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## Faculty of Business Economics

Master of Management

### **Masterthesis**

***Factors influencing citizens' preferences for political communication on social media***

***Research on people aged from 24 to 38 living in Belgium***

**Florence Loix**

Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management, specialization International Marketing Strategy

### **SUPERVISOR :**

Prof. dr. Pieter PAUWELS



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## Summary

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Political communication mixes communication and political science. As a field of study, it encompasses how information spreads and how it can influence politics, voters, journalists, and policy makers. Nowadays, digitalization imbues every aspect of our society, even politics.

The aim of this research is to study qualitatively and quantitatively some characteristics of online political communication in order to establish some guidelines that politicians should follow if they wish to increase their popularity and visibility. Therefore I endeavoured to identify what Belgians voters prefer in terms of political communication on social media, what attributes politicians' digital output should exhibit to have a real positive impact on potential voters. Consequently, the central research question of this study is: "How do citizens develop a preference for political personalities through their use of social media?"

So far, few studies have tried to define the essential requirements that political communication must meet in order to catch the attention of the highest number of people. Therefore I developed an online questionnaire, which asks respondents to rank a number of online posts in order of preference. That questionnaire allowed me to gather a sample of  $n=200$  people.

Despite my questionnaire design not being optimal for that purpose, I then used conjoint analysis to study the influence of a few significant attributes. The following results have been identified. The most important attribute is interactivity, which can be defined as asking for and encouraging potential voters to react. A high level of interactivity is shown to be a good way to increase the effectiveness of political communication. Then, in order of importance, I found that language register must be low, which means that politicians should use simple and common words. The levels of emotional content, redundancy and personalization should also be low. The best combination of attributes I tested is when interactivity is high and the other attributes are low.

Finally, I proposed, based on these results, a few recommendations for the communication team and marketing advisors of politicians.

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## **Preface**

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This master thesis is the final deliverable for the Master of Management (International Marketing Strategy) program at University of Hasselt.

The topic of online political communication was my choice because of several reasons. First of all, it is an up-to-date topic. The recent American and French elections have seen the arrival of a new kind of politicians and I wanted to investigate the role social media might have played in their success. Secondly, I have always been interested in communication. Two years ago, I did an internship in Circuit Zolder, where I was in charge of the online communication of the Belcar Championship. Consequently, a topic of research involving communication seemed an obvious choice. Thirdly, during my master studies, I had many classes explaining how consumers should always be at the centre of business. It seemed to follow that consumers should also be at the centre of any kind of communication. By studying political communication, I wanted to see how politicians could involve the population further in order to increase their visibility and change the way they do politics.

As I put the finishing touches to my master thesis, I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. dr. Pauwels and my co-supervisor Prof. dr. Van Riel for their support throughout the writing process. Thanks to their knowledge and background, I learnt a lot about scientific research and data analysis. They always provided me with remarks and advice in order to ameliorate my work.

I also would like to think my friends and Mr. Henrotte for their time and patience regarding my work.

Florence Loix  
May 2018, Liège



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

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In 1960, John F. Kennedy became president of the United States of America thanks in part to his using a revolutionary communication medium: television. Almost half a century later, Barack Obama won the presidential election because he made the best use of the new communication medium which has come to replace television: social networks. How Obama used social media is still considered one of the most successful aspects of his campaign. It managed to mobilize thousands of people from social categories with typically low voter turnout (Carr, 2008). In recent years, the use of social media in the political world has surged, which has created new marketing opportunities and could potentially contribute to lower electoral volatility.

Social media are rightly seen as the fastest-diffusing communication tools in human history (Lee and Oh, 2012). Therefore, politicians and political parties increasingly use social media in order to attract voters, and are right to do so. It has been demonstrated that social media are an important way to communicate directly with citizens through a non-in the field action. It offers politicians a channel to disclose personal information and to create interpersonal relationships with voters (Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2016). Unlike traditional media, social media platforms allow them to talk of anything, at any time and without worrying about being misquoted or the meaning of their words being muddled by editing (Lee and Oh, 2012).

Computers, smartphones, tablets and the constant connection they allow, have become essential components of our daily lives, and the world keeps searching for ways to get more and more interconnected. Social media has disrupted the way people interact. Consequently, the way politicians interact with citizens has also changed. Politicians have now the possibility to communicate without any intermediary, a direct link with voters that did not exist fifty years ago. Although social media brings self-engagement and a freer mode of political communication, little is known about what actually works and what does not in the context of a political campaign. The political and digital communications are two different topics becoming closer thanks to the digital revolution. Community managers know the main requirements of social media etiquette, which have been established by common consensus

during the last 15 years or so, but they do not know what ordinary citizens consider as the essential features of an effective political communication.

Extensive works on political issues concerning social media are already available but only a few tried to characterize clearly and give valuable advice on how politicians should behave on social media in order to increase their shares of the vote. This master thesis will endeavour to fill this gap.

The central research question of this thesis is: **How do citizens develop a preference for political personalities through their use of social media?**

From this main research question, secondary questions arise. Firstly, the reader needs to have a general view of what types of communication features exist on social media and are considered as the best for politicians to increase their visibility and popularity. Then the following question has to be taken into account:

- **Which characteristics should good political communication on social media exhibit?**

Citizens can be swayed and it can be interesting to learn what their preferences regarding political communication are. Thus:

- **How must those characteristics be combined in order to maximize impact on voters?**
- **Among these features, which one is the most important?**

This thesis will be structured as follows. The first chapter is an introduction, which gives contextual information about social media and politics in Belgium. In the second chapter, the existing literature on this subject is summarized. The experts' interviews are discussed in the third chapter while the empirical study carried out for this thesis is explained in the fourth. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are given, as well as cautionary statements on their scope and thoughts about possible future research.

## **1.1 Belgian political and social-media context**

Belgium is a federal state with two types of federal entities: three regions and three communities, which do not cover the same territory. Both regions and communities have a government and a parliament. At the federal level, the executive power is held by the Federal Council of Ministers, which is characterized by an equal representation of the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities with the possible exception of the Prime Minister. The legislative power is held by the Belgian Federal Parliament, which is bicameral: the House of Representatives (lower house) and the Senate (upper house). (Delwit, 2012)

Political campaigns in Belgium are typically party-based and mainly regional. Although individual candidates' campaigns play a significant role, they should always be seen as part of a party-based organization, if only because political subsidies are awarded solely to parties, not individuals. That being said, Belgian politics have in recent years become increasingly personalized. Party leaders are omnipresent in news coverage and overshadow most other politicians. Belgium's political culture also has a strong local component, which gives local and sub-provincial candidates great popularity and power thanks to their proximity to voters. This personalization is partly due to the fact that politics is increasingly mediated (De Winter & Baudewyns, 2015).

In 2016, 85% of households had access to an Internet connection. However although most Belgians use the Internet daily, only 32% of them actually trust the information it provides. It is mostly used by people under 25 and between 25 and 34, both age groups having a 91% usage rate. These people are upcoming or young voters.

Regarding social media, 36% of the population use social networks daily. The dominant platform in Belgium is Facebook, with a penetration rate of almost 70%, while Twitter is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> with almost 20%. Furthermore, social media are described by most people as primarily a way to keep contact with people they would not keep in touch with otherwise (Statista, 2016).



Political statements and presence on social media are important but one should not forget that people also really care about politicians' actions on the field. Politics on social media have to be complemented with politics on the field (Burton, 2018).

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

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As stated before, the central research question is this: How citizens develop preference for political personalities through their use of social media? Therefore, the main features of political communication on social media need first to be examined through the various authors who have worked so far on the link between social media communication and politics. In view of those existing works, some characteristics seem to appear essential for politicians communicating on social media. They are discussed below.

### **3.1 Political personalization**

Adam and Maier (2010) and Rahat and Sheafer (2007) wrote that “*political personalization is the shift of focus from political parties and institutions to individual candidates*”. Social media platforms such as Twitter are by definition personalized. Although party accounts managed anonymously are common, they are much less popular than individual accounts. The personalization process often involves focusing on politicians’ private lives and on politicians’ personal emotions and feelings rather than on the official views or policies of the party they are affiliated with (Kruikemeier, 2014). Actual political issues seem less central to politicians’ communication on social media. As Kruikemeier (2014) suggested: “*social media is an effective tool used for self-promotion by politicians. They can talk about themselves; refer to specific information such as opinions, articles, etc.*”

Kruikemeier (2014) argues that political personalization has a positive impact on the electorate because it gives parties the opportunity to communicate their message more effectively through a face and a voice people recognise and can empathise with. For instance, Rosenberg *et al.* (1986) (cited by Kruikemeier, 2014; p133) showed that the digital appearance of a politician being viewed positively could have an impact on voting intentions. However, it can also have negative consequences. Politicians releasing less content about political issues can be seen as incompetent (Kruikemeier, 2014). Langer (2007) argues that a politician’s private life and personal qualities cannot be separated from his/her political function, as focusing on the former is a ‘*politicization of the private persona*’. When citizens

feel more connected with politics and interested in political leaders, they are more likely to engage in political activities such as voting (Stromback, 2008).

Van Aelst *et al.* (2012) describe the personalization as having two distinct dimensions:

1. Individualization: focus on individual candidates
2. Privatization: focus on private life and personal interests.

Both induce the illusion of intimacy with politicians, which leads to an increase in voting intention because it fosters emotional closeness with the electoral target. The more citizens perceive their relation with a given politician as an interpersonal interaction, the more they are willing to vote for him/her (Lee and Oh, 2012).

### **3.2 Interactivity**

Liu and Schrum (2002) defined 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.”*

They operationalized interactivity through three dimensions:

1. Active control: voluntary and instrumental actions
2. Two-way communication: reciprocal communication
3. Synchronicity: level of responsiveness

Because this thesis focuses on how politicians should behave on social media, I choose to work primarily on the dimension of two-way communication such as Liu and Schrum (2002) operationalized it. The concept of two-way communication is obviously central in any definition of interactivity. It is defined as follows: two persons can directly communicate with each other. In a political context, it will refer to direct reciprocal communication between politicians and citizens (Kruikemeier, 2014).

Sundar *et al.* (2003) and Utz (2009) observed that politicians who are highly interactive and react promptly to online comments are seen more favourably than the ones who do not.

Online platforms such as Twitter offer various tools, such as, mentions, hashtags, comments, links, etc. allowing politician users to increase their interactivity (Kruikemeier, 2014).

Previous work has demonstrated that politicians using these different Twitter tools (#, @, etc.), or equivalent tools on other platforms can expect an increase in voting intention because it enhances their interactivity. This influence can be explained by the fact that interactivity increases social presence and generates a feeling of closeness and connection with the communicator (Lee and Shin, 2012). Furthermore, politicians' use of social media in an interactive way when discussing a particular topic increases their perceived expertise on that topic because it creates a debate during which politicians are allowed to display their knowledge while listening and reacting to citizens' comments.

High interactivity is conceptualized as the use of tools allowing two-way communication, such as mentions, retweets and hashtags on Twitter. Using these tools allows politicians to show they are willing to engage with diverse segments of the population and to create a public debate around political issues. Kruikemeier (2014) found that politicians who use tools such as the @ symbol in order to interact with citizens received more votes than others who do not.

At this point, we know that interactivity is essential in modern political communication. My thesis will try to ascertain whether the digital interaction under the form of an invitation to react, which seems to be the most widespread and common aspect of the two-way communication, is effective.

### **3.3 Choice of social media support**

In 2008, Obama's "Yes we can" campaign for the US Presidential election was a great success around the world. It proved that social media can stimulate voter support. This thesis focuses on two of the most famous social networks: Twitter and Facebook. Twitter has become an essential medium for political communication, widely used by politicians during election campaigns but also all year long, even when there are no elections looming. Facebook is less used but still a significant aspect of Western political communication

(Kruikemeier, 2014). For example, Trump used the expertise of the digital marketing company Cambridge Analytica in order to target a wide audience with tailor-made messages on social media (Persily, 2017).

Twitter and Facebook are services that facilitate direct communication between users, who can comment, like, share, retweet, etc. other users' posts. It has been shown that, for politicians, using Twitter correctly (i.e. with personalization and interactivity) has a positive impact on electoral support (Kruikemeier, 2014). Facebook's role in the world of political communication is less prevalent.

The main difference between Twitter and Facebook, which explains why Twitter is more suitable for politicians, is that Twitter accounts are public by default while Facebook personal accounts are private by default, although it is possible for a Facebook account to be made public. Twitter posts can therefore have a bigger impact and reach a much greater number of potential voters (Walker *et al.*, 2017).

In theory, a Facebook user can view another user's full profile only if they both agree to become "friends"; the whole design of social networking on Facebook is based on reciprocity and focuses on personal privacy in relation to other users. On the other hand, a Twitter user's tweets can be viewed by anyone who chooses to follow him/her, and even by people who don't have a Twitter account (every tweet has its own URL). No request needs to be made to (and accepted by) users for their content to be accessible (Hong and Nadler, 2016). As a result, Twitter allows for an asymmetrical social relationship and is therefore more suitable for politicians and other public figures.

This means that Facebook can be perceived as more difficult to manage by political parties than Twitter because posts have to follow the guidelines underlying Facebook's algorithms to be sure that messages have an impact. For instance, Facebook is improving its policy towards messages that are purely propaganda or news when they are posted from a company or party account (The Washington Post, 2016). Therefore finding a compromise between communication on a party's page and on a politician's page can prove to be difficult.

Furthermore, the time-consuming aspect of social media complicates things further. It takes a lot of time to post updates and answer each comment. Thus, parties prefer to use Twitter rather than Facebook because Twitter allows for more openness and accessibility. In particular, it allows even non-friends to answer each other's questions and start debates (Kalsnes, 2016).

### **3.4 Emotional content**

Nowadays, information on social media influences the way individuals think and feel, which can in turn influence the way they process information and therefore their behaviour. Consequently, people exposed to positive and negative news on social media may regulate their behaviour in accordance to those news (Yao & Yu, 2016).

Publications written in a positive way tend to get viral (i.e. widely shared) more easily than those written in a negative way (Berger & Milkman, 2012). For instance, during each football tournament, politicians usually like to communicate about the games played by the national team, with posts such as: "*Come on, Red Devils!*" This type of communication receives a lot of attention because it taps into an emotion that almost everyone feels. In contrast, negative communication such as "*No agreement on pension, the MR minister must resign!*" will receive less attention because it does not include a strong, positive emotion that everyone enjoys feeling.

Positive posts need to include a positive sentiment. For instance (Walker *et al.*, 2017):

- A statement of achievement
- Thanking people
- Offering support to others
- Reporting good news.

Negative posts include:

- Critics about the opposition
- Use of sarcasm
- Inducement of fear.

Furthermore, when picture and video are added to a post, attitudes and behaviours towards the person writing it, tend to be more affected (Shah *et al.*, 2015). Brader (2005) observed that politicians are able to increase citizens' involvement and choices by using images, videos and music that evoke emotions, such as enthusiasm or fear. Enthusiasm is a reaction to positive messages and fear is a reaction to negative messages. Enthusiasm fosters motivation and commitment. Fear fosters individualism and introversion but can also engender positive reactions, such as gathering people against a common threat. Furthermore, he observed that enthusiasm leads to a greater shift in voting intention, which is in line with the higher virality potential of positive posts mentioned above.

### **3.5 Number of followers and frequency of use**

According to Spierings and Jacobs (2013), social media can influence voting intentions in two ways:

- A. The direct effect of the number of followers on the number of votes
- B. The interaction effect, explaining how the numbers of followers and the degree of social media use influence each other.

The direct effect is reinforced when a degree of personalization is allowed on social media. It gives potential voters an insight into what happens in a politician's life but also into his/her interests and emotions. For instance, a strong social media presence shows that a politician is trying to be modern. This relatively costless tool can as a consequence yield huge benefits thanks to the large effect it can have.

Political zombie accounts do not inspire much passion in the heart of potential voters. Therefore, candidates need to use the various social media platforms regularly in order to maintain constant communication with their followers. When a candidate uses social media on a regular basis, the effect of the number of followers on the number of votes is proven. Conversely, an inactive account does not bring about a greater share of votes, even if the number of followers is very high. For example, the research of Spierings and Jacobs on the

Dutch election of 2010 showed that each tweet sent during the campaign period resulted in 11 extra votes per 1000 followers. Knowing that on average a candidate sent out 112 tweets, it resulted in 1232 extra votes per 1000 followers. That number indicates that Twitter followers can be opinion leaders who influence other voters, which emphasizes how important campaigning on social media is.

The direct effect is highly dependent on how social media is used. On Twitter, having a significant increase in the number of followers has a positive effect on voting intention when there is a regular and committed use of Twitter. However, to keep the number of followers stable or increasing further, an account needs to be carefully managed. This is why the number of followers doesn't tell the whole story. Contents are important too and can influence potential voters as well.

To get a full picture of the way social media presence can influence voting intention, one has therefore to take into account the number of followers, the frequency of updates, as well as the quality of the posts, which need to keep followers interested.

In this master thesis, I will focus on the quality of the post in order to complete this previous study about the number of followers and the frequency of updates.





### **Chapter 3: Experts interviews**

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Giving an overview of the existing literature is a first step in my endeavour to characterize good political communication. Nevertheless, the reality might be different from what is described in previous works, because context has evolved since these articles were written for instance, or because they don't apply fully to the Belgian political landscape.

It was therefore necessary to interview communication advisors of various Belgian politicians. I contacted several of them, coming from different parties. I asked them to define how, in their view, politicians should communicate to gain attention on social media successfully. I also asked them to comment on ideas discussed in the previous section.

Three of the interviews were conducted in French and one in Dutch, according to the mother tongue of the respondents. The interviews lasted between half an hour and one hour. I started the interviews by asking: "According to you, which communication works best to increase a politician's visibility? What characteristics should be present in political communication?"

Three interviews were personally conducted and one was conducted through Skype because of location constraints. They were so-called unstructured interviews in order to let respondents feel free to talk. The interviews started with an open-ended question in order to get a general idea. Then I interacted with respondents in order to get them to explain their views and go into further detail, following the funnelling technique in interviews (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). When respondents seemed at a loss of new things to say or were straying too far from the object of my research, I explained what I had learned in the literature review and asked their point of view about it by asking: "What do you think of that?"

#### **3.1 Diego Sanges, communication advisor of Frédéric Daerden, Federal deputy**

Diego Sanges works as main communication advisor for Frédéric Daerden (PS). His usual tasks include the creation of content for social media as well as for newspapers, magazines, television, etc.

According to him, there are two kinds of politicians, those who focus on both their private life and their political function and those who focus exclusively on their political function. In Anglo-Saxon countries, politicians do not usually separate their private life and their political role. Both are thought to be complementary and to feed on each other. However, in continental Europe, it is less common for politicians to incorporate their private life into their political function/image because privacy issues remain extremely important, whereas Anglo-Saxon political culture focuses more on transparency. As a result, European politicians are wary of unwholesome curiosity into what they deem should be off-limits to the general public and only integrate their private life into their political communication parsimoniously.

Another very important characteristic of communication on social media is interactivity, i.e. the fact that politicians react quickly and invite the public to participate in discussions. Facebook and Twitter offer plenty of ways to encourage people to react: comments, hashtags (#), mentions (@), direct messaging, likes, favourites, etc. Moreover, posts containing videos (e.g. Facebook Live) and photos trigger many more reactions than a post with a single written sentence. However, this does not necessarily translate into an increase in voting intention. For that, some more work is necessary.

One of the aspects of that additional work is the creation of relevant content. Mr Sanges uses positive as well as negative communication. Most of the time, positive communication seems to work better. However, when politicians talk about sensitive, divisive topics, negative communication can work very well and trigger many reactions. These reactions stem mainly from the public's emotional response to the issue raised. If that response is in line with what the politician is trying to express, the benefit in terms of popularity can be great.

### **3.2 Laurent Burton, Ex-communication advisor of Didier Reynders, Minister of Foreign Affairs**

Laurent Burton (MR) is currently the burgomaster of Embourg, a suburb of Liège. Previously, he was Didier Reynders' communication advisor and in charge of the minister's whole communication strategy. Currently, he also works part time as a consultant in communication for Daniel Bacquelaine, the Minister for Pensions.

Communication is the simplest way of raising the public's awareness of a politician. A good communication is about being authentically yourself, which leads to higher visibility in the long term. One way to convey authenticity is to include their private life into the context of their political life. It is a decision politicians must make early on. If they choose to do it, they should nevertheless remember that they are primarily politicians and therefore that they have a mission that must be accomplished and should take precedence over private matters in their communication.

Didier Reynders's role as Minister of Foreign Affairs offers him numerous opportunities to communicate on issues or events that can be of either private or political nature, or a mixture of both. For instance, in addition to numerous pictures of him in official functions, he also posted a picture of him and his wife at the Magritte du Cinéma. Politicians are de facto celebrities, and citizens like to have an insight into their private life. They will sometimes react in higher number to a private picture or post than to a political one. That effect can be enhanced even more if the emotion underlying that message is widely shared by the public.

Looking at the number of reactions received is a very good way of gauging the effectivity of communication on social media. High numbers mean maximal exposition for the message. It relates to the concept of interactivity described in the previous section, which is key for increasing voting intention. It can be a decisive advantage in a political campaign. Politicians who do not answer to their audience might lose valuable votes because of it. Moreover, the content of each post has an important role to play. When posts are based on news or events that bring Belgian citizens together, they will trigger more reactions. They can be either positive or negative in nature; the only thing that matters is that the emotion underlying them is widely shared.

Mr. Burton confirms what Mr. Sanges said about the way politicians use Facebook and Twitter. The communication style and the target audience are different on the two platforms. Consequently, using both enables politicians to reach a higher number of potential voters.

Communications from politicians and from the parties they are affiliated with are distinct on social media but they should also be complementary. Although the politicians are usually free to manage their communication themselves, they should follow the party line on important issues or in the case of a concerted communication campaign. It brings coherence among politicians from a given party. For example, when the polemic about migrants was at its highest and most sensitive point, the official instructions from the MR leadership to its members was to avoid talking about it publicly.

### **3.3 Camille Doucet, Digital strategist for the party MR**

Camille Doucet is the MR's digital specialist. She's in charge of devising and managing the day-by-day communication strategy that party members should follow. She also personally manages the social media accounts of some of the party's most prominent members, such as Louis Michel.

She said that, although social media seems to rule the world nowadays, the importance of fieldwork should not be underestimated. Being present on social media and acting concretely on the field are both equally important and complementary. They both need to be pursued during the whole duration of an election campaign. That said, campaigning on social media is according to her especially effective during the last part of an election campaign for getting voters' attention and ensuring the core political message of a politician's is well established and understood by potential voters. The primary objective of social media is to make sure citizens are aware of politicians and what they stand for. It is hard for a politician to canvass every street and meet every citizen. Therefore social media are a good way of developing a relationship or a connexion with a large number of citizens at once.

Politicians' communication has to be in line with the ideology and the values of the party they represent, to ensure consistency within the party. It reinforces the politician's position and helps the party to be perceived as credible.

No message (be it a tweet, a comment, a video, etc.) should be released by politicians if it does not fit with their personality. Emotions are a central concept of social media

communication. They describe the personality of the communicant. Thus, it is harder for politicians to increase their exposure if they do not share their emotions with the public. Emotions desacralize and humanise the political person. Moreover, emotions should not be viewed as being positive or negative but mainly on being strong or weak. Stronger emotions work significantly better for communicating because they create much more interactivity than weak emotions.

Interactivity is the central concept of two-way communication. Good interactivity can take the form of comments, mentions, hashtags, etc. and is the most effective way of engaging with citizens. Moreover, information theory argues that redundancy is a good way to reduce noise and to make the message stand out. Therefore, it is essential to keep communicating on the same topic in order to keep it alive in the consciousness of citizens. The more redundant a politician is, the more the noise surrounding his/her message is reduced. That noise can be, for example, statements from the opposition or, in some cases, from the politician's own party, etc. One-shot communication is not as effective since it does not generate a strong enough reaction from the audience.

Furthermore, Facebook and Twitter are completely different tools for politicians but, on both platforms, interactivity is important in order to increase voting intention. Twitter is useful to express an overall political strategy whereas Facebook is essential to reach a greater percentage of the population and to develop a thriving relationship with the general public.

### **3.4 Reinout Van Zandycke, Manager at Exposure**

Reinout Van Zandycke is a freelance specialist in online political communication. He manages online communication for Flemish politicians. He supervises the whole communication strategy in order to raise the exposure of the candidates he works for.

The best way to behave and interact on social media depends on the audience you want to reach. Carefully choosing the kind of language used is therefore very important. Too many politicians write posts using a technocratic, complicated language that ordinary people can't relate with, if they understand it at all. Therefore it is essential for politicians to adjust

messages to their intended audience. They should use simple, short and meaningful words so that everyone can understand what they mean. Repeating a post can help getting the message contained within to its target audience. It is efficient to express the same information several times under different forms in order to ensure that it reaches most of the target audience at least once.

Interactivity is an essential component of any political communication strategy. Getting people to react is necessary in order to raise the profile of politicians. Even if reactions are negative, they will lead to an increase in their popularity because people hear about and read the reactions of others and then analyse what the politician's answers are. It is possible for a politician to get someone's support and secure a vote simply by answering a follower. It is all about promotion. For instance, even if Theo Francken receives many negative reactions to his posts, people are talking about him and now he's famous and popular all around the country. According to Mr Van Zandycke, interactivity is the most important aspect of social media communication; it can really influence voting intentions.

Assertive opinions are a good way of getting positive returns because they create a feeling of closeness with the politician. The message's emotional content will influence voting intentions. Communication can be either positive or negative but in the long term, favouring positive communication seems to be a better strategy, whereas negativity is more suitable as a short-term strategy, for instance as a first reaction to emerging issues.

For instance, if politicians say that they are proud of their country and that we should therefore promote local farming industry, they are playing with the strong emotion of patriotism, which is shared by a great number of Belgians. That in turn can lead to increased support for these politicians.

No real consensus exists on the question of personalization for political communication on social media. Many think that the personalization process should include the family life of politicians in addition to their political life. However, including family life is not always the best way to personalize communication. Politicians can also personalize their social media

pages while only mentioning matters related to their daily political life. Family members or private matters should not necessarily be included. Personalizing their communication may also mean to focus on their personal emotions about their work, or even about society in general.

Facebook is well suited for communicating on a local scale whereas Twitter is more effective at a national level. Twitter is mainly aimed at and used by well-educated people such as journalists, teachers, etc. Communication on Twitter is not intended to reach ordinary voters but to broadcast opinions, ideas, topics to people working in politics, medias, etc. Facebook is more about sharing emotions and personal opinions about daily life. Consequently, these two mediums should be complementary.

### **3.5 What I have learned**

These interviews are full of interesting insights. Some corroborate what I already learned in the literature review and some expand on it. The key points expressed by the experts are given below.

- All four experts agree that any effective political message should include interactivity, emotional content and personalization.
- Interactivity is the most important characteristic as well as the most difficult to get right because it requires engagement from both the politician and the target audience.
- The emotional characteristics should be analysed in terms of how much energy is included in the message. When you are passive, people will not pay attention or even avoid you, but when you are enthusiastic or really angry, people are curious to find out what caused that emotion and therefore may be more willing to empathize with it.
- Politicians including too much of their private life in their communication can negatively affect their image but it can also to some extent increase their exposure as most people are curious to know what happens in the life of celebrities.
- The chosen platform (Twitter or Facebook) is not an essential factor for characterizing how effective political communication is. They serve complementary purposes and should both be included in any political campaign on social media.



- The register used is important and should be decided upon taking into account what the target audience is. Most politicians spontaneously use very technical and formal words whereas most people favours simpler and more common words. That can lead to misunderstandings and a loss of votes.
- The more redundant a message is, the more memorable it will be. When communicating on social media, it is therefore very important to repeat the main message at least a couple of times, preferably using different forms of communication.

## **Chapter 4: Empirical study**

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In this chapter I will describe the research I designed in order to find what voters prefer in terms of political communication on social media. To reflect individual preferences, I opted for a conjoint analysis and a choice-based approach. It will allow me to assess the relative importance weight for various characteristics of political communication that could influence voting intentions. Conjoint analysis is well suited for this kind of study because it is a multivariate technique which was developed specifically to understand the respondents' preferences regarding any type of objects or ideas (Hair *et al.*, 2013). By constructing various specific combinations (i.e. profiles), I can therefore understand the respondents' preference structure, which illustrates to what extent the studied factors influence their overall decision (i.e. the part-worths) (Roa, 2014). The necessary data consists only of evaluations by voters of the various communication profiles.

### **4.1 Foundations for the attributes: literature and qualitative interview**

As stated above, conjoint analysis describes the preferences expressed by respondents about any type of object or idea in terms of the various attributes assigned to it. The attributes chosen in this research are categorical, which means they are qualitatively described by words (Roa, 2014). As seen in the literature review, many authors have stated that personalization and interactivity are the two main characteristics of good political communication on social media (Kruikermeier, 2014; Sundar *et al.*, 2003; Utz, 2009). Personalization enables the audience to feel close to communicators while interactivity enables the audience to feel engaged. Both are complementary and can lead to higher voting intentions. Other factors have also been studied in the literature, such as the choice of platform and the labelling of a message's emotional content as positive or negative.

Then I conducted qualitative interviews (as explained in Chapter 3) with four specialists of online political communication in order to investigate the attributes already found in the literature and inquire about possible other attributes that they would think to be relevant in political communication on social media. In total, four interviews were conducted with specialists coming from different political parties.

By and large, these interviews confirmed the characteristics (i.e. attributes) I already found in the literature but some of them added characteristics which were not mentioned in the literature, such as redundancy and register.

The respondents did not confirm the choice-of-platform attribute that was mentioned in the literature. It seemed obvious to them that politicians should use both Twitter and Facebook since they are complementary. Moreover, the attribute regarding the emotional content of the message has been modified: the distinction between positive and negative emotions was replaced by a distinction between weak and strong emotions.

To summarize, the qualitative research, namely the literature review supplemented with the experts' interviews, led me to include in my conjoint analysis study the attributes of online political communication listed in Table 4.1.

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Political personalization	1	Personalized communication	Providing some information about their private life.
	2	Depersonalized communication	Providing no information about their private life.
Interactivity	1	High	Inviting to comment (#,@,?..)
	2	Low	None
Redundancy	1	High	Repeating the key part of the message
	2	Low	Not repeating the main message
Emotional characteristics/	1	High	Including strong emotional content (e.g. patriotism)
	2	Low	Including only weak emotional content (e.g. sadness)
Register	1	High	Formal register
	2	Low	Common register: simple and understandable by all

Table 4.1: Attributes and levels of online political communication

Each of these attributes of political communication on social media is associated with two levels, one of which is considered to have a positive effect on the audience while the other is considered to have no impact, although many politicians use it.

In total, I have five attributes with two levels, which leads to  $2^5=32$  possible combinations. Respondents would have understandably found it difficult and tiring to rank all possible combinations. Therefore, I opted for an orthogonal design, as created by Prof. dr. Streukens (Uhasselt), which allows me to consider only twelve combinations for this study. These combinations are shown in Table 4.2

<b>Profiles</b>	<b>Political personalization</b>	<b>Interactivity</b>	<b>Redundancy</b>	<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Language level</b>
<b>1</b>	2	1	2	2	2
<b>2</b>	2	2	2	2	2
<b>3</b>	1	1	2	1	2
<b>4</b>	1	1	1	2	1
<b>5</b>	1	2	1	2	2
<b>6</b>	2	1	1	2	1
<b>7</b>	2	2	2	1	1
<b>8</b>	1	2	1	1	2
<b>9</b>	2	1	1	1	2
<b>10</b>	1	1	2	1	1
<b>11</b>	2	2	1	1	1
<b>12</b>	1	2	2	2	1

Table 4.2: Orthogonal design

#### **4.2 Presentation of the stimuli**

In this study, twelve scenarios were presented to respondents. They took the form of a short social media post designed to fit the chosen profiles. As recommended when the number of factors is six or lower (Hair *et al.*, 2013), I followed the full-profile method.

I modified slightly the usual form of presentation. Instead of presenting each profile separately, I presented all twelve at once. Respondents were then asked to rank these twelve profiles in order of preference.

It's not the best way to proceed because, while the profiles are usually very distinct (i.e. a red car or a blue car), they are in this case quite similar. Consequently, it would have been better to show respondents all possible pairs of profiles and ask them, for each pair, which profile they prefer. Even though it would have been a more lengthy and repetitive process for them, it would have yielded more significant results. Most people can quite easily decide what are their favourite and least favourite options but struggle to rank with any clarity the options in between.

I decided to conduct the study in French since all the respondents came from Wallonia. However, I translated it with the help of translator to reduce language bias as much as possible. The questionnaire in French is given in Appendix 1.

To make sure that respondents understand the different levels included in the profiles, I first conducted a pre-test on five persons. It did not reveal any problem with the survey statement.

As said above, the conjoint analysis test was based on only one question, which consists in ranking the profiles in order of preference. The levels were coded as summarized in Table 4.3.

<b>Level</b>	<b>Correlation with the attribute register</b>	<b>Formulation</b>
High personalization	High language	Uncertainty concerning the prospects of my daughter Emma
	Low language	Few prospects for my daughter Emma
Low personalization		Nothing about his daughter Emma
High interactivity	High language	Is your opinion in agreement with mine?
	Low language	Thoughts?
Low interactivity		No question
High redundancy		'Reform' used twice
Low redundancy		'Reform' used only once

High emotion	High language	Infuriated
	Low language	Revolted
Low emotion	High language	Disgruntled
	Low language	Disappointed
High register		Formal
Low register		Simple and common

Table 4.3: Codification of the various levels

I chose to use an online questionnaire created with Qualtrics.com. That choice was dictated by a few considerations. First of all, it was fast and cheap, which enabled me to collect data from respondents living in different parts of Belgium. Secondly, it was easy to use, both for respondents and for researchers, which made a quick analysis of the data collected possible. Thirdly, it automatically guaranteed the anonymity of respondents, who did not have to give their names. Only broad demographic data were asked about, such as age and gender. Finally, using an online questionnaire enabled me to be more accurate as the margin of error is reduced with online questionnaires (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016, p. 157).

#### 4.2.1 List of the different profiles

1. Paul, Education minister: "Disappointed by the new reform of masters studies. Thoughts?"
2. Paul, Education minister: "Disappointed by the new reform of masters studies."
3. Paul, Education minister: "Revolted by the new reform of masters studies, few prospects for my daughter Emma. Thoughts? "
4. Paul, Education minister: "Disgruntled with regard to the proposed new reform of masters studies, uncertainty concerning the prospects of my daughter Emma. Is your opinion in agreement with mine? The reform is ill-conceived."
5. Paul, Education minister: "Disappointed by the new reform of masters studies, few prospects for my daughter Emma. The reform is badly planned."

6. Paul, Education minister: "Disgruntled with regard to the proposed new reform of masters studies. Is your opinion in agreement with mine? The reform is ill-conceived."
7. Paul, Education minister: "Infuriated with regard to the new reform of masters studies."
8. Paul, Education minister: "Revolted by the new reform of masters studies, few prospects for my daughter Emma. The reform is badly planned."
9. Paul, Education minister: "Revolted by the new reform of masters studies. Thoughts? The reform is badly planned. "
10. Paul, Education minister: "Infuriated with regard to the new reform of master studies, uncertainty concerning the prospect of my daughter Emma. Is your opinion in agreement with mine?"
11. Paul, Education minister: "Infuriated with regard to the new reform of masters studies. The reform is ill-conceived."
12. Paul, Education minister: "Disgruntled with regard to the new reform of masters studies, uncertainty concerning the prospects of my daughter Emma."

#### **4.3 Selected sample and description**

This study used convenience sampling, for which Hair *et al.*, (2013) determined that a sample of 200 respondents provided “an acceptable margin of error” (p. 373). They stressed that this number needs to be reached for every population group under study.

I published the questionnaire on Facebook. All respondents came from the French-speaking part of Belgium. People eligible for the study must be born between 1980 and 1994, thus being between 24 and 38 years old. People from this age group are called “digital natives”. Indeed, they are the first generation to have spent their entire lives in a digital environment. Therefore, information technology profoundly affects how they live and work (Bennet *et al.*, 2008) and they are the age group most likely to be influenced by how politicians communicate on social media.

To summarize, my sample should contain 200 people aged 24 to 38 years and living in the French-speaking part of Belgium.

#### **4.4 Measurement method**

The conjoint analysis usually tests tangible aspects of various objects or ideas. In this case, I wanted to test different forms of communication. Therefore I had to adjust the usual measurement method associated with conjoint analysis in order to obtain relevant results with words and not tangible aspects. These adjustments are explained below.

I asked respondents to rank the twelve profiles shown to them in order of preference. Each profile is awarded a number of points according to their rating. The points are distributed as follows:

- The most preferred = 20 points
- The second = 19 points
- The third = 18 points
- The fourth = 17 points
- The fifth = 12 points
- The sixth = 11 points
- The seventh = 10 points
- The eighth = 9 points
- The ninth = 4 points
- The tenth = 3 points
- The eleventh = 2 points
- The twelfth = 1 point

I chose that point system in order to amplify the separation between the profiles ranked in the first few and last few places. I have done several tests during the pre-test to see whether my system of point should be adapted or not. The results showed that even with a bigger disparity in allocating points, the overall results were staying roughly the same. Consequently, I kept my first thought of calculating the profile preferences on a basis of 20 points.

In order to illustrate this method, an example corresponding to a small sub-sample of six respondents is given below:



Firstly, here is the ranking given by the six respondents:

Respondents	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	SUM
1	3	4	2	6	1	10	9	5	7	8	11	12	78
2	5	6	7	2	1	3	12	8	9	10	11	4	78
3	1	7	2	5	11	6	8	10	3	4	9	12	78
4	1	4	12	11	2	7	3	8	9	5	6	10	78
5	5	11	3	1	7	2	12	8	4	6	10	9	78
6	1	2	3	7	5	9	10	4	6	12	11	8	78

Secondly, this is how those rankings translate in terms of number of points. A 1 in the first table gives a 20 in this second table, and so on.

Respondents	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	SUM
1	18	17	19	11	20	3	4	12	10	9	2	1	126
2	12	11	10	19	20	18	1	9	4	3	2	17	126
3	20	10	19	12	2	11	9	3	18	17	4	1	126
4	20	17	1	2	19	10	18	9	4	12	11	3	126
5	12	2	18	20	10	19	1	9	17	11	3	4	126
6	20	19	18	10	12	18	3	17	11	1	2	9	126

Consequently, I can measure the overall preference for each profile by adding the total number of points it received from all respondents.

SUM	102	76	85	74	83	65	36	59	64	53	24	35
%	13%	10%	11%	10%	11%	9%	5%	8%	8%	7%	3%	5%

I end up with a sum for each profile that is in turn expressed as a percentage. This percentage is a measure of the popularity of each profile.

By doing so, I assumed that all profiles are independent of each other and therefore did not get information about the five attributes I wanted to investigate. Consequently, I decided to

go a little deeper in my research by also using a multiple regression, which enabled me to study the importance of the five attributes given in Table 4.1.

To do so, I used SPSS in order to calculate the part worth for each attribute and level. I had to adjust my raw data to make the calculation possible. As a result, I used dummy variables to code my attributes. Thus, when the level was high (i.e. level 1 in table 4.1), it was coded as 1 and when it was low (i.e. Level 2 in table 4.1), it was coded as 0. That method follows the guidelines of the chapter 26 of the book Marketing research of Naresh K. Malhotra, Daniel Nunan and David F. Birks (2017).

The multiple regression model used is:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (x_{1j}) + \beta_2 (x_{2j}) + \beta_3 (x_{3j}) + \beta_4 (x_{4j}) + \beta_5 (x_{5j}) + \varepsilon_i$$

Where,

$Y$  = *The dependent variable which is in this case the rating of the profiles*

$\beta_0$  = *Unknown population intercept*

$\beta_{1 \text{ to } 5}$  = *The betas (i.e. the parameters) of the independent variables  $x_{ij}$  which are personalization, interactivity, redundancy, emotion and register*

$x_{ij} = 1$  *if the level of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  attribute is present and 0 otherwise*

$\varepsilon_i$  = *The regression error*

Finally, I obtain the conjoint analysis model:

$$U(X) = \sum_{i=1}^m \sum_{j=1}^{k_i} \alpha_{ij} x_{ij}$$

Where,

$U(X)$  = *Overall utility of an alternative*

$\alpha_{ij}$  = *The part-worth contribution associated with the  $j^{\text{th}}$  level ( $j= 1,2$ ) of the attributes ( $i = 1,2,3,4,5$ )*

$k_i$  = *Number of levels of attribute  $i$*

$m$  = *Number of attributes*

$x_{ij} = 1$  *if the level of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  attribute is present and 0 otherwise*

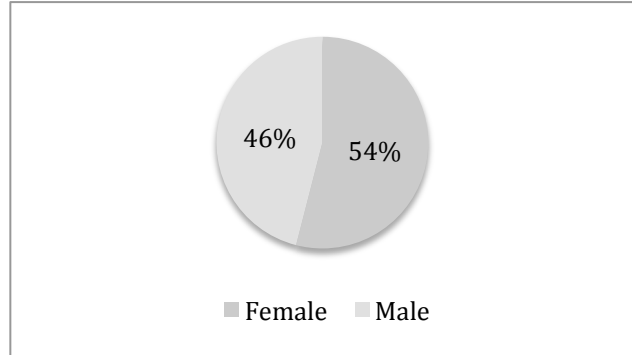


## Chapter 5: Results

The analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire I created on Qualtrics yielded the following results. The first part of this chapter contains descriptive data about the respondents. The second part deals with the conjoint analysis.

### 5.1 Sample demographics

The total number of respondents is 200. They are evenly distributed between genders. 46% of them were male and 54% female.



The target audience for my research is people between 24 and 38 years old. However, other people answered my questionnaire, which means that only

Figure 5.1: Which gender are you?

183 out of the 200 people who filled the questionnaire meet the criteria to be included in my research. That number is close enough to 200 that my results should still be significant. Respondents are between 19 and 43 years old. The age groups 24-28 and 29-33 are the most represented in my sample, with 63% and 17.5% respectively. Contrary to what I expected, the age group 34-38 is rather under-represented. Only 10.5% of all respondents are between 34 and 38 years old. The age groups 19-23 (8.5%) and 39-43 (0.5%) are also represented because the questionnaire was open to anyone on social media.

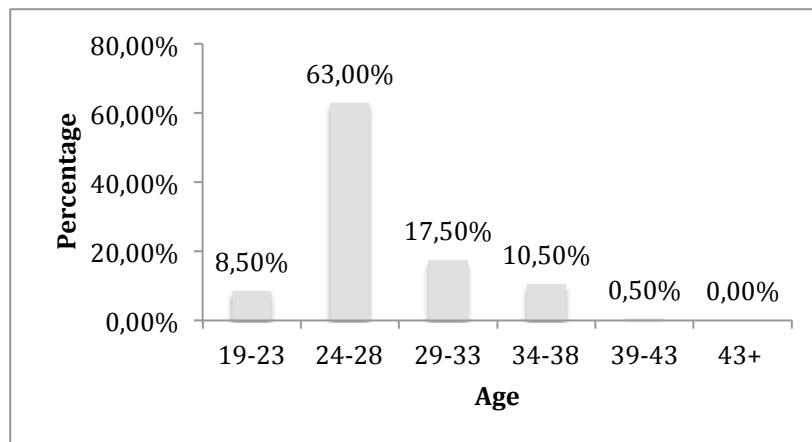


Figure 5.2: How old are you?

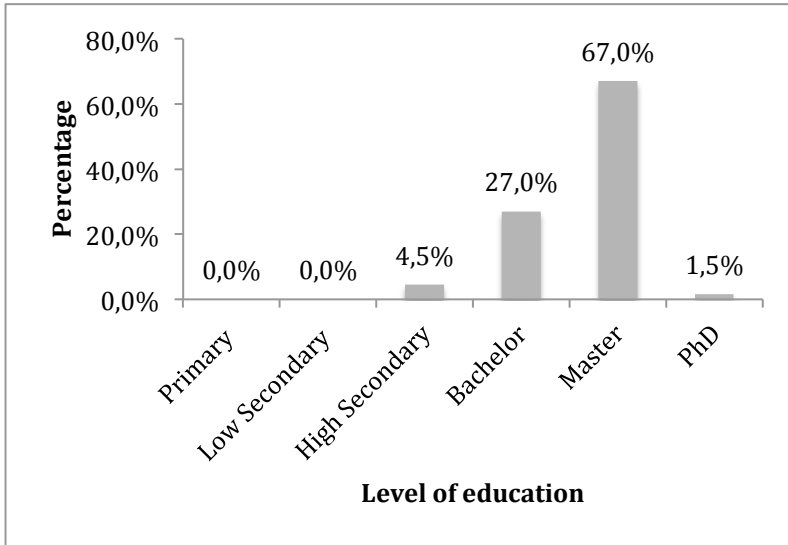


Figure 5.3: What is your highest level of education?

I also asked my respondents to give their highest level of education.

The vast majority of respondents have got a Master or Bachelor degree, with 67% and 27% respectively. A few respondents only have a high secondary (4.5%) while others have a PhD (1.5%). None of the respondents stopped their education at the

primary or low secondary level. This shows that all respondents have received an education that enables them to have a real understanding of what happens in the political world.

Out of the 200 respondents, 62% are currently working, 30.5% are students and 6% are looking for a job. Only 0.5% of them identify as stay-at-home parents and 1% preferred not to answer to this question by choosing the “other” option.

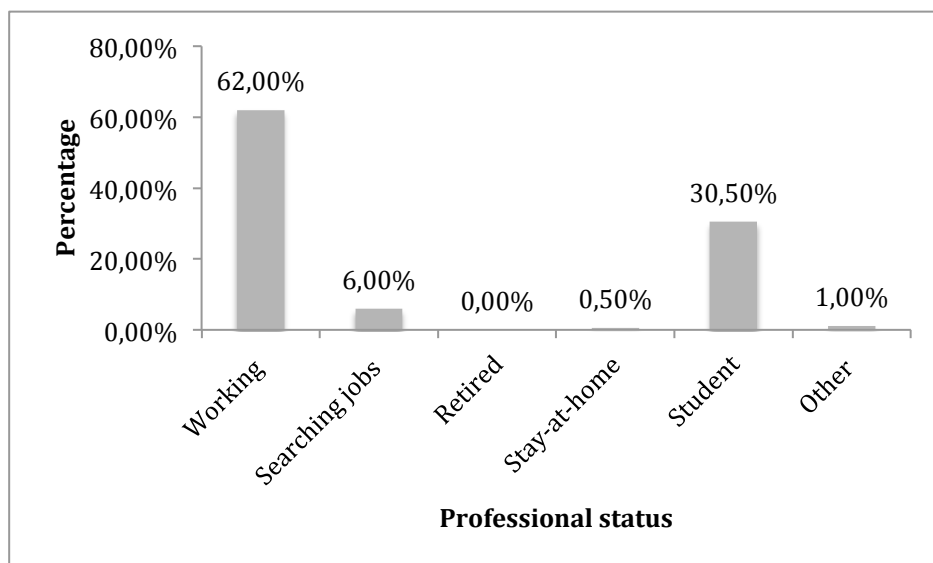
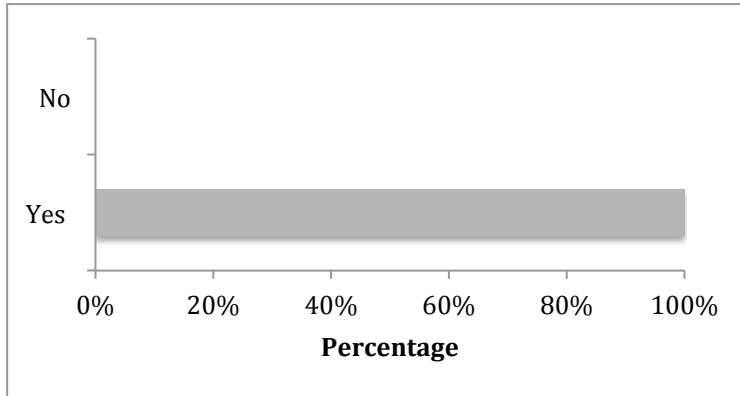


Figure 5.4: What is your professional status?

This research concerns online political communication. Consequently, I decided to ask respondents some questions about how they use and perceive social media.



100% of the respondents are regular users of social media. This can be explained by the fact that my questionnaire has been made available exclusively through that medium.

Figure 5.5: Do you use social media?

The respondents are very active on social media. Most of them (67.5%) use social media multiple times each day. As a result, they are well aware of what happens on platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. The second-largest group of respondents (23.5%) use social media at least once a day. Only 1.5% of them said they used social media no more than once or twice a week while none said they never used it.

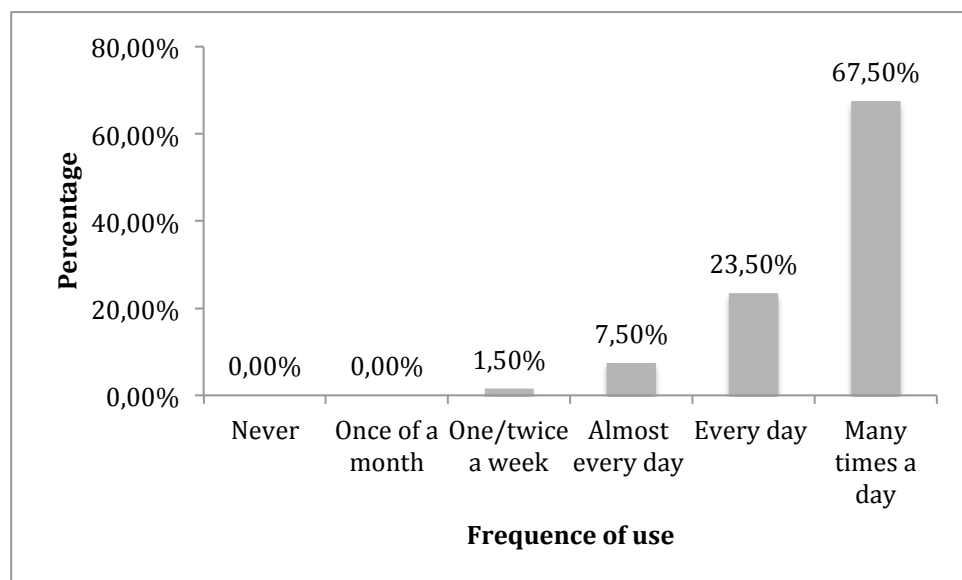


Figure 5.6: How often do you use social media?

Finally I asked the respondents to evaluate how likely they are to be influenced by what they read or see on social media. The majority of them (31%) partially agree that their opinions can be influenced by what they see on social media while 16.5% totally agree. 26% of them said they agreed without qualifying the extent of that agreement.

However, 12% of the respondents are neutral concerning the influence social media can have on their opinions. They might not be aware of any influence social media can have on their person or they might think that there is no way for them to know.

Some respondents disagreed and said that social media have little or no influence on their opinions. 2.5% said they totally disagreed, 4% that they disagreed and 8% that they partially disagreed, which amounts to 29 respondents in all. Those results are somewhat difficult to interpret. Social media seems to have a sizeable influence on respondents, but the question asked doesn't allow me to distinguish between the extent of that influence and the awareness respondents have of it.

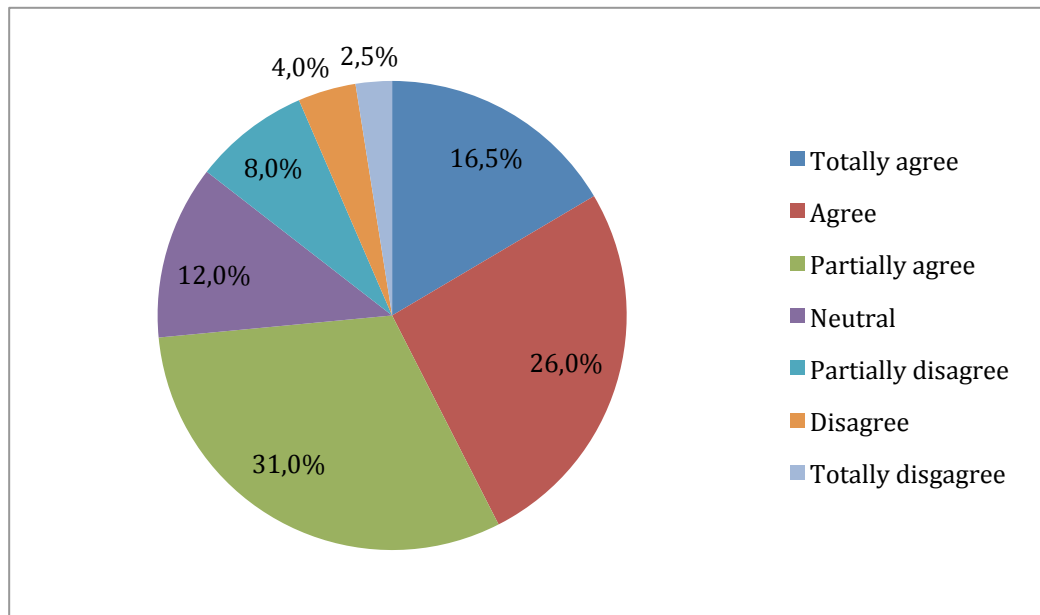


Figure 5.7: Do you think that social media can influence your opinion?

## 5.2 Conjoint analysis

In order to calculate the part worth value, I carried out a multiple regression, which led to the following results.

### 5.2.1 Overall rating of the profiles

The best combination of attributes is the one where only interactivity is equal to 1. This combination received the higher percentage of preference (14%).

That profile, the first one on the list, was: *Paul, Education minister: "Disappointed by the new reform of masters studies. Thoughts?"*

Sentence	Preference (%)
S1	14,04%
S3	12,07%
S4	10,66%
S2	10,49%
S6	9,76%
S9	9,38%
S5	7,56%
S10	6,93%
S7	6,27%
S8	5,30%
S12	3,84%
S11	3,70%

Table 5.1: Profile ranking order

### 5.2.2 The multiple regression and the part-worth

In Figure 5.8, the part-worth functions are represented by the unstandardized betas, which explain the variation of the value of the dependent variable (i.e. the profile ratings).

All betas are significant at the significance level of 5%, which means that all five attributes have a sizeable effect on how the different profiles are rated. That effect is either positive or negative. The rating will increase when the interactivity level is high. For the other attributes, we observe the opposite effect: the rating will decrease when the level is high. This means that respondents preferred the level of these attributes to be low



### Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	12,062	,286		42,198	,000
	D1=personalization	-1,486	,233	-,112	-6,369	,000
	D2=interactivity	5,807	,233	,438	24,881	,000
	D3=redundancy	-1,616	,233	-,122	-6,923	,000
	D4=emotion	-2,262	,233	-,171	-9,693	,000
	D5=language	-3,566	,233	-,269	-15,281	,000

a. Dependent Variable: Rating

Figure 5.8: SPSS Output – Linear regression

The Figures 5.9 to 5.13 below show the part worth functions of the five attributes I studied:

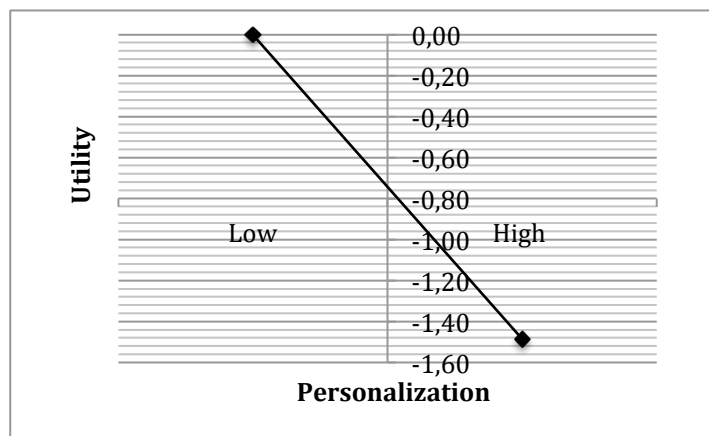


Figure 5.9: Part worth function for personalization

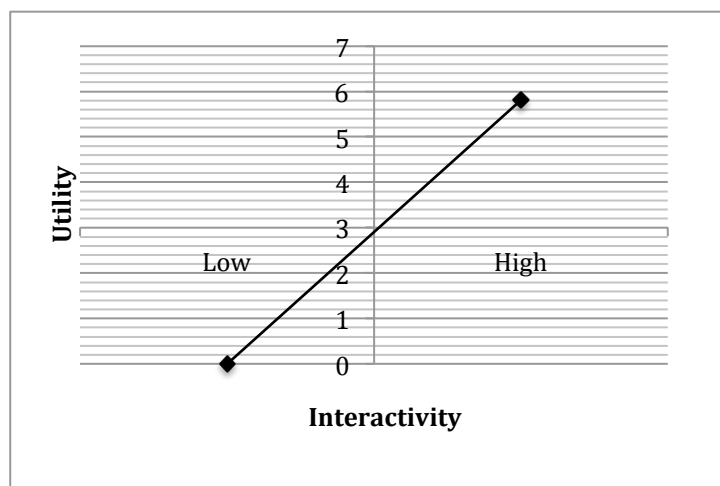


Figure 5.10: Part worth function for interactivity

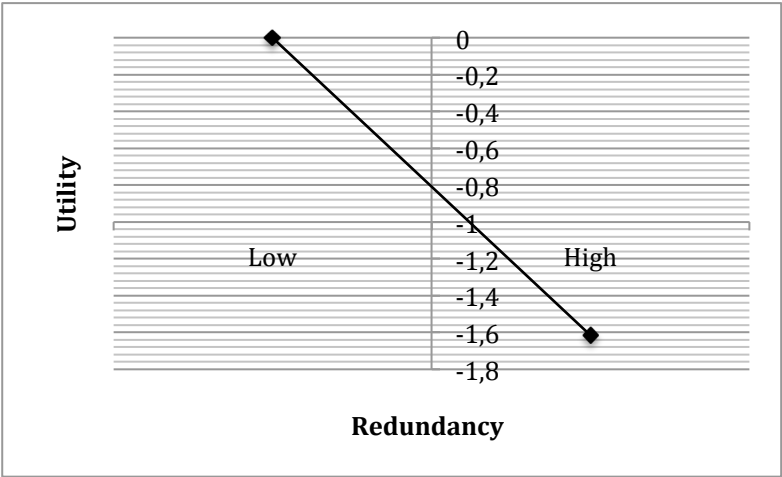


Figure 5.11: Part worth function for redundancy

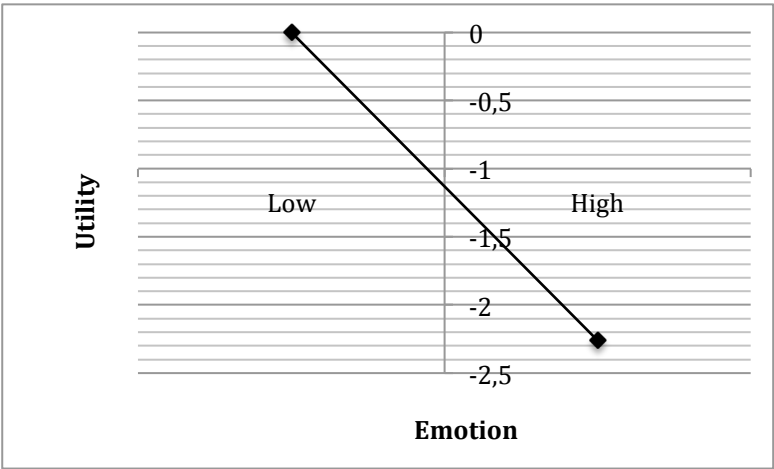


Figure 5.12: Part worth function for emotion

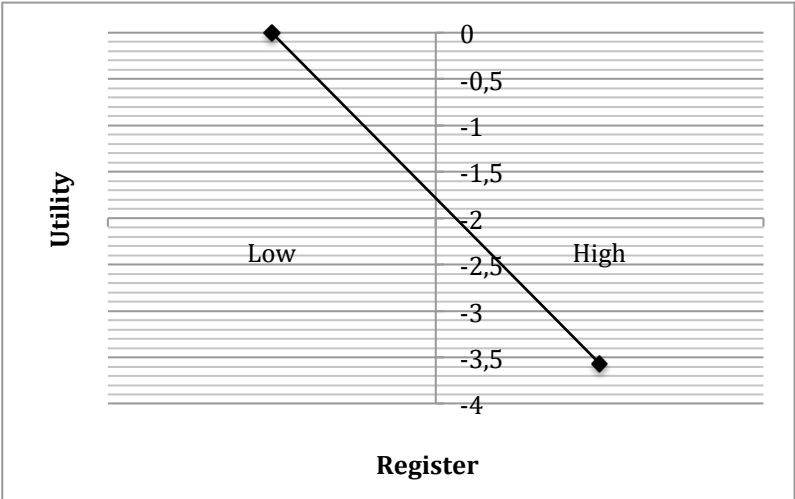


Figure 5.13: Part worth function for register

All attributes, except interactivity, showed a higher utility value for their second (lower) levels. Consequently, my results indicate that voters prefer social media communication from politicians to have a low level of personalization, redundancy, emotion and language. This contradicts somewhat what was expected from the experts' interviews and the literature review, at least for the attributes redundancy and emotion.

### 5.2.3 The relative attribute importance and their ranking

The conjoint analysis was used to determine the relative importance of the various attributes.

As shown in Figure 5.8, the parameters are estimated as follows:

$$b_0 = 12.062$$

$$b_1 = - 1.486$$

$$b_2 = 5.807$$

$$b_3 = - 1.616$$

$$b_4 = -2.262$$

$$b_5 = - 3.566$$

The importance of an attribute,  $I_i$ , is defined as the range of part worth,  $\alpha_{ij}$ , across all levels of that attribute:

$$I_j = \{\max(\alpha_{ij}) - \min(\alpha_{ij})\}$$

For instance, the relative importance of the attribute personalization is equal to:

$$I_1 = (1.486 - (- 1.486)) = 2.972$$

The relative importance weights are then calculated using the  $I_i$  values as follows:

$$W_i \text{ (i. e. Importance weight for attribute } i) = \frac{I_i}{\sum_{i=1}^m I_i}$$

The denominator of that fraction is equal to  $2.972 + 11.614 + 3.232 + 4.524 + 7.132 = 29.474$

The relative importance weights are therefore:

1. Personalization =  $\frac{2.972}{29.474} = 0.100$
2. Interactivity = 0.395
3. Redundancy = 0.110
4. Emotion = 0.153
5. Register = 0.242

Ranking	Attribute	Relative importance weight
1	Interactivity	0.395
2	Register	0.242
3	Emotion	0.153
4	Redundancy	0.110
5	Personalization	0.100
Sum = 1		

Table 5.2: Relative attribute importance

The attributes have then been sorted according to their relative importance weight. The resulting ranking is given in Table 5.2, which shows that the most important attribute is interactivity, then register, emotion, redundancy and personalization, in that order.

### 5.2.4 Summary of results

Attribute	Level			
	Number	Description	Utility	Importance
Personalization	2	Depersonalized	1.486	0.100
	1	Personalized	-1.486	
Interactivity	1	High	5,807	0.395
	2	Low	-5,807	
Redundancy	2	Low	1.616	0.110
	1	High	-1.616	
Emotion	2	Low	2.262	0.153
	1	High	-2.262	
Register	2	Low	3.566	0.242
	1	High	-3.566	

Table 5.3: Summary of results

### 5.3 Reliability and Validity

The quality of fit for the dependent variable (i.e. the rating of the various profiles) can be evaluated to assess the reliability and validity of this conjoint analysis.

By calculating the R Square adjusted

coefficient, I can say that 31,9% of the variability in the ratings received by the different profiles is explained by the estimated multiple regression equation I used, in which personalization, interactivity, redundancy, emotion and language are used as independent variables. This is quite a low percentage but it may be caused by the fact that I did not test the interactions between the attributes.

**Model Summary<sup>b</sup>**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,567 <sup>a</sup>	,321	,319	5,468

a. Predictors: (Constant), D5, D4, D3, D2 , D1

b. Dependent Variable: Rating

Figure 5.14: Model summary

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations**

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### **6.1 Conclusions**

The purpose of this research was to determine how citizens develop preferences for political personalities through their use of social media and therefore to find out what advice could be given to politicians wanting to increase their share of vote through online communication. The following conclusions can be drawn.

From the literature review and the experts' interviews, I had drawn up a preliminary list of possible attributes for online political communication. However, my study results depart in some ways from what these preliminary enquiries revealed.

The experts described emotional content and redundancy as very important attributes but in the attribute ranking derived from my study, they only appeared in third and fourth place, respectively. A high level of emotional content indicates underlying strong emotions, e.g. patriotism. The lower level indicates weak emotions, which can be a mild appreciation or dislike for example. It should be noted that the literature review had suggested that emotional content should be sorted into two categories, positive and negative, but the experts I interviewed told me that a distinction between weak and strong emotions was more significant.

The attribute in fourth place is redundancy, i.e. the fact that politicians repeat their core message a number of times in order to make sure that everybody sees and remembers it. In my test, low redundancy meant that the message did not contain the key word 'reform' twice. As Camille Doucet said when I interviewed her, politicians need to be redundant in order to be sure that their audience remembers the main message.

For those two attributes, experts had suggested that the optimal level, the one that would make the strongest positive impact on potential voters, was the higher level, i.e. strong emotions and high redundancy. But my study showed that, on the contrary, respondents preferred the lower level.

As far as interactivity is concerned, my results totally confirm what was already apparent in the literature review and experts' interviews: interactivity is the most important attribute and its higher level is favourable. It seems that voters strongly respond to politicians asking for their opinions and encouraging them to react to what they say or write. Asking for comments and participation in a debate is the higher level of interactivity available on social media; it facilitates direct communication between users. However, other forms of interactivity are available, such as hashtags, @, etc. but these other forms do not directly encourage two-way communication and usually involve fewer users.

My study indicated that the second most important attribute is register, which indicates how formal the languages used in the post is. That attribute was not derived from the literature review but was suggested to me when I interviewed the experts (namely Camille Doucet and Reinout Van Zandycke), who told me that politicians often use words that are too specific or too difficult. Politicians can choose to use either a formal language or a more simple and common language that can be easily understood by everyone. My study suggests that voters indeed prefer the low level of register, i.e. the use of simpler and more common words.

These last two results, about interactivity and register, are actually closely linked. Voters react positively when the distance between them and politicians decrease, either because they both use the same language or because they are ostensibly asked to participate in a common debate.

In the literature review and experts' interview, no real consensus had emerged concerning the personalization attribute. Was it important or not? Was a higher level favourable or not? The results of my study are therefore a first step in trying to get an answer to these questions. They show that personalization is the least important attribute and that respondents actually prefer its level to be low. Among other things, this might mean that Belgian voters prefer politicians who communicate exclusively about their political work to those who try to mix their private life with their political function.

Consequently, the profile (i.e. the sentence) that gathered the best overall ranking was the one where interactivity was high and all other attributes were low. That profile was: *Paul, Education minister: "Disappointed by the new reform of masters studies. Thoughts?"*

## **6.2 Recommendations**

For politicians, increasing voting intentions through the use of social media is an endeavour that requires careful attention. In order, the most important attributes that politicians should focus on are interactivity, register, emotional content, redundancy and personalization. Each attribute needs to be considered in order to optimize the efficiency of online political communication as a tool for increasing visibility and popularity.

It is usually thought that a high number of comments on social media indicate a higher share of the vote in the subsequent elections. My study seems to confirm this. I found that respondents do consider interactivity to be important. The best profile of all those I used in my test was the one where interactivity was the only attribute to be at its high level. Therefore, politicians should always try to be interactive because it leads to higher visibility, which in turn can generate future votes. Online posts should contain tools or attributes that facilitates interactivity, both between politicians and voters and among voters (prompts for comments, hashtags,...).

In communication (online or offline), the language used to deliver information is essential, as the main goal is to reach and to attract as many people as possible. Politicians tend to use technical and specific words related to their function. However, many potential voters do not fully understand every aspect of every political issue. Consequently, politicians should adapt their language to the population their communication is aimed at. This will ultimately help to raise their profile and it might lead to higher voting intention. This adaptation of the register used should be a basic principle of any communication and marketing actions program.

Another possible way for politicians to increase their voting intention is to play with emotions in their online communication, especially emotions that they want to share with potential



voters. Therefore, emotional content is an important aspect of political communication. According to the results of the conjoint analysis I carried out, politicians should be weary of using too strong emotions and favour weaker emotions. It is quite difficult to assess what constitutes a weak or a strong emotion, but politicians should try to be moderate in the emotions they show to potential voters in order not to be perceived as extravagant, unhinged or, conversely, too kind or naïve. Moderate emotions might be the sign for voters of a stable and efficient mind that is not led astray by baser instincts. All this though remains highly hypothetical and this fourth attribute should be an object of further investigations in the future.

As Camille Doucet said, politicians may successfully use redundancy to make their message stand out clearer from its surroundings, but they should do it over a number of days or weeks. Indeed, my study shows that instant redundancy, i.e. the fact of repeating the same information twice in a single post is perceived somewhat negatively. To be effective, redundancy probably needs to be more discreet and should not be immediately apparent. Politicians can use the same ideas or slogans multiple times in their communication if they seemed likely to have been forgotten by the target audience or eclipsed by other politicians' communication. This can actually be really effective before an election. For instance, the MR's online strategy includes repeating the same ideas under different forms (videos, tweets, interviews, articles,...) one month before the election in order to ensure that voters are aware of the key ideas of its campaign.

Personalization as an attribute of political communication has been extensively discussed. On that matter, European politicians should not necessarily be inspired by the American political culture. In the United States, politicians often blur the lines between their private and political lives and that is accepted as normal. My study indicates that, in Belgium, politicians might benefit from compartmentalising to some extent their private and political lives. Communicating about their political function and political issues seems to generate more interest from the target audience and helps to create a more serious personal image. However, politicians can also include a portion of their private life when they have a legitimate reason to do so in the context of their political function. For instance, even members of the public

who like politicians to be discreet about their private lives can readily accept ministers posting photos with their partners at a political summit because the photo clearly stays within a political context.



## **Chapter 7: Limitations and Future research**

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### **7.1 Limitations**

As mentioned in the methodology, the research has been carried out in French because most of the potential respondents were French speakers. The question of the generalization of my results to politicians from both communities needs therefore to be asked, as I did not show my questionnaire in Dutch to Flemish voters. Furthermore, this research dissertation is written in English, which means that some translation work had to be done on the profiles used for my study. The coding of attributes in two different languages might lead to some discrepancies in the way readers interpret the results. Language might therefore cause a bias in this study, even if precautions were taken to minimize it

The raw data has been collected during a short period of time and through a single questionnaire. However, political communication on line is a very dynamic process that continuously evolves. I strongly believe that this period was not long enough. It also did not include a period of intense pre-electoral campaigning, during which respondents would have been more interested in what happens in the political world. Moreover, I only tested one communication, which was then slightly modified in accordance to the various combinations of attribute levels needed in my orthogonal design. It would have been better if I had included more profiles, especially ones that were more easily understandable and resonated more strongly with respondents, because they made reference to a current news topic for instance.

The population sample I used is the 200 people who filled in my questionnaire, 183 of which met the required conditions to be part of my study. In order to have more accurate results and discriminant results, I should have reached out to more people and used a larger sample size.

Furthermore, the questionnaire was designed in such a way that respondents had only one rather cumbersome and time-consuming task to accomplish: to read twelve very similar social media posts and then rank them. This was not the best way to proceed. Many respondents told me that it was inconvenient, and quite difficult to do. As mentioned before, a better way to

proceed would have been to ask respondents to choose their favourite out of two profiles, for a number of pairs.

Finally, the profiles were created without any help from a communication and marketing specialist. Thus, they might not reflect the true nature of posts that are written by real politicians. I drew inspiration from what I found on the Twitter pages of famous politicians and then tried to find the right balance in coding the various attributes so as not to influence respondents too much. This was not always easy to do since some attributes are tricky to mix: high personalization and low emotion for instance.

This leads me to the final limitation of my research. Throughout the whole analysis, the five attributes have been considered to be independent of each other. This is probably too candid a view: personalization and emotion, interactivity and redundancy for instance are probably linked in some fundamental way that my study does not allow me to investigate.

## **7.2 Future research**

Further research should be conducted to establish whether the concepts developed in this study could be replicated in other settings.

This research considered conjoint analysis to be the most convenient way to test the different combinations of levels and attributes for online political communication. However, the way we test the profile was not the best. Consequently, I think that it would be more effective to design an experiment in which two fake profiles are created and posts are shared during a longer period of time. The researcher will then be able to gather a greater amount of data based on a situation that is closer to the reality. For example, redundancy will be easier to test because it will not have to be instant redundancy.

As written above, I have not tested possible interaction effects between the various attributes. Consequently further experimentation should be done to test these interaction effects.

Other studies should be carried out during an election campaign: when politicians are very active on social media. To do so, using a multidimensional scale analysis would be a good way to have an overview of where each politician is situated within each attribute.

Moreover, this research did not study the possible impact of using the advice I gave in Chapter 6.2. Recommendations. Future research should be done in order to measure how voting intentions may be modified for politicians who followed my recommendations. For instance, it would be interesting to study the relationship between the number of new followers, the number of comments and the number of votes actually received, although the methodology to do so would be difficult to establish.

Finally, my research did not consider the nature and profile of the person who communicates and of the person who receives the message. The register attribute would possibly be perceived quite differently according to the education level of the people who receive the communication. Interactivity might also be perceived differently according to the age of the potential voters. Conversely, politicians across the political spectrum do not target the same audience and that should probably be studied as well. These considerations could pave the way for a much more detailed study of political marketing on social media.



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## **Appendices**

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### **Appendix 1: French questionnaire**

Bonjour,

Je m'appelle Florence et je suis actuellement en dernière année de Master en Marketing International à l'Université d'Hasselt. J'ai choisi de rédiger mon mémoire sur le thème de la communication politique et des réseaux sociaux.

Vous allez donc aujourd'hui participer à un test permettant d'élaborer vos préférences en matière de communication politique.

Le but étant d'analyser quelles caractéristiques sont à prendre en compte dans une stratégie digitale et communicationnelle lorsque l'on est un homme politique en Belgique.

Vos réponses seront traitées en toute confidentialité.

Le questionnaire dure de 7 à 10 minutes.

Veillez à bien répondre à toutes les questions.

Merci d'avance pour votre aide.

Cordialement,

Loix Florence

**Q1** Quel est votre sexe?

Masculin (1)

Féminin (2)

**Q2** Quel est votre âge?

18-23 (1)

24-28 (2)

29-33 (3)

34-38 (4)

39- 43 (5)

43+ (6)

**Q3** Quel est votre plus haut niveau scolaire?

- Primaire (1)
- Secondaire inférieur (2)
- Secondaire supérieur (3)
- Bachelier (4)
- Master (5)
- Doctorat (6)

**Q4** Quel est votre statut professionnel?

- En activité (1)
- En recherche d'emploi (2)
- Retraité (3)
- Au foyer (4)
- Etudiant (5)
- Autre (6)

**Q5** Utilisez-vous les réseaux sociaux?

- Oui (1)
- Non (2)

**Q6** Quel est votre fréquence d'utilisation des réseaux sociaux?

- Jamais (1)
- Une fois par mois (2)
- Une à deux fois par semaine (3)
- Presque tous les jours (4)
- Tous les jours (5)
- Plusieurs fois par jour (6)

**Q7** En général, pensez-vous que les réseaux sociaux peuvent influencer votre opinion?

- Tout à fait d'accord (4)
- D'accord (5)
- Plutôt d'accord (6)
- Ni d'accord, ni en désaccord (7)
- Plutôt en désaccord (8)
- En désaccord (9)
- Pas du tout d'accord (10)

**Q8** Contexte: Après l'annonce de la réforme des Masters, Paul, ministre de l'éducation en Belgique, partage son opinion sur les réseaux sociaux.

Veillez classer les 12 phrases selon votre préférence: la première étant la favorite.

La réforme des Masters n'est qu'une mise en scène pour illustrer une possible communication d'un homme politique. Aucune connaissance de cette réforme n'est nécessaire.

1. « Déçu à propos de la nouvelle réforme des Masters. Qu'en pensez-vous? » (1)
2. « Déçu à propos de la nouvelle réforme des Masters. » (2)
3. « Dépité à propos de la nouvelle réforme des Masters, peu de possibilités d'avenir pour ma fille, Emma. Qu'en pensez-vous ? » (3)



4. « Désappointé par la nouvelle réforme des Masters, incertain quant au futur de ma fille, Emma. Quelle est votre opinion à ce sujet ? La réforme reste équivoque. » (4)
5. « Déçu à propos de la nouvelle réforme des Masters, peu de possibilités d'avenir pour ma fille Emma. La réforme reste floue. » (5)
6. « Désappointé par la nouvelle réforme des Masters. Quelle est votre opinion à ce sujet ? La réforme reste équivoque. » (6)
7. « Ulcéré par la nouvelle réforme des Masters. » (7)
8. « Dépité à propos de la nouvelle réforme des Masters, peu de possibilités d'avenir pour ma fille, Emma. La réforme reste floue. » (8)
9. « Dépité à propos de la nouvelle réforme des Masters. Qu'en pensez-vous ? La réforme reste floue. » (9)
10. « Ulcéré par la nouvelle réforme des Masters, incertain quant au futur de ma fille, Emma. Quelle est votre opinion à ce sujet ? » (10)
11. « Ulcéré par la nouvelle réforme des Masters. La réforme reste équivoque. » (11)
12. « Désappointé par la nouvelle réforme des Masters, incertain quant à l'avenir de ma fille, Emma. » (12)

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**Factors influencing citizens' preferences for political communication on social media**  
**Research on people aged from 24 to 38 living in Belgium**

Richting: **Master of Management-International Marketing Strategy**

Jaar: **2018**

in alle mogelijke mediaformaten, - bestaande en in de toekomst te ontwikkelen - , aan de Universiteit Hasselt.

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Voor akkoord,

**Loix, Florence**

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