The vocal citizens of the European Parliament Facebook page

Who are they and why do they get engaged online?

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Abstract

Digital media and social media are by now established platforms for daily online social interaction, expression and debate, also in the political field. They offer users a space to voice and exchange opinions, as well as a tool to organise political acts of protest or support around offline world events. And they are changing the game of politics in remarkable ways. Political institutions such as the EU also understand the potential of social media as a platform to communicate with its citizens, and even as a means to increase its transparency and legitimacy.

This dissertation examines the citizens who comment on the particular setting of the European Parliament Facebook and defends their comments contribute to the formation of public opinion and their authors conform a Europeanised public. The study gathered 110 participants from different countries and adopted an online survey method in order to capture (1) who these commenters are, (2) how Europeanised they are, (3) why they comment, (4) how often they do so and (5) how interested in politics they are, by asking them individually through a questionnaire. The outcomes of the study suggest that commenters of the European Parliament page are mostly male and well educated, Europeanised as well as interested in EU politics and that their main drive to comment is being able to express their opinions on EU affairs they consider important. The European public sphere supported by this particular page shows a great deal of transnationalism, but is not representative of all Europeans.

Acknowledgements

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List of abbreviations

EU   European Union
EP   European Parliament
SNS   Social Networking Sites

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1. Introduction

Digital media and social media are by now established platforms for daily online social interaction, expression and debate, also in the political field. They offer users a space to voice and exchange opinions, as well as a tool to organise political acts of protest or support around offline world events[1]. And they are changing the game of politics in remarkable ways.

Online comments and debates have started to be regarded as another cornerstone of the more participatory aspect of democracy in the 21st century by a growing number of academics, with a strong correlation to challenges in the traditional public opinion and public sphere concepts[2].

The European Union (EU) understands the potential of social media as a platform to communicate with its citizens and as a means to increase its transparency and even legitimacy[3] in a period of populist turbulence and roaring Euroscepticism. All the institutions and all the main representatives of the EU have Facebook and Twitter profiles where content is uploaded and updated on a daily basis, and where users (the citizens) can leave their impressions. The belief for many is not only that the internet and SNS can help the EU connect with its citizens more and better, but also that it can prompt citizens to connect with each other and discuss European matters, leading, or at least contributing to, the emergence of truly transnational opinion movements.

As Björn Kjellström, Head of Social media and Digital communication for the Swedish Office of the European Parliament (EP), puts it:

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[1] Peter Dahlgren, *The Political Web. Media, Participation and Alternative Democracy* (Palgrave

[2] Homero Gil de Zuñiga, "Social Media Use for News and Individuals' Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 17, no. 3 (2012): 319–26, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01574.x; Dahlgren, *The Political Web. Media, Participation and Alternative Democracy*; Nick Anstead and Ben O'Loughlin, "Social Media Analysis and Organization," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 2 (2015): 204–20, http://resolver.ebscohost.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/openurl?sid=EBSCO:edb&genre=article&issn=10836101 &isbn=&volume=20&issue=2&date=20150301&spage=204&pages=204-220&title=Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication&atitle=Social Media Analysis and Public Opinion.

[3] Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou, eds., *Social Media and European Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

There is no such official aim but a strong presence on Facebook could be seen as a de facto step in the direction of a pan-European public sphere, as demonstrated by the variety of nationalities reacting (and sometimes debating) in the comments of the post of our central page[4].

The overarching purpose of this study is to examine those users of social media who articulate their opinions publicly and react to EU-related content online. More specifically, it aims to shed light on who the citizens that engage in commenting activities on the official Facebook page of the EP are, what they have in common and which motivations they have to participate in this way.

There is a budding body of research on the field of civic participation on social media. Previous works have already focused on the growing importance of digital media in the political context and its impact on public opinion, also on a transnational level[5], but more has research has been conducted on the comments and their content than on the people behind them. That is not to say that there have not been any attempts to study who these politically engaged digital media users are. There do exist a handful of studies on the demographics of the commenters. However, very few have attempted to unearth which possible factors and motivations users may have to get engaged on this kind of online social networks, and none have dealt with this question at a European level yet. This is exactly the gap of knowledge the present dissertation would like to contribute towards, by offering a complete profile of the citizen commenter of the EP page.

1.1 Research objective and research questions

The aim of this study is to identify the profile of the citizens who comment on the EP Facebook page. This profile is examined by designing an online survey aimed at exploring different features of the commenting population on the EP page. These features include (1) demographic characteristics, (2) Europeanising factors, (3)

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[4] Björn Kjellström, Interview by Helena Martinez. Online interview, 24 May 2019.
[5] Michael Bossetta, Anamaria Dutceac Segesten, and Hans-Jörg Trenz, "Political Participation on Facebook during Brexit," *Journal of Language and Politics*, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.17009.dut; Anamaria Dutceac Segesten and Michael Bossetta, "Can Euroscepticism Contribute to a European Public Sphere? The Europeanization of Media Discourses about Euroscepticism across Six Countries," 2018, http://arxiv.org/abs/1810.06745.

motivations to comment (4) frequency of commenting behaviour (5) interest in politics online and offline. In order to accomplish this exhaustive portray, the following research questions underpin the investigation:

Q1: Who are these users who engage and interact from a demographic perspective?
Q2: Do they show signs of Europeanisation?
Q3: Why do they comment?
Q4: How frequently do they comment?
Q5: How interested in politics are they judging both by their online and offline activities?

The findings put forward a picture of these outspoken citizens characterised by gender inequality, with overall strong signs of Europeanisation. Their dominating motivation is the possibility of expressing themselves in a public context, and their levels of political interest run high.

1.2 Thesis structure

This thesis began its journey with a short introduction to the topic, which will be expanded throughout the work and presented the research purpose, and research questions around which it is built. This journey will continue by situating the research problem within the vast field of previous literature dealing with political uses of digital and social media. This literature review will start by offering an overview of the different angles from which the intersection between the digital world and politics can be inspected, to then funnel in the more specific research themes or problems which this work addresses, namely the online commenters and their online behaviour, and presenting the hypothesis derived from the research questions. After that, a theoretical framework to analyse the online comments and commenter phenomena will be furnished, introducing concepts such as public opinion and public sphere applied to the online world and to the European case relevant for the object of the study. The next section describes and justifies in detail the method used for this case study, an online research distributed through Facebook, as well as the particularities of the research platform, the data obtained and the period of time during which the data was collected. What follows is the presentation of the results, which are divided in subsections after each research theme. The closing section, the discussion of the results, follows the same

logical structure as the results chapter, and each subsection reviews critically the results as it assesses whether and how they answer the research questions of the thesis, and later the evaluates them in the general theoretical framework. Finally, the conclusion elaborates on the highlights of this investigative effort, putting an end to the discovery journey of the politically engaged commenters of a European setting.

2. Contextualisation of the research problem and literature review

In this chapter, the goal is to review the existing research around political uses of the web, and more specifically digital media and SNS as pillars for online political manifestations and public opinion. The critical summary highlights the literature investigating SNS activities with political outcomes from different angles. It begins with a broad overview of the political uses of digital media and SNS, also on a European level, and later proceeds to focus on works examining the discursive exchanges which take place on digital media, that is, the comments and the commenters, establishing connections with the research questions of the dissertation. The review only contains works analysing the political impact of SNS in liberal democracies.

2.1 Citizen political engagement in the online environment

Since the arrival and expansion of the internet, human society has been transformed in a myriad of aspects, one of the most notably being communications, which range from the banal to the socially and politically relevant, with many shades in-between. Some authors saw the potential of web-based communications to facilitate the implication of citizens in political discussions online from the incipient stages of the Web, at the end of last century[6]. But it wasn't until years later, with the popularisation of domestic internet networks, that scholars such as Dahlgren started to argument that the virtually endless stream of information the web hosts, alongside the technically enabled real-time interactivity, offer "a seemingly limitless communicative space for whoever wants it, which has redefined the premises and character of political engagement"[7]. Political communication researchers have ever since embarked in the daunting journey of trying

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[6] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Self-published online, 1993), http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/.
[7] Dahlgren, *The Political Web. Media, Participation and Alternative Democracy*, 35.

to map and understand the impact of this technology, digital media, in the political life of citizens. Attempts to gauge this new kind of online political engagement, especially at a transnational level, are still young. This is also a wide field which can be inquired into from different angles, and thus studies are growing in number, yet are still scattered in aims, scope and methods, having focused for the most part on western, Anglo-Saxon political systems so far[8]. Therefore, the following review does not pretend to be exhaustive, but merely offer an outline of different strands of investigation in this wide, multidisciplinary and multiperspective field.

Digital media are a wide range of digitally connected devices via the Internet where information is shared in an instantaneous way[9]. Within digital media, this work draws particularly on SNS because "it is often the aspect of the web that is most relevant for participation"[10].

If we take a stroll down the literature which has tried to understand the links between digital media, social networks and the political, one of the first studies which examines the political use of such a networking site, namely Facebook, analysed the electoral consequences of a Facebook feature which enabled candidates to the midterm elections USA of 2006 to set up a profile and interact with the Facebook community of users[11]. This was the first research project which established that SNS could potentially affect electoral events. From this same top-down perspective, several studies have focused on the use of social media channels by politicians and their interactions with citizens[12].

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[8] Eva Anduiza, Michael J. Jensen, and Laia Jorba, eds., *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2012).

[9] Anduiza, Jensen, and Jorba, 2.

[10] Dahlgren, *The Political Web. Media, Participation and Alternative Democracy*, 36.

[11] Christine B. Williams and Girish J. Gulatti, "Social Networks in Political Campaigns: Facebook and the 2006 Miterm Elections," in *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association* (Chicago, 2007).

[12] Derrick L. Cogburn and Fatima K. Espinoza-Vasquez, "From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign," *Journal of Political Marketing* 10, no. 1–2 (2011): 189–213, https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2011.540224; Gunn Enli, "Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider: Exploring the Social Media Campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election," *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (2017): 50–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323116682802.

Within a different strand from a bottom-up perspective, a number of researchers have concentrated their efforts on analysing "cyberactivism" and the role of SNS in facilitating the organisation mass-protest movements such as the events of the Arab Spring[13], the "Indignados" movement in Spain[14], or the protests against the G20 in 2009 and 2010[15], just to name a couple of examples.

Elsewhere, there are those who have opted to pore over the more mundane but equally relevant and deserving of academic attention: the political discussions and interactions amongst users taking place online, all the comments being posted every day on matters of public concern. Some academics have highlighted their relevance for democratic systems and utility in "democratizing communication"[16]. This strand of SNS research is a step closer in the direction of the present endeavour.

Internet networks are considered by many a new "public space" for deliberation[17], something which, like we have seen, can foster political communication from political institutions to citizens, between citizens, and from citizens to politicians. The fact that more and more citizens rely on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to keep informed and engage in political discussion have led a considerable number of scholars to assert that digital media can have an impact in democracy[18].

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[13] John. G Browning, "Democracy Unplugged: Social Media, Regime Change and Governmental Response in the Arab Spring," *Michigan State International Law Review* 21, no. 1 (2013): 63–86, https://doi.org/10.3868/s050-004-015-0003-8; Theodor Tudoroiu, "Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring," *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (2014): 346–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2014.913841; Magdalena Karolak, "The Use of Social Media from Revolution to Democratic Consolidation: The Arab Spring and the Case of Tunisia," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 10, no. 2 (2018): 199–216, https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr.10.2.199_1.

[14] W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 739–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2012.670661; Sandra González-Bailón, Javier Borge-Holthoefer, and Yamir Moreno, "Broadcasters and Hidden Influentials in Online Protest Diffusion," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013): 943–65, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479371.

[15] Bennett and Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action."

[16] Daniel Halpern and Jennifer Gibbs, "Social Media as a Catalyst for Online Deliberation? Exploring the Affordances of Facebook and YouTube for Political Expression," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 3 (2013): 1160, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.10.008.

[17] Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere," *New Media & Society* 4, no. 1 (2002): 23, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614440222226244.

[18] Homero Gil de Zúñiga, "Toward a European Public Sphere? The Promise and Perils of Modern Democracy in the Age of Digital and Social Media — Introduction," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 3154, http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4783.

As a consequence, numerous authors have turned their attention to the content and the quality of the online discussions emerging on these digitally networked spaces, examining variables such as their civility or deliberative potential, as well as their implications in the wider context of public deliberation and public opinion[19], albeit often obviating the citizens who write them.

2.2 Europe, the EU and social media

The EU is struggling to reach its citizens, in what several scholars have branded a communication deficit[20]. The shortfalls of its past communication policies and the arguable lack of a pan-European public sphere damage the legitimacy and democracy of the EU institutional framework[21], which already has built the dubious reputation of being rigid, bureaucratic and impersonal[22]. A wide sector of European population feels the EU as a distant and complicated muddle of institutions and policies they cannot quite make sense of. This results in low levels of interest and in a majority of citizens not understanding what the EU does, how it works or even why it exists[23].

EU institutions are aware of the impact of the Internet in the political life, and they too acknowledge the potential of digital media and SNS as a tool to communicate with the European citizens[24]. Therefore, the EU has consciously focused on improving its communication policies and fostering communicative spaces for and with its citizens,

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[19] Halpern and Gibbs, "Social Media as a Catalyst for Online Deliberation? Exploring the Affordances of Facebook and YouTube for Political Expression"; Zizi Papacharissi, "Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness, and the Democratic Potential of Online Political Discussion Groups," *New Media and Society* 6, no. 2 (2004): 259–83, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444804041444; Ian Rowe, "Deliberation 2.0: Comparing the Deliberative Quality of Online News User Comments Across Platforms," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 59, no. 4 (2015): 539–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1093482.

[20] Aneta Podkaicka and Cris Shore, "Communicating Europe? EU Communication Policy and Cultural Politics," *Public Communication in the European Union: History, Perspectives and Challenges*, no. June 2010 (2010): 93–111.

[21] Christoph Meyer, "Political Legitimacy and the Invisibility Od Politics: Exploring the European Union's Communication Deficit," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 37, no. 4 (1999): 618, https://doi.org/10.1037//1082-989X.5.2.

[22] Podkaicka and Shore, "Communicating Europe? EU Communication Policy and Cultural Politics," 108.

[23] Neil Fligstein, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 125, http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat02271a&AN=atoz.ebs1003208e&site=eds-live&scope=site.

[24] Katarzyna Anna Iskra and European Parliament, "Communication Policy," Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2018, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/144/communication-policy.

such as the web-based European Citizen Initiatives[25]. The internet and social media provide arguably the most convenient platform for citizens to keep up-to-date with European affairs and to discuss them, bypassing the traditional media with its core national perspective[26], and accordingly, these platforms have been regarded by some scholars as a means to improve the democratic deficit and even as contributing to the creation of an European public sphere[27].

More broadly speaking, on the continental arena we find the major research trends highlighted in the previous general section, although the number of studies produced in European contexts is lower than in the case of USA.

From a top-down perspective, several accounts analyse the online behaviour of different political parties in election case studies, usually focusing on individual countries[28]. Examples of this approach are found in Elter's study, which analysed the SNS activity of German parties before the German state election of 2011[29], or Klinger and Russmann's investigation of Austrian and Swiss parties' use of social media campaigns for national elections[30].

There are also those who have broached the subject from the citizen perspective and have examined the people who produce political content on platforms, like in a project conducted by Vaccari at al., who in 2013, around the Italian general elections, surveyed

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[25] European Commission, "The European Citizens' Initiative," 2019, http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome.

[26] Barisione and Michailidou, *Soc. Media Eur. Polit.*

[27] Barisione and Michailidou; Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, and Trenz, "Political Participation on Facebook during Brexit."

[28] Tom Carlson and Kim Strandberg, "Riding the Web 2.0 Wave: Candidates on Youtube in the 2007 Finnish National Elections," *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 5, no. 2 (2008): 159–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/19331680802291475; Mark Blach-Ørsten, Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst, and Rasmus Burkal, "From Hybrid Media System to Hybrid-Media Politicians: Danish Politicians and Their Cross-Media Presence in the 2015 National Election Campaign," *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 14, no. 4 (2017): 334–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2017.1369917; Pablo Aragõn et al., "Communication Dynamics in Twitter during Political Campaigns: The Case of the 2011 Spanish National Election," *Policy and Internet* 5, no. 2 (2013): 183–206, https://doi.org/10.1002/1944-2866.POI327.

[29] Elter, "Interaktion Und Dialog? Eine Quantitative Inhaltsanalyse Der Aktivitäten Deutscher Parteien Bei Twitter Und Facebook Während Der Landtagswahlkämpfe 2011 Interaction and Dialogue? A Quantitative Content Analysis of Political Parties' Activities on Twitter ."

[30] Klinger and Russmann, "'Beer Is More Efficient than Social Media'—Political Parties and Strategic Communication in Austrian and Swiss National Elections."

a group of Italian Twitter users in order to characterise them demographically and analyse both their online and offline political engagement[31].

Others have focused on the content of these online discussions and have performed sentiment analysis to "better understand the link between political preferences and political behaviour"[32], such as in attempts by Ceron et al. to measure the popularity of Italian political leaders as reflected by content posted on SNS, and of French politicians in the course of the French elections of 2011, only to mention an example.

Yet a different strain has adopted a more transnational perspective, and has focused on the Europeanisation of online debates on SNS about issues of international salience, focusing on the content and patterns of diffusion of these discussions[33]. Some have dealt with the Europeanisation of major topics such as the wave of contestation to the austerity imposed by the EU to several member states during the most recent period of economic crisis[34].

Very little research has concentrated on the use of SNS related to EU institutions, and on the citizen exchanges which take place in these institutionalised online environments. Tarta, one of the few who has, evaluated the content of the comments posted on the EP Facebook page between 2011 and 2014 according to dimensions of attention, discursive capacity, critical function and identity and she noted that the public commenting on the EP page tend to stay on-topic, use arguments to justify their opinions, and respond to the EP rather than engage in conversations with other

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[31] Cristian Vaccari et al., "Social Media and Political Communication: A Survey of Twitter Users during the 2013 Italian General Election," *Italian Political Science Review* 43, no. 3 (2013): 381–410, https://doi.org/10.1426/75245.

[32] Andrea Ceron et al., "Every Tweet Counts? How Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Can Improve Our Knowledge of Citizens' Political Preferences with an Application to Italy and France," *New Media and Society* 16, no. 2 (2014): 353, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813480466.

[33] Michael Bossetta, Anamaria Dutceac Segesten, and Hans-Jörg Trenz, "Engaging with European Politics Through Twitter and Facebook: Participation Beyond the National?," in *Social Media and European Politics*, ed. Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 309, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59890-5.

[34] Mauro Barisione and Andrea Ceron, "A Digital Movement of Opinion? Contesting Austerity Through Social Media," in *Social Media and European Politics*, ed. Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou, 2017, 77–104.

commenting citizens[35]. In this discursive capacity and organisational control, she still sees a potential for a deliberative European public online, although this public according to her is still "weak"[36], and needs a provided setting (such as the EU institutions' profiles and sites) to materialise.

But who are these people, the commenters, the citizens who shape these online discussions? And why do they comment on political affairs?

2.3 Who are the commenters? A demographic perspective

There are many more studies analysing the content of the comments left on online media than on the authors of this content. Most of the studies located that adopt a focal point on the generators of these Internet conversations revolve around the commenters of online newspapers.

When centring the analysis on the online commenters, some of the most common factors analysed by studies in this area so far have been the demographics of the commenting population[37].

The bulk of the studies located are, again, from the Anglo-Saxon world, in particular from the USA. The majority of studies testing these variables have found that males are more prone to comment than females. Several studies from the USA coincide in that American commenters tend to be more male and around 36 years old[38]. For instance, a research project titled "Engaging news project" characterised online (digital media and social media) news commenters in the USA as predominantly male, between 30 and 49

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[35] Ancuța-Gabriela Tarța, "A Framework for Evaluating European Social Media Publics: The Case of the European Parliament's Facebook," in *Social Media and European Politics*, ed. Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou, 2017, 143–65.

[36] Tarța, 163.

[37] Na'ama Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media" (University at Albany, State University of New York, 2011); Susanne M. Almgren and Tobias Olsson, "Commenting, Sharing and Tweeting News: Measuring Online News Participation," *Nordicom Review* 37, no. 2 (2016): 70, https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2016-0018.

[38] K Purcell, L Rainie, and A Mitchell, "Understanding the Participatory News Consumer," *Pew Internet and …*, 2010, 1–3, http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media/Files/Reports/2010/Understanding the Participatory News Consumer.pdf; Hans K. Meyer and Michael Clay Carey, "Men More Likely to Post Online Newspaper Comments," *Newspaper Research Journal* 36, no. 4 (2015): 469–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/0739532915618417.

years old and educated or highly educated[39]. A more recent study surveying Australian online news users also concluded that males were more likely than females to comment online, but in their case, that older users tended to voice their opinions online more than younger users[40].

In one of the very few cross-national studies on the profile of online commenting users undertaken so far, Kalogeropoulos et al., using data from the 2016 Reuters digital news report, found the opposite trend. In their comparative study of online participative users from Denmark, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK and the USA, women were more likely to comment than men[41].

Narrowing down on the object of the present study, Vesnic-Alujevic, in her research of 2012, investigated through a survey the demographic profile of the citizens who got involved with the EP through discursive practices on Facebook. She identified them on average as being between 26 to 35 years old, male and female alike and having attained higher education[42].

There will arguably be no conclusive results in this regard anytime soon, since the demographic profile of digital media commentators is probably bound to factors such as the time, geographical delimitation and cultural context of the study[43] and also likely to sampling methods.

Nevertheless, and since a majority of studies in this field have found males are more proactive when it comes to giving voice to their opinions online in political affairs, and after having followed the discussions taking place on the EP page for some months, the

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[39] Natalie Jomini Stroud, Emily Van Duyn, and Cynthia Peacock, "Survey of Commenters and Comment Readers," 2016, 6, https://engagingnewsproject.org/enp_prod/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ENP-News-Commenters-and-Comment-Readers1.pdf.

[40] Renee Barnes et al., "Personality and Online News Commenting Behaviours: Uncovering the Characteristics of Those below the Line," *Media International Australia* 169, no. 1 (2018): 117–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X18798695.

[41] Antonis Kalogeropoulos et al., "Who Shares and Comments on News?: A Cross-National Comparative Analysis of Online and Social Media Participation," *Social Media and Society* 3, no. 4 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117735754.

[42] Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, "Political Participation and Web 2.0 in Europe: A Case Study of Facebook," *Public Relations Review* 38, no. 3 (2012): 466–70, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.01.010.

[43] Barnes et al., "Personality and Online News Commenting Behaviours: Uncovering the Characteristics of Those below the Line," 127.

hypothesis of this research is also that more males than females will comment on the institutional page, and, in the line with the majority of research published so far, that the commenters will tend to be educated or highly educated.

2.4 The EP Facebook page commenters, a sociological perspective

When laying out this study, one of the intentions was to probe if the commenters in the particular case of the EP displayed signs of being Europanised. Nil Fligstein, in his book from 2008, Euroclash[44], provided a good framework to test the degree of Europeanisation of the commenters in very simple terms. In one of the first sociological studies about the EU, he described the Europeanised citizen, as the citizen who has been able to experience first-hand the "benefits of European integration"[45]. He characterises these cosmopolitan citizens as:

> the educated, professionals, managers, and other white-collar workers who have the opportunity to travel, speak second languages, and interact with people like themselves in different countries (...) Such people are more likely to call themselves Europeans than the elderly, the less educated, and blue-collar workers who have not had such opportunities.[46]

In short, he defends that those people who interact with other Europeans and have experienced the diverse benefits of European integration, both material and intangible, are more likely to feel European, and then proves his hypotheses using data models extracted from Eurobarometer survey.

Based on Nils Fligstein's portrayal of the prototypical European citizen, this work would like to establish a connection between his description of a Europeanised citizen and the profile of the user more likely to comment on the EP Facebook page, which will be deepened in the theoretical section. Thus, within this juxtaposition, this thesis proposes that the EP commenters will on average tend to be Europeanised according to Fligstein's description and thus the users who comment on the EP Facebook page are more likely to have a higher education, work in a on average highly internationalised

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[44] Fligstein, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe.*
[45] Fligstein, 124.
[46] Ibid., 123.

sector, have international experiences and international friendships, and have an overall positive opinion on the EU.

2.5 Why do they comment?

The literature on the motivations of citizens to post online comments seems to date the most limited of all[47]. Only three studies were located which examine the possible motivations of users to leave their opinions online. The first study which deals with this question is by Stromer-Galley, who through a survey of a group of people involved in a study of political conversation for a year, was able to determine what the participants liked most about online political discussions. Amongst the most mentioned statements by her participants, some made reference to motivation in the form of interaction with others (e.g "Talking with other people about issues that effect us all ","Getting other people's ideas from other parts of the country") or the possibility to express one's opinion more freely than on offline settings ("speaking my opinion", "(…) I feel free to say what I think without any fear of criticism or reservation") [48].

The second study devoted to the commenters, in this case of major online newspapers in Israel and in the UK, is a chapter of the doctoral thesis by Na'ama Nagar. In her comparative research, she undertook a survey of over 600 Israeli commenters and 600 British commenters and controlled for a series of measures such as online demographics, online behaviour (frequency of posting) and motivations to comment. She identified seven common thematised motivations to comment as (1) a desire to voice opinions on matters of public concern, (2) exchanging and sharing, (3) knowledge with other people commenting on issues perceived to be important, (4) venting and releasing steam, (5) seeking social interaction and enjoying discussions about politics (6) sensing empowerment as citizens, and (6) a belief in the ability to convince and influence others[49].

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[47] Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media," 56.
[48] Jennifer Stromer-Galley, "New Voices in the Public Sphere: A Comparative Analysis of Interpersonal and Online Political Talk," *Javnost* 9, no. 2 (2002): 23–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2002.11008798.
[49] Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media."

The third and most recent research piece located by Springer, Engelmann and Pfaffinger (2015), interrogated German Internet users and concluded that comment writers were mostly pushed by a desire to interact and socialise with others[50].

In a last piece relevant for this aspect of the investigation, although not devoted to discovering why they comment, Tarta, who as mentioned earlier also centred her research on the EP Facebook page, observed that most user post a comment in reaction to the EP's post, while fewer react to fellow citizens' post[51], and attributed this to the language used by the EP to encourage citizens to react to the content.

After presenting these past inquiries into the motivations to comment, the hypothesis of this dissertation is that the main motivation of users to comment on the EP page is the possibility to express their own opinions.

2.6 How often do they comment?
Yet again, this is quite an under researched aspect of online comments, where the comment content has snatched most of the attention. But there are prior studies whose findings about the online behaviour of commenters show that online participation is not quite an equalitarian domain, meaning that often a small number of very active users are responsible for a major part of the comment production in forums and newspaper comment features[52]. This is perhaps attributable to the correlation between certain psychological characteristics and more proneness to comment, as suggested by Gerber[53].

In light of this, this work would like to test how frequently the commenters of the EP Facebook page engage in commenting activities, both on the page of the case study and

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[50] Nina Springer, Ines Engelmann, and Christian Pfaffinger, "User Comments: Motives and Inhibitors to Write and Read," *Information Communication and Society* 18, no. 7 (2015): 798–815, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.997268.

[51] Tarța, "A Framework for Evaluating European Social Media Publics: The Case of the European Parliament's Facebook," 163.

[52] Harold J Jansen and Royce Koop, "The British Columbia Election Online," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 30 (2005): 630; Jane B. Singer, "Separate Spaces," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 4 (2009): 490, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161209336659; Itai Himelboim, "Civil Society and Online Political Discourse: The Network Structure of Unrestricted Discussions," *Communication Research* 38, no. 5 (2011): 634–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650210384853.

[53] Alan Gerber et al., "The Big Five Personality Traits in the Political Arena," *Ssrn*, 2011, 265–89, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051010-111659.

on Facebook in general. Extrapolating the results shed by participation in forums and digital news media, the hypothesis is that those who interact with the commenting feature of the EP will comment with regularity there and on other Facebook content too.

2.7 Online and offline political interest

This has been one of the most covered areas by research within the intertwinement between social media and politics, as it constitutes a primordial call for political scientists to prove whether political productions and discussions on social media simply mirror the already existing offline political interest of citizens or whether, on the contrary, the internet does play some kind of role or even cause a rise in the levels of political interest of its users[54]. Gil de Zuñiga, Veenstra, Vraga and Shah[55], Nagar[56], Bode[57], Jung, Valenzuela[58]; Jensen, Jorba and Anduiza[59] have all concluded that everyday online interactions on SNS (and other similar online communication platforms such as blogs and forums) about political affairs foster public deliberation and citizen engagement in civic and political terms, both on the online and offline realms. But what is not certain is whether Internet use without explicit political motivations from the start has the same effect[60].

More recently, Shelley Bouliane, in her meta-analysis of research until 2015[61], indicated that there was a "positive relationship between social media use and participation in civic and political life"[62], yet she also highlighted that the data extracted from the analysed studies did not allow explaining the causes of the effects of SNS on this

[54] Andrew Chadwick, "Recent Shifts in the Relationship between the Internet and Democratic Engagement in Britain and the United States," in *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide*, ed. Eva Anduiza, Michael J. Jensen, and Laia Jorba (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2012), 39–55.

[55] Homero Gil de Zúñiga et al., "Digital Democracy: Reimagining Pathways to Political Participation," *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 7, no. 1 (2010): 36–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/19331680903316742.

[56] Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media."

[57] Leticia Bode, "Facebooking It to the Polls: A Study in Online Social Networking and Political Behavior," *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 9, no. 4 (2012): 352–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2012.709045.

[58] Gil de Zuñiga, "Social Media Use for News and Individuals' Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation."

[59] Anduiza, Jensen, and Jorba, *Digit. Media Polit. Engagem. Worldw.*, 240.

[60] Chadwick, "Recent Shifts in the Relationship between the Internet and Democratic Engagement in Britain and the United States," 43.

[61] Shelley Boulianne, "Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Current Research," *Information Communication and Society* 18, no. 5 (2015): 524–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542.

[62] Boulianne.

engagement. However, the effects of SNS on these participative outcomes have been found to vary according to factors such as country, social-political context and period of time studied[63].

Following the footsteps of all the studies which have established a link between political participation in the form of comments on social media and political engagement in other forms offline, it is also expected that the commenters of the EP Facebook page will be politically interested and politically engaged offline, albeit often without digging into which is the cause of the other.

On the whole, what can certainly be gathered from all the published research on the intersection between web-based media and politics is that the impact of this digital media on political life, whether regarded from a top-down, a bottom-up approach or horizontally, is here to stay and to keep evolving. Digital media and SNS have shaped the way political content is created, accessed, consumed, shared, used and discussed during the last decade, and these sites have opened the door to a plethora of political information, instant ways of connecting with other citizens and expressing political preferences and opinions which cannot be ignored by political institutions and governments, with the consequent effect in democracy this entails. Therefore, not only the content of the discussions which dwell on social media, but also their authors deserve a place in the academic research, as more and more people leave their political input, thoughts and concerns in the digital platforms.

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[63] Laia Jorba and Bruce Bimber, "The Impact of Digital Media on Citizenship from a Global Perspective," in *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide*, ed. Michael J. Jensen, Laia Jorba, and Eva Anduiza, First (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2012), 16–28.

3. Theoretical foundation and key concepts

The main purpose of this dissertation is to examine the citizens who comment online in a political context, the comment generators, in the particular institutional online setting of the EP Facebook page. In order to do this, this section first contextualises their social media interactions in the framework of public opinion and proceeds to discuss the role of both comments and commenters in the public sphere, two concepts that have been mentioned in the previous section and will be more fully developed now. Last but not least, some theoretical reflections are advanced, both about the transnationalisation of public opinion and its concept applied to the EU.

The theoretical weight presented in this chapter defends the perspective that online comments (understood in their most general sense; be it on social media, as posts in blogs, forums or newsfeeds, interactions with friends, strangers or on the comment sections of online newspapers on digital media) are a valid form of manifestation of public opinion[64] and that their authors, the commenters, can be regarded as an essential part of the public belonging to the concept of public sphere[65]. It also considers their commenting action as political engagement.

This work is thus framed within the broad political uses of digital media. Let us remember briefly that this works considers digital media are connected platforms characterised by their use of internet, by their global networking capacity and by the enabling of instant access and sharing of information[66]. SNS are considered a part of digital media and the present research focuses on the potential of social sites, such as Facebook, Twitter or Youtube as spaces where public opinion can blossom.

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[64] Na'ama Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media" (University at Albany, State University of New York, 2011); Dahlgren, The Political Web. Media, Participation and Alternative Democracy, 2013:60; Nina Springer, Ines Engelmann, and Christian Pfaffinger, "User Comments: Motives and Inhibitors to Write and Read," Information Communication and Society 18, no. 7 (2015): 798, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.997268; Mauro Barisione and Andrea Ceron, "A Digital Movement of Opinion? Contesting Austerity Through Social Media Pages 77-104," in Social Media and European Politics, ed. Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou, 2017, 77–104.

[65] Tarţa, "A Framework for Evaluating European Social Media Publics: The Case of the European Parliament's Facebook."

[66] Eva Anduiza, Michael J. Jensen, and Laia Jorba, eds., Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2012):3.

Web-based media and social networking sites have not ceased to grow since the arrival of the web 2.0 (a term popularised by Tim O'Reilly to design interactive websites which feature user-generated content)[67], and so have the opportunities for regular citizens to leave their political imprint online. Commenting online is nowadays one of the most accessible and perceptible forms of opinion expression and it has the potential to "amplify the voice of the citizens and encourage democratic practices"[68].

3.1 Public opinion, online talk and political engagement

But how is the concept of "public opinion" to be understood? This is a term around which no consensus has been reached, and as a result, a plethora of definitions of public opinion have developed over time[69]. In the 20th century, a more widely accepted meaning was that public opinion essentially reflects the accumulation of opinions as expressed by individuals and gathered by means of polling[70]. However, this definition fails to encompass opinions which are expressed online and not necessarily collected by official governmental or traditional media surveys and polls. The concept of public opinion on which this dissertation operates no longer relies on professional polling services or traditional media[71]. It holds the view that digital media and SNS have become a public space where citizens can voice their opinions, discuss them instantly and even in some instances mobilise around them[72] without the need for a polling-controlled setting, and this expression of opinion can and should be regarded as a legitimate public opinion form, just like the ones published on printed newspapers or broadcasted on television.

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[67] Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0," 2005, https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html., 2005
[68] Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media." 2011, 20.
[69] Slavko Splichal, *Public Opinion: Developments and Controversies in the Twentieth Century* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999), 5.
[70] Susan Herbst, "Numbered voices: how opinion polling has shaped American politics", 1993 quoted in Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media.", 2011, 21.
[71] Barisione and Ceron, "A Digital Movement of Opinion? Contesting Austerity Through Social Media." 2017, 77
[72] Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere", 2002, 23; Barisione and Ceron, "A Digital Movement of Opinion? Contesting Austerity Through Social Media.", 2017, 78

Some authors have been sceptic about this potential democratising effect of online networks[73] arguing that online connections and discussions are often plagued by polarisation[74], incivility[75] and in general, can also nurture practices that infringe upon democratic principles, rather than defend them. Not all online exchanges are meaningful in political terms or necessarily enrich democratic practices, that is clear. Dahlgren too acknowledges that everyday talk, also informal talk found online, is sometimes far from the normative ideals of rational public deliberation as defended by theorists such as Habermas[76]. Notwithstanding, he considers the more casual, non-deliberative in strict terms, or even misinformed exchanges that abound online to play a role in democracy, often paving the way to promoting political engagement[77]. After all, if we are to understand democracy in more participative and equalitarian terms, all forms of citizen contributions, especially those that deal with public affairs, should be encouraged and taken into account, regardless of the their level of formality.

This work also considers the citizen opinion expression on public affairs taking place on online platforms as a form of online political engagement, making use of Dahlgren's definition of engagement as indicating a state of mobilisation and focus on a particular thing[78], thus applying this definition to political engagement as a state of mobilisation focused on political affairs. The mobilisation can be understood as the act of commenting. As Dahlgren himself indicates, political engagement should not be mistaken for political participation, although "engagement is a requirement for later participation"[79].

Boseta, Segesten and Trenz bring to the fore the "participatory promise" harboured by social media, defined as an increase in the amount of political information to which a citizen is exposed alongside an increase in the possible ways of interacting with this

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[73] Cass Sunstein, "Is Social Media Good Or Bad for Democracy," *International Journal on Human Rights* 15, no. 27 (2018): 83–89,
http://heinonline.org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/surij27&div=11.

[74] Renee Barnes, "Hitch Up the Wagon: Charting the Online Commenting Landscape," in *Uncovering Online Commenting Culture: Trolls, Fanboys and Lurkers* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2018), 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70235-3_1., 2018,5.

[75] Papacharissi, "Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness, and the Democratic Potential of Online Political Discussion Groups.", 2002

[76] Peter Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement - Citizens, Communication and Democracy*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2009), 88-89.

[77] Ibid., 89.

[78] Ibid., 80.

[79] Ibid., 80

political information and with politics in general[80] and they identify the act of commenting in one of the four degrees of political engagement (making, commenting, diffusing and listening), as "the act of responding directly to pre-existing content and conceived as speech acts that contribute to the collective interpretation and engagement with already existing political content"[81]. Comments, in light of these stances, are to be considered as a very accessible and meaningful form of political engagement, which help to establish and promote citizen interpretations and opinions on political affairs in the public domain, and can exercise influence on those citizens who read the comments but do not publish anything themselves.

But public opinion and political engagement cannot be fully grasped without the concept of public sphere and the engaged public expressing these opinions. A great deal more research has theorised about the role of online comments in the mechanisms of public opinion formation and measure, but fewer have made it their goal to understand better the public behind these comments[82].

3.2 Definition and conceptualisation of public and public sphere

The public sphere is another elusive term regarding its definition and conceptualisation[83] It has essentially been defined as a space or domain accessible to all citizens in which citizens can exchange their opinions on public matters of "common" concern[84]. According to Splichal, the concept of public sphere has "public/ness" at its core[85], which is in turn closely linked to democratic principle of citizen engagement in matters that affect all citizens[86].

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[80] Michael Bossetta, Anamaria Dutceac Segesten, and Hans-Jörg Trenz, "Engaging with European Politics Through Twitter and Facebook: Participation Beyond the National?," in *Social Media and European Politics*, ed. Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 54, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59890-5.
[81] Ibid.,59
[82] Tarța, "A Framework for Evaluating European Social Media Publics: The Case of the European Parliament's Facebook.", 2017,144
[83] Slavko Splichal, "In Search of a Strong European Public Sphere: Some Critical Observations on Conceptualizations of Publicness and the (European) Public Sphere," *Media, Culture and Society* 28, no. 5 (2006): 695–714, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443706067022, 695.
[84] Jostein Gripsrud et al., "The Public Sphere," in *The Public Sphere*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud et al. (SAGE Publications, 2011).
[85] Splichal, "In Search of a Strong European Public Sphere: Some Critical Observations on Conceptualizations of Publicness and the (European) Public Sphere.", 696
[86] Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere.", 10

The idea of the public sphere has been heavily influenced by the works of Habermas, whose definition finds its roots in the gatherings of the "bourgeoisie", a social elite who met to deliberate and strove towards rational debate to find common solutions to societal problems[87] and consequently, it has been criticised, amongst other aspects, for its exclusion of other social classes and women[88] and for its exclusion of non-consensual debates[89]. Even though the intention of this brief theoretical discussion on the public sphere is not to review all its characterizations and critiques through history, it is nevertheless important to understand that this very much-argued term has been subjected to different historic and cultural contexts throughout its lifespan.

Traditionally, scholars engaged in the concept of public sphere have only contemplated the possibility of it taking place in physical spaces, where the citizens led their exchanges based on information gathered from the media[90] but the arrival of the internet propelled new theoretical considerations. The internet allows for a virtual setting where geographical constraints are overcome, enabling citizens to meet and interact instantly on different online spaces such as blogs, forums, comment features of online news media, etc. to express their views, as well as to retrieve and exchange information real-time. Taking it even one step further, SNS have enabled the creation of stable forms of online citizen networks.

Papacharissi makes a point not to confuse the terms "public space" and "public sphere". She argues that the Internet has become a public space, as it provides yet another location for political discussion and deliberation, yet in order to truly become a public sphere, it must also play a role in fostering democratic engagement[91]. And this is something which is not embedded in the technology per se, but on the use which is made out of it (in other words, the internet can indeed be used a as democratising tool thanks to its inherent technical features, but as stated earlier on in this section, it can

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[87] Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media", 29; Gripsrud et al., "Public Sph."
[88] Marie Fleming, "Women and the 'Public Use of Reason,'" *Social Theory and Practice* 19, no. 1 (2012): 27–50, https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract19931911.28
[89] Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement - Citizens, Communication and Democracy*.
[90] Gripsrud et al., "Public Sph."
[91] Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere.", 11

also serve the purpose of feeding uncivil discussions[92] and polarising debates[93], spreading misinformation or cementing anti-democratic behaviours[94] if in the wrong hands.)

There is of course also the question of how much pressure the internet-based public sphere would actually be able to exert on the political elite, as opinions published and political exchanges there tend to be fragmented more often than not, and the vastness of the internet network as a whole does not help to canalise online movements efficiently to be heard by the political authorities[95].

All things considered, the fact that internet use has become so mainstream, at least in democratic countries, and the fact that it offers so many possibilities for real-time discursive exchanges amongst citizens, are alone two very important factors to consider as positive for the reinforcement of the public sphere theoretical concept. As some authors have stated, taking as an example Gil de Zúñiga, the Internet does not hold the secret to a more democratic and participative society in itself, yet despite this, it is still a very powerful tool which used in the right way can definitely open up new paths for political engagement, and not just at a national level[96].

The internet, together with more recent phenomena such as globalisation and the more frequent than ever movements of capital, ideas and people across national boundaries[97] have also added new perspectives to the already complex interplay of public sphere components. This is particularly relevant in the case of the European Union and for the research of this work. As the EU has reached an unprecedented level of economic and

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[92] Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel, and Timothy W. Mcguire, "Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication," *American Psychologist* 39, no. 10 (1984): 1123–34, https://doi.org/10.3724/sp.j.1041.2011.00308.

[93] W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar, "A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication," *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 4 (2008): 720, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00410.x.

[94] Sunstein, "Is Social Media Good Or Bad for Democracy."

[95] Splichal, "In Search of a Strong European Public Sphere: Some Critical Observations on Conceptualizations of Publicness and the (European) Public Sphere," 703.

[96] Homero Gil De Zúñiga, Eulàlia Puig-I-Abril, and Hernando Rojas, "Weblogs, Traditional Sources Online and Political Participation: An Assessment of How the Internet Is Changing the Political Environment," *New Media and Society* 11, no. 4 (2009): 553–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809102960.

[97] Gripsrud et al., "Public Sph."

more gradually political integration, some authors such as Habermas have started to advocate for the need of a "European Public Sphere"[98], and others investigate whether it has already started to emerge with the help of digital technologies.

3.3 An emerging European public sphere?

As the EU has expanded its territory during the last two decades and so has its range of policies and actions, its legitimacy has also become more disputed[99], making the question of the emergence of a transnational European sphere plausible[100].

The Europeanisation of the public sphere in the European space becomes even a more complex task if possible, when one thinks about the diversity of cultures, languages, traditions and economies which can be observed in the European continent, all factors which are at odds with the emergence of a unified European "publicness"[101]. If we part from the already contested notion that the public sphere itself represents, assessing whether a European public sphere is, could be, or will potentially be emerging in the context of social media anytime soon is thus not exactly straightforward.

From the standpoint of the empirical evidence provided by Internet and social media at European level, it is possible to affirm that European citizens from different EU member countries do indeed have the possibility to engage with other citizens in discussions on European affairs, and to even try to reach consensus on matters of international scope[102]. In addition to this, and since access to the web has become a widespread commodity (85% of European households had access to the internet in

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[98] Jürgen Habermas, "Warum Braucht Europa Eine Verfassung?," *Die Zeit*, June 28, 2001, 6, https://www.zeit.de/2001/27/Warum_braucht_Europa_eine_Verfassung_/seite-6.

[99] Barisione and Michailidou, *Soc. Media Eur. Polit.* 2017

[100] Thomas Risse, "An Emerging European Public Sphere? Theoretical Clarifications and Empirical Clarifications," 2003; Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, and Trenz, "Political Participation on Facebook during Brexit."

[101] P. Schlesinger and John Eric Fossum, *The European Union and the Public Sphere: A Communicative Space in the Making?*, *The European Union and the Public Sphere: A Communicative Space in the Making?*, 2007, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203960851; Splichal, "In Search of a Strong European Public Sphere: Some Critical Observations on Conceptualizations of Publicness and the (European) Public Sphere."

[102] Gil de Zúñiga, "Toward a European Public Sphere? The Promise and Perils of Modern Democracy in the Age of Digital and Social Media — Introduction."

2016[103]) across the EU, citizens from all social strata and backgrounds can have a potential say in political boards across the internet, enriching transnational democracy in the process.

It is precisely the borderless character of the internet and social media is what Barisione and Michailidou hope can foster the concept of "public Europeanism" in what they define as:

> Sharing common concerns (European politics), being exposed to or more actively interacting within a common information and communication environment (online news media and social media), and forming political opinions that citizens of other EU member states also share, across similar ideological or political lines[104].

They add that this does not mean that a single, unified European public sphere will have been achieved under these given conditions, but that a plurality of public spheres co-exist at a European level, and in certain occasions and settings, a transnational dialogue might take place which might contribute to the feeling of Europeanisation in the public opinion[105].

This concept, which acknowledges several spheres existing, is crucial, given that the European panorama is very complex and a stream of tweets about issues of European salience, such as Brexit, or the citizen discussions posted on the European social media channels, such as the profiles and pages of the European Parliament, European Commission or European Consilium, seem insufficient to fulfil all the requirements of a European public sphere and will not solve the issues of democratic and legitimacy deficit of the EU alone. Howbeit, the aggregation of online spaces of discussion could plant the seed for more resonance of European affairs in national medias or more transnational digital media channels, for instance.

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[103] Eurostat, "Archive:Internet Access and Use Statistics - Households and Individuals," Eurostat: Statistics Explained, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Internet_access_and_use_statistics_-_households_and_individuals&oldid=319719.
[104] Barisione and Michailidou, *Soc. Media Eur. Polit.*, 8.
[105] Ibid., 8.

It is subsequently important to keep an eye on these online spaces, as they are signs of Europeanisation in the public opinion, perhaps not necessarily at a big scale or with far-reaching political repercussion (yet), but it might also occur that, with such a multi-level and vast entity such as the EU, the emergence of a truly transnational European public sphere starts with smaller co-existing and multi-level European spheres on different channels and platforms, but which, thanks to digital technology, might progressively merge into a truly supranational form of European "publicness".

3.4 Europeanisation of the commenters, a sociological approach

This work would also like to incorporate the sociological approach developed by Neil Fligstein, already introduced in the previous review chapter, to its theoretical account, by establishing a link between the profile of the commenters of the Parliament page (or comparable settings) and the profile of the Europeanised citizen as depicted by Fligstein in the 5th chapter of his book[106].

Fligstein enumerates a series of factors which play a role in the transnationalisation of European citizens, all adding towards the degree to which these citizens have had opportunities to interact with citizens from other EU countries[107]. An increase in contacts and bonds between people from different countries but with similar backgrounds and interests promotes the emergence of a certain Europeanness in these people, here understood as a shift of identity and political interests from the exclusively national to the supranational and European[108]. This work defends that these factors described by Fligstein contribute to the creation of (a) Europeanised public sphere(s) as well.

Fligstein's writings underscore the increase in interconnectivity of the continent, caused by the internationalisation of numerous companies (bolstered by EU economic integration policies in the first place), which in their turn fostered travel and transnational contacts amongst professionals, as well the prominent role played by the promotion of international exchanges between educational institutions as keys to the

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[106] Fligstein, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe*.
[107] Ibid., 125.
[108] Ibid., 123.

Europeanisation of EU nationals. Although his focus lies on the mobility patterns of the tangible world, he does devote a paragraph to the potential of internet in furthering these international connections, predicting that they will make exchanges amongst citizen easier[109]. Therefore, this thesis would like to update Fligstein's contribution a decade after its publication, by applying his framework to the international population of a virtual setting, and inspect whether his theory of the Europeanised citizen is applicable to those who comment on EP Facebook page, a site which, at first glance, gives the impression of being prone to hosting rather polarising debates about European (dis)integration.

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[109] Ibid., 15.

4. Methodology

As stated earlier, this work seeks to cast light on the citizens who comment on the EP Facebook page by surveying them and trying to establish their profile and motivations to voice their thoughts publicly on social media. The research adopted a mixed-methods design, with both quantitative and qualitative data obtained through means of a questionnaire.

The selected research method for this dissertation was an Internet survey, and the target population of the research were the commenters on the EP Facebook page. An online survey proved the most appropriate method to recruit participants for the study, given that the target population was exclusively gathered online on that platform. Facebook is the most used social media site of the world nowadays, with over 2.8 billion active users at the time of writing this work[110] and, given its levels of popularity and widespread utilisation amongst such a large sector of human population, it has become a fruitful source for research in many fields.

4.1 Online surveys: advantages and drawbacks

Online surveys are considered to be a swift, efficient and cost-effective way of gathering data[111]. In the case of these particular research effort, since the target population were the online commenters on the EP Facebook page, an internet survey administered through the Facebook Messenger feature was the only viable option to reach them. Online surveys, just like traditional surveys, feature a series of advantages such as the ones presented above but are also constrained by some limitations. Some of the most important limitations presented by Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink to keep in mind are the following[112]:

- Recall capacity: the capacity of people asked in surveys to recall is very low (capacity to remember)
- Memory bias: people might want to give a certain impressions about themselves

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[110] Dan Noyes, "The Top 20 Valuable Facebook Statistics - Updated May 2019," Zephoria - Digital Marketing, 2019, https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/.
[111] Valerie M Sue and Lois A Ritter, "Conducting Online Surveys Introduction," in *Conducting Online Surveys* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2015), 7.
[112] Norman M. Bradburn, Seymour Sudman, and Brian Wansink, *Asking Questions : The Definitive Guide to Questionnaire Design* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

- The answer provided might not reply the question asked (in the case of open-ended questions)

4.2 Facebook as research ground

Several studies in the past have already used Facebook as a means to recruit participants for studies[113], especially in the health sciences field. The only inference one can draw from previous studies is that there is an array of ways to try to gather research participants on Facebook, from the more sophisticated and paying, like using Facebook targeted ads, to simply sharing the link of a study on one's profile or in groups.

The recruiting method for this particular undertaking consisted in asking directly the commenters of the EP Facebook page, in other words, only those who had already posted some kind of reaction to published content on the site. Consequently, it was decided that the best way to get replies from the true commenters was to contact them through a private message, because the intention was to get answers from those who had already commented, not the readers. The main concern using this distribution method was that messages sent to non-befriended users on the platform usually end up in the "message requests" inbox and not the main inbox, thus never reaching the targeted user and resulting in a very low response-rate. In order to compensate this, a comment was left as a reply on the comment posted by the targeted users, to let them know that they had received a private message. But later on, the EP moderation team notified explicitly that, according to their guidelines, targeting users in this way, even if for research purposes, could discourage some users from posting, and so the approach of leaving a public reaction to every contacted user was discarded. After this episode, permission from the EP was requested to post the survey as a comment once on every post (maximum twice a day) but the request was not answered, and thus this approach was ruled out.

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[113] DE Ramo and JJ Prochaska, "Broad Reach and Targeted Recruitment Using Facebook for an Online Survey of Young Adult Substance Use," *Journal Of Medical Internet Research* 14, no. 1 (2012): 1438–8871; Eric R. Pedersen and Jeremy Kurz, "Using Facebook for Health-Related Research Study Recruitment and Program Delivery," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 9 (2016): 38–43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.09.011; Fabiola Baltar and Ignasi Brunet, "Social Research 2.0: Virtual Snowball Sampling Method Using Facebook," *Internet Research* 22, no. 1 (2012): 57–74, https://doi.org/10.1108/10662241211199960.

4.2.1 Ethical considerations

Because Facebook and social media in general are a relatively new terrain on which to recruit potential study participants, there is not an established set of guidelines or ethical code to abide by when conducting research there[114]. For this study, only the Facebook name displayed by the user and their public comment on the EP page were recorded to keep track of how many users had been contacted, on which post they commented and what they had commented. The private messages sent were deleted from the account used after completion of the survey distribution process and no personal information from the contacted users' accounts was recorded. The survey answers were collected anonymously and do not contain identifiable personal information, hence the survey is in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) from the EU[115]. Kosinski et al. recommend to only record and use contact information without the user's consent if the user is aware of having made it publicly available[116], and in the case of this survey process, the name and the comment left on the EP page were considered to be of public domain and clearly acknowledged as such by the user, given the public character of the page.

4.2.2 Constraints

Facebook has a privacy policy that tries to protect users from receiving unsolicited communications and spam in their inboxes. This also means that the activity of an account might be labelled as "suspicious" if it sends out too many messages to other users:

> On Facebook, the most common unacceptable behavior involves some abuse of our communication tools. Such a behaviour can be mild, as in annoying others with too many messages or friend requests or as serious as deliberately trying to spam others for commercial gain[117]

This posed a risk both for the dissertation and for my personal account, as it was used to send out the messages and recruit the commenters. In order to limit the risk of being blocked or facing some kind of ban, the number of daily interactions was set to a maximum of 20 per day (ideally 10 on the first post of the day around midday; and 10

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[114] Michal Kosinski et al., "Facebook as a Research Tool," *CE Corner* 47, no. 3 (2016): 70.
[115] EU, "General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)," 2018, https://gdpr-info.eu.
[116] Kosinski et al., "Facebook as a Research Tool."
[117] Matt Hicks, former coroporate communications at Facebook, "Explaining Facebook's Spam Prevention Systems," 2010.

more on the second post, by evening), and every user was contacted only once regardless of how many times they had commented. The limitation in the number of messages that could be sent entailed that on two occasions the account received a "suspicious activity" warning, which forced a pause in the distribution of the questionnaire for a day or two after.

4.3 The data

The survey was distributed from the 17th of March to the 22nd of April. 628 Users were contacted of whom 110 replied to the survey. The response rate was 17,5%. As mentioned in the previous section, the survey was sent individually through a private message to, on average, the first displayed 10 commenters of every post.

The primary source of data for this research was the EP Facebook page, and more specifically the information provided by the participants of the survey, the commenters. The population of the survey were the commenters of the EP Facebook page, although it could have been extrapolated to the commenters of the other EU Facebook pages since the study is set in the EU institutional context on social media and its communications with citizens.

The main reason to select said page was, on the one hand, its huge follower base (2,519,579 followers or people who have liked the page), especially when comparing with the other two biggest European institutions: the European Commission which only boasts 903,486 followers, and the Council of the European Union and European Council (same page) with only 394,946. On the other hand, and as discussed earlier in the theoretical section of this dissertation, the Facebook page of the EP is a very suitable environment for an online European public sphere to emerge, as a considerable amount of citizens from different member states gather there to comment on topics of transnational reach. This setting was therefore deemed a good case study to understand who these citizens are and what it is that drives them to get engaged in European affairs by means of commenting.

The EP publishes an average of two posts per day. In order to ensure the randomness of the sample, the approach was to contact the first 10 users that appeared in the comment section of each post after having selected the "show all comments" option, and

including those users who had replied to another comment (this involved a further step, namely to click on "see replies" and unfold the replies after the first comment). In the case of "live streaming" posts featuring parliamentary sessions or interviews, the option selected to display the comments was "newest" (for the message used to contact potential study participants, see appendix I). In order to try to counteract the "recall capacity" limitation of survey takers, potential recruitments were contacted within few minutes or hours after having left the comment.

4.4 Survey design

Some of the most basic principles when designing a self-administered questionnaire and which were taken very strictly into account for the design of this survey were: to use unambiguous words and avoid double-barrelled questions, keep the questions specific and simple, and select a suitable period of time for the recalling of behaviours (in the case of this survey, commenting on Facebook)[118].

The questionnaire was composed using Google forms, and the first draft contained 24 questions. Something that was clear from the start was that the survey had to be short and that it had to grab the interest of the respondent from the start to maximise the chances of completion, as one of the main disadvantages of self-administered questionnaires is the low response-rate[119].

Once the first version of the survey was completed (see Appendix II), it was distributed during 5 days amongst some of my peers and colleagues in order to gather feedback and check how long it took to answer. The pilot phase gathered 16 replies, and thanks to the gathered feedback the following changes were applied:

- All the questions except "If the answer to the previous question was YES, do you remember what it was about (comment content)?" were made closed-ended in order to make sure that the information provided was as accurate as possible and make the process of processing the data easier.
- All the questions were set to " answer required" to ensure that participants did not skip any questions which would make the rest of the survey invalid.

[118] Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink, *Asking Questions : The Definitive Guide to Questionnaire Design.*
[119] Alan Bryman and Emma Bell, *Business Research Methods*, 3rd Editio (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 144.

- The order of appearance for the answer options was randomised.
- Some questions were reworded and simplified when possible.

The pilot study revealed that the survey took an average of 3 minutes to answer, which was considered appropriate for this particular case. What resulted after applying all the relevant changes became the final survey (see Appendix III for the whole survey in its original format), which was divided in 8 sections structured in the following way:

- Section 1 contains demographic questions and inquires about gender, age, nationality and employment status of the participants. Only those participants who answered "yes" to whether they were employed were automatically sent to section 2, which asks in which sector they are employed.

- Section 3 asks about the completed level of studies of the participants. Those who selected that they had completed a bachelor degree, master degree of PhD were then directed to section 4 and asked to specify the field of their studies.

- Those participants who responded "I am a student" in section 1 when asked about their employment status, were automatically redirected by the form to section 5, in which the students are asked about their subject of study and their level of studies.

  The questions up to section 5 were designed to answer the research question Q1:Who are the commenters? The questions about age, gender and country were made specifically to determine the demographic characteristics of the sample. The questions inquiring about employment status, educational level, working sector and field of study, despite their demographic character, were also linked to question 2, to determine how Europeanised the commenters were.

- Section 6 was for all the respondents as it delved deeper into their level of "Europeanness" or transnationalism. Taking cues after Fligstein characterisation of the "European citizen", in this section the participants are asked whether they have ever studied abroad, lived abroad, have international friendships, and what

their general opinion on the EU is in order to help assess more precisely their level of Europeanisation (Q2).

- Section 7 intends to map the participants' online behaviour on Facebook and the Internet regarding the EU. It attempts to gauge their interest in EU politics (by asking how often they read content related to the EU and whether they follow the EP Facebook page for example), their interactions with the EP page on Facebook (How many times did you comment on the European Parliament Facebook page during the last 7 days?), and most importantly, their motivations to comment on the page (Which is your MAIN motivation to comment on the European Parliament Facebook page?). Due to time constraints, this question was close-ended and the answer options were extracted from Nagar's study[120]. The options for this question are the themes she coded from the open answers she had gathered. This question alone should answer another main research question of this dissertation, Q3: why do they comment?
Section 7 also aims to measure how politically interested in general these users are according to their online actions (by capturing on what other content on Facebook they have commented and are interested in, for instance) and to analyse whether these participants tend to comment and react more to EU or politics-related content, or they just comment more in general. This section was designed to try to respond both Q4 and Q5, to see whether commenters tend to post frequently or are just occasional, and test how interested in political content they are.

- Section 8, the last section, inquires about offline political engagement very briefly, only asking about voting behaviour. The two questions that conform this last part are, "Did you vote in the last elections in which you were eligible to do so?" and "Do you intend to vote in the forthcoming European Parliament elections". This section is linked to the last question, Q5, to determine whether the EP commenters are genuinely interesting in politics also offline.

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[120] Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media," 56.

4.5 Relevant circumstances of the time period of data collection, possible biases and general limitations

The survey was distributed from the 17th of March 2019 until the 22nd of April 2019. This period saw a total of 79 posts published, with an average number of 246,54 comments per post (although the standard deviation was high, with some posts receiving very few comments and a handful of posts receiving a lot of reactions. See appendix IV for a complete overview).

The short distribution period posed a limitation for the reliability of the results of the study, as it is not a long period of time, and the number of replies collected (110) is clearly insufficient to be able to reflect the real diversity of the citizens commenting on the page. Nevertheless, the extracted data still offers an interesting and academically significant glimpse into who these vocally active citizens on European affairs are.

A series of events marked this period of data collection, some of them very relevant politically and socially across the EU, and as such, they might have influenced the results of this study. To start with, the very day the survey distribution phase was launched, the 17th of March, was St. Patrick's day and the EP's post ot the day commemorated this holiday. A great number of users who commented that day were Irish and so the Irish nationality might be overrepresented in the sample.

But if there is one event that marked this period and all the comments written during this time, it was Brexit. The month of March of 2019 will be remembered throughout history for being the month of Brexit incertitude. The UK was due to officially withdraw from the EU on March the 29th 2019 but every Brexit deal proposed by Theresa May was rejected and so (as of April the 1st 2019) the new Brexit deadline was pushed to the 12th of April 2019[121]. When the survey was finalised, around the second week of March, it was thought the UK would leave the EU by the end of that month and thus Britons would not eligible to partake in the European elections. This was relevant for the last question of the survey, "Do you intend to vote in the forthcoming European Parliament elections"?. As Brexit negotiations failed, it was not clear for some weeks

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[121] Seán Clarke, "Brexit Timeline: Key Dates after EU Extends March Deadline | Politics | The Guardian," The Guardian, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2019/mar/22/brexit-timeline-key-dates-after-eu-extends-march-deadline.

whether Britons would eventually be able to vote or not, and so this has had an impact in the reliability of that question since British participants might have been unsure as to which option to select if they wanted to vote but thought they would not be able to. At any rate, Brexit was a very recurrent topic in the comment section of the page, referred to by plenty of users even in posts that were not related to it.

Last but not least, the 26th of March 2019, the EP approved a new set of copyright rules applied to web content[122]. This seemed to upset a lot of users who interpreted the measure as a limitation to freedom of expression online, and judging by a great bunch of user reactions on the page, it was very contested. As a result, many of the comments posted during the month of March and from that day onwards were specifically about this decision even in unrelated posts. This announcement definitely caused a quite a deal of stir in the users commenting on the EP page, and might have had a great and sudden impact for some in their perception of the EU. It even might have prompted some citizens to comment who would not have done it otherwise.

Regarding the content presented by the EP on their posts during the months March-April where the data was gathered, very diverse subjects were treated (see appendix IV for a table with a full list of subjects). Some posts introduced the EP agenda of the week, two of them were Q&A sessions with parliamentarians aimed at direct interaction of citizens with representatives of the institution, others presented live sessions of parliament work. Amongst the topic showcase, posts promoting the EP elections were featured, alongside a couple of posts about commemorative days like World Health day, Pet day or the Easter holiday and, in general, posts that highlight what kind of work the EP does in the presented areas (such as food safety, or water and energy consumption). But it is hardly a shock that some of the most commented threads were about Brexit and the new digital copyright measures, with 1300 and 897 comments respectively (1512 comments related to the new copyright rules if both posts of the 26th of March are taken into consideration). The notable and humoristic exception was a post about food safety that jokingly portrayed the picture of a pineapple and a slice of pizza adding as a caption "better together". This was the most commented thread with 1700 comments, as

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[122] European Commission, "Modernisation of the EU Copyright Rules," Digital Single Market - Policy, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/modernisation-eu-copyright-rules.

the pineapple and pizza image seemed to capture the attention of many, although not everyone understood the joke. Another topic which arose a great deal of interest judging by the number of comments was Greta Thunberg's speech at the Parliament the 16th of April, the live stream of which ended with 997 comments, plus the announcement (379 comments) and the recap of her address, with 410 comments.

Finally, it must be stressed that the official EP Facebook page uses English in its communications and both the survey and the message sent to contact potential participants were in English. This represents a general methodical limitation when the research effort contemplates the emergence of a possible emerging pan-European sphere. On the one hand, the fact that all the posts and comments are in English probably deters to some degree those European citizens who do not understand, let alone write the language or do not feel comfortable enough doing so. Although it is true that automatic translation tools are in place on Facebook and some people reply in other languages than English, more often than not, those without solid English writing skills might be excluded from the commenting population. On the other hand, both the message and survey used for this study were in English, and again, those without high skills in the language probably did not take part in the study. So the language code here could well be a selection bias and hindrance in the effort to assess a truly transnational and European public.

5. Results

This dissertation set out to profile the commenters of the EP Facebook page by examining who they are and what drives them to write comments on European affairs. To better understand who populates the comment section of this international page, demographic variables were measured, levels of Europeanisation, motivations, commenting habits and levels of political interest (general and specifically concerning EU politics) were gauged (both by asking questions about online behaviour and interests and offline political participation through voting). This section presents and summarises all the relevant findings of the investigation in relation to these research questions using descriptive statistics.

5.1 Demographic variables

The demographic variables measured by this research were the gender, age, employment status, education level of the commenters and nationality distribution.
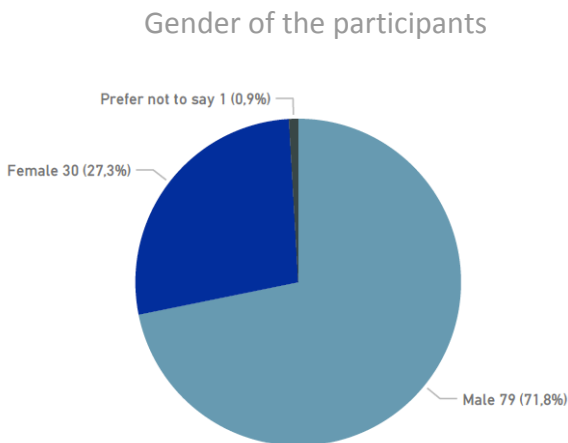
Gender of the participants

What year were you born in?

Prefer not to say 1 (0,9%)

Female 30 (27,3%)

Male 79 (71,8%)

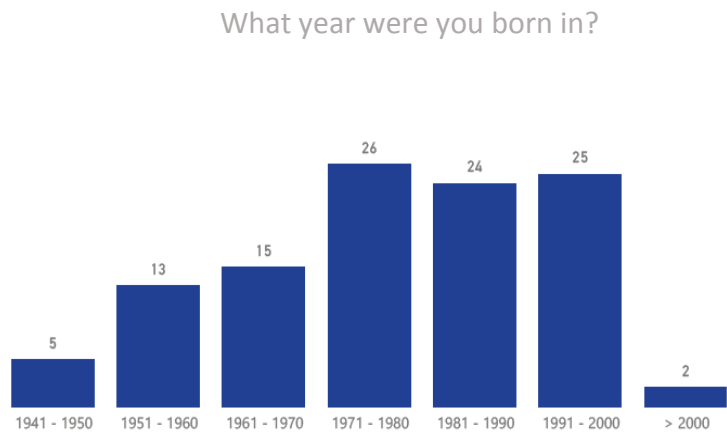*Figure 1 Distribution of participants by gender*   *Figure 2 Distribution of participants by year of birth*

The survey revealed that a clear majority of the commenters who participated in the study were male, while just over a fourth were female. Most of the participants were comprised between the ages of 20 to 49, with the average age of the commenter being 40 and the median 38.
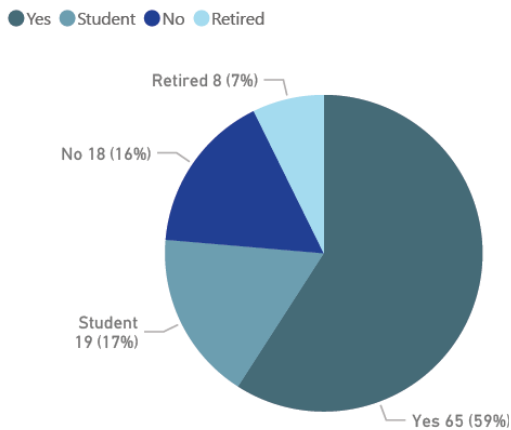
Are you employed?

Figure 3 Distribution of participants by occupational status

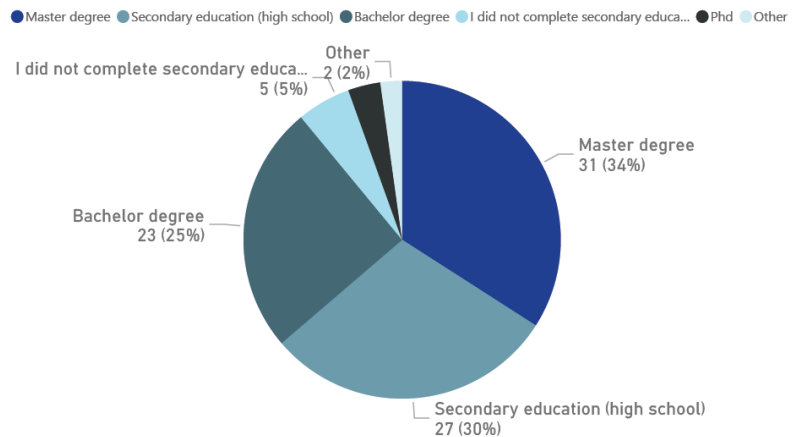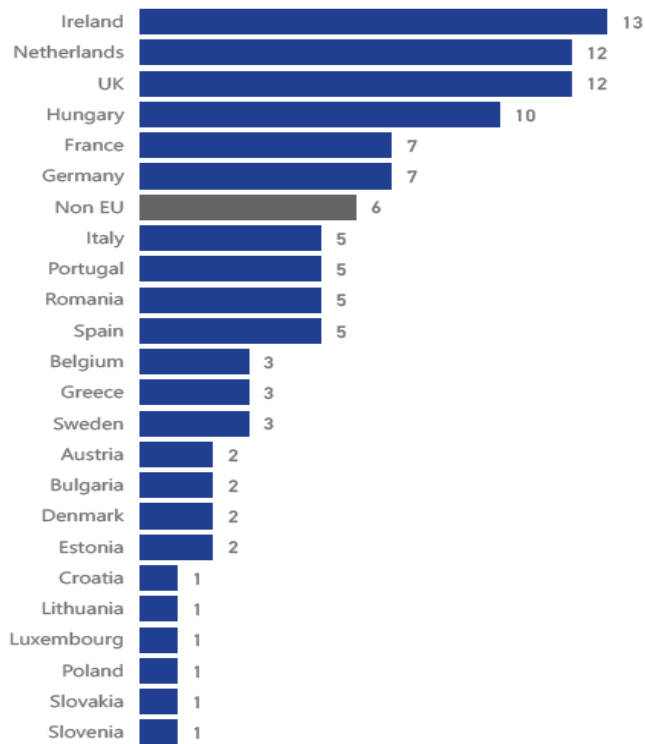

What level of education did you attach?

Figure 4 Distribution of participants by educational level

As figure 3 and figure 4 show, the majority of the surveyed comment writers were employed and had attained higher education. The combination of respondents who hold a bachelor, master degree or PhD reaches 56,6%. Of those who were studying at the time of the survey (19 respondents from figure 3), 10 of them were master students, 7 of them bachelor students and 2 were working on their PhDs.

The present results allow to summarise that the demographic profile for the average citizen who comments on the EP page corresponds on average to a male of around 40 years of age who is currently employed and is educated or highly educated.

With regards to the nationalities present in this data set as shown by figure 5, four countries stood out: Ireland with 13 commenters came in first place, followed by both the UK and the Netherlands with 12 commenters each. Hungary followed with 10 users. Also tied in the 3rd place were France and Germany with 7 commenters coming from each country.

What is your country of nationality?

Country	
Ireland	13
Netherlands	12
UK	12
Hungary	10
France	7
Germany	7
Non EU	6
Italy	5
Portugal	5
Romania	5
Spain	5
Belgium	3
Greece	3
Sweden	3
Austria	2
Bulgaria	2
Denmark	2
Estonia	2
Croatia	1
Lithuania	1
Luxembourg	1
Poland	1
Slovakia	1
Slovenia	1

23 out of the current 28 EU member states were represented in the findings of this study. Only Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Latvia and Malta lack representation.

5,5% of the survey respondents came originally from a state outside the EU.

Figure 5 Distribution of participants by nationality

5.2 Europeanising variables

Some variables aimed to evaluate the level of Europeanness or cosmopolitanism of the commenters, as extracted by Nil Fligstein's account of the Europeanised population[123], and to extract them, the participants were asked in which sector they worked or in which field they had majored, or were majoring if they were students, whether they had studied or lived abroad, whether they had international friendships and what their general viewpoint on the EU was.

What is your degree in?

Field	
Social sciences	14
Business/Economy	12
IT	12
Engineering	8
Humanities	8
Arts/Creative	7
Law	7
Natural Sciences	5
Veterinary/Agriculture/Environment	1

Figure 6 Participants with tertiary education by study field (including current students)

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[123] Fligstein, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe*.
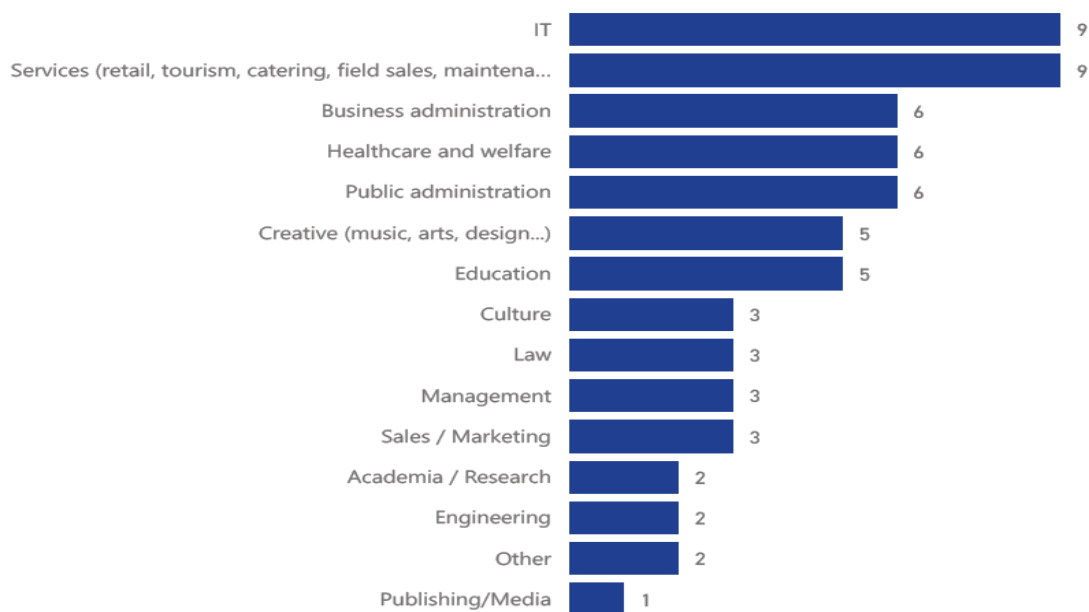
Figure 7 Participants who are currently employed by working sector

As figure 6 exposes, amongst those with tertiary education or currently studying, the most popular degrees were social sciences, business or finance and IT. At the top of the working sectors amongst commenters was also IT, with services, business administration and public administration following closely (figure 7).

With respect to personal Europeanising experiences, those who declared that they had lived abroad accounted for a 64% of the total respondents, while those who had studied abroad represented a 38% of the sample. Nearly all the participants (95,45%) had international friendships. Thus, the results show that a clear majority of the participating commenters had international experiences. The stance towards the EU of more than two thirds of participants (69%) was overall positive, whereas 26% had a negative opinion about it and 5% of participants selected the option "I don't know" in this question.and 5% of participants selected the option "I don't know" in this question.

5.3 Motivations to comment on the European Parliament page

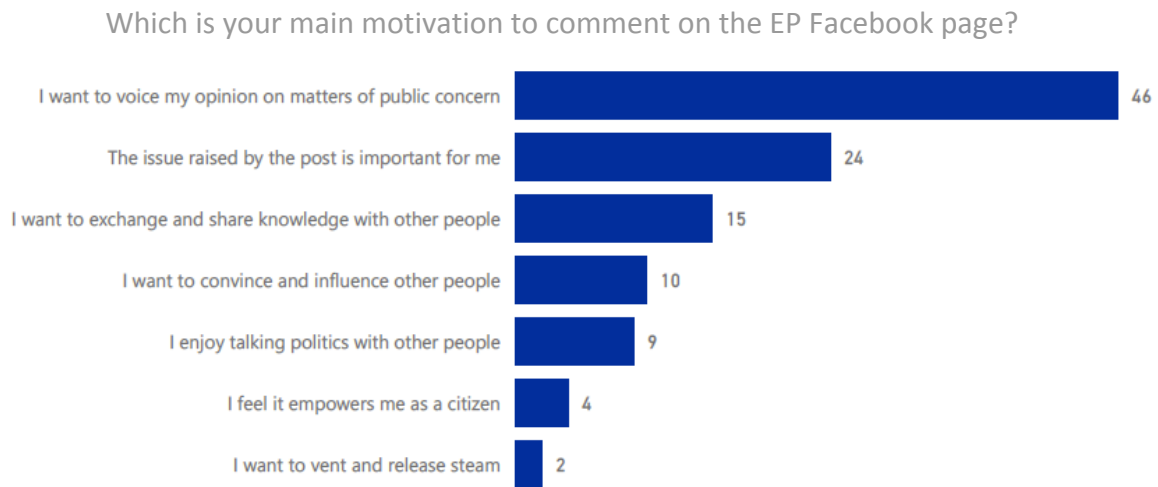Which is your main motivation to comment on the EP Facebook page?

Figure 8 Participants by main motivation to comment on the European Parliament Facebook page

The dominating motivation reported by the surveyed citizens was by far the possibility of expressing their opinion, with 41,8% of the surveyed having selected that option as the main reason to post comments. The following most reported motivation, at 22%, was the personal interest for the topic at hand, and finally, in the third place, the socialising function[124] of wanting to discuss and exchange views with other citizens with 13%.

5.4 Commenting frequency

How many times did you comment on the EP Facebook page during the last 7 days?
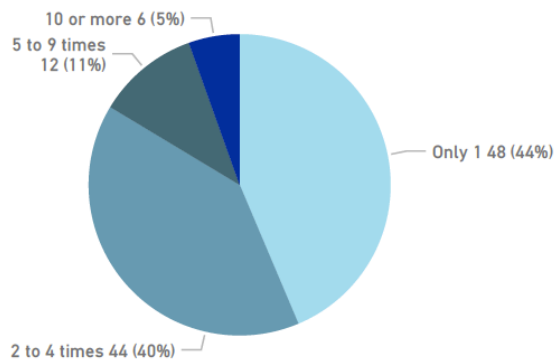

Figure 9 Frequency of commenting on the European Parliament Facebook

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[124] Springer, Engelmann, and Pfaffinger, "User Comments: Motives and Inhibitors to Write and Read."

Two questions inquired about the frequency of commenting both on the examined page and on Facebook in general. The results show that practically nine out of ten participants were likely to be regular commenters (90%), having commented on other Facebook content during the week previous to responding the survey, and their activity seems to be a habit. A quick content analysis performed on what they had commented showed that a majority of those other comments also revolved around political and social issues.

More than half of the respondents had commented more than once on the Parliament page the previous week (as displayed by figure 9), and so these people can be considered more than just occasional commenters on the page object of this study as well. Almost 40% of the participants had commented from 2 to 4 times on the EP page during the week they were surveyed, 11.1% had left between 5 and 9 comments and 5,6% had commented more than 10 times.

5.5 Online and offline political interest

Finally, another set of variables was designed to measure the level of political interest (on the EU and in general) as expressed by political interests on Facebook and on the offline world.
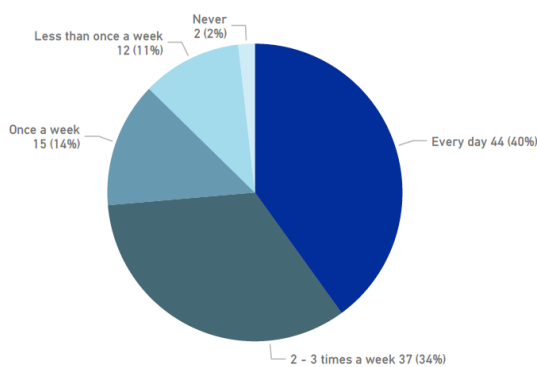
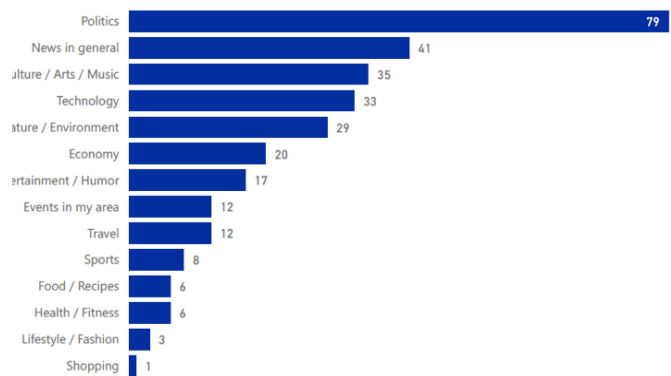*Figure 10 Frequency of EU-related information access*

Figure 11 Distribution of interests by participants

First of all, most participants (76,4%) were active followers of the EP Facebook site, that is, they liked the page, as opposed to 18% of respondents, who had commented but were not following the page on Facebook, which probably means that they had seen the EP content on their feeds as a result of targeted advertising. 5,5% Of the respondents were unsure as to whether they were subscribed to the page or not. This, together with the information from the above graphs, seem to indicate the participants were overall politically interested, also specifically on EU affairs. Practically all the respondents (95%) stated that they were interested in EU politics. And judging by the high frequency with which they keep informed about European affairs (figure 10), with over three quarters of those asked doing so every day or two to three times a week, their interest in supranational affairs is indeed confirmed. Politics was also reportedly the most interesting topic found on Facebook (seen on figure 11), which reinforces the stand that most commenters of the EP setting are politically interested. This online interest was mirrored in their offline political activity as reflected by participation in elections, as represented below by figures 12 and 13. 80% Of the respondents had voted in the previous elections where they had been eligible and nearly 80% also intended to vote in the EP elections taking place the 23-26th May 2019.

Did you vote in the last elections where you were eligible to do so?

No 22 (20%)

Yes 88 (80%)
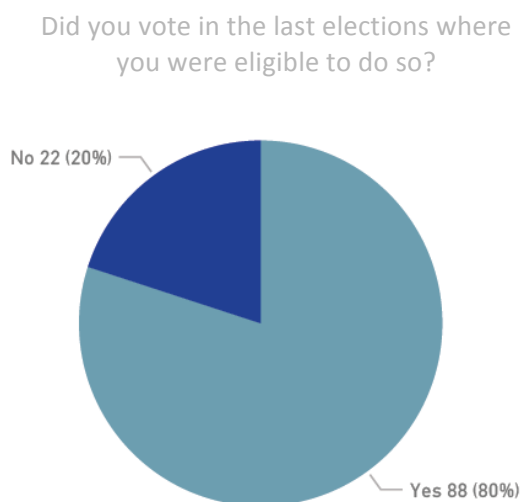
Figure 12 Participant turnout in the latest elections

Do you intend to vote in the forthcoming European Parliament elections?

I am not eligible … 5 (5%)
I haven't decided yet 8 (7%)

No 10 (9%)

Yes 87 (79%)

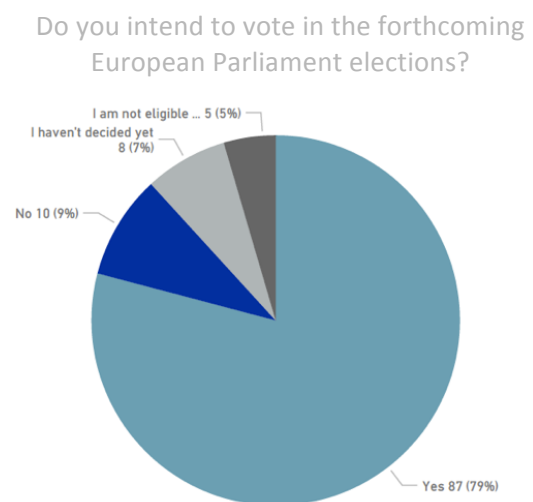*Figure 13 Participant intention to vote in the forthcoming EP elections*

6. Discussion

In this section, the results of the study are critically examined so as to answer the research questions posed in the introduction as well as to place this work in the bigger context of social media use in connection with European politics. Furthermore, the analysis points out at possible general limitations alongside lines for future research to keep building knowledge on the field from the different perspectives explored.

Q1. Who are these users who engage and interact with the EP Facebook page from a demographic perspective?

The answer to the first research question is that the demographic profile of the citizen who comments on the EP page is, according to the findings advanced by this study, a male of around 40 years of age, employed and likely to have achieved tertiary education. This is not a surprising revelation as it is in accord with the bulk of previous research conducted on online commentators, which has found men to be far more articulate than women in online commentary sections of both news and social media, and to be more educated than average[125]. In contrast, it does significantly differ from the EP commenter portrayed by the only study found on this particular population by Vesnic-Alujevic, and which defined the typical commenter as being male or female in a similar percentage[126].

This dissertation would like to emphasise the problem of the gender gap found in the present results. While it is not its goal to elaborate on or try to explain the gender differences which seem to plague the domain of public opinion online, it must be stressed that this is a worrying trend which deserves more attention and investigation; on the one hand, to establish the causes of such a representation imbalance between female and male commenters, and on the other, to find solutions for this problem of online inequality. Now, in terms of effects for the assessment of the online European public sphere(s) presented as the theoretic foundation of this work, this particular result should be considered negative. If fewer females than males express their political views online, the online public sphere is not balanced, and thus not representative, and will

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[125] Purcell, Rainie, and Mitchell, "Understanding the Participatory News Consumer"; Meyer and Carey, "Men More Likely to Post Online Newspaper Comments"; Stroud, Duyn, and Peacock, "Survey of Commenters and Comment Readers."
[126] Vesnic-Alujevic, "Political Participation and Web 2.0 in Europe: A Case Study of Facebook."

inevitably continue to fail to achieve its true democratic and equality-fostering capabilities.

Regarding the average age of about 40 years old, it is slightly higher than in the past research presented earlier and this could be due to the fact that, as the internet-based technologies and applications have now been incorporated into people's daily lives for longer, the average age of the internet user has also increased alongside them as they grow older together with the web. An alternative explanation is, like Barnes pointed out in one of his recent works, that somewhat older generations who did not have such technologies in their infancy or youth have by now learned to use them and integrated them in their daily activities just like the younger cohorts born into the internet era[127].

As mentioned before, seeing that the average participant of this study is employed and tends to be educated or highly educated is also in line with past demographic inquires into online commentary sections. This same variable is also in clear agreement with Fligstein's characterisation of the European citizen, and it will be discussed more in depth in the next section.

Concerning the nationality spectrum of the citizen commenters surveyed, it is positive to see that in such a small sample of only 110 individuals, almost all EU member states were represented in it with the exception of Finland, Malta, Cyprus, Latvia and the Czech Republic. This insufflates hopes into the view of the studied page, and similar online platforms, as a possible space for (an) emerging pan-European public sphere(s) from a national representation point of view. The fact that only 6 participants of the study were original from a non-EU country also reinforces the idea of the EP online space as nurturing a predominantly European audience that cares about European affairs which affect European citizens. As discussed in the methodological part, the Irish nationality is probably overrepresented considering that the first post where participants started to be recruited was about St.Patrick's day, an Irish festivity. Brexit negotiations and the approaching of the initial deadline were a recurrent topic on the news media and also dominated the comment section of the EP site. The combination of these two

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[127] Barnes et al., "Personality and Online News Commenting Behaviours: Uncovering the Characteristics of Those below the Line."

factors could explain why the Irish and British commenters are the most numerous in this study. The neighbouring Irish are also more impacted than any other country by Brexit, so this might provide a compelling alternative justification as to why there were so many Irish participants.

Another factor that has a role to play in the diversity of the European commenting population for this case study is arguably the language, as already pointed out in the methodological observations. The EP only posts content in English on its page (even though nowadays Facebook includes a feature to have content translated into the language Facebook is being used by the user automatically), and English is the language the vast majority of commenters use to reply, although some exceptions exist. Consequently, English native speakers or people proficient in this language arguably have an edge because the language for them does not represent a problem as it could for other EU nationals who do not master this language. Tied at the top together with the UK, the Netherlands was one of the most represented countries and the Dutch are known for their English language proficiency[128]. Interestingly, the fourth of the top nationalities was Hungary, a country ranking moderately in English proficiency levels[129]. In any case, the sample is too small, and so are the numerical differences between countries so as to be able to extract detailed conclusions beyond its already marked pan-European character. However, the evidence suggests that the language used entails inequalities in the share of population which gets involved in debates online, meaning that Europeans who understand and can express themselves with ease in English, which at the moment is the most spoken foreign language in Europe[130], have easier access to transnational online discussion spaces, such as the one examined by this study, than those who do not possess sufficient skills in the language and need to rely on machine translation, which is still inaccurate.

A final remark concerning the analysis of the commenter profile, also suggested by Barnes et al., is that the profile of the commenters is not fixed, but rather susceptible to

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[128] EF Education First, "Ef Epi 2018," 2018, www.ef.com/epi; Eurostat, "Foreign Language Skills Statistics," Statistics explained, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Foreign_language_skills_statistics.
[129] EF Education First, "Ef Epi 2018"; Eurostat, "Foreign Language Skills Statistics."
[130] European Commission, "Frequently Asked Questions on Languages in Europe," Press Release Database, 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-825_en.htm.

changes according to the country or countries, periods of time or cultures examined[131]. This applies to the EP page audience. In the methodological section, it was already suggested that who comments on the posts might be influenced by the topic of those posts to a certain degree following the empirical observations made during the data collection weeks. Moreover, the EP makes use of targeted advertising to disseminate certain posts even amongst users who do not follow the page, and these ads differ by country[132]. The Facebook ad library dashboard does not allow to explore further how many users received targeted ads were in each country, but this could potentially bear upon the profile of the commenters, explaining partially as well why other studies focusing on European SNS have obtained different demographic data. In this regard, it would be interesting to see what both cross-sectional and especially longitudinal studies with more respondents would have to say about the demographic profile of the EP page comment writers to see how they have evolved over time, and how they will keep evolving after the events of Brexit in 2019.

Q2. Do they show signs of Europeanisation?

The theoretical section of this work presented Nil Fligstein's sociological profiling of the typical European citizen as an applied framework for the analysis of the citizens commenting on the EP Facebook page. It was assumed that Fligstein's portrayal of the typical European with its factors would also be valid and applicable to the commenters on European affairs on the online page of the EP, and that most commenters would show signs of being Europeanised. Let us remember briefly that Fligstein portrayed the European citizen as an educated professional who is well travelled, can speak other languages etc. and who in essence has had the opportunity to come into contact with fellow citizens from other countries[133].

The descriptive results of the survey seem to converge with Fligstein's theory, as they paint the picture of an overall internationalised citizen commenter. With 56,6% of the surveyed participants having reached tertiary education and 17% of them being currently students of tertiary education institutions, almost three quarters of the surveyed (73,6%) commenters had either attended university or were students, so they

[131] Barnes et al., "Personality and Online News Commenting Behaviours: Uncovering the Characteristics of Those below the Line."
[132] Facebook, "Facebook Ad Library Report," 2019, https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/.
[133] Fligstein, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe*, 123.

do indeed fulfil the educational criteria as indicated by Fligstein. To put these results in a European perspective, the EU28 average for people aged between 25-54 who had attained tertiary education in 2018 was only 35,2%[134] in comparison.

That the mean age was at 40, the prime of the working life, also lends support to his Europeanising framework of the employed European. The top working sectors where the participants were active were IT, services, public and private business administration and healthcare/welfare. And while it is difficult to make generalisations about such a distribution, we can observe that IT and business administration-related posts arguably stand out both in academic background and career paths reported in the sample. These tend to be highly internationalised professions where a command of English and computer-based communication is essential, and so these observations would once again tally with the portrait of the cosmopolitan European commenter.

Of utmost importance for the Europeanisation claims is also the fact that more than half of the respondents declared having lived abroad, more than a third had studied in a foreign country and practically all of them reported having international friendships. It is therefore not especially shocking that most of the surveyed (69%) also viewed the EU in a positive light. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to contemplate the possibility of a self-selection bias in the respondents who completed the survey, as EU sympathisers could have been more enticed to complete a survey about the EU presence and interaction on Facebook in the first place, thus prompting a sample bias to a certain extent.

The figures which mirror international experiences of the survey respondents were very high when compared to some of the statistics by Eurostat which indicate that in 2017, only 3,8 % of EU citizens lived in a different member state, and ten years before that it was even lower at 2,5%[135]. As a side note, there are reasons to argue that the portrait of the cosmopolitan, Europeanised European citizen as an "elite" presented by Fligstein in 2009 might be starting to become somewhat outdated. While it is true that the total

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[134] Eurostat, "Educational Attainment Statistics," Eurostat: Statistics Explained, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Educational_attainment_statistics.
[135] EuroStat, "EU Citizens in Other EU Member States," no. May (2018), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8926076/3-28052018-AP-EN.pdf/48c473e8-c2c1-4942-b2a4-5761edacda37.

amount European citizens who have the opportunity to study abroad is still low and 37% of Europeans declared that they never travel to other EU countries in 2014[136], the internet has settled down in Europeans' lives together with its borderless possibilities, making transnational connections through SNS, blogs, forums and even games a reality within reach for most citizens of the continent. Therefore, it seems reasonable to believe that nowadays, many more European citizens, not just an "elite", like a decade or two ago, have the possibility of getting in touch with people from other countries without even leaving their home countries, almost anytime, anywhere, with the proliferation of the connectivity features in smartphones.

But back to the main point, and in answer to the research question, what these findings indicate is that, overall, the participants display a tendency to be Europeanised according to Fligstein's framework, prompted by their offline international experiences, but possibly also with help of the internet. The initial hypothesis of this work in this regard is thus confirmed.

As suggested before, it would have been necessary to collect more participants in order to be able to examine with accuracy which field of studies and work are predominant amongst the commenters. The numbers yielded by this study did not allow to conclude in certain terms which educational backgrounds and working sectors are most represented amongst the population who comments on European affairs, given the wide distribution of low frequencies between the options. This particular task remains something to delve deeper into in a future study.

Q3. Why do they comment?

The main motivation to comment for these participants was the possibility to be able to express their opinion on EU-related public affairs, followed by their personal interest in the topics discussed, and by wanting to exchange information and discuss with others in the third place. These results coincide with the study by Nagar (from which the options to answer the question were taken) in which she also identified the most

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[136] European Commission, "E-Communications and Telecom Single Market Household Survey," 2014, 130, https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5e040f5f-a50e-44a9-a395-d651346134a9/language-en.

common motivation to be the expression of opinion[137], and the assumption of this work about the motivation to comment is therefore confirmed. It seems that people see the commenting section of the EP Facebook page as a panel where they can state their own views rather than as a debating ground where they can discuss European affairs with other citizens. The present work, like Tarta's, defends that this could indeed be due to the language used to encourage user interaction with each post, more focused on eliciting opinions and thoughts on the content of the post than on fuelling discussions and debates amongst citizen-commenters[138]. The technical features of the commenting space on Facebook could also have a role to play in why interactions amongst commenters happen, but are by far not as common as single entries. Navigation through comments is not always smooth, and finding a particular comment (perhaps spotted earlier on) by scrolling down almost impossible when the post has a lot of interactions, possibly resulting in people only replying to other comments when they appear in a first view, or featured as "most relevant" by the Facebook algorithms.

On another front, people do not appear to believe in the democratic repercussions of their opinions on the platform. Very few participants felt that commenting empowered them as citizens (only 3,6%). A possible interpretation is that the commenters do not consider commenting on social media, even if it is on a institutional and moderated page, to have any kind of effect on the decisions taken at EU level, as there is no evidence found on the page or in the media to believe that. A feasible way to inquire further into these motivations could be by controlling whether they would be altered if the EP social media team actually responded more often to those who comment. Nowadays, the responding capacity of the EP is next to non-existing, as its policy is by default not to express or react to political content[139]. An additional future path for research on this could also include launching an open-ended question about the motivations to comment specifically on the EP site and analyse whether opinion expression still comes at the top, or whether the free responses given by participants differ.

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[137] Nagar, "The Loud Public : The Case of User Comments in Online News Media," 56.
[138] Tarța, "A Framework for Evaluating European Social Media Publics: The Case of the European Parliament's Facebook," 158–59.
[139] Ibid., 158.

Q4. How often do they comment?

The EP commenters have been found by this study to be frequent commenters. According to the results, more than half of them had commented more than once on the EP page and practically all of them had commented on different content on Facebook the week before having partaken in the survey. This seems consistent with the trail of research which has found that on the one hand, those who comment of digital media and SNS on public content are few and these few generate most of the comments in the boards where they active[140]; and on the other, that propension to comment in online spaces is correlated with specific personality types so that certain individuals are by nature more prone to voice their opinions on online environments than others[141]. By consequence, if they tend to comment, they comment more and on different things and in several spaces, as this need for expression is embedded in their personalities. What this entails for online political discussions is that they are not, by default, as equalitarian and democratic as some would wish for, if commenters are indeed a very active and loud minority. In the case of the EP Facebook space this seems to be confirmed by simply comparing the number of users who follow the page versus the number of users who actually engage with the published content.

Q5. How interested in politics are they judging both by their online and offline activities?

As far as the linkage between engagement in the form of commenting and political interest and participation offline goes, a positive association is clear. It seems logical that the findings uncovered that interest on European politics amongst the participants is very high. They declared it so themselves, but their actions backed this statement: an overwhelming majority of participants, as shown by figure 5.1 reported actively seeking to keep up with European affairs daily or from 2 to 3 times a week. Beside this, the content that interested them most on Facebook was by far the political, followed by general news, a finding which also supports this affirmation. The participant commenters of this study are thus, without a shade of doubt, politically interested, also on EU affairs. This result adds on previous studies which found a connection between

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[140] Jansen and Koop, "The British Columbia Election Online"; Singer, "Separate Spaces"; Himelboim, "Civil Society and Online Political Discourse: The Network Structure of Unrestricted Discussions."
[141] Gerber et al., "The Big Five Personality Traits in the Political Arena."

political uses of the internet and social media and increased political interest[142]. Their offline political activity, measured by the most traditional form of political participation in liberal democracies, namely voting, was also strong. With 80% of the participants having voted in the last elections in which they were eligible and almost the same amount intending to do so in the forthcoming European election, the participant forecast intending to cast their ballot almost doubles the voter turnout from the latest EP elections of 2014[143].

This information helps us complete the profile of the citizen-commenter on the EP page as an individual who is highly interested in politics also offline, as proposed by this study in its initial stage, and more engaged in EU affairs than the average citizen.

Further academic inquiries in this direction should aim to delve deeper into the offline political activities of these users, to determine if they participate in politics beyond casting their vote when an election comes, and to try to gauge their level of political knowledge on EU affairs, to examine it it is also higher than average.

Theoretical implications

This dissertation succeeded in establishing a profile for the online commenters of the most followed EU institution on Facebook, the EP, and elucidated in simple terms why they choose to comment on such a setting. As derived from the findings of this study, the typical commenter on the investigated page is mostly male, around 40 years old, highly educated, employed, Europeanised, highly interested in politics and EU politics, a regular commenter on social media and likely to be participative in the political processes of the offline world as well.

This is the first study which made it its goal to discover the motivations behind the commenters of an EU-managed social media channel such as the EP Facebook page. Understanding what triggers citizens to write comments on the social media channels of the EU where it is possible to do so is important to be able to keep, moderate and build

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[142] Gil de Zúñiga et al., "Digital Democracy: Reimagining Pathways to Political Participation";
Boulianne, "Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Current Research."
[143] European Parliament, "Results of the 2014 European Elections," 2014,
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html.

new online public spaces which can sustain (a) healthy pan-European public sphere(s). As it turned out, the commenting public on this setting principally wants to make their opinion visible on EU affairs. As such, and in line with the public opinion and public sphere theory presented in the second chapter of this work[1], this dissertation considers that these citizens who make the effort to engage with European politics by stating their views deserve to be taken into account within the wider public opinion framework. Like Boseta, Dutceac Segesten and Trenz defend, by stating publicly their viewpoints, fear, beliefs etc. in written form, these vocally active citizens can potentially promote movements of opinion, protest or support amongst a very wide group of citizens[144] (potentially, at least up to the more than 2,5 million users who liked the EP page at the time of writing this work). The commenter-citizens are also a very remarkable group of citizens because, as this dissertation demonstrates, they tend to display high levels of political interest and engagement, also offline, such as measured by voting in the latest elections and intention to vote in the EP elections of May 2019. It is in consequence important to listen to their voices, keep providing these politically engaged citizens with visible and safe settings in which they can freely speak their minds and where they feel their opinion counts, and even encourage them to take their engagement in European politics one step further, and also inspire others around them to get engaged for the sake of democracy.

However, these results also suggest that the EP commenters are not representative of the general EU population, and as obvious as it may appear by looking at the few users who actually comment on the site, it should not be simply disregarded. First and foremost, and as highlighted earlier on, male commenters dominate the opinion streams of the Facebook page, leaving women in a very underrepresented position, a tell-tale alone signalling the deficiencies of the European public present in this particular space. Secondly, the participants of these study are more likely than the average European to have attained tertiary education, to have studied or lived abroad, and to vote in the EP elections, suggesting again a lack of representativeness for the European population. Last but not least, it looks like the SNS page could possibly attract to its commenting feature mostly those who comment frequently as a general rule, while the majority of

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[144] Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, and Trenz, "Engaging with European Politics Through Twitter and Facebook: Participation Beyond the National?," 59.

users who follow the page remain silent. As a consequence, this indicates that this online public sphere is flawed by inequality, just like the offline world. The internet makes information more accessible and engagement more comfortable by enabling virtual spaces free from geographical limitations and other material expenses, and in this sense, it can be regarded as more democratic for sure. In spite of this, only a minority of vocal citizens use these social tools frequently with political intentions and meaning, and it is apparently those who profess a high interest for politics. All in all, the EP Facebook page shows signs of potential as a growing European sphere, as it certainly can boast "public Europeanism" to a degree as users from nearly all EU member states gather there, but it has so far not managed to reach a fully realised potential. This is not to say that the opinions expressed on it matter less for this reason. These opinions count, and can give a reliable account of the citizens' feelings, fears and thoughts about the EU, allowing to take the political and social pulse of the state of the Union online. But the EU should strive to find more ways to create spaces inclusive of all Europeans and truly reach everyone, not only those who benefit or have benefited from European integration policies. The challenge, both in the tangible and virtual world, is still how to spur political interest and later engagement in those citizens who are not concerned by the EU because they have not been able to experience any of the benefits, or are not interested in doing so.

7. Conclusion

This dissertation was an effort to comprehend who the citizens who comment on an EU-managed Facebook page such as the EP's space are. It revealed that the typical commenter is overwhelmingly male, circa 40 years old, highly educated, displays signs of Europeanisation, is an habitual comment writer and is highly interested in EU politics and politics in general, as well as likely to participate in the European elections, much more so than the average European. What drives them to comment is mostly the desire to express their opinion on public European affairs.

Canvassing these political commenters and comprehending their online behaviours and motivations to comment is critical to keep track of the health of public opinion and democratic systems in general, yet this public has not been paid due heed by research so far. These citizens who take the time to express their views in public settings , who are so interested in politics, may hold the key to understand better what drives citizen engagement and to how to promote these signs of political involvement further.

Nonetheless, in regards of potential to host a developing European public sphere, the analysed setting falls short. While it is encouraging that such a great diversity of EU states were represented in the sample, the fact alone that there are such extreme gender differences (over 70% of the commenters were male) defeats the conception of what a true public sphere should be. Besides this, the surveyed commenters were more educated and have more international experiences than what the statistics about the average EU citizen reveal, suggesting that these commenters are more Europeanised than the average citizen.

As a lot of research has already adverted to, the use of social media in the political context keeps evolving over time, and so does the profile of the users who use the features, their motivations, and the relationship between their online engagement and their offline actions, so there is still a long way to go to join all the dots. Given the limited time span of the survey distribution of the present study, the future calls for a bigger-scale research able to collect responses from more participants over different points in time, in order to truly assess the potential of a public sphere on the EP page, and in other online spaces such as Twitter, and keep track of its evolution. The relation

between social media use, democracy and politics is a fascinating arena where one of the few certitudes is that citizen engagement and input in politics online is bound to keep changing through time and space, as communication technologies are also developing at a speed never seen before. The internet and all of its public social spaces are very mighty tools, its technical characteristics enabling real-time connectivity and information exchange alone make it a powerful instrument for citizens to express what is on their mind, also in social and political terms. But for online media to contribute towards the solidification of public spheres where fruitful exchanges take place, it needs to be conscientiously used for these means, and, very importantly; SNS and the politically engaged commenters need to continue to be considered, respected and encouraged by political authorities such as the EU.

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9. Appendix

Appendix I

Message used to recruit participants

Hi *name*,

I would like to know your opinion. I am contacting you because you have recently commented on the European Parliament Facebook page.

I am studying at Lund´s University in Sweden and I am researching citizen engagement with the EU Facebook pages. You can help me by completing a short survey, thank you!

link to the survey

Appendix II

Pilot survey

LUND UNIVER

Citizen engagement on the Facebook pages of EU institutions

Please fill in your answers in the form below. The answers are anonymous and the survey takes about 3 minutes to complete. Thank you!
If you have additional questions please contact me at he2700ma-s@student.lu.se

Gender

○ Female

○ Male

○ Prefer not to say

Which year are you born in?

Your answer

What is your nationality?

Your answer

Are you employed?

○ Yes

○ No

○ I am a student

If you answered YES to the previous question, which sector do you work in?

Choose ▾

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Google Forms

LUND UNIVER

Citizen engagement on the Facebook pages of EU institutions

Level of studies

What level of education have you completed?

○ Secondary education (high school)

○ Bachelor degree

○ Master degree

○ PhD

○ I did not complete secondary education (high school)

○ Other: _____

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LUND UNIVER

Citizen engagement on the Facebook pages of EU institutions

I have completed higher education

What is your degree in?

Choose ▼

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Citizen engagement on the Facebook pages of EU institutions

I am a university student

Which subject are you currently enrolled in?

Choose ▼

At what level?

○ Bachelor degree

○ Master degree

○ Phd

○ Other: _____

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Citizen engagement on the Facebook pages of EU institutions

Europeanness

Have you ever studied abroad?

○ Yes

○ No

○ No, but I plan to in the future

○ No, and I do not plan to in the future

Have you ever lived in another country?

○ Yes

○ No

○ No, but I plan to in the future

○ No, and I do not plan to in the future

Do you have friends from other countries?

○ Yes

○ No

What is your general opinion on the EU?

○ Overall positive

○ Overall negative

○ Indifferent

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LUND UNIVER

Citizen engagement on the Facebook pages of EU institutions

Online behaviour

Which one of the following statements do you think describes you best?

○ I am particularly interested in local politics

○ I am particularly interested in national politics

○ I am particularly interested in EU politics

○ I am particularly interested in global politics

○ I am interested in politics in general, at all levels (local, national, EU, global)

○ I am not interested in politics

On average, how often do you actively read content related to the EU?

○ Every day

○ Between twice and three times a week

○ Once a week

○ Less than once a week

○ Never

How many times, approximately, did you comment on the European Parliament page (or any other EU institution's page) on Facebook during the last 7 days?

○ 10 or more

○ Between 5 and 9

○ Between 2 and 4

○ Only 1

○ Never

Did you comment on any other content on Facebook during the last 7 days?

○ Yes

○ I can't remember

○ No

If the answer to the previous question was YES, do you remember what it was about? (You can list several items)

Your answer

Do you follow the European Parliament and/or the European Commission page on Facebook?

○ Yes

○ No

○ I don't know

Which of the following statements describes best your motivation to comment on the European Parliament or European Commission page on Facebook? (up to 3 replies - 1 most relevant, to 3 least relevant)

(if you do not comment on these particular pages - select a motivation to comment in general)

- ☐ I want to voice my opinion
- ☐ I want to exchange and share knowledge with other people
- ☐ The issue raised by the post is important for me
- ☐ I enjoy talking politics with other people
- ☐ I feel it empowers me as a citizen
- ☐ I want to vent and release steam

Which kind of content found on Facebook interests you most? (more than one answer possible)

- ☐ News in general
- ☐ Entertainment
- ☐ Culture & media
- ☐ Technology
- ☐ Political content
- ☐ Environment and nature
- ☐ Other:

Offline political engagement

Did you vote in the last elections?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

What kind of elections were they?

- ○ Local elections
- ○ Regional elections
- ○ National elections
- ○ European Parliament elections

Do you intend to vote in the forthcoming European Parliament election?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ I have not decided yet

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Appendix III

Final version of survey

LUND UNIVERS

Section 1 of 8

Citizen engagement on the Facebook pages of EU institutions

Please fill in your answers in the form below. The answers are anonymous and the survey takes about 3 minutes to complete. Thank you!
If you have additional questions please contact me at he2700ma-s@student.lu.se

Gender *

○ Female

○ Male

○ Prefer not to say

Which year are you born in? *

1. 2009

2. 2008

3. 2007

What is your country of nationality? *

1. Austria

2. Belgium

3. Bulgaria

4. Croatia

5. Republic of Cyprus

6. Czech Republic

7. Denmark

8. Estonia

9. Finland

10. France

11. Germany

12. Greece

13. Hungary

14. Ireland

Are you employed? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ I am a student

○ I am retired

After section 1 **Continue to next section** ▾

I am employed

Description (optional)

Which sector do you work in? *

○ IT

○ Engineering

○ Banking

○ Manufacturing

○ Sales / Marketing

○ Public administration

○ Academia / Research

○ Construction

○ Law

○ Healthcare and welfare

Level of studies

Description (optional)

What level of education have you completed? *

○ Secondary education (high school)

○ Bachelor degree

○ Master degree

○ Phd

○ I did not complete secondary education (high school)

○ Other...

After section 3   Continue to next section

I have completed higher education

Description (optional)

What is your degree in? *

○ Humanities

○ Social Sciences

○ Business/Economy

○ Law

○ Medicine

○ Engineering

○ Natural sciences/Mathematics

○ Arts/Creative

○ IT

○ Veterinary/Agriculture/Environment

I am a student

Description (optional)

Which subject are you currently enrolled in? *

○ Humanities

○ Social Sciences

○ Business/Economy

○ Law

○ Medicine

○ Engineering

○ Natural sciences/Mathematics

○ Arts/Creative

○ IT

○ Veterinary/Agriculture/Environment

At what level? *

○ Bachelor degree

○ Master degree

○ Phd

○ Other…

After section 5   **Continue to next section**   ▾

Section title (optional)

Description (optional)

Have you ever studied abroad? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ No, but I plan to

○ No, and I don't plan to

Have you ever lived abroad? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ No, but I plan to

○ No, and I don't plan to

Do you have friends from other countries? *

○ Yes

○ No

What is your general opinion on the EU? *

○ Overall positive

○ Overall negative

○ I don't know

After section 6   Continue to next section

Online behaviour

Description (optional)

Are you interested in EU politics? *

○ Yes

○ No

On average, how often do you actively read content related to the EU? *

○ Every day

○ 2 - 3 times a week

○ Once a week

○ Less than once a week

○ Never

How many times did you comment on the European Parliament Facebook page during the last 7 days? *

○ 10 or more

○ 5 to 9 times

○ 2 to 4 times

○ Only 1

Which is your MAIN motivation to comment on the European Parliament Facebook page? *

☐ I want to voice my opinion on matters of public concern

☐ I want to exchange and share knowledge with other people

☐ The issue raised by the post is important for me

☐ I enjoy talking politics with other people

☐ I feel it empowers me as a citizen

☐ I want to vent and release steam

☐ I want to convince and influence other people

Did you comment on any other content on Facebook during the last 7 days? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ I can't remember

If the answer to the previous question was YES, do you remember what it was about? (You can list several items) *

If you did not comment on anything else or you can't remember, write "N/A"

Short answer text

Do you follow the European Parliament page on Facebook? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ I don't know

Which kind of content on Facebook interests you most? (you can select up to 3 answers) *

☐ News in general

☐ Politics

☐ Entertainment / Humor

☐ Technology

☐ Nature / Environment

☐ Shopping

☐ Events in my area

☐ Culture / Arts / Music

☐ Lifestyle / Fashion

☐ Travel

☐ Food / Recipes

☐ Health / Fitness

☐ Sports

☐ Economy

Section 8 of 8

Offline political engagement

Description (optional)

Did you vote in the last elections in which you were eligible to do so? *

○ Yes

○ No

Do you intend to vote in the forthcoming European Parliament elections? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ I haven't decided yet

○ I am not eligible to vote

Appendix IV

General overview of the published posts during the data collection period (date, topic, number of commenters)

Date	Topic	Number of comments
March 17th	St Patrick's days and a speech from Irish Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar	396
March 18th	EP agenda for the week	65
March 18th	Tajani condemns terrorist attack in Utrecht	154
March 19th	Promotion of Instagram contest "#IAMEUROPE"	64
March 19th	LIVE Q&A with Bernd Lange on international trade	477
March 20th	Consumer protection rules	233
March 20th	First day of spring and International Day of Happiness	128
March 20th	Personal data protection in the EU	22
March 21st	World Down Syndrome day	48
March 21st	Overview of measures in case of no-deal Brexit	456
March 22nd	EP agenda for the week	214
March 22nd	World water day / clean water for all European citizens	147
March 23rd	Promotion of GIF-creation contest to encourage EP election vote	136
March 24th	Voting in the EP elections	169
March 24th	Food safety	1700
March 25th	EP agenda for the week	51
March 25th	New EU electricity rules	54
March 26th	EP debate about digital copyright	615
March 26th	EP adoption of digital copyright rules	897
March 26th	Announcement LIVE interview with Frédérique Ries	237
March 26th	EU Cooperation in finance and tax-related areas	178
March 27th	Live Q&A interview with Frédérique Ries on ban of single-use plastics	341
March 27th	More on the new digital copyright rules	430
March 27th	Infographics on CO2 emissions	383
March 28th	EP voting on increasing the quality of tap water in the EU	90
March 28th	Adoption of ban on single-use plastics	390
March 28th	What the EP has decided on during the week	88
March 29th	New rules on electricity consumption	532
March 29th	Promotion of European elections	176
March 30th	Example of entrepreneurship #EUand ME	56
March 30th	Winter and summer time switch	384
March 31st	Winter and summer time switch	425
March 31st	Information about the European Elections	274
April 1st	EP agenda for the week	258
April 1st	Erasmus 2021-2027	541
April 2nd	Consumer protection, new rules	219
April 2nd	World Autism Awareness Day	56
April 3rd	New EU rule on work-life balance	218
April 3rd	LIVE EP members debate on Brexit	1300
April 3rd	EP members discuss future of EU with Swedish Prime Minister	343
April 4th	EU Gas importation	90
April 4th	The story of Asmaa, a refugee from Syria #They AreSyria	112
April 5th	Pensions and EU mobility	109
April 5th	European Health Insurance card	82
April 6th	European Social Fund	135

April 6th	EP elections	349
April 7th	World Health Day	57
April 7th	EP elections	74
April 8th	EP agenda	104
April 8th	Personal story - reducing waste	661
April 9th	Measures to protect whistleblowers	113
April 9th	Ten years of EP on Facebook	218
April 10th	EU rules on better working conditions	172
April 10th	Overview on Brexit	311
April 11th	EU external border protection	176
April 11th	Pet Day and possibility of pets travelling	49
April 12th	EP last session before elections agenda	39
April 12th	Promotion of EP elections	132
April 12th	Promotion of event: 4 May EU open day	13
April 13th	Promotion of GIF contest	85
April 13th	EU employability	114
April 14th	EU work on digital single market	87
April 14th	EU quizz and promotion of EP elections	31
April 15th	EP agenda for the week	40
April 15th	Statistics on EU roads	92
April 16th	Announcement of Greta Thurnsberg's speech at EP	379
April 16th	LIVE Greta Thurnberg at EP	997
April 16th	Greta Thurnberg EP intervention recap	410
April 17th	EP discussion future of Europe with Latvian Prime Minister	555
April 18th	EU space programme	214
April 18th	Announcement of interviews with EP elections lead candidates	112
April 19th	EP adoption of legislation during the week	30
April 19th	Stories from Syrian refugees	46
April 19th	Promotion of Europe Day	9
April 20th	EP election promotion	127
April 20th	EP activities of the week	26
April 21st	Easter and food safety	32
April 21st	Easter and food safety	70
April 22nd	Easter recipes from all over Europe	80