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**GETTING
CONNECTED**

THE EFFECTS OF
ONLINE POLITICAL
COMMUNICATION
ON CITIZENS' POLITICAL
INVOLVEMENT

SANNE KRUIKEMEIER

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VOOR MIJN OUDERS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE DISSERTATION

“The most important question is not what the Internet will do to us, but what we will do with it.” (Robert Putnam, 2000, p. 180)

With the advent of the Internet, new online technologies and platforms changed the way citizens can communicate about politics. Especially the increase in opportunities to communicate with political actors and others without the interference of gatekeepers is at the very center of this shift (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). The prospects to get connected with politics seem endless. New online technologies enable vertical and horizontal communication between citizens, and between citizens and political actors. Citizens can, for example, share information on forums, get voting advice, ask questions and give feedback to political candidates and parties on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Political actors and political organizations have the opportunity to communicate with citizens as well. They can, for instance, provide citizens with information about their plans and views on personal blogs, motivate the electorate to become politically active via party websites, talk about their personal activities or private life on Twitter and persuade citizens to vote for them. Online communication technologies thus not only offer opportunities for citizens, but also for political actors and parties to communicate in a more interactive and personal way.

But the Internet not only rapidly transformed the way citizens can communicate about politics. The barriers to engage in political activities are greatly reduced (Norris, 2000) and new technologies added ways for citizens to participate in politics (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Technological advantages lowered the cost to participate, which makes it easier for citizens to, for instance, donate money online, sign online petitions, and learn more about politics by reading online information or news.

As the advent of the Internet offers citizens different ways to communicate about and to participate in politics, it is almost inevitable that this has political consequences for society. Since the mid-1990s, it has often been voiced that the Internet has a decisive influence on democracy (Anstead & Chadwick, 2008). In his acclaimed book, Hindman (2009) highlights this notion: “[F]rom the moment that [the Internet] became a mass medium, [i]ts most important promise [...] was political. New sources of online information would make citizens more informed about politics. New forms of Internet organizing would help recruit previously inactive citizens into political participation. Cyberspace would become a robust forum for political debate.” (p. 1). This assumption is at the heart of this dissertation. It is investigated whether the Internet contributes to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens’ involvement in politics.

Focus of the dissertation

There seem to be three reasons why great optimism about the Internet prevails. The first reason is the increase in number of citizens who use the Internet in their everyday lives (Anstead & Chadwick, 2008). In particular, the growing majority of citizens that have access to an Internet connection contributed to this development (e.g., in the Netherlands, Internet penetration rate is 94 percent of the households, CBS, 2011). It has been expected that citizens will use the Internet to communicate their viewpoints, opinions and desires effectively to political actors and that they will learn more about various political affairs and policies (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2013). The second major reason is the adoption of Internet by political candidates and organizations. Political actors see the benefits of online communication through digital platforms (Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). Today, incorporating online communication strategies in political campaigning is standard practice for most parties and candidates. The last reason, or more precisely, major event, was the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Although it was not the first time that the Internet was used in a campaign, “[Obama’s] strategy was planned and executed in a way that allowed him to gain advantage over the other candidates [...] in the presidential elections” (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011, p. 191). By using various online tools to mobilize voters, the Obama campaign motivated more than three million contributors and activated five million volunteers. It appeared that the Obama campaign did not only raise money, but also, and maybe more interestingly, enhanced political participation and voter turnout (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011).

Despite the enthusiasm about the use, adoption and effects of online communication, scholars disagree about the impact of the Internet (Boulianne, 2009; Hindman, 2009; Norris, 2000; Tedesco, 2008). Pessimistic scholars predict that the Internet undermines democracy, as it will lead to a decline in civic engagement (Boulianne,

2009). Optimistic scholars believe that the Internet will mobilize citizens to become politically active and thereby the Internet contributes to democracy (Tedesco, 2008). Skeptical scholars claim that the Internet will only engage those citizens who are already engaged. Thus, the Internet only reinforces existing patterns of political participation: it widens the gap between citizens who are more and those who are less politically sophisticated (Norris, 2000). Several studies have examined the impact of the Internet on political (and civic) engagement (Boulianne, 2009). However, scholars repeatedly found inconsistent results (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). Research used inconsistent measures and models were differently specified (Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009). Questions about the political consequences of Internet use remain unanswered.

So, taken together, there is a lot of excitement about the impact of online political communication. There is, however, remarkable little agreement on whether the Internet will contribute to democracy by strengthening political involvement or whether it will contribute to a decline in political involvement (Boulianne, 2009). This dissertation tries to shed light on this void by dealing with the, as of yet, unsettled debate in online political communication research. The main objective is to examine the impact of online political communication on citizens' political involvement. The dissertation aims to investigate whether form and content characteristics of online political communication contribute to democracy by fostering citizens' involvement in politics. The overall research question of this dissertation is: *What are the effects of online political communication on citizens' involvement in politics?*

In order to understand to what extent Internet use affects involvement, theories from political communication, computer-mediated communication and marketing research are combined. Additionally, a multi-method design will be applied and data for the studies will be gathered during and outside election campaigns. Furthermore, this dissertation measures different aspects of the main outcome variable: political involvement. Thus, this thesis offers an in-depth investigation of the consequences of online political communication.

In the remaining part of this chapter, the dissertation will be introduced in much greater detail. First, the link between this thesis and several democratic theories will be given. Then, theories of Internet use and citizens' political involvement will be described. Following this description, the shift of focus towards the main characteristics of online political communication will be explained. Finally, the use of different methods is explained, and lastly, the dissertation outline will be given.

FOSTERING DEMOCRACY: WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Before this dissertation introduces the main theories that shape our thinking of the relationship between Internet use and citizens' political involvement, one fundamental question should be answered. Why is it important that citizens participate in politics? Why should we even care that citizens are active online? These questions are especially relevant with regard to the bigger debate about the consequences of political Internet use. As mentioned previously, optimistic scholars often believe that the Internet

stimulates democracy (Tedesco, 2008), and in contrast, pessimistic and skeptical scholars believe that the Internet undermines democracy (Norris, 2000). The question that is unanswered is what constitutes a 'good' democracy. Views about democracy are largely normative (Hindman, 2009): "different normative views [exists] regarding what characterizes a good democracy" (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 333). These normative views are translated into different models of democracy. Such "models carry different normative expectations on citizens and politicians" (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 333). Answering the question whether the Internet contributes to, or undermines democracy, is therefore no easy task. It requires some knowledge about the different models of democracy, which is explained in the following section. Additionally, a choice for a certain perspective on democracy (a model) should be made to examine whether the Internet's effects meet the expectations of a certain perspective.

The classical models of democracy (Pateman, 1970) ask only minimum requirements from citizens and political actors (Strömbäck, 2008). Free, fair and competitive elections, wherein citizens vote and have knowledge about societal issues and politics, are core necessities. Compared to these classical models of democracy, *participatory democracy* and *deliberative democracy* models demand much more from citizens and political actors (Bohman, 2007). The participatory model of democracy requests citizens to participate in civic and political activities and, thereby, creating bonds and associations with political actors. It has often been voiced that when citizens participate and feel connected, they get more interested in politics, engage in political organizations, and in the end, citizen will vote more often (Strömbäck, 2008). The deliberative model of democracy asks even more from political actors and citizens. This model demands that decisions should always be preceded by discussions. Such discussion should be rational, impartial and requires equal participation and every value about a conflict should be discussed (Strömbäck, 2008). These latter two forms of democracy are often regarded as 'strong' forms of democracy (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003).

This dissertation evaluates whether its empirical findings meet the expectations of the model of participatory democracy. The participatory model of democracy describes that citizens should engage in civic and political activities and create connections with political actors. Citizens will then develop a collective concern about societal issues (Held, 2006). More political participation and engagement in politics is desirable, because involvement provides a mechanism through which citizens can voice their desires and interests to their representatives (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Political actors can then understand citizens' concerns. Moreover, democracy needs citizens to participate in political processes; otherwise no responsiveness to citizens' interests would exist (Verba et al., 1995). Given the fact that more participation and involvement in politics is good for democracy, according to the participatory model of democracy, we should care about whether citizens are active and involved, both online and offline.

In sum, this thesis is mainly focused on the effects of online political communication on political involvement. It investigates whether involvement increases among citizens due to the Internet. This is a desirable outcome in a participatory democracy. Therefore, this thesis is predominantly linked to the participatory model of democracy.

Political involvement

The main dependent variable in this dissertation is political involvement. Political involvement contains a variety of measures of engagement in politics (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Verba et al., 1995; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). More specifically, this dissertation is aimed at different facets of political involvement: It focuses on psychological (feelings of) political involvement (e.g., interest in politics; see Chapter 2 and 4), political behavioral intention (e.g., political talk; see Chapter 5) and actual political behavior (e.g., voting and engaging in online political activities; see Chapter 2 and 3). In this dissertation, political behavior is equivalent to political participation. While political involvement is highly related to participation, and some scholars even consider engagement a cause of participation (Verba et al., 1995), participation and engagement fall in this dissertation under the same umbrella: political involvement.

THEORIES ON ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS: THE HOPES AND FEARS

Although the link between the Internet, political involvement and democracy has been an appealing research venue for political scientists, communication and media scholars (Polat, 2005), scientists compete in predicting the consequences of Internet use on political involvement (Boulianne, 2009; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Overall, there are three groups of scholars, who have opposing viewpoints: the pessimistic, the optimistic and the moderate optimistic or skeptical scholars. In the next section of this chapter, these three views will be described.

The pessimistic view: a decline in political involvement

“One set of scholars [...] believe that the Internet will have a detrimental effect on engagement, because this technology is being used primarily for entertainment” (Boulianne, 2009, p. 193). This statement is based on research that was conducted around the turn of the twenty-first century. Studies found that Internet use was associated with decline in social involvement (spending less time with families and others within their social circle) and an increase in depressions and loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998; Norman & Lutz, 2000). The causal mechanism behind this phenomenon can be found in the ‘time displacement theory’. This theory was introduced by Robert Putnam (2000) for television news, but is often extended to the Internet (Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002). The theory of time displacement explains that when citizens spent more time online, they have less time to involve in civic or social activities (see, also Boulianne, 2009; Kraut et al., 1998). Thus, the Internet will not positively affect involvement among citizens, because the Internet will be used for entertainment and not political purposes. As the Internet distracts citizens, citizens will have less time to engage in civic behavior, such as joining civic groups or participate in political behavior (see also Boulianne, 2009). In other words, Internet use will lead to a decline in political involvement among citizens. Yet, Boulianne (2009) found in her meta-analysis no evidence for a negative effect of Internet use on involvement. This indicates that finding support for the idea that the Internet contributes to a decline in (political) involvement is unlikely.

The optimistic view: mobilization theories

As opposed to the pessimistic view, mobilization theories believe that Internet use promotes democracy, because the Internet empowers ‘new’ citizens to become politically active (Norris, 2000). Norris (2000) points out that these optimistic scholars claim that online participation is distinctively different from offline participation. The Internet reduces the barriers of political participation, by a) lowering the costs (time and effort), by b) offering opportunities for horizontal and vertical communication that may enrich deliberation (interactivity), by c) dissemination of political information, by d) offering access on demand, by e) offering greater depth about (political) issues as people can search for more information via hyperlinks, and by f) offering new and convenient ways of engaging in political life (Boulianne, 2009; Norris, 2000; Polat, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Tedesco, 2008). These advantages make it easier for citizens to participate in politics. A rationale for the positive relation between Internet use and engagement originates in the rational choice paradigm. The rational choice tradition predicts that when costs are reduced, the chance that citizens participate will increase (Bimber, 2001). Since Internet lowers the cost of participation, mobilization theories argue that it propels citizens to use the Internet for political purposes, and consequently, they can become more involved. Previous studies have supported the mobilization theorists. Scholars found that spending time online is positively associated with civic engagement (Shah et al., 2002), political discussion (Shah et al., 2005), political interest (Boulianne, 2011) and (online) political participation (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Vissers, Hooghe, Stolle, & Mahéo, 2011).

The moderate optimistic or skeptical view: reinforcement

In contrast to the optimistic view, reinforcement theory suggest that Internet use will only benefit those who are already advantaged (Norris, 2000; Polat, 2005). The predictors of Internet use are the same predictors of political involvement, which implicates that the benefits of Internet use will generally be applicable to citizens who are already engaged in political life (Boulianne, 2009). In other words, citizens who are already more politically sophisticated (citizens who are interested, knowledgeable, and already engaged in politics), will also use the Internet for political communication. Especially, since these politically sophisticated citizens can see the implications of political Internet use in their lives (Boulianne, 2009; Polat, 2005). Therefore, the Internet will not reform, but rather normalize or strengthen the existing patterns of political participation (Krueger, 2002; Norris, 2000).

The moderate optimistic or skeptical view is supported by previous studies. Scholars found that online political participation was related to reinforcing social inequalities, in other words, those who are engaged online where also the ones who were highly involved online (Bakker, 2013; Best & Krueger, 2005; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006). Other scholars found that Internet use had no or just had a minimal impact on democracy (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). For example, no relationship between the use of social networking sites and political interest and participation of young adults was found (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). This indicates that Internet use has no impact at all.

Remaining voids and issues in research

In 2009, Shelley Boulianne published a meta-analysis on studies that were focused on the relationship between Internet use and citizen engagement. Although her meta-data does find that Internet use positively affects involvement, she is not certain that Internet use will have a substantial impact on involvement. The average positive effect is small in size. In addition, Boulianne (2009) argues that a lot of studies did not explore causal relationships. It is unclear whether Internet use affects involvement or the other way around. Furthermore, she points out that the effects of Internet use on involvement seem to change across time. She also notes that when online news is used to measure Internet use, the effects on involvement are larger than when other measures are included (Boulianne, 2009). Nonetheless, far too little attention has been paid to the content of online communication (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). Previous studies focused on general measures, such as frequency of Internet use or news use. “Conceptualizing and measuring [...] communication and information, rather than the channels through which it flows, are likely to lead to improved insights about how the experiences of digital media use affect political behavior” (Bimber & Copeland, 2013, p. 136).

These gaps in research give directions for this dissertation. First, it is important to study the effects of Internet use on involvement in an era characterized by a more extensive use of Internet in our daily lives (Xenos & Moy, 2007). The studies in this thesis will be examined from 2010 onwards in the Netherlands; this is a period and a country in which almost all citizens use the Internet.

Second, during campaigns, the effects of Internet use may be even more consequential. During elections, citizens make up their minds and cast their ballot. To make a decision, people depend on the media to get informed. As the Internet lowers boundaries to get information or talk about politics, the Internet may facilitate these information needs. Studying the consequences of Internet use during election periods, offers more insight into the effects on political behavior. This will be addressed in this dissertation: The relationship between online political communication and political involvement will be investigated during (Chapter 2 and 3) and outside election campaigns (Chapter 4 and 5). Additionally, change in the effects will be examined using longitudinal panel data with two waves (Chapter 2).

The third void in research relates to the lack in studies that focus on the causal relationships. When studying the consequences of Internet use it is essential to examine causality. Otherwise, making claims about the effect of political Internet use would be inadequate, because the direction of the effects could not be untangled (Boulianne, 2009). Therefore, this dissertation will examine causal relationships by using panel data with multiple waves (Chapter 2) and three experiments (Chapter 4 and 5).

Lastly, since we already know that general online news use has positive consequences for civic life (Boulianne, 2009; Shah et al., 2005), it is important to look beyond the effects of online news usage and focus on more specific forms of online political communication (e.g., Twitter use or visiting a party website). For that reason, we will look beyond the effect of general news usage and focus on specific forms of online political communication (Chapter 2 and 3) and the content characteristics of Internet use (Chapter 3, 4 and 5).

The previous discussion leads to four initial research questions. These initial research questions will be used as a starting point of this dissertation. Answering these questions will offer a broad overview of the effects of the use of different forms of political Internet usage, by giving a first indication *how many* citizens use Internet for political purposes, *which* citizens and with *what* effect. Moreover, it will be examined whether the use of *different forms* (i.e., political Twitter use, reading online political comments, or emailing a politician) has consequences for citizens’ involvement into politics. Answers to the research questions give a preliminary understanding into the reach of online political communication and it addresses the theoretical debate about the consequences of political Internet use.

RQ1. *How many citizens use the Internet for political purposes?*

RQ2. *Which citizens use the Internet for political purposes?*

RQ3. *What are the effects of different forms of political Internet use on citizens’ political involvement?*

RQ4. *Are the effects of different forms of political Internet use on citizens’ political involvement stronger for more politically interested citizens than for less politically interested citizens?*

After the initial four research questions are answered, this dissertation addresses the main voids and issues that have been pointed out in previous research more specifically. This will be explained in greater detail in the following section.

FORM AND CONTENT OF ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: TWO KEY CHARACTERISTICS

When studying the effects of a given (mass) medium, it is often believed that the influence is caused by the form (in general) *and* content (more specific) of a particular medium (Eveland, 2003; McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991). For example, viewing television has specific consequences, but also the advertisement shown on television has specific and maybe different consequences (Eveland, 2003). Previous research, however, made “little effort [...] to discuss what it is about mass media that is producing effect[s]” (Eveland; 2003, p. 396). This is also a major limitation in research on the consequences of online political communication and, more importantly, in the development of theory about the impact of the Internet. As online technologies are rapidly converging and changing (Polat, 2005), it is important to examine not only different forms of Internet use, but also its content characteristics. Moreover, by investigating *how* citizens use the Internet next to *how many* or *how often* citizens use Internet (Shah et al., 2005), the theoretical knowledge about the relationship between Internet use and involvement can be advanced. In this dissertation, the form and the content of online political

communication will be studied. Especially since previous research pointed out that the relationship between various forms of online political communication (form and maybe also content) is dynamic: effects can be positive and negative (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Hence, different forms of political Internet use will be examined (i.e., how many citizens use the Internet, see Chapter 2) and subsequently the effects of specific characteristics of the Internet will be considered (i.e., how citizens use the Internet, Chapter 3, 4 and 5).

Because Eveland (2003) concludes that media is multidimensional (has multiple content characteristics, that can be identified by theorists and researchers), two key content characteristics of online political communication will be examined: interactivity and political personalization. Both characteristics are regarded as key features of online communication (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Vergeer et al., 2013). It will be investigated how these two key characteristics affect involvement. In addition, according to the Mix of Attributes Approach, these different characteristics can also interact with one another (Eveland, 2003). It is, therefore, necessary to not only examine the main effects of these characteristics, but also the interaction effects: will the different content characteristics strengthen or rather weaken the effects. Examining the mix of content characteristics of online political communication can, thereby, “potentially revitalize the study of media effects and bring a measure of recognition and independence to the field of mass communication” (Eveland, 2003, p. 408). This will be done in Chapter 4 and 5 of this dissertation. I will now turn towards the specific content characteristics interactivity and political personalization.

Interactivity

Interactivity makes online media fundamentally different from offline media. Interactivity can be operationalized in many different ways (Lee & Shin, 2012; Liu & Shrum, 2002; Sundar et al., 2003; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005), but one often used definition is the one introduced by Liu and Schrum’s (2002): “The degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized” (p. 54). Television enables one-to-many communication, but Internet has a unique function: It enables many-to-many communication, it lacks gatekeepers (such as journalists) and it offers its users the possibility to respond immediately, which results in reciprocal communication between communicators (Tedesco, 2008; Polat, 2005). For that reason, interactivity has often been regarded as the key characteristic of online media. Political communication research has also been repeatedly emphasizing that interactivity is a key characteristic of online political communication (Sundar et al., 2003). In accordance, previous work using content analyses of online political communication empirically shows that interactivity is indeed an important characteristic of political communication on the web (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Schweitzer, 2008; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006).

To understand the role the Internet plays in affecting involvement, this dissertation incorporate Internet’s most prominent characteristic; interactivity (see Chapter 3, 4 and 5). In addition, this dissertation also focuses on two distinct phenomena of

interactivity: interactivity-as-product and interactivity-as-process (Stromer-Galley, 2004). The former entails communication between people and computers or networks. More specifically, interactivity-as-product is present when technological features enable users to interact with for example a website by clicking on hyperlinks or to click on a button to become a member of a party. Interactivity-as-process entails communication between individuals. Such interactivity is present when individuals (citizens, politicians, organizations) talk to each other online (Stromer-Galley, 2004). In other words, interactivity-as-process is participating in or observing responsiveness in online communication. Interactivity can be a content characteristic (interactivity-as-product), but a communication style as well (interactivity-as-process). Chapter 4 of this dissertation is focused on interactivity-as-product and interactivity-as-process and Chapter 3 and 5 on interactivity-as-process.

Political personalization

The second characteristic of online political communication is political personalization. Political personalization can be operationalized in many different ways as well (Adam & Maier, 2010; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; Van Aelst, Sheaffer, & Stanyer, 2012; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Generally, political personalization is defined as a shift of focus from parties and organizations to candidates and leaders; individual politicians are (increasingly) portrayed as private persona (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Political personalization is one of the key concepts in research on political news coverage (Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012), but political personalization is also especially present in online and social media. “Politicians themselves can now easily publish their opinions on personal websites, weblogs, micro-blogging sites and social networking sites without any third party assistance (e.g. party officials) or interference (e.g. journalists)” (Vergeer et al., 2013, p. 480). The increasing use of personally kept web platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook) seem to advance personalization in politics. But, in addition, the way politicians communicate, seem to enhance personalization as well (Vergeer et al., 2013). The online communication style politician’s use is often characterized by sending messages about what occupies them from a more personal perspective (Vergeer et al., 2013).

In general, personalization exists in the presence of politicians in online media platforms in addition to their parties, but also in the messages they convey. This makes personalization also one of the key concepts in research on the effects of Internet and it is therefore, used in this dissertation as a key characteristic of online political communication (see Chapter, 3, 4 and 5). Personalization can also be technologically divided into two forms. On the one hand, personalization can be present on the Internet because of authorship (politicians are the ‘owner’ of the online platform, e.g. social media). On the other hand, personalization can be present within the communication itself, for example in the biographies that are included in the online content or by way of communicating about, for instance, the politicians’ private life. In that sense, in a similar fashion as interactivity, personalization can be a content characteristic and a communication style. In chapter 4, we will focus on personalization as a content characteristic and a communication style. In chapter 3 and 5, we will focus on personalization as a communication style.

Given the fact that the two characteristics of online political communication are now identified, the remaining part of this section will introduce the last three research questions of this dissertation.

- RQ5. *To what extent are political personalization and interactivity indeed key content characteristics of online political communication?*
- RQ6. *To what extent do the content characteristics of online political communication (i.e., political personalization and interactivity) affect citizens' political involvement?*
- RQ7. *Why do the content characteristics of online political communication (i.e., political personalization and interactivity) affect citizens' political involvement?*

RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis draws upon a multi-method design. The conceptual model of this dissertation combines longitudinal panel data, content analysis, secondary data and several experiments. This combination of different methods offers a more elaborative and thorough investigation into the specific and different effects of online political communication. In the following, it is explained why different research methods are applied.

Longitudinal panel multi-wave data

Longitudinal panel survey data is used to offer an explorative and first insight into the consequences of different forms of online political communication. In addition, panel data with multiple waves is a state-of-the-art method in communication science. More specifically, the first two research questions (how many and which citizens use the Internet for political purposes) will be addressed. By utilizing survey data with a representative sample, political Internet use in society at large can be examined. Secondly, it is examined to what extent this usage affects citizens' political involvement (see RQ3) and whether this effect is conditional (i.e., RQ4, the effect is more pronounced for citizens with higher levels of political interest). The panel data with two waves enables us to examine these research questions in an advanced way. This study contributes to Boulianne's (2009) recommendation to examine the causal relationships more closely. It also addresses her point that the consequences and uses of the Internet for political purposes can increase over time. Data for this study was collected during the Dutch national elections of 2010.

Content analyses

After employing an explorative investigating into the consequences of different forms of online political communication, in the next step, the content characteristics of online political communication will be examined. As mentioned before, by investigating *which* characteristics of online political communication cause effects, instead of the *form* of online political communication, the theoretical knowledge about the relationship

between Internet use and involvement could be advanced. Previous research emphasized that when different attributes or characteristics of a medium are examined; one specific research design should be applied (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012). Dylko and McCluskey (2012) point out that "researchers should proceed by (a) identifying relevant attributes, then (b) use quantitative content analyses to document which of these attributes exist in the medium of interest, and conclude by (c) experiments validating or rejecting theorized effects of various attributes." (p. 255). A similar approach is applied in this dissertation. In this chapter the relevant content characteristics are identified. By using a manual and automatic content analyses of online political communication on a social networking site (i.e., Twitter), it will be identified which content characteristics exists and whether interactivity and political personalization are indeed key characteristics of online political communication. Data for this study (Tweets from political candidates) was collected during the Dutch national elections of 2010. Therefore, this study functions as a starting point for the effect studies and addresses the fifth research question. The effects studies (part c) will be explained in the next section.

Secondary voting data

To begin studying the effects of the main content characteristics of online political communication, the Twitter data and the results of the content analyses will be combined with actual voting data. Because the Twitter data can be combined with an existing outcome measure (i.e., the preferential votes each candidates receives during an election), this study offers a first insight into the electoral effects of the use of Twitter and the effects of the way in which Twitter is used. The study moves beyond self-reported measures and addresses research question six (i.e., the extent to which political personalization and interactivity affect citizens' political involvement).

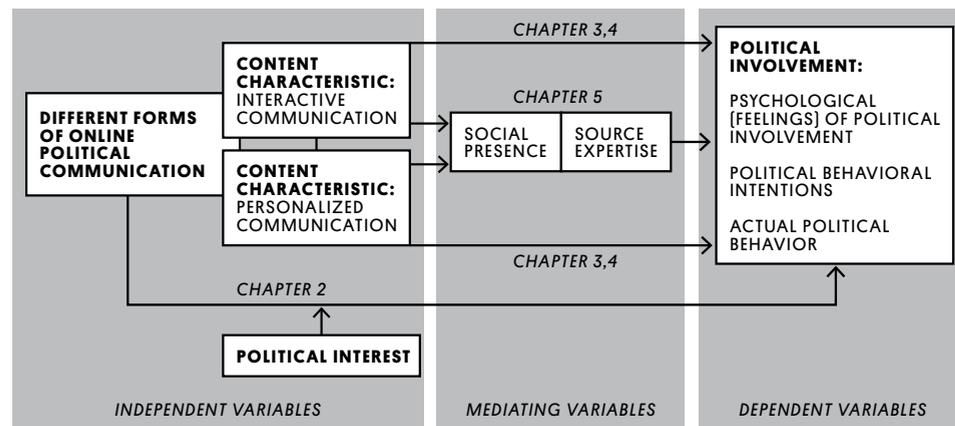
Experiments

This dissertation uses three experiments to test more specifically the consequences of online political communication. In particular, the experiments examine research question six and seven. Experiments are especially suitable, because they help establish cause and effect (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). This was a major deficit in previous research on the effects of online political communication (Boulianne, 2009). Moreover, as experiments allow researchers to have control over the content participants are exposed to, it can be examined *what it is about online political communication* that produces effects (Eveland, 2003). The content characteristics interactivity and personalization can be manipulated, which offers comprehension about the specific effects of online political communication. Hence, as proposed by the Mix of Attributes Approach (Eveland, 2003), the combined effect of these two different content characteristics can be studied as well. Lastly, experiments permit replication (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011): Because different practices of the experimental method were applied (i.e., a scenario experiment, a laboratory experiment and an online experiment), it can be ensured that the conclusions of this dissertation are not somehow unique (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

DISSERTATION OUTLINE

This dissertation consists of four separate studies (see Figure 1.1). Each chapter documents one study and the chapters are self-containing. The chapters are presented as empirical articles that contain abstracts, theoretical foundations, methods, results and separate conclusions and discussions. Below, it is explained how the chapters are related. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 will examine the usage, the users, the content characteristics, the conditional and direct effects of online political communication, and finally, Chapter 5 will investigate the underlying processes of that relationship.

Figure 1.1 The Conceptual Framework of the Dissertation.



This dissertation will start with an explorative study on the consequences of different forms of online political communication on citizens' political involvement. With the advantage of longitudinal data with two waves, **Chapter 2** investigates how many citizens use the Internet for political purposes (RQ1) and, more importantly, which citizens (RQ2). This answers fundamental questions regarding the *mobilization and reinforcement* debate (Hirzalla, Van Zoonen, & De Ridder, 2011; Norris, 2000). Will the Internet merely attract those citizens who are already politically involved, in other words, the 'usual suspects' (Polat, 2005), or will it mobilize new citizens? Once this initial question is answered, the chapter examines the relationship between different forms of political Internet use and citizens' political involvement (RQ3). The study differentiates between active and passive forms of political Internet use. Also the conditional effects will be examined (RQ4). Moreover, it investigates whether political Internet use is beneficial for those citizens who are already interested in politics, because they have the 'skills' to participate, or that it will engage 'new' citizens. This study offers a wide overview and insight into the different forms of political Internet use and the consequences for citizens.

Following this explorative investigation, the dissertation moves from specific online forms that can be used for political communication to the most important characteristics

of these forms. First, by using a content analysis, **Chapter 3** examines whether the two most important characteristics of online political communication, more personalized communication (a focus on an individual politician and his private life) and the use of interactive features, are present in an online medium that is used for political communication during an election campaign (i.e., Twitter; RQ5). It also assesses whether the use of that specific medium (i.e., Twitter) by candidates resulted in more electoral support (preferential votes; RQ3). In addition, the study examines whether the style of communicating (the two characteristics; interactivity and personalization) matters (RQ6). These analyses give us more insight into the real world consequences of online political communication and are a unique addition to the self-reported measures of political involvement in Chapter 2.

Although Chapter 3 uses a novel approach to examine the effects of online political communication, in addition, the direction of the relationship will be examined using experimental studies. By using two different experimental methods, a scenario experiment and a laboratory experiment using actual websites, **Chapter 4** examines whether more personalized online communication and the use of interactive features increases political involvement among citizens. In a scenario experiment, participants were asked to imagine that they were exposed to a website, while in a laboratory experiment participants actually visited a website. Furthermore, in accordance with the Mix of Attributes Approach (Eveland, 2003) it also tests the assumption whether the combined effect of personalization and interactivity enhances political involvement among citizens (RQ 6).

Taken together, the previous chapters focus on the (conditional) effects of political Internet use more general, and the effects of interactivity and personalization more explicitly. However, little is known about why online political communication (i.e., interactive and personalized communication) affects citizens' involvement in politics. What are the underlying processes that explain the positive effects of online political communication? In **Chapter 5**, again the relationship between communication styles (i.e., again personalized and interactive communication) and political involvement is investigated (RQ6). Yet, in this final experiment, the underlying mechanisms are examined as well (RQ7). By integrating theories from marketing and computer-mediated communication research (i.e., social presence and source expertise theory), Chapter 5 contributes to the scholarly work by advancing the understanding of the consequences of interactive and personalized online communication and the mechanisms that explain the effects. To conclude, in the last and final chapter of this dissertation, **Chapter 6**, the theoretical and political implications of the four studies will be discussed.

Taken together, this dissertation investigates whether the Internet contributes to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens' involvement in politics. This objective is important as the debate about the effects of Internet use for political purposes continues. Several studies have examined the effects of political Internet use, but voids and issues in research continue to exist. To my knowledge, previous research has only sporadically examined causal relationships, nor has it focused on different forms and characteristics of online political communication. Knowledge about the extent to which Internet use with its 'new' communication technologies mobilizes citizens to become involved, and

in turn, serve democratic ends, is of great importance. “[D]emocracy is unthinkable without the ability of citizens to participate freely” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 1). The Internet might contribute to political participation and involvement of citizens. Yet, this dissertation will show to what extent

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CHAPTER 2

THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT FORMS OF ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ON CITIZENS' POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In the time since the rise of the Internet, it has often been claimed that it has the potential to contribute to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens' involvement in politics. So far, empirical evidence regarding this purported effect has been mixed, and many questions about the consequences of specific forms of political Internet use (PIU) have remained unanswered. This study expands the knowledge about the relation between PIU and political involvement by examining the effect of active and passive forms of PIU on citizens' political involvement: more specifically, interest and voter turnout during election times. The results obtained from a panel study of a representative sample of the Dutch population ($N = 985$) reveal a positive relation between particular forms of PIU on the one hand and voter turnout and political interest on the other hand. In addition, for two specific forms of PIU, the positive effect on voter turnout is more prevalent for citizens who exhibit lower levels of political interest.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet in the communication of politics has increased tremendously. During the past decade, political parties and elected representatives have used the Internet to inform citizens and party members about their plans, points of view, and daily business¹. Online communication is considered an important element of a successful election campaign. The Internet offers easy access to political information, providing all kinds of opportunities for citizens to participate in political debates and for politicians to communicate interactively with voters. It is no surprise that several scholars argue the Internet has the potential to contribute to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens' involvement in politics (De Vreese, 2007; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Tedesco, 2007; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Wang, 2007).

Despite these optimistic views, communication research suggests that the actual number of citizens who use the Internet as a source of political communication (e.g., through party websites or Twitter) is still rather limited (Hindman, 2009; Rainie & Smith, 2012) and that this group mostly includes "those citizens who are already predisposed or interested in politics" (Boulianne, 2009, p. 194). According to this point of view, the Internet will not encourage new citizens to become more politically involved; rather, it engages citizens who are already interested (Bimber, 2003). This phenomenon is often referred to as reinforcement (Boulianne, 2009; Boulianne, 2011; Hirzalla, Van Zoonen, & De Ridder, 2011; Norris, 2001; Ward, Gibson, & Lusoli, 2003). However, the empirical evidence for such claims is mixed, and questions about the effects of Internet use remain unanswered. In particular, studies that examine specific forms of Internet usage are relatively scarce (Nielsen, 2011). In prior work, Internet use in general has often been measured (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Shah et al., 2005), or online news use has been analyzed (Boulianne, 2011; Shah, McLeod, & Kim, 2007). However, scholars note that

it is important to employ detailed measures of Internet use, including actions such as following a party on Facebook or emailing a politician, rather than considering overall Internet (news) use (Nielsen, 2011). The existing literature shows that specific forms of Internet usage have a positive influence on offline political participation (Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2011) and social capital (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). For that reason, in the present study, we will examine the effect of different forms of Internet usage. These forms of Internet use differ in the extent to which they are active (i.e., they involve participation) or passive (e.g., they entail reading and consuming information; see Bakker and de Vreese (2011) for a similar distinction). The central question of this study is as follows: What are the consequences of active and passive forms of political Internet usage for political involvement (i.e., political interest and voter turnout) during an election period? By employing a panel study with two waves, we can investigate such relationships more realistically (Eveland & Morey, 2011).

THE PESSIMISTS VERSUS THE (MODERATE) OPTIMISTS

In the time since the rise of the Internet, various claims about the relationship between Internet usage and political involvement have been made. Scholars disagree about the impact of the Internet on citizens' engagement in political activities (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2009). The debate presents a wide range of optimistic as well as skeptical claims about the effects of Internet usage. Optimistic scholars assert that the Internet has the potential to increase political involvement among citizens (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2009; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, & Dunsmore, 2005). The argument is that the variety of sources available online, combined with the lower costs of obtaining the information about candidates and the election, encourages citizens to learn more about politics and thus increases their engagement in politics (Shah et al., 2005; Wang, 2007). This mechanism is often defined as mobilization (Norris, 2001). As well as scholars who confirm the positive effects of PIU, there are those who claim that the Internet only has a positive effect for those citizens who are already interested in politics. Citizens who are not "engaged in the political process" are left behind (Boulianne, 2009; Hindman, 2009; Norris, 2001). This viewpoint implies that politics online "mirrors traditional patterns" and is essentially "politics as usual" (Davis, 1999; Hindman, 2009; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003). This view is commonly referred to as the normalization or reinforcement thesis (Boulianne, 2011; Hirzalla et al., 2011; Norris, 2001).

Overall, a considerable debate centers on the question of the extent to which the Internet can contribute to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens' political involvement (Dahlgren, 2005). The empirical evidence is mixed, potentially due to the scarce systematic evidence about specific forms of Internet usage. Besides, we can infer even less about the actual consequences of specific forms of PIU. In the current study, we investigate the relationship between specific forms of PIU and political involvement. We examine the effect of both active and passive forms of PIU.

Understanding involvement

Before we introduce the specific hypotheses of this study, we must define political involvement and indicate how it has been operationalized and assessed in previous studies. Many scholars mention that political involvement can take a wide variety of forms (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011; Delli Carpini, 2004; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010). According to Delli Carpini (2004), involvement can be defined as having democratic norms and values (e.g., political interest), having political attitudes and beliefs (e.g., an ideological orientation), or exhibiting actual political behavior (e.g., voting). Likewise, Weaver (1996) emphasizes that exposure to (newer) forms of media increases general interest in campaigns and intention to vote – the aspect of political involvement most often studied (Donovan, Tolbert, & Smith, 2009; Solt, 2008; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). We focus on the two latter types of political involvement: political interest and voter turnout.

Unlike voter turnout, political interest is often used as a strong predictor of many important types of political behavior because people's political interest is considered to be highly stable over time (Prior, 2010). From this viewpoint, it would seem that political interest determines whether citizens will be politically active (Verba et al., 1995). However, other scholars point out that the direction of causality of this relationship is more complicated. Verba et al. (1995, p. 276) emphasize that "[p]olitical interest ... probably lead to political activity but, presumably, participating in politics also enhances political interest." This notion is supported by recent studies. Wang (2007) found that Internet use promotes political interest and makes citizens more likely to participate in politics. Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) found that attention to political news was strongly associated with political interest, and they stress that this relation is both causal and reciprocal. Likewise, Boulianne (2011) found that online news stimulates political interest.

It seems that different processes are at work for different media and that PIU may not only be determined by political interest, but may also foster political interest and political behavior. Still, empirical assessments of the causal relation between online media use and political interest are rare, and the results seem to conflict. Moreover, the dependence on cross-sectional data makes it difficult to test for the direction of this relationship. In the current study, we will address the issue of this causal relationship. Using panel data with two waves, we can examine whether political interest motivates specific forms of PIU and not vice versa.

Two forms of political Internet use

Prior work within political communication research differentiates Internet usage along the lines of active and passive forms of political Internet usage (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Dimitrova et al., 2011; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Active Internet usage incorporates functions that enable interactive or two-way communication, such as participating in online political discussions (derived from the literature on interactivity; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011; Tedesco, 2007), and passive Internet usage consists of functions that only involve one-way communication, such as reading political information online. Scholars working in the field of persuasive communication make a similar distinction between active and passive forms of Internet usage. Active Internet usage is defined as

creating or contributing to online content (e.g., writing online comments or engaging in online conversation on social network sites) and passive Internet usage is defined as consuming online content (e.g., reading online comments or viewing online videos; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). Furthermore, the educational literature distinguishes between passive interaction (reading online discussions) and active interaction (participating in online discussions; Rovai & Barnum, 2003).

If we turn to the effects of different forms of PIU, the current literature shows that active forms seem to have a bigger impact on political outcome variables than passive forms of PIU. For instance, Hardy and Scheufele (2006) found that the effect of searching information about politics online on political behavior was stronger for people who used computer-mediated interactions (chatting) than for people who use the Internet in a more passive way. De Zúñiga (2009) found that more active use of blogs (i.e., commenting and publishing) predicts political participation better than passive use of blogs (i.e., reading blogs). Furthermore, Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) found that online expression on social media was related to political involvement, while general attention to social media was not. Finally, Dimitrova et al. (2011) found that the use of political party websites and social media have a stronger effect on political participation than the use of online news sites. They argue that political websites (which incorporate interactive and mobilization functions) and social media (which often connect and involve citizens) are more likely to encourage citizens to become politically active than online news websites (which often involve reading information online).

The underlying mechanisms that explain the positive effects of active forms of PIU can be found in the literature on interactivity. Interactivity can be defined as two-way communication: one citizen can communicate directly with another citizen, politician, or system, and vice versa (Tedesco, 2007). Interactivity is a key characteristic to study the effects of online political communication and is an important component of active PIU (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). Active PIU involves engaging citizens to participate in two-way communication with others (e.g., a forum) or with a system (e.g., donating-money buttons on websites). Passive PIU involves one-way communication (e.g., reading online information).

Previous literature has shown that interactive online communication encourages citizens to become more cognitively involved in politics or elections (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010), as participation in an interactive environment presents citizens with a civic role: they feel closer to politics, feel that politics is present and accessible (Chapter 4; Bucy & Gregson, 2001; Lee & Shin, 2012). In other words, interactive communication stimulates citizens to process the information more meaningfully, because it helps them to make sense of this information (Hardy & Scheufele, 2006). Increased cognitive involvement will enhance learning (Rovai & Barnum, 2003) and may consequently lead to an increase of political involvement. Previous work supports these theoretical considerations. For example, Tedesco (2007) found that people who are exposed to highly interactive political websites, compared to people who are exposed to low interactive websites, value voting as a more important activity. Likewise, Lee and Shin (2012) found in an experimental study that exposure to politicians' interactive tweets induced the feeling that a politician was 'present,' which consequently was positively associated with stronger vote intentions for that specific politician.

To sum up, previous work seems to support the notion that more active forms of political Internet use affect citizens' political involvement more strongly than more passive forms. Following the interactivity literature, we define active forms of PIU as having features that enable two-way communication (either interactive or mobilization features) and passive forms of PIU as having features that enable one-way communication (often reading political information or political news). Active forms of PIU are activities such as filling out Vote Advice Applications, writing comments, participating in political activities on social network sites and online political discussion, signing online petitions, forwarding political e-mails, videos or links, or chatting about politics. Passive forms of PIU are reading online news, visiting party websites, reading comments, and following political activities on, for example, social networking sites. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

- H1a: Active forms of PIU have a stronger positive effect on citizens' interest in politics than passive forms of PIU.*
- H1b: Active forms of PIU have a stronger positive effect on voter turnout than passive forms of PIU.*

Furthermore, we expect a positive interaction effect of PIU and political interest on voter turnout. More specifically, we expect that the effect of PIU on citizens' political behavior (i.e., voter turnout) will be modified by political interests. This expectation stems from the reinforcement literature. Within this line of research, it is often claimed that politically interested or active citizens have more resources (civic skills) that allow them to benefit from the advantages provided by the Internet (Best & Krueger, 2005). In other words, the Internet will mainly affect those citizens who are already politically sophisticated and will have less of an effect on those who are not. This dynamic will widen the gaps between the more and less politically sophisticated citizens (Bimber, 2001; Bimber, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Some empirical evidence supports these theoretical claims. For example, in an experimental study, Eveland, Marton, and Seo (2004) find that more sophisticated citizens are more likely to take advantage of the Internet in this regard. Furthermore, Xenos and Moy (2007) find that the effect of online political information exposure on civic and political participation was enhanced for citizens with higher levels of political interest. Online information exposure is, as we operationalized it, a passive form of PIU. So it seems that these scholars found a moderating effect for a more passive form of PIU. It is, however, not known whether such a moderating role exists for more active forms of PIU; although, based on the notion that passive forms of PIU are moderated by political interest, it is likely that this also applies for more active forms of PIU.

On the contrary, it could also be the case that for politically interested citizens, it does not make a difference whether they use active or passive forms of PIU. This can be explained by the fact that political interest is generally so powerful that a single activity in an active form of PIU is not able to influence voting intentions. Politically interested citizens are more likely to have higher voting intentions in any case. Participation in an active form of PIU does not make a difference for those citizens. Following this line of

reasoning, it is more likely that less interested citizens will benefit from active forms of PIU, because using active forms of PIU may have a mobilizing impact on them, while highly interested citizens are already mobilized.

To sum up, on the one hand, it could be the case that both passive and active forms of PIU have a stronger effect on voting intention for citizens with higher levels of political interest than only passive forms. On the other hand, it might also be that for active forms of PIU a contradictory effect will occur – less interested citizens will benefit more from active forms of PIU. However, due to the lack of empirical research into the moderating effects of political interest on both active and passive forms of PIU, the following research question is formulated:

RQ1: Does political interest moderate the relationship between both active and passive forms of PIU and voter turnout, and if so, in what ways?

METHOD

To examine the effects of passive and active forms of PIU, we used a national panel survey of a representative sample of the Dutch population. We conducted the current study in the context of the 2010 Dutch national elections. In the Netherlands, 91% of Dutch households had access to the Internet at home in 2010 (CBS, 2011); Internet use was common in the Netherlands at that time.

In recent years, many studies have focused on high-profile cases in the United States context (e.g., the Obama election, Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Kim, 2011; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). However, evidence shows that “across Western democracies, differences in media environments ... play an important role in shaping individual news behaviour” (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011, 127). Investigating the effects of PIU in a European country with a different political system and media landscape may help to generalize the results to a broader context (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002).

The study was carried out in the spring of 2010, the period leading up to the Dutch national election. The survey consisted of two pre-election waves and was part of a longitudinal study that was designed to examine the public opinion of Dutch citizens about various public issues. The online questionnaires (respondents were invited by email) were distributed approximately nine weeks and two weeks prior to the election². The respondents were sampled from the TNS NIPO database, which contains approximately 200,000 persons and is representative of the adult Dutch population. The panel was recruited using a variety of methods, including face-to-face, telephone, and online recruitment. The panel that we used is representative and respondents were randomly selected. The response rates for the two waves were 78.8% and 79.3% (recontact rate), respectively (calculated according to the AAPOR guidelines; AAPOR, 2011), and 985 respondents participated in both waves. Respondent rates were high, because the respondents in the panel were registered and received incentives when participating.

Measures

Voter turnout

Voter turnout was measured by asking the respondents, “If the parliamentary elections were held today, would you vote, and if so, for which political party would you vote?”. The answers were dichotomized as follows: (0) “intention not to turn out to vote” and (1) “intention to turn out to vote” (*no intention to vote*_{wave 1} = 7.3%, *intention to vote*_{wave 1} = 92.7%; *no intention to vote*_{wave 2} = 6.1%, *intention to vote*_{wave 2} = 93.9%). We are aware that due to our use of self-reported measures, the variable voter turnout may have been affected by over-reporting (the actual turnout for the 2010 Dutch national elections was 74%). In the questionnaire, the respondents had the opportunity to answer “no voting rights,” “I do not want to say,” or “do not know.” These latter answers were recoded as missing³.

Political interest

Political interest was assessed based on responses to the statement “Politics in general interests me,” which were coded using a 7-point scale where 1 equals “totally disagree” and 7 “totally agree” ($M_{\text{wave 1}} = 4.06, SD = 1.80; M_{\text{wave 2}} = 4.16, SD = 1.76$).

Political Internet use

There are various ways to measure PIU. We chose to consider a wide array of possible political Internet activities which are important during election times. As noted earlier, we aim to improve the linkage between use and effects by providing detailed measures of usage. To develop these detailed measures, we consulted previous research that addresses the political content of the Internet (Utz, 2009; Vliegthart & Van Noort, 2010; Walgrave, Van Aelst, & Nuytemans, 2008). Based on the existing literature, we included 11 different types of PIU. These types included the most important political activities that (to our knowledge) were available during the 2010 Dutch national elections, including activities that are both active and passive in nature⁴.

Passive forms of PIU

First, *online news use* consisted of 15 items that asked the respondents how often they visited a news website during an average week. We combined these questions by taking the average scores for each of the 15 items, generating an index for online news use ($\alpha_{\text{wave 1}} = .73, M = 1.58, SD = 0.70; \alpha_{\text{wave 2}} = .74, M = 1.55, SD = 0.69$). Second, the variable *visiting political websites* was constructed from seven items that asked the respondents how often they visited the best-known Dutch party websites. An index was constructed by averaging the scores for these items ($\alpha_{\text{wave 2}} = .91, M = 1.12, SD = 0.49$). Third, the respondents could indicate how often they read comments on online news articles related to political issues, using an 8-point scale ranging from “never” to “almost every day.” The answers generated the data for the measures *reading comments about politics on online news sites* ($M_{\text{wave 1}} = 2.37, SD = 2.02; M_{\text{wave 2}} = 2.34, SD = 2.02$). Fourth, the respondents were able to indicate how often they follow or actively participate in activities on social network sites (SNS) that deal with political issues. Again, the responses were recorded on an 8-point scale ranging from “never” to “almost every day.” These responses yielded the data for the measures *following activities about politics on SNS* (following; $M_{\text{wave 1}} = 1.39, SD = 1.14; M_{\text{wave 2}} = 1.35, SD = 1.14$).

Active forms of PIU

First, the variable using *Vote Advice Application* (VAAs) was assessed based on responses to the following question: “Did you use the VoteMatch [Stemwijzer] application on the Internet for this election?” ($No_{wave 2} = 74.3\%$, $Yes_{wave 2} = 25.7\%$)⁵. VAAs are active online political activities; they let the user interact with the website, and direct feedback (“stemadvies”) is provided by the application. Second, *writing comments about politics on online news sites* ($M_{wave 1} = 1.21$, $SD = 0.79$; $M_{wave 2} = 1.19$, $SD = 0.76$) and participating in activities about politics on SNS ($M_{wave 1} = 1.19$, $SD = 0.80$; $M_{wave 2} = 1.17$, $SD = 0.73$) was measured. The third measurement was constructed from two items that asked the respondents whether or not they followed politicians on Twitter and whether or not they tweeted about political issues. The answers were dichotomized to indicate *political Twitter use*, where 0 equals “did not use Twitter for politics” and 1 equals “used Twitter for politics” (*inter-item correlation*_{wave 2} = .37, $M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.20$). Last, we included four dichotomized measures: *signing an online petition* ($M_{wave 2} = 0.04$, $SD = 0.20$); *forwarding an email, video or link containing political content* ($M_{wave 2} = 0.03$, $SD = 0.18$); *chatting about politics* ($M_{wave 2} = 0.03$, $SD = 0.17$); and *participating in an online discussion about politics* ($M_{wave 2} = 0.04$, $SD = 0.19$).

Control variables

Several studies that explored Internet use and political (or civic) involvement found that demographics play a role in influencing involvement levels (Moy et al., 2005). In all of the analyses presented in this study, we controlled for *gender* (coded as female), *age* (in years), *education* (on a 7-point scale where one equals low educational level and seven equals high educational level), trust in politics and offline news use⁶. Variables for offline news use were *newspaper reading*, *public television news viewing*, and *commercial television news viewing*.

Analysis

The specific regression models used in this paper were ordinary least squares multiple linear regressions and logistic regressions for the dichotomous measures. We included lagged dependent variables (i.e., initial political interest and previous intention to vote in wave 1) as predictor variables in our model to test the causal relationships. These lagged variables enable us to control for initial political interest level and habitual voting. (For an overview of the use of causal lags in analyzing panel data, see Finkel, 1995; Markus, 1979.)

The sampling distributions of certain variables in our data were highly skewed, which makes parametric methods unsuitable for use. The *Jackknife* procedure can be used to overcome these difficulties (Potvin & Roff, 1993). The Jackknife procedure is a resampling method that is similar to bootstrapping. It entails omitting one case from the total sample at a time ($N - 1$) and conducting separate analyses for the reduced sample (Rutten & Gelissen, 2008). This procedure is repeated until all possible samples have been analyzed. Using the Jackknife estimator, we can eliminate possible bias from our analyses. For an overview of the relevant theory and the motivations for using the Jackknife procedure and other similar ones, see Miller (1974) and Efron (1982).

RESULTS

We first identified how many citizens use the Internet for political communication (Table 2.1). Overall, the results listed in Table 2.1 indicate that although Internet use for political purposes is rather uncommon (except for reading online news), some online political communication tools are more popular than others. Because the majority of citizens do not use the Internet for political purposes, those citizens will not be mobilized to become politically active online. In addition, we also determined which citizens actually participate online. Does online political communication mobilize new citizens, or does it reinforce existing patterns of political engagement? Based on regression analyses with the various forms of PIU as dependent variables, it seems that the latter is the case: those who are more interested in politics, who are younger, and who use online news more often are more likely to be politically active online (specific results of these analyses can be provided upon request).

Table 2.1 Descriptives and Change in Political Internet Uses in Percentages

	Wave 1 (N=1242) (%)	Wave 2 (N=986) (%)	Change during the campaign (%)
Passive forms of Political Internet Use			
Online news use	73.0	68.9	- 4.1
Reading comments posted in an online political news article ^a	25.9	25.0	- 0.9
Follow activities about politics on SNS ^a	6.8	5.9	- 0.9
Visiting a party website		14.5	
Following a politician on Twitter		3.3	
Active forms of Political Internet Use			
Posting comments posted in an online political news article ^a	3.7	3.2	- 0.5
Participating in activities about politics on SNS ^a	3.1	2.1	- 1.0
Voting Application Aid (VAA)		25.7	
Signing an online petition		4.4	
Participating in an online discussion about politics		3.7	
Forwarding an e-mail, video or link containing a political content		3.3	
Chatting about politics		3.2	
Tweet about a political issue		1.7	

Note. ^a Once per month or more often

We now turn to our hypotheses and our research question. To test hypothesis 1a, which predicts that active forms of PIU have a stronger positive effect on citizens' interest in politics than passive forms, we performed an OLS regression. The results are presented in Table 2.2, in the first column. Table 2.2 shows that reading comments under an online news article about a political issue is related to increased political interest. This finding is significant when we control for socio-demographics, individual characteristics, and offline news use and political interest earlier in the election. The other forms of PIU did not have a significant effect on political interest. Although we found that one specific form of PIU had an effect on political interest, the findings do not support hypothesis 1a.

To test hypothesis 1b, which predicts that active forms of PIU have a stronger positive effect on voter turnout than passive forms, we performed a logistic regression. We found minimal support for hypothesis 1b. The second column in Table 2.2 shows that the use of VAAs was a significant positive predictor of voter turnout, even when we control for vote intention earlier in the election. Again, the other forms of PIU did not have a significant positive effect on voter turnout. However, we also found that writing comments had a negative effect on voter turnout. It might be that citizens who write comments are more cynical towards politics and are therefore less likely to vote. Overall, it seems that both active and passive forms of PIU can have an effect on political involvement.

To examine research question 1, we performed logistic regressions in which we included interaction terms between the specific forms of PIU and political interest. The significant results are presented in Table 2.2 in the third and fourth columns. In most instances, there was no different effect of PIU for people with different levels of political interest. We found two significant results that improved the fit of our model (see Table 2.2, models b and c), both of which suggested a negative interaction effect between the specific form of PIU and political interest on vote intention.

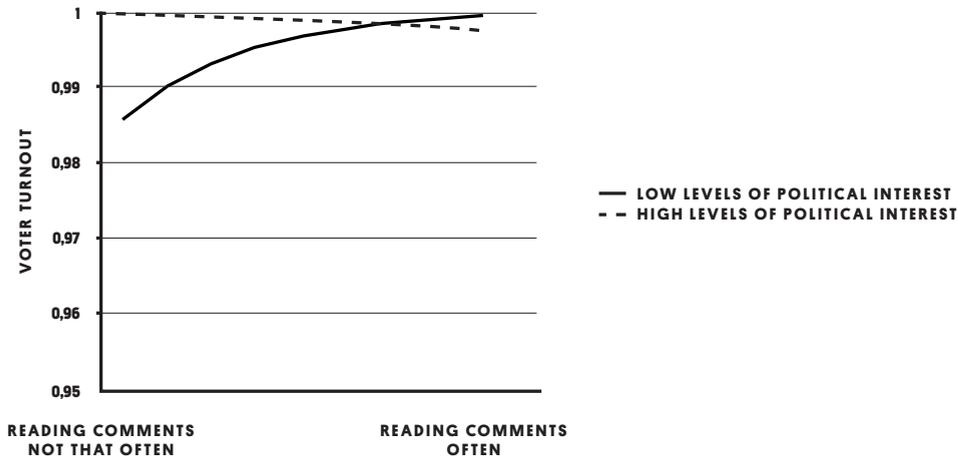
Given the significance of these two results, the effects were interpreted following Aiken and West (1991) and Dawson (2013). The relation between the specific form of PIU and voter turnout is plotted at high (7) and low (1) values for political interest, while the other independent variables remain constant at their means. This approach provides a visual indication of the directions of the slopes. Based on these analyses, we found that less interested people are more likely to vote if they read more comments posted in online political articles and used Twitter for political purposes. In other words, if a citizen has lower levels of political interest and does not often read comments online, his/her predicted voter turnout will be 0.984. If a citizen has a lower level of political interest and more often reads comments online, his/her predicted voter turnout increases to 0.999 (see Figure 2.1). Although the increase in voter turnout may seem marginal, the effect on citizens' political involvement partly contradicts our expectations.

Table 2.2 Explaining the Effects of Different Forms of PIU on Political Interest and Voter Turnout

	Political interest in wave 2		Voter turnout in wave 2 (model a)		Voter turnout in wave 2 (model b)		Voter turnout in wave 2 (model c)	
	<i>B</i> ^b	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> ^a	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> ^a	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> ^a	(<i>SE</i>)
Constant	.38	(.29)	- 9.40**	(2.79)	- 10.39***	(2.86)	- 11.58***	(3.46)
Control variables (not displayed)								
Passive forms of Political Internet Use								
Online new use	.04	(.06)	.21	(.62)	.00	(.61)	.39	(.67)
Visiting political websites	-.03	(.05)	.29	(.59)	.42	(.66)	.56	(.94)
Reading political comments	.07***	(.02)	.15	(.25)	.92 [†]	(.50)	.07	(.27)
Following political activities on SNS	.04	(.05)	.81	(1.17)	1.13	(1.22)	1.29	(2.17)
Active forms of Political Internet Use								
Vote Advice Application	.10	(.08)	2.82*	(1.35)	2.86*	(1.36)	3.09*	(1.41)
Writing political comments	.03	(.04)	-.91*	(.45)	-.69	(.44)	-.65	(.57)
Participating in political activities on SNS	-.09	(.07)	-.59	(1.36)	-.97	(1.40)	.00	(2.97)
Twitter use for politics	-.05	(.19)	.75	(1.40)	.49	(1.39)	15.58*	(9.76)
Signing an online petition	.01	(.15)	-.87	(1.72)	-.93	(1.78)	.12	(2.19)
Participating in online political discussion	-.18	(.17)	- 1.00	(1.97)	- 1.07	(2.04)	- 1.37	(2.33)
Forwarding political e-mail, video or link	.07	(.19)						
Chatting about politics	.21	(.17)						
Political interest (wave 1)	.72***	(.03)						
Political interest (wave 2)			.24	(.22)	.63*	(.30)	.31	(.23)
Voter turnout (wave 1)			4.60***	(.71)	4.52***	(.69)	4.62***	(.71)
Political interest X Reading political comments					-.19*	(.09)		
Political interest X Twitter use for politics							- 3.44*	(1.66)
Adjusted <i>R</i> ² /Nagelkerke Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	.69		.67		.68		.69	
<i>N</i>	932		818		818		818	

Note. The model, including the interaction between political interest and VAAs, as well as the predictor variables forwarding an e-mail, video or link about politics and chatting about politics, could not be estimated, due to extreme high correlation. aLogistic Regression bUnstandardized (*B*) coefficients cStandard Errors reported in cell entries were calculated using a Jackknife estimator. [†]*p* < .10 **p* < .05 ***p* < .01 ****p* < .001. For simplicity of presentation, the coefficients for the control variables and non-significant interaction effects are not displayed; these results are available upon request.

Figure 2.1. The interaction effect of reading comments posted on online news articles containing a political issue (x-axes) and political interest (plotted lines) and voter turnout (y-axis). The relation between reading comments (mean \pm 1 SD) and voter turnout is plotted at high (7) and low (1) values for political interest.



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we expanded the knowledge about the effect of specific forms of PIU on citizens' political interest and voter turnout during elections. First, in line with earlier studies, we found that few citizens participate in politics online. Some forms of political Internet usage are more popular than others, and those people who use the Internet for such purposes are often those who are already engaged in politics. This result, however, does not mean that the effects of PIU during elections are insignificant. Even if just 5% of the electorate uses a particular form of online communication, this percentage is still considerable. If such voters can be mobilized, they can have a substantial impact on turnout rates and election results (Bond et al., 2012; Gibson & McAllister, 2011). In addition, the Internet is still developing, and many forms of online political communication remain experimental (Hindman, 2009). Future technological improvements and the use of newer forms of online political communication may have an even stronger effect on citizens' political involvement.

Second, the data show that the use of only a few specific forms of PIU has a positive effect on political interest and voter turnout. More specifically, the results indicate that citizens who use an online Vote Advice Application or read the comments below online political articles during the election period are more likely to vote or to feel more interested in politics than those who do not. These findings seem to underline the claim that some specific forms of Internet usage have a positive effect on interest and politi-

cal behavior (Boulianne, 2009), and are consistent with recent studies that analyze the effect of Internet use on political interest (Boulianne, 2011; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010; Wang, 2007). However, we also found that citizens who write political comments are less likely to vote. It may well be that these citizens are more cynical about politics, especially because these comments are often negative and sarcastic in nature. Thus, overall, it seems that the effects of PIU are diverse and can be negative as well.

The findings show that the effects of PIU on citizens' involvement may be best understood by examining specific forms of Internet use. We demonstrate that some online political media uses have an effect, whereas others do not. Both active and passive forms of PIU have a positive effect on political involvement. This suggests that certain characteristics, elements (e.g., interactive features), or styles of content matter more than whether the activities are passive or active in nature. It might well be that these specific features or the *content characteristics* (e.g., the amount of interactivity) of these online applications mobilize citizens to vote. Regarding the VAAs, it is possible that the voting advice stimulates users to vote. Therefore, we argue that it is important not only to consider the usage of content but also to consider the *content-specific factors* in investigating the effects of Internet use on citizen involvement. Future research needs to investigate which content characteristics are important.

In addition, we did not find that the positive effect of both active and passive forms of PIU on political participation is more prevalent for citizens with higher levels of political interest. Instead, for two specific forms of PIU, we observed the opposite: the positive effect of these two forms of PIU (i.e., reading comments on online political news articles and Twitter use for political purposes) on voter turnout is more prevalent for less politically interested citizens. Traditionally, research has claimed that politically interested or active citizens have more resources (civic skills) and thus can better benefit from the advantages provided by the Internet (Best & Krueger, 2005). Given that our results showed that less interested citizens can be better mobilized by reading political comments and using Twitter for political purposes, it seems that due to technological developments and growing experience with the Internet, the resource argument is becoming less relevant. "Resource-poor" citizens are perhaps more likely to benefit from the Internet, whereas those citizens who are "resource-rich" do not benefit more from the Internet. This is also in line with the notion that political interest is generally so powerful that PIU is not able to influence the voting intentions of politically interested citizens. It is more likely that less interested citizens will benefit from different forms of PIU because they can be mobilized, while highly interested citizens are already mobilized. Future investigation of this notion, and the moderating role of political sophistication, is strongly recommended.

Furthermore, one reason why using Twitter and reading comments affects citizens with low interest is that both forms show citizens the interactions between politics and their voters. Though Twitter use and reading comments do not represent (inter) active usage, being exposed to interactions between politics and voters may have positive effects on perceived interactivity. Since previous research has shown that interactivity leads to positive effects on citizens' political engagement, it is very likely that interactivity is the underlying characteristic that drives the effects. The rough subdivision of active/

passive is therefore too generic. Future research should concentrate on investigation of the underlying characteristics of new media and the moderating role of political sophistication. It is again suggested that the *content-specific factors* seem to be more important. This supposition, however, requires further examination, especially because our results only provide limited evidence for the contingency of PIU effects on political interest, since most of the interactions we tested turned out not to be significant.

Regarding our results, it should be noted that due to over-reporting, the distribution of the variable voter turnout is skewed. This bias may have an impact on the apparent effect of other variables on voter turnout (Bernstein, Chadha, & Montjoy, 2001). Although over-reporting is a common phenomenon in election studies (Katosh & Traugott, 1981), we could not include actual voter turnout in our analyses. Including actual turnout might bolster our analyses and provide us with more convincing evidence of the effects of PIU.

This limitation notwithstanding, in the broader debate regarding the effects of Internet use, our study has provided new input into the types of effect that specific forms of PIU have, and for whom. We found not only that political involvement determines whether citizens use the Internet for political purposes, but also (and more importantly) that some forms of PIU may foster political involvement. We propose that previously unengaged citizens are more likely to be engaged if they use *specific forms* of online communication for political purposes, which will encourage them to become more politically engaged and provide them with more political content. We suspect that those citizens will become more involved through that exposure. Thus, these “new” forms of political communication also engage “new” citizens.

NOTES

1. Unlike the United States and other countries, Dutch political parties and politicians have no tradition of seeking campaign donations. Therefore, we focus on communication and information distribution as the main Internet influence.
2. The specific dates were as follows: wave₁ 8–14 April 2010 and wave₂ 26–31 May 2010.
3. We explored whether considering the respondents who answered “no voting rights,” “I do not want to say” or “don’t know” differently would yield different results by conducting a multinomial logistic regression analysis where group 1 equals not voting; group 2 equals no voting rights, don’t know, or would not say; and group 3 equals voting. The distribution of the groups was as follows: 5.7%, 7.4%, 86.9%. These results are not substantially different from those presented in this paper for the voters/non-voters distinction. For the sake of clarity, we therefore decided to use the dummy variable.
4. We performed a factor analysis using a polychoric correlation matrix to examine whether the conceptualization between active and passive forms of PIU can be found in the data (see Kolenikov and Angeles, 2004). This specific factor analysis can be used when variables are measured at different levels. The factor analysis revealed the presence of one component with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 75% of the variance. Apparently,

all activities are related and the underlying constructs were not found in the data.

5. VAAs are online applications that present users with a series of questions or statements about their political preferences. After a user fills out an online questionnaire, the VAA automatically determines which political party best matches the preferences or views of the user and subsequently gives the user voting advice (Walgrave et al., 2008).
6. We also included questions asking whether or not the respondent participated in the following offline campaign activities: this resulted in the variable offline political participation. A cross-table, however, revealed that citizens who participated offline always vote and are politically interested. This finding indicates that this variable does not help to predict political engagement. Therefore, offline political participation was not used as a control variable in the analysis.

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CHAPTER 3

THE EFFECTS OF CANDIDATES' TWITTER USE ON PREFERENTIAL VOTES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the content characteristics of Twitter during an election campaign, and the relationship between candidates' style of online campaigning (i.e., politically personalized and interactive communication) and electoral support for those candidates. Thereby, it provides a better understanding of the linkage between the use of Twitter by candidates and effects on preferential votes. Two data sources are used to examine this relationship: first, a quantitative computer-assisted as well as a manual content analysis of tweets posted by political candidates during the Dutch national elections of 2010 ($N = 40,957$) and second, a dataset containing the number of votes for electable political candidates during that period. The findings show that using Twitter has positive consequences for political candidates. Candidates who used Twitter during the course of the campaign received more votes than those who did not, and using Twitter in an interactive way had a positive impact as well.

INTRODUCTION

New media have become increasingly important during election campaigns. The potential of Internet to connect with and mobilize voters, gives politicians the opportunity to promote themselves and to communicate interactively with the electorate, without the interference of journalists (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). It is not surprising that political organizations have embraced the Internet. Political candidates are increasingly using new media, such as Twitter, Facebook and other online platforms.

The rise of web campaigning has also been subject to a growing amount of scholarly inquiry (e.g., Gibson & McAllister, 2006; Wagner & Gainous, 2009). Although these important studies give valuable insights into both the content of online political communication (see e.g., Foot & Schneider, 2006; Lilleker et al., 2011) and the potential effects on citizens (see e.g., Boulianne, 2009; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005), studies that provide a link between the two arenas are relatively scarce (Gibson & McAllister, 2006). Particular studies that examine the persuasive effects of *different styles* of online political communication have been limited. Prior work within this field has frequently pointed out that new media brings new opportunities for politicians (Chapter 4; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006): Candidates increasingly use interactive communication styles (e.g., reacting on comments and posting tweets) and personalized communication styles (e.g., exchange information about their private lives and personal emotions) when communicating online. However, to what extent these communication styles (i.e., politically personalized and interactive campaigning) influence the electorate (e.g., the amount of votes a candidates will receive because of the usage of new media) remains unknown.

The current study tries to fill this gap by investigating (a) the content characteristics of political campaigning on Twitter, (b) the effects of candidates' use of online

campaigning (versus no use) on electoral support, and (c) the relationship between candidates' style of online campaigning and electoral support. This study focuses on the micro blogging platform Twitter, because Twitter has become an essential and frequently used medium during election campaigns – besides party and candidate websites and Facebook (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe, 2010). However, little is known about the content characteristics of political tweets and even less is known about the impact Twitter has on voting. So, by focusing on candidates' Twitter use, this study sheds new light on the linkage between the uses and effects of new media. Hence, the aim of the present study is to understand the relationship between the (style of) usage of Twitter by political candidates, and electoral support for these specific candidates (i.e., the amount of votes a candidate receives).

Two data sources are used to investigate the relationship: (1) a quantitative computer-assisted as well as a manual content analysis of tweets posted by political candidates during the Dutch national elections of 2010 and (2) an aggregated dataset containing candidates' electoral support (i.e., amount of preferential votes). In the next section, the central characteristics or style elements used in web campaigning will be described. Subsequently, the potential effects of web campaigning on electoral support are discussed. Afterwards, two hypotheses and one research question will be proposed.

Communication styles on Twitter: Interactive and political personalized communication

The literature that studies the content of web campaigning has been focusing on different styles and characteristics (Gibson & McAllister, 2006). Two characteristics are repeatedly claimed as most important: interactivity and, to a lesser extent, political personalization.

Sundar, Kalyanaraman and Brown (2003) point out that “several researches have claimed that interactivity is a key variable for studying the uses and effects of new media technologies” (p. 32). Interactivity can be operationalized in many different ways (see e.g., Lee & Shin, 2012; Liu & Shrum, 2002; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005), but two-way communication (the opportunity for reciprocal communication) is a central concept in many definitions. Two-way communication can be defined as follows: one communicator can communicate directly to another one and vice versa (Tedesco, 2007). This characteristic makes new media different and unique from offline media, as offline media principally offers information without receiving information back. In the political context, interactivity is mainly examined on party and candidates' websites (Sundar et al., 2003; Warnick et al., 2005) and, to a lesser degree, on Twitter (Lee & Shin, 2012; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). Both areas of research have shown that interactivity is increasingly used during campaigns (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002), especially because it offers opportunities for direct communication, which is particularly true for Twitter (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). One of Twitter's main functions is to facilitate direct communication between users, as users can comment on each other's posts. Studying the uses and effects of interactivity in the context of Twitter is, therefore, very relevant.

Another important characteristic of online communication is political personal-

ization. Political personalization is conceptualized as a shift of focus from political parties and institutions, to individual candidates and politicians (Adam & Maier, 2010; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). It seems that this shift of focus is present in new media, as individual candidates and politicians are increasingly using new media to communicate with their electorate (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). However, it could be argued that a focus on politicians, instead of parties is different from the personalization that is present on Twitter. Twitter is personalized per definition, as the candidate is usually the holder of the Twitter account. Communication on Twitter therefore conceptualized as a focus on candidates' private life (privatization), on candidate's emotions and feelings (emotionalization) and candidates' competencies and professional activities (individualization; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Recent work that investigated personalization in new media supports this argumentation line. Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers (2010) found that politicians “are primarily using Twitter to disperse information, particularly links to news articles about themselves (...) and to report about their daily activities (...). [Twitter] is [used as] a vehicle for self-promotion” (p. 1612). In other words, it seems that the communication on Twitter is often about candidates' private persona and less about political issues.

Despite the evidence that politicians are adopting interactive and personalized communication styles on Twitter, there is little evidence that shows that these forms of campaigning actually have an effect. This study is going to investigate whether there is a link between style of campaigning and electoral support (i.e., the amount of votes candidates receive).

Persuasive effects of campaigning on Twitter

In general, research that examines the effects of Internet use on voters demonstrates that the effects of new media are often positive (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2009). Different scholars support the notion that Internet use has a mobilizing effect on citizens' political engagement (e.g., Kenski & Stroud, 2006). They argue that, in contrast to traditional media, the (political) information online is flexible and the cost of participation is low. This encourages citizens to learn more about politics. As a result, those citizens become more politically involved (Shah et al., 2005; Wang, 2007).

The literature that studies the effects of web campaigning on voters, points to equal findings (Rackaway, 2007). Already in 1997, D'Alessio found a link between web campaigning and voting. He found that having a website resulted in more votes, so that candidates who did not have a website received significantly fewer votes than candidates who did (D'Alessio, 1997). Later studies confirmed those findings. For example, Gibson and McAllister (2006) found that web campaigning exerts a positive impact on the level of support a candidate receives. This study was conducted during the Australian election of 2004.

There are, however, scholars who are more skeptical. Park and Perry (2008) point out that although campaign websites have a direct effect on political engagement, websites tend to focus more on getting supporters involved who are already engaged. They found that the use of campaign websites influences different forms of political participation (i.e., donating money, sending political e-mails and persuading others to vote),

but not voting. In other words, web campaigning might not influence voting, in contrast to other forms of political participation. However, later work conducted by Wagner and Gainous (2009) found that web presence was a significant predictor of total votes for specific candidates. Similarly, Gibson and McAllister (2011) demonstrate that use of online electoral sources and particularly campaign websites had a positive influence on vote choice. So overall, it seems that there is a substantial amount of evidence supporting the more positive view.

While previous studies focused on political websites, this study focuses on the effects of Twitter use on electoral support. Twitter is a different platform than websites, as Twitter is a social networking site and a (micro) blog platform that is mainly used to directly send and read messages. Websites have a more diverse content, such as news items, pictures or forums. Besides, websites are not primarily used for social interaction. Thus, it can be questioned whether the effects of Twitter use are similar. Recent work that studied the effects of Twitter, however, points to similar effects: candidates' Twitter use seems to have a positive effect on electoral support (Lee & Shin, 2012; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). Therefore, it is expected that Twitter use (compared to no use) positively affect the amount of preferential votes a candidate receives. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Political candidates who use Twitter to communicate with their electorate will receive more preferential votes than political candidates who do not use Twitter to communicate with their electorate.

Although the studies by D'Alessio (1997), Gibson and McAllister (2006; 2011) and Wagner and Gainous (2009) compellingly link online campaigning and electoral support, they do not give insights into the specific underlying mechanisms that explain the association. An explanation, however, can be found in the interactivity literature. But before the interactivity literature will be discussed, the operational definition of interactivity should be explained. In this study, Liu and Schrum's definition is used as a starting point. Liu and Schrum (2002) define interactivity as follows: "The degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized" (p. 54). Liu and Schrum (2002) specify between three dimensions of interactivity: active control (i.e., controlling the content), two-way communication (i.e., reciprocal communication between users), and synchronicity (i.e., immediate response to communication, which relates to technological features). Because this study focuses on the effects of style of communication on Twitter, and since the style of communication on Twitter might largely differ in the extent to which it incorporates two-way communication (between political actors and users, and between users), interactivity is operationalized as two-way communication.

Turning to the literature on the effects of interactivity, researchers repeatedly show the beneficial effects of using interactive communication in political campaigns (Lee & Shin, 2012; Rafaeli & Ariel, 2007). For example, Sundar et al. (2003) found that individuals who visit a highly interactive political website, had more positive evaluations

of political candidates than individuals who visit a low interactive website. Utz (2009) observed that politicians, who reacted online on comments, were seen as more favorable than those who did not. Furthermore, Vliegenthart and Van Noort (2010), who studied party websites, found positive associations between interactivity and election results.

Interactivity or two-way communication, as it is present on websites, is to some extent similar to interactivity used in tweets. Twitter has different communication tools that help users to communicate with each other (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). These tools contribute to an online (political) dialogue, by offering it users the opportunity to send, read, respond and forward messages directly to others (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Small, 2011). This concept (of engaging in an online political dialogue) relates to the conceptualization of interactivity that is used in this study; two-way communication. Twitter has three tools that facilitate two-way communication: mentions, retweets and hashtags. Users are able to respond to others through the use of @mentions (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Small, 2011). Posting a tweet with an @ followed by a name, means that a Twitter user directly sends a message to another user (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Thereby, an @mention targets the other person's attention, which is an important condition for a conversation to occur (Boyd et al., 2010). Another form of interactive communication is the use of retweets (Boyd et al., 2010). Retweets are forwarded messages that were posted by others. It enables users to pass on information to others. Lastly, hashtags are used to mark tweets on a specific topic. By using a hashtag, other users can follow conversations focusing on one specific topic and are, thereby, stimulating group discussion (Boyd et al., 2010).

Recently conducted work on the effects of interactivity used in the communication on Twitter found some positive effects on intentions to vote for a candidate (Lee & Shin, 2012; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). A theoretical explanation for these effects has been proposed by Lee and Shin (2012). They emphasize that interactivity induces social presence, which consequently leads to higher intention to vote for candidates. Social presence is the extent to which an individual feels that another communicator (in this case the candidate) is present and there is an opportunity to engage in an actual conversation (Lee & Shin, 2012; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Tanis & Postmes, 2003; Tanis, 2003). In other words, social presence means having the feeling that another communicating person is close to you and you can connect to that person. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) explain how the concepts of interactivity and social presence are related. They argue that "social presence is a subjective measure of the presence of others, [...] while interactivity is the actual quality of a communication sequence or context. When [interactivity] is realized and when participants notice it, there is social presence" (p. 10-11). Similarly, Fortin and Dholakia (2005), emphasize that "interactivity is likely to create feelings of social presence for the user through the availability of open channels allowing for two-way communication" (p. 390). Taken together, it seems that interactivity often induces social presence. This is also shown by a recent experimental study. Lee and Shin (2012) showed that exposure to an interactive twitter page fosters social presence among people who usually avoid social interaction. Induced social presence, in turn, positively affects voting intentions. Nevertheless, this study could only measure the actual interactive features of the communication on Twitter (e.g., mentions and

retweets). Because interactive features enable reciprocal communication between political actors and users, it can be theorized that this may consequently lead to (feelings of) social presence and intimacy among the readers of those tweets. To sum up, based on the prior work of interactivity on new media and political tweets more specifically, it is expected that:

H2: The more reciprocal interaction a political candidate uses in their communication on Twitter, the more preferential votes this political candidate will receive.

Another explanation for the effect of web campaigning and vote support for specific candidates is less obvious and can be found in the literature on political personalization. The literature that addresses the consequences of political personalization argues that the effects on the electorate are often positive (Druckman, 2003; Kleinnijenhuis, Maurer, Kepplinger, & Oegema, 2001). Political personalization may give parties a face and a voice, which can help parties to communicate their messages more effectively (for an overview, see Brettschneider, 2008). An actual person is much more appealing than for example a political document (McAllister, 2007). For instance, Rosenberg et al. (1986) showed that if politicians are positively evaluated on their appearance, this could positively impact vote intention. Furthermore, Chapter 4 found that users who visited a candidate website felt more close and interested in politics, than individuals who visited a party website. These feelings of closeness may also lead to increased social presence and that may consequently lead to an increase in voting. Lastly, Lee and Oh (2012) argue that personalized messages might induce greater interest into politicians, because these personalized stories draw greater attention towards the message. This induced interested in, for example, a candidate will then lead to more votes.

Because personalization on Twitter is conceptualized as a focus on candidates' private life, emotions and activities, and not as a focus on candidates instead of parties, the effects can also be negative. A recent conducted study in the United States found a negative effect of talking about one's private life on Twitter. This study demonstrated that a focus on personal topics in political tweets, predicted a campaign loss (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). It could be that voters who notice that candidates talk more about personalized issues and less about political issues, see those candidates as less competent. However, due to the lack of research into the effects of personalization on Twitter and inconclusive evidence, the following research question is formulated:

RQ3: What is the effect of candidates' personalized communication on the amount of preferential votes they receive?

METHOD

To test the hypotheses, two data sources are used: first, quantitative content analyses of all tweets posted by political candidates in the period leading up to the Dutch national elections on June 9, 2010 and two months after, was used. Second, a dataset containing

all 'preferential votes' for electable political candidates was used. In the Netherlands (a parliamentary democracy with a party-list system and proportional representation), voters can vote for individual candidates. This enables voters to cast their vote for a candidate higher or lower on the list. Although the total amount of votes determines the number of seats in the Parliament, and seats will be allocated according to the original position of the list, candidates who receive more votes than the electoral threshold ('kiesdrempel') will be elected into the Parliament irrespective of their original position on the electoral list (Van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010).

This study is designed to link the content analysis of online political communication to aggregated data about vote choice. This allows us to assess the relationship between the online content of political communication and its effect on electoral support. A computer-assisted as well as a manual content analysis of political tweets was used to examine how political candidates communicate with citizens. In cooperation with the agency 'PolitiekOnline', political tweets were collected. The collection contains all tweets posted by political candidates, during the first three months and approximately two months after the Dutch national elections in 2010 (i.e., March 3, 2010 to August 17, 2010). This resulted in a sample of 40,957 tweets, posted by 177 politicians from 8 political parties.

Content analyses

For the computer-assisted content analysis, IBM SPSS 20 was used to extract specific interactive features from the tweets (e.g., retweets). To conduct the manual content analysis, a random sample of the total number was used. This resulted in a total of 1,634 tweets that were coded and analyzed. Three coders, who were trained and supervised during regular coding meetings at the University of Amsterdam, conducted the coding of the tweets. Furthermore, the codebook was finalized after a few meetings with coders. Intercoder reliability calculations were based on a subsample of 100 tweets and was calculated using pairwise percent agreement.

For the manual content analysis, previous studies that examined both offline and online political communication were used to code the style elements and characteristics in the tweets (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Two style characteristics were coded in the data; interactivity and political personalization. Computer-assisted content analysis was used to identify all features that incorporate some form of *interactivity* in the data (based on a study conducted by Parmelee & Bichard, 2011); the amount of mentions (identified as '@', used to 'talk' directly to another person), retweets (identified as 'RT', used to forward somebody else's tweet) and hash tags (identified as '#', used to write a tweet that covers a bigger discussion on the web) were identified. Because a computer-assisted content analysis was used, calculating intercoder reliability was not necessary.

Political personalization was derived from a previous study on personalization (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Following this study, three forms of political personalization were coded; emphasize on candidate's personal life (pairwise percent agreement = 87.3 %), candidate's emotions (pairwise percent agreement = 76.7 %) and candidate's professional, personal activities (pairwise percent agreement = 86.7 %) were distinguished.

In order to examine to what extent the latter two characteristics are indeed key characteristic of campaigning on Twitter (i.e., whether or not these styles of communication are often used on Twitter), they were compared with two other characteristics that are also often present in political communication during campaigns. First, 'emphasis on the campaign' was derived from a study on political tweets (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). Three topics of campaigning are distinguished; focus on activities in the election campaign (i.e., advertising and talking to people on the street or organizing campaign meetings; pairwise percent agreement = 97.3 %), mobilization (i.e., call to participate in the campaign; pairwise percent agreement = 99.33 %) and emphasis on polls (pairwise percent agreement = 99.3 %). Second, 'reference to general news' (pairwise percent agreement = 83.33%) and 'political standpoints' were measured (pairwise percent agreement = 89.33%). In the data analysis all styles are included as relative numbers of the total tweets that were posted during the course of the election campaign. The unit of analysis was the tweet and the tweet could contain several topics. For example, the topic of the tweet can cover the election campaign, but it can be personalized as well (e.g., contain emotions/professional activities).

Votes

The aggregated data of electoral support (amount of preferential votes) were collected from the official election report of the Dutch Election Counsel (Kiesraad, 2010). This resulted in a sample of 446 politicians from 8 political parties. Because the dependent variable, *number of preferential votes* (ranging from 32 till 1617636; $M = 20239.49$, $SD = 140981.80$), was positively skewed, a natural log transformation to normalize the item was performed. Log transformation is a commonly used strategy to deal with positive skewed data, as it compresses the right tail of the distribution (Field, 2009). After the transformation, the dependent variable was normally distributed.

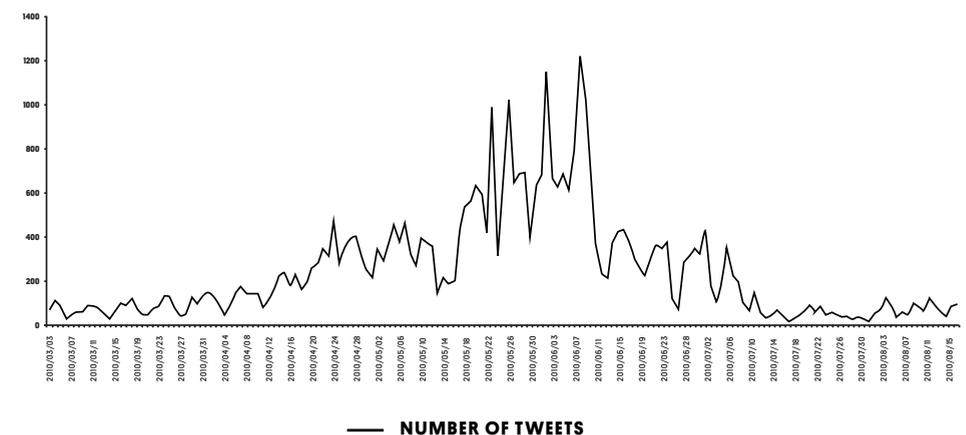
Besides the number of preference votes, the variable whether or not *candidates used Twitter during the election campaign* (0 = not using Twitter, 1 = using Twitter; $M = .40$, $SD = .49$) was gauged. Other (control) variables were also extracted from the Dutch Election Counsel (Kiesraad, 2010). More specifically, several variables were extracted and included that generally predict the amount of preferential votes a candidate will receive (e.g., see Wauters, Weekers, & Maddens, 2010). This study gauged the following control variables: *candidate's sex* (1 = male, 2 = female; $M = 1.35$, $SD = .48$), *candidates position on the list* (ranging from 1 until 75; $M = 30.27$, $SD = 18.97$), *first woman on the list* (1 = first woman, 0 = not first woman; $M = .02$, $SD = .13$), *last candidate on the list* (1 = last candidate, 0 = not last candidate $M = .02$, $SD = .13$), and *incumbency* (1 = incumbent parliamentarian in office, 0 = no incumbent parliamentarian in office; $M = .28$, $SD = .45$). Furthermore, to assess the *candidates' prominence in the media* (media is all newspapers, magazines and trade journals that are available in the Dutch language), Lexis-Nexis Academic was used. Prominence in the media is operationalized as the number of news articles that referred to the specific candidate from March 3, 2010 till June 9, 2010 (ranging from 0 till 4677; $M = 98.80$, $SD = 435.42$), as a proxy for familiarity with the candidate. Also, the following predictors were used: average *amount of followers* a candidate had during the course of the election campaign (ranging from 6 till 82297;

$M = 3537.85$, $SD = 9999.07$) and *total numbers of tweets* (ranging from 0 to 1456; $M = 164.78$, $SD = 204.41$). To analyze the hypotheses, descriptive analyses and hierarchical multiple regressions were used. In all regression analyses, the control predictors were entered in Model 1, and the Twitter predictors in Model 2 and 3. Furthermore, to avoid multicollinearity between the variables total number of tweets and number of tweets that were interactive and personalized, the variables measuring interactivity and personalization were included as relative variables (as a percentage of the total number of tweets posted by the political candidates).

Results

Figure 3.1 shows that the number of tweets posted by political candidates increased during the election campaign and decreased after the Election Day. In the first week of the data collection, 68 tweets were posted per day (on average). In the week prior to Election Day, 814 tweets were posted per day. In the last week of the data collection, 78 tweets were posted per day.

Figure 3.1 Absolute number of tweets posted by Dutch political candidates (y-axis). Before and after election day (June 9, 2010; $N = 40,957$).



Next, the level of political personalization, the amount of interactive features and the amount of focus on the campaign used in the tweets is examined (see Table 3.1). As expected, the results in Table 3.1 show that the candidates' tweets were more often about their private persona (about emotions, private life and activities), than about the campaign. Secondly, the results show that the candidates' tweets were also interactive in nature. More than a quarter of the tweets had some form of interactivity incorporated in their tweets. These results are supporting initial expectations; interactivity and personalization are indeed key characteristics of online political communication.

Table 3.1 Content characteristics and style elements in the tweets (percentage of total number of tweets)

	During the election campaign	After the election campaign
Political personalization	(n = 1,204)	(n = 430)
Candidates' emotions	34.2 %	27.9 %
Candidates' professional activities	24.7 %	18.4 %
Candidates' personal life	17.1 %	15.6 %
Interactive features	(n = 30,186)	(n = 10,771)
Mentions	28.5 %	26.2 %
Hashtags	25.6 %	25.3 %
Retweets	9.0 %	6.9 %
Campaign	(n = 1,204)	(n = 430)
Focus on the election campaign	16.7 %	0.0 %
Mobilization	3.3 %	0.9 %
Emphasis on polls	1.9 %	0.2 %
Other topics	(n = 1,204)	(n = 430)
Reference to general news	17.9 %	14.0 %
Political standpoints	7.0 %	4.4 %

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to examine whether candidates' use (vs. no use) of Twitter predicts the amount of preferential votes, after controlling for the influence of the variables that generally predict the amount of preferential votes a candidate will receive (see Table 3.2). The control predictors were entered in Model 1. After including the variable 'use of Twitter during election campaign' in Model 2, the results show a significant effect of Twitter use by candidates on the amount of votes they received ($\beta = .100, p < .001$, one-tailed). Apparently, using or not using Twitter during the election campaign has a positive significant impact on the amount of preferential votes a candidate received. The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 67.9 %, whereas the use of Twitter explained 0.9 % of the total variance. In other words, although the effect is small, it matters for political candidates to use Twitter. The first hypothesis is therewith supported.

Table 3.2 Effects of Twitter use by political candidates on the amount of preferential votes

	Model 1	Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	β (<i>SE</i>)
Constant	6.422***	6.253***	(.180)
Candidates' sex (ref. = male)	.533***	.512***	.143*** (.099)
Candidates' position on the list	-.027***	-.026***	-.285*** (.003)
First woman on the list	1.982***	2.052***	.159*** (.362)
Last candidate on the list	1.225***	1.238***	.096*** (.353)
Candidates' prominence in the media	.002***	.002***	.421*** (.000)
Incumbency	1.079***	1.107***	.291*** (.120)
Use of Twitter during election campaign		.348***	.100*** (.096)
Adjusted R2	.670	.679	
Incremental R2 (%)		0.9***	
<i>N</i>	445	445	

Note. Ordinary least squares regression.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, one-tailed.

Next, the second hypothesis was examined (see Table 3.3). The second hypothesis predicted that the more reciprocal interaction a political candidate uses in their communication on Twitter, the more preferential votes this political candidate will receive. The control predictors were again entered in Model 1. After including the variables 'total amount of tweets' and 'total amount of followers' in Model 2, to control for the effects of sending out more tweets and having more followers, it appears that one interactivity feature was statistically significant (see Model 3, Table 3.3). As expected, it seems that the use of mentions exerts a significant positive effect on the amount of preferential votes ($\beta = .096, p = .039$, one-tailed). The total variance explained by the models as a whole was 74.1 %, whereas the Twitter variables (i.e., amount of followers, total number of tweets and the interactivity predictors) 1.6 % and 0.6 % of the total explained variance. This partly supports the second hypothesis: Candidates that use a more interactive style in their communication to voters (i.e., included features that enable reciprocal interaction) received more votes, than candidates who were less interactive.

Interestingly, no significant relationship between the amounts of retweets or hash tags used by the candidate and the number of preferential votes was found. In other words, the use of two other features of interactive communication did not result in more preferential votes. A possible explanation might be that these features do not involve

two-way communication. Retweeting is used to forward a tweet and hash tags are used to participate in a bigger discussion. Both features are not designed to offer direct reciprocal communication to other users on twitter, in contrast to the use of mentions.

Table 3.3 Effects of interactive Twitter use (relative numbers) by political candidates on the amount of preferential votes

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	β (<i>SE</i>)
Constant	6.689***	6.570***	6.509***	(.296)
Candidates' sex (ref. = male)	.538***	.567***	.568***	.146*** (.156)
Candidates' position on the list	-.028***	-.027***	-.026***	-.254*** (.005)
First woman on the list	1.686**	1.007	1.705*	.074* (.622)
Last candidate on the list	.718	.683	.672	.038 (.702)
Candidates' prominence in the media	.002***	.001***	.001***	.457*** (.000)
Incumbency	1.040***	.971***	.952***	.234*** (.191)
Amount of followers		.000***	.000**	.171** (.000)
Total number of tweets		.000	.000	-.022 (.000)
Reference to mentions			1.002*	.096* (.563)
Reference to retweets			-.341	-.018 (.943)
Reference to hashtags			-.490	-.052 (.422)
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.725	.739	.741	
Incremental <i>R</i> ² (%)		1.6**	0.6	
<i>N</i>	176	176	176	

Note. Ordinary least squares regression.
p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001, one-tailed.

Furthermore, the results show that having more followers on Twitter (i.e., people who subscribed to the candidates' Twitter) leads to significant more preferential votes ($\beta = .171$, $p = .001$, one-tailed). It seems that being more popular on Twitter, has positive effects on electoral support as well. This finding was quite predictable. However, more surprisingly, the results in Table 3.3 show that sending out more tweets does not lead to significant more preferential votes. In other words, using Twitter more frequently during the course of the campaign does not have an effect.

Last, the third research question was examined (see Model 3, Table 3.4). The third research question asked what the effect was of candidates' personalized communication

on the amount of preferential votes they received. After including the three measures of political personalization, an effect of personalized communication on the amount of preferential votes a candidate receives was not found. Apparently, using a more personalized style of online campaigning on Twitter had no impact on electoral support.

Table 3.4 Effects of personalized Twitter use by political candidates on the amount of preferential votes

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	β (<i>SE</i>)
Constant	6.626***	6.495***	6.380***	(.336)
Candidates' sex (ref. = male)	.599**	.636***	.635***	.163*** (.170)
Candidates' position on the list	-.029***	-.027***	-.028***	-.271*** (.005)
First woman on the list	1.596**	.896	.967	.072 (.631)
Last candidate on the list	.867	.823	.743	.032 (.986)
Candidates' prominence in the media	.001***	.001***	.001***	.445*** (.000)
Incumbency	1.136***	1.056***	1.081***	.266*** (.203)
Amount of followers		.000**	.000**	.184** (.000)
Total number of tweets		.000	.000	-.009 (.000)
Reference to professional activities			-.019	-.003 (.302)
Reference to emotions			.332	.046 (.313)
Reference to private life			.163	.020 (.363)
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.743	.764	.766	
Incremental <i>R</i> ² (%)		2.1**	0.2	
<i>N</i>	146	146	146	

Note. Ordinary least squares regression. Due to the sampling for the manual coding, it was not possible to include all candidates. For some candidates the level of political personalization in the tweets could not be calculated. For that reason, the number of cases in this table is lower, than the number of cases in Table 3.3.
p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001, two-tailed.

Turning back to our hypotheses and research question, hypothesis one and two are supported. Regarding hypothesis one; using Twitter during the election campaign resulted in more votes, than not using Twitter. Regarding hypothesis two; candidates who use a more interactive style (i.e., reciprocal interaction) in their communication to voters received more votes, than candidates who were less interactive. Evidence for research question three was not found; using a more personalized style of online campaigning on Twitter had no impact on votes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was threefold: First, the communication styles of political campaigning by candidates on Twitter were investigated. Second, the effect of candidates' use of online campaigning on electoral support (i.e., the amount of preferential votes) was examined. And to conclude, the relationship between candidates' style of online campaigning and preferential votes was examined. By linking content data of political tweets and aggregated data of voting, this study provides a link between the uses and effects of Twitter during an election campaign. Evidence reported in this study support the expectation that such a link between uses and effects exists: It seems that using Twitter and using it interactively, has positive consequences for political candidates.

The results presented in this paper support the notion that the use of Twitter by political candidates increased during the course of the election campaign. This indicates that Twitter is actually an important platform for political candidates to communicate with their electorate. Another major finding is that Twitter is mainly used as a vehicle to talk about candidates' private persona. As expected, political candidates often talk about their emotions, private life and professional activities on Twitter. This finding corroborates Golbeck et al. (2010), who observed that new media are increasingly used as a vehicle for political candidates' self-promotion. Another important popular characteristic of campaigning on Twitter is the use of interactive features. Engaging in an online conversation, by responding to other people (by using mentions or forwarding another persons' tweet), is a popular style of communicating on Twitter. These findings further support the overall perception that interactivity, or in other words, direct two-way communication, is a key characteristic of new media (Sundar et al., 2003).

However, the most interesting finding emerging from this study is the significant impact Twitter has on preferential votes. Evidence shows that candidate's use of Twitter exerts a positive effect on electoral support, even when the usual and well-established predictors that explain vote choice were included as control variables (Wauters et al., 2010). In other words, a candidate who used Twitter during the course of the campaign received more preferential votes than candidates who did not use Twitter. However, it should be pointed out that the effect of Twitter use was not large, but one would also not expect a huge effect. The effect of Twitter use is above and beyond the effects of established factors (and these factors are all very strong predictors), which indicates that observing a significant effect for Twitter use is even more interesting. This finding also adds to the growing body of literature that found positive effects of web campaigning specifically, and using Internet for political purposes more generally (for an overview of the literature, see Boulianne, 2009).

Another important finding is that the style of campaigning also seems to matter. Results showed that communicating in an interactive way had a significant positive impact on the amount of preferential votes a candidate receives: candidates that use a more direct way of communicating received more support than those who did not. Both findings are in concordance with previous studies that examined the effects of new media and argued that online platforms used by politicians are becoming more and more important during election campaigns (Gibson & McAllister, 2006; Gibson & Cantijoch,

2011; Lee & Shin, 2012; Vliegthart & Van Noort, 2010; Wagner & Gainous, 2009).

Surprisingly, a relationship between different forms of political personalization and number of preferential votes was not found. A possible explanation might be that the context of Twitter is different from other media. Twitter is personalized per definition (as the politician is the holder of the Twitter account). People who read comments posted on candidates' Twitter accounts already know that the tweet is written by an individual candidate and not by, for instance, the party. Therefore, they might already expect that tweets are highly personalized. Future studies, which focus on the effects of personalization present in different (online) contexts, are therefore recommended. It would be interesting to see which level of personalization, a focus on politicians versus parties or a focus on personal life or not, has an effect on vote intentions.

Before the implications of this study will be discussed, some reservations need to be made. As has been noted by other scholars, caution must be applied regarding the effects of Twitter use. Using or not using Twitter, might also be a proxy for professionalization of the candidates' entire campaign, such as better and more active campaigning and intensive use of other online platforms (D'Alessio, 1997; Gibson & McAllister, 2006; Vliegthart & Van Noort, 2010). In his study on the effects of political websites, D'Alessio (1997) addresses this reservation in more detail. He notes that "posting a website is one element of an entire suite of strategies employed by the candidate, the sum of whose payoffs is subsumed under the main effect for having a website" (D'Alessio, 1997, p. 498). This might also be the case in this study: Having a Twitter account might be a proxy for all the strategies employed by the candidate. The sum of these strategies is incorporated under the main effect of having a Twitter account.

Although the argument of professionalization is believed to be very valid, experimental literature on interactivity provides also another explanation for the effects. As been pointed out by Lee and Shin (2012), interactive communication on Twitter may induce higher levels of social presence, and these feelings of social presence (the feeling that the politician is closer to you) may in turn lead to higher intentions to vote for that specific candidate. Due to the aggregated data used in this study, such individual-level predictors which might explain the effects of interactive communication could not be included. The latter explanation might be well suited for the study's findings, however, cannot yet be made. Further investigation using experimental research into the effects of different styles of communicating on Twitter and the specific underlying mechanisms and processes explaining effects, is therefore strongly recommended. For example, future work should include social presence as a mediator that explains the relationship between interactivity and political outcomes (such as voting).

Overall, the results have several important implications. As the use of new media grows, the characteristics of new media become more important. Based on the outcomes of this study, it seems that using Twitter, and the style used in the communication on this platform, has consequences. Twitter does not only offer political candidates a platform for direct and more personalized communication, but Twitter also affects electoral support. Thereby, this study demonstrates that the persuasive effects of new media can be very consequential. This leads inevitably to the question to what extent these effects are desirable. On the one hand, it can be argued that if political tweets only persuade voters,

instead of informing them (Huber & Arceneaux, 2007), the effects of Twitter may have negative consequences for democracy. On the other hand, candidate's tweets may not be able to persuade voters to vote for a completely different party. It is more likely that voters still vote for the same party, but then for a different candidate. So, to conclude, the results of this study answers a fundamental question about the effectiveness of online political campaigning: Using Twitter matters, especially when it is used in an interactive way.

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CHAPTER 4

CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS: THE EFFECTS OF PERSONALIZED AND INTERACTIVE ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ON CITIZENS' POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Political parties and politicians increasingly use the possibilities of the Internet to communicate interactively with citizens and vice versa. The Internet also offers opportunities for individual politicians to profile themselves. These developments are often said to bring politics closer to citizens, increasing their political engagement in politics. Empirical evidence for such claims is, however, scarce. In a scenario-based experiment and a laboratory experiment using real-world websites, the authors examine whether more personalized online communication (a focus on individual politicians) and the use of interactive features increase political involvement among citizens. The results from both studies demonstrate that both highly interactive and personalized online communication do increase citizens' political involvement. Moreover, it was also found that political personalization positively moderates the effect of interactivity on political involvement, meaning that the effects of interactivity are even stronger in a personalized setting.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties and elected representatives increasingly use the possibilities of the Internet to communicate interactively with citizens and party members about their plans, points of view and daily business (e.g., Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2007; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). For citizens, the Internet offers easy access to political information, providing all kinds of opportunities to participate in political debates.

The Internet not only enables interactive communication between political parties and citizens, but social media such as Facebook and Twitter, also offer opportunities for individual politicians to profile themselves. According to Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2010), the rapidly growing number of politicians using new online communication instruments could be seen as a form of 'personalization' – the shift of attention from political parties to politicians, especially since these new media technologies are designed to facilitate direct communication between politicians, not parties, and citizens.

It has been claimed that online political communication (that facilitates interactive and personalized communication), may increase citizens' political engagement, by bringing politics closer to citizens (e.g., De Vreese, 2007; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). There is, however, little empirical evidence for these claims (Boulianne, 2009). Hence, it remains unclear whether personalization and the use of specific interactive features should be part of an effective digital political communication strategy. Our study aims to tackle this uncertainty and contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, most of the work on online political communication has been devoted to the effect of political Internet use in general (e.g., Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005) and not to the effects of specific characteristics of new media. Our study instead investigates the effects of two specific characteristics: interactive and personalized communication. Second, to date, the literature on political personalization has

rarely addressed the consequences of personalization, especially in online communication. Third, previous studies have not yet examined the combined impact of personalization and interactivity on citizens' political involvement. The central question in this article is: To what extent do levels of political personalization and interactivity of online communication increase political involvement among citizens?

To answer this question, we conducted two experiments. In the first experiment we use data from a survey-embedded scenario experiment, which we distributed to a representative sample of the Dutch population. The second experiment replicates and extends the findings in the first experiment, by using a laboratory experiment with real-world websites, different research population and extended measures.

INTERACTIVITY AND PERSONALIZATION IN ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The notion of interactivity is widely used in various disciplines, including political communication. It suffers, however, from conceptual confusion and contradictions. The different understandings have in common that they assume two-way communication, which is also how we will define interactivity in this study. Research about the consequences of interactivity mostly finds positive effects on individual level political variables, such as more positive evaluations of candidates (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003) and a heightened sense of political efficacy (Tedesco, 2007). In line with these arguments, we hypothesize that high interactive online political communication has a positive effect on citizens' political involvement (H1).

Personalization suffers from similarly diverging conceptualizations (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010), with the common denominator being that personalization involves a shift in public attention from political institutions and parties, to politicians and their individual competences, private lives and emotional reflections (sometimes referred to as political privatization, Adam & Maier, 2010; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Personalization might take place especially in new media channels: the specific features used in new and social media 'are designed to facilitate a direct link between sender (politician) and receiver (citizen), and vice versa' (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010, p. 65), which consequently puts individual politicians more to the forefront. Only a few studies have addressed the consequences of political personalization and found positive effects, including increased effectiveness of messages (for an overview, see Brettschneider, 2008), identification with politicians (Langer, 2007) and possibly electoral turnout (Kleinnijenhuis, Maurer, Kepplinger, & Oegema, 2001; Rosenberg, Bohan, McCafferty, & Harris, 1986). By taking these outcomes as a starting point, we propose that personalized online political communication has a positive effect on citizens' political involvement (H2).

Finally, if interactivity and personalization are combined in online political communication, it is likely that possible positive effects may even be stronger. This expectation is based on the Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Tanis, 2003). Social presence increases when a medium (or its features) resembles interper-

sonal communication (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005; Tanis, 2003). Since interactive and personalized communication closely resemble interpersonal communication (because it enables two-way communication and the communication exchange becomes 'personal'), the perception of 'social presence' of the politician will be even stronger, than in the solely interactive or only personalized case (Short et al., 1976; Tanis, 2003). Hence, we assume that a positive effect of high interactive online political communication on citizens' political involvement is stronger when the online political communication is also personalized, and vice versa (H3).

To test our three hypotheses, we conducted a real-life, scenario-based survey-embedded experiment (Study 1) and a laboratory experiment with real-world websites as stimuli (Study 2).

STUDY 1: DESIGN, MEASURES AND OUTCOMES

In the first experiment, we designed a survey in which we offered the respondents a scenario about a fictitious political website, which we manipulated in terms of content and level of interactivity. We created four scenarios on the basis of high-low interactivity and high-low personalization (see Figure A1 in Appendix A). In the high interactive condition, the scenario described a website of a party that actually exists (the social-liberal party D66, a small size, center political party in the Netherlands), and which contained features that enable two-way communication and facilitate control over the communication process, whereas in the low interactivity condition features were described that only allow for one-way communication, and do not allow for control (based upon, Liu & Shrum, 2002; Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2010). In the high personalization scenario the focus of the website was on individual competence and private lives, whereas the low personalization scenario offered information about the organization and history of the political party (based upon, Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Two pre-tests showed that personalization and interactivity were effectively manipulated.

Participants from a representative sample of the Dutch population were invited by email in March 2012. The response rate was 68.4% (calculated according to AAPOR guidelines, AAPOR, 2011), with 718 people responding (52.8% female, mean age 49). After outliers were removed, 650 respondents remained in the sample. After filling out a questionnaire, they were directed online to one of the four scenarios. Next, participants were asked to vividly imagine a situation in which they are searching for political information online, because of an upcoming election.

After reading the scenario, respondents answered questions about political involvement, particularly about having the opportunity to come in contact with politics or politicians and their feelings of being close to politics or politicians. *Contact* was measured using two items (i.e. 'this website offers opportunities for a dialogue' and 'this website gives me the opportunity to come into contact with politicians'). Answers were coded on a seven-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*; $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.33$). *Closeness* was also measured by two items (i.e. 'this website gives me the feeling that I am closer to politics' and 'this website gives me the feeling that politicians are more involved

with their electorate'). Answers were coded on a seven-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*; $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.34$). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with varimax rotation showed that the validity and reliability of our scales were good (details are available upon request from the authors). Last, we included the control variable *likelihood of voting for D66* in our analyses to test for possible confounds. This was measured by asking participants: 'How likely is it that you would vote for D66?' Answers were recorded on an 11-point scale (1 = *I would never vote for this party*, 11 = *I would certainly vote for this party*; $M = 5.34$, $SD = 3.29$).

The results of the multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) show that there are effects of interactivity on both the perception of how easy it is to come into contact with politics, and on feelings of closeness to politics. The difference between high and low was significant for both indicators. People in the high interactivity condition scored on average 0.52 points higher on the scale that indicates how easy they consider it to be in contact with politics and 0.18 points higher for their feelings of closeness to the politics. Thus, participants in the high interactive condition felt that they had more opportunities to come in contact with, and felt closer to politics than participants in the low interactive condition. These results support our first hypothesis.

In terms of the effect of personalization, the results demonstrate that participants in the personalized condition felt that they had more opportunities to come into contact with politics (0.40 points higher on the scale) than participants in the non-personalized condition. However, the results did not reveal an effect of personalization on the sense of closeness to politics and politicians. Thus, our second hypothesis was only partly supported.

With regard to the interaction effects of interactivity and personalization on contact and feelings of closeness, we found a significant interaction between interactivity and personalization on the contact scale; more specifically, the effect of interactivity was significant in the personalized scenario, but only marginally significant in the non-personalized condition. Results on the closeness scale show similar results: the effect of interactivity was significant in the personalized condition but not in the non-personalized condition. This means that the effects of interactivity on political engagement only occur in personalized political communication. These results confirm our third hypothesis (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Analysis of Variance for Effects on Engagement in Political Dialogues (Contact) and Closeness Towards Politics (Study 1)

	Non-personalized		Personalized		Interaction $F(1, 645)$	η_p^2
	Low interactive	High interactive	Low interactive	High interactive		
Contact	3.49 _a	3.76 _a	3.63 _a	4.39 _b	6.78**	.010
SD	1.29	1.40	1.30	1.15		
Closeness	3.44 _a	3.48 _a	3.33 _a	3.66 _b	3.00 [†]	.005
SD	1.25	1.45	1.32	1.32		

Note. Means in the same row with a different subscript (for each personalization condition) differ significantly from each other at the .05 level. η_p^2 = effect size.
[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

STUDY 2: DESIGN, MEASURES AND OUTCOMES

In the second study we tested the same hypotheses, by conducting a laboratory experiment with real-world websites. Participants were 262 undergraduate students (74.4% female) with a mean age of 21 ($SD = 2.61$). We manipulated the level of personalization and interactivity in the same way as in our first study, using the actual website of the social-liberal party D66 as a basis (a pre-test showed that personalization and interactivity were effectively manipulated). This resulted again in a 2 (low vs. high interactivity) \times 2 (non-personalized vs. personalized) between subjects design (see Figure A2 and A3 in Appendix A). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four websites and were asked to evaluate the usability of the site, and to answer questions about political involvement with the party and the politician. We excluded participants who were familiar with the real-world website of D66 (7.7%) to reduce method bias.

We measured political involvement by four dependent variables (i.e. contact, closeness, arousal of political interest and intention to revisit the website). *Contact* was this time measured using five items (i.e. 'this website gives me the opportunity to come into contact with politicians', 'invites people for a conversation', 'shows that politicians are open to ideas from citizens', 'gives politics the opportunity to react to ideas from citizens' and 'shows that politicians are willing to listen to me'). Answers were coded on a seven-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*; $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.40$). *Closeness* was measured using four items (i.e. 'this website reduces the distance between me and politics', 'gives me the feeling that I am closer to politics', 'gives me the feeling that politicians are more involved with their electorate' and 'connects people'). Answers were coded on a seven-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*; $M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.25$). Here too, a confirmatory factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed that these two scales

were reliable and valid (details are available upon request from the authors). *Arousal of political interest* was measured using one item (i.e. ‘this website arouses my interest in politics’). Answers were coded on a seven-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*; $M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.31$). *Intention to revisit website* was also measured using one item (i.e. ‘I have the intention to revisit the website’). Answers were coded on a seven-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*; $M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.21$). We controlled for three variables that we expected to interfere with the main effects of interactivity and personalization that we are interested in: likelihood of voting for D66, affective and cognitive involvement with the website.

Table 4.2 Means, Standard Deviations, and Analysis of Variance for Effects on Contact, Closeness, Arouses Interest and Intention to Re-visit (Study 2)

	Non-personalized		Personalized		Interaction $F(1, 255)$	η_p^2
	Low interactive	High interactive	Low interactive	High interactive		
Contact	1.92 _a	3.65 _b	2.11 _a	4.38 _b	5.56*	.021
SD	0.75	1.12	0.76	1.11		
Closeness	2.86 _a	3.65 _b	2.89 _a	4.32 _b	4.85*	.019
SD	1.14	1.13	1.14	1.00		
Arouses interest	2.68 _a	2.92 _a	2.49 _a	3.40 _b	3.10 [†]	.012
SD	1.29	1.30	1.13	1.34		
Intention to re-visit	2.13 _a	1.97 _a	1.62 _a	2.45 _b	9.63**	.036
SD	1.30	1.21	0.88	1.29		

Note. Means in the same row with a different subscript (for each personalization condition) differ significantly from each other at the .05 level. η_p^2 = effect size.
[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

The results of our MANCOVA show that there is a significant effect of interactivity on political involvement, meaning that participants in the high interactive condition felt that they had more opportunities to come into contact *with* (on average 2.01 points higher), felt closer to (1.12 points higher) and had the feeling that the website aroused their interest *in* politics (0.57 points higher). However, the results revealed no main effects of interactivity on the intention to revisit the website. Overall, our first hypothesis is largely supported.

In terms of the effect of personalization, the results revealed that participants in the personalized condition felt that they had more opportunities to come into contact with politics than participants in the non-personalized condition (0.48 points difference). However, the results did not show an effect on closeness, the arousal of political interest, or intention to revisit the website. Thus, our second hypothesis was only marginally supported.

We also examined the interaction effects between personalization, interactivity and the dependent variables (see Table 4.2). The ANCOVA showed a significant interaction effect between interactivity and personalization on the various outcome variables. More specifically, the results reveal that the effects of interactivity are only significant in the personalized condition for political interest arousal, and intention to revisit the site. For contact and perceived closeness, the effects of interactivity are significant for both the personalized and non-personalized conditions, but in both instances the effect was significantly larger in the personalized condition. Figures 4.1–4.4 provide a graphic representation of the interaction effects. Overall, these results offer support for our third hypothesis.

Figure 4.1 Scores on the Contact Scale as a Function of the Four Conditions

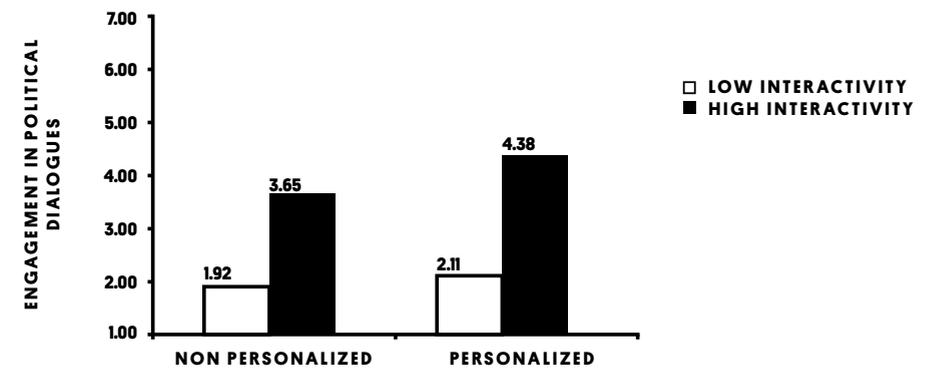


Figure 4.2 Scores on the Closeness Scale as a Function of the Four Conditions

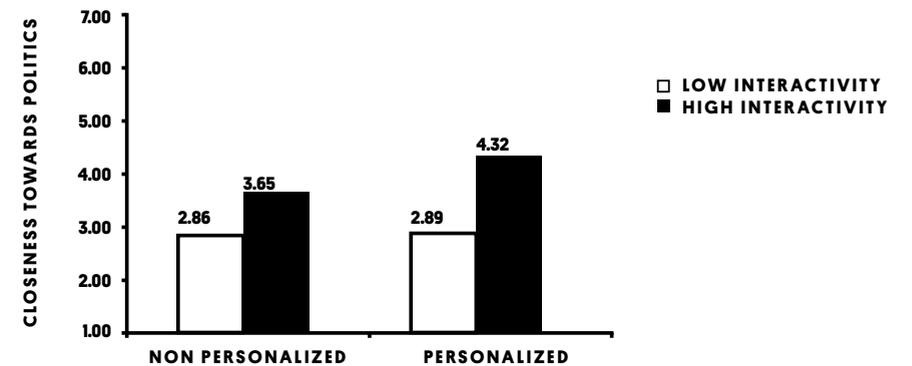


Figure 4.3 Scores on the Arousal of Political Interest Scale as a Function of the Four Conditions

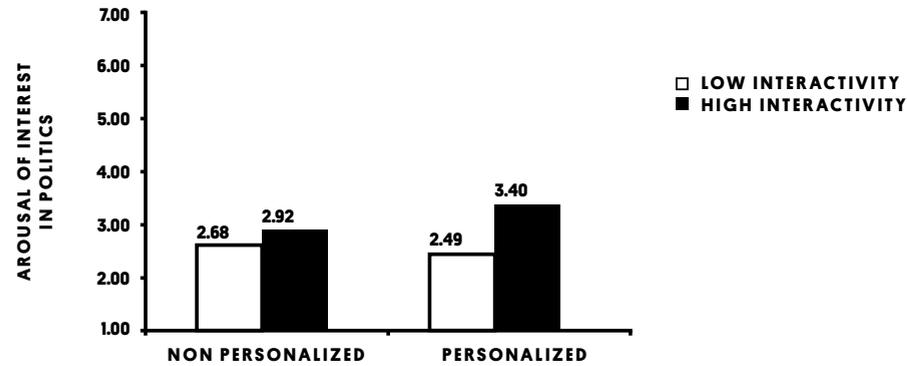
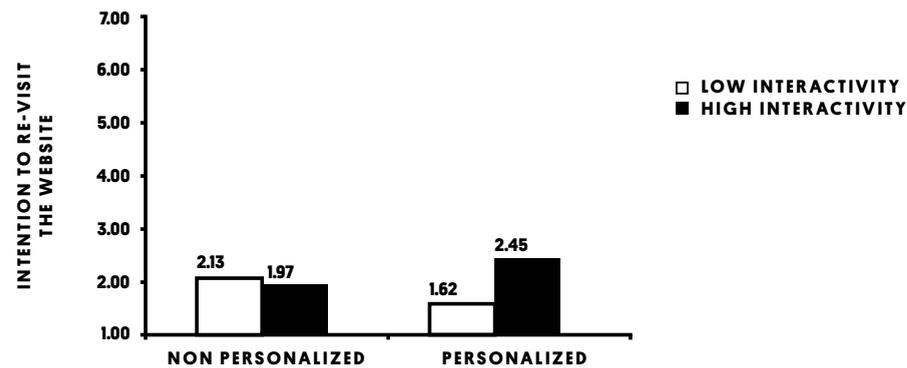


Figure 4.4 Scores on the Intention to Re-visit the Website as a Function of the Four Conditions



DISCUSSION

In this article, we studied the effectiveness of personalization and interactivity in online political communication. We examined whether a focus on an individual politician (vs. a party) and the use of interactive features increase political involvement among citizens. As expected, both studies show that personalization and interactivity have a positive effect on citizens' political involvement. Citizens who visit a website which is more focused on an individual politician or which contains more interactive features, feel more politically involved than citizens who visit a website focused on a political party or which did not contain interactive features. Those results are particularly consistent with earlier studies which looked at the effects of interactivity (Sundar et al., 2003; Tedesco, 2007) and demonstrated positive and desirable effects of higher levels of interactivity. Furthermore, in accordance with our expectation based on the Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976; Tanis, 2003), we also found that the combined effect of personalized, interactive online political communication has an even stronger positive effect on citizens' involvement than when taken separately. More precisely, we observed that interactive, personalized online communication has a positive effect on citizens' feelings of having the opportunity to come into contact with politics, and citizens' feelings of closeness to politics. This implies that it is effective to combine these two new media strategies. Of course, not all citizens will be equally influenced. Part of the electorate is likely to be suspicious towards interactivity and personalization and will consider them marketing tools to convince people, rather than genuine attempts to strengthen the ties between politics and voters, which may decrease the persuasive power (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

In Study 2, we additionally found that individuals who report that an interactive, personalized website arouses their interest in politics and individuals who visited the interactive, personalized website said more often that they would revisit this website, compared to citizens who did not visit this website. It seems that besides feelings of political involvement, personalized and interactive online communication may also exert positive effects on actual interest in politics and behavior, which is also supported by previous evidence (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006). However, it is important to note that, although personalization and interactivity arouse interest and behavior, the overall levels of 'political interest caused by the website' and 'intention to revisit the website' were rather low. This might indicate that personalized and interactive communication strategies are not sufficient to engender high levels of political interest and possible behavior. Perhaps, citizens' trait characteristics, such as efficacy and civic skills (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) are necessary for online political communication to have a strong positive impact on political interest and behavior. Future research needs to investigate whether the effects of personalized and interactive communication are more pronounced for more politically sophisticated citizens.

Interesting for future research is also the fact that the results of the scenario study are similar to the ones found in the laboratory experiment. It could be argued that it is difficult for participants to vividly imagine an 'interactive' website on the basis of a description of a website. Especially since a description does not contain actual interactivity. Nonetheless, on the basis of our results, participants seem to be able to clearly

visualize a website in their mind without actually visiting one. Therefore, the scenario design seem to be a valid method for future research that studies the effects of online communication.

To sum up, the findings presented in this article contribute to theory about the effects of political Internet use, by demonstrating that the characteristics of online communication can contribute to citizens' political involvement. An interesting finding, since scholars who study the consequences of Internet use for political purposes disagree, and tend to be more pessimistic about the impact of Internet use on citizens' political involvement (for an overview of the literature, see Boulianne, 2009). Our study shows a more positive view. It seems that the characteristics of new media are important elements that might eventually explain the positive consequences of political Internet use. Since political parties and their representatives are increasingly using more interactive features online and making their communication more individual (e.g. by using Twitter), political involvement among citizens could increase, which in the end will foster democracy. From this viewpoint, the characteristics of online media become not only more important when studying the effects of political Internet use, but also seem an important condition for the effect Internet may have on democracy.

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CHAPTER 5

CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS: EXPLAINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALIZED AND INTERACTIVE ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND CITIZENS' POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

This chapter is under review as:

Kruikemeier, S., Van Noort, G., Vliegthart, R., & De Vreese, C. H. (2014). Different online communication styles: Explaining the relationship between social media use and political involvement.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the causal relationship between different communication styles (i.e., interactive and personalized) on social media and political involvement, and the mechanisms that explain the effects. By using an experimental design ($N = 243$), a 2 (low vs. high interactivity) x 3 (depersonalized vs. individualized vs. privatized communication) in between subject design, we examine whether more personalized and interactive communication from political parties and candidates on Twitter increases political involvement among citizens through social presence and perceived expertise. The findings show that interactive communication leads to a stronger sense of social presence and perceived source expertise, which positively affect involvement. The effects of personalization differ: Individualized communication positively affects involvement via source expertise. Interestingly, privatized communication positively affects involvement via social presence, but negatively via source expertise.

INTRODUCTION

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, Hermans, & Sams, 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 & 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 & Vedel, 2006) and a crucial element for a successful election campaign.

Online political campaigning via social media has also received increased academic attention. Many scholars have shown a specific interest in examining the relationship between Internet use and political engagement among citizens (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2009). 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., Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). In particular, the use of social media seems valuable. 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 & Jacobs, 2013). Particularly the content characteristics or communication style (interactive and more personal communication) had positive consequences for citizens' involvement into politics (Chapter 4; Lee & Shin, 2012; Lee & Oh, 2012; Utz, 2009).

Despite the increase in interest in the effects of social media use and the positive

effects that were reported in the aforementioned studies, we know little about *why* social media is an effective media tool for getting citizens involved (Lee & Oh, 2012). Hardly any research investigates *which* mechanisms explain the beneficial effect of social media use for political purposes. The current study tries to fill this void by investigating how the use of social media affects political involvement among citizens. More specifically, we will focus on two key style characteristics of social media: interactive and personalized communication. Interactive communication style refers to direct reciprocal communication between politics and citizens. Personalization refers to a communication style that is more focused on the individual politician (individualized communication) and his or her private life (privatized communication), than on the party the politician represents (depersonalized communication). We will seek to understand how these key style characteristics of social media affect political involvement, and which underlying processes mediate such a relationship. To gain more knowledge about the underlying processes, this study integrates well-known theories from marketing and computer-mediated communication research; social presence and source expertise theory. We believe that both theories are particularly suitable for explaining the effects of social media use on political involvement, because they have been applied in marketing research to explain the relationship between advertisement on the web and web advertising effectiveness (Choi & Rifon, 2002; Fortin & Dholakia, 2005). Political communication via social media can be regarded as a form of political marketing. It might be that similar indirect effects can be found in a more political context. Besides, more 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 & Shin, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2013; Lee & Oh, 2012).

This study contributes to the existing literature in various ways. First, we believe that it is necessary to focus on the effects of specific characteristics, or in other words, communication styles used in social media (i.e., interactivity and political personalization). Previous work on the consequences of social media use has often been focusing on the effect of social media use in general (see e.g., Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 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 focusing on specific style characteristics or the social media attributes (Eveland, 2003) we will gain more understanding which communication features of social media actually affect political involvement. Second, this study contributes to the literature by investigating to what extent social presence and source expertise theories explain the relationship between interactivity and personalization and citizens' involvement. The central question is: Does an interactive and personalized communication style lead to a stronger sense of interpersonal contact (i.e., social presence, Lee & 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 form of personalization (individualized or privatized) is most effective in increasing political involvement. Thus, we also answer the question: How personal should personal communication be to be beneficial? So, to sum up, this study is designed to contribute to our understanding of

the consequences of interactive and personalized online communication and the mechanisms that explain the effects.

In order to understand how and why social media affects political involvement, we perform an experiment. In the experiment, we manipulated personalization and interactivity in Twitter accounts. We chose Twitter as the social media platform for this study because we believe that the effects of interactivity and personalization are not only present in websites, but also in other online platforms, such as social media. Prior research typically studied the effects of personalization and interactivity on political websites (Chapter 4; Tedesco, 2007). Not many studies have focused on other online platforms, such as social media. This is surprising, since social media sites are particularly suitable for interactive and personalized communication. Furthermore, by today, virtually all parties and politicians have a Twitter account to communicate with voters, especially in Western democracies and during elections (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe, 2010). Therefore, in our view, Twitter is very suitable to investigate the effects of personalization and interactivity.

INTERACTIVITY AND POLITICAL PERSONALIZATION: TWO KEY STYLE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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 (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Sundar, 2007). Interactivity is a multidimensional construct, researchers use different conceptualizations to define interactivity (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005). However, the rich body of interactivity research commonly defines interactivity as two-way communication (see e.g., Sundar et al., 2003; Tedesco, 2007). Two-way communication is 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 focuses on interactivity as a process and operationalizes interactivity as two-way communication.

Interactivity makes social media different from offline media. Generally, offline media send out information without receiving immediate response (i.e., one-way flow of information, Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007). On social media, interactive communication occurs via a platform, for instance Facebook and especially Twitter. Twitter is designed to facilitate direct 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, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). In addition, such dialogues are also visual and observable for a broader audience. Even if users do not participate, they can be influenced by just reading these dialogues.

If we turn to the research on the effects of interactivity in political contexts, studies point towards positive outcomes: exposure to interactive websites increases recall (Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005), positive political attitudes (Song & Bucy, 2008; Tedesco, 2007), and positive evaluations about politicians (for social media, Utz, 2009). Likewise, exposure to interactivity on a political blog influenced positive attitudes towards the website, candidate evaluations and voting intention (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006). Twitter studies that were conducted in South Korea seem to reveal similar findings. 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 & Shin, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2013).

Another key characteristic of social media, as we mentioned before, is political personalization. Political personalization refers to the shift of focus from parties and institutions, to politicians and their private life (Adam & Maier, 2010; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; Van Aelst, Sheaffer, & Stanyer, 2012). This shift seems to be present in social media (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010), as politicians are using social media individually to communicate to voters. Social media is ideally suited for personal profiling. Especially because the interpersonal communication literature repeatedly showed that an important reason to use social media is to profile oneself (see e.g., Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007). Politicians frequently use social media (especially Twitter) for self-promotion, to talk about themselves and to refer to information about, for example, facts, opinions, or links to articles (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). In general, personalization has two distinct forms; 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, because the way in which politicians communicate on these platforms is profoundly privatized: 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, we know little 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, par. 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. Previous Internet research shows that personalization on political websites has a positive influence on psychological involvement (Chapter 4) and personalization on Twitter aroused greater interest (Lee & Oh, 2012). There are also scholars who are more skeptical. They 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 & Maier, 2010). Others found that privatized information generates political cynicism (Jebril, Albæk,

& de Vreese, 2013), distrust in politicians (Otto & Maier, 2013) and campaign loss for political candidates (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011).

To sum up, previous research indicates that interactivity, and to a lesser extent, political personalization, are the two most important and distinct characteristics of social media (Chapter 3; Chapter 4; Sundar et al., 2003; Tedesco, 2007; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Especially since previous content analyses indicate that these communication styles are especially present in online political communication and in political Tweets more specific (Small, 2010; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006). Evidence regarding the effects of interactivity is, in general, positive. Studies demonstrated that interactivity affects political involvement among citizens. By contrast, the evidence regarding the effects of personalization is anecdotal and very limited. Furthermore, no attempts have been made to identify different psychological processes that explain the relationship between interactive and personalization communication and political involvement. This paper seeks to address these gaps by integrating two theories from marketing and computer-mediated-communication research that might explain the relationship: social presence and source expertise theory.

Social presence

Social presence, a concept that is often used to explain interpersonal communication effects in computer-mediated communication (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Tanis, 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 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 the medium (or its features) resembles interpersonal communication. Since interactive communication simulates interpersonal contact, we believe 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 & Rodgers, 2006, p. 47). Strong psychological connections with others will then increase the likelihood to engage in the flow of online communication (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008), which subsequently arouses involvement into politics. In other words, it seems that the sense of being in an interpersonal relationship could foster perceived intimacy and closeness with the communicator (Lee & Oh, 2012), which, in turn, may have a positive influence on the evaluations and intention to vote for the communicator. We believe that we will find such relationships in Twitter communication. Following previous research, we expect 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 & Shin, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2013). Consequently, it is expected that this conveyed sense of interpersonal contact has a positive effect on political involvement, because heightened presence with the political communicator instigates political involvement.

The following hypothesis is suggested:

H1: Exposure to interactive online communication styles in social media positively affects political involvement via social presence.

Likewise, we also expect that personalized communication influences 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 & Oh, 2012). There is, to our knowledge, only one scientific study that examines the effect of personalized (online) communication on social presence (Lee & Oh, 2012). This study shows that personalized tweets heighten perceived presence for people who are positive about social interactions. Although this study shows interesting findings, it does not take into account the differentiation between individualized and privatized communication. We assume that differential effects exist for these distinctive forms of personalization.

First, we expect that social presence is an important mediator that explains the effect of individualized communication on political involvement. When the communication on social media stems from an individual politician (instead of the party), readers may identify more easily with this source. This helps readers to form a vivid picture of the communicator and increases feelings of intimacy. This results in higher perceived social presence. 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. We expect that readers identify even more with the communicator when more privatized information is enclosed; the communicator becomes 'real' by creating an emotional bond (Lee & 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. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2: Exposure to individualized communication styles in social media positively affects political involvement via social presence.

H3: Exposure to privatized communication styles in social media positively affects political involvement via social presence [a], and the effect will be stronger than the effect of individualization [b].

Source expertise

Another explanation for the effects of interactivity and personalization on political involvement can be found in the source expertise theory. Source expertise has often been studied as a psychological mechanism of persuasion. Source expertise can be defined as the extent to which the communicator is professional and competent (Ohanian, 1990).

Studies show that competence, integrity and reliability are important personality traits whereupon voters evaluate politicians (see e.g., Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986). Following Sundar (2008), we argue that interactive communication affects expertise, because interactive communication creates goodwill regarding the communicator on the side of the reader. More specific, 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, we propose that 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, Naccari, & Fatoullah, 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). Taken together, we argue that:

H4: Exposure to interactive online communication styles in social media positively affects political involvement via source expertise.

Personalized communication on Twitter might also enhance perceived expertise. In general, we know that candidates' Twitter use positively affects perceived credibility (Hwang, 2013). But more specifically, Langer (2007) argues that humanizing a private persona gives someone experiential authentication. Following this study, we propose that individualized communication fosters the feeling among readers that an actual person or human voice is behind the tweets (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). This will enhance the impression that the communication is more professionalized and competent. 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 she or he is personally responsible for the communication that is sent out. We also know that individualized communication helps politicians to bring their messages across, because the political information has gotten a face and a voice (Brettschneider, 2008). We, therefore, anticipate that individualized communication positively affects the evaluation of the politician and not the party.

In contrast, source expertise might also explain the negative effects of personalization. Following Jebir et al.'s (2013) line of arguing, we expect that privatized news has negative effects on source expertise, because a focus on private life distracts readers from political content. Hence, a 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 styles in social media positively affects political involvement via source expertise.*
- H6: *Exposure to privatized communication styles in social media negatively affects political involvement via source expertise.*

Combined effect of interactivity and personalization

Taking the studies described earlier into account, we believe that the Internet's most prominent style characteristics could also interact with one another. As we hypothesized, both interactivity and personalization (i.e., individualized communication) enhances presence with and expertise of the source, which fosters political involvement. It is therefore expected that when these characteristics are combined, this may have an even stronger effect on citizens' political involvement. For example, we know from previous research that individuals who visited a highly interactive website, remembered more about the information that was presented on the website (Warnick et al., 2005). Interactivity may increase the attention users pay to the communication, and therefore, it could be expected that highly interactive communication may have a greater effect when it is presented in a personalized way.

There is one study that combines the two key characteristics. It demonstrates that the conjoined effects of interactivity and personalized communication on political involvement are indeed stronger (Chapter 4). We expect that this will be particularly true for the indirect effect via social presence. Interactivity and personalized communication styles (both individualized and privatized) provoke higher levels of perceived intimacy with the communicator. It is not surprising that we believe that combining these characteristics will activate even higher levels of perceived social presence. This will, in turn, affect political involvement. For the indirect effect via source expertise, we expect to find similar results. Interactivity and individualized communication enhances perceived source expertise, which, in turn, positively affects political involvement. Since privatized communication negatively influences source expertise, we do not expect to find a conjoined effect of privatization and interactivity. Everything considered, we propose the following hypotheses:

- 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, we created an online experiment. In the experiment we abundantly manipulated personalization as well as interactivity in six political Twitter accounts. The accounts we used 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. We believe that by using an existing Twitter account, stimulus materials will be realistic. Additionally, we based the stimulus material on two pre-tests that tested the effectiveness of the manipulations of interactivity and personalization.

A 2 (interactivity: low vs. high) x 3 (personalization: depersonalization vs. individualization vs. privatization) in between subject design was used. Participants who completed the questionnaire were 243 college students (79.4 % female) with a mean age of 20 ($SD = 2.00$). Participants were recruited via an online message board of the university. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. Participants received five euro or course credits for their participation. We collected the data in the winter of 2013.

Stimulus material

As we mentioned earlier, six twitter accounts were created to manipulate interactivity and personalization. Between conditions, the amount of information was kept equal. We downloaded the actual content of the Twitter account of Alexander Pechtold and D66 and then modified the content for the experiment. The stimulus materials consist of the first page of a Twitter account (see Appendix B for a screenshot of the manipulated Twitter accounts and Table B1 for an overview of the manipulated Tweets).

The three personalization levels were manipulated in line with studies conducted by Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2010) and Van Aelst et al. (2012). The personalization levels were manipulated in two different ways: we manipulated the source of the tweets 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.

We manipulated the level of interactivity in line with previous studies that studied the effects of interactive political communication on websites (Chapter 4) and on Twitter more specifically (Lee & 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 sent information (i.e., no dialogue).

We conducted two pre-tests (respectively $N = 59$ and $N = 42$) among a convenience sample, with the aim to establish the effectiveness of the manipulations. The results of the pre-tests demonstrated that both personalization and interactivity were effectively manipulated.

Measures

As “[p]olitical participation arises from the interaction of citizens and political mobilizers” (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003, p. 36), we believe that social media can particularly influence political behavioral intentions. Previous studies focused on the relationship between social media and psychological measures of political involvement (e.g., evaluation of a politician, Utz, 2009). We suggest that the effects are also applicable to various behavioral intentions measures, such as talking about politics, behavioral intentions that are related to the medium (i.e., in the case of Twitter: following a politician) and, obviously, voting intention. Therefore, in this study, we operationalize political involvement as political behavioral intentions and we chose to take a wide variety of different variables that measure political behavioral intention. These are more general political behavior measures and measures that are specifically relevant in the context of social media.

Political talk.

Political talk refers to citizens’ intended behavior to discuss politics or Twitter use with friends, family and colleagues. The variable was measured on a 7-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 = .73).

Twitter behavior.

Twitter behavior 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 7-point scale (1 = *totally disagree* and 7 = *totally agree*) using four items (e.g., ‘After reading the tweets I am more inclined to follow politicians who are active on Twitter’; $M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.44$). The factor analysis revealed that the items load on one dimension ($EV = 3.43$, explained variance 85.9%; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$).

Voting for the party.

We measured voting for the party with one item (i.e., ‘After reading the tweets I am more inclined to vote D66 in the next election’; 7-point scale, 1 = *totally disagree* and 7 = *totally agree*; $M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.56$).

Voting for the politician (party leader).

We measured voting for the politician with one item (i.e., ‘After reading the tweets I am more inclined to vote for Alexander Pechtold in the next election’; 7-point scale, 1 = *totally disagree* and 7 = *totally agree*; $M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.56$).

Social Presence.

Social presence items were derived from the social presence of voices scale (Biocca et al., 2003; Lee & Nass, 2005) and adapted to this study. We measured (perceived) social presence by using three items (i.e., ‘I got to know the source of the tweet better’, ‘I could imagine the source of the tweets vividly’ and ‘the source of the Tweets spoke directly to others’). Answers were coded on a 7-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%; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$).

Source expertise.

Source expertise was derived from the dimensions of source credibility (Ohanian, 1990). Following Ohanian (1991) we use one dimensions of source credibility; expertise. Expertise was measures using four items on a 7-point semantic difference scale (i.e., ‘professional’, ‘competent’, ‘expert’, ‘qualified’; $M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.94$). A confirmatory factor analysis using varimax rotation revealed that the four items load on one dimension ($EV = 2.97$, explained variance 74.3%; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$).

Control variables.

Since previous research found that stronger party identification with a specific party affects how candidates and the party are perceived (Lee & Oh, 2012), and because our stimulus materials were based upon an existing party/politician, we included two control variable in all our analyses to test for possible confounds: ‘likelihood of voting for D66’ and ‘likelihood of voting Alexander Pechtold’. Answers were recorded on a 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).

Analyses

To test our hypothesis that the effect of interactivity and personalization on political involvement is mediated by social presence and source expertise, we conducted multiple (moderated) mediation bootstrapping analyses with 1,000 resamples, using Hayes’ PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4 and Model 9 in Process, Hayes, 2012). PROCESS is a computational tool that can be used for mediation, moderation, and conditional process modeling. In the past, researchers tested for a significant direct relationship before examining indirect effects, but indirect effects can occur without a significant direct relationship. PROCESS can overcome these limitations by giving us the opportunity to test for indirect effects, as the tool provides us with a formal test of the indirect relationship. Besides, PROCESS is especially ideal to examine our study, as it examines multiple mediators, and even moderators, simultaneously (Jensen, King, Carcioppolo, & Davis, 2012). This study will examine multiple mediators and adds moderators to the model. We analyzed all mediators and moderators simultaneously, which eliminates omitted variable bias. However, for reasons of clarity we describe the results for each mediator in sequence.

RESULTS

Social presence

Hypothesis 1 predicted that interactive communication positively affects political involvement via social presence. Analyses revealed significant positive indirect effects of high interactivity (vs. low) on different forms of political involvement through social presence (see Table 5.1). 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 = .57, $p < .01$), and social presence had, in turn, a positive effect on the intention to vote for the politician ($b = .32$, $p < .001$). 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 change to support the politician or party, $b = .18$, 95% Bias Corrected Confidence Interval [.08; .34].

To assess whether the effect of personalization is mediated by social presence, we first tested whether individualized communication positively affects political involvement via social presence (see Table 5.1). 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, hypothesis 2 is not supported.

Next, the indirect effect of privatization versus individualization is tested. The bootstrapping analyses demonstrate that a privatized communication style (i.e., privatization) and not (i.e., individualization), had a *positive* effect on political involvement, because personal information induces feelings of social presence. Subsequently, the indirect effect of privatization versus depersonalization is tested. The analyses revealed again 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 forms 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 ($b = .57$, $p < .01$ and $b = .85$, $p < .001$, respectively), and social presence had, in turn, a positive effect on the intention to talk about politics ($b = .25$, $p < .001$), $b = .14$, 95% BC CI [.03;.30] and $b = .21$, 95% BC CI [.08;.40] respectively. In sum, it seems that personalization has only an effect on social presence when information about the politicians' private life is enclosed. Therefore, this study finds support for hypothesis 3a, but not for 3b.

Table 5.1 Indirect Effects of Interactivity and Personalization on Political Involvement via Social Presence.

Independent variable (X)	Mediating variable (M)	Dependent variable (Y)	Effect of X on		Direct effect (c')	Indirect effect (ab)	95% BCCI		Total effect (c)
			M (a)	on Y (b)			Lower;	Upper	
High interactive (ref. low)	Social presence	Political talk	.57***	.26***	-.43**	.15	.05;.27	-.16	
High interactive (ref. low)	Social presence	Behavior Twitter	.57***	.21**	-.37*	.12	.04;.24	-.04	
High interactive (ref. low)	Social presence	Vote party	.57***	.34***	-.37*	.20	.09;.38	-.02	
High interactive (ref. low)	Social presence	Vote politician	.57***	.32***	-.31 [†]	.18	.08;.34	.04	
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	Social presence	Political talk	.28	.25***	.02	.07	-.03;.20	.20	
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	Social presence	Behavior Twitter	.28	.21**	-.07	.06	-.01;.16	.18	
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	Social presence	Vote party	.28	.32***	.35 [†]	.09	-.03;.23	.57*	
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	Social presence	Vote politician	.28	.30***	.26	.09	-.04;.23	.50*	
Privatization (ref. individualization)	Social presence	Political talk	.57**	.25***	-.15	.14	.03;.30	-.08	
Privatization (ref. individualization)	Social presence	Behavior Twitter	.57**	.21**	-.11	.12	.02;.26	-.11	
Privatization (ref. individualization)	Social presence	Vote party	.57**	.32***	-.21	.18	.05;.37	-.10	
Privatization (ref. individualization)	Social presence	Vote politician	.57**	.30***	-.18	.17	.04;.34	-.10	
Privatization (ref. depersonalization)	Social presence	Political talk	.85***	.25***	-.13	.21	.08;.40	.12	
Privatization (ref. depersonalization)	Social presence	Behavior Twitter	.85***	.21**	-.18	.18	.06;.37	.07	
Privatization (ref. depersonalization)	Social presence	Vote party	.85***	.32***	.14	.28	.14;.47	.47*	
Privatization (ref. depersonalization)	Social presence	Vote politician	.85***	.30***	.08	.26	.12;.43	.40 [†]	

Note. $N = 243$. BCCI = Bias Corrected Confidence Interval. Control variables included Change Vote Party and Change Vote Politician. [†] $p < .10$ * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Source expertise

Hypothesis 4 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 forms of political involvement through source expertise (see Table 5.2). For instance, the use of interactive tweets had a positive effect on the perceived expertise of the source ($b = .40, p < .01$), and source expertise had, in turn, a positive effect on the intention to talk about politics ($b = .31, p < .01$). 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, $b = .12, 95\% \text{ BC CI } [.05;.24]$.

To assess whether the effect of personalization is mediated by source expertise, we first tested whether individualized communication positively affects political involvement via *source expertise* (see Table 5.2). Confirm Hypothesis 5, the tests for the relationship between individualization (vs. depersonalization) and political involvement via source expertise indicated significant results. It appears that exposure to a Twitter account from a politician, heightens perceived expertise of the source ($b = .42, p < .01$), and this leads to, for example, increased levels of political behavior on Twitter ($b = .48, p < .001$), $b = .20, 95\% \text{ BC CI } [.08;.39]$. 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 Hypotheses 6, 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 ($b = -.25, p < .10$), which will lead to less intention to vote for the party leader ($b = .36, p < .001$), $b = -.09, 95\% \text{ BC CI } [-.22;-.01]$. 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. Mentioning politicians' private life in tweets makes them less of an expert, but the level of social presence was heightened. Analysis confirmed this; the total indirect effect (the sum of the two indirect paths) was not significant (e.g., for political talk, $b = .08, 95\% \text{ BC CI } [-.08;.30]$), indicating that a strong beneficial effect of communicating about one's private life was not found. Lastly, we tested the effects of privatization and depersonalization. As one might expect, we did not find a significant effect of privatization (vs. depersonalization) on political involvement via source expertise. Apparently, the positive effect of communicating as a politician diminishes when a politician discloses information about his private life. Thus, taken together, the findings regarding personalization indicate support for Hypothesis 4, 5 and 6.

Table 5.2 Indirect Effects of Interactivity and Personalization on Political Involvement via Source Expertise.

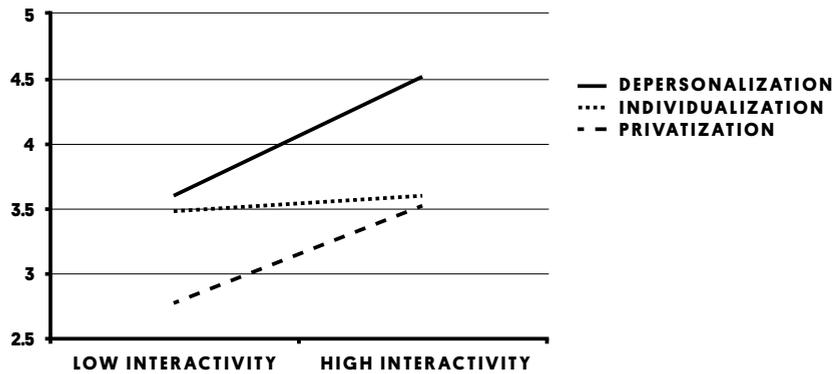
Independent variable (X)	Mediating variable (M)	Dependent variable(Y)	Effect of X on M (a)	Effect of M on Y (b)	Direct effect (c')	Indirect effect (ab)	95% BCCI Lower; Upper	Total effect (c)
High interactive (ref. low)	Source expertise	Political talk	.40***	.31***	-.43**	.12	.05;.24	-.16
High interactive (ref. low)	Source expertise	Behavior Twitter	.40***	.51***	-.37*	.20	.10;.40	-.04
High interactive (ref. low)	Source expertise	Vote party	.40***	.39***	-.37*	.15	.06;.30	-.02
High interactive (ref. low)	Source expertise	Vote politician	.40***	.42***	-.31 [†]	.17	.07;.33	.04
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	Source expertise	Political talk	.42**	.26**	.02	.11	.03;.24	.20
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	Source expertise	Behavior Twitter	.42**	.48***	-.07	.20	.08;.39	.18
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	Source expertise	Vote party	.42**	.32**	.35 [†]	.13	.04;.31	.57*
Individualization (ref. depersonalization)	Source expertise	Vote politician	.42**	.36***	.26	.15	.06;.34	.50*
Privatization (ref. individualization)	Source expertise	Political talk	-.25 [†]	.26**	-.15	-.07	-.18;-.01	-.08
Privatization (ref. individualization)	Source expertise	Behavior Twitter	-.25 [†]	.48***	-.11	-.12	-.31;-.02	-.11
Privatization (ref. individualization)	Source expertise	Vote party	-.25 [†]	.32**	-.21	-.08	-.22;-.01	-.10
Privatization (ref. individualization)	Source expertise	Vote politician	-.25 [†]	.36***	-.18	-.09	-.22;-.01	-.10
Privatization (ref. depersonalization)	Source expertise	Political talk	.16	.26**	-.13	.04	-.02;.15	.12
Privatization (ref. depersonalization)	Source expertise	Behavior Twitter	.16	.48***	-.18	.08	-.06;.25	.07
Privatization (ref. depersonalization)	Source expertise	Vote party	.16	.32**	.14	.05	-.03;.20	.47*
Privatization (ref. depersonalization)	Source expertise	Vote politician	.16	.36***	.08	.06	-.03;.20	.40 [†]

Note. N = 243. BCCI = Bias Corrected Confidence Interval. Control variables included Change Vote Party and Change Vote Politician. [†] $p < .10$ * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Combined effects of interactivity and personalization

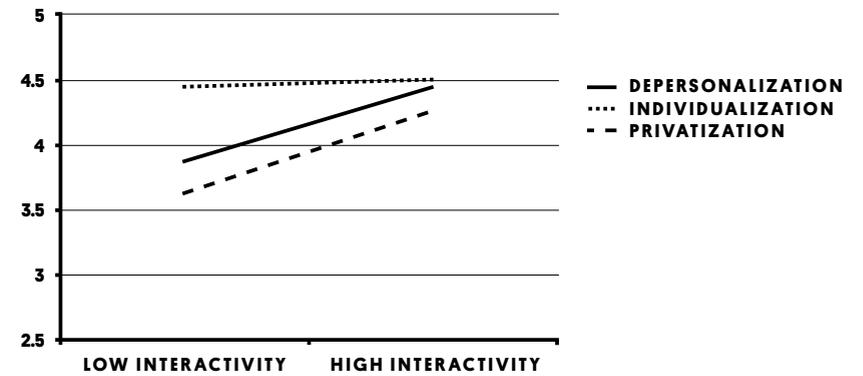
To test the combined effect of interactivity and personalization on political involvement through social presence and source expertise, a moderated mediation (i.e., a conditional indirect effect) analysis was conducted. Specifically speaking, we examine whether the different forms of personalization moderated the indirect effect of interactivity on political involvement via social presence and source expertise. In short, using Model 9 in PROCESS, we examined whether there exists an indirect effect of interactivity on involvement via social presence and source expertise. In this 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; $b = .16$, 95% BC CI [.04;.34]), or the communication was privatized (e.g., for talk; $b = .24$, 95% BC CI [.10;.47]). 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 a higher level of social presence, and in turn, into heightened political involvement.

Figure 5.1 Example interaction effect of interactivity and political personalization on the mediating variable social presence



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 depersonalization (e.g., for talk; $b = .15$, 95% BC CI [.04;.37]), or the communication was privatized (e.g., for talk; $b = .19$, 95% BC CI [.05;.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 result in higher levels of source expertise and consequently political involvement. For a visualization of the indirect conditional effects, see Figure 5.1 and 5.2.

Figure 5.2 Example interaction effect of interactivity and political personalization on the mediating variable source expertise



CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study was set out to examine *the relationship* between social media use and political involvement and the *underlying processes* that explain the effects. In line with our hypotheses, the results 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 political involvement. This finding indicates that social presence and source expertise are two important underlying mechanisms that explain the positive effects of interactive use of social media on citizens' intended political behavior and vote intention. The current findings add to a growing body of literature that shows positive effects of interactive online communication (Tedesco, 2007; Warnick et al., 2005).

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 conjoined effect investigation, our results also show that personalized and interactive communication interact. Following Chapter 4, it seems that the effect of interactivity may be stronger when the communication is also personalized. 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.

The findings from this research have several major theoretical and practical implications. First, theoretically, the findings show that the characteristics of social media are important when explaining the effects of social media on political involvement. This notion supports the idea that it is not general social media use 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 we believe it is important to consider the effects of Internet in general and social media more specific, to advance our theoretical understanding about the specific consequences of social media, one should also 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) and new social media platforms arise and disappear. Our study demonstrates that by focusing 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 & Morris, 2010; Spierings & Jacobs, 2013), this study is the first to investigate two different psychological processes (i.e., social presence and source expertise theory) 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 we believe that they should be considered in future investigations regarding the effects of online political communication.

Lastly, as this is one of the first studies that examine the effects of different aspects of personalization (i.e., depersonalized, individualized and privatized communication), this study demonstrates that different aspects of personalization can have negative and positive consequences. Apparently, political personalization consists of multiple aspects and when studying the consequences of a focus on politicians rather than parties, one should take these different aspects into consideration. Individualization is entirely different compared to privatization, and both have different consequences (ranging from a positive effect to no effect, to a negative effect) depending on different processes.

In addition to other studies, this paper incorporated different forms of political involvement (or political behavior). Previous studies examined the consequences of interactivity and personalization by focusing on psychological feelings of involvement (Chapter 4). By adding to this literature, we also found that interactive and personalized communication not only affects feelings of involvement, but it can actually have an effect on political behavior (such as voting). This striking finding, notes that social media can actually change ones (intended) voting behavior.

An important practical implication is that an interactive and personalized commu-

nication 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. Nevertheless, 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.

A remark should be addressed before we make our final conclusions. In the current study, participants were exposed to a picture of a Twitter page. Participants did not actually engage in an interpersonal conversation online. Although we believe that the audiences in social media can be very extensive and not only participators in online conversations are influenced (also observing personalized, interactive communication influences readers), it would be interesting to investigate the effects of actual interpersonal contact. It might be that the effects are even stronger when a person is actually participating in an online conversation. Additionally, when actual interactive and more personalized communication is manipulated, other processes might become more important, such as flow experiences, transportation and involvement (Green & Brock, 2000; van Noort, Voorveld, & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Future work regarding the actual reciprocal and personal contact on social media is therefore suggested.

Summing up the results, this work contributes to existing knowledge about the effects of social media use by providing evidence that especially interactive, and to a lesser extent, personalized Twitter use can affect citizens' political involvement. Thus far, research on online political campaigning has mostly neglected the underlying mechanisms that might explain the positive relationship. We believe that future studies should follow this area of research. What is now needed is an investigation of the other mechanisms that might explain the effects of social media and examine whether conditional effects exists. Are processes conditional on individual characteristics of citizens (e.g., high versus low political interest) or are these mechanisms more generally applicable?

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CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

“What a fascinating time for political communication researchers. Rarely do we get to witness the launch of a medium with such broad and sweeping potential to change significantly communication behavior”. (Tedesco, 2008, p. 507)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A debate about the Internet’s consequences continues to exist. Some scholars are positive and believe that the Internet contributes to the quality of democracy. However, others disagree and fear that the Internet has negative consequences for political life. This dissertation dealt with this important unresolved debate in political communication research. It examines whether the Internet contributes to the quality of democracy by strengthening political involvement or whether it will lead to a decline in political involvement (Boulianne, 2009). Over the past two decades, scholarly work repeatedly found inconsistent results (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). Research sporadically explored causal relationships, did not often examine changes in Internet use across time, nor has it investigated the specific form and content characteristics of online political communication, or empirically tested the underlying mechanisms (Boulianne, 2009). This thesis filled these voids and adds substantially to the knowledge about how and why political Internet use serves democratic ends. Moreover, the dissertation contributes to the communication and political science literature on media effects by offering an in-depth investigation of the consequences of online political communication for citizens’ political involvement.

In this final chapter, I describe the main findings and conclusions of the research presented in this dissertation by answering the research questions. In addition, theoretical and practical implications will be reported. Finally, this chapter identifies areas for future research and provides concluding remarks.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

This dissertation started with two research questions that together give insight into the use and users of online political communication. Answers to these research questions form the starting point of this dissertation. It was questioned *how many* and *which citizens* use the Internet for political purposes. Answering these two questions offer a broad overview of the possible reach and impact of political Internet use. Moreover, by giving a first indication of how many citizens use the Internet for political purposes and which citizens, fundamental questions regarding the *mobilization and reinforcement* debate can be answered (Hirzalla, Van Zoonen, & De Ridder, 2011; Norris, 2000). Will the Internet merely attract those citizens who are already politically involved, in other words, the ‘usual suspects’ (Polat, 2005), or will it mobilize new citizens?

In general, Chapter 2 shows, in line with earlier studies (Bakker, 2013; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006), that *few citizens participate in politics online. Some forms of political Internet usage are more popular (passive forms) than others (active forms), and the people who use the Internet for such purposes are often those who are already engaged in politics.* This conclusion seems to support the skeptical view.

So generally speaking, the use of the Internet for political purposes is low. However, this does not mean that the use of the Internet for political purposes is insignificant. Some specific forms of Internet use for political purposes are popular and younger citizens are more likely to use the Internet for political reasons. More specifically, the use of Vote Advice Applications (VAA’s) is quite popular; one out of every four (see Chapter 2), and in 2012, one out of every three citizens (Kruikemeier, et al. 2013), uses a VAA during an election period. In addition, visiting political websites or reading online comments under news articles is also a rather common activity among citizens.

In addition, this dissertation shows that younger citizens are more likely to use the Internet for political purposes. An interesting finding, since it has often been argued and demonstrated that younger citizens are generally not interested or involved in politics (Best & Krueger, 2005; Delli Carpini, 2000; Putnam, 2000). An explanation for this observation is that younger citizens have usually more Internet skills than their older counterparts. This might explain why younger citizens are more inclined, and have the ability, to take part in online political activities (Best & Krueger, 2005). But, of course, not only their skills are of great importance, younger citizens should also be motivated to take part in politics (Best & Krueger, 2005). When younger citizens have the motivation to do so, their already existing Internet skills mobilizes them towards greater political involvement. This notion is supported by recent studies. For instance, scholars (using panel data with multiple waves) found that social media use for political purposes is higher among younger citizens, and social media use for political purposes positively predicts political interest and political participation (Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013). It seems that social media use can thus have a significant impact: If youngsters can be motivated to take part in online political communication on social networks sites, for example by adjusting or tailoring online political communication to a younger audience (Möller, 2013), citizens can be mobilized into politics. In that case, Internet may function as a true mobilizer for a ‘new’ generation.

The motivations to become politically active online can also come from another angle. Younger citizens are often more active on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, than older citizens. Online social networks are generally larger and heterogeneous (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008); they are a collection of ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1973). Granovetter already argued in 1973 that: “weak ties, far from creating alienation [...] are actually vital for an individual’s integration into modern society” (p. 203). In other words, “[w]eakly-tied persons, while less likely to share resources, provide access to more diverse types of resources because each person operates in different social networks and has access to different resources” (Garton et al., 1997, Units of Analysis, para. 7). It is tempting to believe that larger networks are an assembly of artificial friendships, but due to the access to a large social network of weak ties, they help obtain new resources (Garton et al., 1997; Steinfield et al., 2008). For instance, research found that social networking sites contributed to the likelihood of coming across different political viewpoints (Kim, 2011). Others added that online political discussion networks are often wider than discussion on non-political topics; for instance, more people participate in these discussions (González-Bailón, Kaltenbrunner, & Banchs, 2010). Work in Chapter 2 found that citizens who use the Internet for political purposes are often interested in politics. These highly involved users might have a greater role in the dissemination of political communication online, because they can function as a ‘network hub’. These hubs are likely to disperse political information or mobilize other citizens via their online networks (Eveland, Hutchens, & Morey, 2013). Also others emphasize this idea: ‘influentials’ (those who are often central in a online network and are likely to reach a bigger audience) and ‘broadcasters’ (those who often ‘send’ messages) have specific network positions that allow them to reach larger audiences (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, & Moreno, 2013). As online social networks of younger citizens are larger and heterogeneous, it can be expected that there is a far greater chance that information from a ‘political hub’ also reaches less interested younger citizens. Less politically interested citizens could then, in turn, be influenced by that political information, which could mobilize them to become politically active. This rationale relates also to the classical theory of the two-step flow of communication (Bakker, 2013): information will flow from a sender to one person (a hub), and in turn to others. The information could also reach less active citizens (Katz, 1957).

In sum, answering the question *how many* and *which* citizens use the Internet for political purposes, tends to lend support for the reinforcement/normalization thesis (Hirzalla et al., 2011; Norris, 2000). Overall, Internet use is low, but the low percentage is by no means hopeless. Even if just five percent of the electorate uses a particular form of online communication, it is still considerable. I agree that these participating citizens are the ones who are already involved in political life, but they might have a greater role in the dissimulation of political communication online. Also, the finding that younger citizens engage more in online political activities bodes hopes for the future. In addition, finding out how many and which citizens use the Internet for political purposes offers context for the effect questions. Insight into the reach of online political communication put the consequences in perspective.

INTERNET’S CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRACY: THE EFFECTS ON CITIZEN’S INVOLVEMENT

I now move towards the heart of the dissertation, by answering the ‘effect’ questions. By moving towards the ‘effect’ questions, inherently the main research question of this dissertation will be answered: to what extent does the Internet contribute to democracy by fostering citizens’ involvement in politics? But first, I will answer the third till sixth research question. In short, the third and fourth research question focus on the direct and conditional effects of different forms of political Internet usages. The fifth and sixth research questions focus on the effects of the key content characteristics of online political communication. The seventh research question will then be discussed. Since it is expected that a relationship between interactive, personalized communication and involvement will be found, the last research question reads as follows: Why do the content characteristics of online political communication (i.e., political personalization and interactivity) affect citizens’ political involvement?

Effects of different forms of online political communication

In Chapter 2, the third question of this dissertation (i.e., to what extent do different forms of political Internet use affect citizens’ political involvement) was answered. The results of Chapter 2 showed that the use of only a few specific forms of political Internet use had a positive effect on political involvement. More specifically, the results indicate that citizens who use an online VAA or read the comments below online political articles during the election period are more likely to vote or to feel more interested in politics than those who do not. In addition, Chapter 3 showed that the use of Twitter by political candidates affects electoral outcomes. These results support the second main finding; *some specific forms of Internet usage have a positive effect on interest and political behavior*. Interestingly, Chapter 2 also found that citizens who write political comments are less likely to vote. It may well be that these citizens are more cynical about politics, especially because these comments are often negative and sarcastic in nature.

The fourth research question asked whether the effects of different forms of political Internet use on citizens’ political involvement were stronger for more politically interested citizens than for less politically interested citizens. According to the reinforcement literature, politically interested or active citizens have more resources (e.g., civic skills) that allow them to benefit from the advantages provided by the Internet (Best & Krueger, 2005). In other words, the Internet will mainly affect those citizens who are already politically sophisticated and will have less of an effect on those who are not.

Chapter 2 did not find that the positive effect of both active and passive forms of political Internet use on political participation is more prevalent for citizens with higher levels of political interest. Instead, for two specific forms of political Internet use, the opposite is observed: the positive effect of these two forms of political Internet use is more prevalent for less politically interested citizens. Chapter 2 showed that reading political comments and using Twitter for political purposes mobilizes less interested citizens. Due to technological developments and growing experience with the Internet, the resource argument is becoming less relevant. It is more likely that less interested citizens

will benefit from different forms of political Internet use because they can be mobilized, while highly interested citizens are already mobilized.

Taken together, it seems that the effects of political Internet use are diverse and can be negative as well. In addition, Chapter 2 did not find support for the notion that Internet benefits more engaged citizens. In fact, the opposite happens. The gap between engaged citizens and the ones who are not does not become wider. Generally, the effects partly support all different views in the debate: mobilization, reinforcement/normalization and the pessimistic view. Although addressing the effects of different forms of political Internet use is important, the results do not support a theoretical framework to understand different effects (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012). Chapter 2 mainly demonstrates that some forms of online political communication have an effect, whereas others do not. This suggests that certain *characteristics* of the Internet are driving the effect. It might well be that the specific content characteristics of these online platforms mobilize citizens to vote and not the specific form of Internet usage (e.g., social media usage). Therefore, I continue the argumentation line (theoretically and on the basis of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) that it is important not only to consider the different forms (*how many* citizens use different online media) but also to consider the content-specific factors (*how* citizens use the Internet) in investigating the effects of Internet use on citizen involvement.

Effects of the content characteristics of online political communication

The previous discussion pointed out that the effects of different forms of political Internet use tend to be ‘fuzzy’. To gain more insight into the consequences of online media in changing democratic practices (Albrecht, 2006; Eveland, 2003), this dissertation turned towards the specific characteristics or attributes of online communication. In chapter 1, two key content characteristics of online political communication were identified: interactivity and political personalization (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). In chapter 3, quantitative content analyses was used to test whether these characteristics are actually present in online political communication and in Chapter 4 and 5, experiments were used to find out whether the theorized effects were actually there.

Chapter 3 investigated the communication styles of political campaigning by candidates on a social networking site (i.e., Twitter). The results of Chapter 3 showed that above other topics in the Tweets (e.g., reference to news or political issues), Twitter was mainly used as a vehicle to talk about candidates’ private persona. Additionally, Twitter is used to communicate in an interactive way. Engaging in an interactive conversation, by responding to other people is a popular style of communicating on Twitter. The results from Chapter 3 are consistent with those of other (content analyses) studies (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Schweitzer, 2008; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006) and support the general observation that interactivity and personalization are indeed key characteristics of online political communication (Sundar et al., 2003; Vergeer et al., 2013).

I will now turn to the experimental evidence on the effects of the two key content characteristics of online political communication. Chapter 3 shows that interactive

communication use by a political candidate on Twitter positively affects the amount of votes he or she receives. In addition, Chapter 4 shows that personalization and interactivity presented on political websites have also a positive effect on citizens’ political involvement. In accordance with previous studies (Tedesco, 2007), citizens who visited a website that was more focused on an individual politician or contained more interactive features, felt more politically involved than citizens who visited a website focused on a political party or did not contain interactive features. Additionally, following the Mix of Attribute Approach (Eveland, 2003), the combined effect of personalized, interactive online political communication was investigated. Both studies that were reported in Chapter 4 showed that the combination of the two characteristics yielded an even stronger positive effect on citizens’ involvement than when taken separately. In other words, interactivity and personalization strengthen each other. Chapter 5 found again similar results. Although the study presented in Chapter 5 examines different mediators, the results showed that individualized and privatized communication styles on Twitter (and in addition their combined effect) positively affect citizens’ political involvement.

The research that has been conducted in Chapter 5 builds upon the findings in Chapter 4 by examining possible explanations for the effects of personalization and interactivity. By discovering underlying processes or mechanisms, Chapter 5 contributes to the scholarly work by advancing the understanding of the consequences of interactive and personalized online communication and the mechanisms that explain the effects. In addition, this chapter adds to the scholarly work on the consequences of political personalization. This Chapter differentiated between depersonalized (focus on party), individualized (focus on politician) and privatized (focus on politician and his or her private life) communication (Van Aelst et al. 2012), instead of the broader distinction between no personalization and personalization. The results revealed that exposure to interactive communication will lead to a stronger sense of interpersonal contact with (perceived social presence), and perceived professionalization of the communicator (perceived source expertise), which, in turn, positively affects political involvement. Additionally, Chapter 5 found that individualized and/or privatized communication styles on Twitter have a positive effect on citizens’ political involvement via the two mediating processes, but the findings are less distinct as for interactivity. Still, these findings indicate that social presence and source expertise are two important underlying mechanisms that explain the positive effects of the Internet. Overall, it seems that the Internet enhances strong psychological connectedness with politics and using Internet makes politics appear more professionalized.

In sum, the third main finding of this dissertation is; *interactivity and personalization are key characteristics of online political communication and they both affect citizens’ political involvement*. Additionally, the fourth main finding of this dissertation is: *feelings of social presence and source expertise are two important processes that explain the positive effects of online political communication*. By taking the last three studies into account, this dissertation supports the mobilization theories. Although the effects are sometimes small, they contribute significantly to citizens’ involvement in politics. Perhaps the major question that now arises is what these findings mean. This will be answered in the next section. In the next and last part of this chapter, I will explain the theoretical and practical implications of this dissertation.

IMPLICATION FOR THEORY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation contributes to the development of theory regarding the effects of online political communication in important ways. First, this dissertation provides insight into the theoretical knowledge about the relationship between Internet use and involvement. It does so, as mentioned in the previous section, by examining the specific characteristics of new media. Previous research asserts that: “With a deluge of novel media forms emerging regularly, researchers have no systematic theoretical media effects framework [...]” (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012, p. 254). This dissertation contributes in this regard by identifying the key characteristics of online political communication (interactivity and political personalization), by documenting their existence (content analyses) and by validating the expected results (effects of interactivity and personalization on political involvement). With regard to the effects of interactivity, this dissertation shows that communicating in an interactive way on different online platforms by political candidates and parties enhances political involvement among citizens. With regard to the effects of personalization, this dissertation shows that communicating in a personalized way on different online platforms enhances political involvement among citizens as well. These findings demonstrate that a focus on the content characteristics of new media, and not the forms (e.g., Twitter use or emailing a politician) help us to understand media effects better, especially in an era where new online platforms come and grow (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), or go and lose popularity (e.g., Hyves and MySpace). Scholars will not continuously reinvent “the theoretical wheel” (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012, p. 271).

Second, this dissertation adds to the growing body of literature that shows that interactivity is a key characteristic that is often the driving force behind the positive effects of new media. Marketing literature already found that interactivity used in commercial websites has positive consequences on attitudes (Coyle & Thorson, 2001; Teo, Oh, Liu, & Wei, 2003), website involvement and purchase intention (Jiang, Chan, Tan, & Chua, 2010). Others found that interactivity used on Twitter by organizations positively influences perceived relationships between the organization and its public (Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013). This shows that the effects of interactivity are not context dependent and are largely applicable to other contexts (in this case political communication) and across different platforms (e.g., Twitter, blogs, commenting). Therefore, the results of this study can be translated to other research fields as well. For instance, interactivity is likely to be present in other online platforms (e.g., LinkedIn and Instagram) and it is interesting to see whether similar effects will be found.

Third, this dissertation is among the first to study the effects of different aspects of political personalization. The literature on the effects of personalization is limited and the evidence is inconsistent. Some scholars found that personalization has positive effects on policy support (Han, 2009) and interest (Lee & Oh, 2012), while others found that personalization leads to political cynicism (Jebriil, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2013) and disbelief in politicians (Otto & Maier, 2013). This dissertation shows in three different experimental studies that personalization positively influences political involvement. More importantly, this dissertation also points out that personalization does not consist of one dimension. In accordance with others (Van Aelst, Sheaffer, & Stanyer,

2012; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010), I want to emphasize that personalization has multiple aspects. Both individualization and privatization are important sub dimensions or aspects of political personalization. Individualization is purely the difference between a focus on an individual politician (individualized communication) rather than on a party (depersonalized communication). Privatization means that the communication is focused on a politician’s private life (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Following Van Aelst et al. (2012), privatization entails communication about a politician’s family-life, past life (e.g., upbringing), leisure time and love life. Chapter 4 examined the effects of personalization in general (both aspects of personalization) and Chapter 5 adds to this by examining the effects of the two aspects of personalization. Because Chapter 5 found that the effects of the different aspects of personalization can vary (see Chapter 5), it is important that in future research on the effects of personalization in, for example an offline context, these aspects are taken into consideration.

There is, however, an important question that should be answered in future investigations. It is unknown whether the ‘product’ characteristics matter or rather the ‘process’ characteristics of both interactivity and personalization. More specifically, according to Stromer-Galley (2004), interactivity can be seen as a product and a process. Interactivity-as-product entails communication between people and computers or networks (e.g., the use of hyperlinks or contact buttons). Interactivity-as-product entails communication between individuals (e.g., direct online conversations between a politician and a citizen). Thus, interactivity can be a content characteristic (a product), but a communication style as well (a process). This is also true for personalization. Political personalization can be present within the communication itself, for example a politician is the account holder of an online media platform (a product) or by way of communicating about, for instance, the politicians’ private life (a process). Just as interactivity, personalization can be a content characteristic (the communication stems from a politician) and a communication style (communicating in a personal way). Although this dissertation examined the content characteristics as well as the communication styles used in online political communication and it is very likely that both phenomena enhance positive effects, it is possible that the effects can also be different (e.g., communicating in a personal way might enhance more intimacy with a politician than just visiting a politicians website). It would be interesting to assess effects of content characteristic (product) versus communication style (process) in future research.

Fourth, although the link between the Internet, political involvement and democracy has drawn the attention of numerous scholars (Polat, 2005), the theoretical knowledge about why the Internet affects political involvement is scarce. Hardly any research investigated which mechanisms explain the effects of online political communication. This dissertation fills this void. This dissertation integrates well-known theories from marketing and computer-mediated communication research: social presence and source expertise theory. Both theories are particularly suitable for explaining the effects of social media use on political involvement, because they have been applied in marketing research to explain the relationship between advertisement on the web and web advertising effectiveness (Choi & Rifon, 2002; Fortin & Dholakia, 2005). In some regard, online political communication can be seen as a form of political marketing (strategy).

By using online political communication, politicians and parties try to inform citizens, but they also try to persuade voters to support the party or to vote for them. From this point of view, the marketing theories are applicable to the political context. Also, more recent studies emphasize that ‘perceived social presence’ is an important psychological mechanism that often explains Internet’s positive effects (Lee & Shin, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2013; Lee & Oh, 2012). Further work needs to be done to establish whether other underlying processes explain Internet’s effects. Moreover, it is important to gain more understanding of all mediating factors that are relevant in the online context. For instance, factors such as psychological nearness between communication partners could matter (see Electronic Propinquity Theory, Walther & Bazarova, 2008). But also flow experiences and transportation might come in play (Green & Brock, 2000; Van Noort, Voorveld, & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Examining these underlying processes offer in an interesting venue for future studies.

Fifth, this dissertation was focused on different facets of political involvement. The dependent variable focused on psychological (feelings of) political involvement, political behavioral intentions and actual political behaviors. Although this dissertation by no means focused on the measurement of involvement, it seems that online political communication affects various facets of political involvement. It affects ‘soft’ measures of political involvement (e.g., feelings, interest and intended behavior), but also ‘hard’ measures of political involvement (e.g., actual voting behavior). This dissertation puts them under the same umbrella of ‘involvement’. It would be interesting, in a future study, to examine the consecutive effects of the different facets of political involvement. For example, does interactive communication affect psychological feelings of involvement (e.g., feeling close to politics), then behavior intentions (e.g., intention to vote), and in the end actual behavior (e.g., actual voting)?

To conclude, while this dissertation offers insights into the direct effect of political communication on involvement, additional research is needed to examine whether there is a significant indirect effect of online political communication via traditional media. It is very plausible that certain online information reaches broader audiences through traditional media. Previous research already found that journalists use various online news sources in their news reporting (Gulyas, 2013). The attention for online sources seems high among journalists. Especially Twitter is a popular news source for journalists (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Journalists are also the ones who often follow politicians on social networking sites. This indicates that online political communication might have a larger indirect effect via traditional media. Traditional news formats are still very popular (Prior, 2003; Wonneberger, 2011) and they have a larger audience. In this light, a broader and maybe less politically interested audience can then be reached. In that case, the Internet may have an even bigger impact on more people.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The work presented in this thesis has also important practical implications for political candidates, political organizations and society at large. First, this dissertation demon-

strates that citizens can be persuaded to vote for a party or specific political candidate. This stresses the importance for political actors and parties to incorporate online communication strategies in political campaigning. First and foremost, political actors and political parties need to be online. In the Netherlands, this is already realized. Political actors see the benefits of online communication through digital platforms and an online presence is standard practice for most parties and candidates. However, previous studies also pointed out that politicians and campaign organizations are sometimes cautious online, because they are afraid to lose control (Carlson, Djupsund, & Strandberg, 2013). Political actors should, however, be responsive and reactive in their online communication to receive positive evaluations or generate votes. It is important to start conversations with or give information directly to citizen, and it is equally and maybe more important to react and respond to citizens online. During campaigns, candidates and political organizations should actually communicate with citizens, instead of just responding to a few citizens (Bor, 2013).

Second, this dissertation made clear that communication in a more personalized way can persuade possible voters as well. The results are less clear-cut than for interactive communication, but personal campaigning (Vergeer et al., 2013), as I pointed out before, has clear benefits. By ‘humanizing’ a political candidate, citizens can perceive candidates as more friendly. Candidates (or their campaign organizations) can do this by showing online that they interact in family life and have hobbies (Bor, 2013). It is however still important for candidates to also portray themselves in a professional light (Bor, 2013), as Chapter 5 shows that a focus on politicians’ private life can lower perceived expertise. I believe that it is important for politician to humanize their persona, without losing their professional image.

Third, not only engaging in an actual conversation with potential voters matters. The results of the dissertation also confirmed that simply observing interactive and personalized conversations might already lead to positive outcomes for politicians and parties. Thus, the use of the Internet may not only be beneficial for a small participating audience, but the communication may also reach a considerable larger group of voters. Campaign organizations, parties and politicians should therefore invest in online political communication, because the dissemination of information might be bigger than only the addressed audience.

Last, this dissertation demonstrates that online political communication can contribute to the model of participatory democracy (Strömbäck, 2008). Citizens who use the Internet for political purposes participate and engage in democracy: they vote more often, participate in online conversations, feel connected with politics, and are more interested in politics. But this does not happen automatically (Putnam, 2000). Citizens are individually responsible to be politically active online. When they are online and use the Internet for political purposes, they can become more involved and participate more in politics, which in turn, fosters democracy. So whether democracy will be strengthened by the Internet depends largely on the fact whether or not citizens feel responsible and are motivated to engage in online activities that are related to politics.

FINAL CONCLUSION: DOES THE INTERNET CONTRIBUTE TO DEMOCRACY?

I will now turn to the main research question of this dissertation; to what extent does online political communication contribute to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens' involvement in politics? Answering this question is certainly no easy task and there are many nuances that should be made. However, in a nutshell, this dissertation shows that few citizens use the Internet for political communication, but some forms are more popular than others. Citizens who then use the Internet for political purposes are often those who are already engaged in politics. Some specific forms of Internet usage have a positive effect on political involvement, but it is mainly the key content characteristics (i.e., interactivity and political personalization) that are the driving force behind the effects. If the communication is personalized and contains interactive features, citizens will be more involved in politics. Such communication makes citizens feel close to politics (social presence) and they perceive the communication as more professional (source expertise).

In general, this dissertation found middle ground between the hopes and fears of Internet's consequences for democracy. In some regards, the Internet does not contribute to the quality of participatory democracy. The reach of online political communication is sometimes low and politically interested citizens are often more likely to participate online. This indicates that a basic requirement of the model of participatory democracy is not met: a large number of people should participate in politics (Strömbäck, 2008). But there are exceptions that should not be overlooked. For instance, the finding that younger citizens engage more in online political activities gives hope for the future. In addition, this dissertation shows that when online political communication is interactive and includes personalization, this positively affects citizens' political involvement. In this regard, the Internet does contribute to the participatory model of democracy (Strömbäck, 2008). The effects are often small, but one would also not expect a huge impact.

Taken together, it seems that the debate between the optimistic, pessimistic and skeptical scholars is outdated. There is not one side of the debate that is fully supported by research presented in this dissertation and research on the consequences of the Internet for democracy in general. Moreover, this dissertation point out that the question *to what extent does the Internet contributed to democracy* is too generic. Instead, future researchers should ask more specific questions about Internet's consequences. In others words, it is now important to move beyond the debate and put emphasis on focused research questions. Such research questions should focus on the characteristics of new media, its specific consequences and its various underlying mechanisms. For instance, which content characteristics of online political communication are consequential for which kind of people? Or which aspect of interactivity (product or process) is effecting political involvement?

To conclude, I agree with the proposition that "scholars [might] placed too heavy a burden of expectations on the Internet" (Tedesco, 2008, p. 518). Finding small positive changes might be an optimistic result after all. There is only one important and rather

fundamental precondition: the Internet *should* be used for political purposes otherwise the Internet will certainly have no impact. So in the end, the first sentence of this dissertation sums it all up: "[t]he most important question is not what the Internet will do to us, but what we will do with it" (Putnam, 2000, p. 180). Only if the Internet is actually used for political purposes by citizens, Internet will serve democratic ends.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Figure A1 Scenarios used in study 1 (the words in brackets varied)

Soon, national elections will be held. You decide to search on Internet for some additional information about the elections. You turn on the Internet and type 'national elections' in Google search. Google will take you to **[the party website of D66/the personal website of D66 leader Alexander Pechtold]**. There, you find **[the logo of D66/a picture of Alexander Pechtold]** and in addition, **[the party's programme/his biography]**. You can read that **[the party was founded in 1966/he was born in 1965]**, **[entered the government for the first time in 1973/ since 2006 is a member of the parliament]**, and **[that he is married to Froukje Idema]** and **[a youth wing/that he has two young children]**. The website **[contains information about the standpoints of/offers you the opportunity to engage in a discussion with]** **[D66/Alexander Pechtold]** and **[the/his]** party programme. The website **[contains/enables you to react on]** news reports posted by **[D66/Alexander Pechtold]**. **[You can also read a report [D66/he] wrote, describing [their/his] opinions about the election campaign/There is also a [personal] call made by [the party/him] to participate in the election campaign]**. Lastly, you can use a username to log **[in/into an online page where you can chat with [D66/Alexander Pechtold]]**.

Figure A2 Personalization and interactivity in the manipulated websites in study 2

Concept	Non-personalized, low interactivity	Personalized, low interactivity	Non-personalized, high interactive	Personalized, high interactive
Interactivity (hyperlinks)	0	0	11	11
Personalization (logo vs. photo)	Logo D66	Photo AP	Logo D66	Photo AP
Personalization/interactivity (Background information)	Party information on homepage	Biography AP on homepage	Party information via hyperlink	Biography AP via hyperlink
Personalization/interactivity (3 news items)	News items on homepage; D66 centre of focus	News items on homepage; AP centre of focus	News items, with hyperlink; D66 centre of focus	News items, with hyperlink; AP centre of focus
Personalization/interactivity (commenting on news items)	–	–	Comments D66 and unknown visitors	Comments AP and unknown visitors
Interactivity (sharing news items on SNS)	–	–	+	+
Interactivity (e-mailing news items to others)	–	–	+	+
Interactivity (RSS feed)	–	–	+	+
Interactivity (Contact)	–	–	+	+
Interactivity (Participation in the campaign)	–	–	+	+
Interactivity (Twitter feeds displayed in website)	–	–	Twitter feeds D66	Twitter feeds AP
Interactivity (Links to SNS and other websites)	–	–	+	+
Interactivity (Link blog)	–	–	Link blog D66	Link blog AP

AP = Alexander Pechtold (Party leader D66), not present = –; present = +

Figure A3 Real-world website used in study 2



NON-PERSONALIZED, LOW INTERACTIVE WEBSITE



PERSONALIZED, LOW INTERACTIVE WEBSITE



NON-PERSONALIZED, HIGH INTERACTIVE WEBSITE



PERSONALIZED, HIGH INTERACTIVE WEBSITE

APPENDIX B

Table B1 Operationalization of personalization and interactivity in the manipulated Twitter accounts

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

Figure B2 Twitter accounts used



LOW INTERACTIVITY AND FOCUS ON PARTY



HIGH INTERACTIVITY AND FOCUS ON PARTY



LOW INTERACTIVITY AND FOCUS ON POLITICIAN



HIGH INTERACTIVITY AND FOCUS ON POLITICIAN



LOW INTERACTIVITY AND FOCUS ON POLITICIAN AND HIS PRIVATE LIFE



HIGH INTERACTIVITY AND FOCUS ON POLITICIAN AND HIS PRIVATE LIFE

ENGLISH SUMMARY

This dissertation examines to what extent the Internet influences citizens' involvement in politics. It is well known that a lot of excitement about the consequences of the Internet exists. Scholars often agree that the Internet offers various political opportunities. Citizens can communicate directly with parties and politicians without the interference of journalists (e.g., via Twitter and Facebook). In addition, the Internet added numerous ways for citizens to participate in politics. Citizens can for instance email questions to politicians, sign e-petitions or become a member of the party using an online registration form. Also politicians and parties adopted the Internet. Incorporating online communication strategies during election times is standard practice for most parties and candidates.

However, some scholars are less optimistic about the Internet and warn that people who are already politically engaged mainly use the Internet for political purposes. In other words, those scholars fear that the Internet will only engage those citizens who are already interested in politics. The Internet will in that case not reform, but rather normalize or strengthen existing patterns of political participation.

This thesis contributes to this debate and examines the political implications of the Internet. This dissertation focuses both on election times and non-election times. In addition, different research methods will be used – longitudinal survey research, content analyses and experimental studies. Three main conclusions are drawn from this research.

Not many people are politically active online, but some activities are more popular than others.

The first chapter of this dissertation shows that not many people are politically active online. Internet use for political purposes is in general low, but some activities are more popular than others. For instance, this dissertation shows that three percent of the Dutch citizens follow a politician on Twitter (in 2010). Yet, filling out a Voting Advice Application (e.g., VoteMatch) is very popular. In 2010, almost one out of four citizens filled out a VAA, and in 2012, one out of three citizens. In addition, fifteen percent of the Dutch citizens visited a party website and reading comments under political online news is also very popular.

Furthermore, this dissertation shows that the citizens who are politically active online are often already interested in politics. Additionally, the results of the dissertation point out that younger citizens are more likely to use the Internet for political purposes. This is an interesting and hopeful finding. It has often been argued and demonstrated that younger citizens are generally not interested and involved in politics. So the Internet might, in the end, play an important role in engaging younger citizens into politics.

The Internet can have positive effects on citizens' political involvement.

Secondly, the study shows that the use of online media by politicians and parties has a positive effect on citizens' involvement in politics. In other words, Internet can have positive consequences. For instance, this dissertation shows that political candidates who used Twitter during the 2010 Dutch national elections received more preference votes than candidates who did not. This dissertation also found that citizens who use an online Vote Advice Application are more likely to vote. These effects are compared to offline media such as television. But that does not mean that, for instance, VAAs are not important. Even a small effect can make a difference.

Also the communication strategies used in online political communication have an effect.

Thirdly, also the communication strategies used in online political communication have an effect on citizens' political involvement. Previous literature shows that online campaigning differs from traditional campaigning; it is interactive and personal. Politicians and parties use various online platforms to start a dialogue with citizens without the interference of journalists. But also citizens can ask questions directly to political actors. This makes online campaigning more interactive. In addition, online communication is personal. Many politicians have their own Twitter account, Facebook page or website. Because of this, the communication is more focused on the individual politician than the party they represent. Besides, online platforms are often used to send out personal messages about politicians' private life. Online campaigning is therefore very personal.

Research presented in this dissertation shows that if political parties use an interactive communication style, citizens feel more politically involved. For instance, when a politician communicates interactively on Twitter, citizens are more likely to vote for this politician. Additionally, a personal approach also matters. A personal communication style (when the focus is on the politician and not on the party) has a positive effect on citizens' involvement in politics. Personal and interactive communication makes citizens feel close to politics. So, in short, when politicians themselves start an online dialogue, citizens feel more involved with politics.

Taken together, the results of this thesis show that few people are politically active online. However, this dissertation also found that *certain forms of online political communication and certain online communication styles* have a small and positive effect on citizens' political involvement. Based on the research presented in this dissertation, I want to point out that the question – to what extent does the Internet contribute to democracy? – is therefore too generic. Instead, future researchers should ask more specific questions about Internet's consequences. Such specific questions should provide more insight into the political consequences of the Internet. For instance, which online platforms do matter and for which people? Are the positive effects stable over time? These specific questions are important because this dissertation shows that the Internet can, in the end, have a positive impact.

NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

In dit proefschrift wordt onderzocht of het internet bijdraagt aan de politieke betrokkenheid van burgers. Veel mensen zijn zeer enthousiast over het vermogen van het internet. Wetenschappers vinden ook dat het internet allerlei voordelen biedt. Zo kunnen burgers, zonder tussenkomst van journalisten, direct in contact komen met partijen en politici via bijvoorbeeld Twitter en Facebook. Bovendien geeft het internet burgers tal van mogelijkheden om politiek actief te worden. Burgers kunnen politici mailen met vragen, online petitie invullen of zich aanmelden via een website om lid te worden van een partij. Ook politici en politieke partijen maken veelvuldig gebruik van het internet. Politici en politieke partijen begeven zich tijdens verkiezingen massaal op sociale media en hebben vaak eigen websites.

Sommige wetenschappers zijn echter minder optimistisch en waarschuwen dat het internet alleen voor politieke doeleinden wordt gebruikt door burgers met een grote politieke interesse. Volgens deze wetenschappers is bij deze burgers weinig winst te behalen. Politiek geëngageerde burgers gaan immers al naar de stembus en zijn al politiek actief.

Dit proefschrift draagt bij aan dit debat en onderzoekt de politieke consequenties van het internet. Dit wordt gedaan met behulp van onderzoek dat is uitgevoerd tijdens verkiezingscampagnes en onderzoek dat is uitgevoerd buiten verkiezingstijd. Daarnaast zijn verschillende onderzoeksmethoden gebruikt – longitudinaal vragenlijstonderzoek, inhoudsanalyse en experimenten. Uit dit onderzoek komen drie belangrijke conclusies naar voren en een aantal aanknopingspunten voor politici, partijen en burgers.

Politiek internetgebruik is laag, maar sommige activiteiten zijn populair.

Ten eerste laat het eerste hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift zien dat relatief weinig mensen politiek actief zijn op het internet. Internetgebruik met politieke doeleinden is over het algemeen laag, maar sommige activiteiten zijn populair. Uit het onderzoek blijkt bijvoorbeeld dat slechts drie procent van de Nederlanders in 2010 een politicus volgt op Twitter. Sommige vormen van internetgebruik zijn daarentegen juist wel populair. Meer dan een kwart – en in 2012 meer dan een derde – van de Nederlanders vult bijvoorbeeld een stembus in en bijna vijftien procent bezoekt wel eens een partijwebsite. Bovendien leest een kwart van de Nederlanders wel eens reacties onder politieke nieuwsberichten. Verder laat het onderzoek zien dat de mensen die politiek actief zijn op het internet vaker al zeer geïnteresseerd zijn in de politiek. Daarnaast zijn zij ook jonger. Dit is een interessante en hoopvolle bevinding. Zeker in een tijd waarin jongeren vaak als politiek ongeïnteresseerd worden bestempeld kan het internet een belangrijke rol spelen in het betrekken van deze doelgroep bij de politiek en democratie.

Het inzetten van online media tijdens verkiezingen heeft zin.

Ten tweede laat het onderzoek zien dat het inzetten van online media door politici en partijen leidt tot meer politieke betrokkenheid. Campagnevoeren op het internet heeft dus zeker zin. Zo blijkt uit het onderzoek dat het inzetten van Twitter door politieke kandidaten – tijdens de verkiezingen van 2010 – leidt tot meer voorkeursstemmen. Daarnaast blijkt dat het invullen van een stemwijzer leidt tot hogere stemintenties – mensen die een stembus raadplegen geven vaker aan te gaan stemmen dan mensen die geen stembus raadplegen. De effecten zijn, vergeleken met offline media zoals televisie, klein. Maar dat wil niet zeggen dat stemwijzers er niet toe doen. Ook een klein effect kan tijdens een verkiezing zeker een verschil maken.

Ook de wijze waarop politici en politieke partijen campagne voeren heeft effect.

Ten derde blijkt dat het niet alleen uitmaakt of partijen en politici online campagne voeren, maar ook hoe zij dit doen. Uit de literatuur weten we dat online campagne voeren zich onderscheidt van traditioneel campagne voeren, het is interactief en persoonlijk. Politici en partijen kunnen via online platformen een dialoog aangaan zonder de tussenkomst van journalisten, daarmee is online campagne voeren meer interactief. Daarbij hebben politici steeds vaker een eigen Twitteraccount, Facebookpagina en websites. Zij treden dus relatief meer op de voorgrond dan de partij die zij vertegenwoordigen. Bovendien wordt op online platformen vaak privé-aangelegenheden van politici besproken. Daarmee is online campagne voeren zeer persoonlijk.

Onderzoek uit dit proefschrift laat zien dat de politieke betrokkenheid van burgers wordt vergroot als partijen en politici een dialoog aangaan via het internet. Een dialoog aangaan kan verschillende vormen hebben. Dit kan bijvoorbeeld door op Twitter een gesprek aan te gaan of op websites ‘buttons’ toe te voegen waarmee burgers geld kunnen doneren of lid kunnen worden van de politieke partij. Een persoonlijke benadering is eveneens effectief. Wanneer de online communicatie persoonlijk is (dus niet de partij maar de politicus centraal staat), dan leidt dit tot meer politieke betrokkenheid bij burgers. Dit komt doordat een persoonlijke en interactieve wijze van online campagne voeren burgers het gevoel geeft dat de politiek dichtbij is. Wanneer politici dus zelf een dialoog aangaan met burgers, dan voelen burgers zich meer betrokken bij de politiek.

De conclusies van dit proefschrift bieden bruikbare aanknopingspunten voor politici, partijen en burgers. Het eerste belangrijke advies is dat politici en partijen een dialoog moeten aangaan met burgers. Dit ligt erg voor de hand, maar politici en partijen zijn soms terughoudend. Ze willen potentiële kiezers niet overladen met informatie, overvloed aan informatie kan immers afleiden. Daarnaast zijn politici en partijen bang om de controle te verliezen. Burgers kunnen bijvoorbeeld negatieve berichten plaatsen op sociale media die onderdeel worden van de online informatie die andere burgers weer tegenkomen.

Toch laat dit onderzoek zien dat een interactieve en directe benadering werkt en dat een online gesprek wel degelijk resulteert in meer betrokkenheid bij burgers. Bovendien laat dit onderzoek zien dat dit juist geldt voor burgers die een gesprek op

het internet observeren en niet alleen voor burgers die deelnemen aan een dialoog. Er is dus sprake van een veel groter publiek dan alleen de persoon waarmee gecommuniceerd wordt. Daarmee is het bereik van het internet ook groter.

Ten tweede is het belangrijk dat politieke partijen en politici burgers persoonlijk benaderen. Een persoonlijke communicatiestijl – waarin de politicus zelf communiceert en persoonlijke informatie toevoegt – leidt tot meer politieke betrokkenheid bij burgers. Het is daarentegen wel belangrijk om professioneel te blijven. Te veel informatie over het privéleven van de politicus kan namelijk afbreuk doen aan de professionaliteit van de politicus.

De laatste aanbeveling die ik wil geven richt zich tot slot op de burger. Burgers zijn uiteindelijk zelf verantwoordelijk om politiek actief te worden op het internet. Alleen als burgers zelf gebruikmaken van het internet, dan leidt dit tot meer politieke betrokkenheid. Of het internet bijdraagt aan de politieke betrokkenheid van burgers hangt dus grotendeels af van wat de burger er zelf mee doet.

Kortom: De resultaten van dit proefschrift laten zien dat weinig mensen politiek actief zijn op het internet, maar als ze online actief zijn dan hebben *bepaalde vormen van online politieke communicatie* en *bepaalde online communicatiestijlen* een bescheiden effect op de politieke betrokkenheid van burgers. Daarmee wil ik onderstrepen dat de onderzoeksvraag – in hoeverre draagt het internet bij aan de politieke betrokkenheid van burgers? – te algemeen is. Het antwoord is immers genuanceerd. Ik wil daarom toekomstige wetenschappers adviseren om zich te richten op specifieke vragen. Deze specifieke vragen geven beter inzicht in de politieke consequenties van het internet. Welke online platformen doen er toe en voor welke mensen? Zijn de effecten stabiel over de jaren heen of zal het internet nog drastisch veranderen? Uiteindelijk worden deze specifieke vragen belangrijker, met name omdat dit proefschrift laat zien dat de effecten er zeker toe doen.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Sanne Kruikemeier was born on November 10th, 1985 in Hengelo, the Netherlands. In 2007, she received her Bachelor's degree in Sociology at Utrecht University. In 2008, she finished her Master's degree Policy Analyses and Organizations at Utrecht University. Between 2008 and 2010 she worked as a researcher at the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research (NIVEL). Between 2011 and 2014, she wrote her dissertation about online political communication and its effects on citizens' political involvement at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam. Her work has been recognized with an award from the Internal Communication Association (ICA). At present, Sanne is an Assistant Professor at ASCoR, at the department of Political Communication and Journalism, at the University of Amsterdam.

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