Predictors of Opinion Leadership in EU Affairs Among EU Interested Social Media Users

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Abstract

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A recurring argument in scholarly literature is that the EU is suffering from a democratic deficit in which its institutional legitimacy is being questioned by the public. To remedy this issue and gain public legitimacy, the EU has over the last 20 years developed a public communications approach to engage citizens in European affairs and to create a European public sphere. However, the EU has not yet been able to close the perceived gap to its citizenry despite ambitious engagement campaigns. This thesis argues that a more strategic communication approach is needed for the EU to reach its objectives. Highly influential individuals in EU affairs, namely EU opinion leaders, could be part of the solution. This thesis studies EU opinion leadership in EU interested social media users to understand who opinion leaders in this context are and if informational media use and political factors (political participation, political expression in social media, political partisanship) can predict EU opinion leadership. A number of hypotheses were developed based on opinion leadership theory, in the theory of the two-step flow of communication, and related fields. A survey was distributed to EU interested social media users on Facebook and LinkedIn (N=220). The results from the statistical analysis showcased that EU opinion leaders were highly educated. Univariable linear regression analyses showed that informational media use and the political factors were associated to EU opinion leadership, but when the whole theoretical model was tested in a multiple linear regression analysis, only informational media use remained associated with EU opinion leadership. Using stepwise regression, the strongest model to predict EU opinion leadership consisted of informational media use and political expression in social media, in combination with the variables age and whether the participant voted in the last election to the European Parliament. These results can be used in designing more efficient public communication strategies to engage EU citizens in EU affairs and close the perceived gap between the EU and its citizens.

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1. Introduction

As many modern democracies in the west, it is claimed that the European Union (EU) faces a crisis of representative democracy in which its institutional legitimacy is being questioned by the public (Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019). Along these lines, a continuous claim among scholars is that the EU is further suffering from a democratic deficit (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Desmet et al., 2015; Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007) grown out of a diverse set of factors which have developed under a long time (Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019), such as the lack of EU transparency, decrease in national sovereignty, and the psychological and institutional distance between the EU and its citizenry (Follesdal & Hix, 2006). Indeed, voter turnout in the European Parliament (EP) elections has historically been low compared to most national elections in Europe (Clark, 2014; European Parliament, 2019) and the European public is in large deemed to exhibit a disinterest and apathy towards EU affairs (Brüggemann, 2010; Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). Adding to this pattern, Eurosceptic political parties in the EU member states have had great electoral successes in recent years (Nicoli, 2017; Treib, 2014), which recently led the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the union (De Vries, 2017). In fact, Euroscepticism has become a buzzword in research (Caiani & Guerra, 2017; De Vreese, 2007; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010), illustrating the urgency of remedying the EU's claimed illegitimacy. Scholars have suggested that the EU's legitimacy problem is a consequence of the lack of a single European identity and because of systemic characteristics of the EU's polity (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Seoane Pérez, 2013), as well as of the lack of well-targeted and efficient public communication (see e.g., Anderson & McLeod, 2004; Butcher & Stratulat, 2019) about the EU polity and of consultations with the EU citizens (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2007; Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013). In this vein, Podkalicka and Shore (2010) emphasized that "how to communicate more effectively with its citizens is a continuing problem for the EU" (p. 98) and that "public approval has become a matter of urgency" (p. 98). As the future of the EU is reliant on the citizens sup-

port, engaging citizens in EU affairs through public communication appears as a reasonable strategy to remedy the democratic deficit and gain public legitimacy. The EU institutions have understood communication in the European public sphere, i.e., "a communicative space(s) in which relatively unconstrained debate, analysis and criticism of the political order can take place" (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007, p. 1), as a mean with which to interconnect the EU with the EU citizens. In fostering such a sphere, the EU aims to form a stronger relationship to the citizenry built on trustworthiness, accountability, and transparency (Bozzini & Bee, 2010; Brüggemann, 2010; Nitoiu, 2013). Hence, communication could be regarded as a useful resource in enhancing European integration and closing the perceived gap between the EU and its citizens.

In light of this, the ubiquitous claim of the EU's democratic deficit has forced the EU to rethink its workings into a more participatory direction. Over the last 20 years, the EU has attempted to spur EU citizens' engagement in EU affairs through diverse communication projects, policies, and strategies to stimulate the emergence of a European public sphere (Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013; Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019). Since the turn of the millennium, stronger citizen participation in EU affairs has been recognized by the EU institutions as a key mean with which to challenge the claimed democratic deficit and gain legitimacy (Georgakakis, 2004). Initially, the EU turned to civil society organizations (CSOs), hoping that they would constitute a bridge between the EU citizens and the EU institutions, and as such bring citizens closer to the EU (Bouza Garcia, 2015). This approach established a new participatory agenda in the union (Bouza Garcia, 2015) which has grown throughout the years in parallel with the sustained legitimacy discussions. The contemporary discourse is increasingly directed not only towards CSOs but also towards individual citizens who are invited to participate in, amongst other activities, citizen dialogues and consultations (European Committee of the Regions, 2019). The EU and the member states spend large amounts of money annually on EU communication to increase public support for the EU, but these communication programs are often not efficient and fail to bring the citizens and the EU closer to one another (Dolghi, 2009; Fähnrich, 2010; Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013). Over the years, research has confirmed the inability of EU participatory and engagement projects to attract a diverse audience and generate any sub-

stantial effects (Butcher & Stratulat, 2019; Kandyla & Gherghina, 2018). The general pattern is that a highly homogenic mass of citizens already convinced of the benefits of the EU, are highly educated, and have a high knowledge of how the EU works are the ones that generally are participating in these initiatives (Kandyla & Gherghina, 2018; Seoane Pérez, 2013). Further, this also seems to hold true for citizens interested in using social media to participate in the public debate about EU politics (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). Research has also argued that EU public communication programs lack explicit objectives which hinders efficient public communication (Brüggemann, 2010; Dolghi, 2009; Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013). What is more, previous research has concluded with overall skeptic results about the EU's attempts to enhance citizen engagement in creating a European public sphere (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007; Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013).

Despite the skeptic scholarly accounts on EU public communication to engage citizens in EU affairs, the initiatives for citizen engagement and participation continues to flourish within the union with high hopes to its effects. Recently, the current European Commission (EC) regime, led by Ursula von der Leyen, has called for a "new push for European democracy" and established it as one out of six areas that the EC will prioritize during its mandate 2019 – 2024 (von der Leyen, 2019). As part of this, the three legislative EU institutions; the EC, the EP, and the European Council, are from 2021 to 2022 jointly arranging the Conference on the Future of Europe where citizens are invited to participate in shaping the ambitions and policies of the EU by sharing their ideas and contributing to policy discussions (European Union, 2021). In a similar vein, the EP has begun to campaign online for engaging citizens by inviting them to join a new pan-European volunteers community, Together.eu, to have their say and to "take action towards a brighter future in the European union […] whether it's by getting involved in the political process or helping promote the importance of voting" (European Parliament, 2020). The EU institutions are further active campaigners on social media sites to enhance engagement in these (and other) initiatives as well as to connect with the EU citizens (Michailidou & Barisione, 2017). Indeed, many governments are aware of the importance of a participative citizenry for modern democracy, and that social media communication can be an asset in this respect due to its in-

teractive dimensions (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016; Tomazic & Misic, 2019). In this vein, it has further been underlined that "any organization concerned with strategic communication is obliged to assume that Internet-enabled technologies will have a significant influence on its ability to achieve objectives" (Åkerström & Young, 2016, p. 1). Michailidou and Barisione (2017) argued that "the space and audience of European politics are to be found in the increasingly digitalized, interconnected national public spheres" (pp. 7-8), thus the social media public is important to consider in spurring citizen engagement in EU affairs. Nevertheless, regarding the skepticism surrounding engagement initiatives for increased EU legitimacy, making them work efficiently appear to be a challenging task. Social media communication will not create engagement on its own (Kamal, 2009), rather a more strategic communication approach is needed (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016).

It has been proposed that online PR campaigns in this area "should not use the Internet in order to get citizens interested in politics, but to create strategies for those who already have a certain awareness of and concern for it" (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012, p. 469) and that being aware of the characteristics the usual suspect active in EU affairs might be useful when planning engagement campaigns to maximize the reach and appeal (Kandyla & Gherghina, 2018; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). Importantly, Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) argued that these highly engaged individuals that are active and interested in EU affairs are often seen as opinion makers that could constitute a significant role in disseminating campaign information to others (that are not equally engaged or interested). In compliance with this argument, previous research has studied the role of interpersonal communication in European integration (Boomgaarden, 2016; De Vreese & Tobiasen, 2007; Desmet, 2013; Desmet et al., 2015; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Marquart et al., 2020; Stockemer, 2012) and showcased that interpersonal communication does matter for e.g., citizens evaluations of the EU's democratic performance (Boomgaarden, 2016; Desmet, 2013; Desmet et al., 2015) and for increased voter turnout in the EP elections (De Vreese & Tobiasen, 2007; Marquart et al., 2020). Whilst Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) and Tarța (2017) have studied the EU interested social media public, it remains unclear who the highly influential opinion makers in EU affairs might be and what factors that can predict their communicative behavior. Know-

ing this could increase the chances of mobilizing this group of individuals through strategic EU public communication so that information can reach to others and ideally contribute to the formation of a European public sphere which could legitimize the EU. It could also expand the current theoretical knowledge related to the theory of the two-step flow of communication, which is closely connected with the idea of opinion makers. The two-step flow of communication argues that information flows from the mass media to opinion *leaders* and then to other less engaged people (Christen, 2013). This suggests that public opinion formation and individuals' decision-making thus depends a lot on other people rather than the mass media, or campaign information. Lazarsfeld et al. (1948), stated that "[…] in every area and for every public issue there are certain people who are most concerned about the issue as well as most articulate about it" (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 49). These opinion leaders take the lead in opinion formation by sharing information and persuading others of specific standpoints, hence obtaining important communicative qualities that could be useful in boosting EU debate and increasing the legitimacy of the EU. Considering today's digital era and the many failures of EU public communication to engage citizens in EU affairs, it is particularly pertinent to study EU interested social media users (among which EU opinion leaders might be present) in this regard to better grasp what characterizes opinion leaders in EU affairs and what factors might predict EU opinion leadership behavior. These individuals might be of importance in boosting EU legitimacy and remedying the EU's democratic deficit by contributing to the formation of a European public sphere. In fact, a continuous argument among scholars is that the absence of a viable European public sphere contributes significantly to the EU's democratic deficit (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007). Hence, identifying opinion leaders in this context and predicting their behavior is of great importance.

As far as this thesis is concerned, although the issue of a European public sphere has been a hot topic in research since the 1990s (Bozzini & Bee, 2010) and the importance to EU democracy of communication and public opinion has been recognized (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007), no study has ever investigated the issue of EU opinion leadership. Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) studied the online behavior of participants on Facebook in relation to the EP and found that engaged individuals usually are "equally male or female, between 26 and 35 years old, highly educated

and a daily user of the Internet" (p. 469) but did not further explore neither this, nor what could predict their behavior. What is more, Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) argued that the study was a *first* step in exploring the target group of political PR in social media in terms of EU affairs, thus more research is needed in order to understand how to boost political participation among EU citizens by means of strategic communication. This is important not only in practical terms for the EU communicators, as the results could aid in developing more strategic communication approaches to enhance citizen engagement, but also in terms of opinion leadership theory and the research field of strategic (public) communication. As strategic communication is "the study of how organizations use communication purposefully to fulfill their overall missions" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017 as cited in Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, p. 57), the general contribution of this thesis would be to expand current knowledge on such communication in an EU context.

1.1 Aim & Research Questions

The overarching aim of this thesis is to contribute with knowledge on the role of EU interested social media users in the formation of a European public sphere to provide EU public communicators with guidelines regarding strategic communication to enhance citizen engagement. Specifically, the thesis aims to develop opinion leadership theory in an EU context by shedding light on the characteristics of opinion leaders in EU affairs and explore a set of opinion leadership predictors by studying EU interested individuals in EU related Facebook and LinkedIn groups. These EU interested individuals are perceived as relevant study objects in terms of EU opinion leadership since topic interest is considered as a fundamental predictor of opinion leadership (Weimann, 1994). Regarding this, the thesis will answer to the following questions:

RQ1: Who are opinion leaders in EU affairs, in a population of EU interested social media users?

RQ2: Do informational media use and political factors predict opinion leadership in EU affairs, in a population of EU interested social media users?

1.2 Delimitations

This thesis is delimited to study the self-reported degree of opinion leadership in EU interested social media users that are members of EU related groups on Facebook and LinkedIn (N=220). The thesis is explorative and employs a quantitative non-experimental and cross-sectional survey design. The theoretical framework rests on the aspect of opinion leadership in the theory of the two-step flow of communication, as well as relevant literature on e.g., interpersonal communication and political communication. It is delimited to test a set of opinion leadership predictors in the chosen context, i.e., informational media use, political participation, political expression in social media, and political partisanship.

1.3 Disposition

The thesis is divided into 7 chapters. Following the introduction (chapter 1), a literature review (chapter 2) over citizen engagement, digital government communication, the EU and the public sphere, as well as the communicative role of social media users is provided to contextualize and motivate the thesis. Thereafter, the theoretical framework (chapter 3) encompassing the two-step flow of communication and opinion leadership is emphasized, along with the development of the theoretical research model tested in the thesis. The method chapter (chapter 4) follows the theory chapter, comprising details on the methodological procedure of the thesis such as research and survey design. Subsequently, the data analysis and results (chapter 5) are presented, followed by a discussion of the results and their implications for theory and practice (chapter 6). Finally, a conclusion is provided which summarizes the thesis and its findings (chapter 7).

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, previous research pertaining to the thesis topic is reviewed with the intention to contextualize and motivate the thesis. First, citizen engagement and digital government communication are stressed, inter alia to emphasize why and how governments are involved in citizen engagement projects. Second, the European public sphere is explained and the various ways the EU work with citizen engagement are briefly covered, as well as an explanation to why the EU has gone down this participatory path. Third, the communicative role of social media users in the public sphere formation is stressed, specifically in relation to the EU. Finally, the different segments are synthesized and briefly discussed to motivate the thesis.

2.1 Citizen Engagement & Digital Government Communication

Citizen engagement is claimed to encompass social capital, civic engagement, and political participation (Skoric et al., 2016). Political participation usually refers to actions that aim to influence political institutions such as governments, and impact policymaking or selection of governmental personnel (Verba & Nie, 1972), whilst civic engagement commonly addresses citizens' collective behaviors for the public good which is more related to voluntary engagement (Zukin, 2006). Citizen engagement thus covers many forms of social participatory activities such as voting, volunteering, engaging in activism or campaigns, and raising awareness of political issues. The role of social capital is a central concept within research on engagement and participation. Social capital is considered to be a fundamental feature of a vibrant democracy in that it contributes to build relationships and trust among and between social actors which creates a fertile ground for democratic participation (Putnam et al., 1993). Putnam (2000) described it as the "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19) and regards these networks, norms and

trust to "enable participants to act more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam, 1995, pp. 664-665). Similarly, Lin (2008) claimed that social capital is the resources in one's social network that can be mobilized for collective action. Social capital is multidimensional, and concretely it can refer to social and political behaviors such as voting, volunteering, talking, and joining civic/political activities. It can also denote attitudes and beliefs such as trust and efficacy, as well as social structures and resources such as networks, norms and information (Putnam, 2000).

Engagement is important in building social capital since decisions made through engagement is argued to be a precursor of social capital formation (Taylor & Kent, 2014). In their handbook of communication engagement, Johnston and Taylor (2018) identified three themes of engagement from a communication perspective: the social and relational definition, engagement as interaction and exchange, and the dynamic and multidimensional nature of engagement. The social and relational definition stresses that engagement is about fostering relational ties between social actors representing different characteristics (worldviews, motivations, interests) with the objective to achieve a result at any societal level. Engagement as interaction and exchange implies that it is through interaction and exchange that understanding can be reached through the cocreation of meaning, and that interaction predicts relationship development. From this perspective, engagement is important in creating social capital. The dynamic and multidimensional nature of engagement entails the psychological foundations of engagement and regards engagement as a process, state, orientation, or strategy. But above all, Johnston and Taylor (2018) argued that "underpinning all of these themes is the central role of communication in engagement—to create, nurture, and influence outcomes" (p. 3). The creation of social capital is thus regarded as a central piece in building democratic and engaged societies with high trust levels between citizens, as well as between citizens and political institutions. To reach this objective, engaging citizens in public affairs is often perceived as a reasonable mean. This is further illustrated in previous research emphasizing the many opportunities that can be seized by engaging citizens in public affairs to shape democratic societies.

In their review of the effects of citizen engagement, Gaventa and Barrett (2012) highlighted that citizen engagement entails mostly positive implications. They noted that the sense of citizenship can be strengthened which in turn can increase the sense of efficient participation in societal development and hence result in stronger social networks, more responsive governments, and a higher degree of accountability within governmental institutions. La Due Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) argued that increasing levels of politically relevant social capital (i.e., social capital facilitating political engagement) increases the likelihood for citizens to get engaged. Along with the digital revolution and web 2.0 (i.e., the 'new' features of the web allowing for participation and interaction) (Harrison & Barthel, 2009), reaching out to citizens has become much easier than ever before. Due to its dialogical features and democratic potential, digital media has become essential to citizen engagement (Coleman & Price, 2012). Interactive media has allowed for greater opportunities for citizen engagement and political participation as the transaction costs are lower compared to political activities in the offline sphere (Farrell, 2012). Several scholars have concluded that social media can be an efficient tool for public institutions in reaching out to citizens to stimulate engagement in public and civic affairs (Bertot et al., 2010; Bonsón et al., 2012; Pérez et al., 2012). The capacity of social media to create social capital in both online and offline spheres has also been stressed (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Hampton et al., 2011), and that social capital generated through social media use positively influences citizens participatory behaviors online and offline to a larger degree than social capital created offline (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Previous research has suggested that social media use for civic engagement positively affects trust propensity and trust towards public institutions, and that public institutions thus could benefit from stimulating social capital online (Warren et al., 2014). Song and Lee (2016) demonstrated that government social media use is efficient in terms of strengthening citizens' trust in government by improving their government transparency perceptions. Meta-studies concerned with the relationship between social media/internet use, citizen engagement and political participation have further showcased that social media/internet use for informational purposes stimulate participation and engagement among citizens (Boulianne, 2009; Skoric et al., 2016). Hence, the positive effects of citizen engagement seem to hold true in both offline and online environments, and as social media exhibits possibilities

to stimulate citizen engagement it is understandable that an increasing number of public institutions are turning to this resource to interact with citizens and foster greater citizen engagement (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016). However, it should be noted that simply using social media to communicate with citizens will not on its own enhance engagement (Kamal, 2009), rather a more strategic communication approach is needed for this to occur (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016).

Strategic public communication has thus become important for governments wanting to engage with citizens and involve them in public life. The interactivity of social media makes it into an attractive asset in this respect (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016; Bonsón et al., 2019; Falco & Kleinhans, 2018). The participatory culture existing in social media spheres can be used by public administrators to increase citizen engagement and build stronger and more transparent government-to-citizen relationships (Bonsón et al., 2012). Adding to this, the concept and theory of dialogic communication is pertinent here since it denotes ways to engage and communicate with organizational or governmental publics to build dialogic (and thus interactive and stronger) relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Kent and Taylor (1998) noted that dialogic communication can benefit strategic communication online. Inter alia, to create effective dialogic relationships with publics they considered it necessary to stimulate the emergence of a dialogic loop, i.e., organizations or governments provide an interactive communication channel through which they can engage in dialogue with their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). In the last decade, their framework has been applied to social media communication (Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018) with results indicating that dialogic strategies are useful for creating stakeholder dialogues in this environment (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009). For instance, engaging in dialogic communication strategies on social media has shown to have positive effects on government-to-citizen relationships such as increased public engagement, increased positive talk about the government, and increased perceived government authenticity (Kim & Krishna, 2018). However, governments fail to utilize the entire spectrum of dialogic engagement strategies offered by social media which leads to e.g., a loss of network activity, network growth, and potentially increased public legitimacy and trust (Bonsón et al., 2012; Hofmann et al., 2013; Tomazic & Misic, 2019). Nevertheless, previous literature further highlights that digital media is not a quick fix for democracy (Van Dijk,

2020). Instead of improving democracy across diverse publics, it seems as if those who are already interested and engaged generally are those who are more inclined to be politically active and engaged online (see e.g., Bimber & Davis, 2003; Hindman, 2008). Yet, social media can bring about new forms of political participation and influence (Gustafsson, 2013), but arguably governments need to strategically plan their communication in order to reach their objectives.

2.2 The Public Sphere, the EU & Citizen Engagement

According to Eriksen (2007), the European public sphere should "test the legitimacy of legal provisions" and be seen as a "counterweight to governmental power" (p. 30). Scrutinizing decision-making processes and making them transparent is normally a task for the media (Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019), which is also seen as "the primary forum of the public sphere" (Habermas, 1974 as cited in Walter, 2017, p. 749). However, problems in European media have been recognized which hinder serious reviews. For instance, there is no European media constituting a space for transnational European debate and national media tend to report about EU events from a national perspective (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2007; Preston, 2009). What is more, there is a general lack of EU news in the mass media since journalists face many challenges in reporting about the EU (Statham, 2010). Hence, the fact that the EU has turned to civil society and individual citizens to form a European public sphere to remedy to so-called democratic deficit appears as a rational consequence of this.

The public sphere is a communicative space where citizens come together to exchange and discuss their ideas, opinions and perspectives to influence the political institutions and thus the societal development (Castells, 2008). The idea of the public sphere is interconnected with democratic theory and its existence is claimed to be an important precondition for democracy (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007). The public sphere was first introduced by Jürgen Habermas, who in his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989) described the bourgeois public sphere as a space where private people debate over the rules governing societal relations. From this point of view, the public sphere is regarded as the communicative generator of public opinion and the

mobilization of this opinion would assure that government representatives execute the will of the people (Fraser, 2007). Public institutions such as libraries and universities have for a long time been considered as important communicative spaces, along with the mass media. In contemporary society, internet and digital communication networks are perceived as equally important to the public sphere existence and development (Castells, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005). Both social capital (Sommerfeldt, 2013) and participation (Calhoun, 1992) are considered as essential features of the democratic public sphere, and since social capital and participation can emerge in digital communication networks (as highlighted above) it is understandable that such spaces now are central to the public sphere idea. Digital communication networks such as social media are particularly important to the formation of the European public sphere (Michailidou & Barisione, 2017; Nitoiu, 2013) as these allow for communication to flow transnationally at a fast pace. In the digital media environment, public spheres are often referred to as digital public spheres (Bossetta et al., 2017). There are, however, many obstacles in forming a European public sphere, whether its digital or not. Although united under the same polity, EU citizens lack common nodes in language, culture, identity, and media (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007; Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019; Seoane Pérez, 2013). Previous literature has thus consistently argued that the European public sphere would not be a single coherent sphere, but rather a sphere consisting of numerous national spheres overlapping one another (e.g., see review in Nitoiu, 2013).

The EU hopes to enhance the development of the European public sphere by fostering greater citizen dialogue (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Brüggemann, 2010; Yang, 2013), communicating the benefits of the EU (Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013), and offering new participatory tools for e.g., EU governance (Bouza Garcia & Del Río Villar, 2012; Greenwood & Tuokko, 2017). Citizen consultations, civil dialogues, electoral campaigns, and online platforms for policy influence are merely a few examples of how the EU attempts to engage citizens. The objectives of these initiatives are diverse, inter alia to receive policy recommendations (Bouza Garcia, 2015), to increase electoral turnout (Marquart et al., 2020), as well as making people feel more European and more positively inclined towards the EU (Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013). Nevertheless, the overarching objective of all these initiatives

is to close the gap between the EU and the EU citizens, diminish the claimed democratic deficit, and remedy the perceived legitimacy problem by creating a European public sphere (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013; Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019). A clear EU communication discourse has been "communicating Europe", against the backdrop that it would be more likely that an aware and informed citizen would have a more positive perception of the EU and thus be willing to get engaged (Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013). The EU's communication strategies for enhancing citizen engagement and ultimately creating a European public sphere have however been criticized for being ineffective, idealistic, and lacking in clear and attainable objectives (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Brüggemann, 2010; Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013). It thus seems as if there is still a long way to go before a European public sphere finally and fully can emerge. Many different strategies have been employed in the EU's numerous attempts to boost its emergence; however, the obstacles seem to be greater than the successes.

Although the EU had identified (and begun to work towards remedying) the democratic deficit about a decade earlier, it was not until the French and Dutch referendum voters' rejection of the constitutional treaty in 2005 that the EU's attempts to enhance a European public sphere by means of communication began to take shape (Bouza Garcia, 2015; de Beus, 2010). Partially, this was manifested in the first European commissioner (i.e., a minister at the EU level) responsible for institutional relations and public communications 2004 – 2009. A white paper on "communicating European policies, enhancing debate and dialogue, and improving both the EU understanding of public opinion and public understanding of the EU" (European Commission, 2006 as cited in de Beus, 2010, p. 25) was one important result of this new communications agenda. In parallel, a "Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate", aiming to engage EU citizens at a local level in European affairs, was put forward. It included attempts to stimulate and support public debate about the future of the EU with social actors. In the upcoming years, this approach was extended under the headline "Debate Europe", and consequently various public communication and engagement initiatives emerged. Amongst other projects, "pan-European public consultations, online networks, exhibitions and seminars" were included in the strategy (Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013, p. 174). Although ambitious, it has been argued that these communication initiatives

lacked explicit objectives and did not generate sufficiently mobilized and interested citizens (Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013). Similar skepticism has also been illustrated in other literature. For instance, Brüggemann (2010) argued that the EU has utilized ineffective means to communicate with the citizenry to foster a European public sphere and that it fails to live up to the promise of transparency and dialogue. Also Tomkova (2010) emphasized that the EU fails to provide full transparency in the entire process of citizens' consultations and that the effects of such projects are unclear. Dolghi (2009) argued that the EU's communication strategies entail numerous limitations, and that "the main gap in the EU communication strategy is the lack of a clear and common vision about what is EU and what kind of political structure EU wants to be" (p. 61) which hinders an effective public communication approach.

Similarly, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), a participatory online platform adopted in 2011 where citizens can launch campaigns to call on the EC to propose new policies (Bouza Garcia & Del Río Villar, 2012), has been criticized. While it has been able to successfully raise awareness of certain EU policy matters (Greenwood & Tuokko, 2017) and managed to influence e.g., the EC's water policy discourse (van den Berge et al., 2020), scholars argue that users of the platform are likely to be the usual suspect (already convinced of the benefits of the EU), and not appealing to the ordinary or skeptic citizen (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Kandyla & Gherghina, 2018). Against this background, it is reasonable to argue that its democratic and engaging potential appears to be limited. Furthermore, the power to propose new EU laws remains with the EC, and not the people. However, it does provide a communicative space around EU issues (Greenwood & Tuokko, 2017) although not appearing to be particularly interesting to the ordinary or skeptic citizen, and hence not able to remedy the EU's democratic deficit and its alleged legitimacy issue. The lack of citizen diversity was also the case for the national web-forums organized under the European Citizens' Consultation (ECC); Kies et al. (2013) noted that participants were only citizens and groups that already had an EU involvement and interest, a high level of education, a political interest, and pro-EU attitudes, which resulted in low diversity on the consultation issue. However, participants felt more informed about the EU and had more positive attitudes towards it after the consultations (but the consultations' policy

proposals were not seriously considered by decision-makers). The same pattern is visible in research on the involvement of CSOs in EU governance which has showcased that consultations with CSOs did not seem to have lived up to its expectations since the communication with the general public was not strengthened and the participation in policymaking was not facilitated (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013). Kohler-Koch and Buth (2013) even argued that CSOs participating in consultations with the EC became "EU minded actors" as they received EU funding and were obliged to be responsive to the requirements made by the EU in order to influence the policy agenda, which in turn negatively influenced the democratic participation of citizens. However, in a digital media environment it has been argued that the European public does not, to a large extent, come into being on its own spontaneously. Rather, the public needs organized spaces where communication between citizens, as well as between citizens and the EU institutions, can occur (Bossetta et al., 2017; Tarța, 2017). Thus, despite the many failures of the EU to engage citizens effectively, their communicative presence is deemed to be needed to constitute a European public sphere. What is more, the EP and the EC are changing their ways of communicating with the public. While the EP aims to raise awareness about the EP to a wide audience, the EC wants to target their communication more specifically to different audiences depending on the context and communicate more broadly about EU related matters to e.g., enhance awareness and engagement (Niklewicz, 2017).

2.3 The Communicative Role of Social Media Users

Vromen (2017) highlighted that "the internet has brought profound changes to citizen engagement with politics and changed the practices of mobilisation and organization" (p. 3). Indeed, the internet and social media has become ubiquitous phenomena in our digital society which has radically transformed the opportunities for participation and engagement (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Mossberger et al., 2008; Navarria, 2020; Rainie et al., 2012). Within the digital environment a new kind of participatory culture has emerged in which expression and engagement have low barriers and where communities can interact with one another (Jenkins, 2009) and mobilize each other to participate politically (Iglič & Font Fábregas, 2007). Concepts such as the networked (Navarria, 2020) and digital citizen

(Mossberger et al., 2008; Vromen, 2017) illustrate the role of individual citizens in shaping society by means of the digital media space. Digital citizens use the internet on a daily basis (Mossberger et al., 2008) and are, ideally, vital agents for political change due to their online participation (Navarria, 2020). A group of digital citizens is social media users, who often manifest themselves by sharing content in various forms (Tarța, 2017). However, some users are more active than others (Bossetta et al., 2017); a simple dichotomy is passive and active users (Kruikemeier et al., 2014). Those who are active in the social media environment comprise the public that share content and interact with others (two-way communication), whereas those who are passive read and consume information but are not actively involved (one-way communication) (Kruikemeier et al., 2014). Although both active and passive forms of social media and internet use has positive effects for political involvement (Kruikemeier et al., 2014), active forms are argued to impact individual's political involvement to a larger extent (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). However, it has also been stressed that passive internet use in combination with low political interest matters for political involvement, whereas active internet use in terms of commenting does not. The former might be explained by the idea that less interested individuals can be mobilized by passively consuming e.g., comments on social media, whereas the latter could be understood in light of political cynicism (Kruikemeier et al., 2014). Simultaneously, active users that disseminate news on social media have significant potential to be influential in their social networks, e.g., since posts shared by friends or relatives are perceived as more trustworthy than posts received directly from a news media (Turcotte et al., 2015). In a similar manner, it has been stressed that the networked relationships among social media users enhance knowledge sharing among citizens (Bonsón et al., 2012), e.g., those who are engaged with government social media can forward civic information to others who are not connected or engaged (Song & Lee, 2016). Additionally, news exposure on social media impact voter turnout positively (Moeller et al., 2018), hence strengthening the implication that individuals who share news online can mobilize others politically. Active users that are highly engaged in social media environments are further more likely to try to persuade others of a political standpoint (Weeks et al., 2017). Active users can thus have a mobilizing effect on less active users in this way which arguably can have profound impact on political and socie-

tal development. Recurring examples of political and societal impacts as a result of active digital citizenship are the Arab Spring (Jamali, 2014), and the MeToo movement (Navarria, 2020); both in which social media was considered as a critical tool to mobilize social capital, interact and disseminate information among participants.

The role of informal interpersonal discussion (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) and social networks (Putnam, 2000) have been considered as important to political opinion formation and democracy. In terms of social media sites, research has showcased that interpersonal discussion about politics encourages both civic and political participation, and make people more competent in judging policies (Zhang et al., 2010). Further, interpersonal communication has shown to impact political attitudes. In an EU context, a recent study has illustrated that conversations with a positive tonality about the EU makes people feel more positive about the democratic performance of the EU and conversely, that conversations with a negative tonality makes people feel more negative about the EU in this regard. The same study also found that positive tonality about the EU in news media had stronger effects and occurred in more contexts than negative tonalities. The effects were stronger in countries where a positive EU image was communicated by the media, particularly consistent effects were found among less politically sophisticated citizens (i.e., individuals with low political knowledge and interest) (Desmet et al., 2015). De Vreese and Tobiasen (2007) noted that interpersonal communication about the EU mattered for explaining voter turnout in the EP elections, as well as EU support and knowledge. Stockemer (2012) showed that the frequency of interpersonal communication on politics between citizens had positive effects on voter turnout in EP elections. Similarly, Desmet (2013) showed that the frequency of conversation and heterogeneity of discussion networks had a positive impact on citizens' assessments of EU democratic performance. What is more, conversations about the EP elections with friends and family has shown to increase satisfaction with EU democracy (Boomgaarden, 2016). Marquart et al. (2020) showed that citizens' mobilization attempts (telling others what to vote for) in the EP election 2019 was a strong contributor to increased voter turnout, particularly political discussion with family members was positively related to voting in the EP election. Furthermore, Kritzinger et al. (2021) reported that most citizens, in their sample

of seven countries, did in fact discuss the EU monthly and that such discussions were enhanced by EP elections. Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) explored the social media environment in relation to EU discussions and found that online engagement leads to offline engagement, and that there is a specific group of politically (EU) engaged social media users who could play an important role in EU information dissemination, so-called opinion makers. Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) further stated that, in light of the public apathy towards the EU, it is necessary to further explore and suggest how participation can be enhanced online by means of communication.

Previous studies have further suggested that attitude change in politics is affected by interpersonal communication to a greater extent than by the media (Desmet et al., 2015; Lenart, 1994). Yet, both the media and interpersonal communication are important factors playing a role in attitude change and opinion formation in politics (Desmet et al., 2015; Scheufele, 2002). But the role of the media in this context is overrepresented in the scholarly literature, compared to research on interpersonal communication. This is illustrated in EU research where the role of the media is largely studied (e.g., Azrout et al., 2012; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Jürgen, 2008) but only a few studies have explored the role of interpersonal communication (Desmet et al., 2015; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Marquart et al., 2020).

2.4 Synthesis

As has been illustrated in the review, citizen engagement can have many positive effects on citizen-to-government relationships, hence explaining why the EU is involved in such communication projects. Particularly, digital media can serve as an important platform for strategic communication to boost the public support for the EU. While it is known that EU public communication is in large failing to meet its objectives, it is also rather clear that the employed strategies are not satisfactory. Although it is naïve to believe that improved public communication would save the entire EU project, it is reasonable to believe that improvements would increase the chances of making a positive change. Many studies concerned with EU public communication and citizen engagement have focused on the sender perspective and the outcome of engagement projects. While these are important

in order to expand the knowledge on what exactly the EU is doing and what their communication contributes to, they do not highlight the receiver perspective, the European social media public, from a communication approach which is important in order to increase the efficiency of EU communication for citizen engagement. As has been shown, the role of interpersonal communication can be vital for democratic development – not least in the EU case. Considering this, and the democratic importance of (EU interested) social media users in the formation of a (European) public sphere, it is essential to increase the comprehension of the EU interested social media public as this group of people can have a mobilizing effect on less engaged and less interested citizens. There is a clear research void regarding who in the online sphere communicates with others about the EU and what factors that might predict this opinion leadership behavior. The EU needs to better target their communication towards these citizens and engage them in dialogue to stimulate the formation of a European public sphere further. Much of the other research on this subject has been focused on interpersonal communication around EP elections, or in relation to the EU's democratic performance. However, more knowledge is needed on the EU interested social media users regarding their mobilizing potential. Focusing on interpersonal discussion during EP elections does not generate enough knowledge on how to strategically frame and tailor EU communication to stimulate citizen engagement and make use of the social capital and participatory culture online to contribute to the European public sphere formation.

3. Theoretical Framework, Model & Hypotheses Development

The theoretical framework that is employed in this thesis, the two-step flow of communication and particularly the aspect of opinion leadership, is stressed in this chapter. Along with describing how it is used in the present thesis, the theoretical framework is discussed and its use in this thesis motivated. The chapter further sets out to build and present the model and the hypotheses which are used to answer the thesis' research questions.

3.1 The Two-Step Flow of Communication

The two-step flow of communication theory posits that information disseminated by the mass media does not reach the target audiences directly, but rather flows via opinion leaders that interpret and communicate the information to other people in their social networks. As such, opinion formation occurs through a two-step communication flow (Christen, 2013). The two-step flow of communication is a classic mass media theory that emerged in *The People's Choice* by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) on media effects and voting behavior in American electoral politics 1940 and 1944. They found that opinion leaders have a greater persuasion impact than the mass media, particularly for those individuals who changed their mind late in the electoral campaign (Davis, 2009). Their theory strongly challenged the media effects paradigm at the time which assumed that media messages flowed to the target audience directly in a one-step flow, and not through other influential individuals that then passed the information on to their less engaged peers (Christen, 2013). The theory became known as the limited media effects paradigm (Christen, 2013) and with it, interpersonal communication came to be regarded as an important aspect of influence in individuals' decision-making processes, including public opinion formation (Jensen, 2016). Throughout the decades it has been dedicated vast research interest and been subject for much theoretical and methodological debate (Weimann, 1991). Besides politics, it has been employed

in a range of different topic areas such as fashion, science, movies, health, and marketing, often with the intention to test different aspects of the theory and improve its explanatory power (Weimann, 1994).

Katz (1957) argued that the hypothesis has three main components, i.e., the impact of personal influence, the flow of personal influence, and the relationship of opinion leaders to the mass media. These aspects of the theory have all been subject for research. For instance, in the famous Decatur study which focused on locating and studying opinion leaders in marketing, movies, fashion and public affairs, the hypothesis that personal influence appeared to make a greater impact on people's decision-making compared to the mass media was confirmed (Katz & Lazarsfeldt, 1955 as cited in Katz, 1957). More recent studies have also implied that attitude change in politics is affected by interpersonal communication to a greater extent than the media (Desmet et al., 2015; Lenart, 1994). However, today it is claimed that both the media and interpersonal communication are important factors playing a role in attitude change and opinion formation (see e.g. Desmet et al., 2015; Scheufele, 2002). Further, identifying opinion leaders and predicting opinion leadership in various contexts have been important and common issues of scholarly interest (Weimann, 1994), and studying opinion leaders remains relevant even in today's ever-changing media landscape (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015; Weeks et al., 2017).

In contemporary research, the two-step flow of communication theory has inter alia been used to examine social media communication flows and opinion leadership in social media (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Park, 2013; Sujin, 2015; Turcotte et al., 2015). In 2015, a special section in the *International Journal of Communication* was dedicated to the two-step flow of communication and opinion leadership in changing media environments, illustrating the pertinence and interest of the theory today. In this issue, Schäfer and Taddicken (2015) found that opinion leadership remains relevant to study in the new media environment, and that a new kind of opinion leader can be distinguished. This new kind of opinion leader is the mediatized opinion leader, who exhibit higher levels of interest in the topic at hand, compared to traditional opinion leaders. Most importantly though, is that these mediatized opinion leaders use both mass and online media for information

surveillance and give advice to others though all kinds of communication channels (both online and offline). In a similar vein, Weeks et al. (2017) studied social media prosumers (i.e., individuals who are highly politically active in social media environments by interaction, information seeking and dissemination) and found that they perceive themselves to be opinion leaders and showcase potential concerning political influenceability on social media platforms. These prosumers were found to be more likely to persuade others politically than non-prosumers. These findings thus further strengthen the relevance of opinion leadership studies in the digital era.

Opinion leadership is the focus in this thesis as the intention is to distinguish opinion leaders and predict opinion leadership in EU affairs. Using opinion leadership theory allows the thesis to map influential individuals in EU affairs and predict what makes someone an opinion leader in this setting. Drawing on this theoretical framework and previous research relevant to the thesis subject area, it is possible to increase the scholarly comprehension of opinion leadership in the chosen context. Thus, before emphasizing the criticism towards the chosen theory, the concept of opinion leadership is stressed.

3.1.1 Opinion Leadership

Opinion leaders are "people who are more influential within their social networks than others" and that "consider themselves experts in a specific area of interest […] and are asked for advice in this area" (Lazarsfeldt & Katz, 1955 as cited in Trepte & Scherer, 2010, p. 119). Davis (2009, p. 970) define opinion leaders as "persons who routinely influence others through networks of personal relationships". Identifying and predicting opinion leadership is particularly imperative since knowing who opinion leaders are and what makes them opinion leaders increase the chances of making an impact with, for instance, a communications campaign (Christen, 2013). In this thesis, political talk and persuasion are perceived as proxies of political opinion leadership. Thus, much of the theory in the model development (see below) are based not merely on opinion leadership research but also on literature pertaining to e.g., political talk and political persuasion.

Various dimensions of opinion leadership have been studied throughout the years, and regarding the large research interest it has attracted across different research areas, it is impossible to review them all. What is clear though, is that opinion leadership does not appear to be constant but, instead, seems to change depending on factors such as subject area, time, and context. Hence, opinion leaders in politics are not the same people who are opinion leaders in, for instance, fashion. Fashion opinion leaders are more commonly young women whilst political opinion leaders generally are deemed to be older men (Weimann, 1994). However, it is important to note that some scholars claim that certain opinion leadership qualities hold across contexts. Most importantly, opinion leaders are believed to obtain a particularly high interest in a specific subject field in which they exercise opinion leadership (Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). What Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) found was that opinion leaders were more interested in the election compared to others. Along these lines, Weimann (1994, p. 75) stated that "Regardless of the subject area, an opinion leader must be interested, involved, informed, and updated about his or her area of expertise". Simultaneously, previous research has also argued that opinion leaders across different topics share common personality traits (Noelle-Neumann, 1985) and suggests that opinion leaders are not automatically topic specific (Merwe & Heerden, 2009). In this vein, opinion leaders are deemed to be more self-confident (Katz, 2015; Shah & Scheufele, 2006), cosmopolitan, and gregarious (Katz, 2015). Further, Katz (1957) emphasized that opinion leaders appear to be influential in different subject areas due to the group constellation he or she is in. Thus, opinion leaders are claimed to come into being by virtue of their social networks. In short, there are many different aspects of opinion leadership which has contributed to the vast theoretical and methodological debate of the concept (Weimann, 1991). Regarding the changing nature of opinion leaders, identifying and predicting opinion leadership is a challenging task which however remains pertinent.

In the research tradition of the two-step flow of communication theory, those who are not considered as opinion leaders have been conceptualized and talked about in different ways. Commonly, those who ask the opinion leader for advice and are influenced by opinion leaders are referred to as followers (Weimann, 1994). Followers are deemed to be information seekers who rely on their opinion leaders for

advice in specific subject matters (Weimann, 1994). However, followers are not per se the same people as those who are not opinion leaders. In fact, a recurring criticism of the two-step flow theory is that communication flows in multiple steps rather than in two steps (Menzel & Katz, 1955; Robinson, 1976). Research has showcased that opinion leaders are followers of other opinion leaders and that the opinion leader-follower roles can change depending on the context and timeframe. For instance, based on his analysis of American election data, Robinson (1976) found that 68% of people that had tried to influence others also received opinions from others. This indicated a multi-step flow rather than a two-step flow. As such, opinion leaders are not only influenced by media but also by other opinion leaders. Robinson also showcased that those who had tried to influence others were much less likely to be persuaded than those who merely had received opinions from others. Thus, although the two-step flow of communication theory and the aspect of opinion leadership have sustained over 70 years it has been subject for much criticism, hence leading to its continuous elaboration and improvement (Christen, 2013).

3.2 Development of Research Model & Hypotheses

Based on the opinion leadership theory and previous literature in a range of research fields covering inter alia media consumption, information dissemination, persuasion, political communication and interpersonal communication, hypotheses about the relationship between EU opinion leadership and its alleged predictors are developed. There is a general lack of literature on the EU and interpersonal communication, and (as far as this thesis is concerned) there are no studies on the EU and opinion leadership. Therefore, hypotheses are developed based on literature on political opinion leadership in general, and related branches. Since previous research has not presented any explicit relationships between EU opinion leadership and its predictors, the mentioned literature is deemed to be suitable to generate such hypotheses.

3.2.1 Who are EU Opinion Leaders?

Political opinion leaders tend to be highly educated older men (Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Weimann, 1994). Similarly, after decades of research on political participa-

tion, it had been established that politics primarily is a domain where highly educated older men participate (see e.g. Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995), however this gender gap is now claimed to have disappeared (Burns et al., 2018). Women are in fact more likely to vote and engage in activism, while men are more likely to participate in direct collective action and be more engaged in political parties (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). Political talk, an opinion leadership proxy, is deemed to be dominated by men (Polletta & Chen Pang Ching, 2013). In their study on interpersonal communication and the EU in seven member states, Kritzinger et al. (2021, p. 16) found that "on an average men discuss the EU more often compared to women" (but noted that these gender differences were rather moderate). The digital media environment seems to hold many promises in terms of remedying political participation inequalities, but that does not seem to be the case (Gustafsson, 2013; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). However, it has been noted that individuals who engage politically online with EU affairs tend to be younger than those who do not (Marquart et al., 2020; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). Nevertheless, since research on political opinion leadership states that highly educated older men are more prone to be political opinion leaders, the following hypotheses are suggested.

H1a: Men score higher on the EU opinion leadership index.

H1b: Age is positively associated to the EU opinion leadership index.

H1c: Highly educated individuals score higher on the EU opinion leadership index.

3.2.2 What Factors Predict EU Opinion Leadership?

Political opinion leaders are deemed to be more active in all forms of political behavior (Robinson, 1976; Weimann, 1994) such as volunteering, voting, and attending political meetings (Black, 1982; Kingdon, 1970). In fact, it is claimed that political opinion leaders are those who make up the politically active population in the US (Kavanaugh et al., 2006). Compared to others, political opinion leaders are more often engaged in political events and actualities through discussions they are exposed to in various social (and often political) contexts in which they are active (Weimann, 1994). It is further established that opinion leadership

and civic participation is positively related, and that opinion leadership matters for encouraging political participation (Shah & Scheufele, 2006). Further, civic participation is claimed to be positively related to political activity (Van Stekelenburg et al., 2016). Both offline and online forms of political participation have shown to be positively related to self-perceived opinion leadership (Weeks et al., 2017). Thus, individuals who participate politically in the online environment are more likely to perceive themselves as influential in their social networks. Further, the same argument seems to hold true for individuals who are politically active in the offline sphere (Weeks et al., 2017).

H2: Political participation (online and offline) is positively associated to EU opinion leadership.

A well-established predictor of opinion leadership in political contexts is high use of informational mass media. This behavior forms part of the information seeking behaviors that opinion leaders are more prone to be engaged in compared to others (Weimann, 1994). Against this background, individuals who are political opinion leaders usually follow the media flow more closely than others (see e.g. Robinson, 1976; Weimann, 1994). It has further been shown that high levels of political talk is generated by forms of media consumption such as reading the newspaper (Boulianne, 2011). Traditional media use, particularly newspaper consumption, is deemed to be positively related to institutionalized offline forms of political participation (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; McLeod et al., 1999). There also seems to be a positive relationship between political participation online and informational media consumption, although the association to offline participation seems to be stronger (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011). In today's digital era, media use continues to be an important predictor of opinion leadership (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015; Weeks et al., 2017), particularly regarding that news is an omnipresent feature in the social media sphere which is increasingly used as a source of information (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). Research has shown that political social media use (i.e., engagement in political social media activities) and attention to political news in traditional media increases engagement in politics over time (Holt et al., 2013) and that consumption of news online has shown to

spur political interest, political engagement and propensity for political talk (Boulianne, 2011).

H3a: Informational media use is positively associated to EU opinion leadership.

H3b: Political participation mediates the relationship between informational media use and EU opinion leadership.

Furthermore, engaging politically seems to predict political talk (Boulianne, 2011). News sharing behaviors on social media appear to be positively associated to being influential since individuals who engage in this kind of activity are perceived as opinion leaders by others (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018) and persuade others in their social networks (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018). This could be because shared news on social media sites exhibit higher levels of credibility among receivers than news stemming directly from news media outlets (Turcotte et al., 2015). Indeed, engaged news users in social media have shown to have significant potential to be highly influential in their social networks (Turcotte et al., 2015; Weeks et al., 2017). Informativeness (Lee et al., 2011) and high news interest (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017) both seem to predict news sharing on social media. Sharing political online content is deemed to be positively related to political participation, which in turn is deemed to be a predictor of political opinion leadership (Gil De Zuniga et al., 2009; Östman, 2012). All this suggest that expressing oneself politically online is positively related to opinion leadership behaviors. Political expression in social media is particularly interesting from an opinion leadership point of view since the interactivity of social media increases the likelihood of making an impact when expressing oneself politically (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Using social media for news seem to have indirect positive effects on political participation online through political expression in social media, whereas it seems to have direct positive effects on political participation offline (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

H4a: Political expression in social media is positively associated to EU opinion leadership.
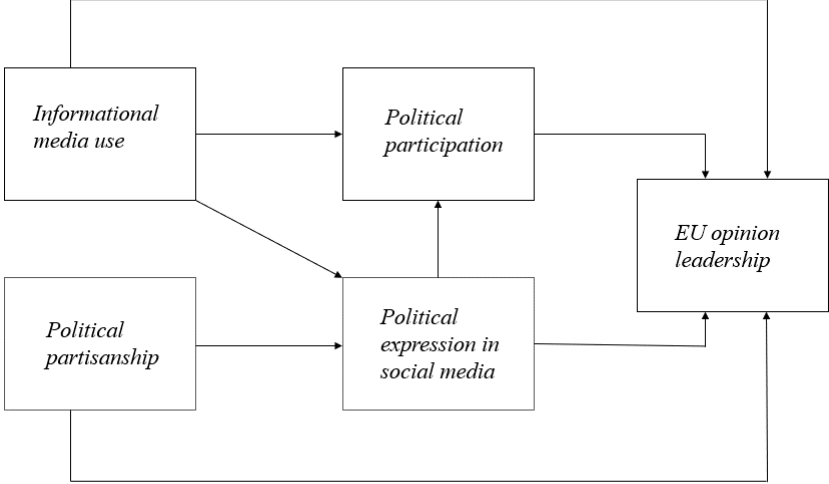
H4b: Political expression in social media and political participation mediates the relationship between informational media use and EU opinion leadership.

A recent study on interpersonal discussion and the EU found that individuals feeling closer to a political party discuss the EU more frequently than political independents (Kritzinger et al., 2021). Adding to this finding, it has further been found that politically partisan individuals are more likely to disseminate and engage with news stories in social media and thereby mobilize others in political matters (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Similarly, partisan strength seems to contribute to explaining political opinion expression and opinion sharing on Facebook (Kim, 2016). People that give (political) advice to others are indeed more active in all forms of political behaviors, including different forms of political participation and such as being a member of, and highly engaged in, a political organization or party (Robinson, 1976). Partisan sharing of news on social media is related to individuals who exhibit higher levels of political knowledge and political engagement (An et al., 2014), and since political knowledge and engagement both are established predictors of opinion leadership (Weimann, 1994) this implies that opinion leaders may feel closer to a political party than others. Opinion leaders are further considered to be more likely than others to follow politicians and parties on Facebook (Karlsen, 2015), thus inferring both higher levels of political interest and possibly partisanship among opinion leaders compared to others.

H5a: Political partisanship is positively associated to EU opinion leadership.
H5b: Political expression in social media and political participation mediates the relationship between political partisanship and EU opinion leadership.

Figure 1. The Theoretical Model.

4. Methodology

This chapter covers the methodology of the thesis to make it clear what has been done during the research procedure. The research paradigm and research design of the thesis is emphasized, as well as the survey design, and the measurements employed in the survey. Thereafter, the sample selection, data collection, biases, and ethical considerations are discussed.

4.1 Research Paradigm & Research Design

This thesis was conducted in the post-positivist research paradigm, given the research questions and the employed research design. Post-positivism is a critical reaction towards the positivist tradition. Whereas positivists argue that there is absolute knowledge to be found, post-positivists claim that "real" reality is "imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109). Thus, positivists are strict objectivists in their search for knowledge and perceive findings to be true, whilst post-positivists take a more critical stance perceiving scientific findings to *probably* be true. Positivists are rooted in natural sciences and employ mainly quantitative methods to verify hypotheses. Post-positivists, on the other hand, intend to falsify hypotheses by modified experimental/manipulative quantitative methods. Post-positivists may also involve qualitative methods in their search for knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, this thesis did not conduct an experiment or carry out manipulation of variables since it aimed to study a naturally occurring social phenomena among a population of EU interested social media users. The thesis was interested in finding out who opinion leaders are in a population of EU interested social media users and what factors that could predict EU opinion leadership behavior.

The research design of this thesis was cross-sectional in that it was delimited to collect data at one single occasion. Cross-sectional designs are useful for describing a population of interest and their behaviors at a specific point in time but are

limited in making assessments about causality. Cross-sectional designs are nevertheless most common since longitudinal designs, that are more successful in assessing causality, require more resources (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020). Although not being able to make statements about causality, this thesis was able to make appraisals of causal relationships in the theoretical model by studying associations. A cross-sectional design was deemed to be the most appropriate approach due to the constrained timeframe and resources of the thesis. Moreover, the thesis adopted a non-experimental, observational, and quantitative survey design. The thesis is regarded as observational since behaviors of the population of interest were observed by self-report measures in a survey. Behaviors are often measured by using self-reports since it is a cost efficient and simple approach. However, attention to response biases is needed due to e.g., social desirability and memory inaccuracy (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020), which is discussed below. When wanting to explain or predict certain behaviors or attitudes, quantitative research methods are deemed to be the most appropriate (Nardi, 2018), hence conducting a survey was considered as adequate for this thesis.

4.2 Survey Design

The survey (Appendix 1) intended to collect data to answer to the thesis' research questions of descriptive and predictive nature. The survey was constructed in the computer software Sunet Survey and was distributed in English. The very first page of the survey included a brief text which introduced the respondents to the survey and the thesis subject, and which provided informed consent. The respondents were informed that their answers were anonymous, confidential, and that they could cancel the survey at any time. They were further informed that their responses would be deleted by the end of summer 2021, when the thesis had been finalized.

The first section of the survey included questions about informational media use, and subsequently questions on EU opinion leadership were asked. Specifically, the questions on media use pertained to both traditional and internet media use for surveilling politics during the past 12 months. In terms of the EU opinion leadership questions, the respondents were asked about their communicative behavior in

relation to the EU or any EU-related issue. Political questions were asked thereafter, starting with political expression in social media. Questions pertaining to political participation (offline and online) were asked after this. In an attempt not to bias the results, the respondents were then exposed to the questions on political partisanship, followed by what they voted in the last national and European parliamentary elections. It is reasonable to think that if the respondents would have been asked about their votes before being asked about their political partisanship, a risk would have been that the respondents could have been nudged by their vote responses to consider themselves more partisan than they would perceive themselves normally. Thereafter, sociodemographic questions (age, gender, level of education, country of living) were asked, as well as what the respondents consider to be their most important political issue. The respondents were also asked about their general EU perception (very negative, negative, neutral, positive, very positive). These were considered as important control questions, e.g., most important political issue was claimed to potentially influence EU opinion leadership (as opinion leadership can be issue specific), and general perception of the EU could reasonably affect the tone of EU talk. Finally, the respondents were asked to voluntarily leave their email address so that it would be possible to contact them to complement with in-depth interview data in case of quantitative data scarcity.

4.2.1 Measurements

Dependent Variable

EU Opinion Leadership. In survey research, a common method to measure opinion leadership is to use a self-reporting technique where respondents answer a few questions that appraise their level of opinion leadership (Jungnickel, 2018). This thesis employed a revised version of the opinion leadership measurement developed by Childers (1986). Childers measurement is mentioned in several studies (see e.g. Jungnickel, 2018; Trepte & Scherer, 2010) and the items internal consistency reliability is considered as good; Cronbach's alpha 0.83 (see Goldsmith & Desborde, 1991). The measurement consisted of six items measured on a 5-point scale. Childers' measurement was developed for measuring opinion leader-

ship regarding cable TV, but it can be moderated to fit other contexts. It is important to note that Childers' scale is one-dimensional, measuring the communicative aspect of opinion leadership. There are scales measuring other dimensions of the opinion leadership concept, such as personality strength (Noelle-Neumann, 1985). However, in this thesis it was important to use a so-called maven scale (issue specific) and to measure the interpersonal communication aspect of opinion leadership, since the thesis was focused on opinion leadership in a specific domain and since interpersonal communication, rather than personality strength or leadership qualities, was the central theme. The value of Cronbach's alpha was 0.813 for the thesis sample, which is considered as good (Pallant, 2010). The index scores ranged from 6 to 30.

Independent Variables

Informational Media Use. Informational media use was measured on a 6-point scale (1=several times a week, 2= about once a week, 3=about once a month, 4=about once every 6 months, 5=about once every 12 months 6=never) consisting of 8 items (newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, online news sites, social media, blogs, news apps). The scale was reversed before the index was constructed. The categories in the construct were inspired from Schäfer and Taddicken (2015) and modified to fit the thesis. The scores were borrowed from the Swedish SOM (society, opinion, and media) Institute's national survey 1986 – 2019 and the internet usage construct (Martinsson & Andersson, 2020, p. 58). News apps were excluded from the summative index constructed in SPSS since it lowered the Cronbach's alpha. In the end, the value of Cronbach's alpha for the index was low but satisfactory (0.642) (Ursachi et al., 2015). The index scores ranged from 7 to 42.

Political Expression in Social Media. Political expression in social media was measured along 5 items on the 6-point internet usage scale in Martinsson and Andersson (2020): (1=never, 2=about once every 12 months, 3=about once every 6 months, 4=about once a month, 5=about once a week 6=several times a week). The items were developed by Weeks et al. (2017) based on previous literature. Respondents were asked about the frequency of their social media use to express their political views, such as how often they post personal experiences related to

politics and how often they post or share thoughts about current events or politics. Cronbach's alpha was reported of 0.848. The index scores ranged from 5 to 30.

Political Partisanship. Political partisanship was measured along a 4-item partisan identity construct on a 4-point scale (1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, 4=strongly disagree) (Bankert et al., 2017). The scale was reversed before the index was constructed. The respondents were asked about their relationship to a political party in terms of social identity and group belonging. Value of Cronbach's alpha was 0.953. Before answering to the items in the political partisanship construct, the respondents were asked if they would say that they feel close to a political party (yes/no/not sure). If answering "yes" or "not sure", the respondent was asked to respond to the political partisanship questions. If answering "no" the respondent was not asked to respond to the partisanship questions and were assigned 0 points on the index. The index scores ranged from 0 to 16.

Political Participation. Political participation adheres to any political activity in the online and offline sphere, such as engagement with online petitions and political polls, as well as attending political rallies and contacting elected public officials. The construct was borrowed from Weeks et al. (2017) and consisted of 13 items measuring the frequency of respondents' engagement in political activities. The items were measured on a 4-point scale borrowed from Nardi (2018, p. 88) (1=frequently,2=sometimes, 3=rarely 4=never). The scale was reversed before the index was constructed. Cronbach's alpha was reported of 0.89. The index scores ranged from 13 to 52.

Control Variables

Sociodemographic variables. Sociodemographic variables are essential control variables in opinion leadership research as they have been central factors for identifying and describing opinion leaders (see e.g., Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Weeks et al., 2017; Weimann, 1991). Data on age, education, gender, and country of living was collected. Age was measured according to birth year, education was measured according to highest level of education completed across 5 categories (elementary school, high school, bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctor's de-

gree), gender was measured along a three categorical variable (male, female, other), and country of living data was collected by free text.

Political variables. The respondents' political orientation was necessary to measure since their ideological stance could potentially affect EU opinion leadership. Therefore, it was decided to gather information on the respondents' vote in the most recent national and European parliamentary election. The respondents answered according to a categorical ideological construct borrowed from Carroll and Kubo (2017) (Radical right, Christian-democratic, Conservative, Liberal, Socialist/Social Democratic, Green, Radical left). The respondents were also able to choose the answer "I did not vote". It was not possible to collect data on the exact party that the respondent voted for due to the diversity of countries involved in the sample and the constrained resources and timeframe of the thesis. Moreover, the survey asked about the respondents' most important political issue. Categorical items for this construct were inspired by Martinsson and Andersson (2020, p. 40). The construct consisted of 10 categories covering common political issues (Integration/immigration, Healthcare, Law and order, Education, Environment/Energy, Economy, Democracy/Human Rights, Foreign policy/International cooperation, governance) and an additional category termed "other" to make sure the construct was exhaustive. If respondents chose "other" they were asked to specify. Since opinion leadership vary across subject areas, levels of opinion leadership might vary depending on which political topic that an individual has most concern for. While there might be general opinion leaders specific for EU politics, their interest might be driven by a single political issue. Therefore, it was deemed relevant to control for this. Moreover, a control question about the respondents' general perception of the EU was included. The possible scores were provided on a 5-point scale (1=very positive, 2=positive, 3=neutral, 4=negative, 5=very negative). The scale was reversed before data analysis.

4.3 Sample Selection & Data Collection

The original intention of this thesis was to study individuals involved in an EU communications campaign for citizen engagement, however the organization with which the cooperation was arranged decided late in the research process that it

was not possible to distribute the survey due to concerns about not respecting the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). However, the survey was not in conflict with GDPR (see below), but the organization still stood by its decision. Thus, to fully conduct the research within the given timeframe, it was decided to distribute the survey to a population of EU interested individuals in EU related groups on Facebook and LinkedIn. This negatively influenced the generalizability and robustness of the research; however, it was considered as an adequate substitute as the respondents still would be EU interested individuals. Hence, the thesis changed from a case study survey design into an explorative survey design of EU interested individuals in social media. A non-probability sampling strategy was employed categorized somewhere between purposive sampling and convenience sampling. Whilst convenience sampling selects participants based on availability, purposive sampling is efficient in selecting certain kinds of individuals obtaining the trait of interest for the research (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020). The strategy allowed for approaching individuals of interest efficiently, but it is important to emphasize that this approach entails numerous limitations and biases (see Biases discussion below).

The data was collected between the 14th and 28th of April 2021, through a sharable web address to the survey, in a set of Facebook and LinkedIn groups (see Appendix 2). A reminder was posted in the middle and at the end of the data collection period. The crucial point was to collect data from individuals who on a general level were interested in the EU in any way, thus the common denominator of the participants was solely EU interest and being a member of an EU related group on Facebook and LinkedIn. The survey was posted in 35 Facebook groups and in 6 LinkedIn groups. As the intention was not to compare the two social media sites, it was considered as adequate to have an unequal distribution of groups between the sites. Further, it was easier to find EU related Facebook groups, compared to LinkedIn, as Facebook is more of a discussion community for politics (Bossetta et al., 2017) than LinkedIn. LinkedIn is not as popular as Facebook (see e.g. Chang et al., 2017) and is focused on professional networking rather than discussion (Baker et al., 2013). However, as EU interested individuals can be found at LinkedIn as well, it was decided to distribute the survey there too.

It is not possible to say how many individuals the survey reached since, amongst other reasons, algorithms in social media filter information to all users. This issue was highlighted in Bossetta et al. (2017) who emphasized that "Facebook users are exposed to content that is automatically tailored to their interests, enticing them to engage with posts." (p. 64). Yet, regarding the sample size of 220 cases and the fact that the survey was distributed in 42 groups encompassing thousands of members in total, it can be concluded that a vast majority of members did not respond.

4.4 Biases

This thesis was subject to several biases that need to be discussed. First, survey data, which is used in this thesis, is commonly based on self-reports. This kind of data is criticized for the bias risks which it potentially entails. For instance, it could be argued that respondents might not accurately remember how often they use social media for informational news use. This influence of memory effect might bias the data (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020). Another bias risk is that of social desirability, which is more common in contexts where respondents are not anonymous. Social desirability implies a situation where respondents answer to the survey question to put themselves in a better light. In such cases, respondents are consciously distorting their answers to a certain extent (Ganster et al., 1983). In this thesis, it was reasonable to claim that social desirability bias might influence the reports concerning political participation. Since the respondents comprised of individuals who have an EU interest and desire to be engaged in EU affairs on social media, it would be logical that they wish to participate politically both offline and online to a fairly large extent. They might report that they do participate politically offline to a greater extent than they do. The same argument is relevant for the self-reports regarding media use. Put differently, being an active informational media consumer and participating politically might be socially desirable for politically interested individuals, which might influence and bias the results. Furthermore, the identification of opinion leaders was also based on self-reports which entailed the risk of subjectivity and social desirability. In an attempt to reduce these potential biases, the survey did not explicitly inform about the aim of the thesis while the respondents were given informed consent. Instead of ex-

plicit information on that it was their EU opinion leadership qualities that were being studied, they were told that they would be asked about their media use habits, political participation habits and EU interest. Despite these biases entailing self-reports in survey research, the self-reporting technique continues to be the most used method in survey studies. Generally, it is claimed that self-reporting data nevertheless is credible but that the risks should be accounted for (Berntson et al., 2016).

It is further pertinent to emphasize that the sample studied in this thesis was likely a population of people very different from people in general. As previously stressed, most people are not interested in the EU and do not participate in citizen engagement campaigns. It is reasonable to think that the respondents consume informational media, participate politically, express their political opinions in social media and are politically partisan to a greater extent than people in general. In light of this, there was also a risk for little or no variance in the sample. However, it was deemed to be likely that the sample fulfilled the opinion leadership requirements of high issue interest (and possibly also that of high knowledge), thus detecting EU opinion leaders was very likely and pertinent in this context. Against the background that EU campaign information should mainly be communicated to already EU interested individuals to maximize the reach and impact (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012), it was considered relevant to study opinion leadership in this sample. Moreover, it should be noted that some people are more willing to answer surveys than other people. This might bias the study results because of the risk that participants might be very different people compared to non-participants (Nardi, 2018).

 The sampling strategy used in this thesis further needs to be discussed as it entails biases. First, non-probability sampling strategies entail greater risks of systematic errors compared to probability sampling. Moreover, it is difficult to acquire a representative sample and "draw broad inferences to a broad population" (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 205). Thus, the results of this thesis are not generalizable. This is also due to the very specific sample acquired (see above). It also needs to be emphasized that the decision to ask for the email addresses of the respondents might have had an impact on the way respondents answered the questions or de-

cided to participate or not. This is because leaving contact details in question-naires asking about sensitive issues such as political participation is not unproblematic. Their information was kept confidential and anonymous but leaving contact details might nevertheless increase social desirability bias since these details might reveal the identity of the respondent if not separated from the data.

Further, the respondents were not necessarily EU citizens, but EU interested individuals which might imply EU opinion leadership qualities. The questionnaire did not ask about EU citizenship, but a clear majority of the respondents reported to live in an EU country. Although the UK left the EU recently, it was decided to keep the UK based respondents in the sample since these individuals still complied with the requirements of EU interest and being a member of an EU Facebook/LinkedIn group. Although they might not be EU citizens, they could still contribute to the formation of the European public sphere by communicating with others about the EU. Although these individuals might not be the primary target for EU citizen engagement campaigns, they might still be able to receive and disseminate EU public communication to others inside and outside of the national borders. This is especially true regarding the digital and transnational public sphere. Furthermore, it could be argued that the EU's legitimacy is not unimportant in third countries, particularly not in a former EU country such as the UK.

Finally, the survey questions asked about the respondents' political participation, political expression, and informational media use during the past 12 months. One of the EU opinion leadership questions asked about the respondents' communicative behavior in relation to the EU during the past 6 months. Although these kinds of questions are adequate under normal circumstances, they might bias the answers under abnormal circumstances. The research was conducted amid the global Covid-19 pandemic (starting in March 2020) which arguably entails less (offline) political and social activities. This fact might have lowered the scores on the indexes. It is also important to note the fact that it was only possible to complete the survey in English. It would have been desirable to translate the survey into other languages to adequately fit the population, but the constrained resources of this thesis made this difficult. Furthermore, it was difficult to know who would

complete the survey and what language they preferred; thus, it was deemed adequate to stick with English.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Considering ethics in research is a crucial prerequisite for conducting research in the first place. Ensuring that the research is not merely interesting and needed but also does not harm those involved is fundamental to this end. In other words, all research thus needs to consider and discuss the potential harm that might cause the participants (Nardi, 2018). To ensure ethical participation, informed consent was given to the respondents. They were informed about the thesis, the themes covered in the questionnaire, the management of their data and their right to cancel the survey at any time. However, the respondents were not explicitly informed about the aim of the thesis. But since opinion leadership could be regarded as a form of political participation, as it incorporates political talk and is a consequence of political participation, the participants vulnerability was not exploited. The respondents were also informed that their participation mattered in terms of making an impact with EU citizen engagement projects. Further, the respondents were ensured that their privacy would be respected, and that confidentiality and anonymity would be guaranteed. It was not possible to link the data to the identity of the respondents. The respondents were asked to voluntarily submit their email address in case the survey data was too scarce and thus needed to be complemented with in-depth interviews. However, confidentiality and anonymity of data was ensured throughout the research process since all email addresses were separated from the data when entered into the statistical analysis computer software. Additionally, the respondents were provided with the contact details of the researcher in case they had any questions or concerns. They were further informed of that the data would be deleted after the thesis had been finalized.

Respecting respondents' privacy and ensuring the confidentiality of their data is always essential. In this thesis it was of special importance because of the political questions in the survey (Piccio & Mattoni, 2020). Politics is a sensitive issue, and sensitive issues require data to be strictly confidential. Revealing political affiliation, opinions, and activities of an individual might impact professional and pri-

vate relationships, this holds particularly true regarding controversial political affiliations, opinions, and activities. Furthermore, revealing information about the frequency and form of political participation that someone is engaged in might also have negative consequences. For instance, if it turns out that these actions conflict with the respondent's occupation. Yet, since confidentiality and privacy were respected, and the data was managed carefully and stored in a Swedish server fully respecting GDPR requirements, this risk was deemed to be low.

5. Analysis & Results

This chapter aims to present the statistical analysis and empirical results of the thesis. To carry out the analyses and answer the research questions, the statistical analysis software IBM SPSS Statistics was used. First follows a brief description of the data (see Table 1), and the construction of the indexes. Thereafter, the analysis procedures to test H1a, H1b, and H1c, are presented along with the results. Univariable linear regressions to test H2, H3a, H4a, and H5a is presented subsequently, followed by tests for mediation (H3b, H4b, H5b) and the results from these analyses. Thereafter, a multiple linear regression analysis to test the theoretical model as one entity is presented, along with the results. Finally, a multiple linear regression model using forward selection to include independent and background variables to predict EU opinion leadership was performed.

5.1 Data Description & Index Construction

In order to explore the data, descriptive statistics were summarized (Table 1). The total data set consisted of 220 cases. Age was not normally distributed, as there was an overrepresentation of younger respondents. Normality was assessed by visual inspection of histograms and normal probability plots. The respondents were aged from 18 – 78 and the median was 34. Multiple regression and other statistical analyses are sensitive to outliers (Pallant, 2010). Potential outliers were hence checked for using histograms, box plots, and by comparing the mean age (38.6) to the 5% trimmed mean age (37.8). One respondent appeared in the histogram at one of the tails, but the slope was even. The box plot revealed no outliers that were more than 1.5 box lengths from the box. Thus, it was decided that all cases should be kept. Further, there were 45.5% women in the sample (including two individuals originally labelled as "other") and 54.5% men. 88.6% of the respondents were highly educated (i.e., had at least a bachelor's degree). Concerning the last EP election, 85.5% of the respondents claimed to have voted. A clear majority of the respondents' general EU perception was positive (88.2%). Nega-

tive and neutral EU perceptions accounted for the rest of the respondents (with a clear majority reporting to have a neutral perception, 8.2% neutral and 3.2% negative). The respondents mainly reported to live in Sweden (25%), Belgium (10.5%), Germany (7.3%), UK (8.6%), France (9.5%), and Italy (6.4%). The most common important political issue among the respondents was Democracy/Human Rights (19.5%). Dummy variables were created for categorical variables to be able to use them in multiple linear regression analyses.

Summative indexes were created for each of the constructs included in the theoretical model respectively, i.e., *informational media use, political partisanship, political expression in social media, political participation* (independent variables), and *EU opinion leadership* (dependent variable). Reliability analyses were used to explore the internal consistency among the variables within each construct. Only the variables for informational media use reported a moderately weak Cronbach's alpha value (0.628). The "news apps" variable was removed from the construct to increase the Cronbach's alpha value to 0.642. See Method chapter for more details, and Cronbach's alpha values for the other constructs. The mean values for each index are summarized in Table 1. Normal distribution was tested for using histograms and normal probability plots. The indexes were explored for potential outliers using histograms and box plots. The mean values of the indexes were compared to their 5% trimmed mean values and no significant differences were found: informational media use (mean 30.2 versus 5% trimmed mean 30.5), political partisanship (7.1 versus 7.1), political expression in social media (16.1 versus 15.9), political participation (23.9 versus 23.3), and EU opinion leadership (23.4 versus 23.6). Therefore, all cases were kept.

Table 1. Background characteristics and indexes.

Variable	N(%)	Missing
Age median(range)	34(18–78)	15(6.8)
Gender		0(0.0)
Female	100(45.5)	
Male	120(54.5)	
High level of education	195(88.6)	0(0.0)
Voted in the last EP election	188(85.5)	1(0.5)
Positive perception of the EU	194(88.2)	1(0.5)
Country of living		2(0.9)
Sweden	55(25.0)	
Belgium	23(10.5)	
Germany	16(7.3)	
UK	19(8.6)	
France	21(9.5)	
Italy	14(6.4)	
Other	70(31.8)	
Most important political issue		4(1.8)
Democracy/Human Rights	43(19.5)	
Environment/Energy	34(15.5)	
Education	22(10.0)	
Foreign Policy/International Cooperation	26(11.8)	
Other	91(41.4)	
EU opinion leadership index mean(SD)	23.4(4.6)	7(3.2)
Informational media use index mean(SD)	30.3(6.7)	19(8.6)
Political expression in social media index mean(SD)	16.1(7.1)	3(1.4)
Political participation index mean(SD)	23.9(7.9)	9(4.1)
Political partisanship index mean(SD)	7.1(4.8)	0(0.0)

5.2 Testing H1a, H1b, & H1c

To test H1a, sex differences in mean EU opinion leadership scores were explored by performing an independent samples t-test (N=213). Before performing the test, assumptions were checked. The histograms for each of the groups were slightly negatively skewed but showcased a relatively normal distribution. In normal probability plots, the cases in each group followed a straight line, thus confirming the histograms' output. The means and medians were relatively similar between the groups (mean female=23.6, median female=24) (mean male=23.2, median male=23), which further confirmed the normal distribution of the sample. Equal

variances were assumed based on Levene's test (p-value>0.05). There was no statistically significant difference between females (mean 23.6, standard deviation (SD) 4.4) and males (mean 23.2, SD 4.8) regarding the EU opinion leadership score (t(211)=-0.668, p=0.505, Table 2). Next, to test H1b, a correlation analysis was performed for age and EU opinion leadership (N=198). As age was not normally distributed, Spearman's r was used. The correlation coefficient was -0.063 and was found to be statistically non-significant (p=0.375). Lastly, H1c was tested using an independent samples t-test (N=213). The EU opinion leadership score was found to be normally distributed in both respondents with a high level of education and with a low level of education, by assessing histograms and normal probability plots. Levene's test for equality of variances was not statistically significant (p>0.05). Respondents with a high level of education were found to have a higher EU opinion leadership score (mean 23.7, SD 4.5) than respondents with a low level of education (mean 21.5, SD 5.2, t(211)=2.25, p=0.026, Table 2).

Table 2. Results for H1a, H1b and H1c.

Variable	EU Opinion Leadership Index	P-value
Age Spearman's r	-0.063	0.375
Gender mean(SD)		0.505
Female	23.6(4.4)	
Male	23.2(4.8)	
Education mean(SD)		0.026*
High	23.7(4.5)	
Low	21.5(5.2)	

Note: *p<0.05 **p<0.001.

5.3 Univariable Linear Regressions

To test the relationships between the independent variables; *informational media use, political partisanship, political expression in social media, political participation,* and the dependent variable *EU opinion leadership* (H2, H3a, H4a, H5a)*, univariable linear regression was used. To test the assumptions for the linear regression models, scatterplots were checked to ascertain a linear relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Furthermore, residuals were tested for normal distribution using normal probability plots. Constant variance for the residuals was evaluated using scatterplots to ascertain homoscedasticity. The assumptions were met for each analysis. In the regression model testing H2, a positive correlation was observed between political participation and EU opinion leadership (Adjusted R^2=0.076, $p<0.001$) (B=0.160, standard error (SE) 0.039, standardized B=0.275, $p<0.001$). A positive correlation was also observed between informational media use and EU opinion leadership in testing H3a (Adjusted R^2=0.092, $p<0.001$) (B=0.215, SE 0.047, standardized B=0.312, $p<0.001$). When testing H4a, a positive correlation was found between political expression in social media and EU opinion leadership (Adjusted R^2=0.077, $p<0.001$) (B=0.185, SE 0.043, standardized B=0.285, $p<0.001$). A positive correlation was also found for political partisanship and EU opinion leadership when H5a was tested (Adjusted R^2=0.055, $p<0.001$) (B=0.237, SE 0.065, standardized B=0.245, $p<0.001$).

Table 3. Univariable linear regression results with EU opinion leadership as the dependent variable.

Hypothesis: independent variable	Adjusted R^2	B (SE)	Standardized B
H2: political participation	0.076**	0.160(0.039)**	0.275**
H3a: information media use	0.092**	0.215(0.047)**	0.312**
H4a: political expression in social media	0.077**	0.185(0.043)**	0.285**
H5a: political partisanship	0.055**	0.237(0.065)**	0.245**

Note: *$p<0.05$ **$p<0.001$.

5.4 Test for Mediation

To test for mediation (H3b, H4b, H5b), univariable and multiple linear regression were used. First, univariable linear regression was used to test the relationship between the independent variable and the mediator, and between the mediator and the dependent variable. Second, multiple linear regression was used to evaluate the relationship between the independent and dependent variable while controlling for the mediator. In employing this latter strategy, the relationship should be weakened (compared to when the mediator is not controlled for) if the hypothesized mediator is in fact a mediator (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020). For all analyses, assumptions were evaluated as previously described (see above). Assumptions were met.

In testing the mediating effect of political participation (H3b), the relationship between informational media use as the independent variable and political participation as the dependent variable was evaluated (Adjusted R^2=0.083, p<0.001) (B=0.351, SE 0.082, standardized B=0.296, p<0.001). The relationship between political participation and EU opinion leadership has been reported already above (Table 3). In the following multiple linear regression, the relationship between informational media use and EU opinion leadership was tested while controlling for political participation (Adjusted R^2=0.125, p<0.001) (B for informational media use=0.174, SE 0.049, standardized B=0.252, p<0.001).

Table 4. Additional univariable linear regression analyses to assess mediation.

Hypotheses: Independent, dependent variable	Adjusted R^2	B (SE)	Standardized B
H3b: informational media use, political participation	0.083**	0.351(0.082)**	0.296**
H4b: informational media use, political expression in social media	0.100**	0.342(0.071)**	0.323**
H4b: political expression in social media, political participation	0.412**	0.721(0.060)**	0.644**
H5b: political partisanship, political expression in social media	0.116**	0.517(0.095)**	0.347**

Note: *p<0.05 **p<0.001.

To test H4b, a univariable regression analysis with informational media use as the independent variable and political expression in social media as the dependent variable was performed (Adjusted R^2=0.100, p<0.001) (B=0.342, SE 0.071, standardized B=0.323, p<0.001). Thereafter, a univariable regression analysis was used to test the relationship between political expression in social media (independent variable) and political participation (dependent variable) (Adjusted R^2=0.412, p<0.001) (B=0.721, SE 0.060, standardized B=0.644, p<0.001). A following multiple linear regression analysis with informational media use, political expression in social media, and political participation as independent variables and EU opinion leadership as dependent variable was performed (Adjusted R^2=0.130, p<0.001) (B for informational media use=0.161, SE 0.049, standardized B=0.233, p=0.001).

To test the mediating effect of political expression in social media and political participation on the relationship between political partisanship and EU opinion leadership (H5b), a univariable linear regression was first performed between political partisanship and political expression in social media (Adjusted R^2=0.116, p<0.001) (B=0.517, SE 0.095, standardized B=0.347, p<0.001). A following multiple linear regression including political partisanship, political expression in social media, and political participation as independent variables, and EU opinion leadership as dependent variable was performed (Adjusted R^2=0.102, p<0.001) (B for political partisanship=0.146, SE 0.069, standardized B=0.151, p=0.036).

Table 5. Multiple linear regression analyses to assess mediation.

Hypotheses: Independent, dependent variable (controlled for)	Adjusted R^2	B (SE)	Standardized B
H3b: informational media use, EU opinion leadership (political participation)	0.125**	0.174 (0.049)**	0.252**
H4b: informational media use, EU opinion leadership (political expression in social media, political participation)	0.130**	0.161(0.049)*	0.233*
H5b: political partisanship, EU opinion leadership (political expression in social media, political participation)	0.102**	0.146(0.069)*	0.151*

Note: *p<0.05 **p<0.001.

5.5 Multiple Linear Regressions

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed with EU opinion leadership as the dependent variable and the informational media use, political participation, political expression in social media, and political partisanship indexes as independent variables. The model showed no signs of multicollinearity as correlation coefficients between the variables were all below 0.7. Tolerances were above 0.1 and the variance inflation factors (VIF) were well below 10, indicating absence of multicollinearity. The residuals were normally distributed when assessed in a normal probability plot and homoscedasticity was observed in a scatterplot. The model had an adjusted R^2 of 0.139 (p<0.001). Informational media use was statistically significantly associated with EU opinion leadership (B=0.150, SE 0.049, standardized B 0.218, p=0.003), but political participation (p=0.247), political expression in social media (p=0.243), and political partisanship (p=0.09) were not (Table 6).

Table 6. Multiple linear regression model with the proposed theoretical model for EU opinion leadership prediction.

Variable	Adjusted R^2	B (SE)	Standardized B
Political participation	0.139**	0.060(0.051)	0.103
Information media use	0.139**	0.150(0.049)*	0.218*
Political expression in social media	0.139**	0.069(0.059)	0.105
Political partisanship	0.139**	0.120(0.070)	0.123

Note: *p<0.05 **p<0.001.

Next, a multiple regression model with EU opinion leadership as the dependent variable was constructed using the variables informational media use, political participation, political expression in social media, and political partisanship as independent variables together with several control variables: age, and dummy variables of gender, high level of education, Sweden, France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, UK, positive general perception of the EU, voted in the last EP election, education (most important political issue), environment/energy (most important political issue), democracy/human rights (most important political issue), or foreign policy/international cooperation (most important political issue). No multicollinearity was observed since correlation coefficients between the variables were all

below 0.7. Tolerances were estimated to be above 0.1 and the VIF were well below 10, confirming the absence of multicollinearity (Pallant, 2010). The assumption of normally distributed residuals was assessed using a normal probability plot which showed linearity. A residuals scatterplot showed homoscedasticity and no outliers that would conflict the assumptions. Hence, assumptions for the regression analysis were met. The model was constructed using forward selection (Nardi, 2018; Pallant, 2010) with p≤0.05 as the criterion for variables to be included in the model. In the final model, four variables remained: informational media use, political expression in social media, age, and voted in the last EP election. The model revealed an adjusted R^2=0.217 (p<0.001). The strongest predictor of EU opinion leadership in the model was "voted in the last EP election" (B=3.248, SE 0.895, standardized B=0.246, p<0.001). See Table 7 for a summary of the model.

Table 7. Multiple linear regression model for EU opinion leadership prediction.

Variable	Adjusted R^2	B (SE)	Standardized B
Informational media use	0.217**	0.138(0.049)*	0.200*
Political expression in social media	0.217**	0.151(0.045)*	0.232*
Age	0.217**	-0.065(0.020)*	-0.215*
Voted in the last EP election	0.217**	3.248(0.895)**	0.246**

Note: *p<0.05 **p<0.001.

6. Discussion

In light of the public apathy towards the EU and the failures of EU public communication to engage citizens in EU affairs to create a European public sphere, this thesis aimed to detect EU opinion leaders among EU interested social media users and to understand if informational media use and political factors could predict EU opinion leadership. To answer these questions, a survey (Appendix 1) was distributed across a set of EU related groups on Facebook and LinkedIn (Appendix 2). The results suggested that neither gender nor age were associated with EU opinion leadership among EU interested social media users, but that high level of education was. The results further suggested that informational media use and political factors individually (political participation, political expression in social media, political partisanship) can predict EU opinion leadership, although the effects were moderate. However, informational media use and political expression in social media, in combination with age and voted in the last EP election, constituted the strongest predictive model accounting for 21.7% of the variance in EU opinion leadership. Voted in the last EP election was the strongest (highest standardized B) contributor in the model. Although all hypotheses regarding media use and political factors were supported in the analysis, the results could not fully support the theoretical model developed in the thesis as one entity as it did not hold in the multiple linear regression model. In total, it was interesting that statistically significant differences were found in the data, although the sample size was small, and the respondents were a very specific group of social media users interested in EU affairs.

Age not being a predictor of opinion leadership alone contradicts older general opinion leadership research (Weimann, 1994) and recent accounts on EU related online political participation (Marquart et al., 2020; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). EU opinion leaders are neither younger nor older. However, age appeared to matter in combination with informational media use, political expression in social media,

and vote in the last EP election. This could imply a suppressor effect (Nardi, 2018) on age from informational media use, political expression in social media, or vote in the last EP election. It could also be biased by unmeasured variables. Nevertheless, what variable that suppresses age is difficult to determine with the data in this thesis as it was not a longitudinal study, which is efficient in measuring cause and effect (Nardi, 2018). Contradictory to what was expected, gender did not matter in terms of EU opinion leadership, which opposes claims by Weimann (1994) and Shah and Scheufele (2006) but supports research on political participation (e.g., Burns et al., 2018). Furthermore, the relationship between high level of education and EU opinion leadership was statistically significant, suggesting EU opinion leaders to have a high level of education. This result supported the hypothesis in this thesis and previous research on political EU opinion leadership (Weimann, 1994). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the sample mostly consisted of highly educated individuals, hence the group of less educated individuals was very small. It could thus depend on chance that the less educated group scored lower on the EU opinion leadership index. However, it is convincing that this result is true regarding previous theory on who opinion leaders (Weimann, 1994) and EU interested individuals are (Kandyla & Gherghina, 2018; Seoane Pérez, 2013; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012).

In line with the proposed theoretical model employed in the thesis, political participation (online and offline) was positively and statistically significantly associated to EU opinion leadership. This supports claims of e.g., Weimann (1994), Robinson (1976), Kavanaugh et al. (2006), and Weeks et al. (2017) that opinion leaders are more engaged politically than those who are not considered as opinion leaders. However, the correlation between political participation and EU opinion leadership was weak and the effect of political participation on EU opinion leadership was low. The weak correlation could reflect a true weak correlation among EU interested citizens, but it could also be due to chance as the sample size was small. Furthermore, political participation appeared to mediate the relationship between informational media use and EU opinion leadership, between political partisanship and EU opinion leadership, and between political expression in social media and EU opinion leadership. Mediation can be observed in the results by inspecting the statistically significant associations between the individual variables

(e.g., between informational media use and political participation, and between political participation and EU opinion leadership) and by the lowered B value for the antecedent variable when controlling for the mediating variable(s) (e.g., the B value for informational media use lowered when controlling for political participation). The results suggest that political participation and political expression in social media are part of the mechanism behind the positive association between EU opinion leadership and informational media use. These findings support Hb3 and H4b, as well as claims in previous research that news consumption leads to political engagement which in turn leads to engagement in political talk (Boulianne, 2011) and that political expression in social media have a mediating effect on the relationship between informational media use online and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). This latter finding expands research on political opinion leadership by implying that political expression in social media seems to matter for political opinion leadership, particularly related to EU affairs. Further, informational media use in general (as have been measured in this thesis) had effects on not only political participation, but also on political expression in social media. Thus, it is not only social media use for news which is positively associated to political expression in social media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014), but also informational media use in general.

Out of all independent variables in the theoretical model, informational media use showcased the highest predictive value (although considered low in general terms) for EU opinion leadership when not controlling for other variables. This conclusion can be drawn based on inspecting the standardized B values from the univariable linear regressions, where the highest value implies the strongest effect on EU opinion leadership. Informational media use also was statistically significantly associated to EU opinion leadership in both multiple linear regression models, implying that it was one of the strongest predictors of all variables tested. However, in combination with political expression in social media, age, and EP vote, the effect of informational media use was reduced compared to in the first univariable regression model, but nevertheless contributed to predicting EU opinion leadership together with the mentioned variables. The positive association between informational media use and EU opinion leadership supports the hypothesized relationship and is in line with previous accounts (Robinson, 1976; Schäfer & Tad-

dicken, 2015; Weeks et al., 2017; Weimann, 1994), and supports the claim that informational media use continuous to be a predictor of opinion leadership in the digital era (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015; Weeks et al., 2017) and implies that it is also matters to EU opinion leadership. As already mentioned, the relationship between informational media use and EU opinion leadership seems to be mediated by political participation and political expression in social media in the study population of this thesis, which supports and expands previous knowledge on media use and opinion leadership (Weeks et al., 2017; Weimann, 1994) and on media use and political participation online (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Weeks et al. (2017) found that "the more people engage the various tools of social media in specific ways (i.e., news consumption and dissemination, political expression, etc.), the more they come to see themselves as influential" (p. 232). The results further clarify the relationship between these variables. As hypothesized, political expression in social media seemed to predict EU opinion leadership, which supports claims on opinion leadership and online influence in previous research (e.g., Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Weeks et al., 2017). Political expression in social media had a direct and indirect (through political participation) positive effect on EU opinion leadership. The predictive value of political expression in social media was modest in the first models but increased slightly in the final multiple regression model. Together with informational media use, age, and EP vote it contributed to the strongest predictive model of EU opinion leadership.

This thesis also found that political partisanship alone is positively and significantly associated to EU opinion leadership, which supports findings on EU discussion among EU citizens (Kritzinger et al., 2021). It further supports research on partisanship and online influence (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017; Weeks & Holbert, 2013) and older research on political opinion leadership (Robinson, 1976). The predictive effect of political partisanship on EU opinion leadership was however low. The relationship between political partisanship and EU opinion leadership was further found to be mediated by political expression in social media, as well as by political participation. The latter supports claims of Kim (2016) that partisanship predict political expression and sharing in social media, whilst the former expands findings of An et al. (2014) that partisan sharing in social media is associated to politically engaged individuals.

6.1 Implications & Recommendations

Against the background of the EU's democratic deficit and lack of efficient public communication for citizen engagement, a strategic communication approach is clearly needed. The literature review has made it clear that less interested citizens can be mobilized by already engaged and more interested citizens, particularly in the online sphere (Weeks et al., 2017). For the EU to make use of the social capital and participatory culture already existing in online (and offline) spheres to spur citizen engagement among the electorate, tailoring their public communication towards EU opinion leaders might increase the efficiency and impact of their messages. The results in this thesis could thus support the development of strategic EU public communication to engage citizens in EU affairs. For instance, based on the results it could be advantageous to strategically plan and tailor the online public communication towards highly educated individuals who vote in the EP elections, express themselves politically online, and consume informational media to a large extent. Moreover, it could be beneficial to target those who, to a great extent, participate politically both online and offline and are politically partisan. EU public communicators interested in enhancing EU citizen engagement could detect these individuals in their social media channels to build further public trust. According to the two-step flow of communication (Christen, 2013), these EU opinion leaders would then disseminate information to others so that those who are not equally engaged or interested might be positively influenced and engage in EU issues to a larger extent, whether it is by voting in the next EP election or talking to others about the EU. Ideally, this would contribute to the emergence of a European public sphere which would have the capacity to, in the longer perspective, legitimize the EU and remedy the claimed democratic deficit. Obviously, this would not be the sole solution to the EU's democratic deficit, but it could be one step in the right direction. Considering the many failures of EU public communication to engage citizens in EU affairs and to reach the EU's objectives of public trust and legitimacy (Brüggemann, 2010; Lodge & Sarikakis, 2013; Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019), strategic communication approaches based on EU opinion leadership is very much needed.

Future research should further explore EU opinion leadership in the online sphere to increase the possibilities of EU public communication to improve and enhance citizen engagement. The theoretical model developed and employed in this thesis could be used in larger population samples with a more robust sampling strategy and study design. For instance, experimental and panel studies would have more robust data to determine cause and effect between the variables. The final multiple linear regression model could also be tested, as it seems to be a stronger predictive model for EU opinion leadership than the tested theoretical model proposed in the thesis. This would contribute to more trustworthy and generalizable results which could be used and elaborated on both in practice and theory and reveal more about the relationships between the variables. Whilst this thesis has identified positive and statistically significant relationships in the theoretical model, the results are not generalizable and thus limited in their usage. Future research should also investigate the relationship between age and EU opinion leadership, to clarify their association.

Future research should also use other methods to study EU opinion leadership to increase the reliability of the results as self-reports of opinion leadership might be biased (see biases discussion above in the Methods section). Specifically, self-reports of opinion leadership are not considered to be as precise as reports by others (Weimann et al., 2007). Further, survey methods for both of the approaches are now "replaced by the automated analysis of public digital communication trace data with key figures and algorithms" (Jungnickel, 2018, p. 2907). Thus, modern approaches to opinion leadership should elaborate on EU opinion leadership theory to generate more reliable results. Moreover, whilst the relationship between informational media use and opinion leadership, as well as political participation and opinion leadership, were largely explored already before this thesis, the other relationships in the theoretical model had to a much lesser degree been studied in relation to opinion leadership. As the results suggested positive associations between political partisanship and opinion leadership, and between political expression in social media and opinion leadership, future research should investigate these relationships further – both for political opinion leadership in general and for opinion leadership in EU affairs. After establishing a reliable profile of EU opinion leaders (if possible), future research should also study who these opinion

leaders talk to and what they talk about in what tonality, as this has consequences for the European public sphere formation, EU citizen engagement, and the existence of the EU in general. It would also be interesting to study how EU opinion leaders contribute to mobilizing others who are less interested and engaged in EU issues. Future research should also use better statistical analysis techniques, such as structural equation modelling (SEM), to test the mediating relationships explored in this thesis. This would generate more robust results as it is efficient in terms of determining cause and effect and as it allows for an evaluation of the importance of each variable (Pallant, 2010).

6.2 Limitations

This thesis has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the sample size was small (N=220) and very niched to a specific group of Facebook and LinkedIn users which might have biased the results (see discussion above). In combination with the fact that the thesis' design was cross-sectional, the generalizability of the results is largely restricted. Further, as the sample was small, differences between groups were more difficult to detect, especially small differences (Pallant, 2010), which could explain the non-significant findings. However, the results still capture patterns and relationships that might be relevant in a larger population of EU interested social media users, but which needs to be explored further in larger longitudinal studies. Moreover, there was an overrepresentation of younger people in the sample and most respondents were Swedish (25%). Another limitation is that of the informational media use construct employed. Besides having a moderately low Cronbach's alpha score, it did not account for different forms of TV, radio, and/or social media use. An improved construct would have accounted for e.g., different forms of social media, which might have increased the construct reliability. Furthermore, the EU opinion leadership scale did not account for who the respondent talked to about the EU/any EU related issue, which topic was talked about, and in what way it was talked about. It also needs to be made clear that EU opinion leadership was not measured in the best way possible due to the constrained timeframe and resources of the thesis, whilst self-reports are easy to use, they are not as reliable as other measurements (see discussion above). Furthermore, the survey did not ask about EU citizenship. Since this

thesis was interested in enhancing EU citizen engagement by improved EU public communication through targeting EU opinion leaders, it would have been better to check for EU citizenship.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has explored opinion leadership in EU affairs among EU interested social media users, against the background of the EU's claimed democratic deficit and the failures of EU public communication to effectively engage citizens in EU matters. The overarching aim was to contribute with knowledge on the role of EU interested social media users in the formation of a European public sphere. Further, the thesis aimed to develop opinion leadership theory, and to provide EU public communicators with guidelines regarding strategic communication to enhance citizen engagement.

The thesis explored characteristics of opinion leaders in EU affairs and tested a theoretical model with quantitative data to predict EU opinion leadership in a population of EU interested individuals in EU related Facebook and LinkedIn groups. The result in this thesis largely supports previous research and theory on political opinion leadership and related fields. Specifically, the independent variables in the proposed theoretical model; political participation (online and offline), informational media use, political expression in social media, and political partisanship, could predict EU opinion leadership individually. A set of mediating relationships between the variables were also found. In short, political expression in social media and political participation seemed to mediate the relationship between informational media use and EU opinion leadership, as well as the relationship between political partisanship and EU opinion leadership. However, the results on who EU opinion leaders are partially contradicted opinion leadership theory. Whilst higher education was positively associated to EU opinion leadership, age and gender were not. What is more, the results showcased that the opinion leadership predictors studied seem to be relevant in an EU context, although the contribution of all variables did not remain significant when the proposed theoretical model was tested in a multiple linear regression as one entity. Further, the combination of informational media use, political expression in social media, age,

and vote in the last EP election was the strongest predictive model of EU opinion leadership. The results also showcase that political partisanship and political expression in social media as individual predictors, which are less common in opinion leadership research, has a positive and statistically significant association to EU opinion leadership.

The data primarily contributes to a clearer understanding of EU opinion leadership in the online sphere. Specifically, it has illustrated how informational media use, political participation, political expression in social media, and political partisanship can predict EU opinion leadership. This thesis was exploratory as it was the first study to cover EU opinion leadership, and it did so in a small sample of EU interested social media users. It is vital to further expand the knowledge on EU opinion leadership to facilitate the creation of public trust for and citizen engagement in the EU, and to enhance the formation of a European public sphere through efficient strategic public communication.

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Appendix 1

LUND UNIVERSITY

Dear participant,

This survey asks about your European Union interest, media use habits and political participation habits. Knowing this is important for making an impact with EU citizen engagement initiatives, hence your participation is very valuable. It takes approximately 5 minutes to complete the survey.

Participation is voluntary, and you are free to cancel at any time. All information you submit is anonymous and confidential, and no conclusions can be drawn about your identity. The data will be stored securely at a Swedish server until the end of this summer, thereafter it will be deleted. Your privacy will be respected and not given to any third parties.

This survey is part of my master's thesis project conducted at the department of Strategic Communication at Lund University in Sweden. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me on my email address am8255ob-s@student.lu.se.

Thank you for your participation and support!

Yours,

Amanda Öberg

Media use habits

This section of the survey asks about your media use habits for surveilling politics. Please choose the answers that best correspond to your media use habits in this regard.

1. During the past 12 months, how often have you used the following media for surveilling politics?

	Several times a week	About once every week	About once every month	About once every 6 months	About once every 12 months	Never
Newspapers	○	○	○	○	○	○
Magazines	○	○	○	○	○	○
TV	○	○	○	○	○	○
Radio	○	○	○	○	○	○
Online news sites	○	○	○	○	○	○
Social media	○	○	○	○	○	○
Blogs	○	○	○	○	○	○
News apps	○	○	○	○	○	○

2. In general, do you talk to other people about the EU or any EU-related issue...

Never   Very often

○   ○   ○   ○   ○

3. When you talk to other people about the EU or any EU-related issue, do you...

Give very little information   Give a great deal of information

○   ○   ○   ○   ○

4. During the past six months, how many people have you told about the EU or any EU-related issue?

Told no one   Told many

○   ○   ○   ○   ○

5. Compared with your circle of friends, how likely are you to be asked about the EU or any EU-related issue?

Not at all likely to be asked   Very likely to be asked

○   ○   ○   ○   ○

6. In a discussion of the EU, or any EU-related issue, which of the following happen most often?

Other people tell you about the EU or any EU-related issue				You tell other people about the EU or any EU-related issue
○	○	○	○	○

7. Overall in all of your discussions with other people are you...

Not used as a source of advice				Often used as a source of advice
○	○	○	○	○

Political expression habits in social media

Here, you are asked about your habits of political expression in social media. Please choose the answers that best correspond to how frequently you engage in the mentioned activities.

8. During the past 12 months, how often have you took part in the following activities in social media?

	Never	About once every 12 months	About once every 6 months	About once every month	About once every week	Several times a week
Posting personal experiences related to politics	○	○	○	○	○	○
Friending, liking, or following a politician or political advocate	○	○	○	○	○	○
Posting or sharing thoughts about current events or politics	○	○	○	○	○	○
Posting or sharing photos, videos, memes, or gifs that relate to current events or politics	○	○	○	○	○	○
Forwarding someone else's political commentary to other people	○	○	○	○	○	○

Political participation habits

The following questions pertains to your offline and online political participation habits. Please choose the answers that best correspond to your habits of participating politically.

9. During the past 12 months, how often have you...

	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Contacted an elected public official	○	○	○	○
Attended a political rally	○	○	○	○
Participated in any demonstrations, protests, or marches	○	○	○	○
Donated money to a campaign or political cause	○	○	○	○
Participated in groups that took any action for social or political reform	○	○	○	○
Been involved in public interest groups, political action groups, political clubs, political campaigns, or political party committees	○	○	○	○

10. During the past 12 months, how often have you...

	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Signed or shared an online petition	○	○	○	○
Participated in online political polls	○	○	○	○
Participated in an online question and answer session with a politician or public official	○	○	○	○
Created an online petition	○	○	○	○
Signed up online to volunteer to help with a political cause	○	○	○	○
Wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper	○	○	○	○
Used a mobile phone to donate money to a campaign or political cause via text message or app	○	○	○	○

11. Would you say that you feel close to one particular political party?

○ Yes
○ No
○ Not sure

12. If "yes" or "not sure", please read each of the following claims and state to what extent you agree or disagree. If "no", continue to the next question (no. 13). "This party" refers to the party that you thought of in the previous question.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
When people criticize this party, it feels like a personal insult	○	○	○	○
When I meet someone who supports this party, I feel connected to this person	○	○	○	○
When I speak about this party, I refer to them as "my party"	○	○	○	○
When people praise this party, it makes me feel good	○	○	○	○

13. In the last parliamentary election in your country, what did you vote?

○ Radical right
○ Christian-democratic
○ Conservative
○ Liberal
○ Socialist/Social Democratic
○ Green
○ Radical left
○ I did not vote

14. In the last election to the European Parliament, what did you vote?

○ Radical right
○ Christian-democratic
○ Conservative
○ Liberal
○ Socialist/Social Democratic
○ Green
○ Radical left
○ I did not vote

15. Please specify which year you were born in (4 digits)

[   ]

16. What is your gender?

○ Male

○ Female

○ Other

17. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

○ Elementary school

○ High school

○ Bachelor's degree

○ Master's degree

○ Doctor's degree

18. In which country do you live?

[   ]

19. What is your most important political issue?

[⌄]

20. What is your general perception of the European Union?

○ Very positive

○ Positive

○ Neutral

○ Negative

○ Very negative

21. Where did you hear about this survey? (specify the name of the Facebook/LinkedIn group)

[   ]

22. There might be a need to complement this survey data with in-depth interviews. If you accept to be contacted later on for an interview, please write your email address below. Your information remains confidential. If you do not accept to be contacted later on for an interview, leave the space empty and press submit below to end the survey.

[   ]

Appendix 2

Facebook	- Together.eu - Tillsammans i Europa - European Union - European federalists - ESC - European Solidarity Corps - EVS - European Voluntary Service - Youth Exchanges for European - Nätverk för framtida EU-karriär - EuroPeers, EuSN and ESC volunteers - ECU - European Citizens Union #EUsolidarity Now - HORIZON EUROPE Framework Programme for Research and Innovation - Brussels Interns - Europapolitik - Stand Up for Europe – Group - Federalist Connection - European Solidarity Corps Official - European Federation - What Europe does for me! - Erasmus+ Partnerships Platform - Europeans - ReSolve Europe - Community of ReSolvers - Pour une Europe fédérale - European Solidarity Corps-VACANCIES #LetEUCitizensVote - Europe Dialogue - Eurofacebook - Friends of the European Commission - European Politics - Démocratie européenne #ensemble.eu – Strasbourg - Ensemble.eu - Équipe locale France - EUROPA Today group - MeetEU
LinkedIn	- EurActiv JobSite - EU affairs networking - Friends of the European Union - European Union 2.0 - EU Affairs Jobs - EU Projects Partner Search - EU Sustainability Public Affairs (Brussels)