i>	<i>0.18</i>	<i>0.06; 0.37</i>	<i>0.07</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Behavior Twitter</i>	<i>0.16</i>	<i>0.48***</i>	<i>-0.18</i>	<i>0.08</i>	<i>-0.06; 0.25</i>	<i>0.07</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Vote party</i>	<i>0.85***</i>	<i>0.32***</i>	<i>0.14</i>	<i>0.28</i>	<i>0.14; 0.47</i>	<i>0.47*</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Vote party</i>	<i>0.16</i>	<i>0.32**</i>	<i>0.14</i>	<i>0.05</i>	<i>-0.03; 0.20</i>	<i>0.47*</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Social presence</i>	<i>Vote politician</i>	<i>0.85***</i>	<i>0.30***</i>	<i>0.08</i>	<i>0.26</i>	<i>0.12; 0.43</i>	<i>0.40***</i>
<i>Privatization (ref. depersonalization)</i>	<i>Source expertise</i>	<i>Vote politician</i>	<i>0.16</i>	<i>0.36***</i>	<i>0.08</i>	<i>0.06</i>	<i>-0.03; 0.20</i>	<i>0.40***</i>

**Notes:**  $n = 243$ . BC CI, bias corrected confidence interval. Control variables included *chance vote party* and *chance vote politician*. The italic relations are significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < 0.10$

Subsequently, the analyses showed no significant indirect effects of individualization (vs depersonalization) on political involvement via social presence. Exposure to a politicians' Twitter account does not induce feelings of presence. Thus, *H2* is not supported. Next, bootstrapping analyses demonstrate that a privatized communication style (i.e. privatization) compared to individualization, had a positive effect on political involvement, because personal information induces feelings of social presence. Next, the analyses revealed a significant positive indirect effect of privatization on political involvement via social presence compared to depersonalization. Exposure to a Twitter account containing information about a politicians' private life, compared to a Twitter account from a political party, had a positive effect on the feeling that the source was "there." This induced social presence had, in turn, a positive effect on different aspects of political involvement. For example, exposure to privatized communication (compared to individualized and depersonalized communication) had a positive effect on the perceived social presence of the source ( $b = 0.57, p < 0.01$  and  $b = 0.85, p < 0.001$ , respectively), and social presence had, in turn, a positive effect on the intention to talk about politics ( $b = 0.25, p < 0.001$ ),  $b = 0.14$ , 95 percent BC CI [0.03; 0.30] and  $b = 0.21$ , 95 percent BC CI [0.08; 0.40], respectively. Personalization has only an effect on social presence when information about the politicians' private life is enclosed. Thus *H3a* supported, but not *H3b*.

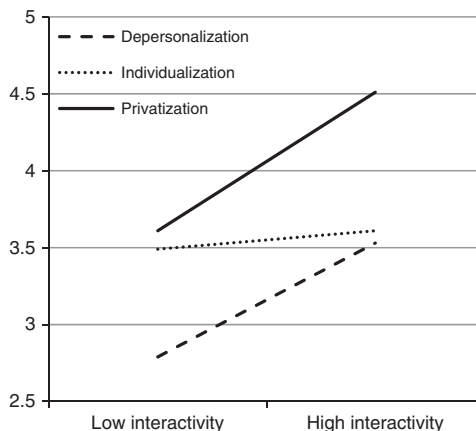
*H4* predicted that interactive communication positively affects political involvement via source expertise. The bootstrapping analyses found significant positive indirect effects of high interactivity (vs low) on different aspects of political involvement through source expertise. For instance, the use of interactive tweets had a positive effect on the perceived expertise of the source ( $b = 0.40, p < 0.001$ ), and source expertise had, in turn, a positive effect on the intention to talk about politics ( $b = 0.31, p < 0.001$ ). So again, it seems that when an interactive way of communicating on Twitter is used, readers feel that the source of that communication is an expert, which in turn makes readers, for instance, more likely to talk about politics,  $b = 0.12$ , 95 percent BC CI [0.05; 0.24].

Conform *H5*, it appears that exposure to a Twitter account from a politician, heightens perceived expertise of the source ( $b = 0.42, p < 0.01$ ), and this leads to, for example, increased levels of political behavior on Twitter ( $b = 0.48, p < 0.001$ ),  $b = 0.20$ , 95 percent BC CI [0.08; 0.39]. Thus, the results suggest that exposure to a politician's Twitter account results in higher political involvement via source expertise instead of exposure to a parties' Twitter account. Conform *H6*, disclosing personal information versus not disclosing personal information had a negative effect on political involvement, as the disclosure of such information reduces levels of source expertise. For instance, exposure to privatized communication gives the readers the idea that the source of the communication is not an expert ( $b = -0.25, p < 0.10$ ), which will lead to less intention to vote for the party leader ( $b = 0.36, p < 0.001$ ),  $b = -0.09$ , 95 percent BC CI [-0.22; -0.01]. This is an interesting result, as the same indirect effect (privatization vs individualization) was positive for social presence. It seems that both significant mediators (one positive and one negative) cancel each other out. Analysis confirmed this; the total indirect effect (the sum of the two indirect paths) was not significant (e.g. for political talk,  $b = 0.08$ , 95 percent BC CI [-0.08; 0.30]), indicating that a strong beneficial effect of communicating about one's private life was not found. Lastly, this study tested the effects of privatization and depersonalization. As one might expect, no significant effect of privatization (vs depersonalization) on political involvement via source expertise was found. Apparently, the positive effect of communicating as a politician diminishes when a politician discloses information about his private life. Thus, the findings regarding personalization indicate support for *H4-H6*.

To test the interaction effect, a moderated mediation (i.e. a conditional indirect effect) analysis was conducted. Specifically, it is examined whether the different dimensions of personalization moderated the indirect effect of interactivity on political involvement via social presence and source expertise. In short, using Model 9 in PROCESS, the study examined whether there exists an indirect effect of interactivity on involvement via social presence and source expertise. In these analyses the relationship between interactivity and social presence/source expertise was interacting with personalization (i.e. both individualization and privatization; and this is a conditional effect). The conditional indirect effect of interactivity on political involvement through social presence was only significant when the communication was depersonalized (e.g. for talk;  $b = 0.16$ , 95 percent BC CI [0.04; 0.34]), or the communication was privatized (e.g. for talk;  $b = 0.24$ , 95 percent BC CI [0.10; 0.47]), but not when the communication was individualized. This indicates that exposure to an interactive Twitter page that was depersonalized or privatized, resulted in higher levels of political involvement through social presence compared to individualized communication. In other words, combining an interactive and privatized style of communicating on social media leads to even higher levels of social presence, and in turn, into heightened political involvement. The conditional indirect effect of interactivity on political involvement through source expertise showed similar results. The tested indirect conditional effects were significant when the communication was depersonalized (e.g. for talk;  $b = 0.15$ , 95 percent BC CI [0.04; 0.37]), or the communication was privatized (e.g. for talk;  $b = 0.19$ , 95 percent BC CI [0.05; 0.41]). This indicates that exposure to an interactive Twitter page which was depersonalized or privatized, resulted in higher levels of all variables of political involvement through source expertise compared to individualized communication. So, in general, combining both characteristics does not simply result in higher levels of source expertise and consequently political involvement. For a visualization of the indirect conditional effects, see Figures 2 and 3.

### Conclusion and discussion

Taken together, the results of this study revealed that exposure to an interactive communication style on Twitter, will lead to a stronger sense of interpersonal contact with, and perceived expertise of the communicator, which, in turn, positively affects

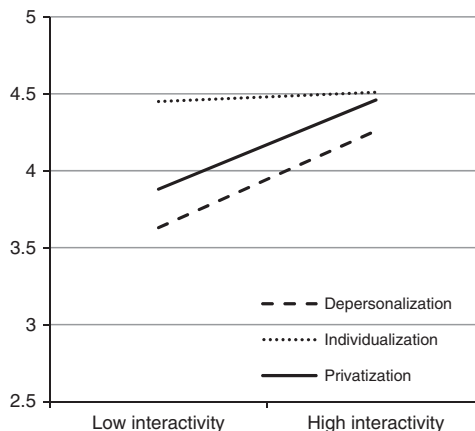


**Figure 2.**  
Example interaction  
effect of interactivity  
and political  
personalization on  
the mediating  
variable social  
presence

political involvement. The current findings add to a growing body of literature that shows positive effects of interactive online communication (Warnick *et al.*, 2005; Tedesco, 2007). Another important finding is that personalized communication styles on Twitter have an effect on citizens' political involvement. Generally, exposure to a Twitter page from an individual candidate positively affects political involvement through source expertise. Exposure to a Twitter page from an individual candidate containing private information can also positively affect political involvement through social presence. Privatization on the contrary can weaken involvement, as privatization negatively affects political involvement via source expertise. Nonetheless, because both processes cancel each other out, our findings provide tentative support for optimistic scholars, who argue that personalized online communication brings citizens closer to politics (Brettschneider, 2008). Despite the exploratory nature of the investigation of the conjoined effect, our results show that personalized and interactive communication, to some extent, interact. However, since this study only explored the relationship and in-depth theoretical foundations are not present, it is recommended that further research investigates how different styles interact and how this interaction affects political involvement.

A remark should be addressed before we address the implications of this study. The use of Twitter by Dutch politicians is similar to politicians who use Twitter in other western democracies. However, some scholars pointed out that Dutch politicians embraced the interactive use of Twitter and also tweet much more often than, for instance, UK politicians (see Graham *et al.*, 2013). Thus, Dutch politicians are more likely to engage in online conversation. This partly assists the external validity of our study, because it is not perceived as "odd" if politicians in the Netherlands use interactive communication online. However, future comparative research should examine whether the effects of interactivity and personalization are more generalizable. Furthermore, this study focussed on younger citizens. Yet, we cannot assess how this age group can be compared to older citizens in terms of underlying mechanisms. We believe that further research needs to be conducted to establish whether the mechanisms also apply to other groups.

The findings from this research have several theoretical implications. First, the findings show that the characteristics of social media are important when explaining the effects of social media on political involvement. It is not general social media use



**Figure 3.**  
Example interaction  
effect of interactivity  
and political  
personalization on  
the mediating  
variable source  
expertise

that positively affects involvement, but the specific content characteristics within such media. In many instances, previous studies examined how many and how often citizens use the internet (Shah *et al.*, 2005). Although it is important to consider the effects of the use of internet in general and social media more specific, to advance our theoretical understanding about the specific consequences of social media, one should study what it is about social media that causes effects (how citizens use social media, Eveland, 2003). This is especially important as social media are rapidly developing and changing (Polat, 2005; Weller, 2015) and new social media platforms arise and disappear. Our study demonstrates that by focussing on the specific content characteristics or attributes of social media (Eveland, 2003), this contributes to our theoretical understanding about why and under which circumstances social media affects citizens. Second, although there are studies that examine the relationship between social media and political involvement (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Spierings and Jacobs, 2013), this study is the first to investigate two different psychological processes simultaneously (i.e. social presence and source expertise) that explain the relationship. Uncovering such processes gives us important and intriguing theoretical insight into the question how social media contributes to citizens' political involvement. Overall, it seems that when an interactive and/or a personalized style is used on social media, citizens feel connected with politics (i.e. social presence) and they have the feeling that the communication is more professionalized (i.e. source expertise). These findings show that two important marketing and computer-mediated communication theories are highly applicable within the political communication context as well, and they should be considered in future investigations regarding the effects of online political communication. Lastly, as this is one of the first studies that examines the effects of different dimensions of personalization, this study demonstrates that different dimensions of personalization can have negative and positive consequences. Apparently, when studying the consequences of a focus on politicians rather than parties, one should take these different dimensions into consideration. Individualization is entirely different compared to privatization, and both have different consequences depending on different processes. In addition, previous studies examined the consequences of interactivity and personalization by focussing on psychological feelings of involvement (Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2013). This study found that interactive and personalized communication could actually affect intended political behavior. This striking finding notes that social media cannot only affect feelings of involvement, but social media can actually change ones (intended) voting behavior.

An important practical implication is that an interactive and personalized communication style should play an important role in political marketing strategies. If political organizations and candidates want to persuade voters, they should first and foremost use a more interactive communication strategy on social media. Furthermore, the use of individualized communication can also be valuable. Finally, using privatized information is only beneficial in specific cases, indicating that communication strategies that include private information are recommended if a politician also portrays him or herself in a professional way. Privatized communication might be less beneficial, because a focus on politicians' private life distracts citizens from the political content (i.e. political issues and policies). Thus, when citizens are exposed to privatized communication, a lack of political substance might then be noticed. Citizens could then be swayed that the politician cares more about private than political issues, which makes him or her less competent.

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## Appendix

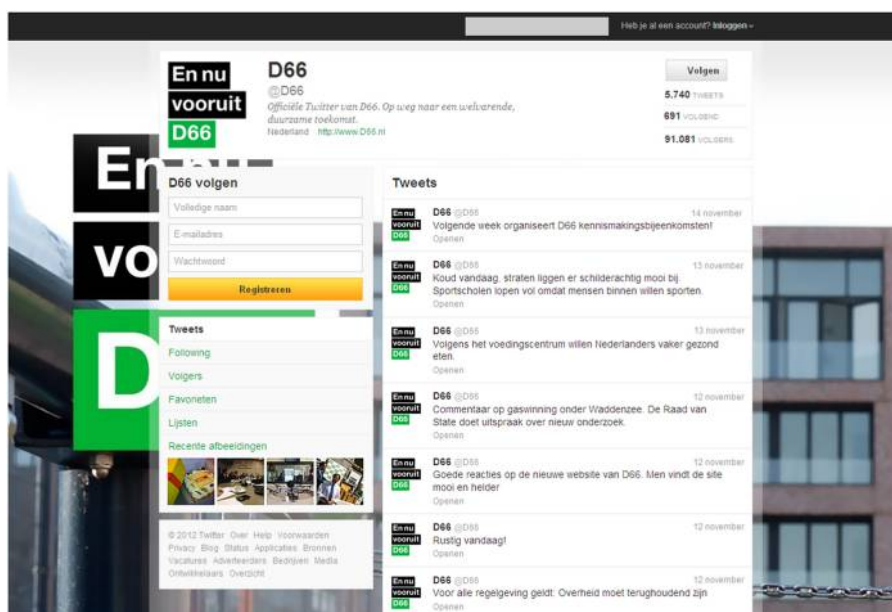


Figure A1. Low interactivity and focus on party

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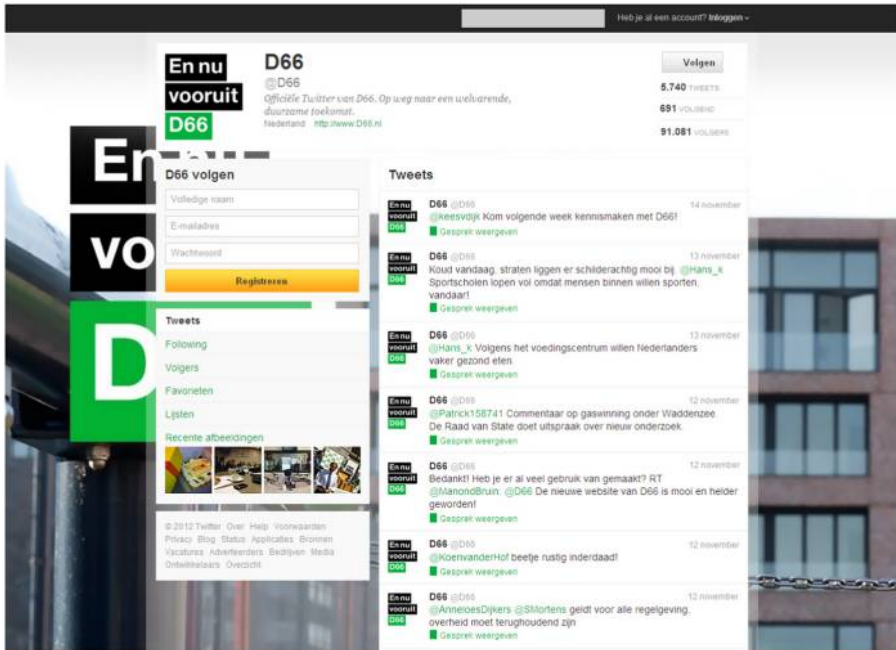


Figure A2.  
High interactivity  
and focus on party



Figure A3.  
Low interactivity  
and focus on  
politician

**D66**

**Durf te kiezen**

**Alexander Pechtold**  
@APechtold  
Fractievoorzitter D66 Tweede Kamer  
Wageningen <http://www.alexanderpechtold.nl>

Volgen  
5.740 TWEETS  
691 VOLGENDE  
91.081 VOLGERS

**Alexander Pechtold volgen**

Volledige naam  
E-mailadres  
Wachtwoord  
Registreren

**Tweets**

Volgend  
Volgers  
Favorieten  
Lijsten  
Recente afbeeldingen

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**Tweets**

- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
@koesvdijk Kom volgende week kennismaken met D66!  
Gesprek weergeven 14 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Koud vandaag, straten liggen er schilderachtig mooi bij  
@Hans\_k Sportscholen lopen vol omdat mensen binnen willen sporten, vandaag!  
Gesprek weergeven 13 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
@hans\_k Volgers het voedingscentrum willen Nederlanders vaker gezond eten.  
Gesprek weergeven 13 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
@Patrick156741 Commentaar op gaswinning onder Waddenzee. De Raad van State doet uitspraak over nieuw onderzoek.  
Gesprek weergeven 12 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Bedankt! Heb je er al veel gebruik van gemaakt? RT  
@ManandBrun: @APechtold De nieuwe website van D66 is mooi en helder geworden!  
Gesprek weergeven 12 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
@KoenvanderHof beetje rustig inderdaad!  
Gesprek weergeven 12 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
@AnneloesDijkers @SMortens geldt voor alle regelgeving, overheid moet terughoudend zijn  
Gesprek weergeven 12 november

Online campaigning and political involvement

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**Figure A4.** High interactivity and focus on politician

**D66**

**Durf te kiezen**

**Alexander Pechtold**  
@APechtold  
Fractievoorzitter D66 Tweede Kamer  
Wageningen <http://www.alexanderpechtold.nl>

Volgen  
5.740 TWEETS  
691 VOLGENDE  
91.081 VOLGERS

**Alexander Pechtold volgen**

Volledige naam  
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**Tweets**

Volgend  
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Lijsten  
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**Tweets**

- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Volgende week organiseert D66 kennismakingsbijeenkomsten! Ik ben benieuwd of we nieuwe mensen enthousiast kunnen maken!  
Openen 14 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Met dikke winterjas aan lekker warm, straten liggen er schilderachtig mooi bij. Voel mij fit na bezoek sportschool :-)  
Openen 13 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Vandaag lekkere, gezonde maaltijd gekookt voor Froukje en de kinderen. Hutspot met worst!  
Openen 13 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Op de bank documentaire gekeken over gaswinning onder Waddenzee. Studievriendin van mijn vrouw geeft commentaar.  
Openen 12 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Goede reacties op mijn nieuwe website. Men vindt de site mooi en helder  
Openen 12 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Rustig vandaag!  
Openen 12 november
- Alexander Pechtold** @APechtold  
Voor alle regelgeving geldt: Overheid moet terughoudend zijn  
Openen 12 november

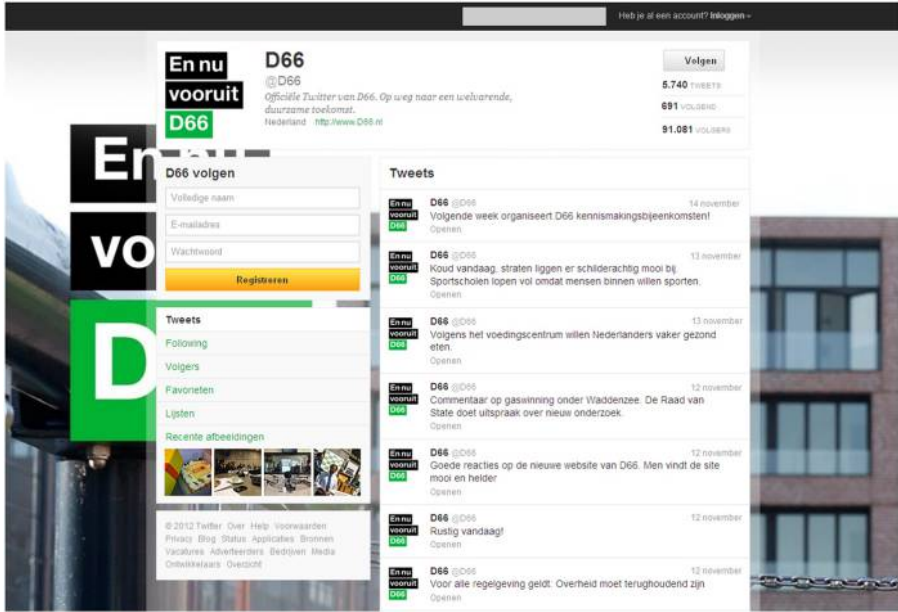
**Figure A5.** Low interactivity and focus on politician and his private life

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694

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**Figure A6.**  
High interactivity  
and focus on  
politician and his  
private life



**Corresponding author**

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