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United Feelings: The Mediating Role of Emotions in Social Media Campaigns for EU Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions

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The mediating role of emotional reactions and their relevance for political attitudes and behavioral intentions has remained an understudied subject, and the extant literature has mostly overlooked the importance of political campaigning on social media in the context of the European Union (EU). Using an experimental design, we test whether political parties' (1) positive or negative EU-related (2) emotional or non-emotional political messages influence citizens' emotions toward the EU, whether these emotions affect politically relevant outcomes, and whether the effects differ for citizens with varying political ideologies. We find that positive emotions in particular affect almost all outcome variables above and beyond experimental condition and individuals' political orientation. We discuss our results in light of political marketing research and recent developments in the EU.

KEYWORDS   European Union; emotions; experiment; political campaigns; social media

Parties and candidates increasingly take advantage of representations on social media to directly address their electorate and bypass mainstream media (e.g., Bor 2014), and both Facebook and Twitter have become essential tools

in modern campaign strategies across the world (Caton, Hall, and Weinhardt 2015; Kalsnes 2016; Lilleker et al. 2017). Insights from recent events such as the 2016 US presidential election demonstrate how social media can be successfully implemented as part of a larger political marketing strategy (e.g., Jensen and Bang 2017; Kreiss et al. 2018; Williams 2017). Campaigners report that the dissemination of information is one of the main motives for posting messages on social media (Bor 2014; Klinger and Russmann 2017), and party representations on social media work as "shop fronts" (Lilleker 2015) that allow candidates and parties to advertise their issue position and campaign for votes. Consequently, party communication on social media offers insights into larger campaign efforts (Williams 2017) and helps researchers in contextualizing and understanding political marketing strategies.

At the same time, only few studies have looked into the distinct effects of exposure to parties' Facebook presence on citizens' attitudes and behaviors. We address this increasingly relevant area of research by investigating readers' emotional reactions to parties' social media posts. Emotions have received wide scholarly attention in studies on political communication, sparking an "explosion of interest in emotion over the past 20-plus years" (Brader and Marcus 2013, 165). Literature on the processing of political information acknowledges that emotions are an important outcome of exposure to such information and a relevant determinant for subsequent outcomes (Miller 2011), yet research on the role of emotions in the context of political marketing on social media remains scarce. Using an experimental design, we test whether an emotional post about the European Union (EU) on Facebook elicits emotional responses in viewers and whether these emotions affect relevant outcomes. Since EU public opinion is fairly complex in nature and also encompasses citizens' *feelings* toward various aspects of the EU (Boomgaarden et al. 2011), parties can try to cater to voters' feelings by stressing emotions in their political messages. We further test the effects for individuals with different political orientations to assess how emotions interact with voters' ideological self-placement on the left-right political scale.

Our study provides important insights into how political parties can effectively use emotional appeals in their political messages on social media and adds to the growing body of research concerned with political campaigning online. Furthermore, it deepens our understanding of political marketing in the context of the EU and investigates the impact of political messages on important democratic outcomes for citizens with different political ideologies. We show how emotional reactions are conditional upon respondents' own political orientation and the post's position and find that politically moderate citizens seem to be the most susceptible to parties' emotional posts. Along these lines, we argue that politicians who do not wish to laden their messages with emotions may want, to the very least, to ensure that they do not reduce positive emotions in potential voters. Our findings

corroborate the assumption that emotions matter for political marketing – on the side of both the political actor and potential voters – and highlight the complexity with which emotions and EU messages are intertwined.

POLITICAL MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Political actors have increasingly turned to Facebook and Twitter to communicate with their electorate (e.g., Larsson 2016), and social media have been integrated as part of larger political marketing strategies to promote political brands, be that parties or candidates (Lilleker 2015; Rutter, Hanretty, and Lettice 2018). Differences between political campaign efforts and commercial marketing strategies gradually become smaller, as "political marketing employs many of the principles applied by the manufacturers of goods and services as they strive for commercial success" (McNair 2018, 7). These include the analysis of the (political) market, research into the electorate's attitudes and desires, and adaptations to the competitive environment of elections and vote shares (Giasson, Lees-Marshment, and Marland 2012; McNair 2018). While advertising is an important element of political marketing strategies (Giasson et al. 2012), it is not the sole way in which political actors can communicate with the electorate. Party communication on social media is key to achieving marketing goals, especially since such platforms provide a free platform and allow parties to circumvent journalistic intervention in the traditional mass media (Bor 2014). Yet only little empirical evidence is available on the effectiveness of political messages online for the goals of marketing strategies, that is, to "shape and alter political cognition and behavior and produce desired responses in citizens and governments" (Beckman 2018, 24). Therefore, it is important to study the effects of parties' social media posts on citizens' attitudes and behavioral intentions, and we focus our work on Facebook as a specific social media platform.

Emotional Political Marketing on Facebook

Political campaign managers rely on social networks to disseminate information about parties, candidates, and political issues (Bor 2014), and web tools are considered "electronic brochures" (Hoffmann and Suphan 2017) or "shop fronts" (Lilleker 2015) that primarily provide information to the audience (Klinger and Russmann 2017; Magin et al. 2017). Importantly, campaign strategies and digital architectures differ between platforms (Bossetta 2018; Kreiss et al. 2018), which makes it necessary to study the content and effects of political messages by individually addressing specific platforms. Facebook is perceived as a hybrid campaign tool that can be

used to target the general electorate, partisan supporters, specific target groups, and individual voters alike (Magin et al. 2017). The platform's coverage and low communication barriers make Facebook a central tool for reaching out to the 'ordinary' citizen (Caton et al. 2015; Gerodimos and Justinussen 2015). Notably, parties use Facebook primarily as an information channel and do not make much use of the platform's interactive features to engage with the audience (Hoffmann and Suphan 2017; Klinger and Russmann 2017; Stier et al. 2018). Campaigners put an emphasis on emotional messages and visuals, targeting voters of all levels of political involvement (Magin et al. 2017). While simply liking and/or following candidates does not seem to increase voters' efficacy or participation (Pennington, Winfrey, Warner, and Kearney 2015), content features such as negativity or the employment of high-arousal emotions increase the likelihood that a Facebook post becomes viral (Bene 2017). In the 2012 US elections, both Romney and Obama used emotional messages in approximately 50% of their Facebook posts (Bronstein 2013), and Obama's campaigns were largely built on hopeful and enthusiastic emotional appeals (Gerodimos and Justinussen 2015; see also Jensen and Bang 2017; Caton et al. 2015).

Emotional appeals are frequently employed in political campaigns in general (Brader 2005; Lipsitz 2017; Ridout and Searles 2011), and particularly complex or "dry" political issues may be especially prone to emotional influence, as emotions facilitate processing when people are not motivated or able to comprehend an issue (Kühne et al. 2011). In a series of studies, Brader (2005, 2006) investigated whether emotions embedded in political ads (e.g., emotive imagery and music) affect campaign interest, vote intention, and candidate choice (see also Lipsitz 2017). Yet previous research largely focuses on the stimulating effects of *negative* affect, such as the potential of anger to fuel political participation (Valentino et al. 2011; Weber 2013), or the inhibiting effect of anxiety for behavioral outcomes (Groenendyk and Banks 2014). However, the activating *positive* affect of enthusiasm (as opposed to mere contentment) drives participation (e.g., Marcus and MacKuen 1993), and the mediating role of emotional reactions to campaign messages remains understudied in the political campaign literature.

Evidence on the effectiveness of emotional content on social media shows that political actors are well advised to include them in their campaigns (Ryan 2012). Not only do emotional posts receive stronger responses (Gerodimos and Justinussen 2015), users are also more likely to post emotionally consistent status updates after seeing a respective post by a friend (Kramer 2012; see also Dang-Xuan et al. 2013). It is therefore worthwhile to investigate the influence of political content on Facebook on individuals' attitudes and behavioral intentions through heightened emotions.

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Research has established that recipients' emotions may play a crucial role in political information processing and decision-making (e.g., Brader and Marcus 2013; Groenendyk 2011). Contesting the allegedly superior role of cognitions over affect, scholars now acknowledge that the two concepts are perhaps equally important for political judgments. Not only do emotions play an important role in everyday politics, individuals also react emotionally to political messages, and depending on the respective emotions activated by political stimuli, peoples' attitudes and behavior toward political entities vary. Since its establishment by Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000), affective intelligence theory (AIT) has become one of the most commonly employed frameworks for the study of emotions in political psychology (Brader and Marcus 2013). AIT posits that, depending on the political geography and context, people will react with different emotions to their surroundings. In turn, emotional reactions lead them to rely on habituated choices or to deliberate on their actions (MacKuen et al. 2007). Emotions may vary in their valence (positive vs. negative) as well as in the level of arousal resulting from them (approach vs. avoidance; e.g., Brader and Marcus 2013; Weber 2013). Based on this conceptualization, AIT is mostly concerned with enthusiasm, anger, and anxiety (e.g., Huddy, Feldman, and Cassese 2007; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2015). While anxiety increases the likelihood for citizens to engage in withdrawal rather than confrontational behavior (e.g., Huddy and Feldman 2011), anger promotes action. Weber (2013) illustrates the activating power of anger for political participation in the context of political campaigning (see also Groenendyk and Banks 2014; Huddy et al. 2005; Valentino et al. 2011). Garry (2014) investigated how emotions affected political decision-making in the 2012 EU Fiscal Compact referendum in Ireland. Negative emotions also mediate the influence of entertainment formats on the intention to participate in political campaigns (Lee and Kwak 2014). AIT asserts that fearful individuals are more likely to seek out additional and balanced information about a threat-inducing object, while anger leads to a rather biased information intake or a stronger reliance on habituated choices (e.g., Parker and Isbell 2010; Valentino et al. 2008; but see Ryan 2012). The latter also holds for enthusiasm: When prompted by, for example, a political ad on TV, enthusiasm leads people to rely on their partisan conviction. Overall, however, less scholarly work has been concerned with the influence of *positive* emotions on politically relevant outcomes (Lecheler et al. 2015).

Research in the context of the EU has shown that journalistic content affects respondents' reactions depending on the type of frame employed in a news article: Lecheler and colleagues (2013) showed how a positive frame amplified EU investment support by increasing

respondents' enthusiasm. Positive affect also improves social interactions in the field of consumer research (Isen 2001) and increases continued participation in social movements (Jasper 2011). Wojcieszak et al. (2016) found positive emotions to decrease after exposure to counter-attitudinal content and to predict participatory intentions while Namkoong et al. (2012) show that favorable emotions toward political candidates mediate the (positive) influence of attention to news media on political participation (see also Martin et al. 2017). Finally, attitudes toward immigration improve when news frames elicit enthusiasm in readers, but decrease in the absence of a positive emotional response – a direct test of the mediating influence of emotional reactions (Lecheler et al. 2015). Taken together, an increasing number of studies in the realm of political communication are concerned with the underlying processes linking media content to emotional reactions in individuals and resulting attitude and behavioral changes via affective mediation. Our study further adds to this growing body of literature by taking into account emotional reactions to political messages on social media.

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING FOR THE EU

Studies in the context of the EU have devoted scarce attention to the influence of campaign messages, and only little empirical data are available on specific European Parliament (EP) elections (e.g., Holtz-Bacha, Novelli, and Rafter 2017). As one exception, Maier et al. (2012) investigated elite cueing in political campaigning for the 2009 EP elections in several member states and found strong effects on attitudes toward the EU when negative economic messages were communicated. Beyond that, little is known about campaigning for what both voters and parties perceive as "second-order" EP elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980; see also Holtz-Bacha et al. 2017). Not only are these elections situated on a complex international level, they are also accompanied by a feeling that less is at stake (e.g., Spoon and Klüver 2014). Furthermore, when it comes to EP elections, the majority of European citizens are dependent on information provided by the mass media and political elites (e.g., Gattermann and de Vreese 2017). In such an information environment, campaign messages on social media may be particularly important for the electorate (e.g., Holtz-Bacha et al. 2017; Nielsen and Franklin 2016). While Members of the EP only reluctantly campaign on Facebook (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; see also Barisione and Michailidou 2017; Tarța 2017), data on EU political parties' communication on Twitter show that tweets' emotional tone is connected to a party's position toward the Union, with positive emotions linked to pro-European stances (Nulty et al. 2016). Importantly, voters need to have a party they

can identify with in order to participate in EP elections (Hernández and Kriesi 2016); accordingly, political messages' potential for mobilizing the European electorate deserves closer scholarly attention.

Political Marketing and Citizens' Political Orientation

Research has shown that partisan biases play an important role when citizens are exposed to political information, such as in the context of issue polarization (Mason 2015) or politically motivated selective exposure (Garrett and Stroud 2014). Democrat and Republican voters in the US differ in cognitive processing when confronted with threatening stimuli (Schreiber et al. 2013), and ambivalent voters are more susceptible to one-sided news content (Hmielowski 2012). We expect that political ideology interacts with mediated information in producing affective reactions (see also Groenendyk and Banks 2014; Gross and D'Ambrosio 2004; Wang, Morey, and Srivastava 2014). However, attitudes toward the EU cannot be categorized uniformly on the self-reported left-right political ideology scale (e.g., Caiani and Kluknavská 2017), but pass ideological lines: Both decidedly left- and right-leaning voters may be skeptical towards the EU, albeit for very different reasons (van Elsas, Hakhverdian, and van der Brug 2016). It is therefore important to assess the influence of emotion-inducing political posts for individuals with different political orientations.

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Following the literature outlined above, we propose several hypotheses and research questions and test them in an experimental design (Figure 1). In a first step, we assume that emotional political posts on social media lead to heightened emotions in viewers when compared to neutral content. Importantly, the direction of these emotions should be conditional on the type of message communicated by a political actor (e.g., Lecheler et al. 2013; Valentino et al. 2011). All else being equal, individuals' emotional reactions should correspond to the position of the political message:

> H1: Exposure to a positive Facebook post leads to an increase in respondents' level of enthusiasm about the EU (H1a), while a negative post leads to increased feelings of anxiety and anger toward the EU (H1b).

Since we cannot determine a priori how individuals' political ideology influences their emotional reactions to anti- or pro-European messages (e.g., van Elsas et al. 2016), we examine this relationship in a research question:
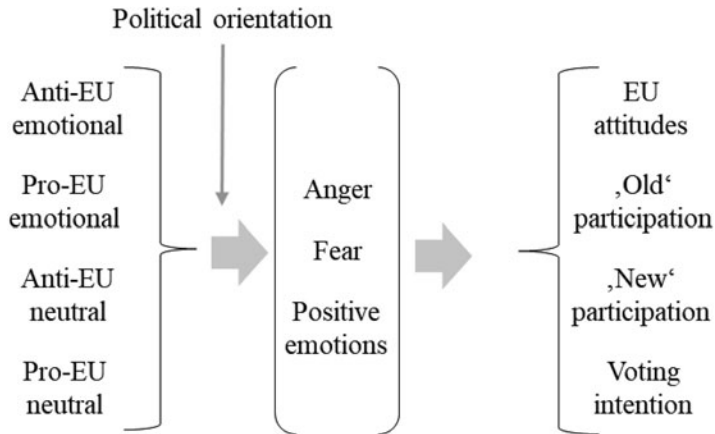
FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

> *RQ1: How does political left-right self-placement interact with a political message on social media in affecting emotional reactions?*

   Resulting from emotional reactions, we expect effects on (a) individuals' attitudes toward the EU, (b) their intention to participate in a number of political activities, and their (c) propensity to vote for the party depending on the experimental manipulation. In line with AIT, if individuals experience enthusiasm, this should exert a positive effect on their attitudes toward the EU and increase their intentions to participate in political activities directed at the object of their emotional reactions (i.e., the EU; Brader 2006). Similarly, increased levels of anger directed against the Union should motivate political action, but negatively affect EU opinions. Heightened anxiety should demotivate political participation and decrease EU attitudes. All assumptions are subsumed as follows:

> *H2: Respondents' emotional reactions to a political social media post affect (2a) attitudes toward and (2b) political participatory intentions directed at the EU.*

   These hypotheses propose an indirect relationship in which emotions mediate the effect of exposure to the political post on our dependent variables. In addition, we abstain from making directional claims about the influence of the political message on study respondents' *propensity to vote* for the campaigning party. Even though clear expectations could be formulated with regard to partisan identities and vote intention for established candidates, it is less clear how voters react to claims made by a newly established party. Therefore, we investigate this relationship in a research question:

> *RQ2: How does exposure to social media messages about the EU affect respondents' propensity to vote for the posting party?*

METHOD

The data for this study were collected in the Netherlands in the summer of 2017. We conducted an online experiment with two factors (position on the EU * emotional tone), in which respondents saw a Facebook post from a fictitious, allegedly new political party, PROGRESS (see below). While lowering the external validity of our design, the decision to frame the message as coming from an unknown party was taken to ensure that message effects were not confounded by existing knowledge about the party. Since the political landscape in Western Europe is open to the establishment of new parties, previously unknown political actors may enter the electoral market at any time (e.g., Sikk 2012).

Respondents in our study were randomly assigned to the experimental groups and presented with either (1) a pro-EU neutral message, (2) a pro-EU emotional message, (3) an anti-EU neutral message, (4) an anti-EU emotional message, or (5) a control condition with a neutral text. All posts were embedded in the page of PROGRESS' Facebook profile, and the outline of that page was kept constant except for the respective texts. The latter were framed as posts in the center of the page (see Figure 2).
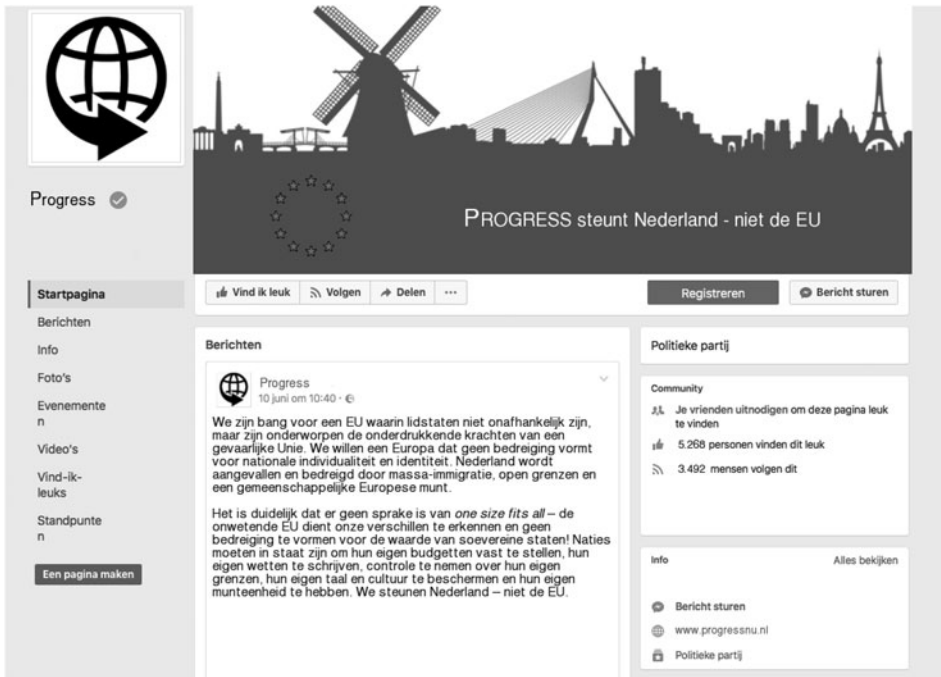

FIGURE 2 Example stimulus page, emotional anti-EU condition.

Stimuli and Pretest

To test our stimuli, we conducted a pretest with a convenience sample ($n = 33$; $M_{age} = 25$, SD = 3.20, 66.7% female, 69.7% Dutch). Respondents were randomly exposed to two messages that presented the positions of two new political parties. First, individuals saw a text phrasing an *anti-EU* position in an either neutral or emotional way (between-subjects factor). Afterwards, we asked them whether they perceived the message to be in favor of or opposing the EU, whether they thought the language used was factual or emotional, and whether they found the advocated ideas to be abstract or concrete in nature (all single-item measurements). Respondents were then presented with a second text, again framed as the position of a new Dutch party, advocating a *positive EU* stance and either using a neutral or emotional language (between-subjects factor). The second stimulus was followed by the same questions as before.

To increase their external validity, all four stimulus texts (EU position * emotional tone) were constructed on the basis of actual policy statements from the online representations of factions of the EP. They were similar in length and gave the position of the party in the form of its general opinion of the EU and the Netherlands' role in it. The message opposing the EU originated from the website of the ENF group (*Europe of Nations and Freedom*). The text stresses that the EU endangers countries' independence and freedom of decision-making with regard to laws and policies. For the emotional language condition, the statement was supplemented by words such as "afraid," "oppression," "attack," "threat," "menace," and "protect." The pro-EU messages were based on statements by the EP's *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe*. The texts emphasize the EU's moral authority, the common standards for peace and stability, and the values shared by European societies. The emotional message includes words such as "proud," "inspired," "dream," "happy," and "excited."

Across both the respective neutral and emotional conditions, respondents judged the pro-EU texts as significantly more in favor of the EU ($M = 6.21$, SD = 1.24) than the anti-EU texts ($M = 1.85$, SD = .97; $t(32) = -15.32$, $p = .000$). However, both the neutral ($M = 4.88$, SD = 1.50) and the emotional anti-EU group ($M = 5.50$, SD = 1.16) rated the texts' language as similarly emotional ($F(1, 31) = 1.75$; $p = .196$), and the same was the case for the pro-EU stimuli (emotional $M = 5.53$, SD = .80; neutral $M = 4.94$, SD = 1.18; $F(1, 31) = 2.87$; $p = .100$). Thus, the manipulation of emotional tone was not successful. Following the pretest results, the texts were adjusted, and stronger emotional references were included before they were incorporated into the main study's Facebook profile pages.

MAIN STUDY

The data for the main experiment were collected in July 2017, and respondents ($n = 520$) were recruited via Survey Sampling International (SSI) in the Netherlands. They filled in the survey online via Qualtrics and received incentives from SSI for partaking in the experiment. 55.4% of respondents were male, with an average age of 50.38 years (SD = 15.34, range 19–84). 5.6% were born outside of the Netherlands, and 45% were employed full- (30.8%) or part time (14.2%). The remaining respondents were retired (22.1%), homemakers (8.5%), self-employed (8.1%), students (6.3%), or unemployed (10%). 31.3% completed basic or lower education (up to and including high school), 42.5% achieved middle-level applied education, and 26.2% finished university (bachelor, master, Ph.D., or similar). Our sample shows a good distribution throughout the general socio-demographic characteristics in the Netherlands.

Procedure and Measurement. Upon assessing the online questionnaire, respondents were introduced to the topic of the study (political information on social media) and had to give their informed consent. They were asked about their political interest ($M = 4.56$, SD = 1.64, 7-point scale, 1 = not at all interested, 7 = very interested) and political orientation ($M = 5.33$, SD = 2.21, 1 – left, 10 – right). For the analysis, political orientation was divided into three groups (left, range 1–3, $n = 116$; moderate, range 4–7, $n = 313$; right, range 8–10, $n = 91$). We also asked respondents about the frequency with which they used social media to access political news during a regular week (0 – never, 7 – each day; $M = 4.02$, SD = 2.99).[1]

Respondents were then assigned to the experimental groups (anti-EU neutral: $n = 108$; anti-EU emotional: $n = 105$; pro-EU neutral: $n = 103$; pro-EU emotional: $n = 102$) or the control condition ($n = 102$). They were told that they would be presented with the Facebook profile page of a new Dutch political party, PROGRESS, which was still in the process of consolidation. Respondents were asked to get an overview of the page (minimum 30 s) and to continue to the next page when they were ready. In the control condition, respondents saw the same Facebook profile page, but the text did not include any reference to the EU.

After the manipulation, we assessed respondents' emotions toward the EU, our assumed mediator. We inquired how what they had just seen made them feel with regard to the EU, and employed a slider format to measure ten different emotions on a range of zero to 100 percent (randomized; see Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2015). Respondents indicated how *enthusiastic* ($M = 35.88$, SD = 26.46), *hopeful* ($M = 38.12$, SD = 27.67), *proud* ($M = 33.56$, SD = 27.31), *scared* ($M = 26.23$, SD = 25.78), or *worried* ($M = 40.52$, SD = 29.32) they were. We also asked them whether they felt *afraid* ($M = 26.14$, SD = 25.98), *hateful* ($M = 23.52$, SD = 25.84),

angry ($M=29.79$, SD $= 28.45$), *bitter* ($M=28.12$, SD $= 26.83$), and *resent-ful* ($M=25.42$, SD $= 25.27$) toward the EU. In order to test whether the items would form the same theoretically informed latent dimensions, we conducted confirmatory analysis with AMOS. In line with AIT, we set the number of factors to three (i.e., anger, fear, and one positive emotion). The model fit was acceptable ($\chi^2 = 166.59$, $p = .000$; CFI = .965; RMSEA = .09; SRMR = .043, see Holbert and Grill 2015), and all items correlated highly with their respective latent factor (.71–.91). An alternative model with two factors (positive and negative emotions) yielded less satisfactory model fit ($\chi^2 = 328.79$, $p = .000$; CFI = .924; RMSEA = .13; SRMR = .050), and we continue with fear, anger, and enthusism.

Next, we asked respondents how likely it was that they would ever *vote* for the party they just saw ($M=3.48$, SD $= 2.40$; scale 1 – not at all likely, 10 – very likely). We assessed *attitudes towards the* EU with 15 items that were extracted from the battery introduced by Boomgaarden and colleagues (2011). In order to test whether the theoretically informed EU attitude dimensions hold, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis and specified the number of latent factors to four (performance, strengthening, identity, utilitarianism). The indices provide good model fit for the four factor-solution ($\chi^2 = 328.30$, $p = .000$; CFI = .970; RMSEA = .075; SRMR = .030). We checked whether one latent factor would be fit to explain all 15 EU attitude items; however, this was not the case ($\chi^2 = 1083.21$, $p = .000$; CFI = .879; RMSEA = .15; SRMR = .048). We get back to this issue in the results.

We also measured respondents' likelihood to *participate* in a variety of different political activities in the future (7 items, 1 – not at all likely, 7 – very likely). Those were subsumed to two indices of political participation based on a principal component analysis (two factors, 74% explained variance). One measures the likelihood to take part in "old" forms of participation (e.g., participating in a protest about the EU; $M=3.13$, SD $= 1.43$). The other addresses "new" forms of participation that relate to the social media environment in particular (e.g., share posts of PROGRESS on social media; $M=2.23$, SD $= 1.51$; e.g., Ohme et al. 2017). The survey ended with a number of socio-demographic questions (gender, age, education, occupational status, country of birth) before respondents were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed. The procedure and all measurements were approved by the ethics committee of the Amsterdam School of Communication prior to data collection.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis and Strategy

A first check confirmed successful randomization for a number of different variables. Respondents in either condition did not differ with regard to

their gender ($F_{(4, 515)} = .61$, $p = .657$), age ($F_{(4, 512)} = .23$, $p = .923$), education ($F_{(4, 515)} = 1.12$, $p = .346$), or political interest ($F_{(4, 515)} = .97$, $p = .426$). The same was true for their political self-placement on the left-right scale ($F_{(4,515)} = .40$, $p = .812$), and the frequency with which they used social media during a regular week ($F_{(4, 515)} = 1.66$, $p = .158$).

In a series of initial regression analyses, we find that, when compared to the control condition and simultaneously controlling for sociodemographics, political orientation, and the assumed mediators, only the neutral pro-EU manipulation exerted a significant effect on EU attitudes ($\beta = -.097$; see Table 1). None of the other dependent variables was affected. When testing for direct effects on the mediators, only the emotional anti-EU manipulation exerted an effect on emotions, and only positive emotions were significantly affected ($b = -9.04$, $p = .009$; detailed results not displayed here). Anger was not significantly influenced by either manipulation, even though the direction of the coefficients point in the right direction for pro- and anti-EU messages, respectively (i.e., feelings of anger being reduced by the former and increased by the latter). For fear, we find

TABLE 1 Standardized OLS regression weights for EU attitudes, participatory intentions, and vote intention.

	B			
	EU attitudes	"Old" participation	"New" participation	Vote intention
Sociodemographics				
Gender (male)	−.058	.001	.019	−.012
Age	−.094*	−.067	−.181***	−.156***
Education	.148***	−.016	−.034	−.042
Political interest	.115**	.374***	.195***	.010
Political orientation[a]				
Left	.078*	.040	.032	−.038
Right	−.103**	−.028	−.044	.029
Experimental condition[b]				
Pro-EU neutral	−.097*	−.016	.027	.021
Pro-EU emotional	−.025	−.016	−.067	−.019
Anti-EU neutral	-.146	-.057	−.056	−.010
Anti-EU emotional	.042	.005	−.007	.010
Mediators				
Anger	−.209***	.066	.104	.109
Fear	−.020	.061	−.021	−.051
Positive emotions	.406***	.090*	.219***	.387***
Adj. R^2	.35	.16	.12	.15
N	516	516	516	516

***$p < .001$.
**$p < .01$.
*$p < .05$.
[a]Relative to moderate political orientation.
[b]Relative to control condition.

a significant and positive effect only for the emotional anti-EU condition ($b = 8.24$, $p = .013$). These first results indicate that political messages on social media can affect emotions associated with the EU, but only if these messages are negative and emotional in tone.

In order to test our assumptions, we estimated a structural equation model (SEM) with multiple group comparisons. We included the direct and indirect effects of our four experimental conditions (in comparison to the control group) on EU attitudes, old and new forms of participation, and voting intention. The indirect effects simultaneously test the mediation via anger, fear, and positive emotions (see Figure 1). In order to test the moderating effect of political ideology, we added the latter as a grouping variable, and investigate the effects for individuals with a left wing, right wing, and moderate political orientation separately. Originally, and based on the results of the CFA, the four EU attitude dimensions were included in the model individually. Since we found no differential effects for the dimensions, we included them as one index, reflecting an overall positive or negative attitude toward the EU (range 1 = very negative, 7 = very positive, $M = 3.35$, SD = 1.45, $\alpha = .94$). Importantly, this decision was taken for the sake of parsimony and presentational clarity, and it does not alter the model fit in a meaningful way. The final model was estimated using Maximum Likelihood estimation. The χ^2 value was significant, and the RMSEA value is slightly too high at .12. However, the CFI value indicates an acceptable model fit at .91. Control variables were omitted from the model, as they were all randomly distributed across the groups.

Hypotheses Tests

Our first hypothesis stated that emotional political messages would lead to stronger emotional reactions compared to neutral posts. We assumed that positive messages increase enthusiasm about the EU, whereas negative messages increase anxiety and anger, and asked whether this effect would depend on political identification (full SEM). The results partly confirm our expectations: For left-leaning respondents, the emotional pro-EU message reduces anger ($b = -12.70$, $p = .030$) and fear ($b = -11.47$, $p = .058$), albeit the latter effect is not statistically significant. However, and somewhat surprisingly, this condition also reduces positive emotions ($b = -13.88$, $p = .042$). The neutral pro-EU message does not exert a significant effect on either emotion for left-leaning individuals, and neither do any of the anti-EU texts (see Table 2 and Figure 3). For moderate respondents, the emotional anti-EU message reduces positive feelings ($b = -10.55$, $p = .017$) and increases fear ($b = 9.63$, $p = .027$), whereas neither the neutral anti-EU message nor any of the positive posts have an effect (see Figure 4). For right-leaning respondents, we find no differences in emotional reactions

TABLE 2 Standardized regression weights for mediators and dependent variables by political ideology.

|			Political ideology		
			Left-wing	*Moderate*	*Right-wing*
Effects on mediators			$n = 116$	$n = 313$	$n = 91$
Neutral anti-EU	→	Anger	−.024	.060	−.023
Neutral anti-EU	→	Fear	.019	.027	−.048
Neutral anti-EU	→	Positive emotions	−.119	.004	.074
Emotional anti-EU	→	Anger	−.033	.050	.122
Emotional anti-EU	→	Fear	.110	.159*	.113
Emotional anti-EU	→	Positive emotions	−.073	−.170*	−.117
Neutral pro-EU	→	Anger	−.105	−.040	.221
Neutral pro-EU	→	Fear	−.040	−.023	.145
Neutral pro-EU	→	Positive emotions	−.044	−.018	−.124
Emotional pro-EU	→	Anger	−.251*	−.045	.237
Emotional pro-EU	→	Fear	−.217	−.037	.129
Emotional pro-EU	→	Positive emotions	−.236*	.074	−030
Effects on dependent variables					
Anger	→	EU attitudes	−.154	−.256***	−.090
Anger	→	Participation (old)	.023	.082	.115
Anger	→	Participation (new)	.115	.178*	−.027
Anger	→	Vote intention	.207	.161*	−.021
Fear	→	EU attitudes	−.063	.070	−.231
Fear	→	Participation (old)	.077	.125	−.028
Fear	→	Participation (new)	−.038	−.049	.109
Fear	→	Vote intention	−.219	−.068	.060
Positive emotions	→	EU attitudes	.466***	.445***	.445***
Positive emotions	→	Participation (old)	.292***	.158**	.123
Positive emotions	→	Participation (new)	.253**	.279***	.243*
Positive emotions	→	Vote intention	.379***	.395***	.386***

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.
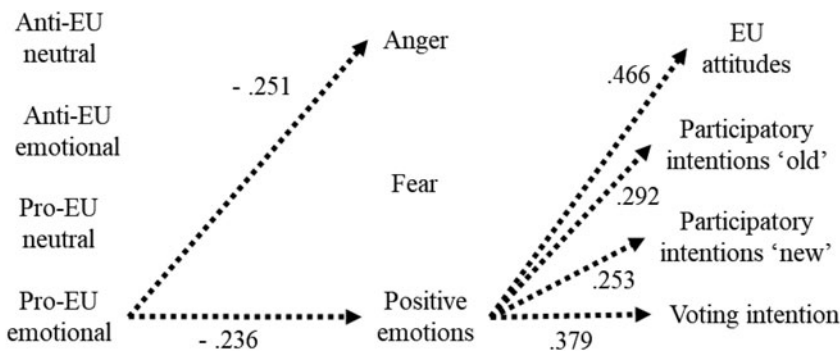
FIGURE 3 Standardized direct effects of experimental manipulation on mediators and subsequent dependent variables for politically left-leaning respondents. Only significant effects displayed, see Table 2 for display of full results.
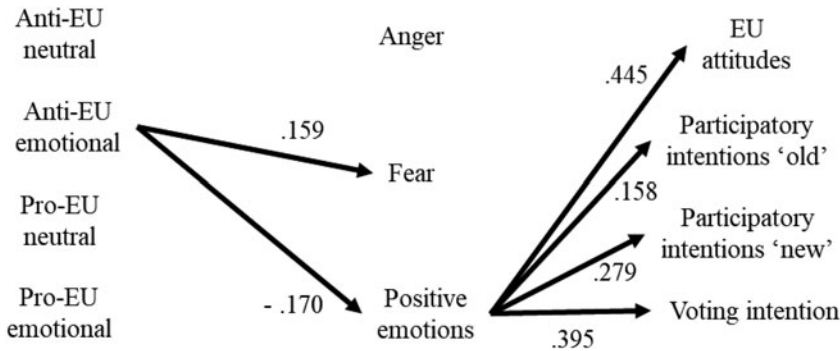
FIGURE 4 Standardized direct effects of experimental manipulation on mediators and subsequent dependent variables for politically moderate respondents. Only significant effects displayed, see Table 2 for display of full results.

depending on the stimulus, even though both the emotional ($b = 17.48$, $p = .053$) and neutral pro-EU messages ($b = 15.07$, $p = .078$) raise anger in right-leaning viewers to an almost significant level compared to the control group. Overall, we find support for our assumption that neutral messages evoke hardly any emotional reactions, while emotional messages do so in some cases and depending on political orientation.

Hypothesis 2 stated that respondents' emotional reactions affect attitudes toward (2a) and participatory intentions directed at (2b) the EU. We also investigated the effects of emotional reactions on the propensity to vote for PROGRESS. Given that our stimulus only evoked some emotional reactions, we focus on reporting the mediating effects of those significant effects as reported above (for all estimates see Table 2). For left-leaning respondents, all emotional reactions were reduced by the emotional pro-EU message, at least to some extent. However, only positive emotions lead to increases in EU attitudes ($b = .03$, $p < .001$), the intention to vote for PROGRESS ($b = .03$, $p < .001$), and changes in intentions for old ($b = .02$, $p < .001$) and new forms of participation ($b = .01$, $p = .015$; see Figure 3). For moderates, the first step in the model showed that the emotional anti-EU message increased feelings of fear and lowered positive emotions. Again, only positive emotions improve EU attitudes ($b = .03$, $p < .001$), intention to vote for PROGRESS ($b = .04$, $p < .001$), as well as old ($b = .01$, $p = .005$) and new forms of participation ($b = .02$, $p < .001$; see Figure 4). Right-leaning respondents only experienced anger, and anger does not affect any of the outcome variables.

To examine the indirect effects, we used the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013) and ran separate analyses for each ideological group and dependent variable (Model 4, multicategorical independent variables). For left-leaning respondents, confidence intervals for bias-corrected bootstrapping (95%, 5000 samples) show that attitudes toward the EU (CI [–.8682,

−.0473]) and old participation forms (CI [−.6396, −.0339]) decrease because of lower positive reactions when exposed to the emotional pro-EU text. The same was true for new participation forms (CI [−.6237, −.0054]) and the likelihood to vote for the party in the future (CI [−.1.1708, −.0454]). Moderates become more negative in their attitudes toward the EU (CI [−.5227, −.0597]) and are less likely to take part in old (CI [−.2379, −.0114]) and new forms of political participation (CI [−.03925, −.0324]) after reacting with less positive feelings to the presentation of the emotional anti-EU text. They are also less likely to vote for PROGRESS (CI [−.8173, −.0762]). All confidence intervals include zero for indirect effects for right-leaning respondents, thus confirming that no mediation takes place for this group.

Taken together, our results show that emotions mediate the effect of political messages on social media on relevant attitudes and behavioral intentions. However, only left-leaning individuals as well as respondents that locate themselves in the moderate center were affected. In contrast, right-leaning respondents' EU attitudes, participatory intentions, and intention to vote for PROGRESS were not influenced by the combined effects of our experimental manipulation and resulting emotional reactions.

DISCUSSION

We examined emotional reactions to different EU messages on social media and tested whether these reactions affect political attitudes and behavioral intentions. We argued that these relationships become increasingly important in a media environment that facilitates the spread of political messages on social media while at the same time catering to voters' feelings. Even though the mediating role of emotions has received increasing attention, the majority of studies examine their interplay with news content and journalistic frames, and no work has investigated emotions as mediators between political social media posts and viewers' cognitive and behavioral responses. In addition, we investigated the influence of *positive* emotional reactions on political outcomes, since the majority of research in the field has focused on the distinct effects of anger and fear. Our data provide valuable insights into EU parties' ability to affect emotions, change attitudes toward the EU, and influence intentions to participate in politics. As such, we link important strands in current research that have not been given sufficient scholarly attention before.

Our main findings show that emotional reactions to political messages on social media are conditional upon respondents' own political orientation and the post's position, and these results are in line with AIT (Marcus et al. 2000). They also confirm that respondents react more positively to messages that reinforce their existing opinions. These results are crucial when it comes to the planning of strategic political marketing efforts on

social media and highlight the need for parties to carefully design messages that target specific audiences and address issues that resonate with the voter base.

Furthermore, voters' emotional reactions depend on whether or not the information is framed in a neutral or emotional way: For left-leaning individuals, only the pro-EU emotional condition significantly reduced emotional responses, which appears to be particularly surprising for positive emotions. One possible explanation may lie in the specific content of the text: Our positive EU messages advocated shared values of democracy across the Union; the text framed these as "essential to ensure lasting peace and a prosperous future" and "the corner stones of our foreign and security policies." As van Elsas and colleagues (2016) show, left-wing citizens in the EU are more dissatisfied with the current state of the EU compared to right-leaning individuals, "while their culturally more cosmopolitan and universalist attitudes lead to a positive evaluation of European integration as an *ideal*" (van Elsas et al. 2016, 1200, emphasis added). If citizens feel that the current EU is far from living up to this ideal, and at the same time find it to be stressed in a party's message, left-leaning individuals may be reminded of this gap and respond accordingly. From a campaigner's point of view, this would indicate a potential backlash effect of positive emotional messages, which could be alleviated by targeting specific groups: When it comes to EU politics, our results indicate that catch-all party messages do not exist, and that what makes a text effective in mobilizing one group of citizens could well deter another. While this seems obvious for political issues that are more clearly defined along the left-right division of political orientation, opinions about the EU cross such divisional lines (van Elsas et al. 2016), which calls for greater caution in political marketing for EU parties. We saw that even a clearly positive and encouraging text can lead to irritation for some parts of the electorate – as a result, voting intentions for the advertiser decrease. Therefore, messages need to be carefully phrased not only in terms of issue position, but with regard to emotional appeals as well.

Right-leaning respondents in our sample reacted with increased anger whenever they were confronted with messages that advocated a positive EU position – whether or not this text included any emotions was irrelevant. In itself, this finding confirms general Eurosceptic tendencies on the political right and indicates that citizens who identify with this ideology may be thrown off by any message that paints the Union in a positive light. For moderate respondents, the anti-emotional message reduced positive feelings and increased fear, while it did not affect anger in any way. As such, moderates seem to be the most susceptible to parties' emotional posts on social media, at least when it comes to their potential to raise negative feelings in viewers.

We found positive emotions alone to positively affect almost all outcome variables irrespective of our experimental conditions and individuals'

political orientation. Even though the effect was rather small in most cases, this result is in line with a large body of research in AIT, conforming the activating power of enthusiasm (e.g., Brader 2005; Marcus and MacKuen 1993) and highlighting its relevance for political communication research. We find this a particularly noteworthy result, especially against the background of the large body of research focusing on the importance of negative emotions in political marketing and campaigning, and we strongly encourage more work in this area. If politicians and marketers successfully cater to voters' pride and enthusiasm, chances are they are not only more likely to vote for them, but also to participate in other political activities and improve their evaluation of institutions such as the EU – whether or not this should be considered a 'good' outcome from a normative point of view remains an open question.

Notably, while positive emotions positively affect all outcome variables for both left-leaning and moderate respondents, we find they are so strongly reduced by the experimental conditions that the overall indirect effect becomes negative. This indicates that their activating effect is overruled by messages that make citizens feel less enthusiastic or proud of a political object. In a reverse argument, politicians who do not wish to laden their messages with emotions may want, to the very least, to ensure that they do not reduce positive emotions in potential voters. Once again, different target groups need to be considered if marketers wish to avoid potential backlash effects.

When testing for full mediation, we saw that moderate individuals were negatively affected by the anti-EU emotional group; as a result, they displayed lower intentions to participate, were less likely to vote for the party, and their evaluations of the EU decreased. Individuals who are neither decidedly right- nor left leaning are thus the most influenced by emotional messages that are directed against the EU because they react with emotional responses that are likely to affect their attitudes and behavioral intentions. Again, this finding tallies well with existing studies on undecided or independent voters and political campaigns (e.g., Hmielowski 2012). Our findings thus corroborate the assumptions that emotions matter for political marketing – both on the side of the political actor and potential voters. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of the *mediating* role of emotions in political campaigning: It is not sufficient to load messages with fear appeals or enthusiastic calls for participation if these are not able to simultaneously evoke emotional responses in the electorate.

Limitations

It is worth noting that some of our investigated effects may be underpowered and that not all of our experimental manipulations successfully

elicited emotional reactions in respondents. Another possible explanation may lie in the mode of the political message: Namkoong and colleagues (2012) demonstrate that television news can provoke stronger emotions in viewers compared to newspaper content. Future studies should investigate whether different levels of emotional appeals affect emotions in respondents to varying degrees.

We assessed the influence of political messages from a fictitious political party and invented both the party and its ostensible messages for the sake of this study. We thus acknowledge the need to investigate established parties' marketing strategies as well. In addition, we recommend replication beyond the specific Dutch case and encourage research into other Western European countries. This, along with replications using different social media platforms, could show whether our findings are generalizable to different contexts. Finally, replications should investigate the impact of political messages on an actual social media platform, i.e., allowing participants to browse the side and navigate through its content, and take into account the effects of long-term, repeated exposure as well.

Prior studies suggest that respondents' political sophistication may play an important moderating role as well (e.g., Miller 2011). Since high political sophisticates are better able to connect their emotional reactions to policy issues and political action, they are also more likely to act upon it. While sophistication was not included in this study, we measured respondents' political interest and educational level; both were evenly distributed among the groups. Therefore, any effects of either construct are random among the manipulations; yet we strongly encourage additional research into this context.

CONCLUSION

Our findings have important implications for the study of political marketing on social media in general and research into political communication and the EU in particular. The particular structure of social media will undoubtedly make them relevant environments for political marketing in the future, and campaigners and scholars alike should pay close attention to the developments of marketing strategies on these platforms. The fact that emotional reactions form an integral part of attitude development and political decision-making should encourage researchers to investigate their potentials and risks for democratic outcomes. Furthermore, it highlights that campaigners need to be vary of potential backlash effects when using emotional messages. As the discussions sparked by the Brexit vote in 2016 have shown, the EU is facing challenges and decreasing levels of trust and support in a number of membership countries right now. While our study shows that heightened enthusiasm

consistently increases support for the Union, one should not underestimate political messages' capability to dampen feelings of hope and pride in the European citizenry. At the same time, emotions alone are not an acceptable substitute for information when it comes to building a European public sphere – emoticons should not make policy decisions. Acknowledging emotions' role in political attitude formation does not exculpate researchers and practitioners from stressing the importance of content over message features. The European electorate can only make informed decisions on their representatives if they know whether parties and candidates advocate their ideas. Given Facebook's coverage, it is becoming increasingly likely for a majority of the EU electorate to get access to political messages such as the ones tested here. Scholars and political campaigners should closely observe these ongoing processes and continue to differentiate between emotional outcomes that affect political decision-making. We showed under which conditions and through which processes emotions make a difference, both when it comes to gaining electoral support and influencing public opinion. As such, we hope that our study will spark more interest in the ability of social media posts to influence emotions toward political institutions on the national and supranational level, and in their potential to affect behavioral intentions and attitudinal outcomes.

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NOTE

1. Respondents who reported "never" accessing social media for political content (26% of the sample) were not excluded from the analysis since the experimental design did not require them to actively navigate the social media page and prior experience with the platform was not necessary. The randomization check confirmed that the frequency with which respondents used social media for accessing political content did not differ between the experimental groups.

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