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Getting connected: The effects of online political communication on citizens' political involvement

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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, & Welp, 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 & Sheafer, 2007; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & 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.

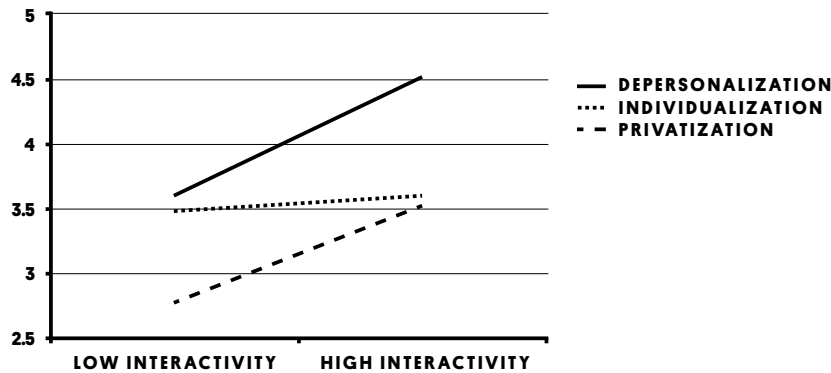
Independent variable (X)	Mediating variable (M)	Dependent variable(Y)	Effect of X on M (a)	Effect of M on Y (b)	Direct effect (c')	Indirect effect (ab)	95% BCCI Lower; Upper	Total effect (c)
High interactive (ref. low)	Source expertise	Political talk	.40***	.31***	-.43**	.12	.05;.24	-.16
High interactive (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

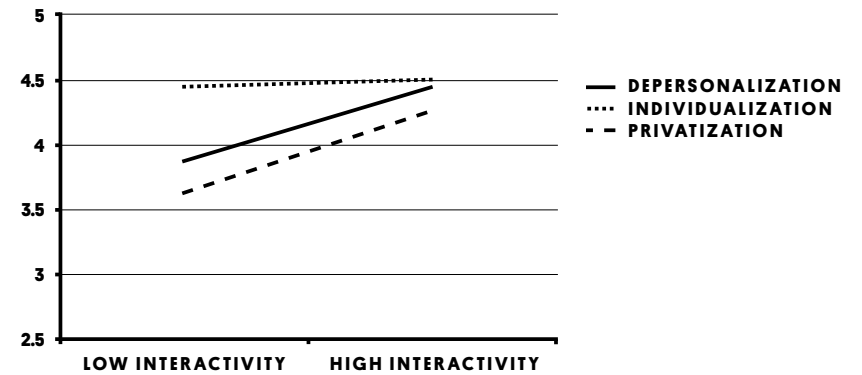
To test the combined effect of interactivity and personalization on political involvement through social presence and source expertise, a moderated mediation (i.e., a conditional indirect effect) analysis was conducted. Specifically speaking, we examine whether the different forms of personalization 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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