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The Effect of Website Interactivity on Political Involvement

The Moderating Role of Political Cynicism

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Abstract. This study examines the extent to which interactive communication on political websites affects various forms of citizens' involvement in politics, and the moderating role of political cynicism in this relationship. Based on the outcomes of a laboratory experiment with a single-factor (interactivity: low vs. medium vs. high interactivity) between-subjects design, we found that interactive political websites have a positive effect on citizen involvement, and this effect is particularly present for websites with high levels of interactivity. We also demonstrate that interactivity effects are, to some extent, contingent on citizens' political cynicism. For higher levels of political cynicism, deviations in the level of interactivity make less of a difference in their impact on political involvement.

Keywords: interactivity, political involvement, political cynicism, experiment, websites

Digital media have altered the way citizens communicate about and participate in politics. Nowadays, citizens get political information from blogs and websites, and connect with political actors via social media. Through online media, politicians and parties also increasingly try to directly connect and engage with citizens. Thus, the Internet offers both citizens and politicians an *interactive* platform to communicate directly with one another, while bypassing gatekeepers (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). The use of online media has become common practice, especially during election times.

The interactive nature of digital media is mostly perceived as an inherently good thing. It has often been argued that online platforms activate citizens into political life (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Oh & Sundar, 2015). More importantly, adopting the online interactive communication possibilities was shown to have a small but positive impact on political involvement (see, e.g., Kruikemeier, 2014b; Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2012). This latter notion is especially important as it helps us to understand “*what* it is about mass media that is producing effect[s]” (Eveland, 2003, p. 396, emphasis added). Interactivity is the most distinct characteristic of online media (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003), and researchers realize that interactivity might play an important role in understanding why online media and its contents affect citizens (Spierings & Jacobs, 2014). Still, evidence showing that interactive use of online political platforms engages citizens remains limited (also for social media; Brewer et al., 2016) and the examination

of underlying mechanisms and conditional factors has been generally neglected. The current study addresses these gaps.

The first aim is to extend our knowledge on interactivity effects in the context of political communication by examining the impact on political involvement. In line with previous studies, we understand political involvement as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing political knowledge, political attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Aarts & Semetko, 2003). More specifically, we focus here on one attitudinal aspect (perceived responsiveness of politics) and one politically crucial intentional aspect (voting preference).

The second aim is to explore the theoretical explanation for interactivity effects, as it remained unclear *why* interactivity leads to increased political involvement. Previous research in related fields suggested flow (Van Noort, Voorveld, & Van Reijmersdal, 2012), perceived interactivity (e.g., Wu, 2005), and social presence (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005) as underlying mechanisms. This study extends this research by examining two processes that are more central to the field of political communication; feeling nearer to politics and arousal of political interest.

Third, evidence regarding the *conditional* impact of Internet use, in general, and interactivity, in particular, is scarce (Bucy & Tao, 2007). Therefore, the third aim of this study is to fill this void by examining for whom interactivity effects on political involvement occur. More specifically, we examine the moderating role of *political cynicism*. This characteristic is often used as a dependent variable when investigating communication effects (Elenbaas

& De Vreese, 2008), but was recently also shown to function as a moderator for media effects (Bos, Van der Brug, & De Vreese, 2013). By focusing on cynicism as a moderator, we can determine whether the Internet mainly engages those citizens who are less cynical and thus have more trust in their representatives (normalization thesis; Hirzalla, Van Zoonen, & De Ridder, 2011; Norris, 2000) or whether it is in particular an instrument to engage those who are more cynical toward politics. In sum, this study examines whether, how, and for whom interactivity on political websites leads to more political involvement.

Conceptualization and Effects

The opportunity for direct and interactive communication makes online media profoundly different from traditional media. Although content analyses have been conducted to show that interactivity is an important characteristic of online (political) communication (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Lilleker et al., 2011; Schweitzer, 2008; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006), little consensus exists about what interactivity precisely entails, and previous research has conceptualized interactivity in many different ways (for an overview, see Bucy & Tao, 2007). In the present study, we adopt the *structural approach* of interactivity.

The structural approach asserts that the degree of interactivity is reflected in the technological attributes that are included in the platform “which allows users to talk to other users, engage with or manipulate media, or influence the content, as the unit of measure” (Bucy & Tao, 2007, p. 651). Such attributes correspond closely with the often-applied conceptualization introduced by Liu and Shrum (2002; and frequently applied by more recent studies, see Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2011). They theorize that interactivity contains three important aspects: two-way communication (allows user to talk online to each other – reciprocal or interpersonal communication), synchronicity (receiving immediate feedback), and active control (customizing the content and jump from one location to another one – information selection, see also Bucy and Tao, 2007). Another important approach that builds on the two-way communication and synchronicity features, and matches the structural approach, is that of Stromer-Galley (2004). She argues that website interactivity can be divided into two distinct concepts (Stromer-Galley, 2004). The first concept, interactivity-as-product, relates to the technical features of a website. This focuses on the way users interact with the website, for instance by clicking on hyperlinks, filling out an online registration form, or watching a YouTube campaign video (which relates to the two-way communication component of interactivity). The second concept, interactivity-as-process, focuses on horizontal and vertical communication between citizens, and between citizens and politicians (which relates to the active control component of interactivity). Taking on the structural approach of interactivity and focusing on both

product and process features, we examine to what extent the level of interactive *attributes* in the medium (i.e., a political website) affects political involvement. Examples of these attributes are hyperlinks, comments and sharing functions, and mobilization features (see also Table B1 in Appendix B).

Turning to the effects of interactivity in (political) communication research generally shows positive effects on citizens. For instance, website interactivity leads to positive candidate evaluations, agreement with policy statements (Sundar et al., 2003), increased levels of political efficacy, positive attitude toward voting (Tedesco, 2007), increased recall, time spent on a website (Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005), positive feelings toward politics and increased political interest (Kruijemeier et al., 2013). Moreover, for social media it is demonstrated that politicians responding to voters' comments are evaluated positively (Utz, 2009), interactive communication on Twitter positively affects electoral support (Kruijemeier, 2014b), and interactivity on a candidates' Facebook page (comments and likes) leads to favorable perceptions and subsequently to more support for the candidate (Brewer et al., 2016).

Underlying Processes: Getting Closer?

Several studies have explored the process for interactivity effects and suggested multiple mediators. Within computer-mediated communication (CMC) research, it has often been argued that feeling closer or nearer to others (a communicating partner) in a computer-mediated environment explains positive interactivity effects on citizens (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Tanis, 2003). Closeness (also social presence) finds its origins in interpersonal communication literature and it basically entails “a sense of being together” in a computer-mediated environment (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 460). Thus, social presence increases when the mediated environment (and its features) mimics interpersonal communication. When a medium contains high levels of interactivity, which involves reciprocal communication and active control, it will engender higher levels of social presence, which in turn affects political involvement. More specifically, when social presence is operationalized as “perceived closeness” and “connectedness in mediated communication,” citizens are more positive about politics (Lee & Shin, 2012, p. 516). In this way, interactive communication functions as an information shortcut in the evaluation of politics (Brewer et al., 2016). Lee and Shin (2012) empirically tested this assumption and revealed that interactivity on Twitter leads to positive feelings of having a direct conversation with a politician (i.e., social presence) for people who usually avoid social interactions, which in turn had a positive effect on voting intentions. On the basis of the aforementioned studies, we expect that interactivity make citizens feel closer to politics (because interactivity creates intimacy), which in turn, positively affects citizens' involvement in politics.

Following previous work, we also expect that interactivity arouses citizens' political interest, and thereby increases political involvement in the longer run. An appealing website arouses political interest (Lupia & Philpot, 2005), and interactivity is a means to make a (political) website more appealing (Song & Bucy, 2007). Moreover, interactivity positively arouses citizens' political interest (Kruikemeier et al., 2013). These empirical findings are in line with others who argue that "[t]he promise of political interactivity lies in its capacity to promote . . . heightened level of interest and engagement while leaving the user with the overall impression that time online was constructively spent" (Song & Bucy, 2007, p. 48). Thus, we expect that higher levels of website interactivity arouses citizens' political interest, which may, in turn, increase political involvement. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Higher levels of interactivity engender higher levels of feeling closer to politics (i.e., nearer) and more interest in politics (i.e., arousal of political interest), and consequently, results in higher levels of political involvement (i.e., increased perceived responsiveness of politics and voting preferences).

The Role of Political Cynicism

Although it is often argued, and occasionally demonstrated, that interactivity effects are dependent on characteristics of the person who is using the interactive medium, the literature on interactivity largely neglected conditional effects. Scholars argue that individual differences are crucial in explaining the political effects of new media (Xenos & Moy, 2007). Especially with regard to the larger debate about reinforcing spirals and normalization effects, it is argued that online media positively influence and engage politically sophisticated citizens only (Avery, 2009; Norris, 2000). Calls have been made to study individual differences that affect interactivity, as it helps researchers to further understand and isolate interactivity effects on (political) involvement, but few attempts have been made (Bucy & Tao, 2007). Some researchers focused on the moderating role of personal traits (Lee & Shin, 2012), motivations, and affective state (Liu & Shrum, 2002), but individual differences related to political attitudes seem to be disregarded.

With respect to political attitudes, political cynicism is a serious threat to democracy (De Vreese, 2008), as scholars have often linked cynicism to a decrease in voter turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Political cynicism – which is a general mistrust toward (elected) politicians, parties, and the political system as a whole (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) – might play a crucial role in the acceptance and interpretation of (online) communication. In political communication literature, cynicism is often studied as an

outcome variable. For example, it is argued that certain media frames potentially increase levels of cynicism more than others (e.g., Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008). Recent research suggests, however, that political cynicism can also be studied as a personal characteristic and might act as a moderator of communication effects. An experimental study found that more cynical people are more susceptible to the effects of a populist communication strategy (Bos et al., 2013). The provided explanation is that the populist style better fits the predispositions about politics of cynical citizens (see also Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In a similar vein, more cynical citizens might be less receptive to higher levels of interactive communication and more resistant to the intended effects by the communicator, withstanding attempts to communicate with politicians. After all, it has been demonstrated that more politically cynical citizens are more negative toward campaigns and media (Pinkleton & Austin, 2002). "Those who are cynical of politics and disengaged will select themselves out of any potential influence" because they mistrust media and political content (Avery, 2009, p. 413), except when it is framed in a very particular anti-elitist manner (Bos et al., 2013). Cynics might regard interactivity as insincere, and this could instigate resistance toward the interactive communication, which will weaken the effects of interactive communication on political involvement. Thus, we expect that (see also Figure 1):

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The mediated effect of interactivity on political involvement is contingent on political cynicism, such that the effects of interactivity will be stronger for less cynical individuals and weaker for more cynical individuals.

Method

Participants and Research Design

In order to test our hypotheses, we rely on a laboratory experiment with a single-factor (interactivity: low vs. medium vs. high) between-subjects design, in which participants interacted with a website from the Dutch political party D66, a social-liberal party that is in the middle of the political spectrum. Participants were recruited using flyers in university buildings and online advertisements on the student website of the University of Amsterdam. In total, 197 respondents participated in our study. Five participants were not included because of technical problems (i.e., they either deleted the website without seeing it¹, looked up the actual, not manipulated, website of D66, or did not fill out all questions in the evaluation form). Thus, 192 students (female = 76.0%, $M_{age} = 22.36$, $SD_{age} = 3.26$) are included in our study and each condition contained 64 respondents.

¹ Participants accessed the website via a link in the questionnaire. However, in rare cases they opened the website and immediately closed the website. In that way, they were not actually exposed to the website, or in other words, they could not be affected by it.

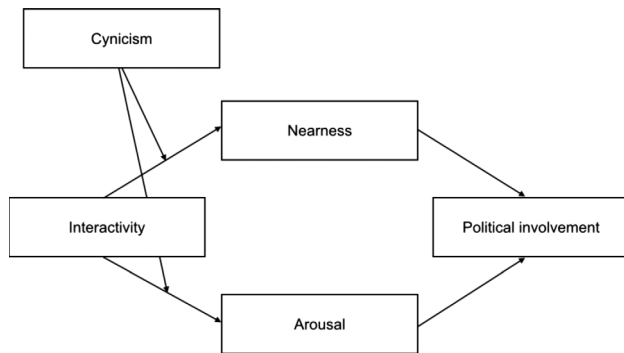


Figure 1. Depiction of the hypothesized relations.

Stimulus Materials

We used the actual website of D66 as a basis to develop the stimuli materials. We first downloaded the website of D66 and deleted information and added texts that were specifically developed for this study. In this way, we could realistically manipulate the level of interactivity. The levels of interactivity (i.e., low, medium, and high) were manipulated based on previous research and are in line with current studies (Oh & Sundar, 2015), and involved features related to both interactivity-as-process (communication involving human interaction, such as user comments and tweets) and interactivity-as-product (focusing on users' interactions with technology, such as inclusion of share features and hyperlinks, and mobilization features such as donating button; see, e.g., Stromer-Galley, 2004). Only the number of interactivity features differed between conditions, the textual content was kept constant (see Appendix A for an example of the stimulus materials and an overview of the interactivity features in the different conditions).

Procedure

Upon arrival in the laboratory, students received basic instructions and filled out an online questionnaire. The questionnaire started with questions about participants' political background. Next, participants were asked to visit a website. The website was embedded in the online questionnaire and participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions. Participants were asked to evaluate the usability of the website, while visiting the website, using a paper-and-pencil evaluation form. This form contained questions about the clarity and readability of the information and the use of mobilization features. This evaluation form was an instrument to make sure that respondents actually interacted with the website, because pilot studies showed that respondents do not browse the (complete) website in a laboratory setting. Additionally, mouse-tracking software (i.e., Mouseflow) confirmed that in each condition respondents interacted with the website. However, because these data were aggregated, it was not possible to link them to individual participants, and we could only analyze whether or not – in general – the interactive

features were used. These checks on the interaction with the website are in our opinion an important improvement compared with previous interactivity effect studies.

After interacting with the website, respondents answered questions about their political feelings of nearness to politics, arousal of political interest, perceived responsiveness, and voting preferences. Lastly, respondents' voting intention for D66 and demographics were assessed. Finally, respondents were debriefed and thanked for their participation. They received €5 or participation credits for their participation.

Manipulation Check

In a pilot study ($N = 26$), we measured whether the three conditions varied in terms of perceived interactivity. This was measured in line with previous research, with 12 items on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) that related to the three dimensions of interactivity: two-way communication, synchronicity, and active control (i.e., based on Voorveld et al., 2011; Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.22$). Analyses of variance showed that the levels of interactivity were successfully manipulated ($M_{\text{low interactivity}} = 2.46$, $SD = .70$; $M_{\text{medium interactivity}} = 3.39$, $SD = .38$; $M_{\text{high interactivity}} = 4.85$, $SD = 1.06$), $F(2, 23) = 21.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .654$.

Variables

To examine how interactivity affects political involvement, we included two different variables to tap into political involvement: perceived responsiveness of politics (based on Kruijemeier et al., 2013) and vote preference (Lee & Shin, 2012). These variables were considered separately in the statistical analyses.

Perceived responsiveness of politics entails the belief that it is easy to come in contact with politics. The construct originates from the perceived interactivity and human voice literature (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; McMillan & Hwang, 2002; Voorveld et al., 2011). It was assessed using four items (i.e., "Politics is open for opinions of citizens," "Politics responds to citizens," "Politics is prepared to listen," "It is easy to come into contact with politics"). Conceptually, this construct is closely related to external political efficacy (e.g., Aarts & Semetko, 2003) and measurement is also comparable, although efficacy is more abstract and institutional in nature, relying on items such as "People like me have no say over who gets to be president" (Kenski & Stroud, 2006) or "People like me have absolutely no influence on governmental policy" (Aarts & Semetko, 2003). The items were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.25$).

Voting preference captures the intention to vote for the party or party leader mentioned in the stimulus material (Lee & Shin, 2012), and was measured using two items (i.e., "Are you more inclined to vote for D66 [party] in the next elections?" and "Are you more inclined to vote

for Alexander Pechtold [party leader] in the next elections?" measured on a 7-point scale; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Again, a mean score was used to measure voting preference (inter-item correlation = .96, $p < .001$, $M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.34$).

To gauge the mediating effect, we measured feelings of nearness and arousal of political interest. *Nearness* entails the feeling that one feels closer to politics, finds its origins in social presence theory (Biocca et al., 2003; Fortin & Dholakia, 2005; Short et al., 1976), and was gauged using four items (i.e., "The website decreases the distance between citizens and politics," "The website gives me the feeling I am closer to politics," "The website gives me the feeling that politicians are concerned about citizens," and "The website ensures a connection between politics and citizens"). The items were also measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.33$).

Arousal of political interest entails the perceived arousal of political interest and was measured using two items (i.e., "The website was interesting" and "The website arouses my interest in politics," deployed by Kruijemeier et al., 2013). The items were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; interitem correlation = .82, $p < .001$, $M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.55$).

Cynicism toward politics was measured with three items (i.e., "Politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver," "Ministers and Secretaries of State are primarily self-interested," "To become Member of Parliament, friends are more important than abilities"), measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). This measure is a shorter version of a measure deployed in previous studies (e.g., Adriaansen, van Praag, & De Vreese, 2010; Cronbach's $\alpha = .62$, $M = 4.38$, $SD = .98^2$). The conditions were successfully randomized with regard to political cynicism, $F(2, 189) = .26$, $p = .769$.

Control Variables

We included several control variables in our analyses, such as *age* and *sex*. The experimental groups did not significantly differ from each other regarding gender, $\chi^2(2) = .40$, $p = .819$; and age, $F(2, 189) = .68$, $p = .509$. We also gauged whether people are inclined to vote D66 in the first place; *likelihood of voting D66* (measured on a 11-point scale, where 1 = *not voting for D66* and 11 = *definitely voting for D66*, $M = 6.71$, $SD = 2.86$). The experimental groups did not significantly differ from each other regarding likelihood to vote for D66, $F(2, 189) = .40$, $p = .668$ (see Table 1 for a correlation matrix). We also recorded how long participants were reading (or interacting) with the websites (in seconds). We examined the extent to which differences between the experimental groups exist using an ANOVA analysis. The groups did not significantly differ from each other

regarding reading or interacting time, ($M_{\text{high interactivity}} = 264.18$, $SD = 103.14$; $M_{\text{medium interactivity}} = 275.70$, $SD = 90.87$; $M_{\text{low interactivity}} = 281.97$, $SD = 101.46$), $F(2, 189) = .54$, $p = .586$.

Results

First, we examined the main effect of interactivity on citizens' political involvement (i.e., perceived responsiveness and voting preference). A MANOVA analysis showed a significant main effect of interactivity, Wilk's $\Lambda = .866$, $F(4, 376) = 7.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .069$. To examine the distinct effect of interactivity on the political involvement measures, we conducted two univariate analyses of variance with Bonferroni post hoc analysis. As expected, we found that participants who visited the high interactive website ($M_{\text{high interactivity}} = 4.03$, $M_{\text{medium interactivity}} = 3.09$, $M_{\text{low interactivity}} = 3.16$) believed it was easier to come in contact with politics compared with participants who visited the medium interactive ($p < .001$) and low interactive website ($p < .001$), $F(2, 189) = 12.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .117$. The analyses also revealed that participants who viewed the highly interactive website were more inclined to vote for D66 ($M_{\text{high interactivity}} = 2.45$, $M_{\text{medium interactivity}} = 2.04$, $M_{\text{low interactivity}} = 1.77$) than participants who visited the low interactive website ($p = .012$), $F(2, 189) = 4.32$, $p = .015$, $\eta_p^2 = .044$. We found no significant effect for the participants in the medium interactive condition (compared with the high and low interactive condition). Taken together, these findings show that interactivity in websites has a positive effect on citizen involvement, but that this effect is limited to websites that contain high levels of interactivity compared with websites of low and medium interactivity.

Next, we examined the mediation hypothesis. We expected that higher levels of interactivity engender higher levels of feeling closer to politics (i.e., nearer) and more interest in politics (i.e., arousal of political interest), and consequently, results in higher levels of political involvement (i.e., believing to have more opportunities to get in contact with politics and voting preferences; H1). To do so, we performed a mediation analysis using PROCESS. We deployed bootstrapping of 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals (Model 4, Hayes, 2013). To fully capture all the different effects, we carried out the mediation analyses four times. First, we examined the (a) effect of the high interactive condition compared with the medium and (b) low interactive condition on our perceived responsiveness measure. Second, we examined the (c) effect of the high interactive condition compared with the medium and (d) low interactive condition on the voting preference measure. Specifically, in every mediation analysis, we included one dummy variable as the independent variable (e.g., high interactivity) and the other dummy variable as the covariate (e.g., medium interactivity).

² Although the cynicism scale has been widely applied in previous studies, it must be indicated that in this study Cronbach's α , and thus the reliability, is rather low.

Table 1. Correlation table of main variables

Visual evaluations	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Perceived responsiveness (1)	–			
Nearness (2)	.68*	–		
Arousal (3)	.46*	.67*	–	
Voting (4)	.29*	.37*	.47*	–
Cynicism (5)	.00	–.07	–.09	–.04

Notes. *Correlation is significant at the $p < .001$ level, $N = 192$.

The last dummy variable was left out to function as the reference category (e.g., low interactivity). Thus, only two dummy variables were included in every analysis. We then get a single test of the indirect effect (e.g., high interactivity compared with low interactivity, while controlling for medium interactivity). Both mediating variables (i.e., nearness and arousal of political interest) were included in one analysis to avoid omitted-variable bias. Thus both mediating variables were included as parallel mediators in each mediation analysis. The results of the analyses can be found in Table 2. The results show, in general, that the effect of interactivity on perceived responsiveness is mediated by nearness. When we compared the high interactive condition with the low interactive condition, a significant positive indirect was observed (indirect effect = .30, $SE = .13$, 95% *BCBCI* [.06, .59]). A similar significant indirect effect was found when we compared the high interactive condition with the medium interactive condition (indirect effect = .52, $SE = .14$, 95% *BCBCI* [.29, .84]). Specifically, exposure to a high interactive website makes participants feel that they are closer to politics (compared with the low and medium interactive website, respectively, $b = .54$, $p = .019$ and $b = .94$, $p < .001$), which positively affects participants' belief that it is easier to come in contact with politics (respectively $b = .56$, $p < .001$). We found no significant indirect effect of interactivity on perceived responsiveness through arousal of political interest.

Additionally, the results also show that interactivity positively affects voting preferences via arousal of political interest when we compare the high interactive website with the medium interactive websites (indirect effect = .20, $SE = .11$, 95% *BCBCI* [.02, .46]). Specifically, exposure to a highly interactive website makes participants feel more interested in politics (compared with the medium interactive website; $b = .55$, $p = .046$), which, in turn, positively affects participants' voting preference (respectively $b = .37$, $p < .001$). This effect was not significant when we compared the high interactive with the low interactive website. We also found no significant indirect effect of interactivity on voting through feelings of nearness toward politics. In sum, it seems that arousal of political interest partly explains the positive effect of interactivity on voting. In addition, feeling nearer to politics explains why interactivity positively affects perceived responsiveness of politics. However, it should be noted that in our analyses, the main effects remained significant, especially for the high versus medium interactive condition. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is partly supported.

Table 2. The indirect effect of interactivity on political involvement via nearness and arousal

Variable	Indirect effect	SE	95% BCBCI	
			LL	UL
High vs. low interactivity				
Direct effect:				
Perceived responsiveness	.57	.16	.25	.89
Voting	.58	.21	.17	.99
Indirect effect:				
Perceived responsiveness via Nearness	.30	.13	.06	.59
Perceived responsiveness via Arousal	.01	.02	–.02	.10
Voting via Nearness	.04	.06	–.05	.20
Voting via Arousal	.06	.10	–.13	.27
High vs. medium interactivity				
Direct effect:				
Perceived responsiveness	.38	.17	.05	.71
Voting	.15	.22	–.28	.57
Indirect effect:				
Perceived responsiveness via Nearness	.52	.14	.29	.84
Perceived responsiveness via Arousal	.03	.04	–.02	.15
Voting via Nearness	.07	.09	–.10	.29
Voting via Arousal	.20	.11	.02	.46
Medium vs. low interactivity				
Direct effect:				
Perceived responsiveness	.18	.16	–.13	.50
Voting	.43	.21	.02	.84
Indirect effect:				
Perceived responsiveness via Nearness	–.22	.13	–.49	.02
Perceived responsiveness via Arousal	–.02	.03	–.13	.01
Voting via Nearness	–.03	.05	–.19	.03
Voting via Arousal	–.14	.11	–.38	.05

Notes. Using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). BCCI = bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval. *SE* = standard error. *LL* = lower limit. *UL* = upper limit.

Turning to the moderated mediation or, in other words, the conditional indirect effects (H2), the analyses found marginal support for the moderating role of cynicism. We again used PROCESS, and deployed bootstrapping of 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals (Model 7, Hayes, 2013). Because our independent variable is a categorical variable, we carried out the mediation analyses several times. First, we examined the moderating effects of cynicism on the indirect effect of the high interactive condition (compared with the low interactive condition – the medium interactive condition was not included) on our perceived responsiveness and voting preference measure. In these analyses, both mediating variables (i.e., nearness and arousal) were included to avoid omitted-variable bias. Second, we examined the moderating effect of cynicism on the indirect effect of the high interactive

Table 3. The conditional effects of the moderated mediation analysis

Indirect effect of high (vs. medium) interactivity on perceived responsiveness via nearness	Value	SE	95% BCBCI	
			LL	UL
Political cynicism (= moderator)				
–1 SD	.99	.25	.56	1.54
M	.65	.17	.34	1.01
+1 SD	.30	.24	–.20	.75
Indirect effect of medium (vs. low) interactivity on perceived responsiveness via nearness				
Political cynicism (= moderator)				
–1 SD	–.59	.20	–1.03	–.26
M	–.22	.13	–.50	.01
+1 SD	.15	.20	–.20	.58

Notes. For reasons of clarity, this table only shows the significant moderated mediation analyses. BCBCI = bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval. SE = standard error. LL = lower limit. UL = upper limit.

condition (compared with the medium interactive condition – the low interactive condition was not included) on our perceived responsiveness and voting preference measure. In these analyses, again, both mediating variables were included. Interestingly, we only found one significant moderated mediation effect when we compared the high with the medium interactive condition (for reasons of clarity, only the significant moderated mediation effects are shown in Table 3). More precisely, less cynical participants feel closer to politics after exposure to a high interactive website (interaction effect between cynicism and interactivity on nearness, $b = -.49$, $p = .024$), which, in turn, has a positive effect on levels of perceived responsiveness of politics ($b = .69$, $p < .000$). Surprisingly, we also found one significant moderated mediation effect when we compared the medium and low interactive condition: Less cynical participants feel closer to politics after exposure to a low interactive website (interaction effect between cynicism and interactivity on nearness, $b = .71$, $p = .004$), which, in turn, engenders positive effects on levels of perceived responsiveness of politics ($b = .54$, $p < .000$). These results are reflected in Figure 2, where, in general, predictions of the variable nearness are highest in the high and low interactive condition for people with low levels of cynicism, while differences across conditions are not significant for people with high levels of political cynicism. Figure 2 shows that higher and lower levels of interactivity (vs. medium levels of interactivity) have a positive effect on citizens' feelings of nearness toward politics when citizens are less cynical toward politics. In other words, high and low interactivity might only have a positive effect on citizen feelings of nearness toward politics when citizens are less cynical toward politics and politicians. Our findings partly support our second hypothesis.

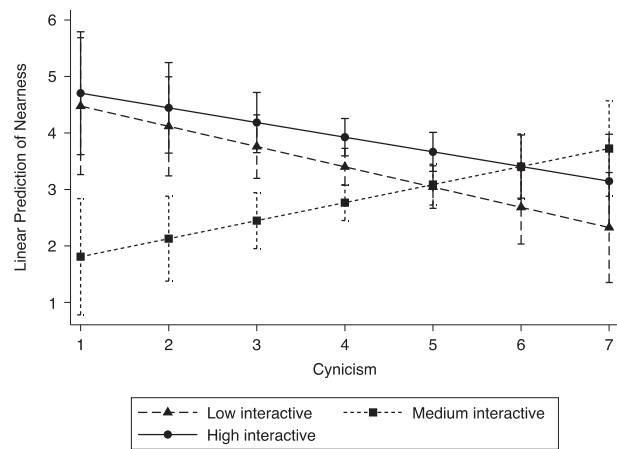


Figure 2. Depiction of interaction effects between interactivity and political cynicism (with predictive margins with 95% confidence intervals).

Discussion

Scholars realize that interactivity might play an important role in explaining why online media affect citizens' involvement in politics (Spierings & Jacobs, 2014), but evidence remains limited. The aim of this study was threefold. We aimed to determine whether and why interactivity affects political involvement. Furthermore, we aimed to examine the moderating role of political cynicism in this effect. By doing so, the findings of this study enhance our knowledge about conditional factors in which interactive practices are influential (Bucy & Tao, 2007). This is important as the debate about the mobilizing potential of the Internet is still unresolved.

We observed two interesting findings. First, in line with the findings from previous studies (e.g., see Kruikeimer et al., 2013; Song & Bucy, 2007; Sundar et al., 2003; Warnick et al., 2005), we found that participants who visited a highly interactive website (compared with the medium and low interactive websites) believed that it was easy to come in contact with politicians and they were more inclined to vote for the party (the source of the website). These findings contribute to “a growing body of literature that shows that interactivity [...] is often the driving force behind the positive effects of new [online] media” (Kruikeimer, 2014a, p. 110). Thus, although the consequences of interactivity are often investigated in marketing research (e.g., see Jiang, Chan, Tan, & Chua, 2010; Van Noort et al., 2012), this study shows that interactivity on political websites also affects engagement, indicating that interactivity effects are not context dependent.

Second, we found that interactive communication gives citizens the feeling that politics is closer to them. As a consequence, citizens believe that it was easy to come in contact with politicians. It thus seems that interactive communication makes politics approachable. Furthermore, we also found that websites can arouse citizens' interest

in politics, which, in turn, affects their voting preferences. Hence, following previous arguments, these results indicate that interactivity makes a website more appealing, and because it is more appealing, it affects citizens' involvement in politics (Song & Bucy, 2007).

Theoretical Implications and Future Research

Several important theoretical implications and suggestions for future research can be derived from our findings. First, we revealed that interactivity positively influenced political involvement through feelings of closeness toward politics and arousal of political interest. This indicates that it is important for future work to incorporate perceptual measures when examining the effects of interactivity. Perceptions of website are important as they shape citizens attitudes toward and involvement in politics (Song & Bucy, 2007, p. 48).

In addition, we revealed that political cynicism can moderate the relationship between interactivity and political involvement. The positive impact of high interactivity, and surprisingly, low interactivity, is absent for those who are more cynical toward politics. A theoretical explanation for this might be that cynics regard high levels of interactivity as insincere and resist the attempts to increase political involvement, thus weakening the effects of interactive communication. Less cynical people reported higher levels of involvement in response to both the high and the low interactive website. Most likely, cynical people do not experience such resistance, and appreciate high interactive information and information that is presented in a straightforward and plain, noninteractive manner. Another explanation for high levels of involvement for less cynical citizens in reaction to the low and high interactive website is the following: The low interactive website was designed as a blog (on a page with a continuous flow of information). The appearance of the website as a blog might function as a cue, since previous research has shown that blogs, compared with websites, communicate a human voice (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Thus while the high interactive website results in higher levels of involvement due to the structural interactive features, the low interactive site probably resulted in higher levels of involvement because it was presented as a blog and citizens perceived it as human, and therefore felt closer and more connected to the communicating political party.

Thus, a first theoretical implication of this finding is that this study provides a more skeptical picture regarding the effects of online communication than is common in the literature (Boulianne, 2009). Apparently, online communication might have positive consequences, but not so much for those who take a cynical stance towards politics. In that way, it might increase the gap between those who hold positive attitudes toward the democratic system and process, and those who do not.

A second theoretical implication is more general: Political cynicism should be considered more often as a moderator of communication effects. As Bos et al. (2013)

showed its importance in influencing the effects of populist communication styles on the legitimacy of political leaders, we demonstrate how it also moderates the effects of interactivity on political involvement. Proving its relevance in these different contexts may indicate that it might be a useful factor to consider in a wider variety of studies focusing on political communication and media effects.

To further sustain these suggestions, future research should extend the current findings by examining other possible moderating variables such as other relevant attitudes, characteristics (e.g., political sophistication), and political context variables (e.g., electoral system characteristics). There is thus ample room for further progress in determining which other factors influence the relationship between interactive communication and citizen involvement. With insight into other factors that influence the relationship between online interactive communication and involvement offers, "we undoubtedly will move closer to better understanding the important role communication technologies play in political [...] life" (Xenos & Moy, 2007, p. 715).

Taken together, this study answers some important questions about the extent to which and when online media affect political involvement. The outcomes of this study largely complement those of earlier studies. However, it also provides a strong incentive to study the conditional variables that influence the impact of interactive communication. Focusing on main effects only, and thus omitting third variables, may lead to ambiguous findings (Song & Bucy, 2007).

Practical Implications

The current study shows that interactivity matters, also in political communication, and particularly for the ones who are not cynical. People who are less cynical toward politics are relatively more willing to get involved in politics and are more positive to political communication. This logic would lead us to expect they are also more inclined to use political sources, media, and content. The current findings imply that offering interactive content can further boost political involvement among these citizens. Thus offering interactive media and content, in which citizens can interact with other citizens and that allows for citizen-politician interactions should continuously involve the politically involved. Interactive tools that enable citizens to chat with like-minded others, discuss political topics, enable them to directly contact politicians and to like, share, and respond to political messages should be part of political communication strategies. Investing in interactive communication is an effective strategy to keep politically interested citizens involved, also in the longer run.

A second implication from the same finding is that interactivity in political communication does not do the whole trick; it does not solve the issue that it is hard to involve cynical citizens in the political debate. Cynics are a hard-to-reach audience even with regard to interactive online political communication. They are likely to tune out because of their mistrust of politics (Norris, 2000). This might have important political consequences, as this could widen the

gap between those who benefit from online communication and those who are left behind (Avery, 2009). Moreover, even if politicians and political parties are able to reach cynics with other media (such as leaflets, TV commercials, flyers, etc.) and are able to convert them to online media (such as websites, a blog post, or a political social media account), interactivity will not affect them and get them involved in the political arena. Thus multi-media and cross-media efforts might reach cynics, but will neither engage nor involve them. Moreover, because cynical citizens are not affected by interactive communication, they become even more alienated from politics, which might eventually lead to less participation in political life (Schuck, Boomgaarden, & De Vreese, 2013). This means politicians should find other ways than interactive media to engage and involve cynics.

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Appendix A

D66 Alexander Pechtold**Biografie Alexander Pechtold**

Alexander Pechtold (1965) is sinds 30 november 2006 lid van de Tweede Kamerfractie van D66. Hij is fractievoorzitter en politiek leider van D66. Alexander Pechtold was van 31 maart 2005 tot 3 juli 2006 minister voor Bestuurlijke Vernieuwing en Koninkrijksrelaties. Hij was in de periode 2003-2005 burgemeester van Wageningen. Hij is opgeleid als kunsthistoricus en werkte onder andere bij een veilinghuis. Van 1997 tot 2002 was hij wethouder in Leiden. Alexander Pechtold was vanaf eind 2002 tot 2005 voorzitter van D66. Behalve met de algemene politieke vraagstukken houdt hij zich bezig met Europese zaken.

Loopbaan

- veilingmeester en adjunct-directeur "Van Stockum's Veilingen" te 's-Gravenhage, van 1 september 1992 tot 22 april 1997
- lid gemeenteraad van Leiden, van 12 april 1994 tot oktober 2002
- wethouder (in 1997-2002 van sport, cultuur, recreatie en monumenten, milieu; in

Figure A1. Low interactive website.

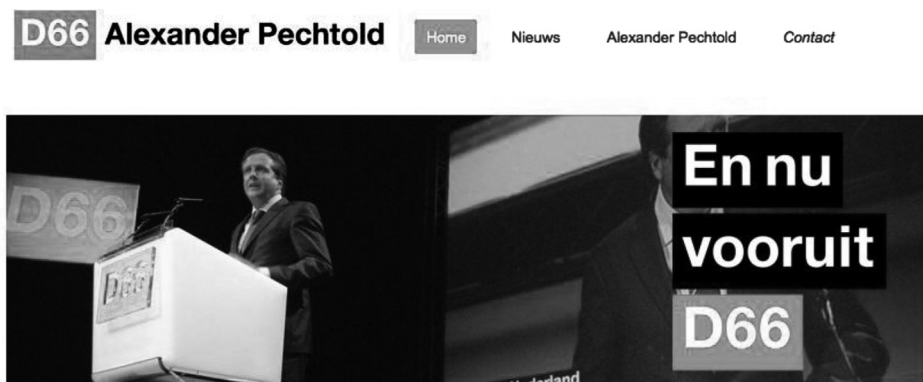


Figure A2. Medium interactive website.



Figure A3. High interactive website.

Appendix B

Table B1. Operationalization of interactivity in the manipulated websites

Concept	Low interactivity	Medium interactivity	High interactivity
Hyperlinks on homepage	0	8	14
Opportunity to give comments	No	Yes	Yes
Share features on homepage	No	Yes	Yes
Contact features	No	Yes	Yes
Hyperlinks on other pages	No	No	Yes
Comments others	No	No	Yes
Tweets from party leader	No	No	Yes
Share features on separate pages	No	No	Yes
Mobilization features	No	No	Yes
Links to other website	No	No	Yes