



From metrics to meaning: A signalling–exchange framework for social media engagement in European small and medium-sized enterprises

Jitka Matejkova 



Department of Law and Social Sciences, Faculty of Business and Economics, Mendel University in Brno, Brno, Czech Republic.

Email: jitka.matejkova@mendelu.cz

Abstract

Social media engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares are widely used as indicators of communicative performance, yet their theoretical role in building durable stakeholder relationships remains insufficiently explained. This study addresses that gap by integrating signaling theory and social exchange theory to conceptualize engagement as a relational mechanism rather than a purely quantitative outcome. It develops and examines a framework in which three communication strategies, personalization, interactivity, and content consistency, influence stakeholder trust and perceived organizational legitimacy, with engagement rate serving as a mediating variable. Using a mixed-methods case-study design, the study combines longitudinal platform data and qualitative content analysis to examine engagement patterns in a Czech small and medium-sized enterprise (SME). The findings indicate that interactive and consistent communication are associated with higher engagement and stronger stakeholder trust, which in turn support legitimacy perceptions. By reframing engagement as a mechanism of relationship-building in the European SME context, the article contributes to interactive marketing and organizational legitimacy scholarship while offering practical guidance for SMEs seeking to strengthen stakeholder relationships through strategic social media communication.

Keywords: Interactive marketing, Organisational legitimacy, Signalling theory, SMEs, Social exchange theory, Social media engagement, Stakeholder trust.

JEL Classification: M31; M37; L25.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This paper contributes to the literature by integrating signalling and social exchange theories to explain social media engagement as a relational mechanism, identifying engagement rate as a mediator between communication strategies and stakeholder trust, and extending evidence to Czech SMEs within the European digital communication context.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Context and Problem Definition

Social media has become an integral component of contemporary marketing and public communication, evolving from a tool of information dissemination into a socio-technical environment in which interaction, influence, and relationship-building are continuously co-constructed by users, organizations, and platform architectures (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Tuten & Solomon, 2017). In the European context, this transformation is closely associated with broader changes in the public sphere, the digitalization of economic and social life, and the growing importance of reputation, trust, and legitimacy as resources of organizational resilience. For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute the backbone of European economies and frequently operate within dense stakeholder networks involving public authorities, customers, local communities, and sectoral associations, digital platforms offer relatively accessible means of enhancing visibility and sustaining stakeholder relationships through ongoing communication.

At the same time, the visibility and reach of organizational communication within platform environments are not determined solely by content quality or communicative effort. They are increasingly shaped by algorithmic ranking and recommendation systems that privilege interaction and thereby influence what becomes visible, credible, and socially salient in digital public space (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeftang, 2012). Engagement is commonly measured through observable indicators such as likes, comments, and shares; however, these interactions perform a dual function. In addition to signaling attention and evaluative response, they activate algorithmic amplification mechanisms that extend reach and may generate cumulative advantage: higher engagement increases visibility, while higher visibility in turn attracts further engagement (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). Engagement thus operates simultaneously as a relational outcome and as a mechanism that enables visibility, with important implications for organizational positioning in digital environments.

Within this context, stakeholder expectations regarding responsiveness, dialogic communication, and perceived authenticity have intensified. Timely responses and interactional consistency increasingly function as baseline signals of reliability and professionalism, thereby shaping the formation of digital trust (Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga, & Bronner, 2018). Many SMEs, however, face capacity constraints and lack sufficiently developed strategic frameworks for managing social media as an interactive space of reciprocal exchange. As a result, they may rely on one-way broadcasting, irregular content practices, or limited responsiveness to stakeholder interaction, patterns that can suppress engagement, diminish credibility, and ultimately weaken perceived organizational legitimacy, particularly in settings where relational capital is central to long-term sustainability (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

Although commercial brands have invested extensively in analytics-driven engagement optimization, SMEs remain comparatively underexamined, especially regarding how engagement operates within specific European institutional conditions and the evolving digital ecosystem of Central and Eastern Europe (Freberg, 2022). This gap is significant because SMEs in this region often navigate post-transition market structures, uneven levels of digital maturity, and stakeholder expectations shaped by distinct local institutional environments. In response, the present study examines how Czech SMEs employ engagement-oriented social media strategies and how these strategies relate to stakeholder trust and perceived organizational legitimacy. By connecting insights from interactive marketing with broader European concerns about trust, legitimacy, and digitally mediated stakeholder relations, the study contributes to a more institutionally grounded understanding of engagement in the European SME context.

1.2. Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to theorize and empirically examine the strategic role of social media engagement in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with particular attention to the institutional context in which trust, reputation, and legitimacy constitute critical resources for organizational sustainability. Building on signaling theory and social exchange theory, the study conceptualizes engagement not merely as a quantitative outcome but as a relationship-building mechanism through which organizations shape stakeholder perceptions and strengthen their broader communicative position. Empirically, it examines whether engagement-oriented communication strategies, namely personalization, interactivity, and content consistency, influence stakeholder perceptions through the mediating role of engagement rate.

The study pursues four interrelated objectives. First, it seeks to identify which engagement strategies are most effective in enhancing visibility and fostering meaningful audience connection within platform-mediated environments. Second, it examines how social media interactions relate to stakeholder trust, perceived professional credibility, and broader reputational outcomes. Third, it explores whether, and in what ways, engagement supports organizational adaptability and resilience under conditions of uncertainty and rapid change. Fourth, it analyzes how digital engagement facilitates two-way knowledge exchange and how such feedback may inform organizational learning and decision-making processes.

The study further conceptualizes social media platforms as relational infrastructures embedded within wider institutional and socio-economic environments. From this perspective, platforms do not merely function as neutral channels of message transmission; rather, they shape the ways in which SMEs signal credibility, respond to stakeholder expectations, and cultivate durable digital communities. This perspective is particularly relevant for SMEs operating in contexts where stakeholder alignment, transparency, and accountability are central to legitimacy and long-term organizational viability.

By reframing engagement as a relational mechanism with broader institutional implications, the study contributes to scholarship on interactive marketing, stakeholder communication, and organizational legitimacy,

while also offering empirically grounded guidance for SMEs seeking to strengthen stakeholder relationships and strategic communication in digitally mediated environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Social Media Engagement

The diffusion of social media has fundamentally reconfigured marketing and organizational communication by shifting the dominant communicative logic from linear message transmission to interactive and participatory exchange (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Unlike traditional one-way media, social platforms enable real-time responsiveness, audience segmentation, and personalized communication, thereby expanding organizations' capacity to cultivate relationships and co-create value with diverse stakeholder groups (Hollebeek, 2011). Within this environment, engagement is frequently operationalized through the engagement rate, commonly defined as the proportion of user interactions, such as likes, comments, and shares, relative to reach or impressions, and widely used as an indicator of communicative performance.

Conceptually, however, engagement cannot be reduced to a set of platform-based metrics alone. The literature increasingly understands engagement as a behavioral and psychological manifestation of stakeholder investment, reflecting attention, participation, and relational orientation towards an organization or brand (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011). From this perspective, engagement metrics represent observable traces of a broader interactive process rather than a complete measure of relational quality. Organizations that achieve strong engagement outcomes typically demonstrate a range of capabilities, including the ability to attract attention, practice active listening, develop audience-relevant narratives, and adapt strategically to platform-specific affordances and constraints (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Such capabilities are important not only for increasing market visibility but also for fostering trust and legitimacy, both of which are particularly significant for SMEs whose competitiveness often depends on reputational resources and durable stakeholder ties.

A defining feature of contemporary engagement is its algorithmic mediation. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram privilege content that generates interaction, thereby shaping visibility and amplifying posts that perform well according to engagement-driven ranking logics (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). This creates a cumulative feedback mechanism in which engagement increases visibility, while increased visibility, in turn, attracts further engagement (de Vries et al., 2012). At the same time, platform algorithms remain dynamic and only partially transparent, thereby limiting organizational predictability and requiring the continuous recalibration of content strategies to maintain relevance and reach. Engagement, therefore, emerges not only as a relational outcome but also as a structurally conditioned mechanism of visibility embedded within platform governance architectures.

These challenges are further intensified by broader environmental pressures, including regulatory change, economic volatility, and shifts in platform monetisation. The growing prevalence of pay-to-play models has reduced the scope of organic reach and has encouraged organizations to balance paid promotion with communication practices that preserve perceived authenticity and interactional credibility (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Simultaneously, evolving data protection and privacy regimes constrain the ways in which organizations collect, process, and use audience data, with direct implications for personalization practices and the design of engagement strategies (Colleoni, 2022). For SMEs, which often operate with limited resources and specialized expertise, these developments may intensify the strategic trade-offs between visibility, compliance, and relationship-building.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how Czech SMEs navigate engagement-oriented communication strategies within a platform-mediated digital environment and how such strategies relate to trust and legitimacy outcomes. By extending engagement research beyond large commercial brands and situating it within a European SME context, the study contributes to a more institutionally grounded understanding of engagement as a mechanism of stakeholder relationship formation and organizational credibility in digitally mediated environments.

2.2. Signalling Theory and Platform-Mediated Credibility

Signaling theory explains how actors reduce uncertainty under conditions of information asymmetry by transmitting observable cues that others interpret as indicators of otherwise unobservable qualities (Spence, 1973). In the context of organizational communication, such signals may take the form of communicative and behavioral manifestations, including responsiveness, tone, consistency, transparency, and visible evidence of competence, through which stakeholders infer reliability, professionalism, and trustworthiness. This perspective is especially relevant in digital environments, where stakeholders often encounter organizations without prior direct experience and are therefore required to form judgments based on limited and immediately accessible cues.

Social media platforms intensify both the need for signaling and the complexity of signal interpretation. First, they compress attention and privilege rapid evaluative judgment, encouraging stakeholders to rely on heuristics such as perceived authenticity, interactional quality, and communicative consistency over time. Second, signals are embedded within platform architectures themselves: visible engagement indicators, including likes, comments, and shares, constitute publicly observable social information that may be interpreted as cues of relevance, popularity, or endorsement. In this sense, engagement metrics function not only as internal indicators of communication performance but also as external signals capable of shaping perceived credibility and legitimacy through the visible display of collective stakeholder responses.

For SMEs, signaling dynamics are especially consequential. Unlike larger firms, SMEs often lack strong brand recognition, broad media visibility, or institutionalized reputational buffers. As a result, platform-mediated signals may exert a disproportionately strong influence on stakeholder evaluation. Communication strategies such as personalization, interactivity, and content consistency may therefore be interpreted as signals of credibility. Personalization may signal attentiveness and stakeholder orientation; interactivity may signal openness and a willingness to engage in reciprocal dialogue; and consistency may signal organizational reliability and communicative predictability. Over time, the accumulation of such coherent signals may contribute to perceived organizational legitimacy, understood as the perception that an organization's actions and communication conform to socially accepted norms, values, and expectations (Suchman, 1995).

Importantly, algorithmic amplification may both reinforce and distort signaling processes. When platforms preferentially distribute content that generates interaction, engagement becomes structurally rewarded, and high levels of visible engagement may be interpreted as evidence of quality or trustworthiness, even where such interaction is driven primarily by controversy, novelty, or emotional arousal. Signaling in platform environments should therefore not be understood solely as the outcome of deliberate organizational strategy. Rather, it is a co-produced process shaped by platform governance, audience behavior, and the visibility effects generated by engagement-driven ranking mechanisms.

2.3. Social Exchange Theory and Engagement as Reciprocal Relationship-Building

Social exchange theory conceptualizes social relationships as being sustained through reciprocal exchanges of valued resources, such as information, support, recognition, and responsiveness, where perceived benefits, fairness, and mutual consideration shape relational quality over time (Blau, 1964). Applied to organizational communication, this perspective suggests that trust and commitment emerge when stakeholders perceive interactions as mutually beneficial and when organizations demonstrate attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational consideration. In social media environments, such exchanges are often low-threshold, iterative, and publicly visible: stakeholders contribute attention, feedback, endorsement, or critique, while organizations respond through information provision, acknowledgment, adaptation, and continued interaction.

From the perspective of social exchange theory, engagement should not be understood as an endpoint but rather as an indicator of ongoing relational activity. Likes, comments, and shares may be interpreted as micro-level contributions that signal a willingness to participate in a continuing exchange relationship. When organizations respond constructively, for example, by acknowledging comments, addressing concerns, adapting content to stakeholder needs, or providing consistent communicative value, stakeholders are more likely to perceive the relationship as reciprocal, thereby strengthening trust. By contrast, one-way broadcasting, delayed responses, or inconsistent communication may weaken expectations of reciprocity and reduce the perceived value of interaction, leading to lower engagement and diminished relational quality.

The three engagement strategies examined in this study correspond closely to the central mechanisms of social exchange. Interactivity operationalizes reciprocity through dialogue, responsiveness, and conversational exchange. Personalization may enhance perceived relational value by signaling recognition of stakeholder preferences, needs, and situational contexts. Content consistency contributes to relational stability by supporting predictable expectations, reducing uncertainty, and facilitating repeated exchange over time. Taken together, these strategies are expected to shape stakeholders' willingness to invest attention and interaction, thereby reinforcing engagement and deepening relational ties between organizations and their audiences.

For SMEs operating in European contexts, social exchange dynamics are often closely intertwined with reputational resources and stakeholder dependence. SMEs frequently rely on relational capital within local, regional, and sectoral networks, where trust functions not merely as a marketing advantage but as a prerequisite for cooperation, repeat transactions, and resilience under uncertain conditions. In this sense, digital interaction on social media may complement offline relationship-building by sustaining continuity, responsiveness, and informational support. These features may, in turn, contribute to stronger trust and subsequently to enhanced perceptions of organizational legitimacy.

2.4. Integrating Signalling and Social Exchange

Taken together, signaling theory and social exchange theory provide a complementary framework for explaining why social media engagement matters beyond the level of observable metrics. Signaling theory clarifies how engagement-oriented communication practices and visible interaction cues shape perceptions of credibility and legitimacy under conditions of information asymmetry. Social exchange theory, by contrast, explains how repeated and reciprocal interactions foster trust through the perception of mutual value, responsiveness, and relational commitment.

The integration of these two theoretical perspectives offers a coherent conceptual foundation for the present study. It makes it possible to understand engagement simultaneously as a visible communicative signal and as an indicator of ongoing relational exchange. From this perspective, engagement rate is not treated merely as a descriptive performance measure but as a mediating mechanism through which communication strategies, particularly personalization, interactivity, and content consistency, may influence stakeholder trust and perceived organizational legitimacy.

Such an integrated framework is especially relevant for SMEs operating in platform-mediated communication environments, where credibility must often be established through limited yet highly visible cues and where sustained stakeholder relationships depend on continued interaction. Within the European SME context, this perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of how communication practices generate both reputational and relational effects in digitally mediated environments.

2.5. Engagement Metrics and Strategic Implications

Engagement metrics function not only as performance indicators but also as diagnostic instruments that help organizations assess audience resonance, content relevance, and the effectiveness of platform-specific communication practices. A widely used operationalization is the engagement rate (ER), expressed as:

$$ER = \left(\frac{\text{Likes} + \text{Comments} + \text{Shares}}{\text{Total Reach}} \right) \times 100$$

By standardizing interaction relative to exposure, this measure allows for longitudinal monitoring within organizations as well as cross-sectional comparison across platforms, campaigns, and content formats (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). At the same time, ER must be interpreted with caution. While it captures visible forms of interaction, the relational significance of engagement, such as trust formation or perceived credibility, depends on the context of interaction, audience composition, and platform-specific mechanisms through which content is distributed and interpreted.

The literature identifies several interrelated drivers of engagement optimization that carry direct strategic implications for organizational communication.

A first driver is content personalization and relevance. Audience-tailored communication tends to increase engagement by aligning messages with users' interests, situational needs, and identity-related cues (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The diffusion of AI-assisted analytics has increased the feasibility of scalable personalization, enabling SMEs to segment audiences and refine communicative framing without incurring the costs traditionally associated with extensive market research. In platform environments, relevance also has algorithmic consequences: content that corresponds more closely to user preferences is more likely to generate early interaction and, consequently, to receive broader distribution.

A second driver concerns interactivity and participatory formats. Interactive features, including polls, quizzes, short-form videos, and live sessions, can increase attention, dwell time, and the likelihood of reciprocal exchange (Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen, 2019). These formats shift audiences from passive consumption toward active participation, thereby creating feedback loops that may strengthen both cognitive involvement and emotional attachment. For SMEs, interactivity also offers low-threshold opportunities to demonstrate responsiveness and stakeholder orientation, both of which are closely associated with trust-building in digital contexts.

A third driver is influencer and community advocacy. Endorsements by credible intermediaries, particularly micro-influencers and locally embedded community actors, may enhance both reach and perceived authenticity. Such forms of advocacy frequently operate as signals of credibility and may be evaluated more favorably than direct organizational messaging, thereby supporting trust and, potentially, longer-term loyalty (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). In European SME contexts, community advocacy may be especially valuable where reputational resources are locally grounded and where online and offline stakeholder networks substantially overlap.

Empirical research links strong engagement to tangible outcomes, including enhanced brand equity, customer retention, and improved commercial performance (Aaker, 1991; Gallup, 2016). Equally important, however, are the less tangible effects. Engagement may contribute to trust, reputation, and perceived legitimacy, resources that are particularly significant for SMEs, whose competitiveness often depends on relational capital and stakeholder endorsement. Sustaining engagement remains challenging. Algorithmic change, audience fragmentation, and content fatigue require organizations to adapt in agile and evidence-based ways. For this reason, continuous analytics, structured content planning, and iterative experimentation are critical for maintaining communicative performance over time (Kumar & Pansari, 2016).

Building on these insights, the present study examines engagement strategies in the still under-researched context of Czech SMEs and evaluates how specific strategic choices relate not only to engagement metrics but also to broader relational outcomes. In doing so, the study contributes to a more mechanism-oriented understanding of engagement by linking observable platform interactions to wider processes of trust formation and legitimacy in European, platform-mediated markets.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods case study design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) that integrates quantitative platform analytics with qualitative content analysis to examine social media engagement strategies within a single Czech small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) context. The quantitative component captures temporal variation in engagement outcomes on Facebook and Instagram over the study period, while the qualitative component focuses on content-related and contextual features that help explain these observable patterns. By combining these approaches, the study moves beyond descriptive performance monitoring and enables a more nuanced interpretation of engagement dynamics concerning communication strategy, organizational practice, and platform-specific conditions. This design enhances both the explanatory depth and practical relevance of the analysis.

3.2. Sampling and Platform Selection

The empirical analysis is based on a single-case study of a Czech SME project whose official Facebook and Instagram accounts were monitored over 12 months from January to December 2022. A single-case design was selected because it enables in-depth examination of engagement dynamics within a specific organizational and communicative context, thereby allowing close analysis of how platform activity, content characteristics, and temporal developments interact over time.

Facebook and Instagram were chosen as the analytical platforms because they remain widely used in the Czech digital environment for both consumer-facing and stakeholder-oriented communication, and because they offer sufficiently developed native analytics to support the systematic monitoring of reach, impressions, and interaction indicators such as likes, comments, and shares (Statista, 2023). The selected case was particularly suitable for analysis because it maintained an active presence on both platforms, published content regularly throughout the reporting period, and generated engagement indicators that were publicly observable or consistently extractable. In addition, the case operated in a stakeholder-sensitive setting requiring communication with diverse audiences, including local communities, visitors, professional actors, and institutional stakeholders. These characteristics made it especially relevant for examining how engagement-oriented communication strategies function within a platform-mediated SME environment.

3.3. Quantitative Measures

The primary dependent variable was *engagement rate* (ER), calculated using the widely accepted formula.

$$ER = \left(\frac{\text{Likes} + \text{Comments} + \text{Shares}}{\text{Total Reach}} \right) \times 100$$

This metric standardizes interaction relative to exposure, enabling meaningful temporal and cross-platform comparisons across content types, campaigns, and audience sizes (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). For interpretive purposes, engagement performance was classified according to commonly used threshold ranges: low engagement

below 10 percent, moderate engagement between 10 and 15 percent, high engagement between 15 and 20 percent, and very high engagement above 20 percent.

In addition to ER, the analysis monitored monthly follower counts, posting frequency, and the distribution of content formats, including image-based posts, video content, text-oriented updates, and live formats. These supplementary indicators were used to contextualize engagement trajectories and to account for fluctuations in communication intensity and format composition throughout the reporting period.

3.4. Qualitative Content Analysis

To complement the metric-based analysis, a structured qualitative content analysis was conducted for all posts published during the study period. The coding framework captured the dominant content format, the communicative framing of posts as informational, promotional, or participatory, and the presence of engagement stimuli such as explicit calls to action, polls, contests, and prompts encouraging user-generated contributions.

Coding was undertaken by two trained coders to ensure analytical reliability. Interrater agreement was high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.87$), and any remaining discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. This stage of analysis enabled the systematic identification of content characteristics associated with higher engagement and provided an interpretive basis for explaining why certain posts or periods generated stronger audience responses than others.

3.5. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, quantitative platform data were organized monthly to identify temporal variation in engagement across the study period. This stage made it possible to track changes in ER, follower growth, posting frequency, and interaction volume on each platform. Second, the coded qualitative data were examined in relation to these quantitative trends to identify recurring content features and communication patterns associated with stronger or weaker engagement performance.

This analytical procedure made it possible to connect observable fluctuations in engagement with variations in content design, communicative framing, and participatory features. Rather than treating engagement solely as a numeric outcome, the study therefore interprets it as a phenomenon shaped by the interaction between platform metrics and the substantive qualities of communication.

3.6. Data Integration Strategy

The quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated through joint analytical comparison (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013), aligning monthly engagement outcomes with coded content characteristics. This approach enabled triangulation between observations in platform metrics and the structure of communication in substantive terms. Consequently, the analysis identified which practices correlated with stronger engagement and the communicative conditions under which these practices appeared effective in a platform-mediated environment.

By integrating metric-based and content-based evidence, the study provides a more mechanism-oriented understanding of social media engagement, linking patterns of observable interaction with broader questions of communication strategy, stakeholder responsiveness, and organizational credibility.

4. Results and Interpretation of Social Media Engagement Trends

This section presents the longitudinal analysis of social media engagement on Instagram and Facebook for a Czech SME project over the 2022 calendar year. The analysis draws on platform-based indicators of interaction, namely posting activity and the aggregate numbers of likes, comments, and shares, which were subsequently standardized into an engagement rate (ER). In accordance with common practice in social media analytics, ER is used here as a comparable indicator of interaction intensity across time and between platforms. Because platform-level reach data were not consistently available for all observations, ER was calculated using the follower base as the standardizing denominator, thereby enabling consistent month-to-month comparison within and across the two platforms.

Across the full reporting period, Instagram consistently generated higher engagement than Facebook. The average ER reached 22.6% on Instagram, compared with 9.3% on Facebook, a pattern consistent with prior research indicating that visually oriented and mobile-first platforms tend to foster more immediate and interaction-intensive forms of user behavior (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). At the same time, engagement fluctuated substantially over the course of the year, with the most pronounced peaks occurring in late summer and early autumn. August and September represented the strongest performance period, coinciding with intensified communication activity, increased posting frequency, and the introduction of geographically targeted paid promotion. These developments suggest a reinforcing dynamic in which greater content output and more strategically targeted distribution jointly enhanced visibility and user interaction.

By contrast, the weakest engagement levels were recorded in March and April, a period that coincided with the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This decline is consistent with the assumption that major socio-political disruptions may suppress promotional engagement by redirecting public attention and altering the emotional and informational salience of organizational communication. A further downward trend was observed in November and December, likely reflecting a combination of reduced posting activity and seasonal fatigue within a highly saturated year-end communication environment. Taken together, these patterns suggest that engagement should be understood not as a stable attribute of communication performance but as a context-sensitive outcome shaped by organizational inputs, platform dynamics, and exogenous attention shocks.

January 2022: Limited Marketing Activity and Low Engagement.

In January, engagement remained low on both platforms. As shown in Table 1, Instagram recorded an ER of 5.4%, whereas Facebook reached only 1.2%. This comparatively weak performance coincided with limited communication activity at the beginning of the year, including the delayed launch of a new website and the absence

of active campaigns that might have provided a stronger narrative anchor for digital communication. Organizational communication capacity also appears to have been constrained during this period, which likely limited both content production and the ability to stimulate interaction through more active community management. January may therefore be interpreted as a baseline month characterized by low visibility, limited audience response, and relatively weak strategic communication intensity.

Table 1. Engagement performance in January 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (January)	Facebook (January)
Likes	66	44
Comments	0	1
Followers	1,231	4,105
ER calculation	$((66 + 0) / 1,231) \times 100$	$((44 + 1) / 4,105) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	5.4%	1.2%

Although Instagram generated higher interaction intensity relative to audience size, both platforms remained within a low-engagement range, making January a useful baseline for interpreting later increases.

February 2022: Event-Driven Surge Associated with the Olympic Festival.

Table 2 shows that in February, engagement increased substantially, coinciding with heightened offline visibility and public interest linked to the Olympic Festival hosted at the project site. The event attracted more than 50,000 visitors and created a strong, time-bound narrative that translated into online attention and interaction. As a result, ER rose to 21.9% on Instagram and 9.5% on Facebook. This month illustrates the significance of offline–online integration: when social media communication is anchored in tangible community events, it can generate higher interaction intensity and strengthen the perceived relevance of organizational content.

Table 2. Engagement performance in February 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (February)	Facebook (February)
Likes	302	391
Comments	6	12
Followers	1,405	4,262
ER calculation	$((302 + 6) / 1,405) \times 100$	$((391 + 12) / 4,262) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	21.9%	9.5%

The February results (above in Table 2) also reinforce the platform contrast observed throughout the year. Instagram maintained a higher interaction intensity relative to audience size, as visible above, consistent with the platform's affordances for visually oriented, event-based storytelling and rapid feedback cycles (Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

March 2022: Engagement Decline Under An Exogenous Attention Shock.

In March, engagement fell sharply on both platforms, with Instagram recording an ER of 2.1% and Facebook 0.4%. This decline coincided with the escalation of the war in Ukraine, which plausibly redirected public attention away from organizational and promotional communication. In addition, the communication function reportedly paused or substantially reduced publishing activity, which would further reduce both algorithmic visibility and the opportunity structure for interaction. Taken together, Table 3 illustrates how platform engagement can be highly sensitive to external geopolitical shocks and organizational output constraints.

Table 3. Engagement performance in March 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (March)	Facebook (March)
Likes	29	17
Comments	0	0
Followers	1,405	4,264
ER calculation	$((29 + 0) / 1,405) \times 100$	$((17 + 0) / 4,264) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	2.1%	0.4%

April 2022: Modest Recovery Linked to An Architecture Exhibition.

In April, engagement began to recover, reaching 5.7% on Instagram and 2.3% on Facebook. As shown in Table 4, this improvement coincided with the month's principal event, the exhibition *New Riverfront Connections*, hosted in the developer's building. The exhibition showcased a design competition centered on a proposed river crossing, including a junction branch leading west towards Svitavské nábřeží Street and the associated access ramps to the bridge. The event appears to have returned the project to the public and media space, thereby increasing audience attention and reinforcing user engagement across both social media platforms. Although the recovery remained moderate relative to the later peak period, the April results (as Table 4 summarizes) suggest that locally embedded and event-based communication can effectively reactivate stakeholder interest following a period of reduced visibility.

Table 4. Engagement performance in April 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (April)	Facebook (April)
Likes	81	97
Comments	0	3
Followers	1,410	4,295
ER calculation	$((81 + 0) / 1,410) \times 100$	$((97 + 3) / 4,295) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	5.7%	2.3%

May 2022: Participatory Community Initiative as an Engagement Catalyst.

In May, engagement increased substantially, reaching 16.2% on Instagram and 4.9% on Facebook. As shown in Table 5, this improvement coincided with a community-oriented outdoor interactive tour of the project site that explicitly encouraged public participation and feedback. The findings suggest that participatory formats, especially those integrating offline experiences with digitally mediated communication, can strengthen interaction by lowering barriers to engagement and positioning stakeholders as active contributors rather than passive recipients of content.

Table 5. Engagement performance in May 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (May)	Facebook (May)
Likes	230	204
Comments	0	9
Followers	1,419	4,306
ER calculation	$((230 + 0) / 1,419) \times 100$	$((204 + 9) / 4,306) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	16.2%	4.9%

June 2022: Cultural Programming and Sustained Interest.

In June, as Table 6 summarizes, Instagram ER reached 12.5% and Facebook 3.2%. This performance coincided with the launch of a summer cinema programme and related promotional activity, which likely increased onsite attendance and provided repeated, shareable content moments. June indicates that recurring cultural formats can sustain engagement by generating predictable attention peaks and enabling ongoing storytelling across multiple posts.

Table 6. Engagement performance in June 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (June)	Facebook (June)
Likes	177	126
Comments	2	12
Followers	1,428	4,363
ER calculation	$((177 + 2) / 1,428) \times 100$	$((126 + 12) / 4,363) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	12.5%	3.2%

July 2022: Stable Engagement with Rising Conversational Activity.

Table 7 presents the engagement performance for July 2022. As shown in Table 7, engagement remained relatively strong during this month, reaching 14.9% on Instagram and 4.4% on Facebook. Although the engagement rate remained below the levels recorded during the later peak period, the number of comments increased, suggesting a shift towards more conversational forms of interaction. The weekly *T.G.I. parties* featuring local DJs appear to have created a socially oriented and repeatable content structure that encouraged discussion and recurring audience attention. This pattern supports the argument that entertainment-oriented programming can sustain engagement by combining continuity with opportunities for socially embedded audience participation.

Table 7. Engagement performance in July 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (July)	Facebook (July)
Likes	215	164
Comments	5	33
Followers	1,480	4,454
ER calculation	$((215 + 5) / 1,480) \times 100$	$((164 + 33) / 4,454) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	14.9%	4.4%

August 2022: Outlier Peak Associated with Capacity Increase and Paid Promotion.

August recorded the highest engagement levels of the entire reporting period, with Instagram reaching 72.7% and Facebook 43.6%. As shown in Table 8, this pronounced increase coincided with the introduction of dedicated social media capacity and the launch of a trial geo-targeted paid promotion campaign focused on the Brno area, with a reported budget of approximately CZK 500. The scale of the increase suggests that the combined effect of intensified content activity, more systematic communication management, and targeted paid distribution substantially enhanced visibility and early user interaction, which may, in turn, have reinforced organic reach through platform ranking mechanisms. Given the magnitude of these values, August is best interpreted as an outlier month shaped by a concentrated strategic intervention rather than as a stable baseline of engagement.

Table 8. Engagement performance in August 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (August)	Facebook (August)
Likes	1,161	1,874
Comments	30	192
Followers	1,639	4,735
ER calculation	$((1,161 + 30) / 1,639) \times 100$	$((1,874 + 192) / 4,735) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	72.7%	43.6%

September 2022: High Engagement Sustained Through Deliberative Public Events.

Engagement remained very high in September, reaching 55.6% on Instagram and 17.5% on Facebook. As shown in Table 9, this strong performance appears to have been driven in part by the opening of the project's public square and by the organization of discussion-oriented events focused on themes such as brownfield regeneration, sustainable architecture, and smart office spaces. In contrast to August, September may be interpreted as reflecting a more structurally plausible level of engagement, as it captures sustained public attention without the same exceptional stimulus associated with the initial introduction of paid promotion. The September results, therefore, suggest that

deliberative public programming and socially relevant thematic content can help maintain elevated engagement beyond short-term promotional interventions.

Table 9. Engagement performance in September 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (September)	Facebook (September)
Likes	912	746
Comments	97	135
Followers	1,815	5,029
ER calculation	$((912 + 97) / 1,815) \times 100$	$((746 + 135) / 5,029) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	55.6%	17.5%

October 2022: Post-Peak Normalisation with Continued Above-Average Performance.

In October, engagement declined from the late-summer peak but remained elevated relative to the first half of the year, reaching 40.6% on Instagram and 12.1% on Facebook. As shown in Table 10, this pattern is consistent with a process of post-peak normalization following the intensive activity and heightened public attention observed in August and September. Event-related content, including a gourmet-oriented program involving influencers and local audiences, appears to have helped sustain engagement, albeit at a lower intensity than during the immediate post-intervention period. The October results thus suggest that although peak engagement levels may be difficult to maintain over time, strategically designed event-based communication can contribute to continued above-average audience interaction beyond the initial phase of heightened visibility.

Table 10. Engagement performance in October 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (October)	Facebook (October)
Likes	763	592
Comments	9	35
Followers	1,901	5,189
ER calculation	$((763 + 9) / 1,901) \times 100$	$((592 + 35) / 5,189) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	40.6%	12.1%

November 2022: Reduced Posting Frequency and Declining Interaction Intensity.

In November, engagement declined further, reaching 32.2% on Instagram and 9.1% on Facebook. As shown in Table 11, this decrease coincided with a reduction in posting frequency relative to the near-daily publication rhythm observed in August and September. The November pattern illustrates the sensitivity of engagement to publication cadence in ranking environments driven by interaction and recency: lower content output reduces opportunities for audience response and may weaken distribution momentum, particularly on platforms where visibility is shaped by recent activity and prior interaction history. These findings suggest that publication regularity constitutes an important structural condition for sustaining engagement in algorithmically mediated communication environments.

Table 11. Engagement performance in November 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (November)	Facebook (November)
Likes	640	444
Comments	24	45
Followers	2,060	5,376
ER calculation	$((640 + 24) / 2,060) \times 100$	$((444 + 45) / 5,376) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	32.2%	9.1%

December 2022: Seasonal Decline Moderated by Community-Oriented Initiatives.

In December, engagement continued to decline, with Instagram reaching an ER of 21.8% and Facebook 5.1%. As shown in Table 12, two community-oriented initiatives, the Christmas mini-market and the charity programme *Tree of Fulfilled Wishes*, appear to have partially mitigated this downturn by providing participatory and value-based content. Nevertheless, overall interaction intensity remained lower, consistent with reduced communication activity and seasonal shifts in user behavior. Although Instagram maintained a comparatively strong level of engagement by end-of-year standards, Facebook returned to a low-engagement range, thereby reinforcing the platform asymmetry observed across the full reporting period.

Table 12. Engagement performance in December 2022 (Own processing; official Instagram and Facebook accounts of the SME project).

Indicator	Instagram (December)	Facebook (December)
Likes	446	248
Comments	3	27
Followers	2,063	5,381
ER calculation	$((446 + 3) / 2,063) \times 100$	$((248 + 27) / 5,381) \times 100$
Engagement rate (ER)	21.8%	5.1%

The social media data for January–December 2022 indicate that both engagement and audience growth were strongly influenced by fluctuations in publishing intensity and interaction volume. Throughout the reporting period, Instagram consistently generated higher engagement rates than Facebook and, even during the end-of-year slowdown, maintained a comparatively stronger level of audience interaction, whereas Facebook declined into a low-engagement range.

The highest engagement levels were recorded in late summer and early autumn, when posting activity increased substantially and was accompanied by marked growth in likes and comments. This period also coincided with accelerated follower growth, suggesting that intensified communication activity contributed not only to greater visibility but also to audience expansion. By contrast, the first half of the year was characterized by more limited

activity, lower interaction volumes, and correspondingly weaker and more volatile engagement. The year concluded with a clear reduction in communication intensity and user interaction in December, which was associated with declining engagement on both platforms. This downturn, however, was more pronounced on Facebook, while Instagram remained comparatively resilient.

4.1. Summary of Findings

This study provides a month-by-month analysis of social media engagement on Instagram and Facebook for a Czech small and medium-sized enterprise during 2022, examining how content choices, organizational capacity, exogenous events, and platform-specific dynamics shaped audience interaction over time. Overall, the findings demonstrate that engagement is not a stable attribute of organizational communication; rather, it varies systematically in response to strategic inputs and to the broader socio-technical and socio-political environments within which digital platforms operate.

Across the reporting period, Instagram consistently outperformed Facebook in terms of engagement. The average engagement rate (ER) reached 22.6% on Instagram, compared with 9.3% on Facebook. This pattern is consistent with established research on platform affordances, which suggests that visually oriented, mobile-first environments tend to facilitate more immediate and interaction-intensive forms of user behavior than platforms where content competes more directly with heterogeneous information flows (Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

The most pronounced engagement peaks occurred in August and September, coinciding with intensified communication activity and the implementation of targeted promotional measures. In particular, August was associated with exceptionally high ER values, 72.7% on Instagram and 43.6% on Facebook, indicating that even modest investments in paid distribution, combined with increased content output and strategic targeting, may generate substantial gains in visibility and user interaction.

By contrast, the lowest engagement levels were recorded in March and April, a period that overlapped with the early phase of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This downturn suggests that macro-level socio-political shocks can suppress engagement by redirecting public attention and reducing the salience of commercial or promotional communication. Beyond this event-specific disruption, the data also reveal a seasonal decline in November and December, likely associated with reduced posting frequency and cumulative audience fatigue within a highly saturated end-of-year communication environment.

Event-led communication strategies proved particularly effective throughout the year. Engagement increased following initiatives that combined offline participation with online visibility, including community-oriented activities, public events, and culturally embedded programmes. These findings support the conclusion that offline-online integration can strengthen engagement by providing concrete narratives, participatory cues, and locally meaningful touchpoints that translate into platform interaction.

Posting frequency also emerged as a significant correlate of engagement performance. Periods characterized by sustained daily or near-daily publishing, most notably from August to October, were associated with higher engagement levels and increased visibility. Conversely, reduced output in the final quarter corresponded to a marked decline in interaction, reinforcing the importance of publication consistency for maintaining algorithmic relevance and audience attention in engagement-driven platform environments.

Finally, content format appears to have played an important role. Interactive, participatory, and visually rich posts generally outperformed static or purely informational updates. Formats linked to real-time participation, local relevance, and community interaction were especially effective, indicating that engagement is strengthened when communication reduces symbolic distance, invites contribution, and visibly signals stakeholder orientation.

5. Discussion

The results carry implications that extend beyond the Czech case and speak to SMEs across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that seek to professionalize social media engagement under conditions of constrained resources and rapidly evolving platform environments. Consistent with prior research, social media functions as a key infrastructure for visibility, interaction, and relationship-building, enabling SMEs to maintain ongoing stakeholder contact and to cultivate reputational resources over time (Hollebeek, 2011; Kumar & Pansari, 2016). At the same time, the findings point to a set of contextual patterns that appear characteristic of CEE markets, including a stronger reliance on organic communication and comparatively limited use of paid promotion and influencer partnerships relative to practices commonly observed in more mature Western European digital marketing ecosystems (Freberg et al., 2011; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). This divergence matters for both performance and legitimacy because it shapes the visibility conditions under which SMEs can signal credibility and sustain reciprocal exchange.

A first implication concerns the underutilization of platform-specific affordances. Although a substantial share of content was cross-posted between Instagram and Facebook, engagement outcomes systematically favored Instagram, indicating that identical content does not perform equivalently across platforms. This supports the view that engagement is co-produced by platform norms, audience expectations, and algorithmic ranking logics, which reward different formats, interaction patterns, and temporal rhythms (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). SMEs can therefore improve outcomes by coordinating campaigns across platforms while tailoring tone, format, and posting schedules to platform-specific behavioral conventions and audience segmentation.

Second, the findings underscore that *consistency is not merely a tactical choice but an algorithmic and relational requirement*. Posting frequency was strongly associated with engagement levels, and sustained publication routines were linked to higher visibility, whereas interruptions, often related to holidays or capacity shortfalls, coincided with pronounced declines. This observation reinforces the argument that consistent communication serves a dual function: it stabilizes audience expectations (a trust-relevant signal) and sustains algorithmic relevance in environments where distribution is conditioned by recent interaction histories (Gallup, 2016). For SMEs, this implies that routinized scheduling and lightweight content planning may yield disproportionate returns relative to sporadic, campaign-only communication.

Third, community dialogue emerged as a central engagement driver. Rather than treating social media as a one-way channel, SMEs benefit when they facilitate participation and reduce barriers to interaction through active

community management. Early-stage participation by internal stakeholders (e.g., staff, partners, advocates) can catalyze initial comment dynamics and normalize engagement, thereby signaling openness and strengthening reciprocal exchange processes (Reichheld & Scheffer, 2000). In relational terms, timely responses and constructive interaction communicate attentiveness and fairness, which are core preconditions of trust formation in social exchange theory.

Fourth, the findings highlight the role of collaboration and public-facing initiatives as engagement multipliers. Offline events and community-oriented activities (e.g., exhibitions, guided tours, local competitions) appear to translate into online participation and user-generated content, which can enhance authenticity and extend reach through peer-to-peer diffusion (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). From a European studies perspective, this linkage is significant: it suggests that platform engagement is embedded in local socio-institutional ecosystems and that legitimacy in digital environments is often reinforced by visible community embeddedness and participatory practices.

Fifth, the findings highlight measurement and attribution as strategic capabilities. Platform metrics alone provide limited insight into downstream organizational outcomes, whereas web analytics can capture spillover effects on website traffic, information seeking, and lead generation, thereby strengthening evidence-based decision-making. Complementary visibility strategies, such as coverage through regional media outlets, may further enhance reputational legitimacy, especially where SMEs seek broader stakeholder recognition beyond platform audiences (Barker, Barker, Bormann, & Neher, 2017).

Sixth, the results suggest that human capital and role formalization shape engagement performance. The observed association between the presence of a dedicated social media role and improved engagement supports the argument that professionalized digital communication is increasingly necessary for responsive and analytics-informed stakeholder interaction (Kotler & Keller, 2013). In resource-constrained SMEs, this does not necessarily require large communication teams; rather, it requires clearly defined responsibilities, regular content-planning routines, and basic analytical capacity that enable timely adaptation to audience feedback and platform dynamics.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Enhancing Engagement Strategies for Small and Medium-Sized Companies: A Czech Republic Perspective

In the contemporary digital environment, social media engagement has become an important strategic resource for public visibility, stakeholder dialogue, and reputational development. For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Czech Republic, social media platforms function not merely as channels of information dissemination but as interactive spaces in which organizations communicate expertise, respond to stakeholder expectations, and cultivate legitimacy (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Within this context, engagement rate (ER) serves as a useful indicator of communicative effectiveness because it captures the intensity of observable audience responses relative to audience size or content exposure. Understanding how ER is shaped and what it signifies in relational terms is, therefore, essential for the development of effective and strategically coherent communication.

The empirical findings of this study indicate that engagement should not be understood simply as a numerical outcome of content distribution. Rather, it reflects a broader relational process shaped by organizational responsiveness, communication consistency, audience relevance, and the affordances of the platforms through which interaction occurs. In this respect, social media engagement emerges as an important mechanism through which SMEs can strengthen trust, increase visibility, and support the formation of perceived organizational legitimacy.

6.2. The Role of Social Media in SME Communication

Social media platforms enable SMEs to interact directly with stakeholders, receive immediate feedback, and maintain continuous forms of relational communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This communicative immediacy supports transparency, responsiveness, and community inclusion, all of which are increasingly expected within digitally mediated markets. At the same time, effective social media communication requires more than routine publication of content. Sustained engagement depends on a deliberate and coherent strategy that combines regular activity, audience-oriented storytelling, and the use of interactive formats capable of encouraging participation.

The findings suggest that engagement is particularly likely to increase where social media is treated not as a one-directional promotional tool but as a structured environment for reciprocal exchange. Interactive and visually rich formats, communication linked to locally meaningful events, and content that invites participation appear to generate stronger audience responses than static or purely informational posts. This indicates that the communicative value of social media lies not only in its capacity to reach audiences but also in its potential to reduce the distance between organizations and stakeholders, thereby reinforcing trust and social proximity.

6.3. Strategic Recommendations for Enhancing Engagement

Drawing on empirical findings and relevant literature, several interrelated strategic implications can be identified for strengthening social media engagement among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Czech Republic. These implications highlight the need for an integrated communication approach where technological capability, relational responsiveness, and content relevance function as mutually reinforcing dimensions of digital stakeholder engagement.

A first strategic implication concerns the personalization of content. The findings suggest that engagement is more likely to increase when communication is aligned with the interests, expectations, and situational preferences of differentiated audience segments. This observation is consistent with prior research showing that personalized content can improve both engagement and message retention (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). For SMEs, this implies the importance of using analytics platforms and AI-assisted tools not merely for performance monitoring, but also for developing more precisely targeted communication that reflects demographic, behavioral, and psychographic variation among stakeholder groups.

A second implication relates to the cultivation of dialogic interaction. Social media engagement appears to be more sustainable when communication is structured as an exchange rather than as one-directional dissemination. Timely responses to user comments, the initiation of conversations, and the visible participation of employees or

brand representatives in comment threads can contribute to a more inclusive and interactive communication environment (Freberg, 2022). Such practices are significant not only because they may improve engagement indicators but also because they reinforce perceptions of responsiveness, attentiveness, and relational commitment.

The findings also underscore the strategic value of interactive content formats. Polls, quizzes, contests, and live question-and-answer sessions appear to encourage active participation and extend the temporal reach of communication outputs (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Their significance lies in the fact that they reduce the distance between organization and audience, while simultaneously aligning with platform logics that reward interaction and user activity. In this sense, interactive content serves both communicative and algorithmic functions, supporting visibility as well as stakeholder involvement.

A further implication concerns communication consistency. The analysis indicates that sustained engagement is closely associated with regular publishing routines, whereas interrupted or irregular posting patterns tend to coincide with declining interaction. This corresponds with research suggesting that reduced posting frequency is linked to weaker engagement performance (Gallup, 2016). For SMEs, consistency should therefore be understood not simply as a matter of tactical discipline but as a condition of both algorithmic relevance and relational continuity. A stable publication cadence helps maintain visibility while also signaling reliability and communicative commitment to stakeholders.

At the same time, the results suggest that organic communication strategies may be complemented effectively by selective paid promotion and influencer collaboration. In contrast to many Western European contexts, Czech SMEs have traditionally relied more heavily on community-based and organic forms of visibility. However, the evidence indicates that carefully targeted advertising and collaboration with micro-influencers may broaden reach, diversify audience exposure, and enhance the circulation of content across stakeholder networks (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). Such practices may be especially useful when organizations seek to overcome the structural limits of organic reach in increasingly competitive platform environments.

Another important implication concerns the role of data-informed communication management. The systematic use of web analytics and native social media dashboards allows organizations to monitor behavioral patterns, evaluate content performance, and identify shifts in audience preferences (Aaker, 1991). From a strategic perspective, this analytical capacity enables SMEs to move from intuitive or ad hoc communication towards a more adaptive and evidence-based model of engagement management. In rapidly changing platform environments, such responsiveness is likely to become an increasingly important component of communicative effectiveness.

The findings further indicate that cross-sectoral partnerships may function as important engagement multipliers. Collaboration with media organizations, non-profit actors, and locally embedded influencers can enhance visibility and credibility, particularly where communication is connected to community-oriented events or shared public initiatives (Clark, Azab, & Key, 2024). These partnerships are valuable not only for expanding audience reach but also for embedding organizational communication within broader local and institutional networks, thereby strengthening legitimacy and public resonance.

Finally, the analysis suggests that engagement is more likely to be sustained where organizations communicate in ways that reflect broader social value. SMEs that position themselves as credible, socially aware, and knowledge-oriented actors may foster deeper and more durable forms of stakeholder attachment. Through expert commentary, transparent communication of values, and participation in issues of wider public relevance, organizations can strengthen emotional and normative ties with their audiences (Keller, 2013). In this respect, engagement should be understood not merely as a function of visibility but as part of a broader process of reputational formation and trust-building in digitally mediated environments.

6.4. Czech-Specific Considerations for Engagement

Social media engagement in the Czech Republic is shaped by a range of contextual factors, including organizational size, sectoral characteristics, resource availability, and the broader institutional environment in which SMEs operate. These conditions influence not only the scale of digital communication activities but also the strategic choices organizations make regarding platform use, content design, and stakeholder interaction. As a result, engagement practices in the Czech setting should be understood as context-dependent rather than universally transferable across national or market environments.

One important factor is organizational capacity. Larger firms typically possess more extensive marketing resources, more specialized personnel, and greater access to analytical tools, which may translate into stronger and more stable engagement performance (Michopoulou & Moisa, 2019). By contrast, SMEs often operate under conditions of limited staffing and constrained budgets, which can restrict content production, reduce responsiveness, and hinder the systematic evaluation of communication outcomes. In such circumstances, the effectiveness of social media engagement depends less on scale than on the strategic allocation of limited resources and the ability to prioritise practices that generate the greatest relational value.

The sectoral context also plays a significant role. Platform effectiveness varies according to the nature of the organization's activities, target audiences, and communication objectives. While business-to-business organizations may achieve stronger results on professionally oriented platforms such as LinkedIn, visually oriented and consumer-facing sectors are more likely to benefit from Instagram and Facebook, where narrative immediacy, image-based communication, and informal interaction support higher levels of audience engagement (Grewal, Gupta, & Hamilton, 2020). This suggests that successful engagement strategies require not only consistency and creativity but also careful alignment between platform affordances and sector-specific communication needs.

A further Czech-specific consideration lies in the continued prominence of organic and community-based communication. In contrast to many Western European markets, where paid promotion, influencer marketing, and highly professionalized content ecosystems have become standard, Czech SMEs have historically relied more heavily on relational proximity, local embeddedness, and community-oriented forms of visibility (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). This does not imply strategic weakness; rather, it reflects a communication culture in which trust, familiarity, and local relevance remain particularly important. At the same time, the growing competitiveness of digital platforms may require Czech SMEs to combine these traditional strengths with more targeted and data-informed promotional strategies.

Regulatory and reputational considerations are likewise relevant, particularly in sectors such as real estate, urban development, or public-facing services, where communication may be subject to heightened scrutiny and where stakeholder trust is closely tied to perceptions of accuracy, professionalism, and public responsibility. In such contexts, engagement cannot be pursued solely through visibility-maximizing tactics. Instead, organizations must balance communicative attractiveness with factual precision, transparency, and sensitivity to public expectations. The quality of engagement, therefore, becomes as important as its quantity.

Taken together, these Czech-specific conditions suggest that social media engagement should be approached as a strategically adaptive practice shaped by both local circumstances and broader platform dynamics. SMEs that can combine community-based authenticity with analytical responsiveness, platform-specific communication, and reputational awareness are more likely to achieve sustained engagement and long-term digital relevance. In this sense, effective engagement in the Czech environment depends not on the simple replication of international trends but on their thoughtful adaptation to domestic institutional and communicative realities.

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