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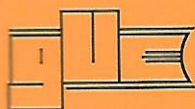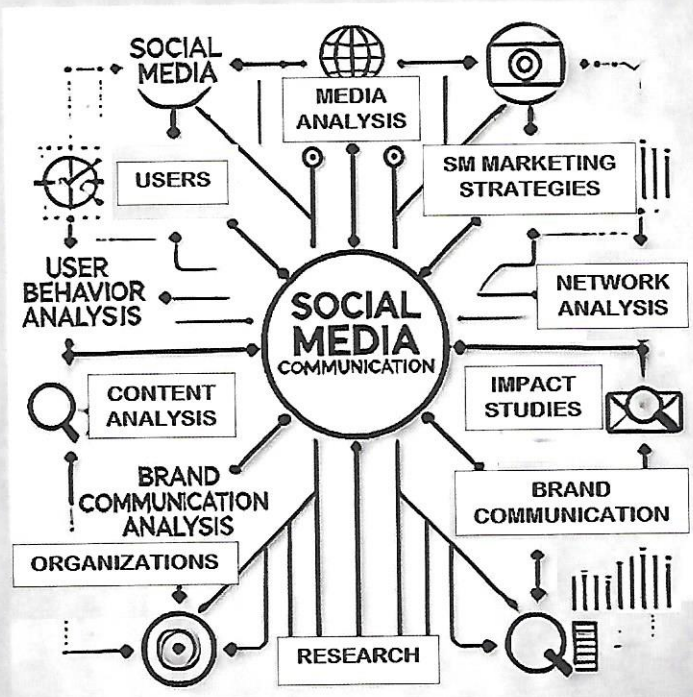
# Social Media Communication
## THEORY AND RESEARCH
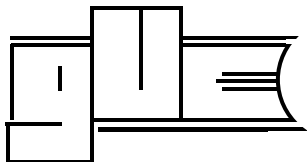
# Social Media Communication

## THEORY AND RESEARCH

# Edited by Ludvík Eger & Dita Hommerová

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**Wenye Mao** is a doctoral student at the Graduate School of Economics and Management of Tohoku University in Japan. She has been involved in three student research projects focusing on third-sector organizations' use of social media, with particular emphasis on social capital and framing theory. Since the commencement of her doctoral program, she has made several contributions to international conferences on third-sector research such as ARNOVA and ISTR. Beyond these student research projects, she also participates in cross-disciplinary research activities at the Graduate School of Information Sciences. Her involvement extends to a collaborative project aimed at understanding digital transformation in third-sector organizations through a hybrid perspective. This initiative combines insights from management, sociology, and information sciences to develop a comprehensive framework for analyzing the role and impact of third-sector organizations in today's civil society.

**Michal Mičík** received his Ph.D. in Economics and Management. He is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Faculty of Economics, department of Marketing, Trade and Services, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic. His research interests cover marketing on social media, role of trust in decision-making process, and electronic commerce. He has authored or co-authored books on marketing research or social commerce. Several of his articles have been published in journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus. He led an international project focused on building trust on social media. Currently, he is working on research focused on social commerce use in Central Europe and on a project devoted to combating fake news, conspiracy theories and misinformation.

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**Laura Völkl**, M.Sc. is a doctoral student at the Department of Marketing and Trade at the Faculty of Economics of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen and holds a master's degree in International Business Studies from the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany. She works as a research assistant at the Institute for Sustainability and Ethics at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Amberg-Weiden, Germany. In her research, she specializes in sustainability in higher education institutions and their sustainability communication in particular. In teaching, she currently conducts a project about climate change adaptation in corporate value chains funded by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection. She collaborates in Czech-German cross-border projects in the field of sustainability.

# Introduction

Social media (SM) is influencing the way hundreds of millions of people around the world relate to one another and share information not only between themselves but also between themselves and organizations (Alalwan et al., 2017; Appel et al., 2020; Datareportal, 2024; Lee, 2022). The term social media is currently referred to as websites, apps, and media that involve online conversation and interaction between people (Strauss & Frost, 2012; Tuten & Solomon, 2015). Kotler et al. (2022, p. 316) state that "Social media are means for consumers to share text, images, audio, and video information with the another and with companies, and vice versa."

The ability of social media platforms to actively engage customers has made them indispensable in modern marketing. Organizations in a number of fields must establish and maintain an interactive online presence through social media and consistently seek to engage with prospective and current customers and their stakeholders. According to Kingsnorth (2019), marketing involves social media in multiple ways, including content marketing, influencer partnerships, and social media advertising.

Social media research covers a broad range of topics and methodologies. These are the main themes and methods for conducting social media research:

User behavior analysis
- Engagement patterns. This focus examines how users interact with content, which includes likes, shares, comments, views, etc.
- Usage trends. Research examines how social media usage varies by demographics, geography, and time.

Content analysis
- Sentiment analysis. Focus is on identification of the emotional tone of social media posts.
- Evaluation of topics. Research, for example, identifies prevalent themes and topics within large social media data sets.
- Misinformation and Fake News. Researchers investigate the spread and impact of false information on social media platforms.

Network analysis
- Community detection. Researchers identify and analyze communities within social networks.
- Evaluation of influencers. This research aims to identify and assess the impact of key influencers on social networks.

Brand communication analysis
- Brand sentiment. Researchers monitor and analyze the sentiment of selected brands.
- Campaign effectiveness. The focus is usually on measuring the success of social media marketing campaigns.

Impact studies
- Social and political impact. The focus of the research is on the role of social media in political movements and social change.
- Public opinion. Research evaluates how social media influences and reflects public opinion.

Privacy and ethics
- Researchers examine concerns and policies regarding user data privacy on social media platforms.

Social media marketing strategies
- Researchers analyse the importance of a well-structured strategy that balances the interests of both organizations and social media users (consumers).
- The strategic aspects of advertising on social media. Researchers are studying the role of emerging technologies and marketing trends in the context of integrated marketing communication.

Social media research can now be conducted in a wider range of ways. We briefly mention the approach based on the three basic research designs.

Quantitative design and methods
- Surveys using questionnaires. This type of research usually collects structured responses from users regarding their social media habits and opinions.
- Content Analysis. This research, for example, apply software to analyze the frequency and patterns of words and topics in social media posts.
- Network analysis. Researchers employ IT tools to visualize and analyze social networks.
- Researchers also employ a diverse range of other technologies to delve into the complexities of social media.

Quantitative design and methods
- Deep interviews and focus groups. Researchers conduct in-depth discussions with users to gain deeper insights into their behaviors and attitudes concerning social media.
- Thematic analysis. The aim is to identify and analyze themes within qualitative data collected from social media posts or user interviews.

Mixed methods research
This research design combines quantitative and qualitative approaches and integrate both methods with the aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of social media phenomena.

Today is SM media marketing a fast-growing trend (Kotler et al., 2022) that allows brands to connect with consumers through personal, user-centric channels for interaction. Integrating SM into marketing strategies can significantly impact consumer behavior. Effective SM marketing requires understanding best practices, benefits, challenges, and emerging trends in this field. To gain a competitive advantage, organizations and their brands must implement SM marketing as part of integrated marketing communication (Belch & Belch, 2024).
Artificial intelligence is a new phenomenon that will change marketing and business practices, including social media (Kumar et al., 2024).

A single monograph can only provide examples of some of the above research topics concerning social media. Let's take a closer look at what the team from the University of West Bohemia offers in cooperation with partners from the Technical University in Liberec, the Technical University of Applied Sciences Amberg-Weiden, and Tohoku University in Japan.

Laura Völkl shows that social media have become relevant channels to communicate sustainability contents. Sustainability-related social media usage, as well as its effectiveness and usefulness were found to predict sustainable intention, which, in turn, influences sustainable behavior. Against this background, the chapter investigates how higher education institutions (HEIs), in specific, should communicate sustainability issues on social media. For that purpose, the contribution conducts a systematic literature review of existing research on HEIs' sustainability communication on social media. It examines 13 research papers published between 2017 and 2024 through bibliometric and thematic analysis. The bibliometric analysis revealed that research in this field is still in its early stage. As the contribution aims at providing concrete guidance for practitioners at HEIs, the thematic analysis focuses on the research results and recommendations presented in the reviewed publications. The compiled recommendations pertain to both, strategic and operative communication management. They emphasize the importance of two-way communication between the HEI and its stakeholders on social media. Sustainability-related contents foster stakeholder interaction, i.e. engagement. Audience engagement can further be enhanced by displaying more visual contents.

This research study presents how to conduct a systematic literature review for a particular topic. The VOSviewer software is used here to provide an overview of coauthorship and presents a citation network. Qualitative data are processed using thematic analysis.

Authors, Christiane Hellbach, Fiona Plank and Carolin Schneeberger follow with the topic social media and higher education. They state that the last couple of decades have led to a growing competition in the higher education sector and have resulted in an adoption of a student-as-customer perspective in marketing of higher education institutions (HEIs). In addition, the target groups, especially students, can no longer be reached using the communication channels previously preferred in marketing of HEIs. The use of social media marketing to address and attract students has become increasingly important. This study applies empirical research aimed at social media marketing at HEIs from a strategic and organizational perspective and identifies potential for the future development of social media marketing at HEIs. The focus is on social media communication with prospective and current students. A qualitative study design was chosen to answer the research questions. The findings of the study show that all the HEIs surveyed consider social media to be increasingly important in their marketing activities. Potential for improvement at HEIs is seen in the strategic and operational management of social media marketing. This includes the development of strategies and guidelines as well as the monitoring of social media marketing. Further potential for improvement is identified, for example, in a more systematic involvement of students and alumni in content creation and in the use of social listening for market research. The findings of this research have practical and theoretical implications for those engaged in practice or research of social media marketing at HEIs.

As mentioned above, this study applies qualitative research approach. The survey was conducted in form of guided interviews with experts from communication and marketing departments at German HEIs.

Michal Mičík in introduction states that social media applications significantly impact various aspects of human life and have evolved into powerful tools that greatly support companies' marketing goals and strategies. Beyond their role in communication, these platforms are essential for enhancing social relationships, which is critical for building user trust. His study examines the Czech and Slovak contexts, areas that have not been explored in this manner before. It aims to identify the trust dimensions crucial for building trust in social media communication. Furthermore, the study explores how factors such as gender, age and social media usage affect individuals' trust perceptions. The analysis reveals notable differences and similarities in trust dimensions between two quasi-representative samples. The research findings provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing trust in social media communication. These insights are valuable for several reasons: they contribute to the

existing literature on online trust within social media, and highlight the influence of gender, age and social media activity on trust dimensions.

This quantitative research, using big data from an online panel from two countries, is focused on user behavior analysis with an emphasis on the very important topic of trust.

Dana Egerová, an expert in human resource management, focused her study on social networking sites and recruitment. She states that recruiting the right employees is a significant challenge for organizations today, and essential for maintaining a competitive advantage. In a rapidly changing business environment and a technology-driven job market, traditional recruitment methods have become inadequate. Online recruitment as a transformative trend is fundamentally changing how job seekers find employment and how employers find candidates. Social media, particularly platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, have become influential tools in recruitment and selection. While social networking sites offer numerous advantages, their utilization also brings potential risks and ethical concerns. The study aims to gain an insight into the use of social networking sites by organizations during recruitment and selection processes from the perspective of job seekers. To achieve this aim, focus groups were chosen as the research method. In March 2024 eleven focus groups were conducted with master's degree students from a Czech university. The findings reveal that the participants perceive both benefits and drawbacks in using social networks in the recruitment process and at the same time recognize the challenges and potential risks. Understanding the benefits and drawbacks perceived by job seekers can help organizations refine their social media recruitment strategies to attract top talent more effectively. Furthermore, insights into candidates' views on ethical concerns and potential risks can guide organizations in creating a more transparent and ethical recruitment process.

This qualitative research uses the focus group method and covers topics such as user behavior, brand communication, and content analysis.

Ludvík Eger presents a study aimed at the use of social media with the focus on connecting with customers, building relationships with the public, and promoting a farm and its products. This research study applies empirical research aimed at marketing in agriculture with a focus on SM. The study collected, mapped, and coded posts published by selected firms on their official Facebook profiles. The data provide an example of the use of Facebook in the agriculture industry by selected firms in Slovakia. The purpose of the analysed sample was to answer the question of which type of post is the most effective in terms of the engagement rate per post by follower. Furthermore, content analysis using uses and gratification theory was applied to gain a deep insight into the selected topic. Correspondence analysis was performed to get a deep understanding of the brand communication of the selected agriculture brands on SM. The finding of the pilot study showed that it is necessary to pay attention to the types of posts from the point of view of the media, and the content of the message to the target group. The findings of this research have practical and theoretical implications for those engaged in the practice or research of social media in the agriculture field.

This research covers topics such as engagement patterns, content analysis, and brand communication. By coding the data and displaying the outputs graphically, this study demonstrates the usefulness of analyzing companies' social media communications.

Vojtěch Beran and Jitka Burešová underline that social networks represent the meeting place between corporate brands and the individual customer's wants and needs. It is worth remembering that people accessing these social networks are very often not only looking for information about the business brands themselves but are increasingly looking for content that relaxes and entertains them. This is factor that in recent years has been contributing to the growth of influencer marketing and its application in the field of building brand awareness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The main objective of this study is to establish recommendations regarding the selection of an SME influencer in connection with

the launch of a brand on a foreign market by analysing a specific example of good practice. Two randomly selected profiles of foreign influencers targeting a transnational audience are analysed in detail using qualitative in-depth analysis and secondary data collection. One influencer was rated high-quality based on a quality index, the other low-quality. The aim was to identify differences in the approach of both influencers to corporate brand communication. The analysis is supported by theoretical insights from range of existing research on the personal brand of influencers, their profile metrics, communication strategy and post format. The study concludes by drawing out and defining a set of key characteristics that can help SMEs to select a suitable influencer, and a description of the process of selecting a suitable influencer is provided (including the actual characteristics of a high-quality influencer) that can inspire SMEs to enter the international market.

This research evaluates influencers and aimed on the influencer's brand and their ability to create attractive posts for their follower base. The researchers state that they have developed a case study and it is evident that this is a mixed-method approach.

The next chapter and authors, Wenye Mao, Dita Hommerová and Qiuyi Chen, represent an international collaboration between co-autohor from West Bohemia University in Czech Republic and two co-autors from Tohoku University in Japan. Their focus is on social media and the non-government sector. Social media is also utilized by third-sector organizations all over the world. In the past decade, scholars have been studying how non-governmental organizations/nonprofit organizations (NGO/NPO) use social media. However, the current body in the Chinese context is limited and scattered, and the unique context of China needs more examination due to its unique Through a systematic literature review, this chapter aims to understand how Chinese NGOs are using social media for communication, and what remains to be studied. Results indicate that the existing literature primarily focuses on social media platforms (such as Weibo, WeChat, and TikTok), examining from both organizational and message-level perspectives. Despite the potential of Chinese social media platforms to facilitate two-way dialogues and community building for Chinese NGOs, these organizations predominantly confine themselves to one-way communication strategies. Finally, this chapter discusses the research gaps and provides some future directions for academia.

This research study is similar to the first one in this publication, but the authors focus on different social media and countries. Again, a systematic literature review is conducted and VOSviewer software is used.

**Resources:**

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# Higher education institutions communicating sustainability on social media: Insights from literature

## Laura Völkl

### Introduction

Ever since societal consciousness for sustainability emerged, higher education institutions (HEIs) have shown strong engagement for sustainable development (Kohl et al., 2022). They know about the key role they play for progress on the path to sustainability (Kohl et al., 2022). By implementing sustainable practices within their organizations, HEIs can act as role models and accelerate their own transformation towards sustainability (Rieckmann, 2018). In their third mission, they can create an exchange with their external stakeholders and raise awareness for sustainability in the general public (Kohl et al., 2022). Through education, HEIs can prepare and support the leaders and professionals of the future to advance a more sustainable society (Kohl et al., 2022; Mulder, 2010). The leaders and professionals of tomorrow are the students and prospective applicants for study of today. Apart from formal education, a more informal, yet promising way to spread the sustainability message among this group appears to be through social media. As a representative survey conducted by German public broadcasting has shown, the age group of current and future students uses social media on a daily basis (Koch, 2023). In Germany, people between 14 and 29 years old (n = 2,000) spend on average 69 minutes per day consuming content on social media (Koch, 2023). Recently, Mohamad Saleh et al. (2024) found in their study among Malaysian and Indonesian students that communicating sustainability contents via social media proves impactful. They identified that sustainability-related social media usage, as well as its effectiveness and usefulness predict sustainable intention, which, in turn, influences sustainable behavior (Mohamad Saleh et al., 2024).

The very first paper that explicitly dealt with the sustainability communication of HEIs on social media was published by Hamid et al. in 2017. In a literature review, they synthesized how higher education addresses environmental sustainability and raises awareness among students and staff, either with or without the assistance of social media (Hamid et al., 2017). However, the review only covered papers published until the end of 2013 (Hamid et al., 2017). Albeit more than 10 years passed, and social media evolved rapidly during that time, several researchers note that research in the field is still scarce (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023; Esposito et al., 2021; Gori et al., 2020) and investigations are mostly limited to a national scope (Carrillo-Durán et al., 2023). This contribution conducts a systematic review of the scientific literature about HEIs' sustainability communication on social media. Thus, it sheds light on the status quo of the research on this specific topic and analyzes existing publications both from a bibliometric and thematic perspective. The chapter targets the academic community and practitioners alike and aims at providing concrete guidance for HEIs compiled from the research results and recommendations presented in the reviewed publications. The extracted findings shall support managers at HEIs in designing online communication strategies that specifically focus on sustainability. The contribution shall further put forward recommended actions for employees and students who operatively create sustainability-related content and administer the social media appearances of HEIs. Against this background, the systematic literature review is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: In what stage of development is the research on HEIs' sustainability communication on social media?
RQ1.1: Where has the existing research been conducted and published so far?
RQ1.2: How is the existing research interrelated, in terms of authorship and citations?

RQ2: What are the main findings of the research conducted on HEIs' sustainability communication on social media?

RQ3: Which recommendations and implications for practice do the researchers derive from their main findings?

## 1 Theoretical background

The topic of this chapter consists of three distinct thematic components, i.e. higher education institutions, sustainability, and social media. As the latter two are frequently and partially imprecisely used in colloquial language, it is beneficial to create a uniform understanding of both terms. For the purpose of this research, social media are defined as "a group of interaction-enabling tools ( … ) to connect Internet users (e.g., people, organizations) based on common interests by creating and sharing user-driven content ( … ) in order to create value (e.g., self-expression or a feeling of belonging for people, and business value for organizations ( … ))" (Van Looy, 2022, p. 29). A single social medium is what Van Looy (2022) refers to as "tool", that is, for example, Facebook, Instagram, or X (formerly Twitter). When users interact with posts published on a social medium, typically in the form of likes, comments, and shares, this is called engagement (Van Looy, 2022). The content of a post on a social medium can have a certain sentiment, an emotional tone, which is either positive, neutral, or negative (Van Looy, 2022).

Probably the best-known definition of sustainability or sustainable development is the one adopted by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (Hummels & Argyrou, 2021). It introduces sustainable development as a development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, n.d., p. 16). Sustainable development lies in the intersection of economic prosperity, social development and environmental protection (Hummels & Argyrou, 2021), what Elkington (1997, p. 2) refers to as the "triple bottom line". Drawing upon the definition of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009), scientists have increasingly criticized the notion of sustainable development as triple bottom line in the past years (Hummels & Argyrou, 2021). They argue for the need to set absolute limits and urge for society to limit emissions that structurally and over a long period of time transgress these boundaries (Hummels & Argyrou, 2021).

As a precondition, all publications included in the review deal with the communication activities of HEIs on social media. However, the screening process revealed that some of them do not address sustainability in the narrow sense, as defined above, but refer to similar concepts closely linked to sustainability. For instance, Esposito et al. (2021) investigated their university's communication on Twitter about its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR as a concept was introduced by Archie B. Carroll in 1979. It describes the responsibility of an enterprise towards its stakeholders and consists of four components, i.e. economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities (Carroll, 1991). The equivalent of CSR in the field of higher education is the concept of University Social Responsibility (USR), which is used by Carrillo-Durán et al. (2023) and Górska et al. (2024). USR calls upon HEIs "to incorporate ethical, social and environmental principles and values within their main functions and this must be achieved from a perspective based on satisfying the needs and expectations of stakeholders" (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017, p. 304).

## 2 Methods

Since the overall objective of this research is to compile findings and recommendations from existing scientific literature, a systematic literature review is considered an appropriate research method for the planned endeavor. It provides a comprehensive overview of the previous works on the topic under investigation and adheres to a structured, transparent, and replicable procedure to identify, screen and synthesize documents (Williams et al., 2021). The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology is a prominent example of such a review procedure (Page et al., 2021). As PRISMA is widely accepted and frequently applied (Page et al., 2021), it is also used in the present study.

A systematic literature review can cover quantitative and qualitative studies alike and usually seeks to arrive at a narrative synthesis of the examined documents which is accompanied by descriptive statistical summaries (Bryman, 2016). The present study takes up these two components. First, a bibliometric analysis is undertaken to show the status quo of the evolution in this particular field of research. Second, a narrative thematic analysis focuses on elaborating the recommendations given in the reviewed publications.

## 2.1 Selection of publications

To find publications for the systematic literature review, the Web of Science Core Collection was used as a database. Web of Science covers more than 250 subject areas and includes over 20,000 peer-reviewed journals (Clarivate, n.d.). Thus, the database provides access to the research results of various scientific disciplines and enables a comprehensive literature review (Virkus, 2016). To search Web of Science, search terms were derived from the research questions. The final search command contained the following search terms:

- First axis: "social media" AND communic* (detects communication, communicating, communicate)
- Second axis: "higher education institution" OR "university"
- Third axis: "sustainability"

Since the research questions demand from the examined documents to refer to all three domains at the same time, the three search axes were connected with the Boolean operator "AND" (Bryman, 2016). The search settings were adjusted to search title, abstract, keyword plus, and author keywords for the defined search terms.

In total, 39 entries were found in Web of Science that meet the search criteria. To facilitate understanding, two terms need to be distinguished in the description of the further review process. "Record" refers to an entry in the Web of Science database. A record incorporates title and abstract of an article indexed in the database (Page et al., 2021). The term "article" is chosen in this study to refer to the actual documents that are examined. An article supplies full information about a priorly conducted research (Page et al., 2021).

The systematic literature review proceeded with all 39 records identified in Web of Science and thereby applied the PRISMA methodology. Fig. 1 shows the flow diagram of the PRISMA procedure, taking Da Silva et al. (2022) as a model.

All 39 records identified from Web of Science were selected for screening. After reading title and abstract included in the record, 24 records were removed from the portfolio. In these cases, title and abstract made clear that the corresponding articles do not touch upon the sustainability communication of HEIs on social media. 15 articles were then retrieved and assessed for eligibility. After reading them in full-text, two more articles were removed, as they do not sufficiently deal with the sustainability communication of HEIs on social media either. The final portfolio consists of 13 full-text articles which were included in the subsequent analyses.

## 2.2 Bibliometric analysis

Bibliometric methods enable quantitative analyses of written publications (Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015). In the course of the present literature review, the portfolio of the 13 selected full-text articles underwent an initial quantitative descriptive analysis to show the current status of the research that already exists on the topic of HEIs' sustainability communication on social media. The bibliometric analysis examined the distribution of articles over the years, the journals in which they were published and their respective research areas, the number of times the articles were cited within Web of Science, and the authors' country affiliations. These metadata on the articles can be found in their corresponding records in the Web of Science database and were retrieved on 17 July 2024.

Moreover, the relatedness of the 13 articles was investigated with the help of the VOSviewer software (see Van Eck & Waltman, 2023). The publications were assessed regarding co-authorship. Apart from that, a citation network was identified based on the number of times the publications cite each other. The results of the relatedness analyses are illustrated through network visualization.
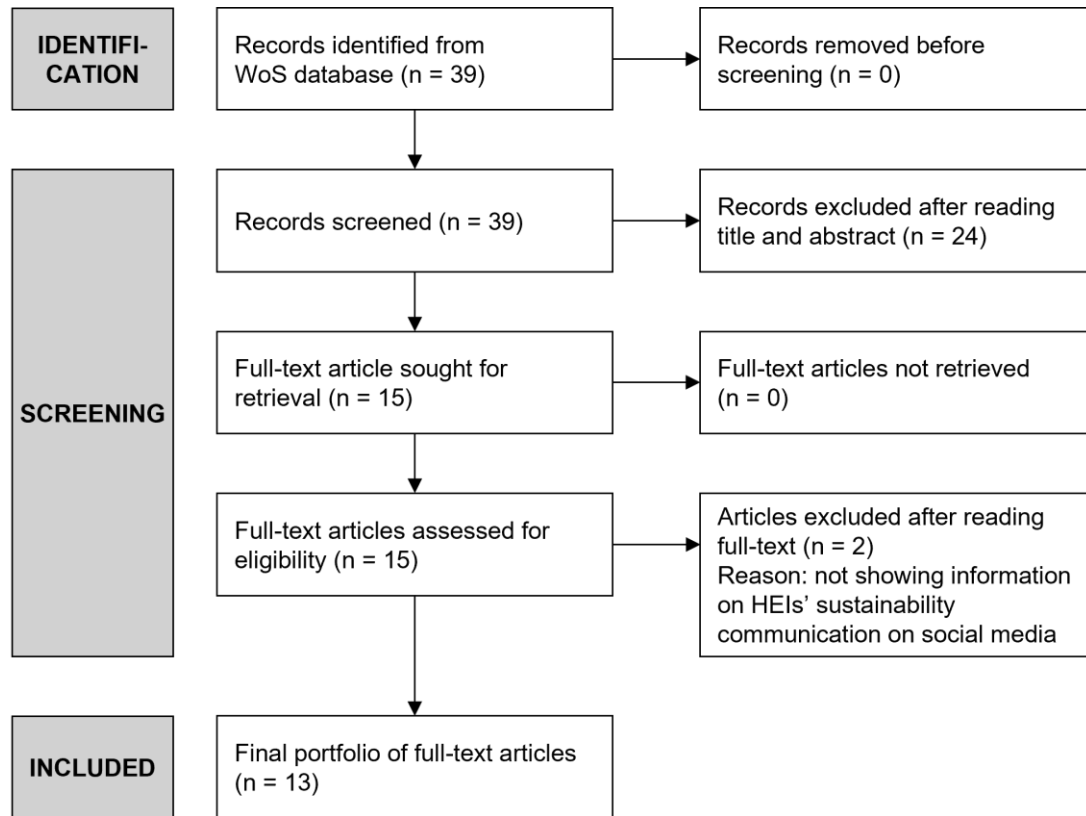


**Fig. 1: Procedure of the systematic literature review following the PRISMA methodology**

Source: own based on Da Silva et al. (2022) and Page et al. (2021)

## 2.3 Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis was structured with the help of an Excel-based grid, which was used as a protocol to document the results of the systematic review. For each article included in the review, the author key words, the main theme and the key sub-theme were recorded in the grid. Following the quality criteria proposed by Bryman (2016) and Shepherd et al. (2006), the systematic review first checked whether the individual article under examination is based on a theoretical framework and contains a literature review. Then the research presented in the article was assessed in detail. Research objectives, designs, and methods were registered in the grid, as well as the nature and formation of samples and the methods of data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2007; Bryman, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2006). After that, the five key findings per article were recorded (Bryman, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2006). The review further demanded a data prove for each key finding to support the interpretation (Bryman, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2006). In accordance with RQ3, the systematic literature review additionally compiled the five main recommendations given in each article under examination. These recommendations needed to be accompanied by a data prove, too (Bryman, 2016; Shepherd, 2006). In case there were more than five findings or recommendations per article, they were prioritized according to their relevance for the topic areas "higher education institutions", "social media", and "sustainability".

Once the thematic analysis grid was completed, the key findings and recommendations collected were clustered according to the subtopics they refer to. The clusters can be divided

into two categories: They either belong to the strategic domain of communication management or to the operative domain.

## 3 Results
## 3.1 Bibliometric analysis
The results of the bibliometric analysis show that research about the sustainability communication of HEIs on social media is still in its early stages. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the 13 articles included in the systematic literature review over the years. The first two articles were published in 2017. After two years of halt, three more papers were published in 2020, reaching the temporary peak. In 2024, so far, three articles have already been published, although the year is still running. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that research interest in this specific topic has increased recently.
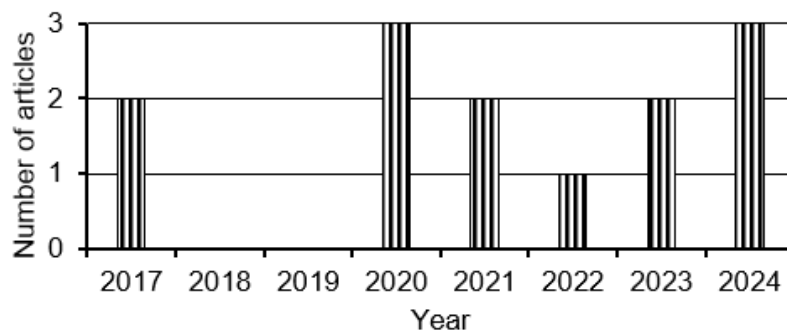


**Fig. 2: Distribution of articles over the years**

Source: own

The 13 articles included in the systematic literature review are dispersed across journals and corresponding research areas, as can be seen in Table 1.

**Tab. 1: Journals and corresponding research areas in which the articles were published**

| Journal | Research Area | Number of articles published therein |
|---|---|---|
| Sustainability | Science & Technology - Other Topics; Environmental Sciences & Ecology | 3 |
| International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education | Science & Technology - Other Topics; Education & Educational Research | 2 |
| Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education | Education & Educational Research | 1 |
| Mathematics | Mathematics | 1 |
| Journal of Computer Information Systems | Computer Science | 1 |
| Higher Education Quarterly | Education & Educational Research | 1 |
| Administrative Sciences | Business & Economics | 1 |
| Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences | Geology; Meteorology & Atmospheric Sciences; Water Resources | 1 |
| SAGE Open | Social Sciences - Other Topics | 1 |
| International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development | Science & Technology - Other Topics | 1 |

Source: own

So far, no dominant publication outlet has emerged, even though three of the articles were published in Sustainability. As to the research areas, three articles were published in journals belonging to the field of education and educational research, which aligns with the focus on

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higher education institutions. Two papers were released in journals attributed to environmental sciences, showing how strongly sustainability is connoted with environmental issues. Two more articles were published in journals assigned to the research areas of mathematics and computer science, owing to the research methods applied in them.

Table 2 lists all articles included in the literature review and the journals they were released in. It further indicates how many times each article has been cited within the Web of Science database as of 17 July 2024. The very first article about the sustainability communication of HEIs on social media, i.e. Hamid et al. (2017), has been cited most often, followed by two of the papers published in 2020. The remaining ones have seldomly been cited yet, which is plausible for articles that were released only recently.

**Tab. 2: Number of times the articles are cited within Web of Science**

| Times cited | Authors | Journal |
|---|---|---|
| 76 | Hamid et al. (2017) | International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education |
| 21 | Fuchs et al. (2020) | International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education |
| 16 | Gori et al. (2020) | Sustainability |
| 7 | Esposito et al. (2021) | Administrative Sciences |
| 3 | Bularca et al. (2022) | Sustainability |
| 3 | De Filippo et al. (2020) | Sustainability |
| 3 | Gravina et al. (2017) | Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences |
| 1 | Alonso-Cañadas et al. (2023) | SAGE Open |
| 1 | Carrillo-Durán et al. (2023) | Higher Education Quarterly |
| 1 | Górska et al. (2024) | Journal of Computer Information Systems |
| 0 | Aldaz, et al. (2021) | International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development |
| 0 | Albarrak & Sorour (2024) | Mathematics |
| 0 | Mohamad Saleh et al. (2024) | Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education |

Source: own

The citation network depicted in Figure 3 displays that Hamid et al. (2017) is a key reference for several of the other articles included in the review. Individual interlinkages are found between Bularca et al. (2022), Esposito et al. (2021), Gori et al. (2020), and Gorská et al. (2024), as well as between Carrillo-Durán et al. (2023) and De Filippo et al. (2020).
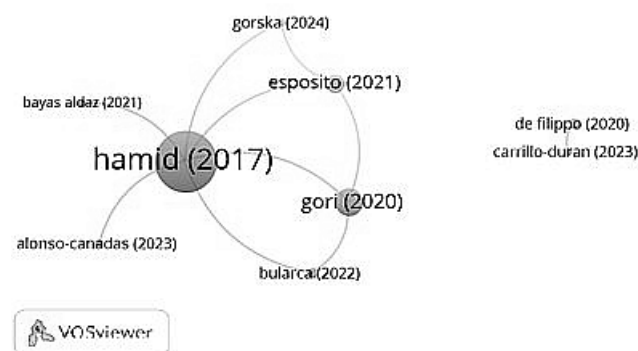


**Fig. 3: Citation network**

Source: own based on VOSviewer version 1.6.20

As can be seen from the country affiliations of the authors in Table 3, research on the sustainability communication of HEIs on social media especially takes place in Spain and Italy. However, the network visualization of co-authorship in Figure 4 reveals that the individual groups of authors are still isolated from one another and do not yet conduct research together, neither within one country.

**Tab. 3: Country affiliations of authors**

| Country affiliation | Authors |
|---|---|
| Brazil | Fuchs et al. (2020) |
| Italy | Gravina et al. (2017) |
| Italy | Gori et al. (2020) |
| Italy | Esposito et al. (2021) |
| Malaysia | Hamid et al. (2017) |
| Malaysia, China, Indonesia | Mohamad Saleh et al. (2024) |
| Poland | Górska et al. (2024) |
| Romania | Bularca et al. (2022) |
| Saudi Arabia, Egypt | Albarrak & Sorour (2024) |
| Spain | De Filippo et al. (2020) |
| Spain | Carrillo-Durán et al. (2023) |
| Spain | Alonso-Cañadas et al. (2023) |
| Spain, Germany | Aldaz et al. (2021) |

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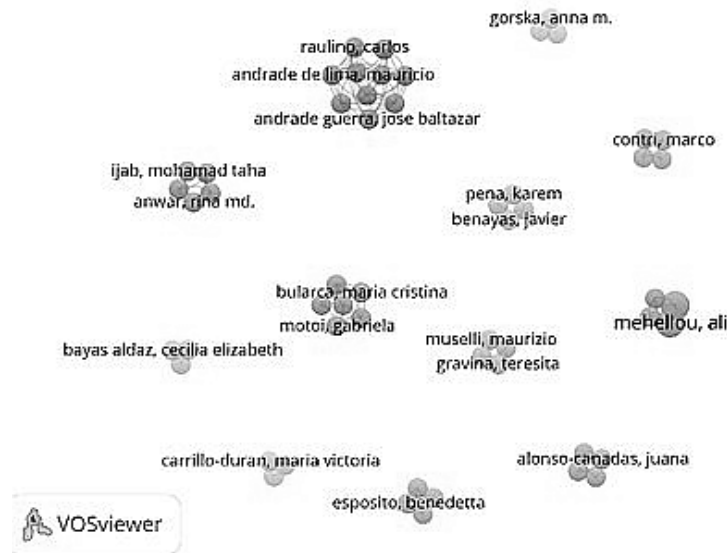


**Fig. 4: Co-authorship**

Source: own based on VOSviewer version 1.6.20

## 3.2 Findings and recommendations resulting from the thematic analysis

As described above, the findings and recommendations collected from the articles examined were divided into thematic clusters. Some of the clusters emphasized topics that belong to the strategic domain of communication management, while others can be allocated to the operative domain.

When it comes to strategic communication management, the importance of dedicated policies is highlighted in the literature. De Filippo et al. (2020) recommend implementing an institutional communication policy that disseminates the main advances in sustainability in mass media and on social media. The policy should be designed to share information and raise awareness among audiences about the HEI's sustainability activities (Aldaz et al., 2021; Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023). But, even more importantly, it should aim at actively involving the audience, that is, the HEI's stakeholders, and thus creating a stakeholder dialogue (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023, Esposito et al., 2021). Such a stakeholder dialogue can be advantageous for the HEI's management team, because it allows them to consider the stakeholders' perspectives when designing a management system and strategies for their institution (Esposito et al., 2021). Alonso-Cañadas et al. (2023) have shown in their

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research that active policies seeking to involve the HEI's stakeholders in the sustainable management system lead to greater online engagement.

Moreover, according to the results of Górska et al.'s (2024) study, decision-makers in HEIs can benefit in their own standing from sustainability-related communication on social media: Górska et al. (2024) found satisfaction with university management to be a significant mediator between the institution's communication about its USR activities on social media and the general satisfaction of the faculty. Hence, decision-makers in HEIs should cater for effective sustainability-related activities and make sure that they are promoted via social media, because this can significantly improve the satisfaction of internal stakeholders with university management, which, in turn, can lead to an overall increase in the general satisfaction of internal stakeholders (Górska et al., 2024).

When creating and implementing sustainability communication strategies, HEIs should consider and understand their audience (Fuchs et al., 2020). For tailoring effective strategies, it is essential to know who is part of the audience that is reached (Fuchs et al., 2020). In this context, it is, for example, relevant that social responsibility initiatives are more important to women than to men (Górska et al., 2024).

To be actionable, sustainability communication strategies and policies need translate into concrete plans. A joint planning of online communication should cover several digital channels, e.g., social media and webpages (Carillo-Durán et al., 2023). In addition, multi-directionality between the individual channels should be ensured to improve engagement (Carillo-Durán et al., 2023). This can, for instance, be achieved through linkages between websites and social media platforms (Carillo-Durán et al., 2023).

The communication plan builds a bridge to operative communication management and the corresponding topic clusters identified during the review. The first topic cluster relating to operative communication management addresses the choice of the social medium. The social medium that is the most frequent object of investigation is Twitter, now called "X", followed by Facebook. The Twitter accounts and tweets of HEIs are examined in eight articles (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024; Aldaz et al., 2021; Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023; De Filippo et al., 2020; Esposito et al., 2021; Fuchs et al., 2020; Gravina et al., 2017; Hamid et al., 2017), while Facebook pages and posts are assessed in seven articles (Bularca et al., 2022; De Filippo et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2020; Gori et al., 2020; Gravina et al., 2017; Hamid et al., 2017, Mohamad Saleh et al., 2024). The sustainability communication of HEIs on websites is studied in three articles (Carillo-Durán et al., 2023; De Filippo et al., 2020; Gravina et al., 2017), although websites are not a social medium in the narrow sense. Two articles deal with Instagram accounts and posts (Bularca et al., 2022; Mohamad Saleh et al., 2024). Figure 5 shows in how many articles each social medium is studied.

When HEIs are about to choose the social media to use for their sustainability communication, the literature under review clearly recommends considering Twitter and Facebook. According to De Filippo et al.'s (2020) study in Spain, these two platforms most actively disseminated sustainability research. Fuchs et al. (2020) stress their importance by calling "not having a Twitter account ( … ) a strategic mistake" (p. 1490) and a Facebook page one of the "pillar strategies related to sustainability communication" (p. 1489). Hamid et al. (2017) suggest HEIs to create a separate Twitter or Facebook account that is administered by sustainability representatives and exclusively dedicated to sustainability issues. Thereby, HEIs could enhance the legitimacy of their sustainability awareness measures (Hamid et al., 2017).
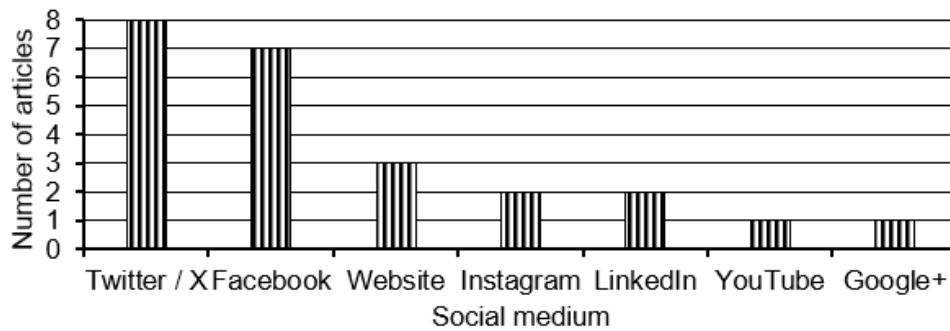
**Fig. 5: Number of articles in which each social medium is object of investigation**

Source: own

In their comparison between Facebook and Instagram, Bularca et al. (2022) detected that the European universities in their sample preferred to use Facebook to promote their sustainability actions. However, all universities analyzed registered more engagement, that is comments and appreciations or reactions, on Instagram than on Facebook (Bularca et al., 2022). This means that the chance of audience interaction with the HEI's sustainability posts is higher on Instagram than on Facebook (Bularca et al., 2022). Recently, Mohamad Saleh et al. (2024) found Instagram to be the most used social medium among Indonesian students to obtain and to communicate about sustainability information. Malaysian students, in contrast, obtained sustainability information most frequently through Facebook, but mostly communicated about it on Instagram (Mohamad Saleh et al., 2024).

As far as specifically the dissemination of scientific results in the field of sustainability is concerned, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, these large-scale social media used across the world, can be effective communication channels, as well (Gravina et al., 2017). Gravina et al. (2017) criticize that the social media which researchers predominantly use to share their results, such as LinkedIn and ResearchGate, are not easily accessible to the general public. Therefore, they advocate for reconsidering the current approach (Gravina et al., 2017). In order to provide access to scientific outcomes for the largest public possible, papers dealing with sustainability research should be published in open access journals (De Filippo et al., 2020). De Filippo et al. (2020) have shown that the impact of sustainability research on social media is bigger for papers published in open access journals than for papers in subscription-only journals. Therefore, if it is of primary importance for HEIs to increase the visibility of their sustainability research, they should pursue open access publications (De Filippo et al., 2020). Content-wise, clear, informative messages and explicative notes are recommended to enhance the readers' propensity to sharing scientific articles (Gravina et al., 2017). Ultimately, HEIs could increase the impact of their scientific output in the field of sustainability on social media by providing training offers to researchers (De Filippo et al., 2020). Here, De Filippo et al. (2020) mention the example of two institutions that have considerably increased their number of mentions on social media thanks to an online course on "How to improve scientific dissemination through social media".

One of the key features of social media is that they allow the recipients of a post to directly interact and enter into a dialogue with its sender. Thus, social media can serve as effective platforms for HEIs to spread their sustainability activities and thereby foster active participation and engagement among their audience (Hamid et al., 2017). To enhance audience engagement, HEIs need to create a two-way communication with their audience about sustainability topics (Esposito et al., 2021; Gori et al., 2020). Two-way communication on social media can, for example, be achieved by guiding and supporting the digital debate, posting interactive content that stimulates discussion, e.g., questions or polls, and actively responding to stakeholders' requests and comments (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024; Esposito et al. 2021, Gori et al., 2020). In their investigation of the tweets published by the University of

Salerno, Esposito et al. (2021) detected that the majority of the university's tweets about its CSR already classify as two-way communication. However, the number of retweets remains low for both CSR related and non-CSR related tweets (Esposito et al., 2021). This aligns with the results of Gori et al.'s (2020) assessment of the sustainability-related Facebook posts of the University of Florence, which found that the level of stakeholder interaction is rather low and more frequently takes place through likes and shares than through comments. Yet, both Alonso-Cañadas et al. (2023) and Esposito et al. (2021) registered higher engagement levels for sustainability-related social media content compared to other content. Among sustainability-related social media posts, audience engagement also differs according to the specific subtopic addressed. In the case of the Twitter account of the University of Salerno, for example, tweets on ethical issues reached a higher average number of retweets (Esposito et al., 2021). Besides, in Gori et al.'s (2020) study, stakeholders mostly interacted on Facebook posts about community engagement, followed by research, campus operations, and teaching. The domain of campus operations stimulated deeper audience interaction than the other categories, which can be seen from the higher average number of comments (Gori et al., 2020). The interest in campus operations is also confirmed by Alonso-Cañadas et al. (2023). According to their findings, HEIs that share their energy and water conservation practices on social media receive more commitment from their internal stakeholders online (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023). Apart from that, the social medium used makes a difference in the level of audience engagement, as Bularca et al. (2022) pointed out. The European universities in their sample achieved more audience engagement in the form of appreciation and comments on Instagram than reactions and comments on Facebook (Bularca et al., 2024).

In terms of the contents that HEIs spread in their sustainability communication on social media, the articles under review show a heterogeneous picture. On the one hand, several articles state that the sustainability-related posts on social media mostly deal with the classic missions of HEIs, i.e. teaching, research, and third mission (Aldaz et al., 2021; Carillo-Durán et al., 2023; Gori et al., 2020). Within the domain of third mission, especially community engagement is a frequently mentioned topic (Gori et al., 2020). On the other hand, campus operations and environmental protection measures carried out on campus, such as recycling and emissions reduction, were observed to be the most frequent subject of HEIs' sustainability-related posts (Bularca et al., 2022). In their systematic review of scientific papers published between 2000 and 2013, Hamid et al. (2017) found that a better quality of life was often brought forward in the literature as a benefit of environmental sustainability. Therefore, the authors recommend emphasizing the message of a better quality of life when communicating sustainability on social media (Hamid et al., 2017). Lastly, HEIs are well advised to diversify the contents they share about sustainability on social media. To ensure relevance, Albarrak & Sorour (2024) recommend aligning the contents of social media posts with trends that are currently pertinent to the HEIs' key domains. In addition, HEIs should make the formats they use on social media more visual and more diverse, e.g. through images, videos, and infographics, as this enhances visibility and audience engagement (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024; Bularca et al., 2022).

The sentiment of the contents that HEIs post on social media about sustainability issues have been analyzed by Albarrak & Sorour (2024), Aldaz et al. (2021), and Alonso-Cañadas et al. (2023). All three assessed tweets and classified the majority of them as positive in sentiment (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024; Aldaz et al., 2021; Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023). In Aldaz et al.'s (2021) study, especially tweets about health concerns linked to transportation problems, as well as about natural damage and its impact on social welfare had negative sentiment. Alonso-Cañadas et al. (2023) highlight the benefit of positive sentiment for sustainability-related tweets since they can influence stakeholders' online engagement with the institution. The researchers suggest publishing messages with clearly positive sentiment in order to motivate stakeholders to participate in the institution's social media communication (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023). Additionally, Albarrak & Sorour (2024) recommend applying tools to monitor sentiment and, if necessary, adjust communication strategies to maintain a positive institutional image.

Finally, HEIs should not only plan their sustainability communication activities on social media, but also concretely schedule them to increase engagement. Monitoring user activity helps to identify the days of the week and times of day at which most users are active (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024). Posting during these time slots can augment engagement (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024). Besides, the frequency of posts needs to be optimized. Here, Gori et al. (2020) contribute that posting one or two posts per day has a positive impact on engagement.

Table 4 summarizes the above elaborations. It lists the recommendations derived from existing research in compact practical guidelines for management and professionals at HEIs.

**Tab. 4: Guidelines for communicating sustainability at HEIs on social media**

| Strategic communication management | | • Implement an institutional communication policy that disseminates the main advances in sustainability in mass media and on social media (De Filippo et al., 2020).<br>• Aim at actively involving the audience and thereby create stakeholder dialogue (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023, Esposito et al., 2021).<br>• Consider and understand the audience to tailor effective strategies (Fuchs et al., 2020).<br>• Develop a joint online communication plan that covers several digital channels (Carrillo-Durán et al, 2023).<br>• Ensure multi-directionality between the individual digital channels (Carrillo-Durán et al, 2023). |
|---|---|---|
| Operative communication management | Choice of the social medium | • Create a separate account, e.g. on Facebook, that is managed by sustainability representatives and exclusively dedicated to sustainability issues (Hamid et al., 2017).<br>• Use Instagram to increase audience engagement with sustainability posts (Bularca et al., 2022). |
| | Audience engagement | • Create a two-way communication with the audience about sustainability topics (Esposito et al., 2021; Gori et al., 2020).<br>• Make use of sustainability-related content to increase engagement (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023; Esposito et al., 2021). |
| | Contents | • Emphasize campus operations and community engagement in posts about the HEI's sustainability activities (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023; Gori et al., 2020).<br>• Align the content with trends currently relevant to the HEI's key domains (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024).<br>• Use more diverse and more visual formats (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024; Bularca et al., 2022). |
| | Dissemination of scientific results | • Large-scale social media can be used for the dissemination of research results, as well (Gravina et al., 2017).<br>• Consider publishing papers dealing with sustainability research in open access journals (De Filippo et al., 2020).<br>• Use clear, informative messages and explicative notes (Gravina et al., 2017).<br>• Offer trainings for researchers about how to use social media for the dissemination of scientific output (De Filippo et al., 2020). |
| | Sentiment | • Use positive sentiment for sustainability-related contents (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024; Aldaz et al., 2021; Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023). |
| | Scheduling | • Schedule posts according to days and times when most users are active (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024).<br>• Increase the frequency of posts (Gori et al., 2020). |

Source: own
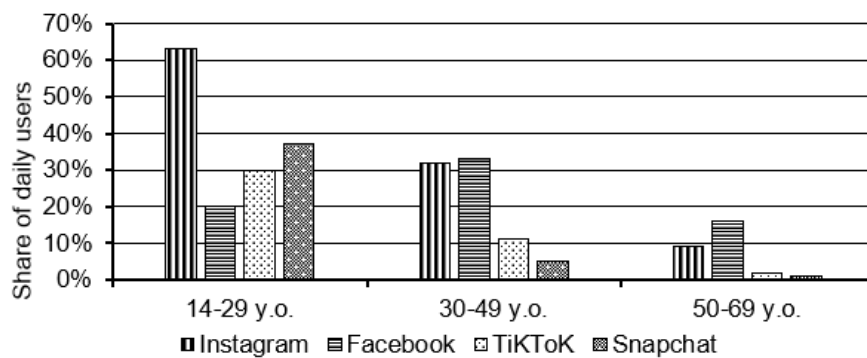
**Fig. 6: Share of daily users per age group and social medium**

## 4 Discussion

All in all, it is worth to note that Twitter, now X, and Facebook are the two social media that are examined by the majority of the articles under review. The focus on Twitter in research contrasts with the actual usage pattern. In Germany, for example, only 4% of the population (n = 2,000) use Twitter daily (Koch, 2023). On a global scale, the number of daily active Twitter users declined since Elon Musk acquired the medium in October 2022 and renamed it as X (Ingram, 2024). In 2023, Instagram outpaced Facebook as the most used social medium in Germany (Koch, 2023). 25% of the population (n = 2,000) use Instagram daily, compared to 20% for Facebook (Koch, 2023). The preference for Instagram is particularly strong among the age group of the 14- to 29-year-old, as Figure 6 illustrates. This age group comprises current and future students of HEIs. Since Snapchat and TiKToK are ranked second and third in daily use, the inclination toward more visually oriented social media in that age group becomes apparent. All three primarily work with pictures and videos, whereas Facebook is still more text-based (Koch, 2023). The shift to Instagram and the growing relevance of more visual social media has got several implications for research and practice. Researchers should seek to increasingly incorporate content displayed on Instagram in their research about social media in general. For their communication activities, HEIs should seize the trend towards Instagram and provide more visual content (Albarrak & Sorour, 2024). This can prove beneficial in terms of interaction with stakeholders, because there is more user engagement on Instagram than on Facebook (Bularca et al., 2022). Sustainability-related contents on a visually oriented social medium make interaction with stakeholders even more likely, since they trigger more engagement than contents not related to sustainability (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2023; Esposito et al., 2021).

## Conclusions and further research

The systematic literature review undertaken in this contribution showed that the sustainability communication of HEIs on social media is still a young field of study and thus provides multiple avenues for further research of both qualitative and quantitative nature. The review is limited by the fact that the thematic analysis was conducted by one single person, which can imply subjectivity of the results. A second limitation is the narrow scope of the search for documents to include in the review. In a potential update of the literature review, additional databases can be consulted to search for further publications to examine. More or broader search terms can be used to identify publications that closely relate to HEIs' communication about sustainability on social media, but do not explicitly mention the term "sustainability" in title, abstract or keywords. Apart from that, backward searching can be applied to detect additional publications to include in the review from the references of the initial articles, as, for example, Da Silva et al. (2022) did. As the bibliometric analysis showed, research about HEIs communicating sustainability on social media is presently evolving. Therefore, the

developments in the field shall be observed and the literature review shall be updated at an appropriate time in the future.

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# Use of social media marketing for higher education: status and future development

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### Introduction

In the context of advancing globalisation, higher education worldwide has experienced a paradigm shift away from state control and closed, bureaucratic administration towards market-oriented institutions (Kschesniak & Harwardt, 2020). This change also represents a reaction to the fundamentally changing market conditions in higher education: the number of students is increasing worldwide, leading to an increase in public and private universities (Hachmeister et al., 2024).

In response to the changes in the environment and the competitive situation described above, an increasingly market-oriented approach is emerging in higher education management, in which students are seen and treated as customers. It can be stated that the deregulation of the higher education system and increasing competition are leading to a progressive shift in market power to the side of the customer, i.e. the potential and current students. This changed perception of students is leading to a gradual incorporation of current marketing theories and concepts into strategic decision-making in higher education (Krezel & Krezel, 2017).

In addition, it can be stated that the extremely heterogeneous target group of prospective and current students living in a completely globalized and digitalised world can no longer be reached using the communication channels previously used (Herrmann, 2019; Kschesniak & Harwardt, 2020). Against this background, the use of social media marketing to address the primary target group, the students, has become increasingly important for higher education institutions (HEIs) and must be organized and used in line with the strategic objectives of the individual HEI (Kaiser, 2023; Maresova et al., 2020; Metag & Schäfer, 2017).

Despite these processes of change and the associated expectations placed on higher education communication, there is a notable gap in research, particularly in relation to social media marketing. Quantitative data on the number of employees in the communication departments of for HEIs who deal with social media marketing or their financial resources are rarely available. Structural information, such as the integration of the departments into their respective organizational units, their cooperation with other units within the for HEIs the strategic orientation of social media marketing or the existence of guidelines have also hardly been considered empirically so far (Leßmöller et al., 2016; Mazurek et al., 2019; Metag & Schäfer, 2017).

Against this background, the present study addresses the question of how HEIs currently operate and manage their social media marketing from an organizational and strategic perspective, which channels they predominantly use and how the content production process is organized. In addition, it is asked what challenges HEIs face regarding social media marketing and what requirements are seen for the future development of social media marketing at HEIs. The focus is on social media communication with prospective and current students.

## 1 Theoretical background
### 1.1 Communication chanels in transition

The use of different social media formats, which are characterized by interaction, participation and collaboration, has fundamentally changed higher education communication. These formats include microblogging services (e.g. Twitter), collective formats such as social networks (e.g. Facebook), video and photo platforms (e.g. YouTube and Instagram), individual formats such as blogs, podcasts and wikis (e.g. Wikipedia) (acatech, 2017).

While communication at HEIs used to be organized primarily by the editorial offices of the mass media and was unidirectional, digitalization has enabled a pluralization and diversification of distribution channels. The constantly growing variety of communication

channels, as well as their fast pace, require a careful selection of the channels relevant to the institutions, as well as adaptability to ever-changing media environments. Social media also demands an adaptation of the communication style and an associated reduction in complexity to communicate in an understandable way (Könneker, 2020). In addition, online platforms offer opportunities for more selective communication to specific target groups than traditional media, as their algorithms promote a personalized user experience (Schnurr & Mäder, 2020).

According to a representative online study by ARD/ZDF, 32% of Germans over the age of 14 were regularly active on Facebook in 2023, i.e. weekly or more often. However, popularity among the under-30s has been falling since 2016. In contrast, video portals such as YouTube, which is used daily by 66.5% of 14 to 29-year-olds, are showing dynamic growth. Instagram is particularly popular with younger users and is used at least once a week by 74% of 20 to 29-year-olds. TikTok has also already built up a good community. 44% of 14 to 29-year-olds use the app at least once a week (Himmler & Hager, 2024).

## 1.2 Changing roles

Various actors are involved in higher education communication, whose roles are also changing because of digitalization and the associated change in the understanding of the content and objectives of communication. In particular, the mediation services of traditional intermediaries – for example in the form of mass media editorial offices and journalism – have become less relevant. Traditionally, intermediaries acted as gatekeepers, selecting, checking, processing and distributing relevant information according to specific criteria. The internet is now giving rise to new intermediaries – these are social media platforms and their operators (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Google, Twitter). They not only provide the necessary digital technology, but also influence usage practices and organize or filter information using algorithms in constantly updating streams or feeds (acatech, 2017; Siegel et al., 2021).

Other important players are the communication and marketing departments of HEIs. They are responsible for mediating between the institution and the media. They manage and control the dialogue of higher education institution members on social media, provide guidelines and set framework conditions (Siegel et al., 2021). In addition, the planning and production of content for social media is largely carried out by the communication and marketing departments of HEIs (Mazurek et al., 2019).

Students are also taking on a new, more active role in the context of social media marketing. Particularly for product-related information processes, which also include the selection of study programs, user-generated content is often trusted more than information provided by professional sources. Peer-to-peer communication at eye level is considered to be particularly effective in this context. To communicate successfully as a HEI in social media and networks, active participation and involvement of students as communicators is therefore required (Haustein et al., 2020). However, studies show that only a small proportion of the published content is produced by the target group of students (Mazurek et al., 2019).

## 1.3 Why use social media in higher education?

HEIs use social media marketing with different objectives and in different phases of the student life cycle. For instance, the use of social media in student marketing is about brand and image building, marketing study programs, disseminating information to specific target groups or building and maintaining relationships with the target group of potential or current students (Mazurek et al., 2019; Pharr, 2016).

Adverts, flyers and brochures or web-based activities such as online advertising, websites or email campaigns are all examples of marketing communication activities carried out on a large scale in the higher education sector. The evolution of the digital age, which goes hand in hand with the changing habits and preferences of internet users, has significantly reduced the importance and effectiveness of using some of the above-mentioned means, which have

gradually been replaced by more innovative ways of reaching Generation Y. As studies show, this generation does not only favor more digital interaction with brands, but also considers opinions and direct contact via social media to be more credible and valuable than interaction based on traditional marketing solutions (Janoskova & Kliestikova, 2018).

For example, it was found that the use of social media is particularly important in connection with enrolment activities at HEIs (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). By using social media, enrolment activities can be made more friendly and direct, as immediate interaction with the target group is possible. In addition, applicants' experience of contacting their chosen HEI is described as more personalized (Bryant & Bodfish, 2014). Potential applicants are also reached in an environment in which they feel most comfortable (Wilson, 2013). Regardless of the type of social platforms used, potential students expect personalized communication and authenticity (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011).

During their time at HEI, the use of social media can encourage students to become more actively involved in the academic life of their HEI (Dumford & Miller, 2018). In addition, student loyalty increases when they perceive that their HEI communicates well and responds to their needs through the communication on social media (Maresova et al., 2020).

## 2 Research methodology

A qualitative study design was chosen to answer the research questions. With the aim of obtaining information as sensitively as possible, experts from communications and marketing departments of German HEIs were interviewed. The survey was conducted in the form of guided interviews.

## 2.1 Data collection

Expert interviews are generally used in empirical social research for enquiries about the practical or experiential knowledge of selected persons on a limited subject area. These people can be described as experts based on their knowledge status. The aim is to obtain structured information and analyze it (Döring & Bortz, 2016; Gläser & Laudel, 2010).

In this study, potential participants were invited individually by email to take part in the interviews. The invitations were sent to representatives of 80 HEIs, the selection of HEIs was based on the size (number of students) and type of HEI. 20 participants were recruited for the expert interviews, which made it possible to achieve a return rate of 25%. The inclusion criterion for participation was written informed consent. The sampling followed a consecutive approach, which means that participants were included in the study one after the other and new participants were included in the study until a comprehensive set of data on all study questions was available. The experts were people employed in the marketing department of different HEIs on the following positions:

- strategic positions (decision-making in budget matters, course of action) – 3 experts
- management positions (budget implementation, team management) – 10 experts
- specialist positions (project implementation) – 7 experts

The interviews were conducted between March and May 2024. No personal data was collected through the interview questions. All participants were assured before the start of the interview that their anonymity would be preserved and that no data that could be traced back to participants or the HEI would be published. The interviews were each conducted by two researchers. The expert survey was designed as a semi-structured interview.

The interview was introduced with a brief description of the research objective and design as well as an overview of the central questions and the methodological approach. The status of the interviewers was also explained. The interview guidelines covered the following topics: Organizational assignment of social media marketing and cooperation with other units of the HEI, use of platforms and of user-generated content, existence of an explicit strategy or guideline, handling of critical communication content, measurement of success and assessment of the further development of social media marketing at the HEI. The duration of

the interviews varied between 23 and 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in video conferences.

## 2.2 Data analysis

The basis for the data analysis were the transcripts of the interviews, whereby only key passages were transcribed. The remaining phases of the interviews were paraphrased and summarized. The interview data was extracted using qualitative content analysis based on a multi-stage analysis process according to (Gläser & Laudel (2010) and classified into a category scheme. They were initially analyzed using an inductive approach, in which the main categories for the analysis were based on the core aspects of the research questions. In addition, further topics were identified in a deductive approach and the category system was adapted and further developed accordingly, new codes were added, and existing codes were subdivided or summarized. Uncertainties about categories were discussed between the researchers. On this basis, the categories were adapted or expanded.

## 3 Results
## 3.1 Management of Social Media Marketing at German Higher Education Institutions

From an organizational perspective, the area of social media marketing at the HEIs surveyed is predominantly located in the communications and marketing departments. A smaller proportion of HEIs (35%) state that they have a separate organizational unit for social media marketing. In addition, there are often cross-relationships with other units (e.g. faculties or institutes) that also generate content or maintain their own profiles. In most cases, at 70% of the HEIs surveyed, social media marketing aimed at the target group of international students is located in the international offices.

However, the way in which social media marketing is managed varies in terms of the number of persons involved, the budget available, the existence of an explicit strategy or guidelines, the monitoring of social media activities or support from external agencies.

In this study, 10% of the HEIs state that they have more than six persons involved in social media marketing. 5% HEI has four persons in this area, 20% of the HEIs have two to three persons involved in the process and 65% of the HEIs surveyed have only one person or less managing social media activities. Interestingly, the number of people involved in social media marketing in the sample of HEIs surveyed appears to be independent of their size.

65% of HEIs see a need for improvement in the process of information flow and coordination between internal departments involved in social media marketing. This includes, for example, responsibilities for planning and creating content, as well as setting up and operating official accounts of the HEI.

20% of the HEIs state that their budget for advertising on social media is between 0 and 25% of their total marketing budget. 35% of the HEIs spend 25 to 50% of their total marketing budget on this type of advertising. 30% of the HEIs spend more than 50% of their budget on social media ads. 15% of the HEIs surveyed were unable to state the exact or even approximate value of their expenditure on social media ads.

At the strategic level, the study examines the existence of an explicit strategy for social media marketing, which pursues overarching and long-term goals, as well as the associated guidelines, which include general rules of behavior for daily use. 80% of the HEIs surveyed state that they have defined neither an explicit university-wide social media strategy nor a guideline. 15% of the surveyed HEIs state that they base their work on the general university strategy, 5% of the HEIs state that the activities in social media marketing are derived from the university's communication or marketing strategy. None of the HEIs surveyed has written guidelines.

The monitoring of social media activities is considered very important by all the HEIs surveyed, although it is carried out with varying frequency and to varying degrees. The

monitoring of social media activities ranges from weekly (15% of the HEIs), monthly (30% of the HEIs) and quarterly (20% of the HEIs) to annually (10% of the HEIs). 25% of the HEIs state that they do not monitor. In all cases, the reasons for this are a lack of personnel resources. The scope of monitoring in relation to the key figures and metrics used varies considerably among the universities surveyed. Most institutions (65%) work with the key figures provided by the platforms they use. Only 35% of the HEIs work with additional analysis tools.

The involvement of external organizations in social media marketing is very rare at the HEIs surveyed. 15% of the HEIs use the services of social media agencies.

## 3.2 Platforms and content

All the HEIs surveyed use Instagram as their primary communication channel in social media marketing and currently consider it to be the most important channel for addressing students. 85% of the HEIs use Facebook and 55% state that they use YouTube. It is interesting to note that the platform that is most popular with the youngest internet users – TikTok – is only used by 10% of the HEIs surveyed. The reasons given for not currently using TikTok were ethical and data protection concerns, as well as insufficient staff capacity. However, 70% of the HEIs state that they would consider actively using TikTok in the future. LinkedIn, which plays an important role in building relationships with graduates and potential employees as well as being a channel for research communication, is used by 90% of the HEIs.

The social media channels of all HEIs surveyed are very consistent in their posting behavior and on average post at least one feed post per day on Instagram. Posting on Facebook and LinkedIn is not quite as frequent. Posts on these platforms are published two to five times a week.

All HEIs state that the content used is largely produced by the central communication and marketing departments. The content consists of a mixture of self-developed and occasion-related topics (e.g. news, events, promotion of degree programs). 25% of the HEIs surveyed have defined categories or pillars (e.g. Research Friday, insights into degree programs) for the basic structuring of content, which are used on a regular basis. Decentralized units (e.g. faculties or institutes) are often involved in the production of content, providing ideas or topics for content creation.

Only 10% of the HEIs have an internal training or counselling concept for the creation of content or the consistent management of accounts. All other HEIs also consider trainings and counselling for persons outside the communication and marketing departments on planning and creating content to be important but are currently unable to implement this due to a lack of personnel capacity.

At most of the HEIs surveyed (90%), students and staff are involved in the creation of content. Most of the HEIs (85%) state that their objectives are to increase the authenticity of their communication and to achieve greater reach and engagement. A higher proportion of user-generated content from students in social media marketing is stated as a key measure in this context (80% of universities).10% of the HEIs use corporate influencers, however three other HEIs state (15%) that they are also planning to involve influencers. At 80% of the HEIs, students regularly take over the HEI's Instagram channel and show, for example, their very personal view of everyday university life, the campus or a stay abroad. 90% of the HEIs surveyed regularly run social media ads on the various channels.

70% of the HEIs use social media ads as an integral part of student marketing in the form of permanent campaigns with a fixed budget, while the remaining 30% of the HEIs use ads on an ad hoc basis e.g. initiated by faculties.

All HEIs surveyed have regularly updated editorial plans that structure the content and scheduling of posts. To plan posts, 35% of the HEIs use specialized tools to simplify technical and editorial processes and for evaluation.

None of the HEIs has a written policy for dealing with unwanted content or negative reactions. However, all the HEIs surveyed have verbally communicated procedures.

### 3.3 Challenges and future requirements

The aim of the study is also to identify the most important challenges and requirements for the further development of social media marketing at HEIs in Germany. All the HEIs surveyed stated that social media is an important part of their institution's marketing activities. Most of the HEIs surveyed confirm that the activities carried out in social media depend on the budgets and personnel capacities available for this purpose. However, both the given financial and personnel capacities are considered insufficient by the majority of HEIs surveyed (65%). 60% of HEIs see opportunities for improvement in social media marketing through systematic social listening and monitoring with additional analysis tools.

In addition, 55% of the HEIs surveyed see a lack of understanding among academic and administrative staff of the importance of social media at HEI's as one of the biggest challenges. They would like to see an urgent improvement in communication and cooperation with relevant departments, especially with decentralized units (e.g. faculties and institutes). In addition, 60% of the HEIs surveyed see potential for improvement in the systematic involvement of students or alumni as an important success factor to produce authentic and up-to-date content and better reach the target groups of potential applicants and students.

### Conclusions and limitations

Social media are an extremely significant communication channel in the world of today, determining also changes in the way HEIs interact with their stakeholders (Mazurek et al., 2019; Pharr, 2016).

The potential of social media should be taken advantage of especially in marketing communications, including enrolment activities, communication with students, or the broadly defined brand building (Pharr, 2016). To find out how HEIs in Germany benefit from and use social media, 20 participants were recruited for expert interviews. The results of the study carried out make it possible to draw various conclusions.

The study shows that at the HEIs analyzed, numerous departments and people are involved in the creation of content and the use of various social media channels. On the other hand, the majority of HEIs do not have a university-wide social media strategy or guidelines that provide a basis for a consistent presence. Given the large number of departments and people involved and the complexity of processes at HEIs, the development of a university-wide social media strategy appears to be of great importance. The development of a social media strategy should begin by analyzing the existing social media marketing of the HEI. The first step of developing an effective social media strategy is setting overall goals and objectives, which identify a clear focus for social media efforts. The next essential step in strategy development is defining the target groups. The use of social media at HEIs involves additional considerations compared to other sectors because it has a segmented audience composed of diverse key target groups such as prospective students, current students, or alumni (Kaiser, 2023).

In addition, primary platforms should be selected. It is crucial to establish platform-specific approaches. Each social media platform has its own culture, special features and user preferences (Kreutzer, 2023). Finally, it should be determined how the followers gained through the marketing measures can be tied to the HEI's social media presence in the long term and encouraged to interact. Equally important is the question of whether, for example, followers can be transferred to other marketing channels, such as the website or events at the HEI.

Based on the social media strategy, guidelines for the use of social media at the HEI should be developed (Kaiser, 2023). These could, for example, contain a style guide or regulate the use of social networks, photo or video platforms, compliance with legal regulations or the handling of negative posts. Processes and responsibilities for the creation of content and the management of accounts should also be defined to improve the HEIs internal workflow between the different departments involved. Guidelines provide a basis for

an independent participation of target groups, such as students or alumni, in social media marketing and at the same time reduce the support required by the core teams.

As already pointed out, social media activities at HEI usually involve many persons and channels. For a better orientation of the various target groups, it could be interesting to set up a social media directory on the HEI´s website, also called a social media hub (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2024), that lists and categorizes all the HEI's social media accounts. As an external point of contact, hubs provide direct access to the HEI´s channels and enable users to follow them with confidence because they can be identified as official accounts. Application forms, guidelines and requirements can also be linked here for easy internal and external access.

60% of the HEIs surveyed see potential for improvement in the systematic involvement of students and alumni as an important success factor. One measure suggested by HEIs surveyed is the development of a generally accessible admissions program so that individuals can apply for a takeover or can become an ambassador of the HEI. Especially first-hand content is particularly relevant and authentic for potential target groups. This type of communication can serve to present everyday university life, correct "misconceptions" about studying, reduce fears and create an opportunity for dialogue (Haustein et al., 2020). Takeovers and the employment of ambassadors or influencers require mutual trust, but also control mechanisms. If students are allowed to post content on the university channel, these people must be carefully selected in advance. Guidelines, precise arrangements and a written agreement on the conditions set the framework for a trusting collaboration. During the campaign, constant monitoring is essential to be able to quickly detect and correct any deviations from the agreement (Haustein et al., 2020).

Only 10% of the HEIs offer trainings or counselling for social media marketing. However, training and counselling services at HEIs for the various target groups could foster a consistent presence of the HEIs in social media, increase the engagement of the target groups and encourage the creation of user-generated content.

The majority of HEIs surveyed see potential for improvement in social media marketing through systematic social listening. HEIs can use social listening to conduct market research in social media by identifying and evaluating the opinions or discussions of their target groups. This offers opportunities to learn about relevant topics and trends from their target groups or to gather information about their specific experiences with the HEI. This information can be used both for communication with the respective target group and for improvements at the HEI, e.g. in the development of study programs. These insights can also serve as a basis for constantly adapting and updating the social media strategy.

Establishing and maintaining open, target group-orientated communication with potential and current students on social media will remain a constantly changing task in the future. However, due to the great importance of social media for users, it seems worthwhile for HEIs to invest in further developing their social media presence. An effective social media strategy can be an opportunity and possibly a competitive advantage even for smaller universities that are not so well known.

Although the results of this study have practical and theoretical implications for social media marketing at HEIs, there are still some limitations. The main limitation of the study is the small sample size: only 20 HEIs were surveyed. The data was obtained through a random sample, which is acceptable for an explanatory study. In addition, the survey was conducted among respondents with different backgrounds and marketing positions within the institutions, which could have influenced the differences in responses between HEIs. Another limiting factor of the study is that it was only possible to survey the HEIs' self-thematisation, but not how target groups (e.g. prospective or current students) react to the social media presence and how they perceive the HEIs. Furthermore, the research findings are based on HEIs in Germany. It seems essential to repeat and deepen the survey conducted to capture the dynamics of the development of the use of social media marketing of German HEIs. It would be also useful to carry out comparative studies with other countries or markets.

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# Trust on social media – a multinational perspective

## Michal Mičík

## Introduction

Trust has consistently played a crucial role in our personal and professional lives throughout history, impacting both online and offline interactions. According to Nieto et al. (2014), trust serves as the basic prerequisite for successful communication. This concept has evolved significantly over the years, particularly with the advent of the internet. Nieto et al. (2014) and Mičík et al. (2022) further observe that trust has increasingly shifted to the online environment in recent years. In earlier times, people primarily trusted their loved ones and close acquaintances. However, in the current digital age, there is a notable trend of trusting the contributions and information shared by strangers on the internet. This shift has profound implications for how trust operates in today's highly globalized and competitive business world.

The role of social media in fostering trust has become increasingly more significant. As trust forms the foundation of all human communication, it is essential for effective online interactions as well. Social media platforms have revolutionized the way people communicate, creating new opportunities for building and maintaining trust. The psychological perspectives of trust and trustworthy behavior on the internet have emerged as a new phenomenon within human behavior research (Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018). Understanding these perspectives is critical as they offer insights into how trust is developed and maintained in digital environments.

Social media communication differs from traditional computer-mediated communication by focusing on social ties and relationships (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2014; Westerman et al., 2013). This emphasis on social connections implies that the process of building trust on social media is unique and requires different approaches compared to other contexts. Trustworthy communication on social media is essential for successful online interactions, fostering connections and engagement among users (Alalwan et al., 2017; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media enables users to establish personal and professional networks, thereby enhancing trust through shared experiences and mutual interests (Ellison et al., 2007).

Despite the potential for social media to enhance trust, there are significant challenges associated with online communication. The proliferation of fake news and inappropriate behavior online poses a growing problem for trust in digital spaces. These issues highlight the need for more focused research on how people communicate and build trust in both society and business contexts (Häkansson & Witmer, 2015). The complexity of trust in the digital age necessitates a deeper understanding of the various factors that influence it (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). For instance, the spread of misinformation can erode trust, making it crucial to develop strategies to combat fake news and promote accurate information dissemination (Tandoc et al., 2018).

In recent years, several studies have attempted to identify the dimensions of trust and assess their significance in trust-building (e.g., Corritore et al., 2003; Cheng et al., 2017; Oliveira et al., 2017). Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018) presented one of the latest models, which served as a starting point for the development and validation of a new model introduced by Mičík et al. (2022). This model emphasizes the need for further research to outline international differences in trust dimensions. The authors argue that cross-cultural differences in building trust are likely to emerge across different cultures, necessitating a broader examination of these dimensions.

This study aims to address this argument by conducting trust-related research employing two quasi-representative samples from two countries to gain deeper insights into which dimensions significantly affect trust. The primary objective is to identify the dimensions of trust that play a role in building trust in social media communication. Additionally, the study investigates whether factors such as gender, age and social media usage influence individuals' perceptions of trust.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a comprehensive literature review on social media and trust, highlighting key findings and theoretical frameworks. This is followed by the presentation of the research question and hypotheses, which guide the study's investigation. The research methodology section outlines the study's objectives, design and data collection methods. This is followed by an analysis of the research findings and results, offering insights into the dimensions of trust in social media communication. The subsequent section includes a conclusion and discussion, summarizing the study's key findings and their implications. The final section presents the study's limitations and suggestions for future research, acknowledging the scope and constraints of the research while identifying areas for further investigation.

## 1 Social media

Social media applications profoundly impact numerous facets of human life, emerging as powerful tools that significantly contribute to companies' marketing objectives and strategies. These strategies particularly focus on areas related to customer engagement, relationship management and interactive communication (Alalwan et al., 2017; Kingsnorth, 2019). The role of social media platforms extends beyond mere communication facilitation; they also play a crucial part in enhancing social relationships, which is essential for building trust among users (Cheng et al., 2017). Social media platforms have become indispensable in modern marketing due to their ability to actively engage customers. They enable companies to interact with their audience in real-time, gather immediate feedback, and tailor their marketing strategies to effectively meet customer needs. Alalwan et al. (2017) emphasize that social media applications provide an interactive channel for businesses to communicate directly with consumers, fostering a sense of community and loyalty. Kingsnorth (2019) notes that social media's role in marketing is multifaceted, involving content marketing, influencer partnerships and social media advertising. These elements are designed to capture attention, build brand awareness and drive consumer action. Social media's interactive nature allows for dynamic engagement, making it a vital component of contemporary marketing strategies.

The enhancement of social relationships through social media is critical for building trust. Social media platforms facilitate the formation and maintenance of personal and professional connections, which are integral to developing trust. Cheng et al. (2017) argue that the relational benefits of social media are paramount, as they provide users with opportunities to interact, share experiences and build networks. Enhanced relationships foster greater trust, a concept supported by earlier studies (Grabner-Kräuter & Bitter, 2015; Liu et al., 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Trust is a foundational element in social interactions, and its development is facilitated by the frequent and meaningful interactions that social media platforms enable. These interactions help users to feel more connected and understood, which in turn enhances trust. The core of social networking lies in the creation and maintenance of both personal and business relationships online. Social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and X provide user-friendly tools that support connection, communication, interaction and networking. Hanna et al. (2011) highlight that social networking sites are designed to foster relationships by enabling users to share content, participate in discussions and collaborate on projects.

Social media communication is distinct from standard computer-mediated communication due to its focus on more personal aspects of life. This personalization makes social media more effective in building trust and engagement. Alalwan et al. (2017) suggest that social media's ability to personalize interactions based on user preferences and behaviors enhances the user experience and fosters deeper connections. Hanna et al. (2011) and Meraz (2009) also note that social media platforms allow users to express themselves, share personal milestones, and celebrate achievements with their network. This personal touch contributes to a sense of community and belonging, which is crucial for building trust. The visual and interactive nature of social media also plays a significant role in this, as users can see and respond to each other's content in real-time. Metzger and Flanagin (2013) highlight the role of cognitive heuristics in evaluating the credibility and trustworthiness of online

information, underscoring the complexity of trust in digital environments. This perspective is crucial for understanding how users navigate the vast amount of information available on social media and how they determine which sources to trust. Research by Tandoc et al. (2018) on fake news underscores the challenges of maintaining trust in the age of misinformation. Their findings highlight the need for effective strategies to combat false information and promote accurate information dissemination. This is particularly relevant for social media platforms, which have become major sources of news and information for many users.

## 1.1 Statistics connected to social media use

Recent statistics further highlight the extensive use of social media across Europe and its impact on various aspects of life and business. According to the Digital 2024 Global Overview Report, approximately 84% of internet users aged 16-64 worldwide are active social media users, reflecting the global penetration of these platforms (Dataportal, 2024a). In the EU specifically, the engagement is substantial, with social media platforms being used not only for personal connections but also as critical tools for business operations. In the European Union, social media has become an integral part of daily life, with 59% of individuals aged between 16 and 74 utilizing the internet for social networking purposes (Eurostat, 2024a). This pervasive use of social media platforms is not uniform across the region; data reveal significant variations among different countries. According to Dataportal, nearly 77% of the Czech population engages in social networking online (Dataportal, 2024b), whereas in Slovakia, this figure stands at 72% (Dataportal, 2024c). These statistics underscore the varying degrees of social media integration in different European societies.

The trust levels associated with social media and other online platforms exhibit notable differences across countries, often correlating with the level of development. The 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer highlights a concerning trend: trust tends to decline as a country's development progresses, with the most developed nations exhibiting the lowest levels of trust. This is corroborated by data from Reuters (2024), which indicate a declining trend in overall trust in news media. Specifically, in Czechia, overall trust in news on media stands at 31%, while in Slovakia, it is even lower at 25%. These statistics are indicative of broader societal trends where increased development and digital penetration are paradoxically accompanied by heightened skepticism and distrust.

An increasing number of companies are recognizing the importance of maintaining an interactive online presence to engage effectively with their audience. This includes the implementation of two-way communication and the creation of engaging content to better meet the needs and expectations of both current and potential customers (Hudson et al., 2016; Vendemia, 2017; Williams & Hausman, 2017). Social media has emerged as a dominant channel for online communication, allowing customers to find, share and interact with information about companies and their products (Hudson et al., 2016; Kingsnorth, 2019). For instance, a 2024 survey by Hootsuite and We Are Social found that 74% of social media users in Europe reported using these platforms to stay updated with news and current events, indicating the significant role social media plays in information dissemination (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2024). Additionally, 69% of users reported following brands they like or are interested in, showcasing the importance of social media in brand engagement and customer loyalty. Moreover, the impact of social media on purchasing decisions is notable. According to the GlobalWebIndex 2024 report, 45% of internet users in Europe have purchased a product or service after seeing it advertised or promoted on social media (GlobalWebIndex, 2024). This statistic underscores the influence of social media marketing and the importance of a strong online presence for businesses aiming to drive sales and engagement.

In the European Union, 61% of enterprises utilize at least one social media platform, and a staggering 90% of these businesses use social media for marketing purposes (Eurostat, 2023b). This widespread adoption underscores the critical role that social media plays in

contemporary business strategies, particularly in enhancing brand visibility and engaging with consumers.

Social media significantly facilitates communication between companies and their customers through electronic word of mouth (eWOM). This form of communication has a profound impact on consumer behavior and is considered one of the most effective online communication strategies. Research indicates that social media platforms amplify the impact and reach of word of mouth more effectively than traditional communication tools (Alalwan et al., 2017; Hudson et al., 2016; Vendemia, 2017).

## 2 Trust

Trust is a critical factor that significantly influences business performance, and high levels of trust can enhance the effectiveness of online communication (Cheng et al., 2017). Trust is widely recognized as a foundational element of human social relationships, serving as a key indicator of these relationships. In the current digital age, examining trust-building within the online environment is crucial (Edelman, 2024). Psychological and sociological theories underpin research in this emerging field of human communication (Sherchan et al., 2013; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018).

In the context of business performance, trust plays an indispensable role. High levels of trust within an organization can lead to numerous positive outcomes, such as increased employee morale, higher levels of collaboration, and improved overall productivity. Trust reduces the need for monitoring and control mechanisms, thereby lowering transaction costs and fostering a more open and innovative work environment (Kramer & Tyler, 1996). Furthermore, trust between a company and its customers can enhance customer loyalty, lead to positive word-of-mouth referrals, and ultimately drive sales growth (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The digital transformation of communication has necessitated a deeper understanding of how trust operates in online environments. Trust in online communication is crucial for several reasons. First, it affects user engagement and participation on online platforms. Users are more likely to engage with content, share personal information and participate in discussions when they trust the platform and its community (Friedman et al., 2000). Second, trust influences the perceived credibility of information. In an era where misinformation is rampant, trust in the source of information is vital for its acceptance and dissemination (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

### 2.1 Evolution of trust concepts

The traditional concept of trust in business contexts, as articulated by Geyskens et al. (1996), revolves around two primary dimensions: trust in a partner's honesty and trust in a partner's benevolence. Trust in honesty refers to the belief that a partner will not lie or deceive, while trust in benevolence involves the belief that a partner has good intentions and will act in the other's best interests. Subsequent research has expanded this framework to include additional dimensions. Mayer et al. (1995) introduced integrity and ability as critical components of trust. Integrity refers to the adherence to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable, while ability encompasses the skills and competencies that enable a trustee to perform effectively in a specific context. Colquitt et al. (2007) further refined these dimensions, highlighting their unique contributions to the overall construct of trust.

Sherchan et al. (2013) offered a more nuanced approach by categorizing trust literature into three criteria: trust information collection, trust value assessment, and trust value dissemination. Each of these criteria encompasses various sub-dimensions that detail the processes through which trust is built, assessed, and communicated. Trust information collection involves gathering data about the trustee's past behavior, reputation and credentials. In the online context, this can include user reviews, ratings and testimonials. The availability and accessibility of such information can significantly influence trust formation (Resnick et al., 2000).

Trust value assessment pertains to evaluating the gathered information to determine the trustee's trustworthiness. This evaluation is influenced by the trustor's personal experiences,

biases, and the context of the interaction. In online environments, algorithms and automated systems often play a role in this assessment by aggregating and analyzing user feedback (Jøsang et al., 2007). Trust value dissemination involves sharing the trust assessment with others. This can occur through word-of-mouth, social media, or review platforms. In the digital age, the speed and reach of information dissemination have increased exponentially, amplifying both positive and negative trust assessments (Sutcliffe, 2011).

Aligning with McKnight and Chervany (2001), it is essential to recognize that trust is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon. This complexity arises from the various contexts in which trust operates, the diverse factors that influence it, and the different outcomes it produces. Trust can vary significantly across cultures, industries and individual relationships, making it a challenging but vital construct to study (Hofstede, 2001).

In this study, trust is defined based on the framework provided by Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018) and Mičík et al. (2022). The research instrument incorporates the following dimensions of trust: Benevolence, Integrity, Competence, Identification, and Concern (detailed information about the research tool is provided in the next chapter).

## Trust dimensions
### *Benevolence*
Benevolence, as a key dimension of trust, is defined by McKnight and Chervany (2001) as the 8extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from an egocentric profit motive. Benevolence includes attributes such as kindness, goodwill, and the desire to support others. It represents the trustee's genuine concern for the welfare of the trustor, creating a foundation for trust in interpersonal and organizational relationships.

In the context of social media, benevolence is crucial as it shapes how individuals perceive interactions and support from others within the network. For example, X users often provide social support and advice to each other, reinforcing the perception of benevolence within the community. Research by Ridings and Gefen (2004) shows that participants in online communities seek social support and friendships, which are perceived through acts of care, love and emotional support, all of which contribute to benevolence.

Overall, the dimension of benevolence within the framework of trust emphasizes the importance of genuine care and supportive interactions in building and maintaining trust in both personal and professional contexts, particularly within social media platforms.

### *Integrity*
Integrity, as defined by the literature, encompasses several key characteristics such as honesty, strength, and virtue. According to Miller and Schlenker (2011), these attributes are crucial for the establishment of integrity. Mehok (2010) elaborates on this by stating that integrity is grounded in a strong moral character built upon honesty, decency and respect. This moral foundation is essential for the perception of integrity in social interactions and professional conduct.

Tullberg (2012) further refines this concept by suggesting that integrity manifests when there is a consistent alignment between personal values, social values and behaviors, particularly in challenging situations. This consistency not only builds an individual's sense of self-worth but also fosters pride in their personal achievements. Ethical ideologies, which are integral to integrity, are defined by one's commitments and moral principles (Miller & Schlenker, 2011). Schlenker et al. (2009) describe these ideologies as a complex system that guides a person's decisions regarding right and wrong, forming the basis for ethical behavior. Historical perspectives on integrity highlight its role in building social relationships within communities, as integrity fosters trust and reliable social interactions (Schlenker et al., 2009).

In the context of social media, integrity is crucial for the sustainability of online communities. Ethical principles underpin the trust that users place in these platforms, ensuring that interactions remain honest and reliable (Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018).

Without such ethical foundations, social media platforms would struggle to maintain user trust and engagement.

## *Competence*

Competence, as defined in the context of social media, refers to the ability or power to perform tasks effectively for others. This construct is integral in determining the trustworthiness of individuals and entities in online environments. Shockley-Zalabak et al. (2000) describe competence as having the necessary skills and capabilities to accomplish what is required. This definition highlights key attributes such as ability, accomplishment and capability, which are essential for building and maintaining trust in social networks.

In a more detailed examination, competence encompasses the trust in one's capability to fulfill obligations and meet expectations. McKnight and Chervany (2001) suggest that competence involves the reliability and effectiveness of individuals in completing tasks for others, thereby reinforcing their trustworthiness. This perspective underscores the importance of perceived ability in establishing trust within social networks. Moreover, competence in the realm of social media is not limited to technical skills but extends to the adept management of social interactions and communications.

In summary, competence in the context of social media trust is a critical factor that encompasses the ability to perform tasks effectively, meet expectations, and manage interactions skillfully. It involves a combination of technical skills, reliability, and the appropriate use of tools and resources, all of which contribute to building and maintaining trust in online environments.

## *Identification*

Identification, as defined in the context of social media trust, refers to the extent to which individuals align themselves with the common goals, norms, values and beliefs associated with belonging to an organization or group. This concept is rooted in social identity theory, which posits that people categorize themselves and others into groups, thereby simplifying the social world and fostering a sense of belonging and identity within those groups (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000).

Research indicates that individuals with high social identity, which includes solidarity and conformity with their social group, higher altruism, and a stronger sense of tele-presence, tend to use social networks extensively. These users perceive encouragement for participation from social networks (Rondas-Cataluna et al., 2015). Identification in this sense can significantly impact perceptions of trust in a social media context.

In summary, identification in social media trust involves the degree to which individuals see themselves as part of a social network, sharing common goals, norms, values and beliefs with others in that network. This identification fosters trust by creating a sense of belonging and mutual understanding within the group.

## *Concern*

In the context of social media, the dimension of trust referred to as "Concern" is defined by the feelings of caring, empathy, tolerance and safety exhibited when others are vulnerable. In the environment of social media, Edmondson's concept of an organization's social capital, which includes the culture and network of its relationships, can be applied. Members of social media groups often describe their environments as caring and empathetic, fostering a sense of safety and tolerance (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000). Emotional ties that bind individuals are fundamental in establishing trust (McAllister, 1995).

In social media settings, this construct of concern is particularly relevant as it involves demonstrating empathy and tolerance in virtual communities to foster commitment and a sense of belonging. Thus, understanding and exhibiting concern in these environments is crucial for building and maintaining trust among users.


## 3 Methodology

Trust is increasingly being recognized as a crucial element in social networking sites (Sherchan et al., 2013). Given the extensive reach and significant impact of these platforms on individuals, the process of building trust becomes vital (Schmidt & Iyer, 2015). The core

principle underlying many social networks is their foundation on relationships (e.g., Grabner-Kräuter & Bitter, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2009). A prime example of such relationships on social networks is "friendship," which fundamentally relies on trust (Sherchan et al., 2013). Consequently, the following research question (RQ) is formulated based on the literature:

*RQ: Do social media users' perceptions of trust differ significantly with respect to their gender, age and social media usage?*

Drawing from the theory of trust and the foundational information regarding social media usage presented earlier, the following hypotheses were formulated to examine specific influences:

*Hypothesis 1a (H1a): there is a statistically significant difference in the perceived importance of factors between Czech men and women.*

*Hypothesis 1b (H1b): there is a statistically significant difference in the perceived importance of factors between Slovak men and women.*

*Hypothesis 2a (H2a): age significantly affects perceptions of the importance of the factors among Czechs.*

*Hypothesis 2b (H2b): age significantly affects perceptions of the importance of the factors among Slovaks.*

*Hypothesis 3a (H3a): there is a statistically significant variation in the perception of factors' importance based on users' social media usage patterns among Czechs.*

*Hypothesis 3b (H3b): there is a statistically significant variation in the perception of factors' importance based on users' social media usage patterns among Slovaks.*

*Hypothesis 4 (H4): there is a statistically significant difference in social media activity between nationalities (Czechs and Slovaks).*

To achieve the research objective of determining which dimensions of trust are most crucial in trust building, we opted for a quantitative research methodology (Creswell, 2014).

## 3.1 Sample

For the research, two distinct samples were utilized for the questionnaire. The first sample included adults (aged 18 and above) living in the Czech Republic, with a sample size of 1,000 respondents. The second sample comprised adults (aged 18 and above) residing in Slovakia, with a sample size of 500 respondents. All participants were fully informed about the study's nature. The primary data were gathered using the Talk Online Panel (TOP), which is a member of ESOMAR and follows its guidelines (Talk Online Panel, 2024). TOP meticulously tracks the demographic attributes of respondents, enabling the selection of participants based on the required sample characteristics. The data collection took place in 2023.

## 3.2 Instrument procedures

The research design drew inspiration from the trust model introduced by Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018). Their 5-factor instrument was utilized. It includes the dimensions of Benevolence, Integrity, Competence, Identification and Concern. The labels of each item are part of the appendix. Participants were asked to rate how well the listed items described their approach to building trust on the internet. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree').

In order to adequately address the research question and hypotheses, and provide a satisfactory description of the data gathered, the data were analyzed and described using the following procedures (Mayers et al., 2010):

- The T-test and Mann-Whitney test were utilized to examine the data based on differences in gender and activity.
- The Kruskal-Wallis Anova test was applied to analyze the data with respect to age.

Each test was conducted with a significance level set at 0.05.

## 4 Results

In the sample of Czech respondents, 513 were male and 487 were female with an average age of 40.45 years (SD = 12.003). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 65 with a median age of 40. The average age of the females was 40.97 (SD=12.11), and the average age of the males was 40.04 (SD=11.88).

In the sample of Slovak respondents, 253 were male and 247 were female with an average age of 41.51 years (SD = 12.72). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 65 with a median age of 39. The average age of the females was 41.60 (SD=12.74), and the average age of the males was 41.42 (SD=12.69).

In the subsequent analysis, t-tests and Mann-Whitney tests were employed as two-sample tests to determine if there are differences in perceived trust levels on social media based on gender and social media usage. Kruskal-Wallis Anova was used to determine if there are differences in perceived trust levels on social media based on age. For each hypothesis, five separate tests were conducted, corresponding to each factor of trust. Given the non-normality of the sample pairs, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was applied (Mayers et al., 2010).

All basic parameters were computed for each sample and trust factor. The findings, along with t-test results, are presented in Tables 1-8, including the p-values for each individual factor where relevant. The data are represented by means (medians) unless otherwise indicated.

**Tab. 1: Mean (median) trust dimensions' scores and significance values: Comparisons by gender (CZ)**

|             | Benevolence | Integrity   | Competence  | Identification | Concern     |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Male        | 2.51 (2.25) | 2.55 (2.50) | 2.50 (2.50) | 2.46 (2.50)    | 2.57 (2.50) |
| Female      | 2.43 (2.25) | 2.54 (2.50) | 2.44 (2.25) | 2.41 (2.25)    | 2.49 (2.50) |
| Signi t     | 0.06        | 0.73        | 0.09        | 0.21           | 0.06        |
| Signi M-W   | 0.12        | 0.88        | 0.23        | 0.34           | 0.18        |

Source: Own

Based on the results in Table 1 above, Czech males scored higher in every dimension than Czech females. However, considering the resulting p-values of both conducted tests, the results are insignificant. To conclude, **H1a** is therefore **not supported**. The results indicate that there is no significant difference in the level of trust in communication on social media between males and females.

**Tab. 2: Mean (median) trust dimensions' scores and significance values: Comparisons by gender (SK)**

|             | Benevolence | Integrity   | Competence  | Identification | Concern     |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Male        | 2.39 (2.25) | 2.46 (2.50) | 2.39 (2.25) | 2.39 (2.25)    | 2.49 (2.50) |
| Female      | 2.32 (2.25) | 2.44 (2.50) | 2.35 (2.25) | 2.27 (2.25)    | 2.40 (2.25) |
| Signi t     | 0.14        | 0.62        | 0.31        | **0.02**       | 0.06        |
| Signi M-W   | 0.15        | 0.73        | 0.36        | **0.04**       | 0.18        |

Source: Own

Based on the results in Table 2, Slovak males scored higher in every dimension than Slovak females. However, considering the resulting p-values of both conducted tests, the results are mostly insignificant. Only for the dimension of identification are the results significant. **H1b** is therefore only **partially supported**.

In Table 3, the respondents are divided into six groups to test differences in individual trust dimensions.

**Tab.3: Mean (median) trust dimensions' scores: Comparisons by age (CZ)**

| Mean (Median) | Benevolence | Integrity | Competence | Identification | Concern |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18-24 | 2.28 (2.25) | 2.45 (2.25) | 2.37 (2.25) | 2.30 (2.25) | 2.39 (2.25) |
| 25-34 | 2.44 (2.25) | 2.56 (2.50) | 2.44 (2.50) | 2.35 (2.25) | 2.51 (2.50) |
| 35-44 | 2.50 (2.50) | 2.54 (2.50) | 2.47 (2.50) | 2.47 (2.50) | 2.55 (2.50) |
| 45-54 | 2.52 (2.25) | 2.56 (2.50) | 2.49 (2.50) | 2.49 (2.50) | 2.55 (2.50) |
| 55-64 | 2.55 (2.25) | 2.59 (2.50) | 2.57 (2.50) | 2.54 (2.50) | 2.62 (2.50) |
| 65+ | 2.49 (2.25) | 2.62 (2.25) | 2.53 (2.25) | 2.62 (2.50) | 2.61 (2.50) |
| Signi K-W mean | **0.014** | 0.498 | 0.178 | **0.001** | 0.105 |
| Signi K-W median | **0.01** | 0.412 | 0.343 | **0.005** | 0.109 |

Source: Own

Table 3 presents the means and medians of trust dimensions for the 6 groups. Trust increases with age; younger Czech respondents score lower than older Czech respondents. However, the difference is significant only for the dimensions of benevolence and identification. Consequently, **H2a** is **only partially supported**. A post-hoc analysis was applied to identify which age groups scored significantly differently in benevolence and identification. The Bonferroni test and Fisher's LSD test (Mayers, 2010) were used; the results show significant differences between the age group 18-24 and the rest of the groups for benevolence, and significant differences between the age group 18-24 and the age groups 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65+ for identification.

**Tab. 4: Mean (median) trust dimensions' scores: Comparisons by age (SK)**

| Mean (Median) | Benevolence | Integrity | Competence | Identification | Concern |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18-24 | 2.29 (2.25) | 2.42 (2.50) | 2.32 (2.25) | 2.28 (2.25) | 2.41 (2.50) |
| 25-34 | 2.43 (2.25) | 2.50 (2.50) | 2.36 (2.25) | 2.37 (2.25) | 2.48 (2.50) |
| 35-44 | 2.34 (2.25) | 2.43 (2.25) | 2.39 (2.25) | 2.25 (2.25) | 2.42 (2.25) |
| 45-54 | 2.41 (2.25) | 2.52 (2.50) | 2.44 (2.25) | 2.37 (2.25) | 2.52 (2.50) |
| 55-64 | 2.27 (2.00) | 2.37 (2.25) | 2.30 (2.25) | 2.38 (2.25) | 2.37 (2.25) |
| 65+ | 2.33 (2.00) | 2.42 (2.25) | 2.40 (2.25) | 2.35 (2.25) | 2.44 (2.50) |
| Signi K-W mean | 0.382 | 0.449 | 0.566 | 0.381 | 0.522 |
| Signi K-W median | 0.237 | 0.307 | 0.392 | 0.435 | 0.326 |

Source: Own

Table 4 shows the results of the Slovak respondents. Contrary to their Czech counterparts, no pattern of increasing trust with age can be observed. The resulting p-values also indicate that there is no significant difference in trust dimensions based on age. **H2b** is therefore **not supported**.

In Tables 5 and 6, differences in trust dimensions based on social media activity are tested. For this reason, respondents were divided into two groups based on their activity; ≤3 for low activity and ≥4 for high activity.

**Table 5: Mean (median) trust dimensions' scores: Comparisons of social media activity (CZ)**

| | Benevolence | Integrity | Competence | Identification | Concern |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low ≤3 | 2.50 (2.25) | 2.58 (2.5) | 2.49 (2.50) | 2.48 (2.50) | 2.58 (2.50) |
| High ≥4 | 2.46 (2.25) | 2.53 (2.5) | 2.46 (2.25) | 2.42 (2.25) | 2.51 (2.50) |
| Sign t | 0.32 | 0.19 | 0.47 | 0.09 | 0.09 |
| Sign M-W | 0.38 | 0.23 | 0.44 | 0.08 | 0.14 |

Source: Own

As is evident from Table 5, the p-values show that no significant differences exist for the Czech respondents in trust dimensions based on social media activity. **H3a** is therefore **not supported**. No difference was found in social media activity between males and females

(sign M-W 0.369; sign t 0.77, p-value = 0.05). Additionally, no evidence of the influence of age on social media activity was found (sign M-W 0.106; sign t 0.087, p-value = 0.05).

**Table 6: Mean (median) trust dimensions' scores: Comparisons of social media activity (SK)**

|            | Benevolence | Integrity   | Competence  | Identification | Concern     |
|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Low  ≤3    | 2.38 (2.25) | 2.47 (2.25) | 2.40 (2.25) | 2.41 (2.25)    | 2.52 (2.50) |
| High  ≥4   | 2.35 (2.25) | 2.45 (2.50) | 2.36 (2.25) | 2.29 (2.25)    | 2.41 (2.25) |
| Sign t     | 0.56        | 0.68        | 0.43        | **0.02**       | **0.05**    |
| Sign M-W   | 0.58        | 0.59        | 0.52        | **0.01**       | **0.03**    |

Source: Own

Table 6 shows the results of the analysis for Slovak respondents. Based on the resulting p-values, statistical differences exist in two trust dimensions – identification and concern. In these dimensions, respondents with high social media activity score lower than respondents with low social media activity. **H3b** is therefore **only partially supported.** No difference was found in social media activity between males and females (sign M-W 0.426; sign t 0.432, p-value = 0.05). Unlike in the sample with Czech respondents, evidence of the influence of age on social media activity was found (sign M-W 0.635; sign t 0.438, p-value = 0.05). The results are shown in Tables 7 and 8.

**Tab. 7: Social media activity means according to age group**

| Age group | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+   |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Mean      | 4.183 | 4.196 | 4.435 | 4.327 | 4.148 | 4.025 |

Source: Own

Table 7 above shows the means of each age group for social media activity. To further investigate possible differences, a post-hoc analysis was applied. Table 8 below shows where a difference was identified; it is between the age groups 65+ and 35-44 (p-value = 0.011). Respondents aged 35-44 scored significantly higher in social media activity than respondents aged 65+.

**Tab. 8: Post-hoc analysis results**

| Age   | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44     | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+       |
|-------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-----------|
| 18-24 | -     | 0.812 | 0.153     | 0.468 | 0.695 | 0.723     |
| 25-34 | 0.812 | -     | 0.086     | 0.468 | 0.468 | 0.785     |
| 35-44 | 0.153 | 0.086 | -         | 0.592 | 0.719 | **0.011** |
| 45-54 | 0.468 | 0.468 | 0.592     | -     | 0.086 | 0.812     |
| 55-64 | 0.695 | 0.468 | 0.719     | 0.086 | -     | 0.592     |
| 65+   | 0.723 | 0.785 | **0.011** | 0.812 | 0.592 | -         |

Source: Own

The final step of the analysis was to determine whether significant differences exist between Czech and Slovak respondents in their social media activity. Based on the results (sign M-W 0.860; sign t 0.936, p-value = 0.05) it can be concluded that no significant differences were found. **H4** is therefore **not supported**.

## 5 Discussion
Based on the data, males from both the Czech Republic and Slovakia scored higher in every dimension of trust than females from the respective countries. However, the results were significant only for one dimension, Identification, and only for Slovak males. The results could be interpreted to mean that Slovak males feel more connected and have more similar

values with their peers on social media than women. Higher scores of males compared to females contradict the results of previous research (e.g. Maddux & Brewer, 2005; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018), where females scored higher than males. On the other hand, the results align with those reported by Mičík et al. (2022). Overall, H1a was not supported and H1b was supported only partially. When comparing scores of individual dimensions between Czech and Slovak respondents, Czech respondents score higher than Slovak respondents. This could be connected to the notable differences across countries in general trust levels that were discussed in the first chapter. Verification of this assumption would require further research.

The values of each dimension of trust for Czech respondents showed a growing trend with increasing age. The least trusting were the respondents from the age group 18-24, while the most trusting were the respondents from age group 65+. Research on age differences in trust suggests that older adults tend to be more trusting compared to younger adults. A study by Sutter and Kocher (2007) found that trust levels increase with age. Another study by Li and Fung (2013) supports this finding, showing that older adults display higher levels of generalized trust compared to younger adults. These studies suggest that with age, individuals might become more open to trusting others, likely due to accumulated social experiences and a shift towards prioritizing positive social relationships.

The analysis of the influence of age on trust dimensions showed two different results. For Slovak respondents, no evidence of age affecting trust dimensions was found. H2b was therefore not supported. For Czech respondents, significant differences in the dimensions of Benevolence and Identification were identified. The Bonferroni and Fisher's LSD tests showed that respondents aged 18-24 display significantly lower levels in two trust dimensions than respondents aged 25+ for Benevolence and 35+ for Identification. Furthermore, benevolence increases with age; the older people grow, the more benevolent they become. These results are similar to those reported by Hubbard et al. (2016) and Mičík et al. (2022). Identification also increases with age. When individuals identify with a group, they experience a sense of safety and positive emotions towards their fellow members. As a result, they are more likely to view these co-members as trustworthy (Voci, 2006). The older the respondents are, the more connected to the group they feel. H2b was supported only partially.

The data suggest that no significant differences exist for the Czech respondents in trust dimensions based on social media activity, H3a is therefore not supported. On the other hand, significant differences were identified for the Slovak respondents for Identification and Concern. Respondents who show higher social media activity score lower in every trust dimension. However, the influence is statistically significant only for the mentioned dimensions of Identification and Concern. Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018) also reported significant differences in trust dimensions based on social media activity. However, in their research, respondents with higher social media activity scored higher in trust dimensions than respondents with lower social media activity. Investigating factors that lead to this discrepancy could be a future direction for follow-up research.

No difference was found in the social media activity of respondents based on age for the Czech sample; on the other hand, a difference was found in the sample of Slovak respondents. The oldest age group 65+ is significantly less active in using social media than the group of respondents aged 35-44. Some studies highlight that social media usage is significantly higher among younger age groups. For instance, according to Pew Research Center (2023), a majority of young adults use social media platforms extensively, whereas the usage rate drops considerably among older adults (ages 65+).

## 5.1 Implications

The research findings offer a better understanding of the factors that influence trust in social media communication. These insights are valuable from several perspectives. Firstly, the research contributes to the body of literature on online trust within social media. Secondly, the findings underscore the influence of gender, age and social media activity on trust dimensions.

In addition to these contributions, the current study focuses on the Czech and Slovak context, which, to our knowledge, has not been previously explored in this manner. We believe that our research will provide valuable insights for both academics and practitioners, offering a foundation for future research in this area.

## Conclusion

Social media continues to be a major element in the lives of individuals and the strategies of businesses across the European Union. The high levels of engagement and interaction facilitated by these platforms contribute significantly to customer relationship management and marketing strategies. However, the varying levels of social media use and trust among different countries highlight the challenges that come with digital development. Addressing these issues while leveraging the power of electronic word of mouth and two-way communication can help businesses build stronger relationships with their customers, ultimately enhancing business performance and customer satisfaction.

## Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to this research that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as the data were collected exclusively from these regions. Consequently, it is likely that the results would differ if applied to populations in other countries. To ensure the findings are generalizable, further research across different locations is necessary. Additionally, this study depends on self-reported survey data. Despite the careful development and testing of the questionnaire, memory bias among respondents is an inherent limitation. The data collection was conducted using quota sampling. Previous studies have indicated that quota sampling does not yield representative samples comparable to those obtained through probability sampling.

Future research might consider paths suggested in the previous sections of this paper - investigating differences in individual trust dimensions between Czech respondents and Slovak respondents, and uncovering factors that lead to differences in trust dimensions based on social media activity between Czech and Slovak respondents.

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## APPENDIX

**Tab. 1A: Labels of items for each trust dimension Q1_1 – Q1_20 (Benevolence, Integrity, Competence, Identification, Concern)**

| |
|---|
| I believe that friends in my social network (e.g. Facebook) would act in my best interest. |
| If I need help, friends in my social network do their best to help me. |
| I believe that friends in my social network care about my well-being. |
| In general, social networks like Facebook are here for the sake of people, and try to serve them well. |
| |
| I believe that people in my social network are truthful in their communication with me. |
| I can characterize people in my social network as honest. |
| I can rely on promises made by people in my social network. |
| In general, social networks like Facebook strive to provide truthful information. |
| |
| I believe that people in my network are able to provide me with important information. |
| People in my social network are effective in providing helpful advice. |
| People in my social network are reliable in doing what they say will be done. |
| In general, social networks like Facebook are a competent tool for providing information. |
| |
| I feel connected to people in my social network. |
| My values are similar to the values of people in my social network. |
| People in my social network listen to me. |
| In general, social networks like Facebook are a good tool for creating and maintaining relationships with people. |
| |
| People in my social network are sincere in their efforts to communicate with me. |
| People in my social network are concerned about my personal well-being. |
| People in my social network show interest in the content of my communication. |
| In general, social networks like Facebook care about how social networks serve people. |

Source: own research

# Using Social Networking Sites in Recruitment and Selection Processes: Future Employees´ Perspectives

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### Introduction

Recruiting the right employees is one of the biggest challenges that organizations face today. The ability to successfully attract and select appropriate candidates is critical not only to a firm's performance and organizational success but also for maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage in the current highly competitive environment (Muduli & Trivedi, 2020; Phillips, 2022; Robbins & Coulter, 2018). The right employee can contribute to an effective and efficient workforce, lowering employment costs and enhancing overall organizational efficiency (Melanthiou et al., 2015; Stewart & Brown, 2020).

In a rapidly changing business environment and a dynamic, technology-driven job market, traditional recruitment strategies and methods, which used to be effective, have become inadequate.  (Biea et al., 2024). Furthermore, the evolving expectations and behaviors of job seekers and the efficiency required in hiring processes demand more advanced approaches (Rad et al., 2020). Therefore, a shift from traditional recruitment to a sophisticated recruitment process is needed (Biea et al., 2024; Rahman, 2022;). As a result, many companies have adopted e-recruitment methods, utilizing online platforms, digital tools, and technologies to attract and assess candidates more effectively. Online recruitment is a transformative trend that is fundamentally changing the way job seekers find employment and how employers find and hire candidates (Si et al., 2023). Although online recruitment offers many benefits, some companies are still reluctant to adopt it completely for several reasons such as a lack of the necessary knowledge or skills to effectively implement and use e-recruitment technologies, preferences for traditional methods, or cost concerns (Melanthiou et al., 2015).

A significant aspect of e-recruitment is its reliance on social media. Social media platforms, particularly social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, have become increasingly influential tools for recruitment and selection (Aggerholm & Andersen, 2018; Gelinas et al., 2017;).

Social networking sites offer numerous advantages such as cost efficiency (Demir & Gunaydin, 2023), speed of recruitment (Lewis et al., 2015), wider reach (Carpentier & Van Hoye, 2018; Nikolaou, 2014) and better candidate screening (Nawaz and Gomes, 2017). On the other hand, the utilization of social networking sites for recruitment and selection purposes brings some potential risks and limitations including misuse, and legal and ethical concerns, with pitfalls (Hosain et al., 2020; Jeske & Shultz, 2019). Thus, organizations must balance benefits with careful consideration of the potential disadvantages and challenges to effectively use social networking sites in their hiring practices

Despite the growing use of social networking sites in recruitment and selection processes, most studies have examined this topic from the perspective of employers (Rad et al., 2020; Sallach et al., 2024). However, the viewpoint of future employees has received little attention (Mowbray & Hall, 2021). Thus, this research study seeks to address this gap by gaining an understanding of candidates' perceptions regarding the use of social networking sites as e-recruitment tools, focusing on their advantages and potential challenges and risks. The study aims to gain an insight into the use of social networking sites by organizations during recruitment and selection processes from the perspective of job seekers, with a specific focus on understanding the perceived advantages, disadvantages, risks and challenges associated with these platforms.

# 1 Theoretical background

## 1.1 Recruitment

Recruiting the right employees is one of the biggest challenges that today's organizations face. The ability of organizations to successfully recruit appropriate employees is critical to a company´s performance and organizational success (Robbins & Coulter, 2018). It is critical not only to a company's performance but also to increase its value (Muduli & Trivedi, 2020). Phillips (2022) even states that employee recruitment is a vital function for organizations to maintain and improve their sustainable competitive advantage in the current highly competitive environment. According to Melanthiou, et al. (2015), the right employee can contribute to an effective and efficient workforce. Moreover, good recruiting can also lower employment costs (Stewart & Brown, 2020).

Employee recruitment is considered the foundation and primary action of effective human resource management (HRM) and can be defined as organizational activities that affect the number and types of applicants who apply for and accept job positions (Acikgoz, 2019; Phillips, 2022,). Another definition defines recruitment as the process of attracting the interest of the people who will apply for the job within an organization (Kucherov and Tsybova, 2022). Some authors (Dessler, 2017; Rahman et al., 2022) have proposed that recruitment is the process of identifying and attracting suitable applicants for the employer's various open positions. Furthermore, as stated by Melanthiou et al. (2015), recruitment refers to the process of attracting, screening, selecting and hiring the most suitable employee based on their skills, experience and fit within an organization. Thus, recruitment serves as the cornerstone for effective human resource management and refers to the process of finding and hiring qualified individuals to fill vacant positions within a company.

The basic goal of recruitment is to attract desirable candidates who align well with both the job requirements and the organizational culture, ultimately encouraging them to apply for positions within the organization (Phillips, 2022).  It also aims to communicate a positive image of the organization while also identifying and gaining the interest and commitment of individuals who have the potential to be valuable employees (Stewart and Brown, 2020). In sum, it can be assumed that the primary aim of organizational recruitment is to identify, attract and select qualified applicants for job openings within an organization who align with its culture and can contribute to its current and future goals.

In contrast to traditional recruitment stands strategic recruitment. This refers to recruitment practices that are intentionally aligned with organizational goals and strategies, and consider the external environment and characteristics of an organization. At the same time it is integrated with other HR management practices within the organization (Phillips & Gully, 2015). Thus, there are two crucial dimensions of strategic recruitment:  vertical alignment and horizontal alignment. The first dimension, vertical alignment, is concerned with the link between the overall corporate strategy and the recruitment strategy. The second dimension, horizontal alignment, ensures that recruitment harmonizes with other HR practices (Yu & Cable, 2013).

Recruiting practices vary significantly, targeting different types of individuals. Some practices aim to attract active job-seekers actively searching for job opportunities. Others focus on passive job-seekers who are currently employed or not actively seeking work but might consider new opportunities if presented. (Phillips, 2022).  The key distinction lies in the methods used to reach these groups. Active job-seekers can be drawn in through relatively passive approaches, such as posting job openings on online boards or company websites. However, these methods may not resonate with passive job-seekers who aren't actively looking for jobs. To reach those individuals, specifically targeting them through more active approaches is needed (Acikgoz, 2019).

Most employers tend to entertain applications from both internal and external candidates, although placing a primary emphasis on either option entails specific advantages and drawbacks (Steward & Brown, 2020). Internal recruitment, characterized by promotion from within the organization, fosters loyalty and motivation among current employees. Methods

commonly employed for internal recruitment include organizational databases, job postings, career plans, employee referrals, and rehiring former employees. This approach is particularly beneficial for companies operating in stable environments where continuity and loyalty are valued (Mathis et al., 2017).

Conversely, external recruitment, which involves hiring candidates from outside the organization, offers fresh perspectives and a broader talent pool, making it suitable for companies operating in rapidly evolving or competitive industries. Traditional methods such as newspaper advertisements, employment agencies and job fairs, as well as modern online channels like corporate websites, job boards and social media platforms, serve as effective tools for external sourcing. Thanks to a wider range of methods used, organizations can access diverse skill sets and experiences to drive innovation and adaptability (Mathis et al, 2017). In today's digital age, companies are increasingly leveraging online portals and social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn to enhance their recruitment strategies. These platforms offer cost-effective and efficient ways to reach a vast audience of potential candidates while showcasing the company's brand and values. However, despite the proliferation of modern recruitment methods, traditional avenues like newspaper ads, referrals and job fairs remain relevant and effective in reaching specific demographics and segments of the talent market. Thus, a strategic blend of internal and external recruitment approaches, coupled with a diverse range of communication channels, enables organizations to adapt to evolving talent needs and achieve their recruitment objectives effectively (Muduli &Trivedi, 2020).

Next, prospective job seekers' attitudes and intentions toward a potential employer, as well as their willingness to establish a connection with the company, are influenced by various factors. These factors encompass information about the organization, its job offerings and opportunities, as well as how job seekers perceive the behaviors of recruiters and other employees. (Muduli &Trivedi, 2020). Therefore, to persuade prospective employees to apply for positions, organizations need to communicate information about jobs, working conditions, expectations, values and organizational climate.

In light of the challenges posed by globalization and intense competition, coupled with the demand for highly skilled employees, the task of attracting and recruiting talented applicants has become increasingly more difficult. Traditional recruitment strategies no longer suffice in attracting the right candidates. Consequently, many companies have turned to more sophisticated recruitment processes, including online recruitment. (Rahman et. Al., 2022).

## 1.2 Online recruitment

In today's dynamic job market, online recruitment has emerged as a transformative and growing trend in the ever-changing landscape of job seekers and employers (Si, et al., 2023). Online recruitment is employed by many organizations of all sizes, whether large or small, either partially or comprehensively, to reach the maximum number of potential candidates (Singh, 2017). It is evident that, as the digital age continues to evolve, online recruitment is gaining popularity, evidenced by the growing number of job boards, social networking platforms, and online recruitment sites (Acikgoz, 2019). On the other hand, despite the numerous positive outcomes associated with e-recruitment, certain companies remain cautious about embracing this relatively new practice. Factors contributing to their reluctance include limited expertise, concerns about costs, unfamiliarity with the process, and a reluctance to deviate from traditional recruitment methods (Melanthiou et al., 2015).

Online recruitment encompasses various terms like E-recruitment, E-recruiting, Web-recruitment, Cybercruiting and Internet recruitment (Abia & Brown, 2020; Galanaki, 2002). Driven by technological advancements organizations are using digital platforms to attract and engage potential applicants. With the development of the concept of online recruiting, different authors offer varying perspectives on its scope and impact (Galanaki, 2002). However, one thing remains clear: companies that embrace new digital technologies, such as social media, mobile apps and analytics, experience significant enhancements in their

recruitment processes (Parry & Tyson, 2009). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of online recruitment is essential in today's competitive landscape both for job seekers and employers.

Empirical evidence reveals diverse definitions and conceptualizations of e-recruitment. These variations in definitions underscore the range of ways e-recruitment is conceptualized. Drawing from their literature review, Abia and Brown (2020) propose five conceptualizations of e-recruitment: as a technology tool, a system, a process, a service, and a proxy. These conceptualizations aid in understanding the use and definition of e-recruitment, providing valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners in the field of recruitment. Online recruitment as a tool refers to the use of information technology to attract and identify potential job applicants, enabling access to a wider audience and saving time (Acikgoz, 2019; Kapse et al., 2012). Similarly, Singh (2017) defines e-recruitment as the utilization of information technology to manage the recruitment process, encompassing the use of company websites and other online platforms to attract potential job applicants. Considering e-recruitment as a system, it can be conceptualized as consisting of interconnected yet independent elements, with information technology, society, organizations and other factors forming its core components. E-recruitment thus represents a cohesive unit comprising various interrelated elements such as technology, society, organizations, and more (Abia & Brown, 2020). E-recruitment as a process can be described as a web-based or online recruitment procedure, involving various activities undertaken by companies to seek out and engage with candidates for job positions through the utilization of the Internet (Allden & Harris, 2013; Parry & Tyson, 2009). Hosai et al. (2020) propose that e-recruitment is the process of recruiting job candidates with the aid of electronic resources, particularly the Internet. Online recruitment is defined as a new method of e-recruitment that has proved to be more effective than traditional recruitment methods (Maree et al., 2018). Online recruitment, conceptualized as a proxy for e-recruitment, plays a pivotal role in portraying the company's image, culture and perceptions regarding recruitment and organizational attractiveness. This involves leveraging company websites and other online communication channels to attract potential job applicants, and has become the primary source of information for individuals seeking employment opportunities (Acikgoz, 2019). Finally, e-recruitment is defined as a service to job-seekers, by providing them with a centralized platform to search and apply for job opportunities and for recruiters to offer tools and functionalities to streamline various aspects of the hiring process. Defining e-recruitment as a service to both recruiters and job-seekers highlights its role in facilitating the connection between employers and potential candidates, ultimately aiming to make the recruitment process more effective and accessible for both parties (Kapse et al., 2012).

In summary, e-recruitment refers to the process of recruiting through web-based or online platforms, encompassing a range of elements, practices, tools, procedures, services and proxies associated with the recruitment process. It involves tools such as career portals, advertisements on job databases, corporate websites and intranets, social networking sites, and other online resources that facilitate the recruiting process (Rahman et al., 2022).

Online recruitment offers numerous benefits. Many authors (Melanthiou et al., 2015; Parry & Tyson, 2009) have highlighted cost-effectiveness as a significant advantage for organizations. Online recruitment enables companies to run their recruitment strategies at a lower cost and with significantly reduced information processing time, decreasing recruitment time and advertisement costs (Brandão et al., 2019). For example, Parry and Tyson (2009) demonstrate that career websites and recruitment systems offer benefits beyond cost reduction. They enhance efficiency, improve the service to clients, and contribute to an organization's strategic orientation. Singh (2017) emphasizes that online recruitment reaches a larger set of potential employees. Online recruitment overcomes geographical limits, allowing organizations to reach distinct populations across the globe. Candidates from different regions gain access to positions they might not have encountered otherwise. Furthermore, Chapman and Gödölle (2017) highlight that e-recruitment expands the applicant pool with diverse skills and competencies. Moreover, online recruitment as an innovative and flexible strategy attracts young talents and passive employees who possess

skills that can drive the company forward (Melanthiou et al., 2015). Galanaki (2002) argues that candidates in online recruitment tend to be tech-savvy and familiar with technology. Additional advantages include the quick provision of feedback to candidates and timely communication, which enhance the candidate experience and reflect positively on the organization. Applicants appreciate knowing where they stand promptly. This transparent approach contributes to a positive employer brand (Melanthiou et al., 2015). In summary, online recruitment offers numerous benefits, including cost savings, efficiency, global reach, enhanced company image, targeted screening, quick feedback, and improved candidate experiences.

Although online recruitment has its advantages, it is also essential to consider its disadvantages. One significant challenge is the potential high number of applications that online processes often generate. While this may seem advantageous, it can overwhelm recruiters (Dessler, 2017). If an organization lacks technological preparedness, it may receive more resumes than desired, resulting in a waste of resources (Galanaki, 2002). Also, the tendency to provide a large number of applicants who are not qualified for the advertised job may be a problem for the organization (Steward & Brown, 2020). The next problem to consider is that some job applicants are less likely to use the internet to apply or are unfamiliar with online resources, limiting the reach of recruitment efforts. (Singh, 2017). Some other disadvantages include making the recruitment process impersonal, which may be less suitable both for employers and potential employees who value face-to-face interactions (Hada & Gairola, 2015). According to some authors (Brandão et al., 2019, Galanaki, 2002), implementing online recruitment processes can be expensive for organizations and implies extra time and effort expended, which may constitute another disadvantage from the perspective of organizations. In sum, while online recruitment offers convenience and efficiency, organizations need to consider the potential disadvantages when designing recruitment strategies.

Online recruitment primarily relies on social media (Melanthiou, et al, 2015). Therefore, the following text will focus on the concept of social media in general, with specific emphasis on its application in recruitment. Subsequently, attention will be given to social networks, discussing their benefits, potential risks and challenges.

## 1.3 Social media

According to some authors (Gelinas et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2022), social media is considered an appropriate tool for recruitment and selection and is increasingly more influential in recruitment. Aggerholm and Andersen (2018) consider social media as a modern instrument for e-recruitment that has the potential to enhance both recruitment processes and their results. In addition, some authors (Girard et al., 2013; Melanthiou et al., 2015) regard them as more dynamic and relational instruments for recruitment. Nevertheless, it is important to note that social media do not replace other e-recruitment tools. For human resource management use of social media is defined as the process of using information technology (IT), including the Internet, to perform, speed up, or improve recruitment and selection procedures and strategies (Nisar et al., 2019). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as a collection of Internet-based applications enabling users to generate and share their content. Nau et al. (2022) note that social media enable individuals and organizations to collaborate, connect and interact, and to create, edit, share and engage with various types of content.

Social media manifests itself through various forms such as blogs, instant messaging, virtual communities and social networking sites, with social networking sites being considered a particularly important part of social media. (Chugh & Ruhi, 2018). Social networking sites allow users to create a personal profile, to share connections with other users, and to view the profiles and connections of others in the network (Gelinas et al (2017; Melanthiou et al 2015). From a corporate viewpoint, the most prominent and widely used social media platforms include Facebook, the largest social networking service globally,

LinkedIn, which focuses on professional networking, and Twitter, known for its microblogging network (Kucherov & Tsybova, 2022).

It should be noted that despite social media and social networking sites not falling within the same category and having distinct characteristics, there is significant overlap. Therefore, in the following text, we will use social networks to encompass both meanings.

## 1.4 Social networking sites

Due to the growing popularity of social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, a growing number of organizations are using these sites for e-recruitment, especially for posting jobs and applicant screening and selecting. For example, a study by Demir and Gunaydin (2023) showed that HR managers in the tourism industry generally prefer to use social media accounts rather than traditional references because they are quick and cheap to search and screen job candidates. Moreover, they provide extensive communication channels and personal networking opportunities, which enhance job seekers' ability to connect with others (Nikolaou, 2014). This trend is pushing organizations to acknowledge the potential benefits and potential risks associated with using social networks to attract and screen potential employees. Therefore, the following sub-chapters are focused on the benefits of using these platforms for recruitment purposes, and subsequently, the risks and limitations are addressed.

Firstly, social media profiles provide more varied and detailed information about potential employees such as work history, work life, skills, interests, educational background, and professional networks. Especially such information that is not intended for recruitment purposes and typically is not available through traditional resumes can provide valuable supplementary insights about applicants (Shahani-Denning et al., 2017). This can help recruiters to screen and select potential candidates. Moreover, social media activities such as candidates´ posts and their interactions with other social media users through comments, followers and followings provide insights into potential employees' behavior which reflect not only users' social lives but also their work lives. Examining the social media posts of applicants can therefore help HR professionals and recruiters to predict how well a candidate will fit within the company and to make their preliminary assessments. (Demir a Gunaydin, 2023; Zide, et al., 2014). Lastly, social media profiles are often updated more frequently than resumes, providing real-time information about a candidate's current positions and achievements. This timely data helps recruiters make more accurate and timely decisions (Zide et al., 2014).

A further advantage is that social networking sites allow a wider set of diverse potential candidates to be reached. The global nature of social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn allows recruiters to attract candidates from different geographic regions, cultures and backgrounds, thereby increasing the chances of finding the right candidate (Nikolaou, 2014; Carpentier & Van Hoye, 2018). Social media platforms provide access to both active job seekers and passive candidates. However, social networks are particularly effective in engaging passive candidates who are not actively seeking jobs but are open to new opportunities (Dutta, 2014).

Next, recruiting via social networking can offer an organization a faster way to search and screen potential employees. Social networking platforms enable faster recruitment processes by facilitating quick responses and streamlining communication (Demir & Gunaydin, 2023; Lewis et al., 2015). Job postings on social networking sites can quickly reach a larger pool of potential candidates, who respond quickly, leading to faster application submission and review (Stokes et al., 2019). Posting job openings within the timeframe that recruiters control can also speed up the hiring process and reduce time-to-fill vacancies (Lewis et al., 2015). Findings from the study by Demir and Gunaydin (2023) indicated that HR managers in the tourism industry generally prefer to examine candidates' social media accounts rather than traditional references because they can quickly screen many applicants. Furthermore, according to Nikolaou (2014) recruiting through social networking sites is more cost-effective than traditional methods. Similarly, Whitaker et al. (2017) argue

that recruiting from Facebook reduces the costs of the recruitment process compared to traditional methods. Vosen (2021) added that social media provides recruiters with access to information that is not easily obtained through traditional assessment methods and at a relatively low cost. Moreover, the viral nature of social media can also increase the visibility of job postings through shares, likes and comments, reaching a broader audience of potential candidates at no additional cost (Nawaz & Gomes, 2017).

Enhancing employer brand is another significant benefit of using social networks for recruiting. From a recruitment perspective, social networks can serve as a platform to promote and enhance an employer's brand image and allow organizations to present themselves as an attractive employer (Kucherov & Tsyboval, 2022). Employer brand encompasses a set of perceived benefits that shape intrinsic attributes related to the job and organizational characteristics, enabling potential employees to identify the company when seeking employment (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2022). The authors Joglekar and Tan (2022) define employer brand as a combination of functional, economic and psychological benefits offered by a job which are uniquely associated with an employer. According to Sarabdeed et al. (2023), employer branding is the process of creating an employer identity aimed at both current and prospective employees, to distinguish the company from its competitors. By sharing content that highlights the company culture, values and achievements, organizations can attract candidates who align with their brand. Joglekar and Tan (2022) argue that active engagement on social media platforms helps organizations build and promote their employer brand. The findings of Carpentier et al. (2017) indicated that engaging with an organization's Facebook pages had a positive effect on the perception of the employer's image and attractiveness. In another study, Carpentier et al. (2019) reported that a positive perception of the employer brand is associated with organizational attractiveness, positive word-of-mouth, and improved recruitment outcomes.

Despite the advantages, employing social networking sites for recruitment and selection purposes brings with it certain disadvantages. Scholars (Hosain et al., 2020; Vosen, 2021) have identified and discussed the number of potential risks and limitations including misuse, legal and ethical concerns, as well as candidates' views on privacy, fairness and ethics related to the practice of social media screening. Jeske and Shultz (2016) noted that before using social networking sites for recruitment, especially for applicant screening, ethical, legal and practical issues need to be addressed. Thus, the following text is intended to provide some of the critical insight and consideration necessary for understanding and addressing risks and limitations associated with the use of social networks for recruitment and applicant screening. On the other hand, a study by Roulin and Liu (2023) showed that the more frequently job seekers post content that tends to be judged positively by hiring managers, the more positive their attitudes toward cybervetting are.

The most frequently mentioned risk is ethical and legal issues related to the disruption of individual privacy breaches (Jeske & Shultz, 2019). According to these authors, using social networking platforms can lead to breaches of personal information, as candidates frequently share extensive personal data on these platforms that can be misused or accessed without consent. In a similar vein, Hosain et al. (2020) note that by searching for content on job seekers' social media profiles like Facebook to evaluate job candidates, organizations may be breaching individual privacy. Roulin and Liu (2023) argue that this is particularly true for collecting and analyzing information that was not originally designed to be used for employment purposes. For example, individuals comment on news, share photos of their leisure activities, or react to friends' posts without the awareness that employers might use that information to assess their job suitability. In this context, some authors discuss the notion of cybervetting which is understood as using information from social media and/or other internet sources to screen and select job candidates (Wilcox et al., 2022). It mainly focuses on personal information related to organizational citizenship behavior (Sallach et al., 2024). Some authors also point out that for individuals is also more difficult to control who they share information with, who is receiving the information and who accesses their information, especially in terms of information that is not relevant to employment (Jeske &

Shultz, 2016). The concern mainly regards those social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter that are regarded as personal (Hosain et al., 2020).

Another challenge that organizations have to consider before implementing social networking as a recruitment tool is the risk of discrimination. Lewis et al. (2015) state that those who do not have a social networking account or have limited/no Internet access would not be able to apply or be headhunted. Next, Whitaker et al. (2017) argue that using Facebook for recruiting may lead to a disproportionate number of participants who are younger compared to a more diverse population. This is a limitation for an organization as they may miss a prospective candidate. In addition, some of the information on social network sites may provide information about gender, race, disabilities and religious affiliation but also political views, marital status and children that are not allowed to be used in regular assessment settings due to their potential to increase the likelihood of discrimination (Lewis et al., 2015).

A further limitation to consider is the accuracy of information obtained from social networking sites, especially in terms of job relevance. Employers might receive inaccurate, made up or incomplete information, which could be misleading if used for personnel background checks (Hosain et al., 2020). Similarly, Alexander et al. (2019) note that it is uncertain whether assessments of the information obtained through social networking sites could be considered valid and legally acceptable for the selection process.

The last limitation that needs to be mentioned is that a lack of expertise limits the fairness of social networking profile evaluation in the hiring process. As noted by Hoek et al. (2016), little is known to what extent employers possess the skills and abilities to perform systematic, fair and equitable social media screening.

## 2 Research methodology
### 2.1 Research questions
The study provides an answer to the following main research question:

**How do students as future employees perceive the use of social networking sites by companies in the recruitment process?**

To fully answer the main question, the following sub-questions were developed:
- SQ1: What advantages do you see in using social networking sites for recruitment purposes from the organization's perspective?
- SQ2: What type of content on corporate social networking sites would most appeal to you and motivate your interest in a job position?
- SQ3: What are the disadvantages of using social networking sites for recruiting from the perspective of a candidate?
- SQ4: What are the potential ethical issues related to monitoring social networking sites when evaluating candidates?
- SQ5: Do you think that some information on social networks can lead to unfair evaluation?
- SQ6: How could one prevent unfair evaluation of a candidate based solely on information from social media profiles?
- SQ7: What would you recommend to companies when using social networks for the recruitment and selection of new employees?

### 2.2 Method
Focus groups were adopted in this research to answer the research questions. Focus group is frequently used as a qualitative research method to gain an in-depth understanding of specific issues or phenomena (Nyumba et al., 2017). The purpose of the focus group is to

gather the opinions, attitudes experiences, perceptions and meanings of participants on a specific topic of research interest. (Ashkrof et al., 2020). Focus group refers to interview situations where participants engage in interactive discussions among themselves and with the researcher. During these discussions, participants express their thoughts aloud, often collectively, and respond to each other's statements (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). The interaction between participants during the discussion is crucial.

## 2.3 Sample characteristics and procedure

In total, eleven focus groups were conducted in March 2024. Each focus group lasted between 40-50 minutes and took place in specially arranged university rooms conducive to discussion. All focus groups were facilitated by one moderator who had received training in focus group moderation, and one assistant moderator. At the beginning of each focus group, the moderator summarized the aim and purpose of the focus group and the research. Then, the moderator used the prepared questions to guide the session. All focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. All focus groups involved 8–12 people. The participants were full-time master's degree students from a university in the Czech Republic. All participants actively use social media, indicating familiarity with modern digital communication tools and an openness to new technologies for various purposes.

## 3. Results

**What advantages do you see in using social networking sites for recruitment purposes from the organization's perspective?**

The majority of participants identified the main advantage of social media in recruitment as the ability to obtain more detailed information about a candidate's interests, hobbies and personal life. One participant stated, "*The company has direct insight into the life of a job applicant,*" while another added, "*For the company, it's ideal to peek into an individual's privacy to discover their interests.*" Another participant noted, "*Everyone has some internet history, so a recruiter can gather far more information about a candidate than what's presented in a cover letter and curriculum vitae.*" Some participants stated that this information would help the company in assessing whether the individual fits into their culture. Participants also mentioned that through social networks, an organization can reach a wide spectrum of potential candidates, including those who are not actively seeking employment at the moment. One participant shared, "*From my own experience, I know that I became actively interested in a company and a position based on an advertisement I saw on social networks which I hadn't originally considered.*" Some participants discussed the possibility of targeting specific groups of people. One participant remarked, "*If a company needs to hire young people, social networks are ideal given how frequently young people use them.*" Others pointed out that social networks have a broader reach. Two participants stated, "*A company can approach more candidates through social networks than through job portals and traditional flyers.*" The ability to directly connect with candidates was also mentioned as an advantage. Several participants also mentioned the possibility of faster communication with candidates. In this context, one participant referred to the LinkedIn network. Two participants mentioned the less formal nature of communication, which tends to be more informal. Moreover, it was noted that organizations can also use networks to present themselves. Some participants mentioned that a company can convey its organizational culture and life within it, and thus a candidate can learn useful and interesting information about the company. Two participants summed up their experience as follows: "*More information obtained about the company from social networks helped us prepare better for a job interview we have been invited to*". Lastly, several participants added that using social networks can contribute to building an employer's brand.

**What type of content on corporate social networking sites would most appeal to you and motivate your interest in a job position?**

Most of the participants agreed that they would be interested in contributions with an insight into the company environment, how things work in the company, how the company operates, and what it does. In this context, participants also mentioned interest in company events and teambuilding activities. One participant emphasized, "The company should share information that gives me a good impression and makes it attractive to me." Several participants stated that they would be attracted to videos showcasing daily life within the company. This was followed up by one participant who added "A company should not be afraid to show its emotions". For some participants, it would be motivating to see presentations of employees or individual teams, highlighting their achievements. One participant stated, "I would welcome an introduction to the team I would like to work with." More than half of the participants indicated that detailed information about the job position being advertised is crucial. Three participants unanimously stated, "The company should provide a detailed job description." One participant suggested that the company could share a video explaining the specific role. Five participants noted that including salary information for the advertised position would be motivating. Most participants considered the sharing of company benefits to be important. One participant stated, "I would like to have information about the benefits offered for the specific position." For some participants, presenting the company's achievements and growth and highlighting its success was motivating. One participant remarked, "I would present the vision and mission; people should know where the company is heading."

**What are the disadvantages of using social networking sites for recruiting from the perspective of a candidate?**

The most frequent disadvantage identified in all the focus groups was the potentially misleading nature of the information a company provides about itself on social networking sites. Participants noted that the information might not accurately reflect the true environment within the company. Several participants highlighted that companies tend to showcase predominantly positive aspects, which may not represent the actual reality. One of the participants stated, "*The company presents a nice team-building event, but personal relationships among employees might be poor.*" Some participants also raised the issue of outdated information shared by the company on company social networks. For example, one participant said the company provided contact details for a recruiter, but when I tried to get in touch, I received no response for a long time, only to later discover that the contact was no longer valid. Three participants thought that a company can post whatever it wants on social media. One participant suggested, *"It is necessary to verify the information shared by the company and seek references from additional sources"*. An interesting point brought up by some participants was that the visibility of job postings to a larger audience on social media decreases their chances of securing the advertised position. In connection with job advertisements, participants mentioned the lack of detailed information about the advertised positions. Moreover, one candidate noted, "*If I want to get information about a position, I tend to use the company's career pages."* Based on their own experience, one candidate stated that it was not possible to filter advertised positions. The majority of participants also indicated that a disadvantage for candidates could be that the assessment is based on information from personal profiles, which are more related to their personal lives than their professional qualifications. Participants expressed concerns that using such information could negatively impact their chances of securing a job. They primarily mentioned Facebook in this context. One participant stated, "*I use Facebook mainly for sharing personal things and LinkedIn for sharing professional matters."* Another participant remarked, "*Evaluating a candidate solely based on information from personal profiles seems unfair."* Interesting was the view of one participant, *"Candidates themselves may deliberately misrepresent information about themselves and thus present a more positive image of themselves than the reality".* Finally, some participants highlighted that those who do not actively use social

networking sites might not become aware of job openings and are thus excluded from the recruitment process, even though they might be very suitable for the position.

**What are the potential ethical issues related to monitoring social networking sites when evaluating candidates?**

The most frequently mentioned issue across all focus groups was that companies use candidate information from public profiles (Facebook was mentioned most often) where candidates share their personal interests, activities, and online profiles that are not directly intended for work life. Some participants considered this practice a violation of their privacy. One participant remarked, "*It feels like a breach of my privacy when companies look at my Facebook profile to judge me for a job.*" Participants expressed concern that information about personal activities could result in candidates not being invited to interviews, despite being professionally qualified. One of the participants noted *"Just because I share my hobbies and opinions on social media doesn't mean I'm not qualified for the job,"* However, this view was countered by another participant, who stated, *"Everyone needs to understand that if their profile is public, then anyone can access that information."* This participant likened the use of public profile information to submitting resumes to agencies, which can then be shared with various employers. *"It's similar to sending your CV to agencies; they can forward it to anyone,"* they explained. Another participant added, *"Unfortunately, many people don't realize what they post on their profiles and how they present themselves."* In each focus group, it was also mentioned that from the profiles the organization can get information about, e.g. family, children, age, and our views, which can lead to misuse of this information in the final selection. Moreover, in several focus groups, participants used the word "discrimination" to describe the potential misuse of this information by companies. A few participants said that using information from social media profiles can lead to discrimination, especially when it comes to personal details that are irrelevant to job performance. These discussions highlight significant ethical concerns regarding privacy and discrimination.

**Do you think that some information on social networks can lead to unfair evaluation?**

In all focus groups, most participants agreed that evaluating a candidate solely from information in the candidates' profiles is not objective. Several participants unanimously stated that they considered the evaluation of candidates based solely on information from social media to be half-hearted. Participants also stated that individuals can present themselves differently on social networks than in reality. One participant gave the example of dressing differently: *"I dress differently in my free time compared to when I go to work.'"* Another participant said, *"A company might give preference to an applicant who presents a healthy lifestyle on their profiles over an applicant who posts photos from parties or similar social events, which they may only attend occasionally."* A few participants also pointed out that evaluation based solely on how an individual presents themselves on the networks can lead to a bias about the applicant and is considered unfair. One participant further stated, *"If a candidate is tracked based on their followers and profiles, it can lead to a bias about the candidate."* In the discussion, some participants also mentioned the misuse of information from personal profiles which relates to sexual orientation, gender, but also the appearance of the candidate, which can also lead to an unfair evaluation. Participants agreed that this information should be disregarded. In the words of one participant, *"Recruiters may have it in their heads and it may influence their decision "* Overall, there was a consensus among participants that social networking sites can pose a risk of unfair evaluation and subsequent selection of job applicants.

**How could one prevent unfair evaluation of a candidate based solely on information from social media profiles?**

Participants across all focus groups reported a variety of themes. However, a few participants agreed that "*Everyone should determine what they want to present on the networks*". One participant added, *"An individual should be careful on social media, not posting on networks what I don't want known or what I feel might put me at a disadvantage*". Some participants argued that everyone is responsible for themselves, including the information they provide on their profile. Several other participants stated that recruiters should not only check social media but use other sources as well. One participant as an example mentioned online tests. According to several participants, firms should focus on LinkedIn in particular. Interestingly, five participants from different focus groups said "*Recruiters should consider the personal life of a candidate from networking, but should only evaluate them after a face-to-face meeting*".

**What would you recommend to companies when using social networks for the recruitment and selection of new employees?**

The majority of participants agreed that social networks will play a significant role in recruitment in the future. However, in light of this, some participants mentioned that companies should use social networks in recruitment only as a supplement, as one of the tools for recruitment and assessment. One participant noted, "*Recruiters should not make conclusions based solely on social media; they should try to get to know the candidate more, perhaps through a personal meeting where they can ask follow-up questions."* This idea was supported by other participants, who suggested that companies should not place too much emphasis on social media. Conversely, some participants argued that social networks should be the primary recruitment tool. One of the participants argued, *"If I were hiring a new employee for a company, I would try to get as much information about the candidate, and social networks are the best way to do that."* Interesting was the opinion provided by two participants, who recommended that companies should use networks like Facebook or TikTok when recruiting younger candidates, while for older candidates use LinkedIn. One participant suggested, "*Firms could contact schools and share job openings for graduates through their social media channels.*" Several participants also noted that recruiters should separate candidates' personal and professional lives. Regarding the content of corporate social networks, participants recommended that companies showcase real-life activities within the company. One participant stated, "*On TikTok, I follow a company that posts funny videos about their workplace."* Some participants mentioned that companies should also highlight the educational courses they offer, the certifications they hold, and the events they celebrate within the company.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to provide an insight into business students' perceptions as potential job seekers regarding the use of social networking by companies in the recruitment process. Specifically, the study's findings offer empirical evidence on perspective candidates´ attitudes and perceptions regarding the advantages, disadvantages, challenges and potential risks associated with organizations utilizing social networks.

Concerning the advantages of social networking sites in recruitment, the majority of participants identified the main one as the ability to obtain more detailed information about a candidate's interests, hobbies, and personal life. This is consistent with the previous relevant literature (Demir & Gunaydin, 2023; Melanthiou et al., 2015; Shahani-Denning et al., 2017), stating that insight into an individual's personal life can provide supplementary information about applicants and thus can assist recruiters in predicting a candidate's behavior and compatibility with the organizational culture and to make their preliminary assessments. Other advantages are the ability to catch individuals who are not actively seeking employment, often referred to as passive job seekers, and the ability to target specific demographic groups. These findings are supported by Galaniaki (2002), who found in their

study that many companies recognize the potential of social sites to recruit passive job seekers who may otherwise remain unreachable. Similarly, Rahman et al. (2020) highlighted the ability of social media to reach applicants from various backgrounds. In addition to the benefits already mentioned, faster and more informal communication, the possibility of presenting organizational life including organizational culture and the presentation of an employer's brand were also identified. These benefits correlate with the study by Joglekar and Tan (2022), which indicated a positive link between employer brand and intention to apply for a job, and a significant effect of a firm's communications about workplace environment on employer attractiveness.

When we asked what type of content on corporate social networks would motivate participants' interest in a job position, most participants agreed that they are interested in insights into the company environment, how the company operates, what it does, and what employees or teams are like. Furthermore, the presentation of the company's achievements, growth and success would also be motivating for participants. Also, a study by Si et al. (2023) demonstrated that presenting information about the company is crucial for motivating job applicants. Moreover, the participants highlighted the importance of detailed job position information, including the salary and benefits for the position. Similar results found by Krishna and Mohan (2016) indicate that only posting a position is insufficient. Thus, for an organization, this means that the job description should be such as to attract the interest of the potential employee.

The most frequently cited disadvantages of using social networking sites for recruitment include providing outdated, incomplete and misleading information about the company, as well as information that does not accurately reflect the actual working environment. This concern also applies to candidates who may share untruthful information on their profiles. In this context, some authors (Melanthiou et al., 2015; Slovensky & Ross, 2012) argue that both organizations and candidates should carefully consider the information they use. Other disadvantages are insufficient information on the advertised job and assessment of candidates based on information from profiles, where personal details about the candidate's life are primarily shared. Lastly, sharing the advertisement with more applicants thus leading to increased competition for the position, was mentioned as a disadvantage.

This study also examined the legal and ethical issues of using social networking sites. The most frequently mentioned issue was the violation of candidates' privacy by organizations using information from applicants' profiles that is not primarily intended for work purposes. This is in line with the findings of Lewis et al. (2015), where the majority of respondents mentioned concerns about privacy as a major disadvantage. Similar conclusions were reached in the study by Melanthiou et al. (2015). Another mentioned issue was unfair assessment and decision on whether or not a candidate is fit for the position and whether or not they fit into the company based rather on personal than professional attributes. Possible discrimination was also noted, as recruiters may form biases based on information available on candidates' social media profiles, such as age, gender, family status or political views. Likewise, Rahman et al. (2020) found in their study that prior knowledge regarding potential applicants' political thoughts, ethnicity or sexual orientation can cause barriers for applicants. A positive finding is that participants are aware of these risks. Respondents believe that everyone is responsible for what they communicate on their profile and should therefore weigh what content they post on the networks. At the same time, respondents recommend that organizations should primarily use professional networks such as LinkedIn.

Lastly, the survey inquired about respondents' recommendations for companies using social networks in the recruitment process. The main finding is that participants view social networks as a tool whose importance will grow in the future, suggesting that organizations should integrate it into their recruitment strategies. However, there was consensus that social networking should not be the sole tool employed and thus other online recruitment tools should also be utilized. Opinions varied regarding the significance of social networking sites in recruitment, with some participants considering it a primary tool, while others viewed

it as just one of several tools. An important recommendation for organizations is to distinguish between personal and professional networks of potential candidates and to be cautious about which platforms they use. Moreover, regarding content, participants suggested that the content companies post on social networks should provide a realistic view of what it's like to work at the company such as day-to-day activities, company culture and employee experiences, and thus help potential candidates make more informed decisions about whether he/she would like to work there.

This study contributes to the literature on the use of social networking sites as an e-recruitment tool by exploring the advantages, disadvantages, challenges and potential risks from the perspective of job seekers. Understanding the benefits and drawbacks perceived by job seekers can help organizations refine their social media recruitment strategies to attract top talent more effectively. Furthermore, insights into candidates' views on ethical concerns and potential risks can guide organizations in creating a more transparent and ethical recruitment process.

## Limitations
This study has its limitations, including the reliance on focus groups, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, since the participants were only master's students, their perspectives may not fully represent those of other groups.

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# Use of social media for agricultural marketing: Facebook and customer engagement

## Ludvík Eger

## Introduction

Social media (SM) is changing the way hundreds of millions of people around the world relate to one another and share information not only between themselves but also between themselves and organizations (Alalwan et al., 2017; Appel et al., 2020; Lee, 2022). The term social media is currently used to describe websites, apps, and types of media that involve online conversation and interaction between people (Strauss & Frost, 2012; Tuten & Solomon, 2015). Nowadays, it is a matter of course and even a necessity for organizations in a number of fields to establish and maintain an interactive online presence via SM and consistently seek to engage with prospective and current customers (Dessart et al., 2015; Gosain et al., 2019; McDonald, 2023).

Agriculture is not an area where communication via social media is a priority, but here too ICT (Bacco et al, 2019; European Commission, 2023) and especially new forms of communication are changing business. On the other hand, the study by McFadden et al. (2022) states that common barriers to the use of digital technologies include costs (up-front investment and recurring maintenance expenses), relevance and limited use cases, user-friendliness, high operator skill requirements, etc. Furthermore, here it is evident that these barriers are insubstantial for the topic of this study and not comparable to areas that require very high investment or complex training of people.

At the end of the 20th century, farmers' traditional and top sources of communication with the public were OOH (billboards and other advertising signs), regional radio, mail, and face-to-face communication with customers. Although these forms of communication are still important, new tools using the Internet have had a greater influence on farmers´ communication than any other communication channel in recent years (cf. Riley & Robertson, 2022; White et al., 2014). Internet mediated communication is a relatively new channel that has the potential to expand local and regional food markets while increasing the viability of small- and medium-sized farms.

Small farmers and their farms are considered an important element of sustainable agricultural production, multifunctional agriculture and rural development (Rumanovská et al., 2018). Furthermore, for small local farms, direct sales to the consumer yield a higher percentage of sales than in the case of large farms (Pteriľák et al., 2020). SM allows small businesses, including small local farms, to engage the public, improve visibility for themselves to promote products, and build trust, which is extremely important nowadays. This marketing channel may serve to promote good farming and offer a potential possibility of how good farming could be displayed (Riley & Robertson, 2022).

The use of communication with consumers through social networks (SNs), such as Facebook or Instagram, is essential in today's marketplace for small businesses, for which this communication channel is one of the cheapest alternatives for managing communication and selling products also in the agriculture sector. SM today has the potential to significantly affect how farmers acquire information about their customers' needs and wishes, and how they communicate with them. Local farmers who process fresh local products should apply this trend effectively.

However research by Pechrová et al. (2015), for example, underlined that the potential of SM for farmers' websites is on the one hand still high and on the other still awaiting utilization. There are many opportunities to develop active agri-marketing using SM. The use of user-generated media, especially SM, now provides farmers with "free" and practically

instantaneous channels through which they can engage with their users, which means with prospective and actual customers.

SM enable users to participate, create knowledge, share information and experience with other users, and maintain relationships with both firms and other users. Users can take various actions to react to the published content, including liking, sharing, and commenting.

SM such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have developed rapidly over the last decade. These media are used daily, even for several hours a day, especially by younger generations of users (Datareportal, 2023). A related opportunity is that younger generations of consumers often support the sub-sector of local fresh and organic produce.

This study also answers calls for more empirical research on marketing in agriculture with a focus on social media. Thus, this study will focus on detailed research in a specialized area of SM application. The aim is to enrich current literature and provide new insights for brand communication development in the agriculture sector with a focus on small local farms. The study aims to address theoretically and managerially important research gaps in the marketing of agriculture by exploring the following research question.

RQ: Are farmers increasingly more active on social media or are they not successfully using this communication channel yet?

## 1 Theoretical background
### 1.1 Agriculture and new marketing activities, Slovakia context
The development of agriculture in Slovakia in the last three decades has been influenced by two important events: the transformation of agriculture after 1989 and Slovakia's accession to the European Union in 2004. There is a contradiction here as, on the one hand, Slovakia's agriculture sector is supposed to be competitive in the common EU market; on the other hand, the conditions for farmers are not the same in all EU countries. Further, there are existing regional differences in Slovakia which also influence the mentioned sector (Némethová, Rybanský, 2021; Izakovičová et al., 2022; Lazíková et al., 2021). In brief, it can be summarized that Slovakia's agrarian sector has undergone major structural changes over the past 30 years. For detailed data on the development of farms in Slovakia, see for example, the research by Tóth et al. (2016) or Bencová et al. (2021).

In this context, the research by Floriš et al. (2022) focused on farmers operating in Slovakia and the course towards making greater value of local producers' products and improving their social situation. This is connected to our topic, which is specifically focused on utilizing online marketing activities for the purpose mentioned above. Further recommendations call, e.g., for new types of entrepreneurial activities, synergies between agricultural practices, and different types of multi-functional activities, such as agri-tourism, engagement in off-farm income activities, and environmental schemes and projects. This issue also corresponds with the necessary innovative marketing activities. The effective use of SM by small farmers for active communication with prospective and current customers could be seen as one of the most important.

Namely, small farms situated in a specific geographic area involved in the whole life cycle of the food, i.e., from its production to its sale, need to improve their marketing communication towards sales support. This also correlates with the recent trend of focusing on local production, as consumers have become more concerned with quality and traceability.  The final aim could be the development of local farm markets and farm shops providing high-quality local food produced by traditional methods. This is associated with support for direct farm sales (cf. Green Report, 2009) and other forms of alternative food networks (cf. Renting et al., 2003). It should be noted that the term alternative network was

not associated with online communication using SM in 2003, but now can be associated with marketing communication, too.

In general, there is also a call for greater cooperation between subjects in the agrarian sector. For example, Michalek et al. (2018) call for two main forms of cooperation that can emerge between farmers: (i) bargaining cooperatives/organizations (horizontal concentration) or (ii) supply and/or marketing cooperatives/organizations (vertical organization). However, our study can only touch on a partial issue in the field of marketing activities. In addition, only one study was found that deals directly with our topic in the context of Slovakia.

In the mentioned study, Petriľák et al. (2020) underline the importance of communication with consumers through social networks, such as Facebook. This is essential in today's marketplace for small businesses, for which this tool represents one of the cheapest alternatives to communicating and selling products. This trend should be accepted by local farmers who process fresh local products. Petriľák et al. (2020) conclude that despite the global trend of using the Facebook platform by consumers and businesses, this is not very apparent in Slovak agriculture, especially for small farmers who produce local fresh products. Findings from this research show that only 1/3 of farmers use this platform to communicate with customers. On the other hand, small farmers mostly employ a small number of employees who are primarily involved directly in the production or processing of products while the farmers themselves are responsible for everything from plant production to the processing and marketing of products.

## 1.2 Why use social media to support farming?

Human society is fundamentally dependent on food, and food production has a significant impact on both human health and the environment. Agriculture firms in the context of safe, sustainable food production, such as small-scale farmers, can be especially well positioned to use SM for customer engagement (Zhang et al., 2023).

Generally, people care about their food. Many focus on the link between food and nature. It should be noted that people from all parts of the world often present what they eat. Very often pictures and videos of what they use to prepare meals and what they consume are shared by them.

Of course, it is necessary to take into account who the customers of a particular business (farm) are and what media they use (consume). The popularity of SM use has changed customers as well. It is crucial for companies and their brands, specifically young people who are digital natives and belong to Generation Z and Y, and use SM as an important communication channel every day. In addition, Generation X also uses SM regularly (Datareportal, 2023; Statista, 2023).

Individuals use SM platforms to express their feelings about their activities related to a company, product, service, or brand. Further, previous research (e.g. Bozkurt et al., 2021; Dessart et al., 2015; Dwivedi et al., 2021) suggests that interacting on social media encourages customers to contribute to brand value directly (through purchasing) and/or indirectly (through referring, influencing, and suggesting).

The above facts indicate that SM is a suitable tool for promoting farms and their products. Farming is visual, and people responsible for SM profiles have numerous opportunities to publish interesting pictures or videos from rural regions that are usually connected with nature or attractive landscapes. Farming offers authentic stories about people and their lives. They can also be stories related to nature, landscape, animals, and also plants, etc. (cf. Santori, & Driessen, 2022).

Farms and the farming community should elicit public support to achieve success. Thus, engaging the public is important in disseminating information about sustainable food and

farming, and new media including SM must play an important role. This research also seeks to understand how posts on the Facebook platform influence social media engagement in the selected industry.

## 1.3 Firm´s profile on social media and brand community

The application of Web 2.0 has enabled profound changes in human interaction. Communication via SM is not only interactive but also participatory, collaborative, personal, and simultaneously communal, thus allowing organizations to engage clients / consumers in constant conversations, supportive behaviour, and meaningful relationships (Tsai & Men, 2017). SM are numerous and varied, but the important thing is that they able to fulfil an instinctual human need, connecting with other humans (McDonald, 2023; Safko, 2012).

Generally, specific objectives of SM marketing are usually focused on generating engagement using selected companies' profiles on SM, stimulating sales, increasing brand awareness, improving brand image, reducing marketing costs, and creating interaction with SM users and other stakeholders (Alalwan et al., 2017; Appel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Communication between firms and their customers using their SM profiles helps build brand loyalty beyond traditional methods (Alves et al., 2016).

An essential component of SM marketing is a brand page or a brand profile on SM, which represent an interactive communication platform. Social networks such as Facebook or Instagram, with their heavy reliance on visual imagery, have provided a platform for organizations to strengthen engagement with their public through the use of organization-generated visual content (Dhanesh et al., 2022). Research results show that SM engagement enhances the public's affiliation and identification with organizations, triggers further online interactions in their peer networks, and can create positive attitudes towards and stronger relationships with organizations, including agriculture firms (Dhanesh et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2021).

Organizations should also analyse conversations in SM with the aim of understanding how consumers view their products and brand (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Vendemia, 2017). Insights gained from SM platforms are pivotal for companies to understand their products and brands' present position (Siahaan & Prasetio, 2022). Furthermore, conversations between firms and their customers and between customers on SM provide firms with new ideas for how to support brand awareness, brand recognition, and brand recall (Alves et al., 2016). The effectiveness of SM marketing may also depend on the specific needs of communication that consumers assign to companies and brands within the SM in selected industrial sectors (cf. study by Rival IQ, 2023) and the agriculture sector and especially small farms are different sectors in comparison with fashion or automotive.

The application of a marketing strategy using profiles on Facebook or Instagram is represented by company-created content. There is the opportunity to expand brand awareness through the messages disseminated on selected SNs (Bozkurt et al., 2021). Companies´ profiles on SM engage their users and support the sharing of information and other promotional activities aimed mainly at existing and prospective consumers. Thus, the brand community is considered a key part of interactive SM marketing. Further, free, accessible and available insights from SM could be essential for companies' decision-making and market analysis purposes (Dwivedi et al., 2021; McDonald, 2023).

Furthermore, strong and successful brand equity becomes an important factor for brands to differentiate themselves from competitors in the eyes of their community members. This fact is also important for firms in the agriculture industry. Therefore, it is important to know which factors or features of the farm product are seriously taken into consideration in the decision-making process and which attributes and other assets of agriculture products are

important for their consumers. As such, this study sets out to examine the differential effects of SM marketing communications with a focus on firm-created content in terms of brand community on SM in agriculture.

## 1.4 Customer engagement

Customer engagement in SM is an important marketing outcome. Online engagement can be defined (e.g., Mollen and Wilson 2010, p. 923) as "a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website." Santini et al. (2020) found that customer engagement has substantial value for companies, and directly impacts firm performance, behavioural intention, and word-of-mouth.

In this study, based on the viewpoint of engagement and the technical features of the selected SM platform, there can be three different kinds of engagement: liking (reactions), commenting, and sharing. Each of them will be measured.

- Likes indicate that users are in favour of the contents of the posts, and each user can like a specific post only once,
- Sharing indicates a high level of engagement, because sharing a post suggests the user would like to further disseminate the information in the post.
- The highest level of engagement occurs when a user comments on a post. This requires the most effort, because the user composes a response (Zhang et al., 2023).

Measurement of the effectiveness of communication using social media and the effectiveness of the institution's marketing strategy on SM is commonly done using engagement metrics. Variants of total engagement are proportional engagements, defined as the level of engagement that takes the reach for each post or in one year or per special measure (e.g. number of customers). They always relate to selected Facebook or Instagram profiles.

Kim and Yang (2017) underlined that each engagement behaviour differs in the value and commitment of resources. Liking represents a very basic form of engagement and an affectively driven behaviour. Commenting is cognitively triggered and enables people to share their thoughts, ideas and opinions, or to show their interest in the post's topic (Kim & Yang, 2017; Zell & Moeller, 2018). Sharing is either affective or cognitive or a combination of both (Kim & Yang, 2017). Different message features, particularly those that utilize call-to-action and motivate users, result in diverse behaviours (Eger et al, 2021; Tuten & Solomon, 2015; Zhang et al., 2023). Regarding this, Alsufyan and Aloud (2017) state that sensory and visual features lead to likes that indicate a simple online reaction to the posted content. Shares are associated with virality, while comments are associated with conversation. Comments lead to rational and interactive features, and shares lead to sensory, visual, and rational features (cf. Dhanesh et al., 2022). Engagement, which is the way a follower or user interacts and relates to a company (farm), can be viewed as one of the non-economic benefits of its social network presence.

The following hypotheses were framed based on the literature and specific situation in the agriculture industry in the selected country:

H1 Farms that are more active in communication on their official Facebook profile (number of posts / 2023) achieve a higher engagement rate.

H2 The types of expositive resources (text, graphic, audio visual) influence the level of engagement per post.

## 1.5 Uses and gratification theory and communication on social media

As mentioned above, this study uses content analysis to examine in detail the communication of selected farms especially on Facebook. Uses and gratification theory (UGT) is based on the origins of social and psychological needs and explains the concept of why people use media (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000). In the past, UGT focused on traditional media, while today this theory is also suitable for researching social networks (Dolan et al., 2016; Muntinga et al., 2017). In other words, SM fulfils many expectations of both mass and interpersonal communication. The basic questions in UGT research remain the same and this study brings answer to the question of what gratifications users receive from the brand community on selected social media (cf. Eger and Gangur, 2024) in the agriculture industry.

In a communication on SM, a brand's overt goal is to attract users (followers) by providing value, or gratification, through its content (cf. Lin & Lu, 2011). Therefore, firms should design content on, for example, their official Facebook profile in a way which creates value for individual SM users to build a stronger level of engagement and facilitate brand communication. Individuals are motivated to fulfil their needs and wants, and that's how individuals take particular actions or access content on selected SM.

For example, Whiting and Williams (2013) provide list of several gratifications in the context of SM. This study follows a new approach by Dolan et al. (2016) and their model, based on UGT. From this perspective, the research objective is focused on identifying which types of gratification bring the highest engagement of users of farm (brand) profiles on SM.

In order to extend the scope of the literature on UGT and SM use, this research assumes that the types of gratification and engagement measures of Facebook are related to the extent to which users (followers / fans) have interacted with these platforms during a selected time period. Furthermore, correspondence analysis could provide empirical evidence to understand how types of gratification on Facebook and Instagram have influenced the level of user interaction on farm SM profiles. Four key categories of gratifications by Dolan et al. (2016) are categorised into four main groups based on the level of information, entertainment, remunerative and relational content.

The following research hypotheses were developed based on the literature above related to UGT:

H3 Greater implementation of the categories Relational + Remunerative + Entertainment will yield a higher level of engagement per post.

H4 There exist differences in the communication of agriculture (farm) brands on social networks according to the UGT categories.

**Tab. 1: Types of gratification (by Dolan et al., 2016 and with additions by De Vierman et al., 2017)**

| Informational content | This content is focused on information for users (followers / fans). The informational type of gratification represents the extent to which the SM content provides users with resourceful and helpful information. The desire to seek information directly from the brand page (here the firm's Facebook or Instagram profile) is considered a motivating factor for consumers to use SM. |
|---|---|
| Entertainment content | The entertainment content of Facebook or Instagram posts refers to the extent to which SM content is fun and entertaining to media users. The media information about interesting matters or posts focused on fans were included. |

| Remunerative content | Users (followers / fans) engage in SM use as they expect to gain some kind of reward such as an economic incentive, product-related benefit or personal wants. SM content that offers a reward or remuneration also includes monetary incentives, giveaways, prize draws or monetary compensations. In addition, also the ability to learn something new about a product, the possibility to get exclusive content, etc. |
|---|---|
| Relational content | Needs of users of SM for integration and social interaction and their desire for social benefits have been identified as key motivations for users to access the Internet. This content supports relations, including the relation between the selected firm and its target groups (prospective customers, customers, staff…). Socialising involves motivations such as gaining peer support, meeting interesting people, belonging to a community and staying in touch with friends. This type is connected with socialising that also involves motivations such as gaining peer support, meeting interesting people, belonging to a community (farm life) and staying in touch with community members. |

Source: own processing

## 2 Methods

Relevant and widely available data sources are critical to evaluating brand communication on SM and obtaining information about customer insights. To capture quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher investigated the official Facebook profiles of selected agriculture companies. This means only publicly available SM media posts were captured.

### 2.1 Sample selection

The quantitative part of the conducted research focuses on describing posting practices and selected engagement metrics of official Facebook profiles of selected agriculture firms from Slovakia in 2023. The research focused on firms registered in EKOTREND Slovakia (Zväz ekologického poľnohospodárstvathe) in October 2023. The researcher simultaneously collected, mapped, and coded posts published by selected firms from their official Facebook profiles in detail to answer the posed research question and hypotheses. For this purpose, six firms (their profiles on Facebook) were chosen for detailed investigation. That means this is a pilot study focused on farms in the Slovakia context and their communication with the public using Facebook.

### 2.2 Data analysis

The study maps quantitative data from the selected agriculture brands' official profiles on Facebook (709 posts = 6 agriculture brands / 2023). The data were imported into an Excel file and the researcher conducted a descriptive analysis.

Engagement metrics are commonly monitored to measure the effectiveness of communication using SM. The research used engagement rate/year and, according to the survey by Rival IQ (2023), engagement rate per post (by follower) as the two primary metrics. First, engagement rate per year (year 2023) = the total number of likes + comments + shares divided by the total number of followers, (ER 2023 per follower). Second, engagement rate per post by follower = total number of likes + comments + shares per post divided by the total number of followers, then multiplied by 100.

Furthermore, the unit of analysis is the post for a selected day. The data were imported (January, 2024) in chronological order on the posting date into an Excel file (post type, number of likes/reactions, comments, and shares). At the same time, the content was coded. Post coding follows two perspectives. The first focuses on the coding of the UGT categories (see above). The second encodes the content of the posts according to categories that correspond to what people look for when they follow a farm on SM. These categories were inspired by tips for farm SM published abroad, e. g. Burkett et al. (2021) or

Mleziva (2022), and previous research by Santori and Driessen (2022), Petriľák et al. (2020) and Riley and Robertson (2022), and the following categories were used: Farm shop (direct sales), Activities in nature, Educational activities, Product, Brand, Environment, Equipment, Customer contest, Event, Others. Before the main content analysis, a pilot study was conducted to improve the codebook and coder training.

Finally, once the categorization and coding had been completed, descriptive statistics and correspondence analysis were conducted using Statistica. To answer the RQ and hypotheses 1 and 2, the "classical" engagement was calculated for the selected 6 firms using data captured from their Facebook profiles. Further, the engagement rate per post (by follower) was calculated for the year 2023 for a detailed investigation. The qualitative approach used an expert evaluation of selected top posts aimed at content categories, UGT categories, and differences between agriculture brands in published content. The purpose of the qualitative part of this research study was to gather information about the communication that Facebook administrators (farmers) use to achieve engagement with the public via the firm's Facebook profile. To answer the RQ and hypotheses 3 and 4, correspondence analysis is used because it is a useful tool to uncover the relationships among categorical variables (Doey & Curta, 2011) with a clear graphical presentation (Beh, 2004).

## 3 Results

The list of registered subjects under EKOTREND Slovakia contains 74 items. It is obvious that these are very different entities. There are also larger companies, but there are also small regional farms, subjects focused on beekeeping, wineries, agri-tourism entities, etc.

It was surprising to discover that 34 of them either do not have a website or it does not function well, which concerns almost 45% of the companies. This fact alone shows how big the problems are from the point of view of marketing in this area. Additionally, another 19 had an outdated website. On the contrary, 13 subjects had a website as an e-shop or directly linked to it. Only 7 subjects had functional Facebook and Instagram profiles. A total of 19 subjects had a functional Facebook profile. Exceptionally, firms were linked to YouTube.

13 firms had functional Facebook profiles with more than 1K followers. The number ranged from 1.4 thou. (VETSERVIS, s.r.o.) to 18 thou. (BIOMILA s.r.o.). 6 entities were selected for detailed analysis to gain a deeper understanding of how the best entities interact with the public on Facebook.

## 3.1 Engagement rate per post (by follower)/ Year 2023

The list of selected agriculture brands and basic information about their communication on their official Facebook profile for the year 2023 is shown in Table 2. The data provide an example of the use of Facebook in the agriculture industry by selected firms in Slovakia. The data show the number of posts published during the year 2023 on the Facebook profile, the number of followers at the end of this year, and values related to the level of reaction (likes + comments + shares).

**Tab. 2: Agriculture brands and Engagement rate, Facebook**

| | T | P | P+A | V/R | Comb P/V | Sum | Likes | Comm | Shares | Follo-wers | ER/per post/ F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agrokarpaty s.r.o. | 0 | 34 | 14 | 3 | 3 | 54 | 3090 | 281 | 331 | 5200 | 0.013 |
| BONAVITA SERVIS s.r.o. | 0 | 56 | 4 | 5 | 0 | 65 | 2742 | 3347 | 1921 | 1700 | 0.072 |
| EKO-Produkt s.r.o. | 0 | 21 | 22 | 3 | 7 | 53 | 2443 | 45 | 680 | 2900 | 0.021 |
| Sad Livia s.r.o. | 4 | 118 | 100 | 16 | 7 | 245 | 5762 | 262 | 446 | 2900 | 0.009 |
| Včelárstvo Dedinský | 0 | 25 | 28 | 7 | 3 | 63 | 2710 | 199 | 232 | 4700 | 0.011 |
| Víno Natural Domin & Kušický s.r.o. | 7 | 159 | 51 | 7 | 5 | 229 | 10293 | 233 | 529 | 2500 | 0.019 |

Note: T = text, P = photo, P+A = photo album (series of images), V/R = video/reel, Comm = Comments, ER/per post by follower

As can be seen from the data in Table 2 above, hypothesis H1 is not confirmed. Agriculture brands that were active on their official Facebook profile (number of posts / 2023) did not achieve a higher engagement rate. Conversely, the two brands with fewer posts scored higher in metric engagement rate per post by follower. BONAVITA SERVIS was able to increase the engagement rate in a targeted manner using customer competitions.

### 3.2 Influence of media type of post resource on engagement rate

H2 focuses on the types of communication resources. The purpose of the analysed sample was to answer the question of which type of post is most effective in terms of the engagement rate per post by follower achieved (Table 3).

The plain Text format was the least used out of 709 posts that were analysed. It only occurred in 7 cases (1.6%) and only two subjects used this simple format in 2023. The descriptive analysis reveals that Photo / graphical resource was the most used by the selected Firms (413 = 58.3%). A successful post type for Facebook in terms of classified media was also the Photo album (219 = 30.9%), which surprisingly did better than the Video/reel (41 = 5.8%). On Facebook, in addition to Reels (which we matched to the Video in terms of source), there are also posts that are a combination of, for example, photo and video, photo albums and reel, etc. In this study, this is marked as the Comb category, and 25 posts (3.5%) were rated.

The type Photo achieved the highest engagement (BONAVITA SERVIS, 8.18 ERP/Fans%), but it should be noted that this firm used this type of post five times for a customer contest and achieved top engagement due to this focus. The most successful post type for Facebook in terms of classified media was the Photo album, see EKO-Produkt (22 = 2.37%) and Víno Natural Domin & Kušický (51 = 2.33%). Interestingly, the post type according to the source Video/Reel (i.e. dynamic image with sound) did not achieve a high engagement rate per post by follower except for firm Víno Natural Domin & Kušický (7 = 4.84%). Three firms, EKO-Produkt, Včelárstvo Dedinský and Víno Natural Domin & Kušický, also a-chieved positive values for posts published on Facebook that combine expositive resources. This type started to be used more on Facebook in the Slovakia context in 2023.

The observed dispersion was highest for the type Photo, from 0.70% (minimum) for Sad Livia, to 8.18% (maximum) for BONAVITA SERVIS. An even more detailed qualitative analysis of individual posts may yield interesting recommendations for benchmarking and managing Facebook's communication with the public.

**Tab. 3: Expositive resources (text, graphic, audio-visual) and the level of engagement rate per post**

| Firms | Type | No of posts | Reactions | ER per post | ERP/Fans % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agrokarpaty s.r.o. | Text | 0 | | | |
| | Photo | 34 | 1828 | 53.76 | 1.03 |
| | Photo alb. | 14 | 1420 | 101.43 | 1.95 |
| | Video/Reel | 3 | 268 | 89.33 | 1.72 |
| | Comb | 3 | 248 | 82.67 | 1.59 |
| BONAVITA SERVIS s.r.o. | Text | 0 | | | |
| | Photo | 56 | 7788 | 139.07 | 8.18 |
| | Photo alb. | 4 | 105 | 26.25 | 1.54 |
| | Video/Reel | 5 | 117 | 23.40 | 1.38 |
| | Comb | 0 | | | |
| EKO-Produkt s.r.o. | Text | 0 | | | |
| | Photo | 21 | 1031 | 49.10 | 1.69 |
| | Photo alb. | 22 | 1514 | 68.82 | 2.37 |
| | Video/Reel | 3 | 91 | 30.33 | 1.05 |
| | Comb | 7 | 532 | 76.00 | 2.62 |
| Sad Livia s.r.o. | Text | 4 | 16 | 4.00 | 0.14 |
| | Photo | 118 | 2379 | 20.16 | 0.70 |
| | Photo alb. | 100 | 3535 | 35.35 | 1.22 |
| | Video/Reel | 16 | 427 | 26.69 | 0.92 |
| | Comb | 7 | 101 | 14.43 | 0.50 |
| Včelárstvo Dedinský | Text | 0 | | | |
| | Photo | 25 | 971 | 38.84 | 0.83 |
| | Photo alb. | 28 | 1396 | 49.86 | 1.06 |
| | Video/Reel | 7 | 411 | 58.71 | 1.25 |
| | Comb | 3 | 363 | 121.00 | 2.57 |
| | Text | 7 | 306 | 43.71 | 1.75 |
| | Photo | 159 | 6660 | 41.89 | 1.68 |
| | Photo alb. | 51 | 2976 | 58.35 | 2.33 |
| | Video/Reel | 7 | 847 | 121.00 | 4.84 |
| - | Comb | 5 | 266 | 53.20 | 2.13 |

Note: Photo album (series of images), Comb (photo and video, photo albums and reel etc.), ERP/Fans= = engagement rate per post by follower

Source: own processing

Using findings from previous research, H2 was formulated as follows: The types of expositive resources (text, graphic, audio visual) influence the level of engagement per post. In this case and based on the obtained data, it is not possible to confirm or refute the hypothesis. However, the source of the post is not the only factor in achieving a high engagement rate. The content of the communication and its focus on the needs of the users will have a significant influence.

Therefore, UGT theory was used, and the published posts were classified into UGT categories as described in Table 1.

### 3.3 UGT categories and differences among agriculture brands in their communication via official Facebook profile

As mentioned above, brand communication via SM should attract users (followers) by providing value, or gratification, through published content. The findings on the UGT content categories show how these content categories were distributed concerning the selected agriculture brands. To examine the published content in detail, the researcher coded the selected sample of posts (Table 3) and performed correspondence analysis to get a deep understanding of the brand communication of the selected agriculture brands on SM.

**Tab. 4: UGT content categories, agriculture firms, Facebook, 2023**

| | Infoma-tional | Inf % | Relatio-nal | Rel % | Enter-taining | Ent % | Remu-nerative | Rem % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agrokarpaty s.r.o. | 44 | 81 | 4 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 9 |
| BONAVITA SERVIS s.r.o. | 46 | 71 | 6 | 9 | 1 | 2 | 12 | 18 |
| EKO-Produkt s.r.o. | 42 | 79 | 5 | 9 | 5 | 9 | 1 | 2 |
| Sad Livia s.r.o. | 230 | 94 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| Včelárstvo Dedinský | 55 | 87 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 5 |
| Víno Natural Domin & Kušický s.r.o. | 220 | 96 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

As seen in Table 4, almost 90% of posts that use various expositive sources bring information to social network users in the first place. Under other types of gratifications (Relational, Entertainment, Remunerative) only 20 to 27 posts were published and not one category reached 4%.

In general, the correspondence map (Figure 1) shows that firms promoted themselves using a similar content category via Facebook.
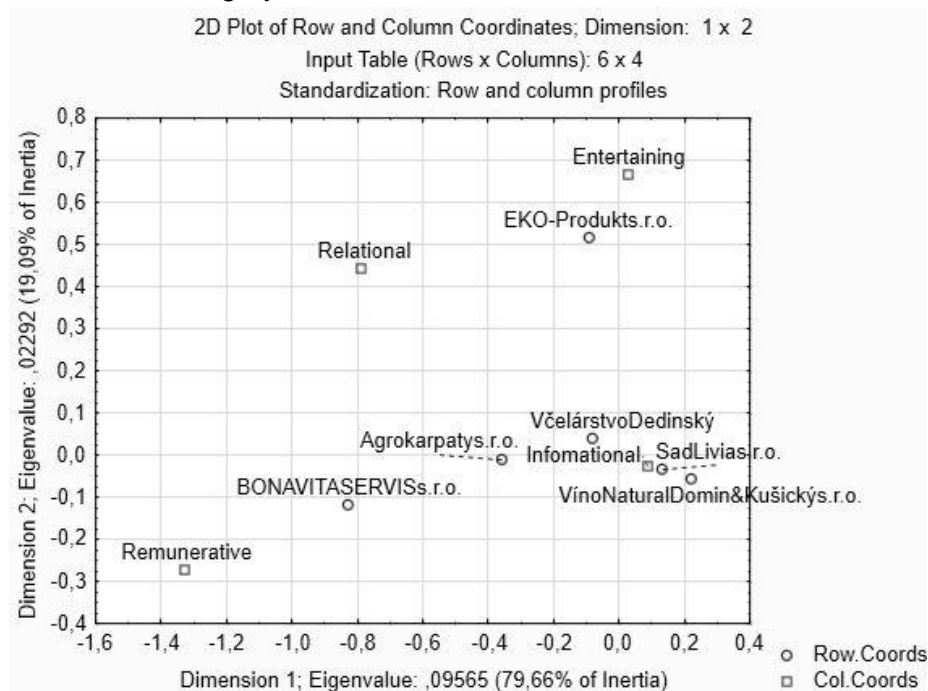


**Fig. 1: Two-dimensional correspondence analysis map, UGT categories of agriculture brands on Facebook**

It was found that the differences were not great. A significant difference was found only at the company BONAVITA SERVIS in the item Remunerative. The firm EKO-Produkt has a relatively higher value in the item Entertainment.

Performing correspondence analysis does not necessarily need to calculate a Chi-square test as it provides a multivariate graphical technique to explore relationships within selected categorical data. The graphic display of the results is a useful tool to uncover the relationships among categorical variables, UGT categories, and clearly shows the problem in communication effectiveness with the use of SM in this area.

The two dimensions, 1 and 2, are sufficient to retain 98.75% of the data's total inertia (variation). As is mentioned above, in terms of promotional content via Facebook, different findings were found when correspondence analysis was applied.

Table 4 and Figure 1 show that relative to the total number of posts, EKO-Produkt applied a focus on different categories relatively best. However, this firm published only 42 posts in 2023, while the firms Sad Livia and Víno Natural Domin & Kušický published over 200. The analysed communication on Facebook confirmed that these firms underestimate the Remunerative category in particular, which was used only by BONAVITA SERVIS and thus obtained a high engagement rate for the Photo post type.

Hypothesis H3 assumes a higher level of engagement per post for UGT categories Relational + Remunerative + Entertainment. Indeed, for our data sample, the engagement rate per post by follower was in the category Relational 2.03%, Entertainment 2.87%, and even in the category Remunerative 15.92%. However, in the most numerous category, Informational, the minimum was 0 and the maximum was 12%, which means that there is a large spread of values. The top post by BONAVITA reached a value of 92.59% (engagement rate per post by follower), and it was a customer contest. The hypothesis is confirmed.

In this pilot study, the findings in Table 4 show that there exist differences in the communication of agriculture (farm) brands on social networks according to the UGT categories. The difference is particularly noticeable for firms with a smaller number of posts in 2023. From this point of view, the communication of the company BONAVITA SERVIS is implemented most effectively. Hypothesis (H4) is confirmed in this data set.

Now there follows additional analysis of the content of the posts according to categories that correspond to what people look for when they follow a farm on SM. Findings are presented in Table 5. It is not a straightforward task to code content. For example, between the product and brand categories, it was necessary to decide according to what is predominant or can be perceived in the first place from the perspective of the SM user. Regarding Table 5, it can be noted that all subjects use communication on Facebook for product promotion in the first place. It is also possible to include the Event category because for some companies (e.g., Sad Livia and Víno Natural Domin & Kušický) it is also a product and in other cases, it is often associated with the sale of products. Some companies also promote activities in nature. Educational activities are important for two companies and Sad Livia also focuses on the environment and equipment category. Again, it is evident how significantly BONAVITA SERVIS uses customer contests and thus achieves a high engagement rate.

**Tab. 5: Content categories related to the agriculture brands, Facebook, 2023**

| Firms | Product | Brand | Event | Contest | A in nature | Educa-tional A | Environ-ment | Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agrokarpaty s.r.o. | 33 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 6 |
| BONAVITA SERVIS s.r.o. | 39 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 1 | 8 | 1 | 5 |
| EKO-Produkt s.r.o. | 20 | 0 | 18 | 0 | 11 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Sad Livia s.r.o. | 66 | 8 | 38 | 2 | 43 | 8 | 43 | 37 |
| Včelárstvo Dedinský | 19 | 4 | 13 | 2 | 11 | 3 | 3 | 8 |
| Víno Natural Domin & Kušický s.r.o. | 69 | 22 | 57 | 1 | 11 | 0 | 52 | 17 |

Note: A in nature = activities in nature, Educational A(ctivities)

Source: own processing

Since this is a pilot study, some items have zero frequencies and others very low frequencies. Thus, correspondence analysis is of no use, which would have been a great way to graphically document the above findings.

## 4 Discussion

The study performed an analysis of the posts' content using UGT and interpreted the topics, classifying them according to the semantic meanings of the published content using theoretical concepts. The adopted approach can be used as a good example for practitioners who intend to improve communication of agriculture firms with SM users (generally) and customers.

The research results also show that there are differences between what individual agriculture firms (farms) offer customers.

- There are traditional farms focusing on the production of organic products, often with sales directly to consumers. Some of them, however, process the products further and use e-commerce, especially e-shops, to deliver them.
- There are also more specialized firms, for example, wineries, beekeeping firms, or ones focusing on natural cosmetics, etc.

It was observed, similar to Zhang et al. (2023), that knowledge sharing has a positive influence on SM engagement, and that different types of posts have distinct effects on SM engagement. Social media is one marketing tool available, and while it is popular and its use is almost free (cf. Alalwan et al., 2017), the important thing is that a responsible person sets goals for communication via these channels and determines ways how SM can help promote agricultural activities and products. Based on the previous findings by Graybill-Leonard et al. (2011), it would be in the best interest of agricultural communicators to utilize Facebook, along with other social media tools, to communicate not only their products but also agricultural issues, and to promote trends in this field. SM (Riley & Robertson, 2022) also offer a key new site for reflecting and demonstrating the potentially shifting boundaries and scripts of good farming.

Furthermore, on the one hand, Petrilak et al. (2020) report that there is a lack of workforce and a lack of marketing skills in small farms, and on the other, online platform conditions are rapidly changing and there is a growing demand for skills and knowledge in the field of online marketing. However, on the Internet, we can find practical recommendations for farmers on how to deal with the administration of a profile on Facebook or other social networks, e.g. Santori, & Driessen (2022). Also for family farms, it is an opportunity to involve the younger generation, who usually have ICT skills and will be innovative in communicating with a younger target group.

Floriš et al. (2022) argue that micro and small enterprises in the agriculture sector differ compared to large companies in the high production costs and prices at which they sell their products. They argue that shortening the distance in the supply chain and complete minimization through in-house sales could lead to a reduction in transport costs, which could affect operating expenses (their reduction). Communication through social media can support in-house sales. In addition, especially customers from the younger Z, Y, X generations (Datareportal, 2023), who use SM every day, and many of whom prefer an ecological approach and quality food, should be targeted.

Marketing communication using SM has the potential to improve brand equity and enhance consumer responses. The findings of this research study demonstrate that a higher number of posts published on a firm's official Facebook profile does not imply a higher engagement rate. The media type of post resource influences engagement rate. The content analysis confirmed that the content of posts focusing on target groups is key. Specifically, UGT categories that deepen interaction with or entertain users have been confirmed to lead to higher levels of engagement. The highest level of content is associated with the Remuneration category.

## Conclusions and further research

In order to fully utilize the potential of SM for agricultural development, it is necessary to encourage more farmers to use them. At the same time, relevant experts and agencies must provide support for this effort, such as training farmers or their staff in using SM. Regular use of SM is a great way to connect with customers, build relationships with the public, and promote the farm and its products. Having an online presence is a step in the right direction. It aims to gain the attention of prospective and current customers, building the necessary trust, and maintaining long-term relationships. The findings of the pilot study showed that it is necessary to pay attention to the types of posts from the point of view of the media, and the content of the message to the target group. It is also appropriate to make targeted use of insights from communication theory, here UGT, to achieve high levels of engagement with social network users.

## Research limitations

While the findings of this research have practical and theoretical implications for those engaged in the practice or research of SM in the agriculture sector, several limitations still exist. The research results are dependent on the selected agriculture firms in the context of Slovakia. The data were obtained through convenience sampling, which is acceptable for an explanatory study. Further research should use a different sample from a different cultural context. Further, it will also be important to investigate the role of the type of platform (e.g. Facebook vs. Instagram).

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# Case study: Identifying a high-quality influencer suitable to work with an SME when communicating brand in foreign markets

## Vojtěch Beran and Jitka Burešová

### Introduction

For the past few decades, globalization and the worldwide spread of the internet have led to the establishment of virtual interpersonal relationships, which can be identified as one of the significant factors affecting the number of social network users (Tarman & Yigit, 2012). Dean (2021) reports that there were 4. 48 billion active users in 2021, a staggering 13.13% increase from the previous year. In 2015, there were 2.07 billion active social network users, meaning that social networks have seen a 115.59% increase in the last six years (Dean, 2021). Social networks are now a relatively common communication tool, and due to their influence and the impact of progressive digitalization, users of these platforms are becoming much more educated and far more critical of the content of commercial messages (Biaudet, 2017). The ever-increasing interest of people in becoming active users of social media brings enormous opportunities for businesses to communicate with consumers there. Still, communication needs to be more sophisticated than before, given the improved media literacy of users. This need creates new marketing industries, such as influencer marketing (Appel et al., 2020).

Influencer marketing is a relatively new and effective way for businesses to collaborate with influencers. Sometimes referred to as an "influential user", an influencer is an internet user who manages to impact the behaviour of other internet users through the content they create, their connections and the size of their audience (Podnikatel. cz, 2023). The goal of a business is to use influencers and their intense personal brand, which is known within established communities, to build the brand of the business (Podnikatel.cz, 2023). Influencers have great influence over their fans, which they can leverage to communicate the company's brand, which is very appealing to the fans (Vyatkina, 2020). When working with a company, the influencer becomes an imaginary mediator and disseminator of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) to their follower base, as they are the opinion leaders for that particular group (Dalstam et al., 2018). Thus, businesses can communicate their brand through their predetermined brand goals using a symbiotic relationship with the influencer (Duroň, 2016). The influencer can further disseminate these goals to the target audience in return for specific consideration (Dostál, 2019). For example, the influencer can recommend products of a selected brand (Isyanto et al., 2020), influence the brand perception of the target audience (Wu et al., 2021) and thus co-create a positive view of the brand image or increase the brand awareness of the target audience (Hermanda et al., 2019).

Influencer marketing is an increasingly popular form of marketing communication and has become an essential part of the marketing mix of many companies (Audrezet et al., 2018). In 2017, 45% of companies in the Czech Republic already had a marketing budget that accounted for influencer marketing (Ogilvy & Mather, 2017). In 2021, when global companies were cutting marketing budgets due to the COVID-19 pandemic, research conducted in the UK, US and Germany revealed that up to 73% of marketers in large companies had increased their influencer marketing budgets and up to 90% of marketers perceived this type of communication as effective (Hejkrlík, 2021). Even though large international companies are embracing influencer marketing as a stable part of their marketing mix, Renchen (2020) indicates that there is still a degree of uncertainty and caution in using influencer marketing among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Nevertheless, influencer marketing is a straightforward way to launch a brand in a foreign market without the need for significant investments and cooperation with marketing agencies (Machková & Machek, 2021).

The fact that many SMEs do not use influencer marketing owing to the uncertainty of how

to implement this cooperation properly has led the authors of this article to the idea of creating a case study, using the example of a selected SME that communicates its products using influencer marketing on a foreign market to demonstrate what to focus on when choosing an influencer and which benefits influencer marketing can bring to SMEs. Research from 2021 shows that finding the right influencers is the biggest challenge for companies, especially when the company is running the campaign itself and does not use the services of a marketing agency. Instagram was selected as the most suitable social network for influencer marketing analysis, as it is used by two-thirds of international companies (Hejkrlík, 2021).

The main objective of this paper is to provide recommendations on selecting an SME influencer for brand communication in a foreign market based on the analysis of a specific example of influencer marketing. Based on the main objective, the following research question (RQ) was formulated:

**RQ:** *Which attributes have a high-quality influencer suitable for working with an SME?*

The main contribution of this paper is to reduce the level of uncertainty across the SME sector towards this modern method of marketing communication. Based on a literal review and detailed analysis of a specific SME and the influencer communication that works with the company, the authors present a set of recommendations to assist SMEs in effectively using influencer marketing to communicate their brands.

## 1 Literature review
The first chapter provides a literature review related to the issue under analysis. In this section, we first make clear what brand and influencer marketing means.

## 1.1 Brand
*"A brand is a product, but a product that adds additional dimensions that distinguish the brand from other products created to satisfy the same need"* (Keller, 2007, p. 34). A brand exists primarily in the consciousness of consumers. In other words, a particular brand is what the customer thinks (Healey, 2008). Thus, the customer's perception of the brand is crucial. For this reason, companies try to create a positive image of the brand in customers' eyes so that customers perceive it positively and want to buy it regularly (Kaputa, 2011). Brand equity is created to enable an apt marketing perception of the brand. Vázquez et al. (2010) defined brand equity as "*the utility that the consumer associates with the use and consumption of the brand*". If a brand brings high value to the customer, it is also valuable to the firm because it brings higher profits.

A key element in the branding process is brand knowledge, which has two sub-dimensions: brand awareness and brand associations. Brand awareness, i.e., brand imprint in customers' minds, is the first prerequisite for customers to buy a brand (Keller, 1993). Research by Dabbous and Barakat (2020) illustrates that quality content on social media and user engagement with the company leads to increased brand awareness, which leads to increased purchase intention, even in offline environments. Brand image is defined by Aaker (1996, p. 113) as *"the net result of all the experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge that people have about a company".* Marketers strive to make their brand image positive. This is the only way to get customers to buy the brand. Thus, brand awareness alone is usually not enough to make a purchase (Hsieh & Li, 2008).

The culmination of building brand equity is thus achieving loyal customers who repeatedly purchase the brand, recommend it to friends and acquaintances and have a more profound positive relationship with it. These customers are not susceptible to competitors' marketing activities and remain loyal to the brand for a more extended period, sometimes for life (Rypáček, 2003). Appropriate communication of the company on social media can build the loyalty of customers who subsequently purchase online and offline products (Novotová, 2018). One of the possible forms of communication on social media is influencer marketing, which is introduced in the following section.

## 1.2 Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is a marketing method that uses powerful brand influencers to communicate a company's brand. Influencers create their personality brand, which they present to their followers. A personality brand can be defined as *"a form of self-presentation singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value"* (Hearn, 2008, p. 213). An influencer's brand's extraordinary influence on followers stems from several factors currently being researched. A fundamental factor in building a solid personal brand appears to be the emergence of parasocial interaction (Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021), which can arise when a person is repeatedly in contact with a media personality and develops a sense of intimacy towards that famous personality (Stephens et al., 1996). This process called a parasocial relationship (PSR), has characteristics similar to those formed through direct social interactions over time (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Due to the possibility of direct communication between influencers and followers on social media, PSR develops more quickly than has been familiar with PSR between fans and celebrities offline (Arora et al., 2019). PSR is formed when the influencer interacts intensively with followers and has personal characteristics that are attractive to followers. Musada et al. (2022) identified homophily (the influencer is similar to their followers, being one of them) and attractiveness of the influencer as critical characteristics of an influencer. Scott (2018) mentions the influencer's authenticity, which leads to high trust from fans towards the influencer, while the influencer's credibility is also crucial. Fans are more likely to trust influencers who demonstrate expertise on the topic they cover (Zhou et al., 2020) and have charisma (De Meulenaer et al., 2015).

The authors above also examined the effect of PSR and influencer characteristics on communicated corporate brands when the influencer collaborates with the firm. For example, Ledbetter and Meisner (2021) have shown that the ability of an influencer to create a PSR with followers is a critical factor that positively influences followers' purchase decisions. Influencer credibility has also been found to transfer to the communication of the product brand, which is also credible in customers' eyes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The charisma of the influencer is transferred to the brand in the form of associations that form the brand image (De Meulenaer et al., 2015). Ohanian (1990) asserts that a positive attitude towards a brand is formed through the influencer's expertise. Therefore, an influencer should only communicate product brands related to the topic they are addressing on the social network. Zhou et al. (2020) showed that the positive effect on brand equity and brand loyalty is mainly due to the attractiveness of the influencer, while their expertise about the product being promoted also has a positive impact, but not as significant. However, it should be noted that research on PSR and its influence on communicating corporate brands is still in its infancy; many factors may not yet have been identified.

The quality of an influencer from the perspective of a company that wants to start working with them is based on their ability to get followers to take action. Follower activity decreases if the number of followers increases (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Influencers can be divided into four groups according to the number of followers: nano-influencers, micro-influencers, macro-influencers and mega-influencers. Nano-influencers have up to 10,000 followers and are often unaware they influence their surroundings. Some of them, however, use their influence to work with companies. Micro-influencers have over 10,000 followers and are primarily dedicated to one topic in which they are very well-versed and have a high level of expertise. These influencers are very close to their audience, who trust them and treat them as friends (Boerman, 2020a).

Vyatkina (2020) discusses the friendly relationship between micro-influencers and their fans. Macro-influencers have over 100,000 followers. These influencers are typically well-known personalities from the world of music, film or sports, but also those who have built a vast fan base over the years. Macro-influencers have the advantage of a higher reach, but it is often not in their power to communicate directly with fans. Their greater distance from fans tends to reduce their trustworthiness. Mega-influencers have over 1 million followers and are often known by people in multiple countries. Again, these may be well-known personalities

from the world of sports, music or film who are known outside of social networks. Because of the number of followers, the relationship between influencers and fans is distant (MediaGuru, 2020). It is common for macro and mega influencers to have low follower activity.

The increasing number of posts on an influencer's profile also hurts follower activity. If an influencer publishes many posts, followers do not follow them, or they get bored with the posts and limit their activity. Conversely, if the influencer follows many accounts, it signals that they are a regular user who forms a network of social connections. Their followers are more active (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). According to Men et al. (2018), a successful influencer should combine three basic communication strategies that make their posts enjoyable to followers. These strategies are effective (use emojis, be personal, etc.), interactive (ask questions, add links to other profiles in posts, etc.) and cohesive (address followers as friends, use hashtags in the caption, etc.).

Influencers should always follow the rules that set out how to handle commercial posts. Any post promoting a product the influencer has received as a gift from the company or is paid to promote should be tagged (FSV UK, 2021). Boerman (2020) found that if an influencer tags a paid collaboration with a company in a post, followers of the ad will better recognize and remember the product brand. Furthermore, the follower's PSR to the influencer will not be disrupted. The findings suggest that companies should require influencers to tag posts. Moreover, the social network's terms of use and the country's laws regarding hidden advertising should be respected, and followers will better remember the communicated brand.

## 2 Methodology and company introduction

The research was designed as a descriptive case study. The case study aimed to uncover the relationships between the aspects and thus explain the essence of the case (Švaříček & Šeďová, 2007). A single-case study was conducted with one company, its Instagram account and two selected influencers who worked with the company during the research period. The selection of the firm was deliberate based on predefined criteria. The authors set the following criteria: the firm must fall into the SME category and be active in the jewellery industry in the Czech Republic is famous abroad, must have recently communicated at a foreign market, must have collaborated with influencers on the social network Instagram and the main communication goal must be increase number of company Instagram followers. Based on these criteria, BeWooden was selected. The communication between the firm and the collaborating influencers was monitored over an extended period from June 2021 to December 2021 to make the study results as objective as possible (Sockett, 1993). At the same time, the marketing communication of the firm and the influencers were monitored in their natural environment, i.e., on Instagram, without the researchers' intervention.

The authors used qualitative in-depth analysis and secondary data collection as fact-gathering methods. Qualitative in-depth analysis is used when the object of interest is limited to a few units, making classical quantitative analysis impossible (Hagen et al., 2004). Quantitative analysis involves both data collection and data evaluation. The researcher collects the data, evaluates it and decides which data is needed and which is not. As a result, the researcher has a somewhat subjective view of the problem under study, which is considered the most significant disadvantage of this method (Hendl, 2005). To objectify the results of this case study, the authors drew on previous research and defined in advance what data they would collect. This resulted in the final table in the discussion section, which compares the theoretical findings with the data collected.

The analysis of the company profile was based on a combination of observation of the number of followers over a given period (individual follower counts were noted every month) combined with the collection of secondary data and metrics from the company profile using the freely available online analytics tool Not Just Analytics and with the data from the company and data from the cooperation influencers. The aim of combining these methods was to create a detailed description of the Instagram profile of the company under investigation; the influencers' posts analyze and identify the list of attributes which the

companies can use to determine the best influencer for them.

The authors also focused on identifying all influencers who collaborated with BeWooden during the period under review. To get a better idea of the diversity of the company's influencer marketing, the authors divided the influencers into five homogeneous groups according to their area of focus, as described in the chapter "Company's influencer marketing in an international environment". Based on the manually collected metrics, the authors calculated the "influencer quality" coefficient for each profile, according to the methodology in Tafess and Wood (2021). The authors state that a "high-quality influencer" can get its followers to interact with the post as much as possible. The influencer quality coefficient is based on the components of follower activity for the identified posts during the observation period. The individual components and the actual formula based on which the influencer quality coefficient was calculated can be seen in the following relationship No. 1.

$$\text{Follower activity} = (\text{likes} + \text{comments}) / \text{followers} \qquad (1)$$

Based on the influencer quality coefficient calculated for each profile, the authors ranked all influencers in descending order of the coefficient value (see Appendix A). From the coefficients, an average was calculated, dividing the influencers into high-quality influencers (above-average values) and low-quality influencers (below-average values). All necessary calculations and tables can be seen in Appendix A and Appendix B of this case study. Subsequently, one influencer from the high-quality and low-quality influencers category was randomly selected using a random number generator. Using qualitative content analysis, the authors analysed the two selected Instagram profiles.

## 2.1 Introduction of the company

The Czech BeWooden Company Ltd. was founded in 2013, emerging out of the joint efforts of three friends who shared similar values and beliefs in uniqueness, refined taste, the beauty of neglected traditional crafts and honest handmade work. It is precisely these factors, and above all, the belief in handmade craftsmanship, that has enabled the BeWooden brand to create timeless, exclusive and, not most miniature, products that are in harmony with nature since 2013. According to the Administrative Register of Economic Entities (Ares, 2021), the company is based in Frýdek-Místek and employs between 10-19 people. The company's initial business was producing and selling wooden bow ties. Over time, the company has expanded its product portfolio to include producing and selling other wooden and leather accessories.

The company's product portfolio can be divided into four main categories. The first group consists of the wooden watch category - in this segment; one can find a range of watch products labelled BeWooden (forming the primary product line of the segment) and then watches marked "TAKE A SHOT" (focusing on unusual and elegantly designed watches). The second product segment is jewellery: wooden rings, earrings, pendants, lockets, bracelets, brooches, etc. The third rather diverse category is labelled accessories, represented by wooden bow ties, backpacks and bags, wallets, wedding accessories, sunglasses, etc. The last major product category is labelled "Home & Office". Among the products in this category are wall decorations (paintings, wall clocks or other types of art), drink coasters, diaries, MacBook covers, or variously focused decorations, for example, for Christmas and Easter.

The prices of the products are higher, reflecting the quality of the materials and handmade work. The products are aimed at the segment of customers who want original pieces made of natural materials, for which they are happy to pay extra. This segment includes trendy people aged 25-40 from larger cities who have a keen aesthetic sense and want something different. The collections are often aimed at executives and managers who place an emphasis on natural materials, as well as young couples planning a wedding. For example, the prices of BeWooden wooden watches designed for the Czech market range from CZK 2,952 to 7,884.

In contrast, the company's offer also includes products that are free of charge. These products are represented, for example, by wooden Christmas decorations made using surplus material that would otherwise be thrown away. The company also offers unique products, the purchase of which can support a selected foundation and thus contribute to helping those in need. Therefore, the company's philosophy is to think ecologically, which brings the company as close as possible to nature while emphasising other aspects of social responsibility.

The company's main communication channel is its official website, which is linked to an e-shop with the following URL: https://www.bewooden.cz. This website serves as the focal point for the company's sales activities and, in addition to the products and services provided, it also contains contact details, the company's history, a blog and the company's official social networks, namely Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest and Twitter. It should also be mentioned that all communication on the abovementioned platforms is not only in Czech. Customers from abroad are also offered other languages such as English, German, Finnish, etc.

The following part of the paper will focus on analysing the investigated company's Instagram profile and the study of high-quality and low-quality influencers.

## 3 Results
This chapter presents the results of its measurement and identifies forms of cooperation between the company and selected influencers.

### 3.1 Analysis of the company's Instagram profile during the period under review
The company's Instagram profile aimed at foreign followers, "@bewooden", was established in the Czech Republic on October 25th, 2013. In the initial header of the profile (BIO), the company briefly communicates its attitude towards nature in English. It highlights the handmade work that is used in the production of its products. The BIO includes a link to the company's website in German and also a link to the company's associated Instagram profile called "@bewoodenhome", where the company presents a different product segment, namely handmade home and office décor.

In terms of online marketing analytics, this section first outlines the trend in the number of followers and the number of posts over the period under review. At the beginning of June 2021, the profile had 20,246 followers. At that time, the number of posts added by the company was 1,105. At the end of the observation period, the number of Instagram followers was 20,999, which means there was an overall increase of 753 followers, and the number of posts was 1,171, an increase of 66 during the observation period. The development of the number of followers in the observation period is shown in Figure 1.
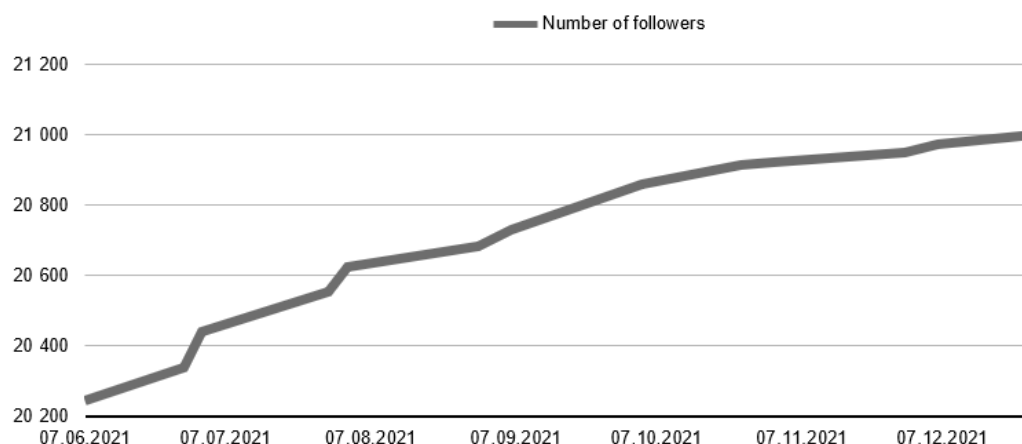


**Fig. 1: Number of followers during the researched time period**

Source: Own measurement; Not Just Analytics (2022)

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With respect to the posts published on Instagram, the company managed to create relatively engaging and visually interesting content in the feed during the period under review. The following chapters focus on the use of influencers in BeWooden's communication activities in an international environment.

## 3.2 Company's influencer marketing in an international environment

A total of 77 influencers were identified during the period under review based on the analysis of "labels" outside the main feed, for which a quality coefficient was calculated (see Appendix A). These influencers can be divided into the following groups according to their topics:

1. Group of bloggers (fashion, ecology, sustainability...)
2. Group of public figures (musicians, presenters, entrepreneurs...)
3. Group of bridal salon and boutique representatives (boutiques, bridal salons, stylists...)
4. Group of wedding photographers and digital creators (photographers, travellers...)
5. Group of satisfied customers

According to the calculated influencer quality coefficient (see Appendix B), influencers can be divided into the following 2 groups:

- High-quality influencers (influencer quality coefficient is greater than or equal to 0.11)
- Low-quality influencers (influencer quality coefficient is less than or equal to 0.11)

The following chapters focus on describing and analysing the posts communicating the Bewooden brand by two randomly selected influencers. Maria Moravčíková from the blogger's group was chosen as a high-quality influencer, and Robert Novak from the digital creator's group was chosen as a low-quality influencer.

## 3.3 Collaboration between BeWooden and Mária Moravčíkova (@maria.moravcikova) on Instagram

As a self-described travel blogger, Mária Moravčíková (quality coefficient 0.20) is a Slovak Instagram influencer. As the travel blogger label suggests, her main interests include travelling and exploring new landscapes. Apart from travelling around Slovakia, to which she has partly dedicated her working life (she is the co-author of a blog), she likes to travel abroad and be inspired by cultures around the world. However, she focuses on travel, lifestyle, and travel advice. In addition to nature, followers can thus gain inspiration in tourist fashion or hiking gear for trips.

Moreover, the influencer's profile offers valuable tips and recommendations to help followers make their trip an unforgettable experience. The influencer regularly adds collaborations with well-known corporate brands to her portfolio of Instagram posts, which suitably complement the areas above of interest. Among these collaborations, one can find various brands ranging from exercise equipment and footwear to food, beverages, fashion accessories, etc.

The above-mentioned influencer uses the following communication channels (all communication across channels is in Slovak):

- Blog website (https://www.poslovensku.eu/index.html)
- Instagram profile (https://www.instagram.com/maria.moravcikova/?hl=cs)
- Facebook profile (https://www.facebook.com/maria.m.moravcikova)

The Instagram profile (@maria.moravcikova) was created in the Slovak Republic in May 2015. As of 06.12.2022, the profile had a total of 455 posts. The number of followers of the profile on the same date was 9,554, and the number of followers was 590. From June 2021 to December 2021, 4 posts were identified that showed signs of cooperation with BeWooden

in their content. Due to the limited scope of this article, the authors focused on describing only two posts. The authors selected the first and the last posts from the period under study for their detailed post-analysis. Both posts aimed to increase the number of followers of the company profile; therefore, a click-through to the BeWooden profile was placed on the posts.

The first identified post (Figure 2) was shared on August 8th, 2021. The post's content was a portrait photo of the influencer wearing original wooden earrings from the company under study. Individual labels accompany the photograph itself. After clicking the labels, the photo shows labels such as bewooden, bewoodencz, dnes.spoznavam and cestovanie_a_priroda. The total number of likes is hidden for the post based on the influencer's profile settings (the actual number of likes is only shown to the profile owner), so a manual calculation of this metric was performed based on the post's clickability. The authors calculated that this post managed to attain a total of 126 likes. The post was accompanied by a comment below the photo in which the influencer announced the possibility of taking advantage of a 15% discount on purchasing a new product from BeWooden. In the following parts of the text, the Czech and foreign profiles is tagged with @bewooden, @bewoodencz, which the author very intuitively incorporated into the text, mentioning why she liked this particular product. In the last sentence of the comment, the influencer states that this is a mutual collaboration. The whole post reached 24 comments and is accompanied by 27 hashtags. Among these hashtags can be found #collaboration, #bewooden, #bewoodencz, #naturelovers, #slovakiagirl. Mária Moravčíková informed us that 51 followers clicked through the post on the BeWooden company profile.



**Fig. 2: First identified contribution during the period under review**

Source: influencer's official Instagram profile

The second post (figure number 3) to be analysed in detail was shared on 12.15.2021. Due to the timing before Christmas, the main focus of this post is to announce a competition in collaboration with the company under study for wooden Christmas decorations of their choice. The content of the primary visual presentation is a collection of 3 photographs of Christmas ornaments highlighting their uses. As with the previous post, the number of likes is directly hidden and tagged @bewooden, @bewoodencz, and @bewoodenhome in the photo collection. Based on the untagging of the data and manual calculation of likes, the authors identified 111 likes, and 43 followers clicked through the post on the BeWooden company profile. The post is again accompanied by a comment from the influencer, highlighting the rules and necessary conditions for participation in the Christmas competition. The main three conditions included following the influencer (if the person in question was not already following), following the @bewoodencz profile, a comment identifying the person who would be entering the contest, and a comment further stating what ornaments the

potential winner is interested in. A total of 21 hashtags were added to the post. Among the hashtags were #sutaz, #bewooden, #gift, #handmade, #collaboration, #wood, #ornaments, etc. Thanks to these contest conditions, the post managed to receive a total of 367 comments.



**Fig. 3: Second identified contribution during the period under review**

Source: influencer's official Instagram profile

## 3.4 Collaboration between BeWooden and Robert Novak (@finghal) on Instagram

Robert Novak (quality coefficient 0.03) is an international award-winning Travel & Lifestyle photographer, guide and adventurer living in the heart of Lofoten, Norway. Travel and photography have been his passions since he was a teenager, and he is currently working towards combining these two hobbies into his dream job. Robert started his business as a professional photographer and guide approximately nine years ago. He now works full-time as a travel content creator, delivering visual content to the virtual world to help brands promote products, launch campaigns and get in front of followers in the online space. During the peak seasons of summer and winter, Robert works as a tourist guide in Lofoten, Norway. His offer includes a wide range of services, such as photography workshops focused on creating engaging content for social networks such as Instagram, photography tours hiking to see the aurora borealis, etc. These services are provided to individuals and small groups (Novak, 2022).

The influencer described above uses the following communication channels (all communication across channels is in English):

- Personal webpages (https://finnghal.com)
- Instagram profile (https://www.instagram.com/finnghal/)
- Facebook profile (https://www.facebook.com/finnghal)
- Twitter profile (https://twitter.com/finnghal)

The Instagram profile (@finnghal) was founded in 2014 in Norway and has 511 posts and 38,400 followers as of 06.12.2022.

During the period under review (Figure 4), i.e., June 2021-December 2021, the influencer published only one post directly promoting the BeWooden brand. The post aimed to increase the number of followers of the company profile; therefore, a click-through to the BeWooden profile was placed on the post. Specifically, this is a post dated 12.15.2021 based on eight photos. Unlike the example of a high-quality influencer, this shared post is the antithesis of what a collaboration between an influencer and a selected brand should resemble. The first

photo in the collection of images shows the influencer wearing a red winter jacket in a winter setting. The BeWooden product and branding can be found in up to 3 images in the sequence, with the promotional photo showing the influencer wearing a BeWooden watch while lighting a fire from a distance. This and the poor positioning of the company's branding make it appear ambiguous and thus reduce the credibility of the brand's communication under study. Due to the nature of the photograph and the above facts, the product being promoted is easy to miss in the whole image (without un-clicking the label, the product would disappear completely), which is the wooden watch. The entire post is compromised by the fact that it is accompanied by irrelevant written commentary from the influencer himself and the use of an inappropriate hashtag. The hashtag #finghal aims to promote the influencer himself and thus does not communicate the collaboration with Bewooden. Despite all the shortcomings identified, the post received 1097 likes and 69 comments, but only five followers clicked through the post on the BeWooden company profile. The authors believe that the high number of likes and comments is more related to the attractiveness of the photos in the collection and not to the brand being promoted. Most likely, the brand may not have been noticed by many followers.
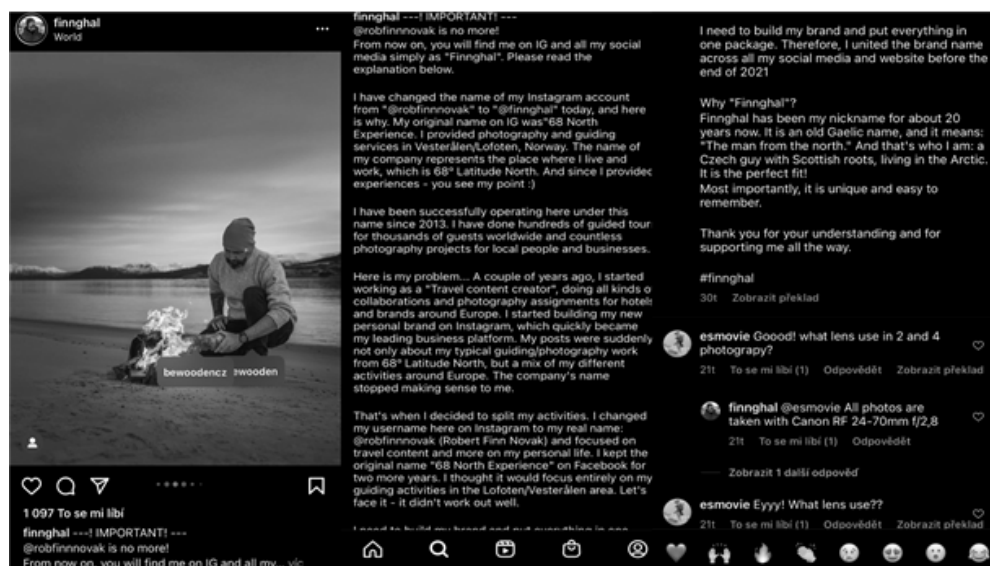


**Fig. 4: First identified contribution during the period under review**

Source: influencer's official Instagram profile

## 4 Discussion

Based on the theoretical research outlined earlier in this article, the analysis of the Instagram profile of the company under study and the analysis of the influencers, the authors define, in this section, key features that will help SMEs select a suitable influencer for communication on a foreign market. Table 1 shows the categories of traits identified based on the literature search results in the left column, followed by the individual characteristics and the authors who remembered them. The two columns on the right present the results of the analysis of the profiles of the two influencers studied.

A key trait SMEs should consider when choosing an influencer is their brand. As mentioned in the theory, the primary factor of a solid personal brand is PSR, which consists of, e.g., homophily, authenticity, charisma, expertise and credibility of the influencer. When considering these traits, it should not be forgotten that if a company plans to communicate effectively in a foreign market, the influencer's personal brand should align with the company's mission and vision (Gandola, 2022; Gregory, 2022). Considering the influencer analysis from the chapter "Company's influencer marketing in an international environment", it can be concluded that the influencer Mária Moravcikova (@maria.moravcikova) seems to be a more suitable influencer based on the personal brand trait than Robert Novak (@finnghal). Compared to Maria Moravcikova, Robert Novak cannot be considered to be one of the typical representatives from among his followers (we saw 50 followers on the first

page of his profile, and only 2 were professional photographers), and hence, the level of homophily will not be very high, mainly because he can be described as an experienced guide who knows Nordic nature, is in excellent physical condition and can also be considered a professional photographer or digital artist. Professional photos from Robetc Nemec can lead to less trust in followers due to their high quality. Influencers often "post" posts promoting a company brand in the form of snapshots or seemingly not-quite-professional photos taken in a studio. Colliander and Marder (2018) explain that these posts are natural and are not perceived by users as intrusive advertising but as regular posts in the feed. Due to their unprofessional appearance, these posts improve users' attitudes towards the brand and willingness to recommend it to their friends (WOM or EWOM). Robert Novak's photos are perfect and can give an overly professional impression, reducing the influencer's authenticity.

The second important set of traits that an SME should consider when considering influencer marketing is "Metrics". The main metrics that can be crucial for planning a communication strategy include the number of followers, the number of posts and the number of followers. These metrics can thus help SMEs decide whether it is more appropriate to choose a nano-influencer, micro-influencer, macro-influencer or mega-influencer for the planned communication activities. Each type of influencer has certain advantages and disadvantages in terms of size. More detailed information about these advantages/disadvantages and the different types of influencers have already been discussed in the theoretical part of this paper. In terms of "Metrics", the influencers analysed in the chapter "Company's influencer marketing in an international environment" can be classified as nano-influencers (@maria.moravcikova) and micro-influencers (@finnghal).

The third group of features defined here by the authors is based on the work of Men et al. (2018) and can be referred to as "influencer communication strategies". Within these communication strategies, one can find the affective communication strategy (e.g., the use of emotional expressions, emojis, sharing personal life and experiences), the interactive communication strategy (questions inviting users to be active; direct linking to the profile, profile website or SME website; call to action - taking advantage of a discount, making a purchase...) and the cohesive communication strategy (location tagging, use of hashtags, influencer reactions and interactions in comments). The tools identified and the examples resulting from the determined contributions (see chapter "Company's influencer marketing in an international environment") are captured in Table 1 at the end of this section. The analysis of high-quality and low-quality influencers shows that a high-quality influencer uses a more incredible combination of communication strategies and individual features than a low-quality influencer. At the same time, the high-quality influencer works much more with emotions and uses more emotionally coloured messages in cooperation with the brand under study. Another characteristic is that a high-quality influencer posts content in which they ask followers questions and indirectly invite them to be active in the comments through this approach.

This work's last group of features is "the form of the post". The key features for the post form are the post type (photo/video), the number of hashtags, the form of the paid collaboration label and the brand's visibility. An appropriately designed post form significantly impacts the visual appearance of the company's communicated brand and contributes to enhanced recognition and memorability of the shared brand. The use of hashtags helps to increase the searchability of the communicated brand in a post. According to West (2023), using 3-5 hashtags is the ideal number. Particular attention should be paid to creating custom hashtags to attract a community of fans in the long term who can make their content under these hashtags and thus promote the company or brand (Suchý, 2019). For the influencers analysed above, the optimal number of hashtags used was not identified in either case. Nevertheless, a higher number of shares was recognised for the high-quality influencer than for the low-quality influencer. Furthermore, the high-quality influencer was more transparent in tagging paid collaborations, and overall brand visibility was better than the low-quality influencer.

**Tab. 1: Features and traits of influencers**

| group of features | traits | source | Mária Moravčíkova (coefficient quality 0.20) | Robert Novak (coefficient quality 0.03) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **personal brand = ability to create PSR) (Ledbetter a Meisner, 2021)** | Homophily | Musada et al., 2022 | Yes | No |
| | Charisma | De Meulenaer et al., 2015 | Yes | Yes |
| | Expertise | Musada et al., 2022 | Yes | Yes |
| | Attractiveness | Zhou et al., 2020 | Yes | Yes |
| | Authenticity | Scott, 2018 | Yes | Yes |
| | Trustworthiness | Sokolova & Kefi, 2020 | Yes | No |
| **Influencer profile metrics** | Number of followers | Tafesse & Wood, 2021 | 9,554 | 38,500 |
| | Number of followings | | 590 | 787 |
| | Number of posts | | 455 | 516 |
| **\*Influencer's communication strategy** | Affective | Men et al., 2018 | **Emotional** ("I fell in love with the brand", "you can always have a piece of nature with you", "inspired by nature and created with the heart"), **Emoji** (green hearts, plants, Christmas gifts, Christmas tree, emoji sending kisses...), **Personal** (looking into their life, sharing their own feelings or experiences) | **personal** (looking into their life, explaining their reasons and motives...), **Emoji** (blue hearts, Norwegian flag) |
| | Interactive | | **Question** ("What do you think of this set of earrings and necklace?"), **Direct Reference** ("If it so happens that, thanks to @bewooden, I can have a piece of nature with me at any time", "This post was created in collaboration with @bewoodencz"), **External Call to Action** ("Discount code: mariamoravcikova for 15% discount | **Direct Reference** ("Blue watch by BeWooden on one of my favourite beaches..."), **External call to action** (use promo code and get 15% off your order) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | valid until 09/26 at www.bewooden.sk and www.bewooden.cz ") | |
| | Cohesive | | **Location** - location labels (e.g., Slovakia), **Hashtag** - hashtags in the description (e.g., #nature, #naturelovers, #adventuretime) **Comments** - in the comments replies to followers and responds with hearts | **Location** - location labels, **Hashtag** - hashtag (#finghal) in the caption, **Comments** - replies to followers in comments and responds to comments with hearts |
| **Form of the posts-** | Post type (photo, video, etc.) | Mittal et al., 2017; Rogers R., 2021 | For the 4 identified posts, the following types were identified: portrait photos showing the influencer's use of the product, collections of photos showing different uses of BeWooden products | For 1 identified post, a collection of photographs was used. |
| | Number of hashtags | West, 2023 | A total of 96 hashtags were identified for all posts during the period under review. (27, 21, 27, 21) | Only 1 hashtag was identified for the examined post. |
| | Identification of paid collaborations | Boerman, 2020 | In all identified contributions, a form of collaboration between the influencer and BeWooden is acknowledged. The collaboration is not only indicated on the photos themselves, but is also appropriately acknowledged in the comments accompanying the post. Acknowledgement of the collaboration | For the identified post, it is not entirely clear whether it is a collaboration between the Bewooden brand and the influencer. Apart from the company name in the photo, it was not possible to trace any sign of acknowledgement of collaboration in other parts of the post. |

| | Brand visibility | Rogers R., 2021; Martínez-López, F.J et al., 2020. | In the 4 identified contributions for the period under review< the visibility of the BeWooden brand was high (the brand's products are featured in the foreground of the photo, the photo collection shows the products from different angles (in different situations), the BeWooden tag appears across different parts of the shared post (photo, comment, hashtags, tagging, etc.) | is also present in the hashtag #collaboration. In the identified post for the monitored period, the visibility of the BeWooden brand was low (product photographed from a distance - not the main subject of the photo, insufficient communication across the shared post - not enough space dedicated to the brand, BeWooden label not appearing across different parts of the shared post). |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Source: own

In addition to the attributes mentioned in the table, it should be noted that how visibly the brand or product will be placed in the post is also very important. In Robert Němec's post, the watch is only an accessory that the viewer may overlook at first glance. Even though the post received many likes and comments, there were practically no clicks on the BeWooden company profile. Since the goal of the cooperation was to increase the number of followers of the company profile, we can state that the goal could not be achieved. Therefore, we recommend that MSPs want to see the finished post from the influencer before it is published and can check if it meets their expectations and fulfils the expected goals. If the goal is to increase the followers of the company profile, the brand must be visible in the post. In addition, we recommend that the company request complete metrics for the post from the influencer; the number of likes and comments may not be sufficient due to the established communication goals.

## Conclusion

This case study provides a realistic picture of the function and use of influencer marketing in the Bewooden Company, which simultaneously communicates its products and services in foreign markets. The advantage of SMEs leveraging influencer marketing may thus be the use of the influencer's brand and their ability to create attractive posts for their follower base. This can be used even if the company is not well known in a foreign market and does not know how to communicate with its target audience.

A group of critical characteristics that SMEs can use to determine which influencer is a good fit include the influencer's personal brand, influencer profile metrics, the communication strategies used by the influencer and the format of their posts. The hallmarks of a high-quality influencer are the use of an appropriate combination of all of the features described above and a high level of PSR, which is generated by the interaction between the influencer and their follower base on a profile. A quality collaboration with an influencer is further characterised by transparent and appropriate tagging of the communication with the brand being promoted. Thus, SMEs should select a suitable influencer by first finding multiple influencers whose communication is aligned with the company's mission and vision, then by

analysing influencers' posts based on Table 1 and calculating the influencer quality coefficient. Based on these analyses, it is possible to identify the most suitable influencer for the company and its communicated brand. Based on our research, it was found that good brand visibility on the post is also essential. The company should see the post before posting and check the visibility.

A limitation of the analyses in this article is the subjectivity of the author's view of the issue under investigation, which is considered the most significant disadvantage of qualitative in-depth analysis. To objectify the results of this case study, the authors drew on previous research. This article and its conclusions should be further supplemented with quantitative data, which unfortunately were unavailable to the authors, and subsequent statistical calculations. Overall, however, this case study fulfils the objectives defined above and thus offers scope for further scientific research.

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## Appendix A - Overview of influencers by categorised groups

1) Blogger group (fashion, ecology, sustainability...)

| Title | Posts (total number) | Followers | Following | BeWooden notifications during the period under review (number of posts) | Number of likes (for tagged posts) | Sum of comments (for tagged posts) | Quality coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| lass_es_uns_erleben | 143 | 1273 | 1180 | 1 | 300 | 47 | 0.27 |
| chaos_im_buecherregal | 152 | 658 | 387 | 1 | 134 | 11 | 0.22 |
| maria.moravcikova | 455 | 9554 | 590 | 4 | 484 | 1394 | 0.20 |
| daniel_run_meier | 121 | 2167 | 909 | 1 | 323 | 2 | 0.15 |
| interior_by_canik | 430 | 18200 | 989 | 2 | 2095 | 99 | 0.12 |
| jagdrausch | 397 | 6588 | 728 | 1 | 768 | 19 | 0.12 |
| majnaragica | 387 | 3978 | 58 | 2 | 399 | 15 | 0.10 |
| meine.zwerge.und.ich | 397 | 19000 | 1268 | 2 | 1375 | 197 | 0.08 |
| jessica_klpp | 180 | 3028 | 971 | 1 | 235 | 7 | 0.08 |
| bellis_fitness | 122 | 492 | 536 | 1 | 28 | 5 | 0.07 |
| abandoned_undead83 | 361 | 440 | 156 | 1 | 26 | 0 | 0.06 |
| _lucky_aussie_ | 24 | 520 | 841 | 1 | 26 | 0 | 0.05 |
| cozysphynxhome | 219 | 9063 | 440 | 1 | 412 | 28 | 0.05 |
| twinannii | 106 | 12100 | 1058 | 1 | 552 | 29 | 0.05 |
| philip_klpp | 113 | 2440 | 941 | 1 | 113 | 2 | 0.05 |
| plaitysim | 490 | 10800 | 667 | 1 | 454 | 40 | 0.05 |
| positivevibes_only_1 | 382 | 817 | 167 | 1 | 36 | 0 | 0.04 |
| guelay.ee | 1109 | 33300 | 486 | 1 | 1036 | 315 | 0.04 |
| romiminarikova | 501 | 8691 | 713 | 1 | 108 | 9 | 0.01 |
| bian.casa.living | 1286 | 10100 | 1977 | 1 | 98 | 9 | 0.01 |
| s_laskou_niki | 445 | 14,400 | 3932 | 1 | 78 | 0 | 0.01 |
| dnes_nosim | 7529 | 102,000 | 12 | 4 | 419 | 46 | 0.00 |
| miestni | 1718 | 8,518 | 1106 | 1 | 30 | 0 | 0.00 |
| victoria_na_druhou | 308 | 9,005 | 426 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0.00 |

2. Group of public figures (musicians, presenters, businessmen...)

| Title | Posts (total number) | Followers | Following | BeWooden notifications during the period under review (number of posts) | Number of likes (for tagged posts) | Sum of comments (for tagged posts) | Quality coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| lis_t.cz | 28 | 93 | 30 | 2 | **42** | **3** | 0.48 |
| wewoodrockyou | 123 | 237 | 459 | 1 | **36** | **3** | 0.16 |
| berndnickaesmusic | 536 | 2691 | 2015 | 2 | **377** | **7** | 0.14 |
| trauteuchfrei | 563 | 2760 | 995 | 2 | **289** | **6** | 0.11 |
| zuzu.kushnirukova | 173 | 12700 | 833 | 1 | **755** | **6** | 0.06 |
| alina.kreuter | 137 | 6689 | 585 | 1 | **176** | **4** | 0.03 |
| Marcandju | 60 | 7773 | 718 | 3 | **54** | **0** | 0.01 |

3. Group of bridal salon and boutique representatives (boutiques, bridal salons, stylists...)

| Title | Posts (total number) | Followers | Following | BeWooden notifications during the period under review (number of posts) | number of likes (for tagged posts) | sum of comments (for tagged posts) | quality coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| boutique_liebe | 616 | 2632 | 938 | 36 | **2620** | **82** | 1.03 |
| mensqualitybox | 132 | 510 | 307 | 7 | **193** | **13** | 0.40 |
| boutiquen28 | 159 | 476 | 515 | 3 | **121** | **4** | 0.26 |
| le_gendre_ideal_lamballe | 287 | 1378 | 2226 | 5 | **235** | **4** | 0.17 |
| boss_wedding_stores | 137 | 1272 | 112 | 1 | **106** | **64** | 0.13 |
| muna.io | 28 | 123 | 434 | 1 | **15** | **1** | 0.13 |
| beeanco_com | 191 | 2931 | 1938 | 1 | **325** | **15** | 0.12 |
| mariventa_hochzeitsplanung | 86 | 565 | 484 | 1 | **55** | **5** | 0.11 |
| michellemahlerwedding | 90 | 923 | 396 | 1 | **64** | **0** | 0.07 |
| mimibeau.stylist | 398 | 969 | 507 | 1 | **59** | **2** | 0.06 |
| anjahabel_events | 229 | 2516 | 1679 | 1 | **134** | **12** | 0.06 |
| Braut_trifft_kleid | 310 | 1863 | 537 | 1 | **96** | **6** | 0.05 |
| boss_hochzeitshaus | 104 | 498 | 98 | 1 | **26** | **0** | 0.05 |
| taftundeullbrautstudio | 250 | 1686 | 626 | 1 | **71** | **1** | 0.04 |
| weddingdreams_salzburg | 291 | 2391 | 980 | 1 | **89** | **8** | 0.04 |
| maroquinerie.bysance.brest | 400 | 981 | 988 | 1 | **32** | **1** | 0.03 |
| l_homme-par_lecointre | 215 | 719 | 1445 | 2 | **24** | **0** | 0.03 |
| weddyplace_hochzeitsplaner | 1128 | 13400 | 963 | 1 | **165** | **9** | 0.01 |
| bylili.accessoires | 882 | 4247 | 184 | 3 | **55** | **0** | 0.01 |
| hochzeitswahn | 2363 | 65300 | 546 | 1 | **298** | **156** | 0.01 |

4. Group of wedding photographers and digital creators (photographers, travellers...)

| Title | Posts (total number) | Followers | Following | BeWooden notifications during the period under review (number of posts) | Number of likes (for tagged posts) | Sum of comments (for tagged posts) | Quality coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3psomon | 41 | 415 | 962 | 1 | **76** | **0** | 0.18 |
| ricardoprosperi | 168 | 897 | 173 | 1 | **160** | **4** | 0.18 |
| terezaghattphotography | 921 | 723 | 773 | 1 | **73** | **0** | 0.10 |
| muco.mlgr | 786 | 1762 | 858 | 2 | **114** | **41** | 0.09 |
| larsgode_weddingphotography | 241 | 1511 | 590 | 2 | **117** | **6** | 0.08 |
| nathalie.civ | 1308 | 20100 | 5550 | 2 | **1566** | **57** | 0.08 |
| hrachovenachova | 420 | 3059 | 434 | 1 | **196** | **7** | 0.07 |
| ganz_in_weise_fotografie | 1344 | 2919 | 2667 | 1 | **140** | **6** | 0.05 |
| fraebitude | 384 | 28800 | 790 | 1 | **1301** | **77** | 0.05 |
| annalenaholz_ | 481 | 10 100 | 1389 | 2 | **422** | **54** | 0.05 |
| finnghal | 516 | 38500 | 787 | 1 | **1097** | **69** | 0.03 |
| shine_vision | 780 | 6391 | 664 | 1 | **96** | **4** | 0.02 |
| nelemunzhochzeitsfotografie | 561 | 3067 | 1738 | 1 | **45** | **0** | 0.01 |
| zlindesignweek | 771 | 3680 | 602 | 1 | **25** | **0** | 0.01 |
| fokusweite.de | 295 | 1646 | 498 | 1 | **0** | **0** | 0.00 |

5. Group of satisfied customers

| Title | Posts (total number) | Followers | Following | BeWooden notifications during the period under review (number of posts) | number of likes (for tagged posts) | sum of comments (for tagged posts) | quality coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| sharonsjunk | 96 | 291 | 351 | 1 | 89 | 15 | **0.36** |
| kristynakafkova | 167 | 236 | 175 | 1 | 71 | 3 | **0.31** |
| margaux_withlove | 72 | 3637 | 375 | 2 | 1001 | 68 | **0.29** |
| ak_newfybeaglemom | 332 | 580 | 762 | 2 | 153 | 2 | **0.27** |
| wiki_cooper | 147 | 1224 | 968 | 1 | 183 | 8 | **0.16** |
| lilly3n | 154 | 288 | 447 | 1 | 40 | 0 | **0.14** |
| vyladyss | 22 | 1624 | 538 | 1 | 195 | 3 | **0.12** |
| my_patrik | 185 | 645 | 606 | 2 | 75 | 3 | **0.12** |
| migaroza | 126 | 232 | 716 | 1 | 17 | 1 | **0.08** |
| spilled_coffee_beans | 197 | 188 | 201 | 1 | 12 | 1 | **0.07** |
| _blanka_ | 68 | 1364 | 511 | 1 | 78 | 3 | **0.06** |

# Appendix B- Division of influencers into high-quality and low quality influencers

1. Low-quality influencers

| Title | Posts (total number) | Followers | Following | BeWooden notifications during the period under review (number of posts) | Number of likes (for tagged posts) | Sum of comments (for tagged posts) | Quality coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| majnaragica | 387 | 3978 | 58 | 2 | 399 | 15 | 0.10 |
| terezaghattphotography | 921 | 723 | 773 | 1 | 73 | 0 | 0.10 |
| muco.mlgr | 786 | 1762 | 858 | 2 | 114 | 41 | 0.09 |
| meine.zwerge.und.ich | 397 | 19000 | 1268 | 2 | 1375 | 197 | 0.08 |
| larsgode_weddingphotography | 241 | 1511 | 590 | 2 | 117 | 6 | 0.08 |
| nathalie.civ | 1308 | 20100 | 5550 | 2 | 1566 | 57 | 0.08 |
| jessica_klpp | 180 | 3028 | 971 | 1 | 235 | 7 | 0.08 |
| migaroza | 126 | 232 | 716 | 1 | 17 | 1 | 0.08 |
| michellemahlerwedding | 90 | 923 | 396 | 1 | 64 | 0 | 0.07 |
| spilled_coffee_beans | 197 | 188 | 201 | 1 | 12 | 1 | 0.07 |
| bellis_fitness | 122 | 492 | 536 | 1 | 28 | 5 | 0.07 |
| hrachovenachova | 420 | 3059 | 434 | 1 | 196 | 7 | 0.07 |
| mimibeau.stylist | 398 | 969 | 507 | 1 | 59 | 2 | 0.06 |
| zuzu.kushnirukova | 173 | 12700 | 833 | 1 | 755 | 6 | 0.06 |
| _blanka_ | 68 | 1364 | 511 | 1 | 78 | 3 | 0.06 |
| abandoned_undead83 | 361 | 440 | 156 | 1 | 26 | 0 | 0.06 |
| anjahabel_events | 229 | 2516 | 1679 | 1 | 134 | 12 | 0.06 |
| Braut_trifft_kleid | 310 | 1863 | 537 | 1 | 96 | 6 | 0.05 |
| boss_hochzeitshaus | 104 | 498 | 98 | 1 | 26 | 0 | 0.05 |
| ganz_in_weise_fotografie | 1344 | 2919 | 2667 | 1 | 140 | 6 | 0.05 |
| _lucky_aussie_ | 24 | 520 | 841 | 1 | 26 | 0 | 0.05 |
| cozysphynxhome | 219 | 9063 | 440 | 1 | 412 | 28 | 0.05 |
| twinannii | 106 | 12100 | 1058 | 1 | 552 | 29 | 0.05 |
| fraebitude | 384 | 28800 | 790 | 1 | 1301 | 77 | 0.05 |
| philip_klpp | 113 | 2440 | 941 | 1 | 113 | 2 | 0.05 |
| annalenaholz_ | 481 | 10 100 | 1389 | 2 | 422 | 54 | 0.05 |
| plaitysim | 490 | 10800 | 667 | 1 | 454 | 40 | 0.05 |
| positivevibes_only_1 | 382 | 817 | 167 | 1 | 36 | 0 | 0.04 |
| taftundeullbrautstudio | 250 | 1686 | 626 | 1 | 71 | 1 | 0.04 |
| guelay.ee | 1109 | 33300 | 486 | 1 | 1036 | 315 | 0.04 |
| weddingdreams_salzburg | 291 | 2391 | 980 | 1 | 89 | 8 | 0.04 |
| maroquinerie.bysance.brest | 400 | 981 | 988 | 1 | 32 | 1 | 0.03 |
| l_homme-par_lecointre | 215 | 719 | 1445 | 2 | 24 | 0 | 0.03 |
| finnghal | 516 | 38500 | 787 | 1 | 1097 | 69 | 0.03 |
| alina.kreuter | 137 | 6689 | 585 | 1 | 176 | 4 | 0.03 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| shine_vision | 780 | 6391 | 664 | 1 | 96 | 4 | 0.02 |
| nelemunzhochzeitsfotografie | 561 | 3067 | 1738 | 1 | 45 | 0 | 0.01 |
| romiminarikova | 501 | 8691 | 713 | 1 | 108 | 9 | 0.01 |
| weddyplace_hochzeitsplaner | 1128 | 13400 | 963 | 1 | 165 | 9 | 0.01 |
| bylili.accessoires | 882 | 4247 | 184 | 3 | 55 | 0 | 0.01 |
| bian.casa.living | 1286 | 10100 | 1977 | 1 | 98 | 9 | 0.01 |
| hochzeitswahn | 2363 | 65300 | 546 | 1 | 298 | 156 | 0.01 |
| Marcandju | 60 | 7773 | 718 | 3 | 54 | 0 | 0.01 |
| zlindesignweek | 771 | 3680 | 602 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0.01 |
| s_laskou_niki | 445 | 14400 | 3932 | 1 | 78 | 0 | 0.01 |
| dnes_nosim | 7529 | 102000 | 12 | 4 | 419 | 46 | 0.00 |
| miestni | 1718 | 8518 | 1106 | 1 | 30 | 0 | 0.00 |
| victoria_na_druhou | 308 | 9005 | 426 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0.00 |
| fokusweite.de | 295 | 1646 | 498 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0.00 |

## 2. High-quality influencers

| Title | Posts (total number) | Followers | Following | BeWooden notifications during the period under review (number of posts) | Number of likes (for tagged posts) | Sum of comments (for tagged posts) | Quality coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| boutique_liebe | 616 | 2632 | 938 | 36 | 2620 | 82 | 1.03 |
| lis_t.cz | 28 | 93 | 30 | 2 | 42 | 3 | 0.48 |
| mensqualitybox | 132 | 510 | 307 | 7 | 193 | 13 | 0.40 |
| sharonsjunk | 96 | 291 | 351 | 1 | 89 | 15 | 0.36 |
| kristynakafkova | 167 | 236 | 175 | 1 | 71 | 3 | 0.31 |
| margaux_withlove | 72 | 3637 | 375 | 2 | 1001 | 68 | 0.29 |
| lass_es_uns_erleben | 143 | 1273 | 1180 | 1 | 300 | 47 | 0.27 |
| ak_newfybeaglemom | 332 | 580 | 762 | 2 | 153 | 2 | 0.27 |
| boutiquen28 | 159 | 476 | 515 | 3 | 121 | 4 | 0.26 |
| chaos_im_buecherregal | 152 | 658 | 387 | 1 | 134 | 11 | 0.22 |
| maria.moravcikova | 455 | 9554 | 590 | 4 | 484 | 1394 | 0.20 |
| 3psomon | 41 | 415 | 962 | 1 | 76 | 0 | 0.18 |
| ricardoprosperi | 168 | 897 | 173 | 1 | 160 | 4 | 0.18 |
| le_gendre_ideal_lamballe | 287 | 1378 | 2226 | 5 | 235 | 4 | 0.17 |
| wewoodrockyou | 123 | 237 | 459 | 1 | 36 | 3 | 0.16 |
| wiki_cooper | 147 | 1224 | 968 | 1 | 183 | 8 | 0.16 |
| daniel_run_meier | 121 | 2167 | 909 | 1 | 323 | 2 | 0.15 |
| berndnickaesmusic | 536 | 2691 | 2015 | 2 | 377 | 7 | 0.14 |
| lilly3n | 154 | 288 | 447 | 1 | 40 | 0 | 0.14 |
| boss_wedding_stores | 137 | 1272 | 112 | 1 | 106 | 64 | 0.13 |
| muna.io | 28 | 123 | 434 | 1 | 15 | 1 | 0.13 |
| vyladyss | 22 | 1624 | 538 | 1 | 195 | 3 | 0.12 |
| my_patrik | 185 | 645 | 606 | 2 | 75 | 3 | 0.12 |
| interior_by_canik | 430 | 18200 | 989 | 2 | 2095 | 99 | 0.12 |
| jagdrausch | 397 | 6588 | 728 | 1 | 768 | 19 | 0.12 |
| beeanco_com | 191 | 2931 | 1938 | 1 | 325 | 15 | 0.12 |
| trauteuchfrei | 563 | 2760 | 995 | 2 | 289 | 6 | 0.11 |
| mariventa_hochzeitsplanung | 86 | 565 | 484 | 1 | 55 | 5 | 0.11 |

# How Chinese Non-Governmental Organizations Use Social Media for Communication: a systematic literature review

## Wenye Mao, Dita Hommerová, Qiuyi Chen

## Introduction

Third-sector entities, including non-profit organizations (NPOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are actively utilizing social media to achieve a series of objectives, mirroring the practices of individuals and corporations. This phenomenon has gained significant attention within academia, leading to a series of related studies.

These studies encompass different functions of social media use by third-sector organizations, such as fundraising, advocacy, relationship-building, accountability delivery, etc.(Amelia & Dewi, 2021; Cho et al., 2014; Fedorenko & Sun, 2016; Gao, 2016; Guo & Saxton, 2018; Hou & Lampe, 2015; Lam & Nie, 2020; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Namisango et al., 2019; Sun & Asencio, 2019; Waters et al., 2009). Numerous studies found that social media can contribute to organizations' performance. For example, it is found that there is a positive relationship between online donations/fundraising and social media networks (Saxton & Wang, 2014; Zhou & Ye, 2021). Furthermore, social media is an effective tool for creating and maintaining social connections and engaging stakeholders (Nah & Saxton, 2013; W. Xu & Saxton, 2019). Based on this, scholars are also trying to understand how third-sector organizations can optimize their communication strategies within the increasingly competitive cyberspace (Wiley et al., 2023; W. Xu & Saxton, 2019). Scholars have also raised concerns about NGOs potentially using social media merely as a one-way communication channel, rather than engaging in two-way strategic communication (Sun & Asencio, 2019; Zhou & Pan, 2016).

Despite the growing interest in NGO social media use globally, there is a notable dearth of research focusing on the Chinese context. The western literature may not be applied directly to China because China presents a unique social context, stemming from its authoritarian regime and markedly different social media landscape (Gao, 2016). Due to the existence of the "Great Firewall," mainstream international social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are inaccessible within China's borders. Consequently, China has developed its own social media ecosystems, such as Weibo and WeChat (functionally analogous to Twitter and Facebook/WhatsApp, respectively). Furthermore, the rapid emergence of new platforms like TikTok (referred to as "Douyin" in China) and Red (referred to as "Xiaohongshu" in China) has further diversified China's social media landscape. On the other hand, in the context of Chinese literature, research on NGO social media use has emerged alongside studies of "Internet philanthropy" and "online charity". However, most studies in these areas do not solely limit to NGO communication strategies but rather incorporate multiple perspectives.

Moreover, the Chinese third sector's attitude towards and application of internet technologies differs significantly from Western countries. The development of China's third sector has been relatively brief, with its primary emergence closely tied to the process of market reforms. Consequently, the emergence and development of many NGOs in China have coincided with the rise of the internet, making them more willing to embrace internet and social media compared to their Western counterparts (Zhou & Pan, 2017). There are two types of relationships between NGOs and the Internet in China: one is to use the Internet as an instrument, and the other is to rely on the Internet for the entire organization's existence (Song et al., 2021; Yang, 2005), highlighting the importance and necessity of in-depth research on the impact of social media on these organizations' development.

Given the above research gap, it is necessary to pay attention to the Chinese context. While there exists a certain amount of literature regarding the social media use of Chinese NGOs, the research in this area is characterized by a lack of cohesion and organization. In this way, we raise the following research questions:

RQ1: How Chinese NGOs are using social media for communication?

RQ2: What are the emerging trends and future directions in research on Chinese NGOs' use of social media?

Therefore, this chapter aims to systematically review existing literature on the understanding of social media use by Chinese NGOs in communication strategies, while also identifying potential directions for future research by relating to existing Western research. Through this process, we aim to provide novel insights into the distinctive social media practices of NGOs in the Chinese context, thereby laying a foundation for subsequent studies in this field. Furthermore, it can contribute to international insights into the social media use of third-sector organizations and the formation of civil society.

## 1 Theoritical Background

In the field of social media use by third-sector organizations, there are two strands of theory worth mentioning.

First, Lovejoy & Saxton's research (2012) is particularly significant, providing foundational and pioneering insights in the field of NGO social media use. Based on the content analysis of Facebook posts of the 100 largest NPOs in the U.S., they inductively proposed a hierarchy of engagement model known as the "information-community-action" model. It points out that NPOs are using social media for disseminating information, building community, and calling for action. This framework identifies the three main communication ways for which NPOs employ social media and has been widely adopted in subsequent research. After that, more than 10 studies used this framework to solve a wide range of research questions on different social media platforms (Campbell & Lambright, 2020). For instance, these studies explore the factors influencing organizations' selection of these communication strategies, as well as the diverse responses of various stakeholders to these strategies (Lam & Nie, 2020; Saxton & Waters, 2014). Second, related research often refers to dialogic theory by Kent & Taylor (1998) in public relations literature. Since social media use can be considered as an investment in fostering stakeholder relationships (Xu &Saxton, 2019), scholars are trying to understand whether organizations use social media for two-way communication with strategic dialogues.

## 2 Methods

To answer the research questions, we adopted a systematic literature review as the research method (Petticrew & Robert, 2006).

Given the widespread adoption of social media platforms since 2010, the search parameters were defined for the period from 2010 to 2023. Related research was conducted both in English and Chinese, therefore, Web of Science and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) were employed as the primary search databases respectively. CNKI was chosen because it is a widely acknowledged academic database in Chinese academia.

While searching on Web of Science and CNKI, we tried different combinations under the meaning of "social media by Chinese NGO". First, we combined the interchangeable words for "NGO" in the Chinese context, including NGO, NPO, social organizations, charitable organizations, and public welfare organizations. Second, we substituted the generic term "social media" with the names of prominent Chinese social media platforms: "WeChat, Weibo, TikTok, and microblogging".

After retrieving the initial results, we manually filtered them to include only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers and book chapters. To ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature, we conducted additional keyword searches in leading journals within journals for third-sector studies, including Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly (NVSQ), VOLUNTAS, Nonprofit Leadership and Management.

Then, since this chapter aims to address the social media use by the organization, we excluded studies that did not involve NGOs within their research scope by reading the abstract. For instance, some studies focused on philanthropy communication in the digital

era, often involving multiple stakeholders (such as government and corporate entities) and utilizing communication platforms other than social media. This filtering step enabled us to more precisely concentrate on literature directly relevant to our research questions.

Finally, there were 22 English papers and 17 Chinese papers being identified. The 39 articles was investigated with the help of the VOSviewer software.

## 3 Results

For the result of data analysis, we first provided a description of the reviewed articles, including the year published, the social media platforms being studied, and methodology.

Fig. 1 shows a visualization generated by VOSviewer, indicating a comprehensive landscape of research themes pertaining to social media use by Chinese NGOs. The clustering pattern of the network reveals several important research areas: the unique characteristics of China's social media environment, including aspects of censorship and engagement; NGOs' information dissemination and collective action strategies; organizational identity construction in digital spaces; and communication strategies. The prominence of platform-specific nodes such as "Weibo" and "WeChat" highlights the significance of indigenous social media platforms in this research context.

Then, we analyze from the perspective of social media platforms. Our decision to analyze from the perspective of platforms is based on several key considerations. First, this approach aligns with the predominant trend in Western literature, where studies often take platforms as the entry point (e.g., Campbell & Lambright, 2020; Taylor, 2023), considering that technological features significantly shape communication strategies. Second, as Gao (2016) argues, an organization's choice of communication channels is a crucial aspect of strategic communication. Lastly, Fig. 1 also revealed that most studies focus on the use of a single platform.
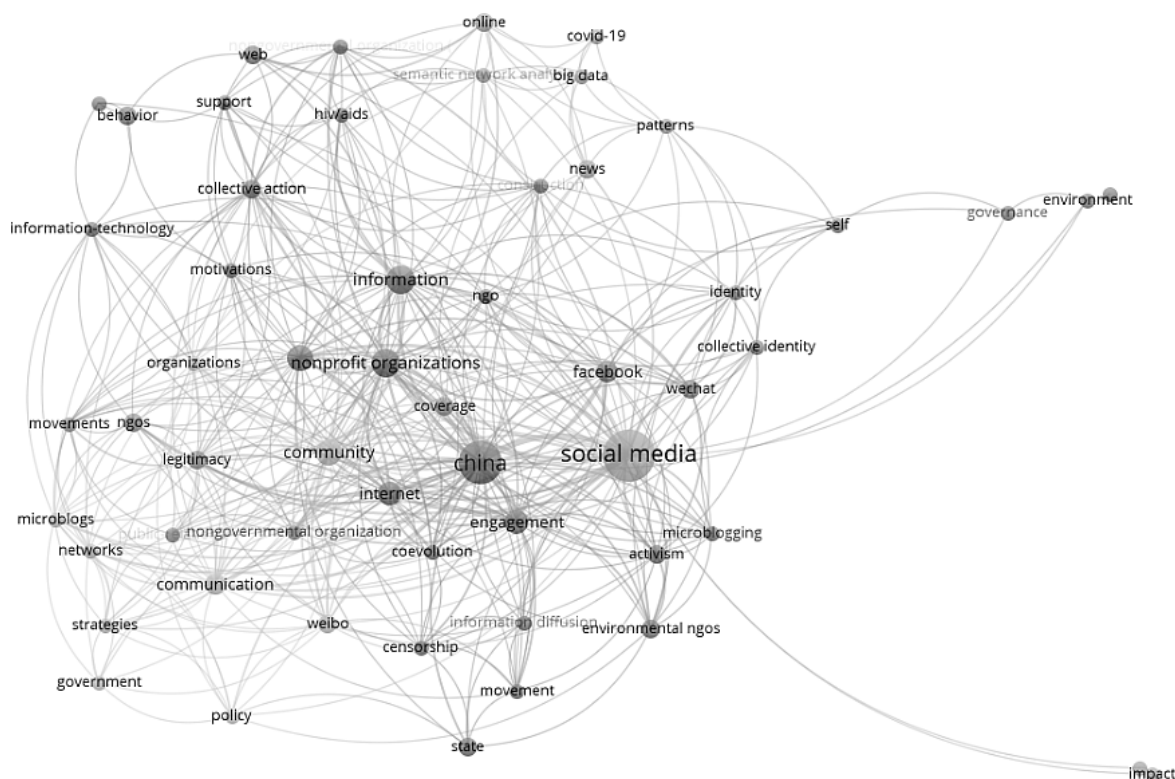


**Fig.1 Keywords Co-occurrence Analysis of the Selected Paper**

Source: own based on VOSviewer version 1.6.20

### 3.1 Description of Reviewed Articles

Fig. 2 illustrates the distribution of publication years. A notable increase in related studies can be observed after 2016. Table 1 presents an overview of the research methods employed in the reviewed studies. Content analysis, quantitative approaches, and case studies emerge as the three most prevalent methodologies. Then, Table 2 shows the platforms being studied. In the following sections, we will then discuss the literature on social media platforms being studied.
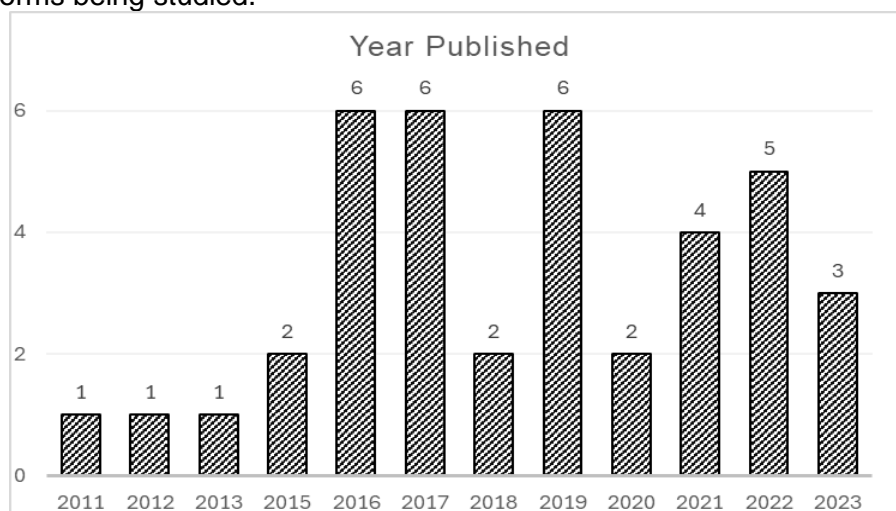


**Fig. 2 Distribution of the Year Published**

Source: own

**Tab. 1 Distribution of Research Method**

| Research Method | Number of Papers |
|---|:---:|
| Content analysis | 12 |
| Quantitative | 11 |
| Case Study | 8 |
| Literature Review | 4 |
| Mixed method | 3 |
| Interview | 1 |
| Total | 39 |

Source: own

**Tab. 2 Distribution of Social Media Platforms being Studied**

| Social Media Platform | Number of Papers |
|---|:---:|
| Not Specified | 15 |
| Weibo | 14 |
| Crowdfunding Platforms | 5 |
| WeChat | 3 |
| TikTok | 1 |
| Weibo & WeChat | 1 |
| **Total** | 39 |

Source: own

## 3.2 Social Media Platforms being Studied
**Social Media Platforms: not specified**

Interestingly, many studies do not focus on a specific social media platform but rather analyze social media as a general concept. This perspective allows for a broader understanding of how social media, in general, facilitates the goals of NGOs, such as expanding outreach, enhancing engagement, and improving communication strategies.

The work by Zeng et al. (2013), Zhou & Ye (2021), and Yu & Liu (2021) highlighted the capabilities of NGOs' social media use from multiple perspectives, such as fostering trust, networking, community building, and advocacy. As Pan (2021) argues, NGOs have demonstrated a positive attitude towards the fundamental functions of social media platforms. Furthermore, NGOs' social media use also contributes to crisis communication of organizations. For instance, according to Zhou & Liu (2022), when an NGO encounters a crisis of trust, the dissemination of charitable information on social media platforms will be an important path for rebuilding the organization's profile. These studies reflect the findings of Zhong & Li (2011), in the current digital media landscape, NGOs have gained new communication opportunities to establish good communication channels and interact with the public, thus expanding their advocacy and action capacity.

Additionally, scholars studied how NGOs can design messages on social media. For example, Zhou et al. (2023) found that gain-framed messages have a positive effect on individual donation intention.

Overall, these studies highlight the overarching trends and general strategies that NGOs can employ across various platforms to foster trust, build networks, and advocate for their causes effectively. Although these findings highly align with the Western literature, they still add to the positive role of social media use in the Chinese context.

⇒ *Weibo*

Among all social media platforms, Weibo, as illustrated in Table 2, has emerged as a focal point for academic research. Studies on NGO communication strategies on Weibo primarily fall into two categories: first, analyses of NGOs' overall communication strategies on the platform; and second, examinations of specific communication tactics employed by NGOs to achieve a particular objective, such as fundraising.

Regarding the analysis of overall communication strategies of NGOs on the Weibo platform, scholars primarily employ case studies and content analysis methods. Notably, the studies by Zhou (2012), Zhou & Pan (2016) and Gao (2016) represent early systematic content analyses of Weibo content.

The study by Zhou (2012), as an early attempt to analyze the communication strategies of NGOs, selected 13 foundations to study. It was found that most organizations failed to utilize the interaction function and rely on Weibo to increase transparency by sharing information.

Zhou & Pan (2016) applied the engagement model to analyze the Weibo posts of 155 rural education NGOs, finding that Chinese NGOs rely more on information functions compared to their Western counterparts. This finding highlights the unique characteristics of Chinese NGOs in their use of social media. Meanwhile, Gao (2016) acknowledged the positive role of dialogue and interactive content in foundation Weibo accounts, which could lead to higher levels of engagement. However, they also pointed out a paradox: despite foundations recognizing and attempting to utilize Weibo's opportunities for dialogue, they still tended to favor one-way communication. Notably, foundations underutilized Weibo's diverse multimedia features, such as images, videos, and interactive functions, indicating room for improvement in their social media strategies.

Subsequent studies have further deepened the understanding of how organizational factors influence usage strategies. Zhou & Pan (2017) conducted another content analysis of the same 155 rural education NGOs' Weibo accounts, revealing that NGOs from different backgrounds have varied preferences for the communication strategies proposed by Lovejoy & Saxton (2012). Specifically, grassroots and student organizations without government or

corporate affiliations were more inclined to post calls to action, whereas corporate-led NGOs shared more information, and government-led NGOs focused more on community-building. These findings underscore the importance of organizational background in choosing social media strategies. Additionally, they identified the organization's internet capability as the most critical determining factor, a conclusion potentially explained by resource dependency theory, although the authors did not delve further into this.

Continuing this line of research, Zhang & Skoric (2020) compared the public responses to the strategies of government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and grassroots NGOs (NGOs without government affiliations) from an informational perspective. Their study not only confirmed the influence of organizational background but also explored the differences in public reactions. They found that the public preferred GONGO content with dialogue features, while grassroots organizations' environmental advocacy content was more likely to be reshared. This finding provides empirical support for NGOs to develop differentiated social media strategies. Additionally, their research showed that Weibo posts with emotional expressions were more likely to be reshared, offering valuable guidance for content creation.

Ma & Zhang (2015) and Fedorenko & Sun (2016) conducted case studies on the Urban Air Pollution Monitoring Program and the PM2.5 Campaign, respectively, rather than focusing on specific NGO types. Their research examined how NGOs utilize social media to achieve organizational goals within these projects.

Ma & Zhang's (2015) study highlighted that environmental NGOs tend to employ specific information strategies when using Weibo. They argued that NGOs adopt commercial strategies centered on material incentives on social media, rather than volunteer participation models based on solidarity incentives. This conclusion aligns with numerous previous studies, suggesting that while NGOs attempt to emphasize the dialogue and community-building functions of Weibo, they may not fully comprehend the underlying mechanisms.

Fedorenko & Sun (2016) approached the topic from a civil society perspective, emphasizing the significance of social media for NGOs in shaping civil society. Their analysis explored how social networks can facilitate citizen engagement in public governance within the context of their case study. Regarding social media communication, they found that NGOs need to employ non-inflammatory, pro-government communication frameworks when developing their communication strategies on Weibo.

Scholars are also interested in how NGOs are using social media for some specific purposes, mainly focusing on raising funds and managing public relations.

An example of engaging supporters and raising funds on Weibo is Tian et al (2021). By collecting over 6 years of daily donation data from the Chinese nonprofit Free Lunch for Children and their corresponding daily activities on Weibo and analyzing the relationship between them, Tian et al. (2021) indicate interesting counterintuitive results showcasing a different optimal strategy for the nonprofit as compared to the for-profit sector. Another important reason to connect with the public on Weibo is discussed by Liu (2016); after analyzing the official Weibo accounts of 113 foundations, this research points out the fact that organizations that provide more mechanisms for interaction on Weibo are more likely to meet the public's expectations of organizational legitimacy.

As one of the largest domestic social media platforms in China, the use of Weibo can show the organizations' online networking capacity and effects. For instance, by collecting the data from random samples of 400 Chinese foundations' official Weibo accounts and contents, Zhou & Ye (2021) confirms that online networking on Weibo can not only bring in online donations but also to potentially increase offline donations.

⇒ *WeChat*

WeChat stands as China's preeminent social media platform, with near-universal adoption among the Chinese population. Its functionality can be considered as a hybrid of WhatsApp and Facebook. Users employ WeChat for daily communication and content sharing on their "Moments" feed, encompassing both personal updates and current affairs. Additionally, WeChat offers an "official account" feature, allowing organizations and individuals to

establish official accounts for content dissemination to subscribers. Users frequently share articles from these official accounts on their "Moments," thereby creating a social network platform characterized by strong relational ties (Deluca et al., 2016).

According to Wang's (2019) survey of over 600 Chinese NGOs, the adoption rates of WeChat and Weibo by NGOs were comparable. However, research focusing on WeChat remains relatively scarce compared to studies on Weibo.

Qu (2020) conducted a content analysis of 550 articles from 55 environmental NGOs' WeChat public accounts, examining how they conduct dialogic communication and foster public engagement. Similarly, Xu & Zhang (2022) performed a content analysis on 2472 articles from 175 Chinese foundations.

Qu's (2020) study examined foundations' communication strategies on WeChat through the theoretical lens of dialogic theory and the hierarchy of engagement models, indicating that foundations primarily utilize WeChat as a tool for information dissemination and action mobilization. Despite WeChat's potential for facilitating dialogue, foundations often struggle to establish the cyclic feedback mechanism proposed by Kent & Taylor (1998) due to human resource constraints.

Xu & Zhang's (2022) research, drawing on the two communication models proposed by Grunig and Hunt, thus categorizing WeChat articles into activating and informing strategies. The study revealed that action-oriented articles were more likely to elicit public engagement, with messages recruiting volunteers receiving the highest feedback rates. At the organizational level, the research found that environmental organizations based in economically and educationally advanced regions were more likely to garner public response. This study affirmed WeChat's effectiveness as a mobilization tool for NGOs, including for fundraising and volunteer recruitment. This effectiveness may stem from WeChat's technical feature requiring users to actively subscribe to organizations' official accounts, fostering the formation of tight-knit social networks and enabling organizations to directly engage with like-minded public groups.

Combining these two studies focusing on WeChat communication strategies, it reveals that Chinese NGOs primarily employ an informing strategy on the platform, characterized by one-way information dissemination. From this viewpoint, WeChat appears to offer communicating functions like Weibo. However, these studies also highlight how NGOs utilize WeChat to facilitate dialogue and mobilize public action. Although a systematic comparison of communication strategies between Weibo and WeChat is currently absent, strong network relationships in WeChat seem to render it a more effective platform for higher engagement levels.

It is noteworthy that these studies primarily analyze the current situation without offering specific recommendations for communication strategies. Given organizational resource constraints, there remains a research gap regarding how organizations can fully realize the potential for building dialogic communities and effectively mobilizing action. WeChat's technical restrictions hinder users from accessing detailed engagement data. Users have limited access to viewing statistics, with read counts being capped at "10w+" for readings over 100,000. They can only see selected comments chosen by organizations and do not have access to sharing metrics or all comments. This technical feature constrains researchers' ability to thoroughly assess the effectiveness of NGOs' communication strategies on WeChat (Qu, 2020). For instance, Xu & Zhang (2022) relied solely on article read counts to evaluate the public's engagement levels. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct in-depth interviews with organizational representatives and NGO followers.

Furthermore, the studies indicate differences in communication strategies between foundations and environmental organizations. This underscores the need for future research to encompass a broader range of NGO sectors to comprehensively understand WeChat utilization strategies across various types of NGOs.

While there is a scarcity of studies specifically examining the communication tactics of the WeChat platform, there are several studies that discuss the function of WeChat in facilitating crowdfunding campaigns for NGOs in the field of digital philanthropy.

In Chinese context, Xie (2022) points out that various charitable organizations can raise funds through the Internet fundraising information platform designated by the Chinese government or carry out corresponding charitable activities on their official websites. The online fundraising platforms for people suffering from critical illnesses, such as WaterDrop Fundraising, have also attracted attention from many people with caring and intentions to make donations.

The Waterdrop Crowdfunding is a dedicated crowdfunding platform that is mainly transmitted via the "Moment" function of WeChat. This platform is used as a means of contacting and sharing information only with friends who are already connected to each other, as the WeChat Moments function allows information to be viewed and sent by users' consent. In the context of China's Internet and the widespread use of WeChat, the reciprocal help model advocated by the Waterdrop Crowdfunding quickly became a hot topic on the Moments platform of WeChat. According to Fan (2024), by posting information requesting for help through platforms like Waterdrop Crowdfunding, and spreading from NGOs and social media users, this kind of request for help breaks through the personal "circle of friends" of the beneficiaries, and gains donations from unspecified caring members of the community, supported by the credit of the platforms and organizations for seeking help for critical illnesses.

In summary, the development of online fundraising platforms such as Waterdrop Crowdfunding has significantly impacted charitable activities in China. The integration of social media and charitable initiatives fosters a culture of reciprocity, making it easier for individuals facing critical illnesses to receive more financial support. This evolution in fundraising underscores the potential of digital platforms to transform traditional charitable practices, promoting a more connected and compassionate society.

**Short-video-based Social Media Platforms: TikTok as a Typical**
Except for Weibo and WeChat, NGOs also use short-video-based platforms like TikTok for communication (Wiley et.al, 2023), Chinese NGOs are not exempt from this trend (Chen, 2019; Hu, 2019; Yu &Liu, 2021).

TikTok has distinct attributes that are absent in alternative social media platforms. Bhandari (2022) analyzed TikTok's unique algorithm and argued that it is an application that combines several aspects of previously existing social media. It is 1) a short video platform that allows users to share personal information, 2) a social networking site that allows users to make friends, and 3) a content community that connects people interested in the same topic by adding hashtags.

In the Chinese context, a total of more than 5,000 government official accounts and more than 1,000 press accounts have been opened in TikTok, and it has become a new platform for government and media information dissemination marketing and communication channels (Chen, 2019). Furthermore, the transmission of short videos through TikTok has had a variety of effects. Hu (2019) discusses the socializing function of TikTok from the perspective of symbolic interactionism. Actions such as comments, liking, and reposts are seen as symbols, shared perceptions and understandings are formed among users in response to these actions. Consequently, the structure of social relations in people's interactions is revealed, being conducive to philanthropy causes.

However, the current body of research on TikTok used by Chinese NGOs is limited and is under the scope of charitable giving, mentioning how NGOs can utilize the channel. According to Yu & Liu (2021), charitable giving videos on TikTok are successfully achieving their advocacy purposes, by uploading charitable content to guide audiences to form emotional empathy, and to promote the effective conversion of charitable communication concepts. Another way to help others through TikTok is clicking links to access other social media platforms, guiding audiences to complete online donations or online purchasing behaviors. Moreover, TikTok also encourages public participation, in which creative content is added to the short videos, and celebrities are invited to take the lead in participation, which is then adopted by the audiences. This kind of short video attracts the audiences to take challenges from a video template into producing short video works with their personal style, which satisfies their desire to follow the trend and to communicate with each other, which

shows the potential of TikTok to encourage charitable behaviors.

In the various scenes of interaction that emerge from donations, there is the potential for the exchange of information in the form of short videos. For example, people in need can be seen on TikTok, which can be a motivation for audiences to donate. Even if they do not search for the information themselves, it is likely to be brought to their attention by an algorithm. It will also be possible to see the results and updates of donations from short videos. In addition, people would be able to use the videos to confirm the credibility of the organizations. In this way, TikTok has the potential to facilitate interaction between donors and beneficiaries, as well as between donors and organizations.

From a practical view, these studies can help to form nonprofit strategies for effective engagement and communication building on TikTok. NGOs can utilize the platform's strengths in eliciting emotional responses through compelling video content, while also prioritizing transparency and accountability to address potential trust issues.

## 4 Discussion
### 4.1 Current Research and GAPs

In this section, we provide a comprehensive summary and analysis of the current state of research on social media use by Chinese NGOs, based on a systematic review of literature from 2010 to 2023. After defining the scope of literature, we first conducted a descriptive analysis. It is evident that existing studies predominantly employ content analysis, with the Weibo platform receiving the most attention.

Subsequently, we categorized and critically examined studies based on the social media platforms they investigated, allowing us to identify platform-specific trends and gaps in the current body of knowledge.

Researchers have predominantly examined communication methods at both the organizational and message levels by combining the existing literature on Weibo and WeChat. At the organizational level, most studies focused on factors influencing NGOs' choice of communication strategies. At the message level, researchers examined social media-specific technical features such as hashtags and emojis, as well as framing and discourse-related aspects.

Theoretically, scholars frequently refer to Lovejoy & Saxton's hierarchy of engagement model, specifically designed for NGO social media use, and Kent & Taylor's dialogic theory from public communication literature. By referring to these theories, studies confirmed the potential of Weibo and WeChat, as China's mainstream social media platforms, in enabling organizations to establish two-way communication, including building communities and engaging in strategic dialogues. However, how organizations can fully exploit these characteristics remains under-researched. Notably, these two platforms differ significantly in functionality and user behavior, influencing NGOs' strategy choices and communication effects. Weibo, characterized by weak relationships, is more suitable for rapid information dissemination and sparking broad discussions, benefiting NGOs in expanding influence, enhancing trust and legitimacy, and attracting public attention. This may explain why case studies related to social campaigns often focus on the Weibo platform. In contrast, WeChat is known for its stronger connections, making it more appropriate for stronger interactions and maintaining long-term relationships. This feature might be more conducive to NGOs cultivating loyal supporters and volunteers, as well as facilitating in-depth discussions on philanthropy causes.

Moreover, existing literature on NGO classification exhibits diverse yet somewhat fragmented characteristics, reflecting scholars' varied classification methods based on different research objectives. The main classification approaches can be categorized into several types. First is a classification based on function or thematic areas, such as environmental NGOs and educational NGOs (e.g., Ji et.al, 2018; Zhou &Pan, 2017). These studies often explore how social media use enhances NGO legitimacy. However, it's worth noting that the selection of certain research subjects (e.g., educational NGOs) may partly stem from sampling convenience, potentially affecting the generalizability of findings.

Another classification is based on organizational characteristics, primarily focusing on the relationship between the Chinese government and NGOs, such as comparing government-led NGOs with grassroots NGOs (e.g., Zhang & Skoric, 2020). This classification reflects the uniqueness of NGO research within the political environment of China. Lastly, some studies focus on specific organizational types, such as foundations. In these discussions, social media use is often closely linked to enhancing public trust and increasing organizational transparency, considering scandals in recent years, such as the Red Cross's scandal in 2011.

While this diversity in classification methods provides multiple research perspectives, it also highlights the lack of a unified, comprehensive NGO classification framework. This absence may hinder the comparison and integration of different research findings, limiting our comprehensive understanding of Chinese NGO social media use.

Moreover, in terms of research methods, many studies predominantly use social media content analysis either as the primary research method or as a component of their research methodology. Although this approach offers great insights since Lovejoy & Saxton's (2012) initial work, it may overlook important internal perspectives. The lack of viewpoints from internal stakeholders, such as NGO staff, may lead to an insufficient understanding of the motivations, challenges, and decision-making processes behind NGO social media strategies.

The current body of research still primarily focuses on the Weibo platform, with relatively limited research on WeChat, demonstrating a clear discrepancy with practical realities and the latest social media landscape. Chinese NGOs increasingly tend to use WeChat for stakeholder interaction, yet relevant empirical studies are few and far between. Notably, despite limited current research, WeChat's strong connection feature has fostered closely associated crowdfunding platforms, a phenomenon warranting in-depth exploration. We also suggest that there is a need or potential to study Weibo and WeChat comparatively, thus providing more practical insights for NGOs on selecting a platform according to their organizational characteristics and capabilities.

Additionally, as social media platforms show a diversified landscape, capturing public attention becomes increasingly challenging, prompting many organizations to experiment with emerging platforms. Besides WeChat and Weibo, some studies have begun to focus on emerging platforms such as TikTok and RED. The emergence of these platforms not only enriches the social media ecosystem but also brings new opportunities and challenges to NGO communication strategies. In the next section, we will discuss this trend in both praxis and research perspectives.

## 4.2. New trends brought by the Chinese social media platform

Short videos were seen as more emotionally moving than other social media formats like images and text. In examining the impact of short videos, Liu et al. (2019) argues that by making the content of the videos like common experiences in users' lives, companies are able to communicate more intimately with users, which in turn has a positive impact on their perceptions of the corporate brand. Not only for marketing purposes, the combination of visuals and audio in depicting individuals in need elicited strong feelings of empathy and an urge to help immediately among donors. As one of the most famous short video platforms, by May 2024, TikTok is available in over 160 countries, has over 1.1 billion users, and has been downloaded over 220 million times in the United States alone (TikTok Statistics, 2024). Its format allows NGOs to create engaging and visually compelling content that can quickly capture the attention of a wide audience. The design mechanisms of short video platforms like TikTok place a greater emphasis on user creativity, user-to-user interaction, and cross-platform sharing, which makes them more conducive to dialogic communication, or meaningful engagement with users. Instead of one-way information sharing, community building (e.g. responding, emphasizing dialogs) is the most widely used function on TikTok, and it leans on interaction and communication (Wiley et al., 2022). This platform is particularly effective for storytelling, raising awareness, and launching viral campaigns that

can reach millions in a short time. The use of trending challenges and hashtag campaigns can further amplify NGOs' message, engaging with younger potential audiences and donors.

Similarly, RED, known for its user-generated content and emphasis on lifestyle and personal experiences, provides a platform for live streaming, media distribution, blog posts, and direct brand purchasing, attracts more than 100 million users (Liu, 2023). It also shows the possibility of providing a unique space for NGOs to connect with potential supporters on a more personal level. By leveraging influencer partnerships and creating content that resonates with RED's community-focused ethos, NGOs can build trust and foster a sense of community around their causes. The platform's integration of e-commerce also presents opportunities for NGOs to raise funds through merchandise sales or collaborations with brands.

These new platforms not only expand the reach of NGOs but also offer diverse tools and strategies to engage with their audiences. From leveraging TikTok's viral potential to harnessing RED's community-driven approach, NGOs can enhance their visibility, attract donations, and build stronger, more interactive relationships with their supporters. As these platforms continue to evolve, they will undoubtedly play an increasingly important role in the strategic toolkit of NGOs, helping them to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape and maximize their impact.

## 4.3 Crowdfunding and Social Media Based Platforms

The dramatic rise of charitable crowdfunding has changed the landscape of fundraising and giving (Pan & Dong, 2023). According to Gong (2023), The phenomenon of online personal fundraising should be understood as a hybrid form of charitable behavior that primarily aligns with public welfare and charity. This research shows that crowdfunding platforms (e.g. Waterdrop, Qfund, Tencent Philanthropy) have revolutionized the way NGOs and individuals raise funds in China. Zhou & Ye (2018) argue that the crowdfunding platforms link with social media platforms. For instance, participants can promote their campaigns through WeChat by sharing the campaign with friends or reposting the webpage version of campaigns to other social media platforms. Thus, donors can easily make contributions through Payment apps on their smartphones. They allow users to share their fundraising campaigns within their social networks, primarily through WeChat, and other platforms like Alipay and TikTok. These platforms bridge the gap between individuals seeking help and compassionate potential donors, transforming traditional private charitable acts among friends and social relations into public charitable efforts that support people in need. Moreover, as Zhao et al. (2022) argues, the crowdfunding platforms present the promotion framework for the joint innovation of multiple sectors and show good outcomes.

From a practical view, NGOs can discover various communication strategies on crowdfunding platforms like Waterdrop to enhance their fundraising efforts and engage more effectively with donors. Crowdfunding platforms allow NGOs to engage with their supporters and donors directly. Through updates, comments, and sharing features, NGOs can build a community around their cause, fostering a sense of involvement and commitment among supporters. Further, by using these platforms, NGOs can raise awareness about specific issues and advocate for their causes. The visibility provided by these platforms helps NGOs reach a larger audience and educate the public about their work.

In conclusion, the integration of crowdfunding and social media platforms has provided NGOs with innovative tools and strategies to enhance their fundraising efforts. By employing effective communication strategies, leveraging social media integration, and building a hybrid charity tool on crowdfunding platforms, NGOs can maximize their impact, ensuring their campaigns are successful in raising funds and building lasting relationships with donors and supporters.

## Conclusions and further research

This study systematically reviews research on social media communication by Chinese NGOs from 2010 to 2023, based on keyword searches of published books and academic papers. We analyze the current situation and research gaps in existing literature and propose directions for future research. This chapter aims to provide valuable insights into the development of civil society in China.

Analysis of current literature indicates that Chinese NGOs, regardless of the social media platform, have not fully utilized the potential for two-way communication. Instead, they tend to rely on one-way communication to enhance organizational transparency, credibility, and legitimacy. Research also shows that the type of NGO significantly influences its specific communication strategies. However, current studies in this area are relatively fragmented, lacking a comprehensive investigation into how different types of NGOs prefer various communication strategies. At the message level, discourse analysis and examination of social media technical features reveal how NGOs construct messages to increase public engagement. Regarding platform-specific research, analysis of Weibo remains predominant, though research methods are often limited to content analysis or case studies.

Based on the current research landscape and identified gaps, and considering the practices of Chinese NGOs, we offer several recommendations for future research directions. First, we suggest that future studies may involve more NGO categories and a more consolidated perspective. Second, it is also crucial to investigate emerging social media platforms such as WeChat, TikTok, and Red, as these also represent global trends in digital communication. Third, we suggest that scholars within the framework of digital transformation, putting social media in a broader context. Specifically, research could focus on how NGOs can cooperate with crowdfunding platforms in social media platforms.

This study is also subject to several limitations. First, it focuses solely on NGOs' communication strategies on social media, other important aspects of traditional media studies are not covered. Second, the data collection relies only on keyword searches of published books and academic papers. This method may miss relevant studies not captured by our search terms, and excludes insights from literature as reports and policy papers. These limitations highlight the need for future research to use a broader range of sources and to explore other dimensions of NGO activities.

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