



Universiteit Utrecht

A Quantitative Research on the Influence of Social Media Use on Political Trust among Citizens of the Netherlands

Abstract

Today, social media allows members of digital communities to connect in new ways. Previous research has shown that social media has the ability to create online social capital which increases offline political participation. As political trust is also a relevant aspect of social capital, the question arises whether the same relationship can be found. This study aimed to investigate how the use of social media influences political trust of citizens of the Netherlands. In light of its findings, the current study cannot support the assumption that general social media use predicts changes in political trust of citizens in the Netherlands. However, some controversial findings were found, as the social networking sites Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp do show an effect on political trust. Besides, the influence of social media use differs for certain age groups, however the same does not apply for political affiliation. More elaborated future research is necessary to elucidate the effect of the different social media on political trust and to gain more insights into the mechanisms behind this.

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1. Introduction

Trust in the government and others in society, has increased among the Dutch population in the period between 2012-2017 (CBS, 2018). This development however, is at odds with the prevailing view that social and institutional trust in the Netherlands has diminished in recent years, especially during the current Corona pandemic (Peeters, Smits van Waesberghe, Mesic, & van Wonderen, 2020). In times of crisis, fluctuations in trust can take place. These are also present within the current pandemic. After the recent riots and multiple demonstrations regarding regulations due to the Covid-19, it might be expected that trust in the government is at its lowest (NOS, 2021). Especially since the disagreement among the Dutch population about the measures and rules the government has implemented, is currently rising (DVJ Insights, 2021).

Social media plays a significant role in the rising disagreement, as online discussions about the pandemic are increasing on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Xue et al., 2020). Earlier this year, Arjen Lubach, the host of the well-known Dutch television show '*Zondag met Lubach*', discussed political trust in one of his episodes and particularly focused on the role of social media platforms (VPRO, 2020). On November 18th, nearly 2 million people watched the episode called '*fabeltjesfuik*' in which Lubach expresses his concerns about the way social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, influence the content that is presented to users (AD, 2020). According to Lubach, algorithms cause people to get into a so called '*fabeltjesfuik*' (myth trap), in which the platforms show the same kind of personalized content to users. Lubach argues that through this process, people can become vulnerable to radical ideas and conspiracy theories, including those regarding the current Corona pandemic and the government (VPRO, 2020). The current pandemic is a good example of which processes influence the amount of trust individuals have in their government and shows the growing impact of social media within this process. It is therefore important to investigate whether social media influences the political trust of citizens, as trust remains an essential aspect of society.

According to well-known theorists such as Tocqueville, Durkheim and Simmel, trust is one of the most important forces in society (Newton, 2001). It makes it possible to maintain peaceful and stable social relations that create the basis for collective behavior and productive cooperation. While investigating trust, the social capital theory cannot be missed. This theory argues that a dense network of voluntary associations and citizens organizations, helps to sustain civil society and community relations in a way that generates trust and cooperation between citizens and a high level of civic engagement and participation (Newton, 2001).

According to the social capital theory, generalized social trust is an important and central element in a complex and virtuous circle of social attitudes, behavior, and institutions that act as the foundation for stable and effective democratic government (Zmerli & Newton, 2008). Moreover, an important aspect of the social capital theory is the relationship between social capital and political trust (Putnam, 2000). Political trust has different ways to be measured, however this study uses confidence in parliament as a measure of political trust, as parliament is the main representative institution of democratic governments (Newton, 2001).

Most scientists agree upon the significance of the relationship between these two elements (Kaase, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Newton, 2001; Schyns & Koop, 2009; Zmerli & Newton, 2008). However, only a few studies are conducted regarding the new kind of way people can create social capital: social media. This relatively new way of being able to create a digitally network can have different effects on the way that people interact with each other. The study of Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Scherman (2017), argues that the emergence of social media has changed the nature of social capital and the ways in which it is generated from social relationships. The new phenomenon was introduced as ‘social media social capital’ and is seen as a new conceptual and empirical construct by the researchers. Social media social capital embodies the new way of creating interpersonal relationships on social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, and the gathering of information and emotional support from this online social network. They found that social media social capital can be distinguished from offline social capital, which is further explained later in this study. The results also showed a relationship between social media social capital and political participation, which is an important aspect of the social capital theory (Putnam, 2000). The relationship between social media social capital and political trust however, was not investigated, which leaves a scientific gap regarding this topic. This research will study the influence of social media use on political trust via social media social capital. This will result in theoretical progress as the social capital theory will be expanded by investigating the construct of social media social capital and the influence of social media use on political trust of citizens of the Netherlands.

Moreover, the current study will also investigate whether mechanisms such as Lubach’s *‘fabeltjesfuik’*, influence the effect of social media use on political trust for certain groups of individuals. Previous research has already shown that so called ‘filter bubbles’ have an effect on how social media users see particular content and how this influences their viewpoints on for example politics (Klein & Robinson, 2019). The results also indicated that this effect differs for people with contrasting political affiliations. Furthermore, the amount of time spent on social media varies between age groups which might also influence the effect on political trust

(CBS, 2019). Within this research it will therefore be studied whether the effect of social media use on political trust varies for groups with different political affiliations and ages.

The main research question that will be answered within this study is “*What is the effect of social media use on political trust of citizens of the Netherlands?*”. Followed with the two sub questions: “*How does political affiliations influence the effect of social media use on political trust of citizens of the Netherlands?*” and “*How does age differences influence the effect of social media use on political trust of citizens of the Netherlands?*”.

In the first part of the current research, the main theories regarding political trust, social capital and social media usage will be discussed in the theory section. Thereafter, the data, operationalization and applied methods are described, followed by the results. At last, the conclusions and points for further discussion will be presented.

2. Literature overview

2.1 Social capital & Social media use

According to well-known scientist Robert Putnam (2000), social capital can be defined as the connections among individuals and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Through these kinds of social relations or through social networks in general, an actor may borrow or apprehend resources of other actors, for example their health, power or reputation (Lin, 2008). These social resources can then generate a return for the actor. The general premise of social capital is therefore its network-based quality, which is acknowledged by all scholars who have contributed to the discussion (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Scherman, 2017). The social capital theory was at first used to characterize the structure of opportunity and action in communities or collectives. However, this idea was later adapted and focused on individual behavior and orientations toward politics and the public sphere (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). In addition, scholars found that communities were defined by the structure of interpersonal relationships rather than the geo-spatial structure (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Scherman, 2017). Communities were therefore seen as diffused networks of personal relationships which changed the view on social capital, since scholars started seeing it as the value that relationships add to individuals' lives (Burt, 2005).

Moreover, Putnam (2000) argues that rich and dense associational networks facilitate the underlying conditions of interpersonal trust and cooperation, that provide the social foundations for a vital democracy. Coleman (1988) also argues that trust is one of the main components of social capital and social capital is in itself an important condition of social

integration and democratic stability. The general trust level of individuals influences the amount of trust they have in political institutions (Bäck & Kestilä, 2009). People who trust other people in general, tend to be the most trustful of political forces.

Continuing, social media such as Facebook and Instagram, enables users to create profiles and allow them to make new social connections in a virtual space (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These social network sites enables members of digital communities to relate and communicate in new ways, in which the co-presence of others is not necessary to develop social capital (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Scherman, 2017). In addition, research has shown that social media changes the structure and nature of social connection, which could therefore alter the distribution and nature of social capital embedded in those social relationships (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). In later research conducted by the same scholars, the relationship between social media social capital and traditional social capital was investigated (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Scherman, 2017). They found that even though the constructs are related, social media social capital is empirically distinct from offline social capital. This means that social capital remains an important benchmark on how strongly people connect in their communities, yet social media affects the nature of the value derived from relationships created on those platforms.

Furthermore, Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Scherman (2017) also studied the relationship between social media social capital and political participation and found a significant and positive effect. Their results indicate that social media social capital predicts both offline and online political participation. This means that relationships generated through social media are predictors of online political participation as well as traditional political participation. Based upon these findings, one could predict the relationship between social media social capital and political trust, as political participation and political trust are both important indicators of social capital (Newton, 2001). Following this reasoning, it could be argued that when social media social capital influences offline social capital, political trust is influenced by social media social capital too. To clarify these predicted relations, see figure 1 below.

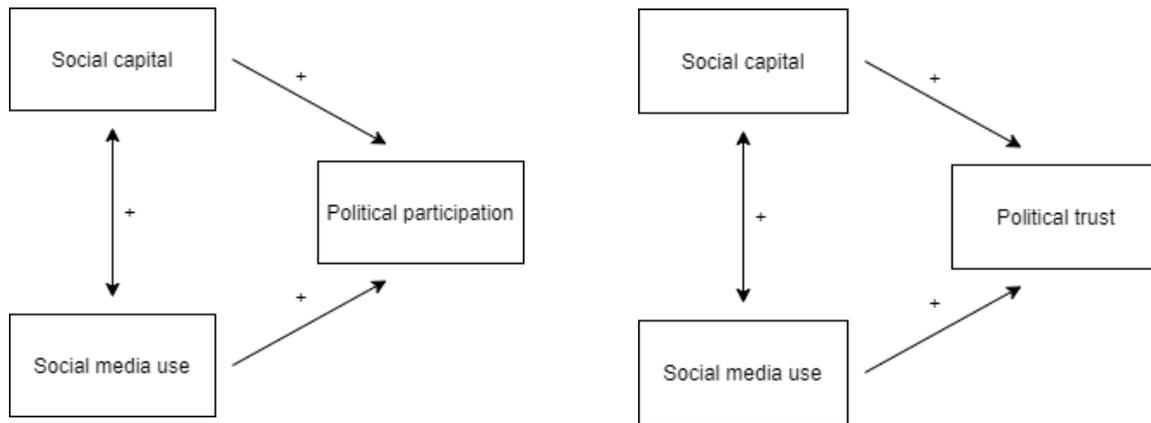


Figure 1: The effect of social media social capital on political participation & political trust.

The relationships could be explained by the fact that social media influences offline social capital, as mentioned before. Social media promotes engagement with a broader range of media content related to politics and public affairs. In this way, social media social capital enhances the gathering of online information from which individuals can base their opinion on. Moreover, due to the interactive character of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, participation and peer-to-peer- conversation are promoted, which gives users more control over their exposure to political news than they would get by using traditional media (Ceron, 2015). In addition, confidence in the government increases because of the interactions with fellow citizens and politicians which expands the political engagement of users (T. J. Johnson & Kaye, 2014). In this way, political participation is positively influenced and enhanced and through the same way one might predict the influence of social media social capital on political trust.

Concluding, due to the interactive character of social media, users create social media social capital which affects their trust in the government. Therefore, it could be expected that a high social media usage of the general Dutch population, will lead to a greater social media social capital, followed by high political trust. This leads to the following hypothesis;

[H1]: Social media use is positively related with offline political trust.

The positive effect of social media use on political trust is expected for the general Dutch population. However, social media use in combination with groups that have certain characteristics could maybe alter the effect on political trust. Hence, this research will study whether different effects can be found for particular groups within this general population.

2.2 Social media use & political affiliations

The positive effect of social media social capital on political trust, might not hold true for groups of individuals who already tend to have low political trust in general. This could therefore alter the effect of social media, as individuals who have lower political trust perhaps gather negative information with regard to the government on their social media.

First, it is important to understand what influences political trust in general. Political party identification can function as a predictor of support for the political system. Scholars argue that when people get attached to a party that represents their views, they become integrated into the political system and develop greater levels of trust (Holmberg, 2003). This view however, does not apply to all parts of the electorate. Voters that are more on the extreme ends of the left-right spectrum, might develop negative attitudes towards the political system, especially when these parties do not join any government coalitions (Strøm, 2008). Research conducted by Söderlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen (2009) confirms this assumption as it shows that radical right-wing supporters tend to show greater levels of dissatisfaction and distrust towards the political system and political institutions. Besides, the same scholars found that radical right-wing voters place on average less trust in parliament and politicians than those who voted for other parties. Nonetheless, this does not only apply for the radical right side of the left-right spectrum. Hillen & Steiner (2019) found that voters for radical left-wing parties also exhibit lower levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust. This might suggest that many of the supporters of radical right- as well as radical left-wing parties, have found an outlet for their frustration by identifying themselves with and voting for a specific party (Söderlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009). Based upon these findings, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

[H2a]: The political affiliation of either radical right-wing parties or radical left-wing parties has a negative effect on political trust.

For individuals who already have low to little political trust as described above, social media might reinforce these negative attitudes even more. For example, Klein & Robinson (2019) found that people who obtain news from social media and social network sites report lower trust in government. In addition, they discussed the interaction between social media use and the partisan predispositions of the person using the social media platform. Those who had partisan attachments to the governing party in the US, reported more trust in government as their levels of social media usage increased. Nonetheless, those with negative views of the governing party reported less trust. This interaction is due to the polarizing effects that social

media platforms can have (Pariser, 2011).

Social media sites are often blamed for reinforcing political polarization by creating “echo chambers” that prevent people from being exposed to information that contradicts their preexisting beliefs (Bail et al., 2018). This is in line with the term ‘filter bubble’ that was created by Pariser (2011) to illustrate the phenomenon of polarization on social media platforms. With this term, he tries to explain that algorithms which are intended to customize and personalize the user’s online experience, place the user in a bubble where only information that matches with their previous consumption behaviour is presented. A more important phenomenon regarding this topic, is that of selective exposure. This entails the tendency that individuals have to consume media which is in line with their views and beliefs and avoid such content that is different in perspective or even challenging to their position (Spohr, 2017). There is increasing evidence to support the argument that selective exposure has a significant influence on polarization and group homogeneity.

Through these types of algorithms that are used in social media and selective exposure, people are influenced in their political views. The feeling towards a political party substantially influences how individuals interpret and use new information (Klein & Robinson, 2019). Specifically those who have a strong political opinion regarding radical left or right wing parties are more willingly to accept information consonant with their predisposition and dismiss or rationalize deviating information (Lelkes & Westwood, 2017). Research shows that citizens who are sensitive to populist or radical right wing arguments, often find themselves in filter bubbles or echo chambers where they can shut themselves off from those who disagree and are only open for reassuring content (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018). Based upon the insides of the literature, one might expect that the positive effect of social media social capital on political trust only applies for individuals that vote for central parties. For individuals who are more on the extreme ends of the left-right spectrum, this positive effect is expected to be smaller or perhaps even turn negative. Therefore, the hypotheses are as follows;

[H2b]: The positive effect of social media use on political trust applies for central party voters.

[H2c]: The positive effect of social media use on political trust is smaller for radical right-wing and radical left-wing voters and could even become negative.

2.3 Social media use and age differences

The expected positive effect of social media use on political trust might also differ between the average usage of certain groups, particularly between age groups. Currently, almost every individual regardless of their age, uses social media. However, younger citizens in the Netherlands use social media the most and are even in the leading groups of social media users within Europe (CBS, 2019). In 2018, 95 percent of young people aged between 12 to 25 used the internet on a daily basis. The effect of social media use on political trust could be positive or negative for younger citizens, which will be explained by using the theory of bridging and bonding social capital.

Bridging social capital

The social capital theory distinguishes two types of social capital: bridging social capital and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital refers to loose connections between individuals in which people can provide each other with new information and input via these connections. These connections can be related to Granovetter's (1983) term of 'weak ties', in which he describes them as connections that often exist in large quantities for a person but do not describe a very close relationship. These weak ties bring together heterogeneous groups in which individuals can gain new information through diverse weak ties. Furthermore, bridging social capital is often associated with a higher level of trust in government (Myeong & Seo, 2016). Through bridging social capital on social networking sites, users gain new information which results in higher political trust. Hence, through the process of bridging social capital one could expect a higher political trust among young Dutch citizens as they have a higher amount of social media usage.

Thus, an interaction effect with age is to be expected, in which the positive effect of social media use on political trust would be greater for younger citizens. This leads to the following hypotheses;

[H3a]: The positive effect of social media use on political trust is greater for younger citizens of the Netherlands.

Bonding social capital

In a review study conducted by Williams (2019) however, it is shown that in recent years bonding social capital also plays an important role in online social networking. This might

explain and predict a negative effect of social media use on political trust. Bonding social capital is described by Putnam (2000) as close relationships in which emotional support is exchanged, which can be compared to Granovetter's (1983) 'strong ties'. These are often homogeneous and dense networks in which the same information is spread. Williams (2019) found that individual bonding social capital can be cultivated and nurtured via use of online social networking sites. This might lead to a negative outcome as Myeong & Seo (2016) found a negative effect of bonding social capital on political trust. This can be explained by Putnam (2000), as he argues that bonding social capital can lead to dysfunction by excluding differing views due the spread of similar information within the network. By gathering the same information through a dense network on social media and not having access to new information, it can lead to excluding other views and reinforcing the already existing beliefs of individuals. When these beliefs are already negative with regard to confidence in the government, this might increase these feelings as well. Moreover, the effect of filter bubbles and selective exposure on social media as explained earlier, increases this process even more.

The negative effect of bonding social capital in combination with that of filter bubbles and selective exposure, could therefore negatively influence the expected positive effect of social media use on political trust. One can also expect this to be even greater for younger individuals as they use social media platforms more often, which leaves us with an expected negative interaction effect of age. This leads to the following hypothesis:

[H3b]: The positive effect of social media use on political trust is smaller for younger citizens of the Netherlands and could even become negative.

This research will explore which expected interaction effect will hold true for the youth of the Netherlands given the two competing hypotheses of H3a and H3b.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Sample

The current research makes use of data of the LISS (Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences) panel administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands) in order to test the above stated hypotheses. The LISS panel is a representative sample of Dutch individuals who participate in monthly Internet surveys. The panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet connection. A longitudinal survey is fielded in the

panel every year, covering a large variety of domains including health, work, education, income, housing time use, political views, values and personality. This research uses three separate questionnaires from the LISS panel. These are also both part of the LISS Core Study which is a longitudinal survey delivering a broad range of social core information about the panel members.

The first questionnaire is the twelfth wave of the LISS core Study module called ‘Social Integration and Leisure’, in which data was collected between October 2019 and November 2019. The sample consists of panel members aged 16 years and older, in which the selected number of household members is a total amount of 5,929 (100%). The non-response rate is 847 (14,3%), which leaves us with a response rate of 5,082 (85,7%), from which 4,972 (83,9%) household members completed the whole questionnaire.

The second questionnaire is also part of the LISS Core Study and is called ‘Politics and Values’. The data of this questionnaire was collected between December 2019 and March 2020, which creates a gap between the two questionnaires. However, due to the longitudinal nature of both the questionnaires and the short length of the time gap, this will not cause implication in using the data for this research. The ‘Politics and Values’ survey was split into three parts, this research however will only make use of the first two. The first part took place in December 2019, in which the selected number of household members contained 6,175 (100%) and includes a nonresponse rate of 704 (11,4%). This leaves us with a total response of 5,471 (88,6%) in which 5,450 (88,3%) household members completed the survey entirely. Part two of the questionnaire took place in January 2020 and contains 6,347 (100%) selected household members. The nonresponse rate is a total amount of 728 (11,5%) which means a response rate of 5,619 (88,5%) from which 5,595 (88,2%) household members completed the survey.

The third dataset that will be used in this research, contains the background variables of the household members who filled in both the questionnaires as described above. This questionnaire took place in December 2019, at the start of the Politics and Values questionnaire.

The three questionnaires are merged in a new data file that contains data of all the household members that completed all three surveys, including the background questionnaire. This leaves us with a sample of 3775 household members that can be used in order to test the hypotheses.

3.2 Measures

In the following section the dependent and independent variables will be described. All the dependent and independent variables are presented in table 1.

3.2.1 Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this research is political trust. In the Politics and Values questionnaire, the variable is measured by the question “Can you indicate, on a scale from 0 to 10, how much confidence you personally have in each of the following institutions?”. This is followed with the items *Dutch government*, *Dutch parliament*, *the legal system*, *the police*, *politicians*, *political parties*, *European Parliament*, *United Nations* and *the media*. Respondents could answer this question by filling in a number on a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10 for each item, with 0 meaning no confidence at all and 10 full confidence. In the current research the Dutch parliament item will be used to measure political trust. By looking at the score on this item, one could indicate whether the respondent has a high or low level of political trust. The mean score for this variable is 5.54 ($SD = 2.070$), which indicates that the average respondent has a quite general feeling regarding confidence in the parliament. This suggests that the average political trust of the respondents is neither high nor low.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of all variables in the analyses

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Dependent variable</i>				
Political trust	5.54	2.070	0	10
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Social media use	5.15	1.844	1	7
Social media: Facebook	.67	.469	0	1
Social media: Twitter	.14	.342	0	1
Social media: LinkedIn	.32	.466	0	1
Social media: YouTube	.70	.460	0	1
Social media: Instagram	.34	.473	0	1
Social media: WhatsApp	.90	.298	0	1
Age	51.72	17.437	16	102
Political affiliation: Radical right	.054	.226	0	1

Political affiliation: Radical left	.049	.216	0	1
<i>Control variables</i>				
Offline social capital	1.501	.472	1	5
Gender (Female)	.538	.499	0	1
Total N (valid listwise)	3755			

3.2.2 Independent variables

Social media use

The first independent variable is social media use, for which the Social integration and leisure questionnaire is used. For measuring the general amount of social media use, the question “How often did you make use of social media in the past 2 months?” is applied. The possible answers for this variable were set into a 7-point scale ranging from 1 to 7, in which a score of 1 means *never*, followed up with *less than once a month*, *1-3 times per month*, *once a week*, *several times per week*, *every day* and *several times a day*. The mean of this variable is 5.16 ($SD = 1.844$), which indicates that the average respondent uses social media several times per week.

For additional exploratory research, this study will investigate whether the use of specific social media and social networking sites will have a different effect on political trust. In order to measure these possible effects, the question “Which social media and/or social networking sites do you use?” is used. The social media and social networking sites that are added in this research are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp, as these are currently the biggest platforms in the Netherlands. In the present study WhatsApp is mostly used ($M = .90$), followed by YouTube ($M = .70$) and Facebook ($M = .67$).

Age

The second independent variable is age. The age of the respondents is asked in the background variables questionnaire, in which the exact number is used. The mean of this variable is 51.66 ($SD = 17.437$), which indicates that the age of the average respondent is quite high. The youngest respondent is 16 years old and the oldest 102.

Political affiliation

The last independent variable is the political affiliation of the respondents. In this study the question ‘Which party do you feel attracted to?’ is used, as this measures the political affiliation

at its best. Dummy variables were constructed for those who voted for radical right-wing parties and radical left-wing parties. In the Netherlands the current radical right-wing parties are the *PVV* (Freedom party) and the *FvD* (Forum voor Democratie) (Binnema & Vollaard, 2020). The current left-wing parties are the *SP* (socialist party) and the *PvdD* (animal welfare party) (Meijer, 2015). The dummy of radical right-wing parties was constructed in a way that those who feel attracted to the parties *FvD* and *PVV* received the score of 1 and the others a score of 0. The same applies for the radical left-wing dummy, as the respondents that feel attracted to the *SP* and *PvdD* received a score of 1 and the others a score of 0.

3.2.3 Control variables

The control variables that are used in this research are gender and offline social capital. Gender was measured with the variable 'geslacht' in which the possible answers are male or female. This variable was also constructed into a dummy, in which the score of 0 means male and a score of 1 female.

To measure offline social capital, a new variable was constructed. The first question of the Social integration and Leisure questionnaire measures whether respondents have some sort of connection to various organizations, such as a sports club or a trade union. Respondents could fill in a score of 1 to 5, ranging from *no connection* (1), *donated money*(2), *participated in an activity*(3), *member*(4) and *performed voluntary work*(5) (see Appendix A). A new variable was created in which the mean score on the questions regarding the connection to the organizations resembles the degree of offline social capital of the respondents. The average offline social capital of the respondents in the current study is 1.501 ($SD = .472$), which is quite low.

3.3 Analytical strategy

First, this study investigates whether social media use will lead to more political trust. To test this relationship, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed including social media use as the independent variable and political trust as the dependent. In order to test the main effects of political affiliation (radical right & radical left) and age, these were also included as independent variables into the first model. For the exploratory research, the separate social media variables were included. Lastly, the variables of gender and offline social capital were entered as control variables into the first analysis.

In order to test hypotheses 2b,2c, 3a and 3b, a multiple regression analysis was performed, including social media use, political affiliation and age as the independent variables.

When testing interaction effects, all predictors were centered (except for the binary variables) and interaction variables of the centered versions of the predictors were created. These interaction variables were included into the second model.

Lastly, in order to investigate whether the different social media and social networking sites separately are interacting with age and political affiliation, the interaction variables were included into the third model.

4. Results

In model 1 (table 2) the results of the regression analysis are shown, with political trust as the dependent variable and social media use, political affiliation and age as the independent variables. The predictors in this model together have a significant effect on political trust ($F(12.3742) = 31.896$; $p < .001$) and 9.3% of the variability of political trust can be explained by the entire model ($R^2 = .093$). However, model 2 (table 2) including the added interaction variables of social media in combination with political affiliation and age, explains 9.7% of the variability of political trust ($R^2 = .097$) and is also significant ($F(15.3739) = 26.848$; $p < .001$). This suggests that model 2 is a better fit and should therefore be used to interpret the main effects and the interaction effects. For this reason, the results of model 2 regarding the main effects, interaction effects and the effects of the different individual social media will be discussed before the interaction effects of the additional exploratory research (model 3).

4.1 Main effects

Hypothesis 1 posited that the general social media use would positively relate to political trust. The model (table 2) shows no significant effect of social media use on political trust, meaning that the first hypothesis is not supported ($b = -.003$; $p = .898$).

Moreover, the second hypothesis (H2a) stated that a political affiliation for either radical right-wing or radical left-wing parties would negatively relate to political trust. The model shows a significant effect of the political affiliation of radical right-wing parties on political trust ($b = -1.669$; $p < .001$). The negative effect indicates that those who have a political affiliation for radical right-wing parties, have lower political trust. For the political affiliation of radical left-wing parties however, the model indicates no significant effect ($b = -.270$; $p = .072$). Hypothesis 2a is therefore partially supported by the results.

In addition, for the control variables applies that the effect of offline social capital on political trust is significant ($b = .540$; $p < .001$), however the effect of gender is not significant

($b = .011$; $p = .870$). This suggests that offline social capital does provide an alternative explanation for what influences political trust, yet gender does not.

4.2 Exploratory research: main effects

With regard to the exploratory research of the main effects of the separate social media, the model shows significant effects of Facebook ($b = -.253$; $p < .01$), LinkedIn ($b = .640$; $p < .001$) and WhatsApp ($b = .240$; $p < .05$). The negative effect of Facebook and positive effect of LinkedIn and WhatsApp, suggests that those who use Facebook have lower political trust, while the use of LinkedIn and WhatsApp leads to higher political trust. No significant effect was found for Twitter ($b = -.127$; $p = .204$), YouTube ($b = -.019$; $p = .795$) and Instagram ($b = .025$; $p = .769$).

4.3 Interaction effects

In the same model (model 2), the interaction variables were included to test whether the effect of social media use differs for a certain political affiliation and a certain age. It was expected that for those with a political affiliation of either radical right-wing or radical left-wing parties, the positive effect of social media use on political trust would be smaller or even become negative (H2b & H2c). The results show no significant effect for both radical right-wing ($b = -.022$; $p = .764$) and radical left-wing parties ($b = -.046$; $p = .578$). This suggests that both hypotheses 2b as well as 2c, are not supported.

Furthermore, with regard to the third hypotheses, model 2 shows a significant negative main effect of age on political trust ($b = -.010$; $p < .001$). Two competing hypotheses were formulated, expecting either a greater (H3a) or a smaller (H3b) positive effect of social media use on political trust for younger citizens. The model shows a significant interaction effect of social media use and age on political trust ($b = -.005$; $p < .001$). This suggests that the effect of social media use, which is insignificant on average, tends from more positive for younger people to more negative for older people. This is in line with the arguments for hypothesis H3a.

Table 2: Results Regression analysis (N=3755)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Constant	5.264	.222	5.056	.229
Social media use	-.031	.021	-.003	.023
Social media: Facebook	-.261***	.078	-.253***	.078
Social media: Twitter	-.129	.100	-.127	.100
Social media: LinkedIn	.625***	.074	.640***	.074
Social media: YouTube	-.019	.074	-.019	.074
Social media: Instagram	.095	.082	.025	.084
Social media: WhatsApp	.235*	.111	.240	.111*
Political affiliation: Radical Right	-1.664**	.145	-1.669**	.146
Political affiliation: Radical Left	-.293	.150	-.270	.150
Age	-.010***	.002	-.010***	.002
Social media use * Radical right			-.022	.072
Social media use * Radical Left			-.046	.083
Social media use * Age			-.005***	.001
<i>Control variables</i>				
Offline social capital	.546***	.070	.540***	.070
Gender (female)	.020	.068	.011	.068
<i>R</i> ²	<i>.093</i>		<i>.097</i>	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

4.4 Exploratory research: interaction effects

In the third model (table 3) interaction variables of the individual social media are included, in order to test whether the effect on political trust of the use of a specific social media is influenced by a certain political affiliation or age. The entire model is significant ($F(29.3725) = 13.899$; $p < .001$) and 9.8% of the variance is explained. The results show no significant interaction effect of Facebook and age ($b = -.007$; $p = .123$) and no significant interaction effect of Facebook and the political affiliation of radical left ($b = -.142$; $p = .685$) as well as radical right ($b = -.488$; $p = .133$). For LinkedIn applies the same, as the interaction effect of LinkedIn and age ($b = -.002$; $p = .630$), radical right ($b = -.136$; $p = .205$) and radical left ($b = -.259$; $p = .425$) are insignificant. In addition, no significant interaction effect was found for WhatsApp and age ($b = -.009$; $p = .187$), radical right ($b = -.132$; $p = .749$) and radical left ($b = -.289$; $p = .531$).

Furthermore, the main effect of Twitter was already insignificant and this also applies for the interaction effect of Twitter and age ($b = .000$; $p = .951$) and radical left ($b = .166$; $p = .679$). The interaction effect of Twitter and radical right was excluded in the regression analyses as the variable did not bring additional significant information to the model. Moreover, no significant interaction effect was found between YouTube and age ($b = -.005$; $p = .222$), radical right ($b = .411$; $p = .205$) and radical left ($b = .754$; $p = 0.60$). Finally, there is also no significant interaction effect of Instagram and age ($b = -.004$; $p = .389$), radical right ($b = .506$; $p = .160$) and radical left ($b = .009$; $p = .978$). Concluding, the results of the third model suggest that no interaction effects were found for the various social media.

Table 3: Results regression analyses (N= 3755)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Constant	4.146	.474
Social media use	-.029	.021
Social media: Facebook	-.200*	.082
Social media: Twitter	-.136	.110
Social media: LinkedIn	.646***	.082
Social media: YouTube	-.052	.079

Social media: Instagram	.034	.089
Social media: WhatsApp	.315*	.132
Political affiliation: Radical Right	-1.597**	.001
Political affiliation: Radical Left	-.456	.554
Age	.009	.227
Facebook * Radical Right	-.488	.325
Facebook * Radical Left	-.142	.351
Facebook * Age	-.007	.004
Twitter * Radical Left	.166	.402
Twitter * Age	.000	.951
LinkedIn * Radical Right	-.136	.344
LinkedIn * Radical Left	-.259	.324
LinkedIn * Age	-.002	.005
YouTube * Radical Right	.411	.324
YouTube * Radical Left	.754	.401
YouTube * Age	-.005	.005
Instagram * Radical Right	.506	.361
Instagram * Radical Left	.009	.334
Instagram * Age	-.004	.005
WhatsApp * Radical Right	-.132	.414
WhatsApp * Radical Left	-.289	.461
WhatsApp * Age	-.009	.007
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Offline social capital	.548***	.071
Gender (female)	.014	.069
<i>R</i> ²		.098

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

5. Conclusion and discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the influence of social media use on political trust of citizens of the Netherlands. Previous research has already introduced the term social media social capital, which reflects the way individuals can create social capital online and how this positively influences political participation of individuals. However, whether social media social capital positively influences political trust and how this might differ between certain groups in society, is quite understudied. This in combination with the current rising media attention regarding the topic, such as the ‘*Fabeltjesfuik*’ episode of Arjen Lubach, has created a call for a better understanding of the interplay between social media use and political trust.

5.1 Conclusion

First, no evidence was shown for the expectation that the general use of social media positively influences political trust. The social media social capital theory argues that social media use leads to more offline political participation. However, due to the lack of evidence in the current study, the same cannot be concluded for political trust. Controversially, when focused on several social media platforms separately, the results show that there is an effect between Facebook, LinkedIn and WhatsApp, and political trust. Meaning that the general use of social media does not influence the political trust of citizens of the Netherlands, yet the use of specific social media does. Interestingly, there is evidence that using Facebook leads to less political trust, while the use of LinkedIn and WhatsApp increases the political trust of the users. Hence, the answer of the main research question of “*What is the effect of social media use on political trust of citizens of the Netherlands?*” is that the effect on political trust varies between social media platforms. However, in general social media does not affect the political trust of citizens of the Netherlands.

Secondly, the results of the study support the premise that individuals with a political affiliation for radical right-wing parties, indicate lower political trust. However, this relationship was not found for the radical left side of the political spectrum, which is controversial with findings of previous research. Moreover, the results did not provide support for the effect of political affiliation in combination with general and specific social media use, on political trust, which is also contradicting with previous research.

Thirdly, the current study shows evidence for the expectation that general social media use has a more positive effect on political trust for younger citizens. The results also show that older people have a lower political trust in general and that the effect of general social media

use on political trust is also more negative for older citizens. This is in line with the expectation that younger citizens have a higher social media use and that this leads to more bridging social capital. Remarkably, the results indicate that the use of specific social media and the effect on political trust, does not differ for a certain age group.

Notably, evidence shows that offline social capital increases political trust. This study therefore reaffirms that offline social capital is a predictor of political trust.

5.2 Discussion

This study provides some interesting but controversial findings. The non existing evidence found for the influence of general social media use might be due to the limited data that has been used within this study. The variable social media use only measures the amount of time spent on social media, but does not measure whether the respondents created social media social capital online. The LISS data panel does not provide extensive data regarding social media use and social media networks. This is not in line with previous research conducted by Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman (2016), which might explain the lack of evidence found in the current study. For future research, the use of a questionnaire that is able to investigate multiple constructs regarding social media social capital can result in more elucidated outcomes.

Nonetheless, it is interesting that there appears to be an effect of social media on political trust, yet only when focused on the separate social media platforms. This indicates that the social media social capital- and online bridging- and bonding theories, might still be relevant with regard to political trust. The different effects of social media platforms on political trust however, do raise the question whether other factors, that could not be examined in this research, might have had an impact as well. For example, the different designs and algorithms of the social media platforms could be a plausible explanation. Whether social media platforms are designed to create more social capital, could be an explanation for the positive effect of LinkedIn and WhatsApp on political trust. For example, it could be suggested that LinkedIn is more focused on establishing bridging ties which in turn would increase political trust (Myeong & Seo, 2016). Yet, the negative effect of the use of Facebook could be due to the influence of ‘filter bubbles’ and selective exposure, as showed by Pariser (2011) and Klein & Robinson (2019). These algorithms used by Facebook, such as the ‘*Fabeltjesfuik*’ of Arjen Lubach, could possibly result in a negative effect on political trust development. More future research including the possible underlying mechanisms are necessary in order to investigate the relationship between social media use and political trust.

Furthermore, the evidence concerning the influence of political affiliation on political trust and social media use, is against the expectations that the results would be in line with existing literature of Klein & Robinson (2019). They argued that social media reinforces polarization through the same mechanisms as ‘filter bubbles’ and selective exposure. In addition, it is particularly striking that the use of Facebook by citizens with a radical political affiliation does not necessarily lead to lower political trust, since the general use of Facebook does have a negative influence on the development of political trust. This indicates that there might be other possible underlying mechanisms with regard to political affiliation, social media use and political trust, that could not be explained by the current study.

In addition, the more positive effect of social media use for younger citizens that was found within this study, could perhaps indicate that online bridging ties can function as positive predictors of offline political trust for younger citizens. This is in line with the results of previous research of Myeong & Seo (2016), that showed that bridging social capital is associated with higher level of trust in the government. Interestingly, the effect of the use of a specific social media does not differ for certain age groups, which is quite remarkable as general social media use does show differences between age groups. These results demonstrate the need to specify the kinds of online social media use in which young citizens are engaged, and more broadly, the political influence of social media and online social networks.

Finally, the Dutch Western culture might influence the results as citizens of the Netherlands are known for having relatively high political trust in their government (CBS, 2018). For this reason, a cross national study would be interesting in order to investigate whether the effect of the use of specific social media differs across countries. Besides, the questionnaires from the LISS panel that are used within this study, were conducted in 2019. Social media however, is subject to change, meaning that recent developments regarding this topic could lead to different outcomes.

As a conclusion, the current study created a deeper understanding of the interplay between social media and political trust. However, due to the complex and continuously evolving nature of social media, the challenge remains to be able to specify which factors have an influence on the development of political trust. Hence, more elaborated future studies are necessary to gain more insights into the relationship between social media use and political trust of citizens of the Netherlands.

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Appendix A: Variables for offline social capital from the LISS data panel.

“Can you indicate, for each of the organizations listed, what applies to you at this moment or has applied to you over the past 12 months?”

Possible answers: 0 = No; 1 = Yes.

1= no connection

2 = donated money

3= participated in an activity

4= member

5 = performed voluntary work

	1	2	3	4	5
a sports club or club for outdoor activities a cultural association or hobby club	cs191003	cs191004	cs191005	cs191006	cs191007
cultural association or hobby club	cs191008	cs191009	cs191010	cs191011	cs191012
a trade union	cs191013	cs191014	cs191015	cs191016	cs191017
a business, professional or agrarian organization	cs191018	cs191019	cs191020	cs191021	cs191022
a consumers' organization or automobile club	cs191023	cs191024	cs191025	cs191026	cs191027
an organization for humanitarian aid, human rights, minorities or migrants	cs191028	cs191029	cs191030	cs191031	cs191032
an organization for environmental protection, peace organization or animal rights organization	cs191033	cs191034	cs191035	cs191036	cs191037

a religious or church organization	cs191038	cs191039	cs191040	cs191041	cs191042
a political party	cs191043	cs191044	cs191045	cs191046	cs191047
a science, education, teachers' or parents' association	cs191048	cs191049	cs191050	cs191051	cs191052
a social society; an association for youth, pensioners/senior citizens, women; or friends' clubs	cs191053	cs191054	cs191055	cs191056	cs191057
other organizations that you can freely join	cs191058	cs191059	cs191060	cs191061	cs191062