Master Thesis

Social Network Sites in Dutch Society: The Effect of Facebook use on Political Knowledge and Engagement

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1. Introduction

Democracy in contemporary Western societies is said to be in decline (Mair 2006; Halman 2007). Due to the increasing individualization of these societies, "people are less and less inclined to engage in civic actions" (Halman 2007, 319), such as engaging in politics, a basic requirement for democracy to work (Putnam 1993). The traditional ties family, religion and class that connected people have become less important (Halman 2007; Putnam 2000), making way for a growing individual freedom to decide what to do in everyday life. Following this development, membership of political parties in Western societies is decreasing, along with voter turnout (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012).

The process of individualization also seems to have an effect on people's political knowledge, knowledge of at least basic political events and institutions (Galston 2001). Political knowledge and political engagement are closely related, as a lack of political knowledge often coincides with a weak understanding of political processes and issues. This can lead people to abstain from engaging in politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Because both political knowledge and political engagement are associated with a well-functioning democracy in which the public is able to evaluate its representatives in government, a decline in these areas is of concern to scholars (Wicks et al. 2014; Putnam 1993).

In contrast to the process of individualization, the modernization of technology, and with it the flow of information, has made it possible for people to be connected with each other and everything that happens around them at all times using PCs, mobile phones, and tablets with a connection to the Internet. Of particular interest for this thesis is the application of social network sites (SNS, e.g., Facebook and Twitter) in people's

daily life, as it can be argued that these sites facilitate the spreading and sharing of information of all sorts, including political information. In their most basic form, SNS are sites that allow users to "1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd and Ellison 2008, 211).

Moreover, by sharing life events by means of blog-like posts, as well as through personal (private) messaging, users can establish and maintain an online network of both their 'offline' and 'online' contacts. Furthermore, they can create a personal newsfeed consisting of posts by organizations or individuals of a user's choosing by clicking on a 'like' or 'follow' button on the SNS webpage of these other users (but note that these users are often required to be active on the same SNS). Finally, one can integrate the networks and interests of others into their own. Information 'liked' (which indicates that the content is liked or approved by clicking the 'like' button of the specific post) and posts duplicated by others (which can be done by clicking on the 'retweet' or 'share' button) also appear on one's own newsfeed.

If someone were to post political information, this would thus appear on the newsfeeds of their friends or followers. These users would then have the opportunity to share the post or write a comment to it, consequently spreading the information that the initial post contained even further. Considering that 74% of all Internet users in the United States uses SNS (Pew 2014a), and with almost 9 out of 10 people using SNS in the Netherlands (Newcom 2014), it is safe to say that, despite the process of individualization, SNS are now an established factor in these Western societies.

Despite the possibilities that SNS offer when it comes to exposing people to

political information, there is no agreement in the literature on the influence that SNS have on political knowledge and engagement. More specifically, there is a clear division between scholars. Whereas some find that SNS use has a marginal, positive effect on political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012; Tang and Lee 2013), others refute these results by arguing that SNS instead facilitate opting out of politics altogether (Theocharis and Quintelier 2014).

In this thesis, however, the starting point is considerably more hopeful. Because SNS facilitate the sharing and spreading of political information, the political knowledge of people using SNS to gather this information can actually be enhanced, consequently leading to an increase of the level of political engagement. This would then affect the interaction between citizens and the state in democratic societies, and possibly in non-democratic societies as well.

The specific research question is as follows: *To what extent does the use of Facebook, the largest SNS option, have an effect on people's political knowledge and/or political engagement?* In order to both answer this question and contribute to the existing literature on SNS use in combination with political knowledge and engagement, the different ways in which people can use SNS and their influence on political knowledge and engagement are subject to a quantitative study following a survey (N = 220) conducted among Dutch citizens in April 2015. A comparison between Facebook users (n = 153) and non-Facebook (n = 67) users is included.

The results offer a mixed pattern. Facebook use for political information gathering purposes does not have a statistically significant effect on political knowledge and offline political engagement. Nevertheless, it is statistically significantly associated with online political engagement, as discussing politics on Facebook more often

correlates with a higher level of online political engagement. Moreover, the Facebook users in this sample do not have more knowledge of current political events than non-Facebook users, nor do they engage more in offline political activities. However, compared to non-Facebook users, users of Facebook do engage more in online political activities. The findings of this thesis indicate that Facebook acts as an alternative for other, more conventional media platforms, with the addition that it facilitates recruitment for and engagement in online political activities.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, scholars have been debating about what the effects of SNS on political knowledge and political engagement are. However, the jury is still out. Some argue that general SNS use, along with general media use, will widen the gap between those with and without political knowledge, and offers people a motivation to abstain from politics completely (Prior 2005; Theocharis and Quintelier 2014). Others, however, find marginal but statistically significant positive relationships between SNS use and an increase in political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012; Tang and Lee 2013). The latter group is accompanied by the worldwide application of SNS to mobilize people to get involved in (protest) politics. Some remarkable examples are protests in Egypt during the so-called 'Arab Spring,' the nation-wide Brazilian demonstrations during the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup that the country hosted, and the Hong Kong 'Umbrella Movement' (Tufecki and Wilson 2012; Waldram 2013; Runnacles 2014).

This raises the question to what extent SNS users are actually exposed to political information. This is what enhances political knowledge, and arguably influences political engagement as well. Of the 64% of United States citizens that use

Facebook, 30% was reached by news on this particular SNS (Pew 2014b). The Pew study has also shown that news concerning entertainment (including sports) dominate SNS. Nevertheless, 55% of Facebook users in the United States saw posts covering news stories about national politics, and to a lesser extent international politics (39% respectively). This implies that if SNS users are exposed to political information, it could potentially have an effect on people's political knowledge and engagement.

2.1 Political Knowledge

Merely being exposed to news and actually understanding it are two different things entirely. As Price and Zaller argue, "[o]nly people who actually acquire information from the news can use it in forming and changing their political evaluations" (1993, 138). Instead of studying self-reported exposure to media, researchers should therefore study political knowledge as this indicates people's ability to evaluate the information they receive (Price and Zaller 1993, 134).

In order to be able to measure people's ability to evaluate the information they receive on SNS, a further distinction concerning political news needs to be made. Whereas it cannot be expected that SNS contain posts concerning the structure of a country's political system, it is considerably more likely that they do contain posts about certain political actors or current events that have been featured on other media platforms as well over the last couple of months.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a gap in the literature with regard to the potential relationship between SNS use and political knowledge. The small amount of studies on SNS use in which political knowledge of respondents or participants is measured, uses it as an intermediary variable for either political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012) or political information efficacy, an indicator of

"voter's confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage in the political process" (Kaid, McKinney and Tedesco 2007, 1096; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010). Therefore, the relationship between conventional media use (television, radio and newspapers) and political knowledge needs to be reviewed here before a similar relationship between use of SNS and political knowledge can be established.

However, first it needs to be covered how one can gain political knowledge. This knowledge of recent events, core political actors and institutions helps people in assessing whether their elected representatives function "according to the democratic expectations" (Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg 2004, 415; see also Dahl 1989). The biggest source for political information is the consumption of mass media, enhancing people's knowledge of politics. In their research on political knowledge in the Netherlands, Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg therefore look at the relationship between political knowledge and three types of media consumption (2004, 421). The measurement for political knowledge consisted of five questions each covering either a political actor or institution and the knowledge they measured can thus be described as the knowledge of political actors and institutions. The media platforms they incorporated were television, radio and newspapers, and the results showed the relationship to be positive: an increase in media use correlated with an enhanced level of political knowledge. Furthermore, Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg found that media consumption was more correlated with political knowledge when the respondents watched, listened to, or read specific items on politics than when these items had a more general topic (*Ibid*.).

This arguably indicates a situation in which "knowledge begets knowledge" (as

noted by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 287), who conducted similar research in the United States). On the one hand, people without political knowledge choose to consume media content that does not enhance political knowledge due to either a lack of interest, or a relative high cost of understanding these politically oriented news items. On the other hand, people with a higher level of political knowledge are not restricted by such costs, and therefore have an easier time of consuming media content on politics (Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg 2004).

Moreover, the fact that people can actually choose what kind of media content to consume corresponds with the idea of the modernization of technology and the flow of information leading to an increase of individual freedom in deciding to what information people want to expose themselves. It is therefore the way in which these media platforms (including SNS) are used – for example, SNS use for entertainment purposes or for gaining (political) information can be distinguished – that can affect political knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga 2009). Nonetheless, as Baumgartner and Morris (2008, 25) argue, people "that may not be interested in politics can get political information through their online network of friends and acquaintances," which could then lead to an enhanced level of political knowledge.

The time period in which the studies of Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg (2004) and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) were conducted did not allow them to look into SNS use. Now that widespread usage of SNS has emerged over the last decade, relationships that are similar to that between use of conventional media platforms and political knowledge may be established with SNS use as a source of political information.

Despite the gap in the literature concerning such relationships, conventional

media organizations such as broadcasting networks and newspaper companies, political organizations and institutions, as well as individuals can distribute political information through SNS by posting this information in the form of a text, picture, video or link to another webpage. Examples are national newspaper companies writing a post about frictions within a political party, broadcasting networks posting a video of an interview of the president or prime minister, and political parties posting a link to their party program. Meanwhile, the users within their network can indicate that they approve the information they just received by clicking the 'like' button, or by duplicating and spreading the post by clicking the 'share' or 'retweet' button connected to the post. Moreover, these organizations and individuals can read, listen to, or watch posts containing political information that is distributed by other users. Because the activities that need to be carried out to take in the political information are rather passive, reading, listening to, or watching (video) posts covering political information on SNS will from here on be conceptualized as *passive political information gathering*.

However, media use is not the only way in which people obtain political information: by having conversations with one's social network, people can be exposed to information that has the potential of enhancing their political knowledge (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987; La Du Lake and Huckfeldt 1998). On SNS, this can be done by sending (private) messages to, or commenting on posts by other users within the network of users that they communicate with. These do not necessarily have to be a user's nearest contacts (called 'friends' on Facebook, or 'followers' on Twitter), but can also consist of organizations, (government) institutions, specially formed groups of users with a common interest, and contacts of a user's own contacts.

Some scholars say that social activities suffer from extensive television watching

and Internet use, diminishing face-to-face contact (Putnam 1995, Nie 2001). However, these studies do not take into account the relative low cost of establishing or maintaining networks online. Even though the ties within these networks may be weak (due to the specific or limited context in which individuals know each other), it is exactly these ties that are "good sources for novel information" (Donath and boyd 2004; see also Granovetter 1973), arguably enhancing political knowledge.

Moreover, with an increase of one's network size, the likelihood of encountering someone with a high level of political knowledge and/or an opposing political opinion compared to one's own increases as well, which can then also result in an increase of the level of political knowledge (Huckfeldt et al. 1995). Research shows that the use of SNS to discuss politics indeed enhances users' exposure to different viewpoints (Kushin and Kitchener 2009; Kim 2011). Other scholars therefore argue that online interactions supplement interactions 'in real life' (Wellman et al. 2001).

Furthermore, Kim (2011) argues that the cost for both finding and talking to people with different political thoughts may be lowered due to the possibility that SNS offer to integrate the networks of others into one's own network. In his study, Kim did not separate the information gained from SNS: information that was obtained through posts by (news) organizations and those by the contacts in one's network were not distinguished from SNS users that discussed politics with each other. For the present thesis, a distinction between passive (reading, listening to, and watching (video) posts) and active (discussing politics) political information gathering is made. Because of this, it can be assessed whether the different ways in which people gather political information on SNS have diverse effects on political knowledge and political engagement.

In summary, a higher level of knowledge of current political events is associated with when one is exposed to political information on SNS more often. Thus, the first hypothesis can be composed:

Hypothesis 1: An increase of SNS use for active and/or passive information gathering correlates with a higher level of knowledge of political events.

2.2 Political Engagement

There is a strong relationship between talking about politics first and then engaging in politics at a later moment, making political knowledge an important variable in explaining political engagement (Rojas 2006; Shah et al. 2005; see also Junn 1991). Moreover, if SNS use for informational purposes contributes to people's ability to engage in politics due to enhanced political knowledge, this could indicate that this particular way of using SNS also enhances political engagement.

In contrast to active political information gathering, which exclusively entails discussing politics with one's network, political engagement is any "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, 38). Research on the subject has traditionally entailed engaging in 'offline' political activities, such as voting and joining a political party, as well as attending protests (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012).

With the addition of engaging in 'online' political activities via the Internet over the last decades, such as signing e-mail or Web petitions, citizens have been offered more ways in which to engage in politics. Moreover, the possibility to engage in online activities seems to be appreciated by the public, as respondents of a survey by Følstad

and Lüders (2013) indicated that the online environment provided them with, among other things, a sense of influence, a lowered threshold for participation, and the motivation to engage in local politics. In addition, because online political engagement can be done anonymously or at a safe distance behind one's computer screen, tablet or mobile phone, this could give people an incentive to actually engage in politics instead of opting out of it altogether.

The Internet not only enables engaging in politics online. It also facilitates the distribution of political information on SNS. Whereas information shared on SNS can raise interest in political engagement, the networking aspect of SNS can also assist in the recruitment of users for both online and offline political activities. Therefore, both reading, listening to, and watching politically related (video) posts on SNS, and discussing politics on SNS – passive and active political information gathering – are expected here to enhance users' level of political engagement. The following hypothesis will thus be tested:

Hypothesis 2: An increase of SNS use for passive and/or active information gathering correlates with a higher level of offline and/or online political engagement.

To get an indication of the extent to which the explanatory factors have an influence on political knowledge and engagement, the influence of the following factors should be taken into account. Even though it is not likely that political information regarding knowledge of the political system is distributed on SNS, this knowledge can nonetheless influence one's knowledge of current political events, offline political engagement and online political engagement. This assumption leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: An increase of knowledge of the political system correlates with a higher level of knowledge of political events, offline political engagement and/or online political engagement.

Furthermore, whereas the size of both one's offline and online network matters when it comes to political knowledge, it does for political engagement as well (Huckfeldt et al. 1995). An increase in network size thus not only increases the likelihood of getting in touch with people with a high level of political knowledge, but also with those who actually engage in politics. People can therefore obtain a higher level of political knowledge, and/or be recruited for political engagement themselves as their network size increases (*Ibid*.).

In addition, political engagement is influenced by the political efficacy of people, as it is argued that believing that one cannot influence politics discourages people to actually engage in politics (Kaid, McKinney and Tedesco 2007). A distinction between external and internal political efficacy is made: whereas external political efficacy measures whether people feel like the way the political system works allows them to influence politics, internal political efficacy indicates the extent to which people feel they possess the right skills or knowledge to engage in that political system. To test whether political efficacy indeed has an effect on political engagement, the following hypothesis will be tested:

Hypothesis 4: An increase of external and/or internal political efficacy correlates with a higher level of offline and/or online political engagement.

3. Research Design

3.1 Data Collection

The research design for this thesis is a survey looking into the influence that the extent

to which people use SNS by passive and/or active political information gathering (the independent variables) has on their online and/or offline political engagement (the dependent variables). The unit of analysis for this thesis are thus individuals, distinguished by their specific use of SNS. Data collection was done with a survey among Dutch citizens, focusing on individual respondents' SNS use, as well as their levels of political knowledge and political engagement. Because it was not possible for the present thesis to rely on a representative sample, convenience sampling was used. This limits the generalizability of the research, because the results are not representative of the entire Dutch population.

The study's focus is limited to the use of the SNS Facebook. In the Netherlands, a majority of the population uses Facebook (8.9 million users, which is about 53% percent), followed by 4.1 million LinkedIn and 3.5 million Twitter users (25% and 21%, respectively (Newcom 2014)). LinkedIn is primarily a business service (boyd and Ellison 2008), whereas on Twitter the amount of characters one can use to communicate with his or her network is limited. Because of both the relative ease of finding Facebook users, and the limitations of the two other popular SNS used in the Netherlands, the SNS Facebook is being studied in this thesis.

Respondents were recruited in two separate ways. First, the questionnaire (see the Appendix for the specific wording of the questions, translated in English) was shared with the author's Facebook network. Second, in order to avoid selection on the Facebook use variables, the link to the online survey was also sent to the author's personal network outside of Facebook by e-mail. Both ways allowed respondents to share the survey with their own network and thus distribute the survey even further, a method called snowball sampling. In Qualtrics, the online survey software used for data

collection, no distinctions between the respondents were made based on whether they started the questionnaire following the invitation on Facebook or whether they received it by mail. However, Facebook users and non-Facebook users were distinguished, after which Facebook users were asked to indicate the extent to which they used Facebook. The remainder of the survey was identical to both Facebook users and non-Facebook users. Respondents could fill in the questionnaire from the 1st until the 15th of April. In total, 220 respondents filled in the questionnaire, of which 167 used Facebook to at least some extent and 53 did not use Facebook at all.

Compared to national percentages in the Netherlands, female respondents are overrepresented in the sample (with 50.5% female citizens nationwide (CBS 2014a) compared to 72.3% in the sample). Gender is known to have a marginal effect on political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg 2004), but not on political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012). Because of the overrepresentation of female respondents, the results of this study should nonetheless be interpreted with caution.

Moreover, the average of age in the Netherlands lies at 41.0 years, whereas in the sample the average age is 46.8 years. However, this could have been expected as the category ranging from 0-19 is underrepresented (CBS 2014a). It should not influence the results, because not many of the people in this age category are likely to engage in politics. This is due to the voting age in the Netherlands being 18 years. Besides, the population of interest more or less equals voters. In addition, two respondents that had indicated unnaturally high levels of age were coded as missing value.

Furthermore, it is known that respondents' level of education correlates with their political knowledge (Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg 2004).

In the present thesis, the respondents have a high level of education. 44.6% of all 220 respondents have finished at least their first year at a university.

Finally, the average yearly household income in the sample falls in the €40.000-€59.999 category. This is similar to the national average of €43.600 (CBS 2014b).

3.2 Operationalization

In order to distinguish between respondents that either do or do not use Facebook, the questionnaire contained a question that establishes *Facebook use*. Respondents that do not use Facebook at all (coded as 0) were redirected to the non-Facebook related questions later in the questionnaire. Users of Facebook (coded as 1) answered questions about their Facebook use. By allowing non-Facebook users to fill in the questionnaire, it is possible to analyze potential differences both within the group of Facebook users, as well as between Facebook and non-Facebook users.

For the explanatory variables, *passive* and *active political information gathering*, two 8-point items have been created. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale ranging from 'never' (coded as 0) to 'daily' (coded as 7) on how many days per week they use Facebook for passive and active political information gathering in an ordinary week. Additionally, respondents that indicated that they do not use Facebook at all were coded as missing. They were thus left out of the analysis of specific Facebook use and its effect on political knowledge and/or engagement.

The level of respondents' *knowledge of current political events* was measured by asking them to answer a number of questions about politics. Five close-ended questions were composed in order to cover respondents' knowledge of current political events that have been trending on both Facebook and other media platforms over the last 12 months. Questions answered correctly were coded as 1. Incorrect or missing answers

were consequently coded as 0. One of the questions was answered correctly by all of the respondents and thus held no variance that could be explained by any of the independent variables. The remaining items were added to form an index of knowledge of current political events, ranging from 0 to 4 (α = .39, M = 3.64, SD = .65). Cronbach's alpha indicates whether the individual items measure the same construct. A low alpha-value, such as the value reached for the index of knowledge of current political events, indicates that the items do not correlate with each other at a high level. Here, removing question 4 would increase the alpha by .076 to α = .46. However, as question 4 has been answered incorrectly more often than the other questions, removing it would also have decreased the variance of the knowledge of current political events index.

For *offline political engagement*, respondents were presented a list of seven activities that cover political engagement and were then asked to indicate in which of the following activities they engaged over the last 12 months: 'voting in the 2015 Dutch provincial elections,' 'wearing a badge, sticker or T-shirt with a political message,' 'signing a written petition,' 'participating in a demonstration or protest,' 'boycotting a product for political, ethical or environmental reasons,' 'writing or calling any politician at the local, provincial or national level,' 'writing a letter to a newspaper or magazine or calling a live radio or TV show to express a political opinion.' Multiple answers could be ticked, after which a single index was formed out of the amount of ticked answers, ranging from 0 to 7. This did not lead to a very reliable index (α = .44, M = 1.50, SD = 1.05). Removing the option of voting in the 2015 Dutch provincial elections would have increased the alpha by .035 to α = .47. However, this would not have made sense as voting is one of the traditional activities indicating political engagement. This particular

item deviates from the others as the respondents picked it most, as could have been expected.

The same procedure applies to *online political engagement*. In this part of the survey, respondents were asked for their use of the Internet for the following activities over the last 12 months: 'making contact with a politician using the Internet,' 'signing an e-mail or Web petition,' and 'posting a message on a blog to express a political opinion.' Online political engagement then forms an index ranging from 0 to 3 ($\alpha = .28$, $M = .46$, $SD = .64$). Because respondents do not engage in online activities that often, this implies that if they do engage in an online activity, then the chances are small that these respondents engage in multiple activities. The correlations between the variables are thus very low, as is Cronbach's alpha. Again, the index' reliability could not be improved by leaving out one of the individual items of which the index is composed. Online political activities that require the use of Facebook were omitted from the survey. This way, it is possible to compare the extent to which the two groups of respondents engage in the same online political activities. It can then be assessed whether the use of Facebook facilitates engaging in online activities that do not require using Facebook.

In order to be able to establish a relationship between the specific use of SNS for political newsgathering and political knowledge and/or political engagement, the use of media platforms other than Facebook needs to be controlled for, since this is known to have a substantial effect on political knowledge (Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg 2004). As with SNS use, it is the specific use of media platforms other than Facebook that can influence a person's political knowledge. Therefore, respondents were not only asked for their weekly *general television, radio, newspaper*

and *Internet use* (measured in days per week, ranging from 'never,' coded as 0, to 'daily,' coded as 7) in each of these media platforms, but also for their *television, radio, newspaper* and *Internet use for political information gathering purposes*. This was measured by asking respondents how often they use these media platforms to gather political information (also ranging from 'never' to 'daily'). Two indices were then composed: conventional media use (consisting of the traditional, offline, media platforms, $\alpha = .77$, $M = 23.65$, $SD = 11.17$) and Internet use (albeit less reliable, $\alpha = .55$, $M = 9.69$, $SD = 4.00$).

Respondents' *external* and *internal political efficacy* were measured by their agreement with five statements covering possible political efficacy issues (ranging from 'strongly disagree,' coded as 1, to 'strongly agree,' coded as 5). For both variables, a scale was composed. The wording of the questions for *external political efficacy* implies that "the lower the score, the more the respondent agrees with the statement and thus the more distrustful or negative his or her attitude toward the political system is" (Kaid, McKinney and Tedesco 2005, 1102), and therefore the greater the likelihood that the respondent does not engage in politics. In order to analyze respondents' scores on this scale in the proper direction, i.e. a more positive attitude towards the system is expected to increase the likelihood of someone engaging in political activities, the variable was re-coded by mirroring the values ($\alpha = .76$, $M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.83$).

For *internal political efficacy*, the questions were posed in such a way that the higher one's score on the internal political efficacy scale, the greater the likelihood of the respondent to engage in politics ($\alpha = .74$, $M = 9.39$, $SD = 2.49$). In the online survey, the questions covering one's internal political efficacy were asked before respondents had to answer the knowledge questions. This way, one's ability to answer

the knowledge questions did not influence how the respondent feel about his or her abilities to both understand and engage in politics.

Furthermore, five close-ended questions were composed to cover respondents' *general political knowledge*, knowledge of the structure of the Dutch political system, in order to assess basic knowledge of politics irrespective of knowledge of events that happened and were featured on SNS over the last 12 months. As with knowledge of current political events, the index of general political knowledge ranges from 0 to 4, as one of the questions was answered correctly by all of the respondents ($\alpha = .45$, $M = 3.17$, $SD = .93$).

Other control variables that have been taken into account due to their possible influence on the dependent variables are *offline network size* (the number of people with whom they talk about politics without using the Internet, $M = 9.63$, $SD = 10.77$), *online network size* (the number of people with whom they talk about politics using the Internet, $M = 6.12$, $SD = 35.54$), and *general Facebook use* (the amount of days that people spend on Facebook on a weekly basis, ranging from 'never,' coded as 0, to 'daily,' coded as 7, $M = 5.68$, $SD = 2.24$). Some final questions covered basic demographic variables: gender (male respondents coded as '1,' female respondents coded as '0'), age (ranging from '0-19,' coded as 0, to '60 or older,' coded as 3), education (ranging from 'primary school,' coded as 0, to 'Master's degree or PhD,' coded as 7) and yearly household income (ranging from '€0-€19.999,' coded as 0, to '€100.000 or more,' coded as 5 – with a final option included for respondents who either did not know their yearly household income or rather would not say it. This option was coded as missing value).

3.3 Statistical Analysis Procedure

In this thesis, a number of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. This procedure allows for entering the variables in such a way that previously entered variables are controlled for when analyzing the predictor variables. The analysis presents the explained variance for each block of variables that is entered. The added explained variance after each block is entered can tell something about the effect that adding blocks has on the dependent variable, compared to the influence of previously entered blocks. For the analysis of all three dependent variables, a block of demographic variables was entered first, followed by the other independent variables that are expected to have influenced each dependent variable. Finally, the predictor variables passive and active Facebook use for information gathering were entered into the hierarchical multiple regression analysis. All tests were performed using SPSS 20.0.

4. Results

This section consists of four different parts. In the first part, the distribution of the predictor variables passive and active Facebook use is presented. The other three parts focus on the dependent variables, knowledge of current political events, offline political engagement and online political engagement, and each have a similar structure. First, the distribution of the dependent variable in question will be shown, after which the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analyses for Facebook users are covered in depth. Finally, a comparisson is made between the results for the group of Facebook users and that of non-Facebook users.

4.1 Passive and Active Facebook Use

Table 1 presents the distribution of the respondents' passive and active Facebook use. In

Table 1. Frequencies of scores of the specific Facebook use variables.

	Passive Facebook use (n = 153)		Active Facebook use (n = 153)	
Amount of Days	N	%	N	%
0	38	24.8	109	71.2
1	28	18.3	20	13.1
2	16	10.5	6	3.9
3	13	8.5	4	2.6
4	6	3.9	3	1.0
5	12	7.8	1	0.7
6	1	0.7	0	0.0
7	39	25.5	10	6.5
Total	153	100.0	153	100.0

general, the respondents discuss politics on Facebook less often than that they are exposed to political information on Facebook. This is best illustrated by the difference between those who indicate that they never use Facebook for passive political information gathering (38 respondents, 24.8%) and those who never actively use Facebook for this purpose (109 respondents, 71.2%). Because of the differences between the two predictor variables, one can also expect them to have distinct effects on knowledge of current political events, offline political engagement, and online political engagement.

4.2 Political Knowledge

Table 2. Frequencies of scores on the index of knowledge of current political events.

	Facebook Users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook Users (n = 67)	
Correct Answers	N	%	N	%
0	0	0.0	0	0.0
1	2	1.3	2	3.0
2	6	3.9	3	4.5
3	40	26.1	9	13.4
4	105	68.6	53	79.1
Total	153	99.9*	67	100.0

*The deviation from 100.0% is due to rounding.

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents on the index of knowledge of current political events. All of the respondents have answered at least one question correctly. Moreover, 71.8% of the respondents gave the correct answer to every single question. The distribution of the index is similar for both groups of respondents (Facebook users:

M = 3.62, SD = .63, non-Facebook users: M = 3.69, SD = .70).

According to the first hypothesis, an increase in the use of Facebook for passive and/active political information gathering should correlate with a higher score on the index of knowledge of current political events. In order for this to be the case, the coefficients of the variables passive and/or active Facebook use need to be positive, as well as related to the dependent variable at statistically significant levels ($p < .05$).

Table 3 presents the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis of knowledge of current political events. The independent variables were entered into the hierarchical multiple regression model in a number of steps. The demographic variables gender, age, education and income were entered first in order to control for their influence on the dependent variable. They were followed by the independent variables of which, according to the literature, it can be expected that they have an influence on the dependent variable, but which are not the independent variables of interest for this study. The variables that were entered in this second block of variables were conventional media use, Internet use, general Facebook use, offline network size and online network size. Finally, the predictor variables passive and active Facebook use were entered, completing the regression model.

The first model with demographic variables explains a mere 8.9% of the variance in the dependent variable ($F = 2.797$, $p < .05$). Income was the only demographic variable with statistical significance ($\beta = .220$, $p < .05$). The second regression model with the addition of the independent control variables led to an increase of the explained variance of 18.4% ($F = 4.083$, $p < .001$). In this model, the beta coefficients of both conventional media use ($\beta = .258$, $p < .05$) and knowledge of

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Facebook and Non-Facebook Users' Knowledge of Current Political Events

Dependent variable: Knowledge of Current Political Events				
	Standardized beta coefficients			
	Facebook users (n = 153)			Non-Facebook users (n = 67)
Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3[1]	Model 2[1]
Step 1: Demographic variables				
Gender	-.012	.097	.101	.089
Age	-.011	-.108	-.107	.175
Education	.171	.039	.035	.081
Income	.220*	.130	.130	.166
Step 2: Control variables				
Conventional media use		.258*	.253*	.147
Internet use		.154	.156	.188
Offline network size		.271	.272	.014
Online network size		-.186	-.092	-.074
Knowledge of the political system		.253**	.256**	.159
General Facebook use		-.006	-.017	-
Step 3: Facebook use for political information gathering				
Passive Facebook use			.028	-
Active Facebook use			-.011	-
Model statistics				
Adjusted R^2	.057	.206	.191	.015
R^2	.089	.272	.273	.179
R^2 change	.089	.184	.000	.070
Significance of change	.029	.000	.967	.575
df (regression, residual)	119	115	109	49
F statistic	2.797	4.083	3.348	1.092
Significance of *F*	.029	.000	.000	.388

*p < .05.
[1]Final model

the political system (β = .253, p < .01) correlate at a statistically significant level with knowledge of current political events. This is almost the case for offline network size as well (β = .271, p = .052). In the third and final model (*F* = 3.348, p < .001), the explained variance only increased with .1 percentage point to 27.3%.

Based on this percentage, one might thus have expected that the predictor variables passive and active Facebook use are not statistically significant. Conventional media use (β = .253, p < .05) and knowledge of the political system (β = .256, p < .01) offline network size (β = .210, p < .05), however, explain a statistically significant amount of variance in the third model. Again, the same almost applies to offline

network size (β = .272, p = .055). Based on the present sample, an increase of active and/or passive Facebook use does not add to a higher level of knowledge of current political events. In contrast, as conventional media use increases and one's offline network size grows, the amount of questions answered correctly increases.

It is then interesting to look at the extent to which the independent variables that, according to the literature, should have an influence on peoples' political knowledge of current events and political engagement regardless of Facebook use actually did so. This was done by performing hierarchical multiple regression analyses using the control group of non-Facebook users. Here, only two blocks of variables were entered, with the demographic variables being entered first, followed by the remaining independent variables with the exception of passive and active Facebook use. In addition, the variable general Facebook use was left out of these models, for the knowledge of current political events of non-Facebook users cannot be influenced by their general use of Facebook.

The results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis for non-Facebook users' knowledge of current political events, of which the final model can also be found in table 3, are as follows. With a R^2 beta coefficient of only .109 and .179 respectively, this model does not do a very good job at predicting non-Facebook users' knowledge of current political events in the present sample. No statistically significant results were found. This could be due to the small amount of variance in the dependent variable. Compared to the group of Facebook users, the model for non-Facebook users' knowledge of current political events is thus not influenced by conventional media use and knowledge of the political system. The implications of these findings are covered in this thesis' discussion.

In summary, an increase of Facebook user's knowledge of current political events correlates at a statistically significant level with an increase of conventional media usage and knowledge of the political system. However, the first hypothesis cannot be accepted, as an increase of passive and/or active Facebook use does not correlate with a higher level of knowledge of current political events.

4.3 Offline Political Engagement

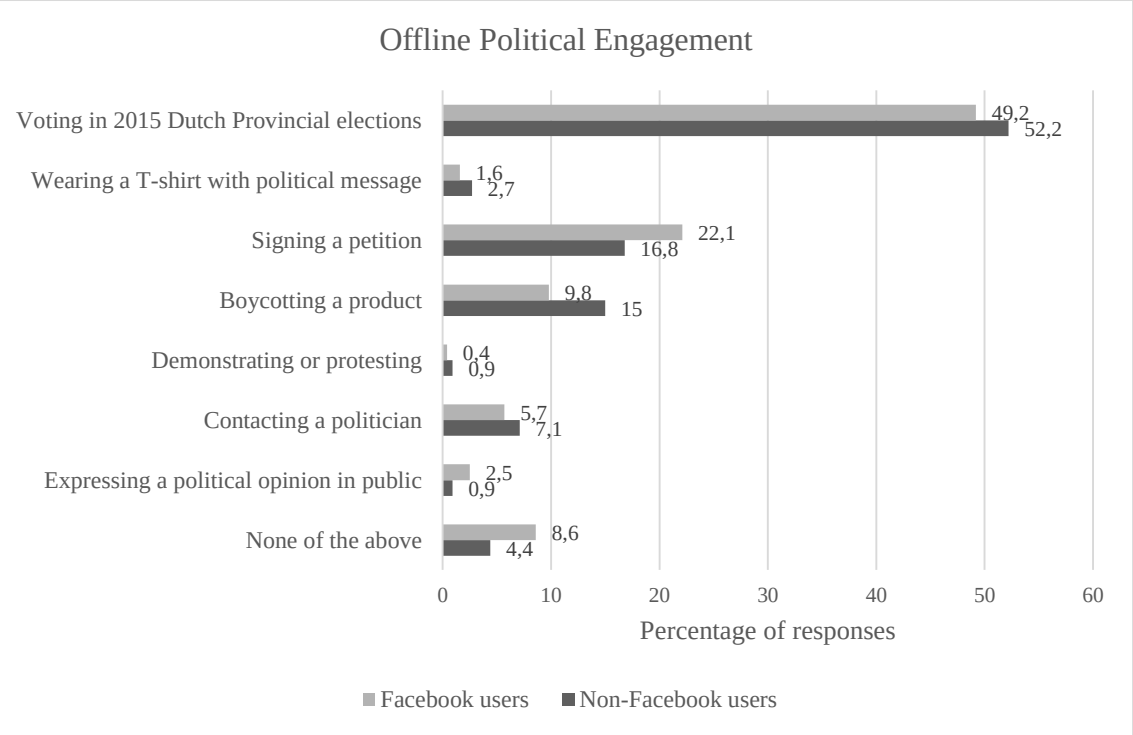

Figure 1. Bar chart of the distribution of the political activities for the offline political engagement of both Facebook and non-Facebook users.

Even though passive and active Facebook use do not have an influence on one's knowledge of current political events, these variables might still have an influence on political engagement. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the individual items that indicate respondents' offline political engagement. The bars represent the percentage of times that the various options were checked. The total percentage thus adds up to 100%. In total, the 220 respondents checked 357 activities. With 81.4%, the majority of respondents has participated in the 2015 Dutch provincial elections. The other six

Table 4. Frequencies of scores on the index of offline political engagement.

	Facebook Users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook Users (n = 67)	
Number of Activities	N	%	N	%
0	21	13.7	5	7.5
1	70	45.8	36	53.7
2	41	26.8	13	19.4
3	14	9.2	8	11.9
4	6	3.9	4	6.0
5	1	0.7	0	0.0
6	0	0.0	1	1.5
7	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	153	100.1	67	100.0

possible ways of engaging in politics offline that could be chosen were ticked off considerably less often, ranging from 2 (attending a demonstration of protest, 0.9% of respondents) to 73 times respectively (signing a petition on paper, 33.2% of respondents). The distribution of respondents is shown in table 4. Here, it can be seen that none of the respondents engaged in all seven activities, whereas at the other end of the spectrum 26 respondents (11.8%) indicated that they engaged in none of the offline political activities. The responses for the two groups of respondents turn out to be very similar (Facebook users: M = 1.46, SD = 1.01, non-Facebook users: M = 1.61, SD = 1.14).

In table 5, the hierarchical multiple regression model for the dependent variable offline political engagement is presented. Shown are the beta coefficients of the independent variables and the significance of their correlation with the dependent variable. Again, the independent variables were entered into the regression model in several blocks. Compared to the analysis of knowledge of current political events, some new variables, external political efficacy and internal political efficacy, were added to the second block because they are assumed to influence peoples' offline political engagement. Subsequently, the predictor variables passive and active Facebook use were entered into the model.

Table 5. Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Facebook and Non-Facebook Users' Offline Political Engagement

Dependent variable: Offline political engagement				
	Standardized beta coefficients			
	Facebook users (n = 153)			Non-Facebook users (n = 67)
Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3[1]	Model 2[1]
Step 1: Demographic variables				
Gender	-.132	-.011	-.023	.334*
Age	-.029	.110	.098	.180
Education	.248**	.166	.189	.001
Income	.044	-.021	-.019	-.303*
Step 2: Control variables				
Conventional media use		-.049	-.028	-.327*
Internet use		.112	.096	.082
Knowledge of the political system		-.016	-.032	.117
Offline network size		.048	.040	-.048
Online network size		.096	.102	.051
External Political Efficacy		-.177	-.180	-.458***
Internal Political Efficacy		.140	.156	.066
General Facebook use		.097	.149	-
Step 3: Facebook use for political information gathering				
Passive Facebook use			-.144	-
Active Facebook use			.092	-
Model statistics				
Adjusted R^2	.037	.077	.074	.299
R^2	.070	.170	.183	.442
R^2 change	.070	.101	.013	.299
Significance of change	.078	.127	.437	.012
df (regression, residual)	119	115	107	50
F statistic	2.157	1.830	1.683	3.099
Significance of *F*	.078	.052	.070	.004

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
[1]Final model

In the first model, the variables gender, age, education and income explain 7% of the variance in the dependent variable (F = 2.157, p = .078). In this model, strong evidence is found for the influence of education (β = .248, p < .01). The second model adds another 10.1 percentage points to the explained variance, a change at p = .053, adding up to 19.1% in total (F = 1.830, p = .052). Here, no statistically significant correlations were found. In the final model, 18.3% of the variance is explained (F = 1.683, p = .07). Again, none of the variables explains the variance of Facebook user's offline political engagement at a statistically significant level.

When it comes to the model's explanatory strength for non-Facebook users' offline political engagement, the change of explained variance from 17.0% in the first regression to 44.2% in the second and final regression is significant ($p < .05$). Of the demographic variables, both the beta coefficients for gender ($\beta = .334$, $p < .01$) and income ($\beta = -.303$, $p < .05$) are statistically significant. This implies that male respondents engage in offline political activities more often than female respondents do. In addition, the higher respondents' yearly household income, the lower their level of offline political engagement. It could be that these respondents do not feel the need to engage in a large number of offline political activities because they are financially successful in the current political situation and do not want it changed.

Moreover, conventional media use has a significant, but negative effect on offline political engagement ($\beta = -.327$, $p < .05$) after controlling for gender, age, education and income. The more one watches television, listens to the radio or reads newspapers for either general or political purposes thus correlates with a decrease in offline political engagement. This was not expected following the literature. Furthermore, and again in contrast to the literature, the p-value of external political efficacy provides very strong evidence for a negative effect ($\beta = -.458$, $p < .001$). Those with a high trust in the current political system thus engage in offline political activities within that system less often.

Compared to the group of Facebook users, the model for the offline political engagement of non-Facebook users thus offers some interesting and remarkable results. Whereas education has an influence on Facebook users' offline political engagement, it does not for that of non-Facebook users. Furthermore, it is the exact opposite for gender, income, conventional media use and external political efficacy. These are the

variables influencing non-Facebook users' offline political engagement, whereas they have no significant effect on that of Facebook users.

As was the case for knowledge of current political events, the use of Facebook for political information gathering, be it passively or actively, has no effect on respondents' offline political engagement.

4.4 Online Political Engagement

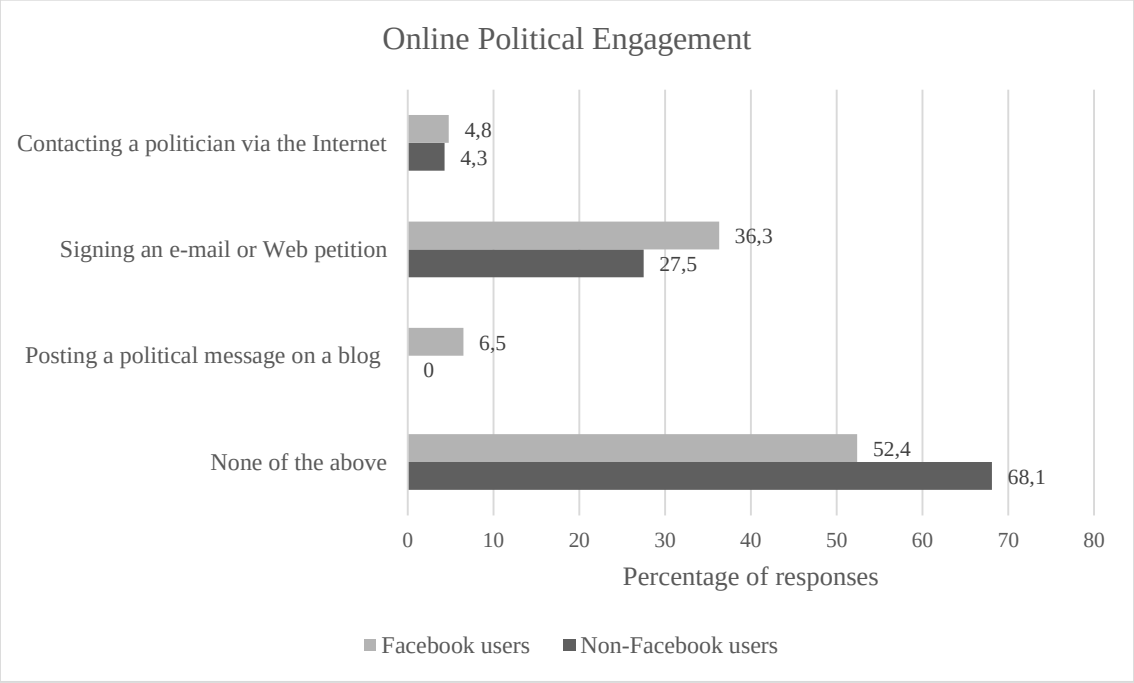

Figure 2. Bar chart of the distribution of the items making up the online political engagement variable for both Facebook and non-Facebook users. Note that the differences between Facebook users and non-Facebook users for each individual item are not statistically significant.

Identical to the variable offline political engagement, online political engagement was measured using a multiple response question. Respondents could thus tick off multiple, preconceived options covering online political engagement. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the individual items for online political engagement. Again, the bars represent the percentage of times that the various options were checked and the total percentage adds up to 100%. The total amount of activities checked is 237, or 107.7%. As was the case with the offline political activities, several respondents have checked at

least one activity that indicates online political engagement.

Most of the respondents (135, or 61.4%) did not engage in any online political activities that were asked about in the online survey. A range of 11 to 80 respondents (5% to 36.4%) chose at least one of the three individual items that indicated actual online political engagement.

Table 6 shows the distribution of respondents on the online political engagement index. Only one respondent engaged in all three activities. Moreover, 134 respondents (60.9%) did not engage in any of the online political engagement items. The two groups appeared to be distributed somewhat differently (Facebook users: M = .52, SD = .67, non-Facebook users: M = .33, SD = .53) and an independent samples t-test was then conducted in order to find out how likely it is that this difference is attributable to chance. The sig. (2-tailed) value turned out to be .023, meaning that it is likely that the difference between the means of Facebook users' and non-Facebook users' online political engagement was not based on chance. This suggests that the predictor variables might have a statistically significant influence on online political engagement. The following analysis covers this possible relationship in more detail.

Table 6. Frequencies of scores on the index of online political engagement.

	Facebook Users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook Users (n = 67)	
Number of Activities	N	%	N	%
0	87	56.9	47	70.1
1	53	34.6	18	26.9
2	12	7.8	2	3.0
3	1	0.7	0	0.0
Total	153	100.0	67	100.0

Table 7 shows the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis for online political engagement. As with the two other dependent variables, the model exists of three different blocks. The independent variables were the same as in the model for offline political engagement and the order of entering the blocks was

Table 7. Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Facebook and Non-Facebook Users' Online Political Engagement

Dependent variable: Online political engagement				
	Standardized beta coefficients			
	Facebook users (n = 153)			Non-Facebook users (n = 67)
Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3[1]	Model 2[1]
Step 1: Demographic variables				
Gender	-.129	.020	.049	.357*
Age	-.039	.115	.038	.011
Education	.161	.118	.124	.111
Income	.117	.044	.082	-.209
Step 2: Control variables				
Conventional media use		-.199	-.206	-.153
Internet use		.087	.041	-.102
Knowledge of the political system		.104	.100	.180
Offline network size		.401*	.453**	.035
Online network size		-.184	-.250	.168
External Political Efficacy		.104	.065	-.282
Internal Political Efficacy		.110	.077	-.028
General Facebook use		.005	-.060	-
Step 3: Facebook use for political information gathering				
Passive Facebook use			.034	-
Active Facebook use			.261*	-
Model statistics				
Adjusted R^2	.017	.084	.136	.097
R^2	.050	.176	.237	.281
R^2 change	.050	.126	.061	.140
Significance of change	.203	.048	.017	.328
df (regression, residual)	119	115	107	50
F statistic	1.514	1.904	2.334	1.526
Significance of *F*	.203	.042	.008	.157

*p < .05, **p < .01.
[1]Final model

identical. However, the analysis of online political engagement nonetheless portrays a number of differences compared to that of offline political engagement.

In the first regression model, 5% of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by the demographic variables (F = 1.514, p = .203). Here, no statistically significant relations were found. The second model (F = 1.904, p < .05) explains 17.6% of the variance, an increase of 12.6 percentage points that is statistically significant (p < .05). With a beta coefficient of .401, the variable offline network size is also statistically significant (p < .05).

The third and final model ($F = 2.334$, $p < .01$) explains 23.7% of the variance of online political engagement. Similar to the second model, the beta coefficient for offline network size is statistically significant ($\beta = .453$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, active Facebook use, one of the variables of interest for this study, correlates at a statistically significant level with online political engagement ($\beta = .261$, $p < .05$). The second hypothesis assumed that an increase of SNS use for passive and/or active information gathering correlates with a higher level of offline and/or online political engagement and is thus supported by the results here.

Finally, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis of non-Facebook users' online political engagement was conducted. The same two blocks of variables were entered to the regression analysis, compared to the analysis for offline political engagement. The first model ($F = 2.056$, $p = .101$) explains 14.1% of the variance in the dependent variable. Gender is statistically significant here with a beta coefficient of .333 ($p < .05$). Whereas the second model ($F = 1.526$, $p = .157$) amounts to another 14.0% explained variance (though not at a statistically significant level, at $p = .328$) and thus 28.1% in total, the gender variable remains similar ($\beta = .357$, $p < .05$). Male respondents thus engage more in online political activities than female respondents do. Of the other variables, only external political efficacy ($\beta = -.282$, $p = .058$) has a high p-value.

Compared to the final regression model of Facebook users, the regression analysis of non-Facebook users' online political engagement shows that gender can have an influence on online political engagement. However, the effect of one's offline network size for the group of Facebook users is not found for non-Facebook user. It should be noted that the independent samples T-test had indicated a difference between the means of Facebook users' and non-Facebook users' level of online political

engagement, which might thus explain the different variables that have an influence on either one of the groups. Furthermore, as the predictor variable active Facebook use has a statistically significant effect on online political activity for Facebook users, the level of online political engagement of non-Facebook users cannot be influenced by this variable. It is thus likely that the predictor variable active Facebook use attributes to the difference between the levels of online political engagement of both groups.

Even though the procedure that was followed for the regression model of both offline and online engagement was the same, a small number of variables and their statistically significant effects can be distinguished. The income variable for non-Facebook users, for example, was statistically significant for offline political engagement, but this was not the case for online political engagement. The same goes for conventional media use. Non-Facebook users that were exposed to conventional media more often engaged in less offline political activities. A similar relationship for online political engagement was not found. Moreover, the size of a Facebook user's offline network had a statistically significant, positive influence on online political engagement, whereas this was not the case for engaging in offline political activities. However, non-Facebook users' gender was statistically significantly correlated to both political engagement variables.

In short, the amount of correlations that were found between the predictor variables and dependent variables was small. This was only the case for active Facebook use, influencing online political engagement. In addition, some of the other correlations, involving control variables, contrast expectations from the literature. In the following section, the implications of these findings are discussed.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to find out to what extent the use of Facebook has an effect on people's political knowledge and/or political engagement. There has been previous research that looked into possible factors influencing political knowledge. However, the extent to which the use of SNS such as Facebook might have an effect has not been taken into consideration before. Moreover, whereas general use of Facebook has been found to influence people's engagement in political activities, often no distinction was made between Facebook use for political information gathering and that for other purposes. In the present thesis, however, this distinction was made, as well as the possibility to further distinguish between political information gathering done by reading, listening to, or watching (video) posts on Facebook, and discussing politics with other Facebook users.

5.1 Implications

The findings show a mixed pattern. Neither passive nor active use of Facebook for political information gathering purposes has any statistically significant effect on knowledge of current political events. As being exposed to political information on Facebook does not correlate with a higher level of knowledge of current political events, no evidence is found for the first hypothesis.

The absence of any statistically significant effects of the predictor variables on knowledge of current political events can be evaluated from multiple viewpoints. It could be that Facebook use for political information gathering does not have an influence on people's political knowledge in the present sample exclusively. However, whereas no positive effect could be found, there is also no evidence of a negative effect. Looking at it this way, finding no effect is just as much of a result as finding either a

positive or negative effect. In the literature, the debate concerning the use of Facebook focuses on two distinct arguments. Neither the claim that the use of Facebook results in a decline of political knowledge, nor the one stating that Facebook increases political knowledge is supported by the thesis here. It can thus be argued that the present study contributes to the debate by finding support for a stance in the middle of the two camps.

In this thesis, it has been assumed that the information covered by the questions indicating respondents' knowledge of current political events is the sort of information that is shared on Facebook. If this is indeed the case, then it may be questioned to what extent Facebook use can actually contribute to people's political knowledge by offering an alternative to the use of conventional media platforms. In compliance with earlier research (Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg 2004), using these conventional media platforms more often correlated at statistically significant levels with knowledge of current political events. This suggests that it is likely that the political information on Facebook is not merely limited to that specific media platform. However, the use of Facebook could still offer an alternative for political information gathering on conventional media platforms for those who do not use other media platforms.

Moreover, the advantage that Facebook use has over other, conventional media platforms is the ease of sharing political information with one's network. The findings suggest that this is related to engaging in political activities. The second hypothesis, which assumed that an increase of SNS use for passive and/or active information gathering correlates with a higher level of offline and/or online political engagement, is supported by the findings here. Even though none of the predictor variables had an effect on engaging in political activities offline, an increase of active Facebook use did

correlate with a higher level of online political engagement. This suggests that the use of Facebook to discuss politics with other users facilitates actual political engagement. The assumption that there exists a relevant difference between the effects of passive and active Facebook use is thus confirmed as well.

Not only was the use of active Facebook use for information gathering purposes positively correlated with online political engagement, respondents that used Facebook had a higher level of online political engagement than non-Facebook users. This difference was based on political activities that did not require the use of Facebook. It thus provides food for thought when assessing the potential ease of using Facebook for online political activities that do require Facebook use.

It has already become clear that engaging in online political activities is influenced by discussing politics with one's network on Facebook. According to the literature, the bigger a respondent's network, the greater the likelihood that some of the people from that network engage in politics (Huckfeldt et al. 1995). These people can consequently inspire the respondent to partake in political activities. This assumption is partially confirmed here, as very strong evidence was found for a relationship between offline network size and online political engagement.

Surprisingly, online network size does not correlate with online political engagement. It is nonetheless likely that a respondent's online networks is at the root of a higher level of online political engagement. Having an online network is not only a requirement for active Facebook use, but also for engaging in two out of three of the activities in this thesis' questionnaire (that is, making contact with a politician using the Internet and signing an e-mail or Web petition). The absence of a correlation between online network size and online political engagement thus suggests that it is a network's

ability of inspiring people to engage in politics that matters here, not its size.

The third hypothesis assumed that more knowledge of the political system would correlate with a higher level of knowledge of current political events, offline political engagement and/or online political engagement. Knowledge of the political system only had a statistically significant effect on knowledge of current political events. Those with a high level of knowledge of the political system are thus also likely to have a high level of knowledge of current political events. This could be due to an interest in politics, but it could also suggest that those with knowledge of one aspect of politics have an easier time consuming and understanding information about another political aspect. Both explanations are in consistence with the idea that knowledge begets knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 287). Regardless of the absence of an effect of a high level of knowledge of the political system on engaging in more offline and/or political activities, the hypothesis could thus be accepted.

The fourth hypothesis assumed that a higher level of external and/or internal political efficacy would correlate with a higher level of offline and/or online political engagement, as was suggested by the literature (Kaid, McKinney and Tedesco, 2007). However, internal political efficacy has no statistically significant effect on either offline or online political engagement. For external political efficacy, the evidence is mixed. Even though the external political efficacy of Facebook users does not correlate at a statistically significant level with their engagement in offline and online political activities, non-Facebook users' external political efficacy nonetheless has a negative, highly statistically significant effect on offline political engagement. The analysis for online political engagement also suggests that non-Facebook users with a high trust in the current political system engage in political activities within that system less often. In

summary, the findings here show no support of the fourth hypothesis.

The pattern that emerges is both reassuring and worrisome within the context of current democratic societies. The effects of external and internal political efficacy point in the same direction as that of knowledge of the political system. On the one hand, those who think they can influence politics to a lesser extent than others do not engage less in political activities. In other words, they do not let a lack of trust in the political system limit their political engagement. On the other hand, respondents with less knowledge of the political system do not engage less in these activities either. Seeing that those with more knowledge of the political system do not engage more in political activities, the question that rises is whether the collective knowledge of the political system is high enough for evaluating the functioning of government.

In addition, offline network size correlated at a statistically significant level with online political activity, whereas knowledge of the political system did not. This suggests that knowing people who engage in politics is more of an indicator of whether someone will engage in politics than that person's knowledge of the reasons why one should engage in specific political activities. Because of the following limitations, however, it cannot be ruled out that some of the results with regard to political knowledge offer a somewhat unrealistic view of the matter at hand.

5.2 Limitations

Certain factors concerning the research design of the present study may have caused the absence of more statistically significant correlations between passive and active Facebook use and knowledge of current political events, offline political engagement and online political engagement. For example, there was only little variance on the index covering knowledge of current political events. Most respondents scored the same

amount of points by answering the questions correctly. As a result, the index was highly skewed at -1.994 (considering that acceptable values for skewness range from -1.0 to 1.0). It is then unlikely that an increase of the level of knowledge of current political events can be explained by an increase or decrease of Facebook use (both general Facebook use and passive and active Facebook use for political information gathering) at a statistically significant level.

There are four different possible explanations for this lack of variance, all of which can be traced back to the thesis' research design. First of all, it is difficult to compose a reliable measure for political knowledge. According to Levendusky and Jackman (2003), the ideal way to do this is to combine a number of knowledge questions with a subjective assessment by an interviewer. In the present study, however, respondents were asked to fill in an online questionnaire, without an interviewer present to assess respondents' level of political knowledge. A less reliable alternative is then to ask respondents to indicate how much they know about politics (*Ibid*.), as was covered here by the internal political efficacy question that asked whether respondents agreed with the statement that they were better informed about politics than most people. However, no correlation between a higher level of internal political efficacy and knowledge of current political events was found. As such, it is unclear how well this measure can indicate a respondents' actual level of political knowledge.

Another possible explanation is that the knowledge questions covering current political events were too easy and thus required only a low level of actual political knowledge. Nearly 72% of the respondents gave the correct answer to all of these questions. This had not been accounted for initially; neither did it become clear from pretesting. With the wisdom of hindsight, some questions should have been made more

difficult. They should either have gone into more detail content-wise, or the form in which the questions were posed should have been different. Instead of close-ended, multiple-choice questions, open-ended equivalents might have limited the amount of respondents answering all answers correctly, which then potentially would have resulted in more variance. The problem with open-ended questions, however, is that it requires respondents to put more time and effort into filling in the answers, which might lead to a high dropout rate. Moreover, with the questions made more difficult, the knowledge index could become skewed at the other end of the spectrum, which might again result in almost no variance.

Furthermore, it could be that respondents scored high on the knowledge indices because the overall level of political knowledge of people with regard to these issues is higher than expected. Naturally, there is interaction between the difficulty of questions and the level of respondents' knowledge. However, if the level of knowledge is too high on average, the number of questions answered correctly will be large regardless of how hard it is to answer them.

In addition, it should be taken into consideration that the sample used in this thesis is by no means a representative one. Most of the knowledge questions in this thesis, if not all of them, were similar to those posed in national election studies in both the U.S. and the Netherlands. They are also very alike to the questions used by Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg (2004). In that study, the percentage of correctly answered questions was considerably lower. Whereas the sample in the Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg study was a representative one, this was not the case in the present study. The high scores on the knowledge index in this thesis may thus be due to a selection bias, resulting in a sample that is not

representative.

Finally, the lack of variance may be explained by the fact that people could 'cheat' while answering the knowledge questions. The present study used an online survey to gather data. However, this implies that the setting in which respondents filled in the survey could not be controlled. Respondents could be helped out while answering the knowledge questions by either asking another person for the correct answer or by simply looking it up on the Internet. However, all entries were anonymous, which might have ruled out respondents' feelings of shame for not knowing the answer to some of the questions. It can thus be doubted that respondents actually sought help.

There are also limits to measuring political engagement. The problem with having multiple activities that indicate political engagement is that some activities may be seen as having a bigger impact on the political process than others. It could be that more people therefore engage in these specific activities. The best example of this is voting in elections. Some citizens might think that voting has enough of an influence on politics already and that they therefore do not need to engage in other political activities. To anticipate to this, respondents can be asked to indicate which activities they find the most influential and then add a certain weight to the activities to receive more of a normal distribution. This weight can be based on pretesting, or by adding a question to the questionnaire. As every sample might have different weights added to the individual items, the generalizability of the results would be limited. However, the generalizability would be limited even more when the author was to distribute the weights in an arbitrary manner.

Based on the results and limitations of this thesis, the following ideas could be worth researching in the future. For example, to be able to assess the extent to which

Facebook use has an effect on political knowledge, it should first be clear how much knowledge of politics citizens living in democratic countries should have, as well as how to measure this. Otherwise, one can have a very reliable measure for political knowledge while still finding results that do not match expectations. This issue can be solved by conducting a larger pre-test.

Moreover, an experimental setting could solve the potential problem of respondents using sources other than their own knowledge to answer knowledge questions. Notice, however, that this requires the creation of a situation that represents the use of SNS in the real world. It will be difficult to realize such a setting. One of the issues would be that participants cannot be forced to read all Facebook posts appearing on their newsfeeds. Because it is not likely that Facebook users read every single post on their newsfeed, this would manipulate the results of the experiment.

Furthermore, future research could look into the extent to which Facebook can be used as an alternative to conventional media platforms. The findings in this thesis suggest that this may already be the case for those without television or newspapers at home. However, not only Facebook use for political information gathering should be subject of future research. The use of Facebook for entertainment purposes, which supposedly leads to people abstaining from politics, requires attention from communication researchers as well. Because no evidence could be found here for a correlation between using Facebook for political information gathering purposes and political knowledge, it would be a finding of great importance when Facebook use for entertainment purposes would correlate to a decline in political knowledge and engagement. In addition, the use of other SNS deserves attention as well, even though these sites are less popular than Facebook.

To conclude, this thesis has attempted at contributing to the debate on the influence of SNS by providing evidence of the effect that Facebook use for political information gathering has on political knowledge and engagement. Despite some limitations, one can take away a number of findings from the present thesis. Whereas the use of Facebook might simply look like an alternative to conventional media platforms for gaining political information at first, it also appears to be capable of facilitating engaging in online political activities. Because this aspect is available to a widespread public, the use of Facebook may contribute to a democracy in which citizens are more politically engaged.

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7. Appendices

7.1 Questionnaire

Questions regarding respondents' use of Facebook (two-point item):
1. "Do you use Facebook – (1) yes or (0) no?"

Questions regarding respondents' general Facebook use (eight-point item):
2. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend on Facebook in an ordinary week – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"

Questions regarding respondents' passive political information gathering on Facebook (eight-point items):
3. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend on Facebook in an ordinary week reading, listening to, and watching (video) posts containing political information – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"

Questions regarding respondents' active political information gathering on Facebook (eight-point items):
4. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend on Facebook in an ordinary week discussing politics with other Facebook users – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"

Questions regarding respondents' television use (eight-point items):
5. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend watching television in an ordinary week – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"
6. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend watching television in an ordinary week to follow political developments – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"

Questions regarding respondents' radio use (eight-point items):
7. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend listening to the radio in an ordinary week – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"
8. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend listening to the radio in an ordinary week following political developments – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"

Questions regarding respondents' newspaper use (eight-point items):
9. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend reading newspapers in an ordinary week – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"
10. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend reading newspapers in an ordinary week following political developments – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"

Questions regarding respondents' Internet use (eight-point items):
11. "Could you indicate the amount of days that you spend surfing the Internet (excluding Facebook) in an ordinary week – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?"

12. “Could you give an estimate of the amount of hours that you spend surfing the Internet (excluding Facebook) in an ordinary week following political developments – (0) never, (1) 1 day, (2) 2 days, (3) 3 days, (4) 4 days, (5) 5 days, (6) 6 days, (7) daily?”

Questions regarding respondents’ external political efficacy (five-point items):
13. “Could you indicate how you feel about the following statement: “Public officials do not care about what I think.” – (0) strongly disagree, (1) disagree, (2) neither agree nor disagree, (3) agree, (4) strongly agree.”
14. “Could you indicate how you feel about the following statement: “People like me have no say in government.” – (0) strongly disagree, (1) disagree, (2) neither agree nor disagree, (3) agree, (4) strongly agree.”

Questions regarding respondents’ internal political efficacy (five-point items):
15. “Could you indicate how you feel about the following statement: “I feel that I have a good understanding of politics.” – (0) strongly disagree, (1) disagree, (2) neither agree nor disagree, (3) agree, (4) strongly agree.”
16. “Could you indicate how you feel about the following statement: “I feel that I am well qualified to participate in government.” – (0) strongly disagree, (1) disagree, (2) neither agree nor disagree, (3) agree, (4) strongly agree.”
17. “Could you indicate how you feel about the following statement: “I feel that I am better informed about government than most people.” – (0) strongly disagree, (1) disagree, (2) neither agree nor disagree, (3) agree, (4) strongly agree.”

Questions regarding respondents’ level of knowledge of political news:
18. “Who was the politician that asked his public whether they wanted more or less people from Morocco to live in the Netherlands after which the crowd started shouting “less, less, less!” – Mark Rutte / Geert Wilders / Alexander Pechtold / Diederik Samson?”
19. “In what country did the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) crash? – Syrië / Rusland / Wit-Rusland / Oekraïne?”
20. “Who is the politician that left his job as the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs to become the next Euro Commissioner for the Netherlands – Ivo Opstelten / Frans Timmermans / Henk Krol / Fred Teeven?”
21. “From what party is Dutch minister of Finances Jeroen Dijsselbloem? – PvdA / SP / VVD / PVV?
22. “What are the two political parties currently making up the Dutch government – VVD en PVV / CDA en PVV / VVD en PvdA / PvdA en CDA?”

Questions regarding respondents’ level of general political knowledge:
23. “What is the amount of members of parliament in the Netherlands – 75 / 100 / 150 / 175?”
24. “What is the form of government of the Netherlands – Absolute monarchie / Semi-presidentiële republiek / Parlementaire republiek / Constitutionale parlementaire monarchie?”
25. “In what city do the Dutch ministries reside? – Amsterdam / Rotterdam / Utrecht / Den Haag?”
26. “Of which Chamber are the members allowed to amend proposed legislation – Alleen de Eerste Kamer / Alleen de Tweede Kamer / Zowel de Eerste als de Tweede Kamer / Geen van beide?”
27. “Following what constitutional convention do ministers bear the ultimate

responsibility for the actions of their ministry or department – Scheiding der machten / Koninklijk besluit / Secularisatie / Ministeriële verantwoordelijkheid?"

Questions regarding respondents' offline political engagement:
28. "Could you indicate whether you have engaged in any of the following activities over the last 12 months (multiple answers possible) – Voting in the 2015 Dutch provincial elections / Wearing a badge, sticker or T-shirt with a political message / Signing a written petition / Participating in a demonstration or protest / Boycotting a product for political, ethical or environmental reasons / Writing or calling any politician at the local, provincial or national level / Writing a letter to a newspaper or magazine or calling a live radio or TV show to express a political opinion / None of the above?"

Questions regarding respondents' online political engagement:
29. "Could you indicate whether you have engaged in any of the following activities over the last 12 months (multiple answers possible) – Making contact with a politician using the Internet / Signing an e-mail or Web petition / Posting a message on a blog to express a political opinion / None of the above?"

Questions regarding respondents' offline network size:
30. "Could you give an estimate of the amount of people with whom you talk about politics without the use of the Internet (for example, family, friends, acquaintances and colleagues – [open-ended question]?"

Questions regarding respondents' online network size:
31. "Could you give an estimate of the amount of people with whom you talk about politics by using the Internet – [open-ended question]?"

Question regarding respondents' demographics:
32. "What is your gender – (0) male or (1) female?"
33. "What is your age – [open-ended question]?"
34. "What is the highest form of education that you have finished – (0) Basisonderwijs, (1) Voortgezet onderwijs: VMBO/MAVO, (2) Voortgezet onderwijs: HAVO, (3) Voortgezet onderwijs VWO/HBS/Gymnasium, (4) Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs (MBO), (5) Hoger beroepsonderwijs (HBO), (6) Wetenschappelijk onderwijs: Bachelor/Kandidaats, (7) Wetenschappelijk onderwijs: Master/Doctoraat, PhD.
35. "Could you give an indication of the shared income of your household – (0) €0-€19.999 / (1) €20.000/€39.999 / (2) €40.000-€59.999 / (3) €60.000-€79.999 / (4) €80.000-99.999 / (5) €100.000 of meer / (6) Dat weet ik niet of zeg ik liever niet?"

7.2 Distribution of Answers to the Knowledge Questions

Questions covering the variable respondents' knowledge of current political events with the correct answer in bold:
1. "Who was the politician that asked his public whether they wanted more or less people from Morocco to live in the Netherlands after which the crowd started shouting "less, less, less!" – Mark Rutte / Geert Wilders / Alexander Pechtold / Diederik Samson?"

Table 7. Frequencies of answers given to question 1.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
Mark Rutte	0	0.0	0	0.0
Geert Wilders	**153**	**100.0**	**67**	**100.0**
Alexander Pechtold	0	0.0	0	0.0
Diederik Samson	0	0.0	0	0.0

2. "In what country did the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) crash? – Syrië / Rusland / Wit-Rusland / Oekraïne?"

Table 8. Frequencies of answers given to question 2.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
Syrië	1	0.7	0	0.0
Rusland	1	0.7	2	3.0
Wit-Rusland	0	0.0	0	0.0
Oekraïne	**151**	**98.7**	**65**	**97.0**

3. "Who is the politician that left his job as the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs to become the next Euro Commissioner for the Netherlands – Ivo Opstelten / Frans Timmermans / Henk Krol / Fred Teeven?"

Table 9. Frequencies of answers given to question 3.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
Ivo Opstelten	2	1.3	1	1.5
Frans Timmermans	**145**	**94.8**	**64**	**95.5**
Henk Krol	3	2.0	1	1.5
Fred Teeven	3	2.0	1	1.5

4. "From what party is Dutch minister of Finances Jeroen Dijsselbloem? – PvdA / SP / VVD / PVV?

Table 10. Frequencies of answers given to question 4.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
PvdA	**112**	**73.2**	**56**	**85.1**
SP	1	0.7	1	1.5
VVD	40	26.1	9	13.4
PVV	0	0.0	0	0.0

5. “What are the two political parties currently making up the Dutch government – VVD en PVV / CDA en PVV / VVD en PvdA / PvdA en CDA?”

Table 11. Frequencies of answers given to question 5.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
VVD en PVV	3	2.0	2	3.0
CDA en PVV	0	0.0	0	0.0
VVD en PvdA	**146**	**95.4**	**61**	**91.0**
PvdA en CDA	4	2.6	4	6.0

Questions covering the variable knowledge of the political system with the correct answer in bold:
1. “What is the amount of members of parliament in the Netherlands – 75 / 100 / 150 / 175?”

Table 12. Frequencies of answers given to question 1.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
75	13	8.5	5	7.5
100	2	1.3	0	0.0
150	**135**	**88.2**	**61**	**91.0**
175	3	2.0	1	1.5

2. “What is the form of government of the Netherlands – Absolute monarchie / Semi-presidentiële republiek / Parlementaire republiek / Constitutionale parlementaire monarchie?”

Table 13. Frequencies of answers given to question 2.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
Absolute monarchie	3	2.0	0	0.0
Semi-presidentiële republiek	1	0.7	0	0.0
Parlementiare republiek	16	10.5	0	0.0
Constitutionale parlementaire monarchie	**153**	**86.9**	**67**	**100.0**

3. “In what city do the Dutch ministries reside? – Amsterdam / Rotterdam / Utrecht / Den Haag?”

Table 14. Frequencies of answers given to question 3.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
Amsterdam	0	0.0	0	0.0
Rotterdam	0	0.0	0	0.0
Utrecht	0	0.0	0	0.0
Den Haag	**153**	**67**	**100.0**	**100.0**

4. “Of which Chamber are the members allowed to amend proposed legislation – Alleen de Eerste Kamer / Alleen de Tweede Kamer / Zowel de Eerste als de Tweede Kamer / Geen van beide?”

Table 15. Frequencies of answers given to question 4.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	N	%	N	%
Alleen de Eerste Kamer	36	23.5	12	17.9
Alleen de Tweede Kamer	81	52.9	39	58.2
Zowel de Eerste als de Tweede Kamer	30	19.6	11	16.4
Geen van beide	6	3.9	5	7.5

5. “Following what constitutional convention do ministers bear the ultimate responsibility for the actions of their ministry or department – Scheiding der machten / Koninklijk besluit / Secularisatie / Ministeriële verantwoordelijkheid?”

Table 16. Frequencies of answers given to question 5.

	Facebook users (n = 153)		Non-Facebook users (n = 67)	
	Yes* (n = 153)	No** (n = 67)	Yes	No
Scheiding der machten	19	12.4	3	4.5
Koninklijk besluit	11	7.2	2	3.0
Secularisatie	3	2.0	0	0.0
Ministeriële verantwoordelijkheid	**120**	**78.4**	**62**	**92.5**

*Facebook users.

**Non-Facebook users.