

About platforms and purposes

A quantitative content analysis of Flemish politicians' social media behaviour in everyday politics across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

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ABOUT PLATFORMS AND PURPOSES:

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Abstract

Political communication has changed remarkably throughout the years. Especially the emergence of social media platforms have boosted politicians' communication towards the electorate. While many studies aimed to capture the social media behaviour of politicians, this study takes a comparative approach by expanding the focus to three different platforms: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In this way, this thesis aims to contribute to the political marketing literature by providing insights into how the different platforms can be used. Therefore, the central research question of this thesis is: how do politicians employ the different social media platforms in their everyday political communication? To answer this question, two subquestions are formulated. First, through which platforms are the various functions of politicians' online communication fulfilled? Second, to what extent does the length, use of language and vividness features, as well as social media engagement differ across the social media platforms? To answer these questions, a quantitative content analysis is conducted of 1363 social media posts, posted by the Flemish party presidents across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

The results of this study indicate that Facebook is the most popular platform for political communication in Flanders. This is indicated by the fact that it is the only platform which is actively used by all politicians, as well as the high social media engagement. It is also the platform where the most effort is put in the post given their length and the fact that most are original. Facebook is mostly used for spreading political arguments and they tend to contain more language aimed towards convincing the audience of their credibility. Moreover, posts are made vivid through the use of photos or videos. Next, Twitter is also popular amongst Flemish politicians, especially the retweeting feature. It is mostly used to express criticism towards others and (almost) never for political personalisation. Posts are made vivid through the inclusion of hyperlinks. Despite the fact that it is widely used by most politicians, social media engagement is significantly lower. Finally, Instagram combines the features of posts and stories, naturally made vivid through the inclusion of pictures and videos. While Instagram posts are the least occurring format, Instagram stories are widely used by most politicians. Political personalisation is the most occurring function on Instagram. Furthermore, Instagram posts are a popular way to jump on the bandwagon, while stories are often used for self-promotion. Besides, they tend to use more language aimed at triggering the audience's emotions.

KEYWORDS: *Political communication, Functions, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter*

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Preface

I proudly present to you my Master's Thesis titled: About platforms and purposes – A quantitative content analysis of Flemish politicians' social media behaviour in everyday politics across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Both politics and social media always have been very strong interests of mine, and I could not be happier to combine these into the topic of my Master's Thesis.

Writing a Master's Thesis at home during a pandemic was not exactly how I imagined to finish my student years. Luckily so, I had the most amazing support system to help me through the entire process. First of all, I would like to express my eternal gratitude to my supervisor, dr. Chris Aalberts. I truly believe that his flexibility, help and always honest yet constructive criticism have helped me in lifting this research to a different level. Secondly, I would also like to thank dr. Isabel Awad for her support and guidance in the early stages of the research process, as well as her dedication to match me with a supervisor according to my research interests.

Furthermore, a big thank you goes out to Sam Van Hoof, who helped me in this research by taking up the role of the second coder, as well as supporting me throughout the whole process. Finally, during the entirety of my studies, I could always count on the unconditional support of my parents. For this reason, I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for everything they did for me the past years. Without their support, none of this would have been possible, and this is something that I should never take for granted.

Sara Lambrechts, Noorderwijk, June 2021

Chapter 1: Introduction

Political communication has changed significantly throughout history, with technological development being one of its main drivers (Swart et al., 2018). In recent years, the increasing use of social media has played a crucial role in the further facilitation of this communication (Schwanholz & Graham, 2018). Nowadays, the portfolio of politicians is not only limited to policymaking and governing a region, but also includes promoting themselves and their party to the electorate (De Vries, 2017). Social media essentially provide politicians with a platform to accomplish this (Graham et al., 2013; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Poulakidakos & Veneti, 2016). Therefore, the line between politicians' communication and political marketing has become blurred.

Throughout the years, a great amount of scientific research has been conducted with the aim to study the social media behaviour of politicians. However, the vast majority of these studies focused on only one social media platform in isolation. In the current (social) media landscape, there is a plethora of social media platforms available and it can be observed that politicians employ multiple platforms – such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram – in their communication strategies. This raises the question whether each platform serves a certain purpose, or whether politicians simply jump on the bandwagon by using a certain platform, with the sole purpose not to miss out on the platform and its audiences (Poulakidakos & Veneti, 2016).

One study that served as a great source of inspiration for the current research, is a study by Bronstein, Aharony and Bar-Ilan (2018) into the Facebook use of Israeli politicians during the 2015 general elections. The authors focused on four main elements of social media use: the type of persuasion language, social media engagement, elements of political personalisation and features of vividness. While, indeed, the study points to four relevant elements of politicians' social media use, it fails to make the distinction between *how* and *why* politicians make use of social media. Moreover, social media engagement is not necessarily an element the politician can control.

The current study places the distinction between how and why politicians make use of social media central. On the one hand, *how* politicians make use of social media refers to particular tools and elements that are used in the post, including language and visual features (Bronstein et al., 2018) or elements of spreadability (Jenkins et al., 2013), such as hashtags. On the other hand, *why* politicians make use of social media refers to the underlying reasons or motives why a certain politician shares a certain message. These reasons and motives can also be understood as *functions* of social media use, which this study attempts to outline. By complementing the existing academic literature with a pilot phase of qualitatively interpreting the data, this study identified seven different functions. These include propagating the ideology (Mahapatra & Plagemann, 2019), mobilising the public (Mahapatra & Plagemann, 2019; G. Wright, 1942), agenda setting (Mahapatra & Plagemann, 2019), criticising others (Heglich & Shahrezaye, 2015; Mahapatra & Plagemann, 2019; Šimunjak et al., 2017), personalising politics (Bronstein et al., 2018; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007), self-promoting (Sheldon et al.,

2017) and simply jumping on the bandwagon. This research aims to identify meaningful connections between both how and why politicians use social media across the various social media platforms.

More specifically, the central research question of this thesis is: How do politicians employ the different social media platforms in their everyday political communication? In order to develop an answer to this question, two subquestions are formulated. Firstly, through which platforms are the various functions of politicians' online communication fulfilled? Secondly, to what extent does the length, use of language and vividness features, as well as social media engagement, differ across the three social media platforms? The social media platforms that are included in this study are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

This research takes place within the Belgian context. More specifically, as Belgium is a federal state divided into various regions and communities, the study focuses on Flanders, which is the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. In Flanders, there are seven political parties who achieved the electoral threshold on both the Flemish and federal level. The party presidents of these seven parties are the main objects of study in this research, as they are the main representatives and the most important people of the respective political party (Deschouwer, 2009).

The current study aims to tackle two main gaps in the existing scientific literature. Firstly, the vast majority of these studies have focused on one specific social media platform in isolation. However, Chadwick (2013) argues that one can acquire power through the employment of the 'hybrid media system', thereby referring to the accurate use of all the media tools available. Therefore, the current study aims to add a comparative perspective by expanding the focus to three different social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Secondly, whereas the social media behaviour of politicians has been widely studied in the context of elections, there is a gap in the research when it comes to everyday politics. Wright, Graham and Jackson (2015) argue that much of the research into political communication "ignores the 'everydayness' of political communication and engagement and the networks where such talk emerges" (p. 74). While the main aim of politicians might be to gain votes for the upcoming elections, these only take place every x years. In the meantime, however, there are numerous opportunities for politicians to place themselves on the map (De Vries, 2017). For this reason, it is also important to study the social media behaviour of politicians in an everyday context.

In order to provide an answer to the central question of this thesis, a quantitative content analysis is conducted. More specifically, the social media posts of the seven Flemish party presidents across the three platforms are assessed systematically and objectively, through the use of a codebook designed specifically for this research (Neuendorf, 2017). This research technique allows the researcher to detect underlying meanings of a large amount of data (Neuman, 2011). Through the analysis of social media posts by the presidents of the Flemish political parties, this study aims to provide insights into how and why these platforms can be used from a political marketing perspective.

Following this introductory chapter, this thesis continues with Chapter 2, which provides a review of the existing literature in the field. Here, firstly, the complex Belgian political system is elaborately introduced in order to better understand the context of the study as well as the choice of research objects. Secondly, the role of the different social media platforms in political communication is discussed and compared. Thirdly, the existing research into politicians' social media behaviour is presented, thereby distinguishing between *how* and *why* they make use of social media. Afterwards, the thesis proceeds with Chapter 3, which outlines the methodology of how this research is carried out. Chapter 4 of this thesis presents the results of the quantitative content analysis. Finally, the thesis concludes with Chapter 5, which aims to place the results in perspective and provide an answer to the central research question of this study.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the existing literature in the field is reviewed. The chapter starts with an introduction to Belgium's complex political system. This is discussed elaborately in order to better understand the context in which this research takes place. Secondly, the role of social media platforms in political communication is discussed. More specifically, this part zooms in on each platform – Facebook, Twitter and Instagram – individually, explaining how the platform and its affordances contribute to political communication. Thirdly, the existing research into politicians' social media behaviour is presented. Here, the distinction is made between *how* and *why* politicians make use of social media.

2.1 The Belgian political system

Before diving into the role of social media platforms in contemporary politics, it is important to first contextualise the political landscape in which this research takes place. In this subchapter, firstly, Belgium's political structure in terms of levels of government is outlined. In this regard, the role of Flanders is situated more clearly. Secondly, a closer look is given to the role of the political parties, thereby illustrating the current political landscape.

2.1.1 Belgium's political structure in a nutshell

The political organisation in Belgium is characterised by its complexity. In their book *Sociology in Belgium: A sociological history*, Raf Vanderstraeten and Kaat Louckx (2018) explain that “its rather complex political and legislative structure, which took shape in recent decades, is the result of a series of tensions and conflicts, some of which antedated the foundation of the Belgian state” (p. 2). Today, even though Belgium is a rather small country, it comprises six different governments on the national and subnational level, each holding its own competences.

The six different governments are the result of a divided country. More specifically, Belgium is divided in in two different ways. One way is its division into three different *communities* with language as the distinguishing feature (Vanderstraeten & Louckx, 2018). As there are three official languages in the country – Dutch, French and German – three communities exist: the Flemish, French and German-speaking Community. Each community has its own government with similar competences for the respective community. These competences include culture, education, health care, welfare and justice (Flemish Government, n.d.).

A second way to divide the country is with geographical location as distinguishing feature. In this way, three regions emerge: the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital Region. Each of these also have their own government with different competences than the community governments (Vanderstraeten & Louckx, 2018). The regional competences include economics, employment, agriculture, protection of ambient water, housing, public services, energy, transport, environment,

urban and regional planning, nature conservation, budget, external trade and supervision over the provinces and cities (Federal Government Services, n.d.-b). It should be noted that the Flemish Community Government and the Flemish Regional Government merged into one.

Additionally, there is one central government holding the competences for national decisions: the Federal Government. These competences include finances, defence, social welfare, external affairs, internal affairs and health care (Federal Government Services, n.d.-a). The national parliament is composed of the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate.

To conclude, with three community governments, three regional governments and one federal government, Belgium would have seven different governments. However, given that the Flemish Community Government and the Flemish Regional Government merged into one, Belgium comprises six governments in total. It should be pointed out that these six governments operate on the same level, meaning that the Federal Government is not superior to any of the community or regional governments.

2.1.2 Belgium, a true partitocracy

Political parties play a crucial role in Belgium's multi-party democracy (Devroe et al., 2019). In his book *The Politics of Belgium: Governing a divided society*, Kris Deschouwer (2009) writes that, in Belgium, the political parties "are by far the most important political actors" (p. 78). For this reason, Belgium is considered a typical 'partitocracy' (De Winter, 1998, as cited in Deschouwer, 2009). Not only are the political parties highly present through a range of social, economic and cultural organisations that are intrinsically connected to them, they also have a great impact on the government formation and have control over the actions of the ministers (Deschouwer, 2009).

As the political parties play such a large role in Belgian politics, the heads of these parties – the party presidents – are considered to be amongst the most powerful people in politics. "The party president is the real leader of the party" (Fiers, 1998, as cited in Deschouwer, 2009, p. 104). These are the people who take the lead in the negotiations towards government formations. This person also acts as the spokesperson representing the party, and is further responsible "to keep the profile of the party clear and visible" (p. 104).

As Belgium's political landscape is rather fragmented, there are many different political parties. Seven different Flemish political parties achieved the electoral threshold on both the Flemish and federal level. The three oldest parties trace back to Belgium's pillarised structure. These are the CD&V (Christian democrats), Vooruit (Socialists) and Open Vld (Liberals). The newer parties include the PVDA (Communists), Groen (Ecologists), N-VA (Flemish Nationalist conservatives) and Vlaams Belang (Flemish Nationalist right-wing populists). Most of the parties – CD&V, Vooruit, Open Vld and Groen – also have a Walloon ideological counterpart. Interestingly, in some cases, there are large differences between the popularity of a certain Flemish party and its Walloon ideological counterpart

(Devroe et al., 2019). The PVDA is the only political party that is not fragmented and thus operates as a single entity on ‘the national level’ despite its language differences.

Due to this multi-party system, it is very unlikely that one party is able to govern on its own. Therefore, the governments work with coalitions (Tesch, 2013). Because each government has its own elections, the coalitions can differ per government. In table 2.1, a comparison of the current coalition-opposition dynamic is made of both the Flemish Government since October 2019 and the Federal Government since October 2020. The fact that coalitions in the Federal Government are not necessarily identical – or even similar – to those in, for example, the Flemish Government further complicates the relationships between the different political parties.

Table 2.1 Overview of the representation of political parties in Flemish and Federal Parliament

Party	Level	Ideology	Flemish Parliament		Federal Parliament	
			Coalition	Opposition	Coalition	Opposition
CD&V	Flemish	Christian democrats	15.3%		8.0%	
Vooruit	Flemish	Socialists		10.5%	6.0%	
Open Vld	Flemish	Liberals	12.1%		8.0%	
PVDA	National	Communists		3.2%		6.0%
Groen	Flemish	Greens		11.3%	5.3%	
N-VA	Flemish	Flemish nationalist conservatives	28.2%			16.0%
Vlaams Belang	Flemish	Flemish nationalist right-wing populists		18.5%		12.0%
Other	Both	Independent	0.8%			1.3%
CDH	Walloon	Christian democrats	-	-		3.3%
PS	Walloon	Socialists	-	-	12.7%	
MR	Walloon	Liberals	-	-	9.3%	
Ecolo	Walloon	Greens	-	-	8.7%	
DéFI	Walloon	Social-liberal, liberal, regionalists	-	-		1.3%
Total			56.5%	43.5	58.0%	42.0%

As table 2.1 illustrates, the coalition in the Flemish Parliament is formed by the largest party N-VA, together with CD&V and Open Vld. The second largest party, Vlaams Belang, therefore

remains in the opposition. However, in the Federal Parliament, the coalition is composed of Open VLD, Vooruit and Groen with their Walloon ideological counterparts, and CD&V without its Walloon ideological counterpart. With this, the largest party N-VA remains in the opposition, together with the third-largest party Vlaams Belang. This phenomenon was a source for public protest, organised by Vlaams Belang, as the coalition is composed by parties who supposedly ‘lost’ the elections (Cardoen, 2020).

2.2 The role of social media platforms in political communication

Throughout the years, social media have come to play an important role in society. The gradual emergence of social media platforms have marked a shift in the importance of traditional media. More specifically, these platforms have intrinsically changed both the production, consumption and distribution processes of information (Wilding et al., 2018). With citizens being exposed to unlimited access to a range of online information sources, their dependence on journalistic media has decreased (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019).

Moreover, today, these social media platforms also play a big role in politics. As Steven Chaffee (2001) argues, “the structure of communication shapes the structure of politics, both because so much of political activity consists of communication and because constraints on communication limit the exercise of power” (pp. 237–238). According to this logic, it can be argued that the rise of social media have transformed politics by providing platforms for political communication to thrive.

In order to address the role of social media platforms in political communication, it is important to first develop a common understanding of what political communication entails. Brian McNair (2018) defines political communication as all “purposeful communication about politics” (p. 4). This roughly includes every type of communication by, to and about political actors with the aim to achieve a particular goal. In this thesis, the predominant focus will be set on the former, namely the communication by politicians themselves.

The social media use of politicians has become a highly researched topic within the communication studies due to the many opportunities these platforms have to offer for politicians’ communication strategies. Poulakidakos and Stamatis (2016) point to various studies indicating that such technological developments have provided “a fertile new ground for new forms of public participation, political mobilization and information diffusion” (p. 120). Indeed, these platforms enable politicians to reach a broad audience composed of potential voters (McGregor & Lawrence, 2019). Moreover, the increasing popularity of social networking sites have also drastically facilitated the targeting of niche audiences within the mass public (McNair, 2018), which in turn contributes to political marketing practices (Lees-Marshment, 2019).

Furthermore, as Poulakidakos and Stamatis (2016) suggest, social media platforms allow for engagement and participation of audiences in social media campaigning (Sherman & Smith, 2012). In fact, social media engagement is a crucial element of social media marketing. It can be measured by

what Picone, Kleut, Pavlíčková, Romic, Møller Hartley and De Ridder (2019) conceptualise as ‘small acts of engagement’, such as the liking, commenting and sharing of social media posts. They further argue that these practices are meaningful because they illustrate people’s everyday agency and/or resistance. However, it should be noted that these acts of engagement illustrate varying degrees of participation. For example, a ‘like’ requires much less effort than writing a whole comment (Muñoz & Towner, 2017). Moreover, a study by Elizabeth Housholder and Heather LaMarre (2015) concludes that social media engagement with a political campaign tends to be a great predictor for people’s offline voting behaviour.

While various studies have aimed to capture the social media behaviour of politicians, the majority of these studies have focused on one social media platform in isolation. In contrast, this thesis will take a comparative approach. By expanding the focus to three different social media platforms, one can research in what way the content is shaped by the platform (Stier et al., 2018). For this reason, this thesis looks into politicians’ communication through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These three platforms appear to be the most relevant ones in Belgium, especially when it comes to politicians using them.

Prior to this study, Shannon McGregor and Regina Lawrence (2019) have also attempted to look into the dynamics of these three different platforms by studying Hillary Clinton’s social media use in the 2016 United States presidential election campaign. They argue that the affordances and audiences differ per platform, and therefore should not be generalised and extended to other – what seem to be similar – social networking sites. To be more specific, they conclude that Facebook is considered a vehicle aimed towards reaching a large audience, claiming that “Facebook is for everything and everybody” (McGregor & Lawrence, 2019, p. 59). In contrast, they observed that Twitter is mainly used to communicate to the press. With regard to the use of Instagram, they note that campaigns in general are uncertain how to make use of the platform. However, the platform proves to be useful to present politicians in a more human way. In this way, Instagram allows for an intimate sphere to be created within the world wide web.

The differences across the various platforms illustrate the demand for particular skills and strategies to make the most out of each platform. As David Taras (2019) beautifully summarises: “The social media game has to be played on a number of different chess boards at the same time” (p. 10). In the following subsections, each platform will be discussed in the context of political communication, and their relevance within the Belgian context will be situated. In this way, it will become clear why it is particularly interesting to look at the combination of these three platforms.

2.2.1 Facebook

The social media platform Facebook was created by Harvard students Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz, Chris Hughes and Eduardo Saverin. It launched in February 2004 with the aim to create an online community connecting Harvard students (Barr, 2018). However, in September 2006,

Facebook became accessible for everyone above the age of 13 (Facebook, n.d.). Today, it is estimated that Facebook has 2.8 billion active users monthly (Tankovska, 2021b). Moreover, it is the most popular social media platform in Belgium (Tankovska, 2021c).

A study by Stier, Bleier, Lietz and Strohmaier (2018) into election campaigning on social media suggests that Facebook tends to be used in a direct manner, for both organisational and mobilisation purposes. More specifically, the platform allows politicians to interact directly with their audiences, composed of potential voters (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Additionally, with their research into political impression management through politicians' Facebook (and Twitter) use, Šimunjak, Sinčić Ćorić and Brečić (2017) conclude that politicians use social media “as a public relations vehicle through which they are informing their followers of the campaign events” (p. 553).

However, a study by Bronstein, Aharony and Bar-Ilan (2018) into the Facebook use of Israeli party leaders seems to challenge this view. They have found that Facebook's easily accessible character has contributed to the popularity of the platform allowing politicians to reinvent political communication:

Instead of using these sites as platforms to disseminate their ideas, plans and strategies, it aims to create and maintain affective alliances with the public, by presenting politicians as approachable ‘normal people’ with family lives and hobbies that audiences can identify with. (Bronstein et al., 2018, p. 564)

The varying conclusions of research in the field illustrate that there is not one way or purpose for using Facebook, but rather show the degree of potential of the platform. The different uses of the platform should be understood as complementing rather than challenging each other.

Besides Facebook being used by individual politicians, it can also be observed that the platform is popular amongst political parties for its paid advertising. In Belgium, during the last elections, large amounts of money have been invested in Facebook advertising. More specifically, it is estimated that the seven Flemish political parties together spent 800,000 euros on Facebook advertisements, of which half was spent by solely the Flemish Nationalist right-wing populist party Vlaams Belang (Vandeputte, 2019). Remarkably, also after the election day, political parties continued to invest in their advertising strategies on Facebook (Vandeputte & De Smedt, 2019). Given that Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Belgium, and political parties clearly recognise its importance, this platform is crucial to include in the analysis.

2.2.2 Twitter

In 2006, the microblogging site Twitter was founded by four employees of Odeo, a company specialised in podcasting-software. What started as an internal tool for employees of the company, ended up being released for the wider public, similar to the success story of Facebook. This is when its

popularity boomed: “The company became the digital world’s new darling” (Fitton et al., 2015, sec. The origins of Twitter). Today, it is estimated that the platform has 192 million daily active users (Tankovska, 2021a). Although the platform is one of the most prominent ones for political communication in many countries (Straus & Williams, 2019, p. 77), specific numbers of its popularity in Belgium are lacking. Given the interest of the platform in other countries’ political contexts, it is deemed useful to include in this research.

What distinguishes Twitter from other social networking platforms, is that it is a microblogging site allowing users to share posts with a limited amount of characters. Initially, the maximum was 140 characters, but Twitter increased this limit to 280 characters in 2017. Nevertheless, it was observed that the vast majority of the tweets remains below 140 characters (Perez, 2017).

Typified by the short and strong messages, Twitter is considered a highly efficient and effective way to reach the public (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). A study by Grant, Moon and Grant (2010) found that politicians aim to use Twitter for political engagement, with varying degrees of success. In contrast, a study by Graham, Jackson and Broersma (2018) found that politicians use Twitter in an informal and intimate manner through the use of interactive small talk with their audience. In this way, the image of the politician highly differs from the way politicians tend to be presented in traditional media. Thus, they conclude that the personalised tweeting behaviour by politicians “can potentially strengthen the relation with voters by creating a sense of closeness and intimate attachment with followers” (pp. 152–153). Moreover, Jackson and Lilleker (2011) found that Twitter is used “as a tool of impression management” (p. 100). This means that a politician has control over the way they are perceived by the public. More specifically, Twitter provides politicians a platform to promote themselves. “This self-promotion is largely based on their qualifications or positions held, and so emphasises the hard work they are engaged in” (pp. 100–101).

Furthermore, a study by Hegelich and Shahrezaye (2015) found that politicians tend to use Twitter to spread information, although there are differences between the political parties. Moreover, their study illustrates that the communication with politicians from other parties is more harsh than their communication with members of their own political party. They argue that “this particular usage of communication on Twitter might lead to stronger polarisation in political discourses” (Hegelich & Shahrezaye, 2015, p. 155). Additionally, Duncombe (2019) argues that Twitter has the potential to represent and provoke emotions, which can play a crucial “role in the escalation and de-escalation of conflict” (p. 409). Including Twitter in the analysis will allow for a comparison of these functions towards the other platforms.

2.2.3 Instagram

What started as a photo-sharing platform in 2010, resulted into one of the most popular social networking sites today, with its popular features such as Instagram stories and Instagram TV, generally known as IGTV. Towner and Muñoz (2018) explain that “the ease with which consumers

can now capture images and videos on their smartphone has contributed to Instagram's growing popularity" (p. 487). Keeping in mind the rising popularity of the platform, Instagram is increasingly being used in political communication. Additionally, it can be observed that the social media engagement on Instagram is particularly higher than on both Facebook and Twitter (Elliott, 2015, as cited in Muñoz & Towner, 2017).

While research into the role of Facebook and Twitter in political communication is widespread, academic research focussing on Instagram as a tool for political communication is scarce (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). However, the shift from text to visual communication on social media illustrates Instagram's potential for political marketing (Muñoz & Towner, 2017). Moreover, earlier research has shown that images are more likely to attract the attention, and therefore are easier to remember. This phenomenon is known as the 'picture superiority effect' (Paivio et al., 1968). Placing this in the political marketing context, it can be concluded that images have the power to shape the attitude of the viewer when it comes to the politicians' character (Rosenberg et al., 1986).

Muñoz and Towner (2017) write that Instagram is used by politicians "as visually rich self-presentation platform, offering behind-the-scenes looks, family photographs, issue messages, thank you messages, and pictures of rallies" (p. 291). However, a study by Filimonov, Russmann and Svensson (2016) illustrates that Instagram is predominantly used by politicians for broadcasting rather than political mobilisation. While the focus of content can be described as personalised, yet professional, the private lives of politicians were rarely portrayed. A different study by Russmann and Svensson (2017, as cited in Muñoz & Towner, 2017) "found that political parties rarely used Instagram to directly communicate with their followers and the quality of these interactions – when they occur – was not substantial" (p. 294). Furthermore, Russmann and Svensson (2016, as cited in Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019) argue that Instagram can fuel practices of both the personalisation and celebritisation of politics. While, again, the studies find varying uses of the platform, it can be concluded that more research is needed that allows the different uses to coexist.

2.3 The social media behaviour of politicians

Various studies have aimed to capture how politicians use social media. This chapter aims to bring this literature together, forming the main theoretical framework behind the current study. To do so, a distinction is made between *how* politicians use social media, and *why* politicians use social media. The former relates to elements such as the use of language and the vividness of the social media posts. The latter refers to the underlying motives of why a certain politician shares a certain message.

2.3.1 How politicians use social media

When looking at how politicians use social media, several elements can be identified. In this regard, a study by Bronstein, Aharony and Bar-Ilan (2018) identifies two main features: language and

vividness. Whereas language involves various elements such as the language style, content, but also the use of metaphors and sound bites; vividness refers to the potential inclusion of vivid elements such as, but not limited to, images and videos.

Language

When analysing the social media behaviour of politicians, one of the most important elements is the language used. There are various aspects of language that can be inspected. First of all, the language style of a politician should be identified. More specifically, two distinctions can be made. On the one hand, the politician can choose to use a colloquial style, which is characterised by a clear and understandable vocabulary. On the other hand, the politician can also choose to adopt a more professional language style, which can be conceptualised as political jargon (Campus, 2010). The latter refers to the use of particular terminology used by a profession or group that is difficult for others to understand.

A similar distinction was made with the concepts of *politichese* and *gentese* by Osvaldo Croci (2001). He explains that *politichese* is characterised by “its cryptic character [that] can be properly understood only if seen against both the functional requirements and systemic constraints of the Italian post-war political regime in general, and its party system in particular” (p. 350). Here, *politichese* refers to what was described earlier as political jargon. *Gentese*, in contrast, is typified by its “clarity, simplicity and spontaneity” (p. 354). The main aim of the latter is to make it easily understandable to the audience. In other words, this refers to the colloquial language style.

Secondly, a closer look should be taken to the language of persuasion that the politician adopts in their post. Bronstein, Aharony and Bar-Ilan (2018) have focused on the Aristotelian language of persuasion, including three themes: ethos, pathos and logos. The first is the ‘ethical appeal’ and aims to convince the public of the credibility of the author, in this case the politician. The second is the ‘emotional appeal’ which aims to persuade through the manipulation of the public’s emotions. The third is the ‘logical appeal’ which makes strategic use of logic or reason to convince the audience. Each of these themes are interesting to detect in order to grasp in which way politicians aim to convince their audience. In their study about the use of the Aristotelian rhetoric in Facebook messages during the Israeli 2013 election campaign, Samuel-Azran, Yarchi and Wolfsfeld (2015) found that ethos is the most prevailing strategy. However, the social media engagement in terms of likes was observed to be the highest when politicians adopted pathos-based language.

Thirdly, De Landtsheer, De Vries and Vertessen (2008) have also recognised language as an important element of politicians’ impression management. They refer to the use of sound bites and metaphors. They describe sound bites as “short utterances by politicians that generally include style elements such as metaphors and alliteration” (p. 222). In other words, they typically include slogans and catchphrases. Nowadays, sound bites often emerge through the use of hashtags to further foster spreadability (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Vividness

The second element of politicians' use of social media is vividness. This can be described as "the extent to which a brand post stimulates the different senses" (Steuer, 1992, as cited in Bronstein et al., 2018, p. 553). Sheng, Yang and Feng (2020) state that vividness is the extent to which content fosters the imagination and allows the user to engage emotionally. Nisbett and Ross (1980, as cited in Sheng et al., 2020) describe vividness as content that is "(1) emotionally engaging, (2) concrete and imaginative and (3) has sensory, temporal or spatial proximity" (p. 1044). Social media thus allows politicians to attract the attention of audiences in various ways, through the use of pictures, memes, videos, GIFs, sounds, and other forms of vivid content.

A study by Burns, Biswas and Babin (1993, as cited in Sheng et al., 2020) illustrates that the increasing vividness of advertisements affects people's consumption behaviour positively. Moreover, a study by Babin and Burns (1997) into the use of pictures in print advertising shows that advertisements containing images of a product in use were more effective in both the stimulation of the vivid visual imagery and shaping the attitudes of the viewer in favour of the advertisement and brand than advertisements who did not use (concrete) pictures at all. In the social media context, this can be established by accompanying a social media post with vivid elements. Applying this logic to the political communication context, it can be expected that the vividness of social media posts positively affects people's attitudes towards politicians.

2.3.2 Why politicians use social media

Besides studying *how* politicians use social media, it is equally important to consider *why* they do so. In this regard, different motives or functions of social media use by politicians can be outlined. While many studies have shortly pointed to the motives of politicians to post, a theoretical framework clearly distinguishing the various functions is lacking. For this reason, this study aims to construct one based upon the existing literature, complemented with a qualitative interpretation of the dataset prior to the quantitative content analysis. It is important to note that this list is not exhaustive and a single social media post can fulfil various functions.

In their study into the social media strategies of Indian political parties, Mahapatra and Plagemann (2019) state that social media is used "to propagate their ideology, mobilise public opinion, set policy agendas and discredit detractors" (p. 1). While this study thus points to four different functions of social media, it fails to further specify these.

The first function is to propagate the ideology. More specifically, when politicians aim to propagate their ideology, they try to spread a certain political argument. As social media platforms allow politicians to be in direct interaction with potential voters (McGregor & Lawrence, 2019; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), the platform offers politicians a voice to spread their ideological beliefs and political opinions in order to convince the electorate. Nevertheless, since the de-pillarisation in Belgium, Flanders moved from the three traditional parties to seven different political parties.

Therefore, the importance of ideologies has decreased as the existence of more political parties increases the likelihood that those share similar ideological beliefs (de Beus, 2001; Manin, 1997).

The second function is political mobilisation. Genevieve Wright (1942) broke this process down into four phases. Firstly, there is a general discontent with regard to the current societal conditions. Secondly, people are aware that change is needed. Next, there is a stage of controversy and discussion. Finally, people decide that taking action is the way to achieve the desired change. The latter is crucial as it is the end goal in the process of political mobilisation. On social media, this action can entail, for example, sharing content or signing a petition. In the offline world, an example of taking action in the political mobilisation is to participate in a protest.

The third function of politicians' use of social media is agenda setting. By using the tools provided by the social media platforms, politicians can place particular topics on the (political) agenda by simply sharing social media posts. Whereas previously, the public agenda was mostly defined by the mass media coverage (Ghanem, 1997), now, politicians also have the opportunity to decide what people will talk about. More specifically, they can do this by sharing their own resolutions about certain topics, or by calling upon other politicians to take action.

The fourth function is to discredit detractors. More broadly, this can be extended to criticism in general. A study by Hegelich and Shahrezaye (2015) found that politicians are likely to communicate positively towards people of their own political party, while they would rather 'attack' their political opponents. While this is a strategy that can be found across multiple studies with regard to politicians' social media use, Šimunjak, Sinčić Ćorić and Brečić (2017) conclude that politicians are more likely to attack opponents in traditional media than in their own social media posts.

While the four functions as outlined by Mahapatra and Plagemann (2019) provide a solid basis, further research points to additional functions which were not mentioned in their study. Therefore, the fifth function included in this thesis, is personalising politics. Political personalisation should be understood as a dynamic process of an increasing importance of individual politicians and a decreasing importance of the political party or ideology (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). One of the ways in which politicians try to gain individual importance rather than attention to the political party, is by focusing on emotionally based content (Bronstein et al., 2018). This function has become popular because it allows the politicians to present themselves as 'real people'.

A sixth function is self-promotion. While this is a function that is often found in studies that do not focus on politicians' social media use specifically (Sheldon et al., 2017), it is highly applicable to politicians' use as well. A study by Jackson and Lilleker (2011) into the Twitter use of British Members of Parliaments confirms this and argues that politicians tend to promote themselves by emphasising their qualifications and achievements. Other examples of self-promotion on social media include a request for a like, follow, share or vote.

While these six functions can be found in a variety of scientific literature, the current study will further complement this list with the findings of a pilot phase of qualitatively interpreting a part of the dataset. In the following chapter, the research design of this study is elaborately described.

Chapter 3: Research design

In this chapter, the research design of the study is elaborately presented. The chapter starts with an explanation of what quantitative content analysis is and why it is the best suited research method to answer the research question of this thesis: How do politicians employ the different social media platforms in their everyday political communication? Next, it explains what data are included in this research and how these data are collected. Followingly, the theoretical concepts are operationalised and presented as quantifiable measures. Afterwards, the statistical techniques of the data analysis are discussed. Finally, this chapter ends with a reflection on the limitations, validity and reliability of this research.

3.1 Method

In order to determine how politicians use the different social media platforms in their everyday political communication, a quantitative content analysis of their social media posts is conducted. A quantitative method is suited to answer this research question because it allows to identify statistically significant differences in the variables on social media use across the different platforms. A very brief definition of quantitative content analysis is provided by Kimberly Neuendorf (2017), who states that it is “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (p. 1). Riffe, Lacy, Watson and Fico (2019) expanded on this and define it as “the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods” (p. 20). The method has become increasingly popular amongst a variety of academic disciplines, especially in recent years (Neuendorf, 2017).

Similar to other quantitative methods, the precise measurement of variables is a central aspect of quantitative content analysis. Therefore, special attention should be given to how the different variables in the research are operationalised into specific, objective and quantifiable measures (Neuman, 2011). Eventually, the operationalisation of these measures results in a codebook (see Appendix A: Codebook), which can be described as a manual of questions according to which all the data will be coded (see 3.3 Measurement).

The first reason why quantitative content analysis is specifically suited for answering this research question, is because it allows for the systematic analysis of a large amount of data (White & Marsh, 2006), in this case social media posts. The aim of this method is to draw “replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (Krippendorff, 1989, p. 403). White and Marsh (2006) specifically point to the importance of *inference*, as “the researcher uses analytical constructs, or rules of inference, to move from the text to the answers to the research questions” (p. 27). In this way, the underlying meanings of the data – which are challenging to recognise by mere observation – can be identified (Neuman, 2011).

The second reason is because it operates beyond the conventional approach of studying communication, thereby referring to the traditional “who says what in which channel to whom with what effect” model (Lasswell, 1948, as cited in Loisen & Joye, 2017, p. 163). More specifically, as quantitative content analysis aims to identify the underlying meaning of the data, the method also allows to account for the psychoanalytical, institutional and cultural context of the data (Krippendorff, 1989). This can be done through creating the right variables in the codebook and operationalising them. Especially in the field of political communication, this broader context can be important to take into consideration.

3.2 Data collection

In this research, the units of analysis include the social media posts of politicians. To determine which politicians are included in this research, purposive sampling is applied. This sampling method allows the researcher to select the most suitable or representative people to focus on in the analysis (Sarstedt et al., 2018). Because the main aim of the study is to disclose potential similarities and differences across platforms, only one politician per political party will be included. Due to the language complexities, only the political parties who achieved the electoral threshold on the Flemish level are included in the analysis. When focussing on only one politician per party, a logical choice is to focus on the party presidents. Not only because they are considered “the real leader[s] of the party”, but also because they act as the spokesperson of the party (Deschouwer, 2009, p. 104). For this reason, the seven party presidents of the Flemish political parties are the main objects of this study. Table 3.1 provides an overview of these seven people and their political responsibilities sorted per level of policymaking.

Table 3.1 Overview of the Flemish Party Presidents and their political mandates on the various levels of policymaking

Party	President	Federal level	Flemish level	Local level
CD&V	Joachim Coens	/	/	Mayor of Damme
Vooruit	Conner Rousseau	/	Member of the Flemish Parliament	/
Open Vld	Egbert Lachaert	Member of the Chamber of Representatives	/	Alderman of Merelbeke
PVDA	Peter Mertens	Member of the Chamber of Representatives	/	Member of the Municipal Council Antwerp
Groen	Meyrem Almaci	/	Member of the Flemish Parliament	Member of the Municipal Council Antwerp
N-VA	Bart De Wever	/	Member of the Flemish Parliament	Mayor of Antwerp
Vlaams Belang	Tom Van Grieken	Member of the Chamber of Representatives	/	Member of the Municipal Council Schoten

Furthermore, this research looks at the aforementioned politicians' social media posts across three different platforms: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These three platforms are chosen because they each have already been studied in isolation, while this research aims to add a comparative perspective. Moreover, after exploring the social media activity of these seven politicians, it can be concluded that Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are the most popular social media platforms for political communication. It should be noted that this study will make the distinction between Instagram posts and Instagram stories, as both features seem to be used differently.

As this study aims to provide a perspective into the day-to-day political communication, the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts will be retrieved over a period of six weeks, namely from Monday 1 March 2021 until Sunday 11 April 2021. However, due to the fact that Instagram stories disappear after 24 hours, it is impossible to trace back posts. Moreover, because of the limited time Instagram stories can be retrieved, it was decided to only include two weeks of data for this type of post. The Instagram stories were retrieved over a period of two weeks, from Monday 10 May 2021 until Sunday 23 May 2021. This period is chosen because (a) it is outside of the electoral context, and (b) it offers an up-to-date view on reality. Finally, it should be noted that the Twitter account of one of the politicians, Tom Van Grieken, has been blocked from 8 April until 17 April 2021. Because it could be observed that he compensated for this ban by posting more on the other platforms, it was decided not to include more data from his Twitter account.

Table 3.2 provides an overview of how many social media posts were posted by each politician across all three platforms during the aforementioned time period. This data was collected during the final week of April and the first three weeks of May 2021. For this reason, it is possible that the most recent posts score lower on social media engagement than older posts, but this difference will

be consistent for each politician. Facebook posts include all posts posted by the politician, whether this is completely original or shared from a different profile. Twitter posts also include all posts posted by the politician, including retweets, excluding replies. Instagram posts and stories are naturally distinguished. In the case of Facebook posts, Twitter posts and Instagram stories, a separate variable will indicate whether the post is (a) original, (b) shared or (c) a combination of both.

Table 3.2 Overview of the politicians' posting frequencies per platform

Party	President	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Instagram stories	Total
CD&V	Joachim Coens	20	59	7	48	134
Vooruit	Conner Rousseau	82	2	4	48	136
Open Vld	Egbert Lachaert	50	113	12	80	255
PVDA	Peter Mertens	89	59	22	14	184
Groen	Meyrem Almaci	21	68	5	0	94
N-VA	Bart De Wever	33	11	30	0	74
Vlaams Belang	Tom Van Grieken	119	320	16	31	486
Total		414	632	96	221	1363

The data are collected through the Qualtrics software. More specifically, the codebook – which will be further elaborated on in 3.3 Measurement – was constructed as a ‘survey’. In this way, each social media post was coded separately and systematically by one human coder. Moreover, the Qualtrics software allows for an easy retrieval of the collected data into an SPSS dataset. Additionally, 14.5% of the total amount of data is also coded by a second human coder, using the same platform. In this way, eventually, the intercoder reliability can be measured, which indicates the reliability of the codebook. This will be further elaborated in 3.5 Limitations, validity and reliability.

3.3 Measurement

In order to conduct a quantitative content analysis, all the relevant variables need to be operationalised. The operationalisation of these variables, also called the measurement, then results into a coding system. To create this codebook (see Appendix A: Codebook), the researcher needs to define how the variables should be measured throughout the entire research.

The coding scheme can thus be described as a system in which all the variables are operationalised by establishing certain categories and assigning numerical values to each option within that category. While the data might be qualitative in nature, the aim is to quantify it, meaning that numbers are assigned to certain answers to questions (Neuendorf, 2017). Riffe, Lacy, Watson and Fico (2019) have described measurement as “the reliable and valid process of assigning numbers to units of content” (p. 47). In practice, it tends to be assumed that certain categories are either absent and receive the number 0, or present and receive the number 1 (Neuendorf, 2017). According to Kassirjian (1977), it is exactly this “quantification of judgment [that] distinguishes content analysis from ordinary critical

reading” (p. 9). Namely, in this way, it allows the researcher to perform quantitative analysis, thereby further interpreting the data and developing inferences.

The codebook should include all the measures that are relevant to later provide an answer to the research question. For each variable, it should be clear which number needs to be assigned to the answer, and ideally, the measurement scale should be as high as possible. Furthermore, the codebook “should have clear definitions, easy-to-follow instructions, and unambiguous examples” (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 32). The categories, or variables, should be both relevant and valid. In this sense, relevant refers to the usefulness of the categories, referring to their potential to actually test the hypotheses. Validity, on the other hand, refers to the accurateness of the measure in the sense that it measures the concept the researcher wants to measure (White & Marsh, 2006). An elaborate explanation on the validity and reliability of this research will follow in chapter 3.5.

Social media engagement. To measure social media engagement, this research will look into what Picone, Kleut, Pavlíčková, Romic, Møller Hartley and De Ridder (2019) conceptualise as ‘small acts of engagement’. More specifically, this includes the amount of likes, comments and shares. In the case of Facebook and Twitter, small acts of engagement over 1,000 are rounded to hundreds, and over 10,000 to thousands, due to the technological affordances of the platforms. In the case of Instagram posts, there is no feature to retrieve how many times a certain post was shared; thus this variable will be excluded. Moreover, in the case of Instagram stories, it is impossible to retrieve any of this information. Additionally, the variable hashtags is included because a hashtag can serve as a tool for increasing spreadability, that is, the likelihood that certain content will be spread (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Language. In order to measure the language of the politician, first, the language style of the politician will be determined. More specifically, it will be determined whether there are at least two words or one sentence of political jargon used in the post, or whether the author uses clear, understandable colloquial language. Political jargon can be conceptualised as particular terminology that tends to be used by a specific profession or group and is difficult for others to understand. Next, the presence of persuasion language will be examined. This measurement will be based upon a study by Samuel-Azran, Yarchi and Wolfsfeld (2015). It was decided that ethos was present if “the post’s content was designed to convince readers of the candidate’s credibility or character, or establish a specific image for the candidate by recalling [their] accomplishments, life story or plans for the future” (p. 155). Next, pathos was present if “the post’s content constituted an emotional appeal designed to persuade readers by appealing to their emotions, through the use of humour, fear, sympathy or anger” (p. 155). Further, logos was present if “the post’s content constituted an appeal to logic and reason. Such appeals typically present facts and figures to support the candidate’s claims, discuss party ideology, attempt to counter opponents’ allegations using statistics, etc.” (p. 155). Finally, it was determined whether or not the author made use of soundbites, which can be defined as short utterances including style elements such as metaphors and alliterations (De Landtsheer et al., 2008), through the use of – for example – expressions, slogans or hashtags.

Vividness. Given that no previous study has operationalised the concept of vividness, this study attempts to do so by breaking it down into three different variables. The first variable looks at the amount of photos used in the social media post. The second variable looks into the amount of videos in the social media post. And thirdly, after a pretest, the variable hyperlink was added given that many posts used this and it also sparks the vividness of the post. For the hyperlink variable, it were merely observed whether it was present (1) or not (0).

Functions. As already discussed in the theoretical framework, no study has previously attempted to outline a framework of different functions. Again, this study attempts to do so. Inspired by a variety of academic literature, a pilot qualitative study was carried out. In this way, the functions of one week of social media posts by the seven politicians across the three different platforms were openly coded. Later, selective coding was performed, until ending up with a list of seven distinct functions, as illustrated in table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Overview of pilot test open coding

Selective coding	Open coding
Propagating ideology	Spreading a political argument
	Participating in a public debate
Mobilising public opinion	Calling upon citizens to sign a petition
	Calling upon citizens to join a protest
	Calling upon citizens to like, follow or share to achieve public participation
Agenda setting	Calling upon politicians to act
	Informing the public about a certain resolution
Criticising	Criticising the Federal Government
	Criticising the Flemish Government
	Criticising other political parties
	Criticising other politicians
	Criticising the media
Personalising politics	Criticising others
	Depicting family life
Self-promoting	Depicting personal interests
	Sharing own accomplishments
	Calling upon citizens to like, follow or share for self-promotion
Jumping on the bandwagon	(Re-)share or post with the only purpose to self-promote
	Joining the non-political conversation
	Expressing holiday wishes
	Sharing statement on (inter-)national day of ...

The first function is propagating ideology. Here, it is questioned whether or not the politician aims to spread their ideology or a particular political argument. The second function is mobilising the public opinion. This variable aims to identify whether or not the politician calls upon the audience to

take (political) action, such as signing a petition or joining a protest. The third function is agenda setting, determining whether or not the politician aims to place a particular topic on the (political) agenda by calling upon politicians to act or proposing their own resolution. The fourth function is criticising. This variable will measure whether or not the politician aims to criticise something or someone with their post. A follow-up question is included to provide more insight into who or what is being criticised. The fifth function is personalising politics. This variable measures whether or not the politician is providing a glimpse into their non-political private life. The sixth function is self-promoting. Here, it is determined whether or not the politician is presenting their own actions or achievements, and/or is calling upon citizens to like, comment or share a certain post. The last function is jumping on the bandwagon. This variable measures whether or not the politician aims to join the non-political conversation.

It was decided that these seven functions are not mutually exclusive and thus can coexist. For this reason, these are seven different variables that each look for the emergence of a respective function, which are also coded into 1 when present and 0 when absent. For this reason, it is also possible that a post does not fulfil any of these functions. Finally, it should be noted that for all the yes- or no-questions, the option 'unclear' was also provided, which results in a value of 99. Eventually, these values are defined as missing values.

3.4 Data analysis

After all the data is collected in the Qualtrics software, the dataset can be easily retrieved from the platform. In this way, the data can be further processed using SPSS, a statistical analysis software. To answer the research question how politicians employ the different social media platforms in their everyday political communication, the analysis is structured around the subquestions of this research.

In order to provide an answer to each subquestion, two different statistical techniques are used. As the majority of the variables aims to identify differences between the multiple platforms, the most used technique is the analysis of variance (ANOVA). This technique allows the researcher to identify whether there are significant differences between the scores of the dependent variable for each of the groups, in this case the different platforms (Pallant, 2016).

However, in some cases, there will be only two groups to be compared. This is the case for the variable measuring the amount of shares for example, due to the fact that this cannot be measured on Instagram. When one wants to identify statistical differences between variables of two groups, a t-test is performed instead of an ANOVA, the latter being used to compare more than two groups (Pallant, 2016).

3.5 Limitations, validity and reliability

Similar to any other research, this study also has its limitations. While quantitative content analysis provides various opportunities from which this research benefits, there are also several

limitations to this approach. The first limitation stems from the fact that all the data is operationalised in measurable, quantitative data. While this is needed for the analysis and brings along certain advantages, it should be taken into account that it tends to limit the interpretation of certain discourses (Krippendorff, 1989). Furthermore, despite the fact that the sample size of this analysis is quite large, only one politician per political party is included, meaning that the social media posts of only seven different people are included in the analysis. For this reason, attention should be paid when comparing the social media use of the different political parties. While the party presidents do indeed play an important role in representing their party (Deschouwer, 2009), the party is not limited to this sole individual.

Next, validity should be understood as “the extent to which a measuring procedure represents the intended – and only the intended – concept” (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 123). Especially in quantitative content analysis, the question of validity is of crucial importance (Kassarjian, 1977). In this research, the validity of the measures is ensured because the vast majority of the variables are measured based on operationalisations of earlier research.

Furthermore, working with human coders makes the research susceptible to subjectivity. In order to minimise this, the question of reliability becomes paramount. Reliability, also known as reproducibility (Kassarjian, 1977) refers to “the extent to which a measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials” (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 123). In other words, reliability is important because it indicates to what extent the research can be repeated at different moments in time or by different people, and still generate the same results.

In order to ensure the reliability of this research, this study makes use of two human coders. The first coder is the main researcher who codes all the data. The second coder is a volunteer experienced with quantitative content analysis, who coded 14.5% of the total dataset. In total, this reliability analysis included 195 posts. As illustrated in table 3.4, the selection of data reflects the dataset proportionally, meaning that approximately 14.5% of each politician’s activity per platform was included, excluding Instagram stories due to the technological affordances of the feature. Moreover, only the relevant variables were included in the case of the second coder, meaning that he coded only the variables that are up for interpretation. These include the latent variables, while numerical and factual variables were excluded.

Table 3.4 Overview of the data coded by the second coder

Party	President	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Total
CD&V	Joachim Coens	4 (/20)	8 (/59)	1 (/7)	13
Vooruit	Conner Rousseau	14 (/82)	1 (/2)	1 (/4)	16
Open Vld	Egbert Lachaert	9 (/50)	17 (/113)	3 (/12)	29
PVDA	Peter Mertens	15 (/89)	11 (/59)	3 (/22)	29
Groen	Meyrem Almaci	4 (/21)	12 (/68)	1 (/5)	17
N-VA	Bart De Wever	4 (/33)	2 (/11)	4 (/30)	10
Vlaams Belang	Tom Van Grieken	18 (/119)	60 (/320)	3 (/16)	81
Total		68	111	16	195

To calculate the reliability, two measures are calculated. The first measure is the percent agreement. This is a measure that expresses to what extent both coders agree about the distinct variables within the data (Cho, 2008; Zhao et al., 2013). However, the percent agreement is a measure that is often criticised because it is overly simple and does not account for agreement by chance. For this reason, it is considered “the most primitive” intercoder reliability measure (Cohen, 1960, p. 38). The second measure is Krippendorff’s α (Alpha). This measure also accounts for agreement by chance, and is therefore more suited to calculate the reliability (Zhao et al., 2013). In order to be acceptable, Krippendorff’s α should be .67 or higher. However, Zhao, Liu and Deng (2013) explain that Krippendorff’s α “systematically rewards smaller samples” (p. 38). For this reason, it is possible that with a sample size of 195, it is difficult to reach acceptable outcomes. Both the percent agreement and Krippendorff’s α of each variable are presented in table 3.5.

Table 3.5 Reliability analysis

Variable	Percent agreement	Krippendorff’s α
Jargon	93.8	0.30
Ethos	81.0	-0.05
Pathos	64.6	0.30
Logos	81.0	0.04
Soundbites	92.8	0.46
Propagating ideology	67.2	0.35
Mobilising public opinion	95.4	0.38
Agenda setting	84.1	0.03
Criticising others	85.1	0.70
Personalising politics	96.4	0.57
Self-promoting	74.4	0.45
Jumping on the bandwagon	89.7	0.69

Starting with the interpretation of the percent agreement of each variable, it should be noted that this measure should be above 80.0% to be accepted as reliable (Kassarjian, 1977). When

inspecting each variable, it becomes clear that this is the case for all variables except three: *pathos*, *propagating ideology* and *self-promoting*. Here, it can be concluded that there might be an issue with the phrasing of the respective questions in the codebook. Therefore, conclusions should be drawn with careful attention for these variables. Because the percent agreement is often criticised for not accounting for agreement by chance, it is necessary to also look at Krippendorff's α .

Krippendorff's α should be .67 or higher for each variable in order to be reliable. In the table above, it can be clearly observed that this is not the case. More specifically, the only two variables that do meet this criterium are *criticising others* and *jumping on the bandwagon*. One explanation for these low values is what Zhao, Liu and Deng (2013) explain to be one of the main paradoxes about Krippendorff's α . More specifically, they explain that the higher the sample size is, the higher the agreement by chance becomes, and thus the lower α will be. A second explanation is that the frequencies of the categories are unbalanced. For example, imagine 3.4% of the social media posts contain political jargon. Both coders may agree for 93.8% that jargon is absent, but if they disagree about when it is present, the codebook variable is not a reliable measure to identify whether or not jargon is present. While these arguments do explain why the Krippendorff's α are this low, it must be pointed out that these explanations do not justify these values. Nevertheless, it is decided to accept the low α values and proceed with the analysis because the percent agreements are sufficiently high.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, the results of the statistical analyses are presented. This is done in three parts. First, a description of the sample is provided. Secondly, the statistical analyses are presented which aim to provide an answer to the first subquestion, namely through which platforms are the various functions of politicians' online communication fulfilled? Thirdly, the statistical analysis aiming to answer the second subquestion are presented, namely to what extent does the length, use of language and vividness features, as well as social media engagement differ across the three social media platforms?

4.1 Sample description

Table 4.1 Frequencies of types of post per platform

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Instagram stories	Total
Original	399	137	96	151	783
Shared	5	444	-	69	518
Combination	10	51	-	1	62
Total	414	632	96	221	1363

As illustrated in table 4.1, 1363 social media posts were coded in total. Over the period of six weeks, Twitter posts seems to be the most popular format ($N = 632$). This high number can be explained due to the fact that this includes both original posts ($N = 137$), retweets ($N = 444$) and a combination of both, namely a retweet with an additional statement ($N = 51$). With 70.3% of the Twitter posts being retweets, it can be concluded that this is a very popular use of the platform. Next, with 414 Facebook posts, this seems to be the second most popular platform amongst politicians. In contrast to Twitter, original posts ($N = 399$) are the most occurring type, while shared posts ($N = 5$) and a combination of both ($N = 10$) are remarkably less popular on Facebook. Then, it can be observed that Instagram posts are highly underrepresented ($N = 96$) compared to the previous two types. All 96 are original posts, as the platform does not allow to directly share content of other users. However, because of the underrepresentation, it was decided to also include two weeks of Instagram stories in the dataset. Over this period of two weeks, which equals one third of the research period across the other platforms, 221 Instagram stories were posted. Therefore, it can be concluded that this format is equally popular as Twitter posts. Amongst these Instagram stories, 151 were original stories, 69 were shared and 1 was a combination of both.

However, as table 4.2 suggests, differences exist in the frequencies with which these platforms are used, depending on the individual politicians. Therefore, it is important to note that, for example, Instagram stories are not equally popular amongst all politicians as both Meyrem Almaci and Bart De Wever did not post a single Instagram story over this period of time. On that note, it can also be

observed that Conner Rousseau mostly uses Facebook ($N = 82$) and Instagram stories ($N = 48$), while he barely posted on Twitter ($N = 2$) and Instagram ($N = 4$). Furthermore, it can be observed that Tom Van Grieken is the most active across all platforms ($N = 486$), which accounts for 35.7% of the total dataset. Moreover, Bart De Wever seems to be the least active across all platforms ($N = 74$), accounting for only 5.4% of the dataset. From this, it can be concluded that these differences in social media use and frequencies exist because of the individual choices of the politicians. For this reason, these differences will also be given further attention in the following subchapter.

Table 4.2 Frequencies of individual politicians' posts per platform

Party	President	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Instagram stories	Total
CD&V	Joachim Coens	20	59	7	48	134
Vooruit	Conner Rousseau	82	2	4	48	136
Open Vld	Egbert Lachaert	50	113	12	80	255
PVDA	Peter Mertens	89	59	22	14	184
Groen	Meyrem Almaci	21	68	5	0	94
N-VA	Bart De Wever	33	11	30	0	74
Vlaams Belang	Tom Van Grieken	119	320	16	31	486
Total	Total	414	632	96	221	1363

4.2 Why politicians use different platforms

This section aims to answer the question: through which platforms are the various functions of politicians' online communication fulfilled? Looking at the seven different functions of politicians' social media use, it can be observed that some functions occur more than others. With 41.0% of the posts aiming to promote themselves, this is the most popular function amongst them. Secondly, 37.1% of the posts contained criticism and thirdly, 27.4% of the posts aimed to propagate ideology. Then, 13.8% of the posts were posted to jump on the bandwagon; 10.8% contain political personalisation; 9.8% of the posts aimed to place a particular topic on the (political) agenda; and 2.5% aimed to mobilise the public.

In order to identify the differences between the functions fulfilled through each platform, several analyses of variance (ANOVAs) are performed. This is a research technique to determine whether or not there are statistically significant differences between the scores of a dependent variable of different groups (Pallant, 2016). More specifically, the dependent variable each time is one of the seven functions of politicians' social media use, while the independent variable, also known as the grouping variable, is the platform. In this way, differences are determined between the specific functions for Facebook posts, Twitter posts, Instagram posts and Instagram stories. Various significant differences are found and are sorted in this chapter according to the size of the effect. Table 4.3 provides an overview with the group means and other descriptive statistics of these variables.

Table 4.3 Descriptive statistics of functions of social media use

	<i>M</i>				<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
	Face-book	Twitter	Instagram	Instagram stories				
Personalising politics	.12	.01	.32	.30	.11	.31	0*	1*
Criticising others	.30	.55	.16	.09	.37	.48	0*	1*
Jumping on the bandwagon	.19	.09	.32	.08	.14	.35	0*	1*
Agenda setting	.15	.10	.01	.02	.10	.30	0*	1*
Propagating ideology	.37	.26	.20	.18	.27	.45	0*	1*
Self-promoting	.37	.40	.30	.56	.41	.49	0*	1*
Mobilising the public	.05	.01	.02	.00	.03	.16	0*	1*

*Dichotomous variable: 0 = no, 1 = yes

First of all, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for the different platforms on the function *personalising politics*, which measures whether or not the politician provides a glimpse of their non-political private life, $F(3, 1351) = 74.98, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Twitter was less likely to be used for the personalisation of politics ($M = .01, SD = .08$) than Facebook ($M = .12, SD = .32, p < .001$), Instagram posts ($M = .32, SD = .47, p < .001$) and Instagram stories ($M = .30, SD = .46, p < .001$). Additionally, Facebook is less likely to be used for the personalisation of politics than Instagram posts ($M = .32, SD = .47, p < .001$) and Instagram stories ($M = .30, SD = .46, p < .001$). In other words, Instagram posts and stories are the two most popular features through which politicians present their private lives.

Secondly, the results of the ANOVA indicate a significant main effect for platforms on the function *criticising others*, $F(3, 1355) = 72.48, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Twitter was more likely to be used to voice criticism ($M = .55, SD = .50$) than Facebook ($M = .30, SD = .46, p < .001$), Instagram ($M = .16, SD = .37, p < .001$) and Instagram stories ($M = .09, SD = .28, p < .001$). Moreover, Facebook was more likely to be used to voice criticism than Instagram ($M = .16, SD = .37, p = .019$) and Instagram stories ($M = .09, SD = .28, p < .001$). Therefore, it can be concluded that voicing criticism mostly occurs on Twitter, followed by Facebook. A follow-up question was included to provide more insight into what or who was being criticised by the politician.

Table 4.4 Overview of actors being criticised per platform (in percentages)

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram posts	Instagram stories
Federal Government	25.4%	39.0%	26.7%	0.0%
Flemish Government	7.9%	25.3%	6.7%	0.0%
Other political parties	19.8%	12.5%	20.0%	0.0%
Politicians from other political parties	33.3%	29.1%	13.3%	10.5%
Non-political public figures	5.6%	4.4%	6.7%	10.5%
Media	6.4%	6.7%	6.7%	63.2%
Others	27.8%	20.1%	46.7%	15.8%

Table 4.4 illustrates the results to the following question: in the case that the social media post entails criticism towards others, towards whom is the criticism directed? Seven non-mutually exclusive options were provided: the Federal Government, the Flemish Government, other political parties, politicians from other political parties, non-political public figures, the media, and finally an option ‘others’, where the coder could insert their own observation. This category includes a range of different options, such as foreign politicians, large companies, specific groups of people, religion, etc. The results suggest that on Facebook, most criticism is directed towards politicians from other parties. On Twitter, most criticism is directed towards the Federal Government. In Instagram posts, most criticism is directed towards others. And in Instagram stories, most criticism is directed towards the media.

The third ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the function *jumping on the bandwagon*, which measured whether the politician aimed to join the (non-political) conversation, $F(3, 1356) = 19.28, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Instagram was more likely to be used to jump on the bandwagon ($M = .32, SD = .47$) than Facebook ($M = .19, SD = .40$), $p = .004$, Twitter ($M = .09, SD = .29$), $p < .001$, and Instagram stories ($M = .08, SD = .27$), $p < .001$. Additionally, Facebook ($M = .19, SD = .40$) was more likely to be used to jump on the bandwagon than Twitter ($M = .09, SD = .29$), $p < .001$, and Instagram stories ($M = .08, SD = .27$), $p < .001$. To conclude, when politicians jump on the bandwagon of joining the non-political conversation, they are most likely to use Instagram posts to do so, followed by Facebook posts.

The fourth ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the function of *agenda setting*, measuring whether or not the politician aimed to place a particular topic on the political agenda by calling upon other politicians to act or presenting a resolution themselves, $F(3, 1357) = 12.80, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Facebook was more likely to be used to set the agenda ($M = .15, SD = .36$), than Twitter ($M = .10, SD = .30$), $p = .023$, Instagram ($M = .01, SD = .10$), $p < .001$, and Instagram stories ($M = .02, SD = .15$), $p < .001$. Furthermore, Twitter ($M = .10, SD = .30$) was more likely to be used to set the agenda than Instagram ($M = .01, SD = .10$), $p = .025$ and Instagram stories ($M = .02, SD = .15$), $p = .003$. No significant difference was found between Instagram ($M = .01, SD = .10$) and Instagram stories ($M = .02, SD = .15$). In other

words, when politician aim to place a topic on the (political) agenda, they are most likely to use Facebook to do so, followed by Twitter.

Fifth, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the function *propagating ideology*, measuring whether or not the politician aims to spread a political argument, $F(3, 1355) = 10.70, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Facebook was more likely to be used to propagate the ideology ($M = .37, SD = .48$), than Twitter ($M = .26, SD = .44$), $p < .001$, Instagram ($M = .20, SD = .40$), $p = .004$, and Instagram stories ($M = .18, SD = .39$), $p < .001$. It can thus be concluded that the most popular platform to propagate the ideology is Facebook.

The sixth ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on *self-promotion*, measuring whether or not the politician aims to promote themselves by presenting their own achievements or requesting a like, share follow or vote, $F(3, 1356) = 9.80, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Instagram stories was more likely to be used to self-promote ($M = .56, SD = .50$), than Facebook ($M = .37, SD = .48$), $p < .001$, Twitter ($M = .40, SD = .49$), $p < .001$, and Instagram ($M = .30, SD = .46$), $p < .001$. In other words, while it seems that self-promotion occurs often across all platforms, Instagram stories tend to be the most popular platform to do so.

Finally, the results of the seventh ANOVA indicate a significant main effect for platforms on the function *mobilising the public*, measuring whether or not the politician aimed to convince the audience to take (political) action, $F(3, 1357) = 6.85, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Facebook was more likely to be used to mobilise the public ($M = .05, SD = .23$), than Twitter ($M = .01, SD = .12$), $p < .001$, and Instagram stories ($M = .00, SD = .07$), $p = .001$. To conclude, when politicians aim to mobilise the public through their social media, they are most likely to use Facebook to do so.

To conclude, for all seven functions, the various ANOVAs found significant differences between the different platforms. However, when inspecting the measures of partial eta squared (η^2) – which is the measure which indicates the size of the effect – it can be argued that this remains rather low for most variables. The two variables with the highest effect are *personalising politics* (14.3%) and *criticising others* (13.8%); but apart from these variables, the effect ranges from 1.5% to 4.1%. These percentages illustrate the amount of variance in the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variable. In other words, it suggests to what extent the platforms play a role in the emergence of certain functions. To explore a different area, again, seven ANOVAs were performed for each function, but this time with the individual politicians as the independent variable. In this way, the size of the effect can be compared with those of the previous seven ANOVAs. Table 4.5 provides an overview of this comparison.

Table 4.5 Comparison of ANOVAs of the functions per platform and per politician

	Platforms					Politicians				
	df between groups	df within groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2	df between groups	df within groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Personalisation of politics	3	1351	74.98	<.001	.14	6	1348	38.33	<.001	.15
Criticising others	3	1355	72.48	<.001	.14	6	1352	277.18	<.001	.50
Jumping on the bandwagon	3	1356	19.28	<.001	.04	6	1353	19.75	<.001	.08
Agenda setting	3	1357	12.80	<.001	.03	6	1354	14.14	<.001	.06
Propagating ideology	3	1355	10.70	<.001	.02	6	1352	17.30	<.001	.07
Self-promotion	3	1356	9.80	<.001	.02	6	1353	13.32	<.001	.06
Mobilising the public	3	1357	6.85	<.001	.02	6	1354	16.10	<.001	.07

When taking a closer look to the measures of partial eta squared of both ANOVAs, it can be observed that for each function, this measure is higher for the ANOVAs with politicians as the independent variable than for those with platforms as the independent variable. While it is the case for each function, the difference is especially remarkable for the function *criticising others*. Here, 13.8% of the variance in this function is explained by what platform was used, while 50.2% of the variance is explained by which politician posted the post. From this table, it can be concluded that, while indeed there are significant differences as a result from the platform being used, this analysis suggests that the choice of the individual politicians plays an even bigger role than what platform is used.

4.3 How politicians use different platforms

As the previous subsection pointed out, politicians use the different platforms for different purposes. However, why politicians use these different platforms is not the only difference that can be observed. This section goes deeper into how politicians use the platforms differently. The first aspect that is discussed is length, followed by the use of language, the use of vividness features, and finally social media engagement.

Length

Table 4.6 Descriptive statistics of length

	<i>M</i>			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram				
Length	301.18	147.71	225.34	209.88	355.50	0	6,426

Table 4.6 illustrates that the length of the posts ranged from 0 to 6426 characters, with an overall average of 209.88 ($SD = 355.50$). For this variable, 82 outliers were detected, but it was decided to keep these in the dataset because it can be meaningful to look at what platform or by which politician these outliers occurred. Instagram stories were excluded from this analysis as the amount of characters is overly challenging to define, due to the visual elements and spoken word typically used in Instagram stories.

Taking a closer look into the means per platform, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on *length*, $F(2, 1139) = 24.37$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Facebook posts were composed of more characters ($M = 301.18$, $SD = 555.21$) than Twitter posts ($M = 147.71$, $SD = 76.47$), $p < .001$. No significant difference was found between Instagram posts and both Facebook and Twitter posts. In short, this means that Facebook posts tend to be twice as long as Twitter posts on average. While it makes sense that Twitter posts are rather short due to their character limit, it shows that the absence of a character limit on Facebook is truly used to the politicians' advantage.

Language

When it comes to language, only 3.4% of all the social media posts contained political jargon. This means that the vast majority of social media posts made use of clear and easy-to-understand language. Further, the majority of the posts (62.7%) contained pathos-based language, which aims to persuade through the manipulation of the public's emotions. With this, pathos-based language was the most-used strategy of persuasion. Next, 24.6% of the posts contained ethos-based language, aiming to convince the public of the credibility of the author; and 21.2% of the posts contained logos-based language, making strategic use of logic or reason to convince the audience. In only 7.0% of the posts, the politician made use of soundbites.

Table 4.7 Descriptive statistics of language use variables

	<i>M</i>				<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Instagram stories				
Jargon	.05	.04	.02	.00	.03	.18	0*	1*
Ethos	.29	.23	.16	.25	.25	.43	0*	1*
Pathos	.76	.48	.92	.67	.63	.48	0*	1*
Logos	.22	.24	.13	.16	.21	.41	0*	1*
Soundbites	.09	.07	.12	.02	.07	.26	0*	1*

*Dichotomous variable: 0 = no, 1 = yes

Next, looking at the various language variables (see table 4.7), it can be seen that ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of *jargon*, $F(3, 1358) = 2.84, p = .037$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Facebook posts used more jargon ($M = .05, SD = .21$) than Instagram stories ($M = .00, SD = .07$), $p = .030$. While, indeed, jargon tends to appear more in Facebook posts than other platforms, it still occurs in very few cases.

Furthermore, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of *ethos-based language*, which aims to convince the public of the credibility of the author, $F(3, 1357) = 3.43, p = .017$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Facebook had more ethos-based language posts ($M = .29, SD = .46$) than Instagram ($M = .16, SD = .37$), $p = .027$. In other words, posts on Facebook tend to consist of more language aiming to convince the public of the credibility of the politician than other platforms.

Next, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of *pathos-based language*, which aims to persuade the audience through the manipulation of their emotions, $F(3, 1355) = 44.78, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Instagram had more pathos-based language posts ($M = .92, SD = .28$) than Facebook ($M = .76, SD = .43$), $p = .016$, Twitter ($M = .48, SD = .50$), $p < .001$ and Instagram stories ($M = .67, SD = .47$), $p < .001$. Additionally, Twitter was found to adopt significantly less pathos-based language ($M = .48, SD = .50$) than Facebook ($M = .76, SD = .43$), $p < .001$ and Instagram stories ($M = .67, SD = .47$), $p < .001$. To conclude, language aiming to persuade through the manipulation of the public's emotions appeared the most in Instagram posts and the least in Twitter posts.

Moreover, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of logos-based language, which tends to make strategic use of logic or reason to convince the audience, $F(3, 1356) = 3.45, p = .016$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Nevertheless, Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed no significant differences between the means of the platforms for the use of logos-based language.

Finally, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of soundbites or catchphrases, $F(3, 1358) = 4.73, p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Instagram stories used less soundbites ($M = .02, SD = .26$) than Facebook ($M = .09, SD = .28$), $p <$

.013 and Instagram ($M = .12$, $SD = .33$), $p = .005$. In short, Instagram stories made the least use of soundbites, which are typically short utterances including style elements such as metaphors and alliterations.

Vividness

In terms of the use of vividness features, table 4.8 shows that the amount of pictures ranged from 0 to 22, with an average of .68 ($SD = 1.23$). More specifically, 43.2% of the posts did not include any pictures. In this variable, 23 outliers were detected. Instead of deleting the outliers, it was decided to recode the variable into 0 not containing any pictures and 1 containing one or more pictures. Next, the amount of videos ranged from 0 to 5, with an average of .19 ($SD = .44$). Here, it was observed that 81.7% of the posts did not include any videos. Because this many posts did not include any video, every post that included one or more videos is technically an outlier. Therefore, it was decided not to delete these but to recode the variable into a dichotomous one where 0 means that the post does not contain any videos and 1 means that the post contains one or more videos. Finally, 19.7% of the posts included a hyperlink.

Table 4.8 Descriptive statistics of vividness features

	M^{**}				M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Instagram stories				
Photos	.68	.35	.82	.89	.68	1.23	0	22
Videos	.23	.18	.18	.11	.19	.44	0	5
Hyperlinks	.19	.29	.03	.01	.20	.40	0*	1*

*Dichotomous variable: 0 = no, 1 = yes
 ** Group means after recoding continuous variables into dichotomous variables

Looking closer at the differences between the platforms, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of *photos*, $F(3, 1359) = 108.37$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Twitter used less photos ($M = .35$, $SD = .48$) than Facebook ($M = .68$, $SD = .47$), $p < .001$, Instagram ($M = .82$, $SD = .38$), $p < .001$ and Instagram stories ($M = .89$, $SD = .32$), $p < .001$. Additionally, Facebook ($M = .68$, $SD = .47$) was found to use less photos than Instagram ($M = .82$, $SD = .38$), $p = .020$ and Instagram stories ($M = .89$, $SD = .32$), $p < .001$. In other words, Instagram posts and stories tends to make more use of pictures, which makes sense given that Instagram is an image-based platform. In contrast, Twitter posts made remarkably less use of pictures.

Next, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of *videos* $F(3, 1359) = 4.03$, $p = .007$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Facebook made more use of videos ($M = .23$, $SD = .42$) than Instagram stories ($M = .11$, $SD = .32$), $p = .003$.

Moreover, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of *hyperlinks*, $F(3, 1359) = 37.02$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Twitter used

more hyperlinks ($M = .29, SD = .46$) than Facebook ($M = .19, SD = .39$), $p < .001$, Instagram ($M = .03, SD = .18$), $p < .001$ and Instagram stories ($M = .01, SD = .10$), $p < .001$. Additionally, Facebook was found to use more hyperlinks ($M = .19, SD = .39$) than Instagram ($M = .03, SD = .18$), $p = .002$ and Instagram stories ($M = .01, SD = .10$), $p < .001$. In other words, hyperlinks were most popular to be used on Twitter, followed by Facebook.

Social media engagement

In terms of social media engagement, table 4.9 illustrates that the amount of likes ranged from 0 to 22,000, with an average of 1,294.07 ($SD = 2,507.96$). Important to note is that Instagram stories cannot be liked, and therefore were excluded in this analysis. Moreover, in this variable, 166 outliers were detected, which equals 14.5% of the dataset. Next, the amount of comments ranged from 0 to 6,100, with an average of 244.45 ($SD = 589.24$). Again, Instagram stories were excluded. In this variable, 174 outliers were detected, which equals 15.2% of the dataset. Then, the amount of shares ranged from 0 to 14,000, with an average of 129.39 ($SD = 530.39$). This data only includes the observations for Facebook and Twitter posts. In this variable, 138 outliers were detected, which equals 13.2% of the dataset. Finally, the amount of hashtags ranged from 0 to 11, with an average of .45 ($SD = 1.03$). In the case of hashtags, 60 outliers were detected. Because for each of these variables, the outliers made up a fair amount of the dataset, it was decided to keep them all as they could tell us more about which platform or which politician is most likely to have high social media engagement.

Table 4.9 Descriptive statistics of social media engagement variables

	<i>M</i>				<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
	Face- book	Twitte r	Insta- gram	Insta- gram stories				
Likes	2700.39	210.68	2361.58	-	1,294.07	2,507.96	0	22,000
Comments	604.46	31.04	96.83	-	244.45	589.24	0	6,100
Shares	247.71	51.88	-	-	129.39	530.39	1	14,000
Hashtags	.37	.56	1.03	.05	.45	1.03	0	11

*Dichotomous variable: 0 = no, 1 = yes

Inspecting closer how social media engagement varies across the different platforms, the first ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the amount of *likes*, $F(2, 1139) = 172.71$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .23$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Twitter posts received significantly less likes ($M = 210.68, SD = 489.41$) than Facebook ($M = 2700.39, SD = 3386.46$), $p < .001$ and Instagram ($M = 2361.58, SD = 2553.22$), $p < .001$. In other words, 23.3% of the variance in the likes is determined by the platform. This is a rather big effect and important finding. More specifically, Twitter posts tend to receive far less likes than both Facebook and Instagram posts.

Secondly, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the amount of *comments*, $F(2, 1139) = 154.48, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .21$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Facebook posts received significantly more comments ($M = 604.46, SD = 863.81$) than Twitter ($M = 31.04, SD = 54.64$), $p < .001$ and Instagram ($M = 96.83, SD = 129.09$), $p < .001$. In other words, 21.3% of the variance in the comments-variable is determined by the platform. More specifically, Facebook posts tend to generate the most comments. Thirdly, a t-test showed that Facebook has a significantly higher amount of shares ($M = 247.71, SD = 803.40$) than Twitter ($M = 51.88, SD = 168.02$), $t(436.77) = 4.89, p < .001$. To conclude, social media engagement in terms of likes, comments and shares is significantly higher on Facebook than any other platform.

Finally, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for platforms on the use of *hashtags*, $F(3, 1359) = 26.47, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Instagram posts used more hashtags ($M = 1.03, SD = 2.20$) than Facebook ($M = .37, SD = .91$), $p < .001$, Twitter ($M = .56, SD = .93$), $p < .001$ and Instagram stories ($M = .05, SD = .21$), $p < .001$. Additionally, Twitter was found to use more hashtags ($M = .56, SD = .93$) than Facebook ($M = .37, SD = .91$), $p = .014$. Moreover, Instagram stories was found to use significantly less hashtags ($M = .05, SD = .21$) than Facebook ($M = .37, SD = .91$), $p = .001$ and Twitter ($M = .56, SD = .93$), $p < .001$. In other words, hashtags were mostly used in Instagram posts, followed by Twitter, then Facebook and finally Instagram stories.

Similarly to the previous analyses placing the functions of social media use central, the choices of individual politicians should also be inspected for the variables measuring how they make use of social media. To do this, again, multiple ANOVAs are performed in order to compare the results of platforms as the independent variable with those when the individual politicians are used as the independent variable.

Table 4.10 Comparison of ANOVAs of length per platform and per politician

	Platform					Politician				
	df between groups	df within groups	F	p	Partial η^2	df between groups	df within groups	F	p	Partial η^2
Length	2	1139	24.37	< .001	.04	6	1135	15.52	< .001	.08

Table 4.10 illustrates the comparison of both ANOVAs for the variable *length*. The partial eta squared indicate the 4.1% of the variance in length is explained by what platform is being used, while 7.6% of the variance is explained by what politician posted the post. Here, it can be concluded that while indeed the platform plays a role in determining the length, the choices of the individual politicians play an even bigger role.

Table 4.11 Comparison of ANOVAs of language variables per platform and per politician

	Platform					Politician				
	df between groups	df within groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2	df between groups	df within groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Jargon	3	1358	2.84	.037	.01	6	1355	1.78	.100	.01
Ethos	3	1357	3.43	.017	.01	6	1354	18.53	<.001	.08
Pathos	3	1355	44.78	<.001	.09	6	1352	8.03	<.001	.03
Logos	3	1356	3.45	.016	.01	6	1353	15.58	<.001	.07
Soundbites	3	1358	4.73	.003	.01	6	1355	5.27	<.001	.02

Table 4.11 shows the comparison of both analyses for the language variables. First of all, it should be noted that all the analyses are significant, except for the one of jargon determined by the politician. Here, the platform is thus a better way of explaining the variance in jargon being used, although it only explains 0.6% of the variance. For the remainder of the variables, the results are divided. While ethos-based language and logos-based language can be better explained by which politician posted the post, the use of pathos-based language and soundbites is better explained by which platform is being used. Nevertheless, for all language variables, the measures of partial eta squared are below 10.0%, which indicates that both the platforms and the politicians have play a rather small role in what language is being used.

Table 4.12 Comparison of ANOVAs of vividness variables per platform and per politician

	Platform					Politician				
	df between groups	df within groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2	df between groups	df within groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Photos	3	1359	108.37	<.001	.19	6	1356	26.75	<.001	.11
Videos	3	1359	4.03	.007	.01	6	1356	16.01	<.001	.07
Hyperlinks	3	1359	37.02	<.001	.08	6	1356	13.92	<.001	.06

Next, table 4.12 provides the results of the analyses for the vividness variable. Again, the results are divided. While the platform is a better way of explaining the variance in the use of photos (19.3%) and the use of hyperlinks (7.6%), the use of videos is clearly better explained by the individual choices of the politicians (6.6%).

Table 4.13 Comparison of ANOVAs of social media engagement variables per platform and per politician

	Platform					Politician				
	df between groups	df within groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2	df between groups	df within groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Likes	2	1139	172.71	<.001	.23	6	1135	58.05	<.001	.24
Comments	2	1139	154.48	<.001	.21	6	1135	34.26	<.001	.15
Hashtags	3	1359	26.47	<.001	.06	6	1356	35.00	<.001	.13

Finally, table 4.13 illustrates the results of the analyses for the social media engagement variables. Here, it can be observed that both factors explain approximately the same amount of variance in the amount of likes. In the case of the amount of comments, the platform is a better way of explaining the variance (21.3%). In contrast, for the use of hashtags, the individual politician is clearly a better way of explaining the variance (13.4%). Moreover, the measures of partial eta squared for these social media engagement variables are rather high in general, meaning that both factors do a fair job in explaining the variance in social media engagement.

To conclude, while in the analysis applied to the functions of social media use, the measures of partial eta squared were consistently higher for individual politicians as the independent variable, the differences in this analysis are not as explicit. For this reason, this comparative analysis suggests that both platforms and individual politicians have a meaningful impact on how and why politicians make use of social media.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Driven by technological development, political communication has changed remarkably throughout the years (Swart et al., 2018). Particularly the emergence of social media have highly facilitated the communication between politicians and the electorate (Schwanholz & Graham, 2018). While a great amount of scientific research has aimed to capture the social media behaviour of politicians, this study aims to add a comparative perspective by focussing on three different social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Moreover, previous studies tended to focus on politicians' social media behaviour in the electoral context, thereby ignoring the day-to-day political communication. This research, however, focuses on the everyday, non-electoral context of politicians' communication.

The central research question of this thesis is: how do politicians employ the different social media platforms in their everyday political communication? To answer this question, two subquestions have been formulated. First, through which platforms are the various functions of politicians' online communication fulfilled? Second, to what extent does the length, use of language and vividness features, as well as social media engagement, differ across the three social media platforms? To answer these questions, a quantitative content analysis has been conducted of 1363 social media posts, posted by the Flemish party presidents across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

5.1 Summary of results

How do politicians employ the different social media platforms in their everyday political communication? First of all, it should be noted that the most occurring function across all the platforms was self-promotion. This was followed by criticising others, propagating ideology, personalising politics and jumping on the bandwagon. The two least occurring functions were mobilising the public and agenda setting. Moreover, the quantitative content analysis has revealed various significant differences between the platforms. This subchapter will provide the conclusions of each platform individually.

5.1.1 Facebook

Facebook is without a doubt the most popular platform amongst the Flemish party presidents. While it is not the most represented platform in the dataset, it is clear that Facebook – in contrast to any other platform – is in fact actively used by all of the politicians that were included in this study. Moreover, 96.4% of the Facebook posts were original posts, meaning that the vast majority of the posts on this platform is not simply shared by other users, but the politician (or their communication manager) actually made the effort to post original content.

In terms of the functions of social media use that were observed throughout the Facebook posts, it can be concluded that, with 36.7% of the Facebook posts aiming to spread their political

arguments, propagating ideology is the most occurring function on this platform. While the platform is also often used for self-promotion (36.7%), this function emerges even more on Twitter and Instagram stories. Next, with 30.4% of the posts aiming to voice criticism, this is also one of the most popular uses of the platform. With 19.3% of the posts aiming to jump on the bandwagon, Facebook is, after Instagram posts, the second most used platform to do so. Furthermore, with 15.5% of the posts aiming to place a particular topic on the political agenda, agenda setting emerges the most on Facebook. Finally, even though only 5.3% of the Facebook posts aimed to encourage the audience to take (political) action, political mobilisation occurred the most on this platform.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that Facebook posts tend to be the longest of all. More specifically, a Facebook post tends to be – on average – even twice as long as a Twitter post. Next, while generally, political jargon is not used a lot throughout the social media posts of politicians, it occurs most on Facebook (4.6%). Also, it is the platform where ethos-based language which aims to convince the public of the credibility of the author, occurs the most (29.2%). Finally, in terms of social media engagement, it is remarkable that Facebook posts score significantly higher on the amount of likes, comments and shares than any other platform.

5.1.2 Twitter

Moving on to Twitter, it can be observed that Twitter posts were the most represented type in the dataset. While indeed, the platform seems to be very popular amongst most politicians, there is one politician, Conner Rousseau, who barely made use of this. Moreover, with 70.3% of the Twitter posts in the dataset being retweets, it can be stated that retweeting is a very popular use amongst politicians. This can be explained due to the ease with which one can spread a certain message in this way, simply by sharing someone else's.

With 54.8% of the Twitter posts expressing criticism towards others, this function is occurring the most on this platform. Further, 40.1% of the Twitter posts aimed to promote themselves. While this is indeed a popular use of this platform, self-promotion occurs even more in Instagram stories. Next, 10.2% of the posts aimed to place a particular topic on the political agenda. What stands out specifically is that political personalisation only occurs in 0.6% of the Twitter posts. With this, Twitter is the platform that is least used for political personalisation.

Furthermore, as Twitter is a platform typically used to spread simple, short and strong messages of text, it was found that photos were used the least on this platform, namely in 65.3% of the posts, no pictures were used. In contrast, hyperlinks were used the most, namely in 29.3% of the posts. Another remarkable finding is that the amount of likes are significantly lower on Twitter than on other platforms.

5.1.3 Instagram

Continuing with Instagram, it should be noted that here the distinction is made between Instagram posts and Instagram stories. While Instagram posts seemed to be the least occurring type of all, Instagram stories were very popular. However, it was observed that Instagram posts are not actively used by one of the politicians (Conner Rousseau), while Instagram stories were not used at all by two of the politicians (Meyrem Almaci and Bart De Wever). The first observation is that both posts and stories are used a lot for political personalisation, with 32.3% of Instagram posts and 29.8% of Instagram stories. Next, with 32.3% of the Instagram posts jumping on the bandwagon, this functions occurs the most in Instagram posts. Moreover, 30.2% of the Instagram posts aimed to promote themselves. While this number is indeed high, self-promotion is occurring the most in Instagram stories, with no less than 56.1% of the stories fulfilling this function.

Finally, Instagram posts used the most pathos-based language aiming to convince the audience by manipulating their emotions, namely in 91.7% of the posts. Moreover, Instagram stories made the least use of soundbites, namely in only 2.3% of the stories. Besides, there were found no outstanding differences when it comes to the length of Instagram posts and the use of vividness features.

To sum it all up, Facebook is often used by politicians to propagate the ideology. Most posts are original, meaning that the politician made an effort to write these. Typically, they tend to be rather long and contain more ethos-based language aiming to convince the audience of the politician's credibility than other platforms. In many cases, Facebook posts are made vivid through the use of photos or videos. Moreover, social media engagement is remarkably higher than on the other platforms. Twitter on the other hand, is mostly used for voicing criticism towards others; whilst (almost) never for political personalisation. Posts are made vivid through the inclusion of hyperlinks. Though, social media engagement on Twitter tends to be rather low. Finally, Instagram is a popular platform for the personalisation of politics and self-promotion. Instagram posts are also popular to join the non-political conversation. Moreover, they tend to use more pathos-based language aiming to convince the audience by triggering their emotions than other platforms. Finally, both Instagram posts and stories are naturally made vivid through the inclusion of pictures and videos.

5.2 Discussion

As the numbers of social media use in Belgium indeed indicated (Tankovska, 2021c), Facebook appears to be the most popular social media platform in Belgium. Despite the fact that it is not the platform that is the most represented in the dataset, it was observed that Facebook is being actively used by all the Flemish party presidents. This observation confirms the claim of Shannon McGregor and Regina Lawrence (2019) that "Facebook is for everything and everybody" (p. 59), as it is considered a vehicle aimed towards reaching a large audience. Moreover, Facebook is also the platform where the social media engagement is the highest. Although Facebook posts received

significantly more likes than Twitter posts, no significant difference was found with the likes on Instagram posts. However, they also generate significantly more comments and shares than posts on both other social media platforms. Given the fact that likes tend to require less effort from the user than writing a comment or sharing a post (Muñoz & Towner, 2017), the significant difference in the amount of comments and shares reflects the higher social media engagement on Facebook in a better way.

The latter conclusion contradicts Elliott (2015, as cited in Muñoz & Towner, 2017), who concluded that social media engagement on Instagram is particularly higher than on both Facebook and Twitter. However, our results clearly indicate that Facebook scores significantly higher on both likes, comments and shares. Therefore, it must be taken into account that Instagram stories were excluded from this analysis because the affordances of the platform do not allow us to retrieve this kind of data. It is thus possible that while Facebook allows these kind of data to be retrieved, Instagram may be more effective when it comes to social media engagement, but it happens under the radar. Namely, Instagram allows users to see the reach of their stories, while it also enables users to directly respond to other people's stories by means of a private message. These responses are not visible to other users and thus remain confidential between the sender and receiver. While this is a potential explanation, it is extremely hard to research this. A second explanation is that in this study, the amount of likes, comments and shares do not account for the amount of followers. In this regard, it is possible that there are simply more Flemish Facebook users than Instagram users. If the amount of likes, comments and shares would be divided by the amount of followers on the respective account on that moment in time, this number would tell us more about the engagement rate of the followers on that platform. For these reasons, it is possible that the current study underestimates the social media engagement on Instagram.

Furthermore, mobilising the public, or in other words convincing the audience to take some sort of political action such as signing a petition or taking part in a protest, is a function that was repeatedly reported important in the previous scientific literature (Mahapatra & Plagemann, 2019; Stier et al., 2018). However, in this study, it was found to be one of the least popular functions of social media use. Even though the function emerged the most on Facebook (5.3% of the posts), it can be concluded that this is still quite rare. One possible explanation could be ascribed to the fact that previous studies were contextualised in the electoral context, while the current study takes place in everyday politics. For this reason, it is possible that in times of elections, politicians are more likely to mobilise the public than in everyday politics. While this is a possible explanation, it must be emphasised that this research does not put forward any evidence to confirm this.

Next, Bronstein, Aharony and Bar-Ilan (2018) have argued that Facebook's popularity has allowed politicians to reinvent political communication, by presenting themselves as "approachable 'normal people' with family lives and hobbies that audiences can identify with" (p. 564). In other words, they suggest that Facebook is often used for political personalisation. While the results of this

study indeed show that 11.6% of the Facebook posts contains political personalisation, this function truly blooms on Instagram, in both posts (32.2%) and stories (29.8%). The latter finding confirms the findings of Shannon McGregor and Regina Lawrence (2019). In contrast, our results show that Twitter is barely ever used for political personalisation (0.6%), which contradicts the findings of a study by Graham, Jackson and Broersma (2018). They found that politicians use Twitter in an informal and intimate manner through the use of interactive small talk with their audience, arguing that it helps creating a balance between the politician as a person and “the increasingly stage-managed nature of much political campaigning” (p. 153). The results of this study indicate clearly that, today, Instagram is the platform used to fulfil this function

Furthermore, Shannon McGregor and Regina Lawrence (2019) found that Twitter was mainly used to communicate to the press. The findings of this study cannot directly confirm nor contradict this. But, this study did find that Twitter was mostly used to express criticism on the one hand, and promote themselves on the other. Pushing the interpretation of the results further, it must be noted that Twitter, in general, tends to score rather low on social media engagement. For this reason, the following question arises: if Twitter scores this low on social media engagement, why do politicians still make use of this platform to voice criticism and promote themselves? An answer to this question could indeed be what Shannon McGregor and Regina Lawrence (2019) suggest, namely that amongst the audience that is active on Twitter, is a lot of press. For this reason, it could be that the interaction or social media engagement is not very relevant.

In terms of language, Samuel-Azran, Yarchi and Wolfsfeld (2015) found that ethos is the most prevailing strategy. In other words, they argue that politicians mostly use language aimed at convincing the audience of their credibility. The results of this study, however, contradict this. This study found that pathos is by far the most prevailing strategy when it comes to persuasion language. An explanation to this can be that pathos is a very broad variable, involving all the language that aims to trigger some emotions, whether these are positive or negative. Nevertheless, it was also found that ethos-based language occurred significantly more on Facebook than the other platforms. This can be explained by the fact that most Facebook posts are original, and that the effort put in the post thereby reflects their credibility.

To add to this, the comparative aspect of the current research has revealed significant differences in both how and why the different platforms are used by politicians. Therefore, it can be concluded that indeed each platform serves a certain purpose for the politician and it is useful to include each platform in the politicians’ communication strategy. Facebook is used for spreading ideology, Twitter for voicing criticism and self-promotion, and Instagram for portraying their private lives. To say it with the words of David Taras (2019): “The social media game has to be played on a number of different chess boards at the same time” (p. 10) and the Flemish politicians have clearly understood this. Moreover, the differences in content appearing on each platform can also be explained by the target audience of the respective content. For example, the average Instagram user is

younger than the average Facebook user in Belgium, and Twitter is more used by public figures than average citizens. For this reason, it is possible that politicians adapt their content to these audiences.

While indeed the analysis has illustrated that the content is – to certain extent – shaped by the platform, further analysis also shows that the choices of individual politicians play an even more important role when it comes to why they make use of social media. While this study did not go deeper into the individual differences between the politicians, this is an important note to make. This observation suggests that, despite the content being shaped by the platforms, each politician also has their own purposes to achieve through these platforms. As a consequence, their content will reflect these rather than the functions for which the platforms may be intended. Further research can help in understanding the individual role of politicians in this regard.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

While this research has identified significant differences between how and why different social media platforms are used by politicians, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The first limitation is methodological. While quantitative content analysis provides various opportunities from which this research benefits, there are also several limitations to this approach. Even though the seven functions outlined in this study were inspired by the literature and further complemented, a more meaningful approach could be to fully determine the function applying qualitative content analysis. This is also a systematic approach for data reduction, but it is far more flexible than the quantitative variant (Schreier, 2013). In this way, it allows the researcher to fully describe the main purpose of the posts. Furthermore, despite the large sample size, only one politician is included per party. While the party presidents indeed play an important role in representing their party (Deschouwer, 2009), it could be worthy to include more politicians who are active on various levels of policymaking. In this way, it can be researched whether patterns emerge between the political parties.

The next limitation, and perhaps the most problematic one, is the reliability of the codebook. While the percent agreements were – for most variables – sufficiently high to be accepted, the low Krippendorff's α values suggest that the codebook could be further improved. For this reason, at this point doubts exist with regard to the reliability of the codebook. This occurred despite the fact that most of the measures were retrieved from earlier studies, and further complemented with instructions and examples. In future research, the codebook should be further specified and a thorough pretest of the codebook can help increasing its reliability.

As for future research, this study already touched upon the differences caused by the choices of individual politicians. In many cases, the individual politicians were a better way of explaining the variance in certain variables of social media use than what platform was being used. For this reason, future research could focus on these differences, keeping in mind the conclusions of this research with regard to the role of the platforms. Furthermore, in doing so, other research methodologies might bring a new perspective into the field. While quantitative content analysis is an often-used method in

studying people's social media behaviour, qualitative in-depth interviews with politicians and/or their social media managers might bring new insights to the front. Moreover, this study only included one politician per party. Future research could expand the focus to multiple politicians, thereby looking for patterns in their use of social media. To conclude, this research has identified meaningful differences in the way different politicians make use of the various social media platforms available. While it was found that, indeed, the platforms determine the type of content being spread to some extent, it can be concluded that the choices of individual politicians play an even bigger role in this regard.

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Appendix A: Codebook

Post ID

Insert post ID

Length

How many characters were used in the post?

Exclude spaces.

Platform

On which platform was the post posted?

- Facebook (1)
- Twitter (2)
- Instagram (3)

Author

Who posted the post?

- Tom Van Grieken (VB) (1)
- Bart De Wever (N-VA) (2)
- Egbert Lachaert (Open Vld) (3)
- Joachim Coens (CD&V) (4)
- Conner Rousseau (Vooruit) (5)
- Meyrem Almaci (Groen) (6)
- Peter Mertens (PVDA) (7)

Type

What is the type of the post?

- Original (1)
- Shared (*e.g. repost, retweet ...*) (2)
- Combination (*e.g. report, retweet ... with additional statement*) (3)
- Unclear (99)

PART I: SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Likes

How many likes does the social media post have?

Comments

How many comments does the social media post have?

Shares

How many times is the social media post shared?

PART II: LANGUAGE

Jargon

Does the author of the post use at least two words or one sentence political jargon?

Political jargon: particular terminology used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Ethos

Is the post designed to convince readers of the politicians' credibility or character, or establish a specific image of the politician?

This can be done by recalling their accomplishments, life story or plans for the future.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Pathos

Is the post designed to trigger the emotions of readers, such as fear, anger and empathy?

This can be done through the use of humour, cynicism, fear, sympathy or anger.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Logos

Is the post designed to convince the readers using logic and reason?

These typically present facts and figures to support the candidate's claims, discuss party ideology, attempt to counter opponents' allegations using statistics, etc.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Soundbites

Does the author make use of short utterances such as catchphrases including style elements such as metaphors and alliterations?

This can be done through for example the use of expressions, slogans or hashtags.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Hashtags

How many hashtags does the author use in the post?

PART III: VIVIDNESS

Images

How many photos does the social media post include?

Videos

How many videos does the social media post include?

Hyperlink

Does the social media post include a hyperlink to another post, article, website, etc.?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

PART IV: FUNCTIONS

Propogating ideology

Does the post aim to spread a political argument?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Agenda setting

Does the post aim to place a particular topic on the (political) agenda?

This can be done by calling upon politicians to act or informing the public about a new resolution.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Mobilising the public

Does the post aim to encourage the audience to take (political) action?

This can be done through, for example, sharing content, signing a petition or taking part in a protest.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Jumping on the bandwagon

With this post, does the author aim to jump on the bandwagon by joining a conversation for the sake of joining the conversation?

This occurs when a politician wants to voice their view or opinion on a certain event, incident or holiday taking place.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Self-promoting

Does the politician aim to promote themselves with this post?

Indicators of self-promotion include, but are not limited to, presenting their own achievements, a request for a like, follow or vote.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Personalising politics

Does the post include a portrayal of the politicians' non-political private life?

These include day-to-day activities, family, friends, habits, hobbies, etc.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

Criticising others

Does this post entails criticism towards others?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- Unclear (99)

If yes, towards whom is the criticism directed?

Multiple options are possible.

- Federal Government (1)
- Flemish Government (2)
- Other political parties: ... (3)

- Politician(s) from other parties: ... (4)

- (Non-political) public figures: ... (5)

- Media (6)
- Others: ... (7)
