





Strategic competencies in social media management: exploring the role of entrepreneurial vision, personification and intuition

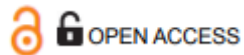
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Abstract



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Objective of the study: To relate the manifestation of entrepreneurial competences to the strategic use of social media by small businesses.

Methodology / Approach: Mainly qualitative and deductive approach, using in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs and analysis of public documents as sources of evidence.

Originality / Relevance: The study contributes to the understanding of the entrepreneur's role in developing creative and unconventional strategies that allow them to leverage their businesses.

Main Results: This article showed that (i) strategic vision for social media, (ii) personification and (iii) media intuition are among the main entrepreneurial competencies capable of turning social media usage more strategic for business.

Theoretical and practical contributions: This study mainly contributes to theories and practices on entrepreneurial competencies and social media management. Faced with a series of entrepreneurial competencies that can be achieved by managers, whether in digital media or outside of them, it is essential to know which of those hold the greatest strategic potential for business. They are, therefore, a factor that generates greater organizational efficiency and, consequently, competitiveness.

Keywords: business strategy, entrepreneurial competencies, social media, small businesses

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Resumo

Competências estratégicas na gestão de mídias sociais: explorando o papel da visão, personificação e intuição empreendedoras

Objetivo do estudo: Relacionar a manifestação de competências empreendedoras ao uso estratégico de mídias sociais por pequenos negócios.

Metodologia / Abordagem: Abordagem predominantemente qualitativa e dedutiva, tendo como fontes de evidência entrevistas em profundidade com empreendedores e análise de documentos públicos.

Originalidade / Relevância: O estudo contribui para o entendimento do papel do empreendedor na elaboração de estratégias criativas e não convencionais que permitem alavancar seus negócios.

Principais Resultados: Este artigo evidenciou que (i) visão estratégica das mídias sociais, (ii) comunicação personificada e (iii) intuição midiática estão entre as principais competências empreendedoras capazes de tornar o uso das mídias sociais mais estratégico para os negócios.

Contribuições teóricas e práticas: Este estudo contribui, principalmente, para teorias e práticas sobre competências empreendedoras e gestão de mídias sociais. Diante de uma série de competências empreendedoras possíveis de serem alcançadas por gestores, seja em meios digitais ou fora deles, é fundamental conhecermos aquelas que têm maior potencial estratégico para os negócios. Trata-se, portanto, de um fator gerador de maior eficiência organizacional e, conseqüentemente, de competitividade.

Palavras-chave: estratégia empresarial, competências empreendedoras, mídias sociais, pequenos negócios

Resumén

Competencias estratégicas en la gestión de medios sociales: explorando el papel de la visión, personificación e intuición emprendedoras

Objetivo del estudio: Relacionar la manifestación de competencias emprendedoras con el uso estratégico de los medios sociales por parte de las pequeñas empresas.

Metodología / Enfoque: Enfoque predominantemente cualitativo y deductivo, utilizando como fuentes de evidencia entrevistas en profundidad a empresarios y análisis de documentos públicos.

Originalidad / Relevancia: El estudio contribuye a la comprensión del papel del emprendedor en el desarrollo de estrategias creativas y no convencionales que le permitan desarrollar sus negocios.

Principales resultados: Este artículo mostró que (i) la visión estratégica de las redes sociales, (ii) la comunicación personificada y (iii) la intuición mediática se encuentran entre las principales competencias emprendedoras capaces de hacer que el uso de las redes sociales sea más estratégico para los negocios.

Aportes teóricos / gerenciales: Este estudio contribuye principalmente a teorías y prácticas sobre competencias emprendedoras y gestión de redes sociales. Ante una serie de competencias emprendedoras que pueden alcanzar los directivos, ya sea en los medios digitales o fuera de ellos, es fundamental conocer aquellas que tienen mayor potencial estratégico para el negocio. Es, por tanto, un factor que genera mayor eficiencia organizacional y, en consecuencia, competitividad.

Palabras clave: estrategia empresarial, competencias emprendedoras, redes sociales, pequeñas empresas

1 Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as the engine of capitalism (Schumpeter, 1934; Foss et al., 2008; Henrekson et al., 2024), with the entrepreneur serving as the central force in the market system (Mises, 1949). In Brazil, 99% of entrepreneurs lead Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs), which contributed approximately 30% of the GDP and 54% of formal employment in 2021 (SEBRAE, 2023a). The dream of owning one's own business is common among Brazilians, as evidenced by the increase in the Total Entrepreneurship Rate from 20.9% in 2002 to 39.0% in 2021 (GEM, 2019; SEBRAE, 2023a). However, less than 36% of MSEs survive after five years of operation (IBGE, 2020), partly due to the lack of essential competencies among small business owners. In MSEs, the concentration of strategic decisions in the hands of owners requires entrepreneurs to develop specific competencies to maintain competitiveness (Chandler & Jansen, 1992; Van Gelderen, 2023).

The rise of social media platforms like Instagram, with its 122.5 million active profiles in Brazil (STATISTA, 2023), presents a unique opportunity for small businesses, as 40% of Brazilian users are willing to purchase products endorsed by posts on this platform (STATISTA, 2022). Although they recognize the potential of social media as a marketing tool (Montenegro, 2024), many small business owners face challenges in using them strategically, notably the lack of time and resources and the absence of technological skills (Alim et al., 2023; Rugova & Prenaj, 2016; Yang & Kankahalli, 2014). Additionally, pressures from customers and competitors (Danhil et al., 2014; Marchand et al., 2021) and trust issues (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021; Jayasingh, 2019) further hinder their usage. As a result, MSEs often underuse social media, treating them merely as advertising tools (Nakara et al., 2012; Susanto et al., 2023) and ignoring their potential for engagement and relationship building with consumers (Nordin et al., 2023).

The deployment of specific entrepreneurial competencies significantly amplifies the strategic utilization of social media by small businesses, particularly within the context of an increasingly competitive digital landscape (Teece, 2018; Nguyen, 2023). Entrepreneurs possessing competencies in innovation, adaptability, and communication (Nguyen, 2023) are well-positioned to generate relevant content, enhance brand visibility, and leverage data-driven insights to strengthen their businesses' competitive advantage (Herzallah et al., 2022; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021). Moreover, by acting as digital influencers, entrepreneurs can reinforce authenticity and public trust, personalize communication, and promote greater engagement (Brown & Fiorella, 2023). Showcasing the entrepreneur's persona within the content shared on



a business's social media platforms has the potential to foster a strong emotional connection between the brand and its audience, potentially leading to increased consumer loyalty and improved sales performance for the firms they manage (Li et al., 2023).

Research on strategic management in micro and small enterprises (MSEs) continues to yield inconclusive findings regarding the entrepreneur's influence on business success, particularly in leveraging social media as a resource to create competitive advantages (Sharma et al., 2020; Nordin et al., 2023). The existing literature highlights notable gaps in integrating entrepreneurial competencies into the operational practices of these businesses (Li et al., 2023) and in understanding how such competencies can be developed to optimize the strategic use of social media (Audretsch, 2022; Nguyen, 2023). Furthermore, there is a pressing need to examine the human behavioral elements that underpin the creation of competitive advantages (Barney et al., 2021), especially given that decision-making in MSEs is profoundly shaped by the personal experiences and characteristics of their managers (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020).

Given the imperative to revisit theories on the strategic use of social media by small businesses, this article aims to deepen the understanding of the entrepreneur's pivotal role in managing these platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2022). Considering the significant contribution of MSEs to the Brazilian economy (SEBRAE, 2023a) and the increasing relevance of social media—particularly Instagram—as a space for interpersonal influence and the creation of new business opportunities (Kozinets et al., 2017; Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Susanto et al., 2023), the following question emerges: How can the demonstration of entrepreneurial competencies enhance the strategic use of social media by small businesses?

To address this question, the study employed a qualitative and deductive approach, drawing on in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs from the bakery sector and an analysis of their Instagram profiles as key sources of evidence. The discussion of the findings revisits the role of entrepreneurial competencies as critical micro-foundations in the strategic formulation of MSEs (Man & Lau, 2000; Pennetta et al., 2023), particularly in the digital environment, where adaptability and innovation serve as decisive competitive differentiators (Wu et al., 2023). Based on this analysis, the study provides practical insights to assist managers in leveraging social media more effectively to enhance their businesses' performance (Audretsch, 2022; Dwivedi & Pawsey, 2023; SEBRAE, 2023b; Xu & Li, 2022).

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Entrepreneurial Competencies

Entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in driving innovation, which transforms economic and social structures (Block et al., 2017). Their proactive stance in uncertain environments (McGrath et al., 1992; Van Ness et al., 2020) and their ability to convert creative ideas—often linked to resources commonly perceived as homogeneous—into heterogeneous outcomes position their firms as superior choices in the marketplace (Alvarez & Buzenitz, 2001; Barney et al., 2021). Consequently, the study of entrepreneurship focuses on exploring personal traits and individual behaviors associated with identifying, seizing, and creating opportunities (Zampier & Takakashi, 2011; Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Alim et al., 2023).

The literature in the fields of Economics, Management, and more recently, Psychology, is abundant with discussions about the characteristics and behaviors that distinguish entrepreneurs from other individuals (Buzenitz & Barney, 1997; Yi & Duval-Couetil, 2018; Van Gelderen, 2023). The very nature of entrepreneurial activity exposes individuals to novel, unpredictable, and complex situations that tend to generate excessive information, requiring a high level of critical and constructive thinking (Baron, 2000). These cognitive demands are directly reflected in the entrepreneur's ability to perform their roles successfully (Man & Chan, 2002; Alves & Yang, 2022).

The proper manifestation of entrepreneurial competencies can lead to superior business performance (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020). In competitive environments, entrepreneurs are expected to possess specific competencies—whether innate or acquired (Van Gelderen, 2023)—that enable them to drive their businesses toward value creation (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Aidara et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs with stronger competencies are better equipped to identify market opportunities, adapt to environmental changes, and formulate strategies that align more effectively with their business goals (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010; Pennetta et al., 2023). Given the entrepreneur's central role in business management, especially in smaller firms (Baum, 1994; Bird & Schjoedt, 2017; Tittel & Terzidis, 2020), the study of entrepreneurial competencies and their potential to influence competitive performance becomes increasingly relevant (Man et al., 2008; Pulka & Mohamad, 2021).

A wide range of competencies can be associated with the entrepreneurial role. A competency can be understood as a high-level characteristic influenced by the entrepreneur's experiences, education, training, and familial, social, and demographic circumstances (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Bird & Schjoedt, 2017; Man et al., 2002; Pennetta et al., 2023). Since

the 1990s (Chandler & Jansen, 1992), numerous studies have sought to identify and categorize entrepreneurial competencies with the aim of proposing analytical models to understand their influence on business success (Reis et al., 2021; Tittel & Terzidis, 2020). In this research, the categorization proposed by Man and Lau (2000) guided the literature review and identification of entrepreneurial competencies. As a result, entrepreneurial competencies were classified into four broad categories, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Categorization of Entrepreneurial Competencies

Categories	Entrepreneurial Competencies (Examples)
Strategic Mindset: Competencies related to identifying, evaluating, and seeking market opportunities, as well as establishing, assessing, and implementing the firm’s strategies.	Identifying and/or creating business opportunities; assessing unmet market gaps and trends; creative thinking aimed at generating and/or implementing new ideas. Ability to establish a long-term vision for the business; strategically evaluate and allocate firm resources and capabilities; promote strategic change to mitigate threats or capitalize on opportunities; analyze the competitive environment; think intuitively; be observant; handle complex information; make quick and intuitive decisions; take initiative; possess an innovative vision.
Relationship: Competencies linked to individual interactions between people or between individuals and groups.	Building and maintaining relationships with existing or potential customers, suppliers, and employees; leveraging these networks to strengthen business opportunities; using established trust-based relationships to promote products or services; engaging with media; communicating spontaneously and intuitively with consumers.
Organizational: Competencies related to coordinating different human, physical, financial, and technological resources, whether internal or external.	Planning operations and resource allocation; leading and motivating employees; developing organizational culture; implementing and evaluating goals; delegating responsibilities to capable employees within an effective system of processes; promoting organizational control, routines, and processes.
Commitment: Competencies that drive entrepreneurs to persist in their business endeavors.	Committing to the business’s long-term goals over short-term gains; overcoming personal limitations and/or restarting after failures; dedicating time and hard work to the business; adhering to values and beliefs associated with hard work.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Aidara et al., 2021; Baum, 1994; Chandler & Jansen, 1992; Foss et al., 2008; Pulka & Mohamad, 2021; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Man et al., 2008; Man & Lau, 2000; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010; Pennetta et al., 2023; Reis et al., 2021; Tittel & Terzidis, 2020; Van Gelderen, 2023.

Despite decades of research aimed at studying and categorizing entrepreneurial competencies, there is still no clear consensus on which specific competencies can be directly linked to business success (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010; Reis et al., 2021; Tittel & Terzidis, 2020). Notably, studies investigating the impact of entrepreneurial competencies on the



competitive advantages derived from the strategic use of social media by micro and small enterprises (MSEs) remain limited (Munir et al., 2019; Susanto et al., 2023). Existing research has largely focused on understanding entrepreneurs' motivations for adopting social media, while paying insufficient attention to the role of senior management's direct involvement in shaping published content or identifying the critical competencies required for entrepreneurs to fully exploit social media as a strategic tool (Secundo et al., 2021; Pennetta et al., 2023). This gap underscores the need for a deeper examination of how entrepreneurial competencies can influence the effective and competitive use of social media in small business contexts.

2.2 Social Media Management and Entrepreneurial Competencies

The emergence and rapid expansion of social media in recent decades have led to profound changes in how businesses and consumers interact (Kotler et al., 2017; Marchand et al., 2021). Social media platforms have transformed consumers into active participants in content creation, fostering collaborative creation and the sharing of personal consumption experiences (Wang & Kim, 2017; Riley, 2020). This has introduced a new paradigm in the flow of information, as social media has exponentially enhanced communication between consumers (Kozinets et al., 2017; Dwivedi & Pawsey, 2023).

As consumers become increasingly connected, brand credibility and trust have taken on heightened significance in influencing purchasing decisions. The perception, experience, and decision-making process for purchasing a product or service now align with a multidimensional communication pattern, where consumers increasingly seek information from their peers rather than relying on traditional advertising (Kozinets et al., 2010; Shareef et al., 2019; Marchand et al., 2021).

The concept of social media management encompasses a range of activities and decisions that can be understood through their impact on the commercial, communicative, and relational dimensions of business. The commercial dimension pertains to the presence of a business on social media platforms, aimed at expanding the customer base, conducting promotional activities, and executing advertising campaigns (Dwivedi & Pawsey, 2023; Fang et al., 2022). The communicative dimension involves creating a deeper connection with the audience, moving beyond basic media exposure of products and promotions to deliver high-quality content that differentiates the brand from competitors and actively engages consumers (Rietveld et al., 2020; Secundo et al., 2021). Finally, the relational dimension positions social media as a platform for building relationships and establishing credibility, leveraging key

elements such as reputation and trust to strengthen connections with stakeholders (Augustian, 2023; Nordin et al., 2023). The key activities and decisions related to social media management in business, as identified in the literature, can be categorized based on these three dimensions, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Social Media Management Dimensions in Business

Dimensions	Activities / Decisions (Examples)	References
Commer-cial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating social media into the overarching strategy for advertising and market positioning; • Designing and implementing targeted promotional campaigns; • Analyzing and selecting the most effective advertising formats and strategies; • Strategically positioning ads on platforms, considering cost-effectiveness; • Identifying and capitalizing on business opportunities facilitated by social media; • Optimizing the effectiveness of advertising campaigns; • Aligning products and services with customer demands using data and insights derived from social media; • Measuring and analyzing the effectiveness of advertising efforts. 	Cuevas-Molano et al., 2021; Dwivedi & Pawsey, 2023; Fang et al., 2022; Lou et al., 2019; Marchand et al. 2021; Munir et al., 2019; Nakara et al., 2012; Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Rugova & Prenaj, 2016; Wardarti & Mahendrawathi, 2019; Yang & Kankanhalli, 2014.
Communi-cative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing and maintaining the brand's reputation on social media; • Using visual elements to enhance the brand's social media presence; • Developing and sharing engaging content; • Establishing and maintaining a consistent brand voice; • Monitoring social media platforms to track audience engagement; • Identifying emerging trends in content creation to drive consumer interest; • Continuously monitoring brand reputation and consumer perceptions. 	Cuevas-Molano et al., 2021; Kotler et al., 2017; Kozlenkova et al., 2014; Kozinets et. al., 2017; Li & Xie, 2020; Nakara et al., 2012; Park & Namkung, 2022; Rietveld et al., 2020; Rugova & Prenaj, 2016; Secundo et al., 2021.
Relational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging with consumers through conversations and interactions on social media; • Enhancing customer loyalty through digital influence initiatives; • Encouraging consumer participation in content creation and discussions; • Creating and implementing strategies to build and sustain customer relationships via social media; • Leveraging the entrepreneur's persona to strengthen the connection between consumers and the business; • Engaging in active social media listening to gather insights and strengthen customer relationships. 	Abu-Rumman et al., 2021; Augustian, 2023; Crittenden et. al., 2024; Jayasingh, 2019; Riley, 2020; Li et al., 2018; Li & Xie, 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Mc Cracken, 1989; Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Rietveld et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Solomon, 2016; Wang & Kim, 2017; Nordin et. al., 2023.

Source: Prepared by the authors.



The trends introduced by the rise and rapid popularization of social media (STATISTA, 2022) serve as catalysts for the strategic engagement of entrepreneurs in optimizing every dimension of social media management for their businesses. Through data-driven strategies, interactivity, live streaming, content creation, and influencer marketing, entrepreneurs can enhance their market presence (Olanrewaju et al., 2020; Montenegro, 2024). By leveraging analytics provided by social media platforms, entrepreneurs can implement targeted strategies to maximize the commercial dimension, effectively converting content into tangible sales (Sharma et al., 2020; Saura et al., 2023). Real-time interactions and live streams on platforms like Instagram amplify the relational dimension, fostering greater consumer engagement and loyalty (Park & Namkung, 2022; Riley, 2020). Content marketing and storytelling that incorporate the entrepreneur's persona can differentiate brands in competitive markets, strengthening the communicative dimension (Silva et al., 2020; Agustian et al., 2023).

Social media, by nature, is a relationship-building space (Liu et al., 2018; Nordin et al., 2023). Entrepreneurs often engage personally in promoting their businesses, leveraging their personal stories and credibility to endorse and market their products or services within their networks (Martens et al., 2007; Rietveld et al., 2020). Capitalizing on this proximity to consumers can enhance the strategic use of social media by small businesses, as emotions, relationships, reputation, and trust are difficult to replicate (Li & Xie, 2020; Nordin et al., 2023).

However, leveraging social media strategically poses a complex and multifaceted challenge for small businesses. SMEs face barriers to adoption and usage, including a lack of strategic guidance (Nakara et al., 2012; Brooks et al., 2023), perceptions of low returns (Secundo et al., 2021), reputational risks (Rietveld et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2023), resource limitations (Nakara et al., 2021; Meier & Peters, 2023), and challenges in managing data (Saura et al., 2023). Entrepreneurs' direct involvement in social media strategies often reveals gaps in knowledge (Alhakimi & Albashiri, 2023), privacy concerns (Nugroho & Angela, 2024), and a lack of skills in producing engaging content (Meier & Peters, 2023). Nevertheless, recent contributions suggest that even without formally planned strategies, SMEs can successfully leverage social media by overcoming the inherent resource constraints associated with small businesses (Qalati et al., 2021; Secundo et al., 2021; Agustian, 2023; Dwivedi & Pawsey, 2023; Montenegro, 2024).

Dominant theoretical frameworks, often developed with a focus on large corporations, fail to capture the unique opportunities and challenges faced by small businesses in managing social media (Olanrewaju et al., 2020; Nordin et al., 2023). Many studies treat these platforms merely as tools for promotion or communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021; Felix et al., 2022),



overlooking their relational potential (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Tafesse, 2022). Furthermore, these frameworks inadequately address the resource constraints that hinder SMEs' effective use of social media (Leonidou et al., 2021; Olanrewaju & Hossain, 2022). Small businesses require novel conceptual models that emphasize the entrepreneur's central role in crafting creative and unconventional strategies to maximize the use of limited resources (Munir et al., 2019; Alim et al., 2023).

When well-executed, social media management enables entrepreneurs to identify, evaluate, and exploit strategic opportunities that translate into measurable outcomes, such as increased sales (Yang & Kankanhalli, 2014; Sharma et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2022). However, the ability to capitalize on these opportunities varies among entrepreneurs, as strategic decisions are shaped by personal factors that differ from individual to individual (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Pennetta et al., 2023). A frequently overlooked dimension is the entrepreneur's role as a central figure in influencer marketing (Crittenden et al., 2024). By personally endorsing their products, entrepreneurs can enhance brand authenticity and foster emotional connections with their audience, leading to greater loyalty and engagement on their social media profiles (Malthouse et al., 2021; Tafesse, 2022; Brown & Fiorella, 2023). This personal exposure is particularly significant in SMEs, where the entrepreneur's identity and image often merge with the brand itself, playing a strategic role in establishing long-term and robust relationships with consumers (Leonidou et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2023).

This study contributes to addressing these gaps by exploring how the deployment of entrepreneurial competencies can help overcome such limitations and maximize the strategic impact of social media for small businesses (Rietveld et al., 2020; Secundo et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2023).

3 Methodological foundations

This study employs a predominantly qualitative approach, chosen for its capacity to explore and interpret the subjective meanings individuals assign to social phenomena (Creswell, 2010). The methodological approach centers on achieving a comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in the social relationships underlying the examined phenomena, prioritizing the deep understanding of socially constructed nuances and meanings over the pursuit of universally generalizable truths (Flick, 2008). Social media, as a research context, provides a unique opportunity for qualitative inquiry by enabling an in-depth examination of the interplay between offline and online interactions, as well as the growing influence of individuals on organizational dynamics (Kozinets et al., 2017; Pousti et al., 2021).

By addressing this complexity, qualitative research enables a richer connection to the field and captures the fluid dynamics that reflect contemporary social realities (Yin, 2016).

Given the nascent and constantly evolving nature of the phenomenon under investigation, this study adopts an exploratory-descriptive design. This approach seeks not only to understand the phenomenon but also to describe ongoing processes and trends (Myers, 2019). The methodological strategy follows a primarily deductive framework (Yin, 2016), starting from established theories and principles to analyze relationships between constructs, with the goal of generating novel insights (Saunders et al., 2020). Specifically, this research examines how entrepreneurial competencies manifest in relation to the entrepreneur's involvement in social media management, aiming to advance theoretical and practical understanding of this intersection.

3.1. Data Collection Procedures

This study relied on semi-structured interviews, alongside the collection of documents, data, and audiovisual materials, as its primary sources of evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In qualitative research, employing multiple sources of evidence enables the development of convergent lines of inquiry, which enhances the corroboration of findings and results in more compelling, accurate, and valid outcomes (Yin, 2016).

The interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom video calls, allowing the researcher to observe elements beyond the participants' verbal responses, such as mannerisms, gestures, and expressions (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). An interview guide comprising eighteen questions was designed to explore the participants' self-perceptions regarding the manifestation of entrepreneurial competencies and their impressions of how these competencies influence the strategic management of social media by small businesses. Each interview lasted an average of 39 minutes, providing sufficient depth for data collection without risking the participants' loss of focus or interest (Irvine, 2011).

The interviews were transcribed using the Transkriptor platform and meticulously reviewed prior to each subsequent interview, enabling the identification and correction of errors while allowing for the reevaluation and refinement of the research direction throughout the data collection process. The interviews conducted with the 18 participants generated a total of 11 hours and 44 minutes of audiovisual material, which was transcribed into 106,247 words organized across 578 lines in a Word document formatted in Times New Roman, size 12.

In addition to the interviews, this study gathered evidence from the Instagram profiles of the firms managed by the participating entrepreneurs. User-generated content and



interactions on this social media platform were systematically collected and monitored to uncover perceptions, intentions, and behaviors (Lai & To, 2015), with the researcher maintaining a non-intrusive role throughout the data collection process (Kerschbaumer et al., 2022). The data collection involved accessing each public post on the analyzed profiles (Kozinets et al., 2017; Rietveld et al., 2020), as all accounts were publicly accessible (Parry & Mautner, 2004). A total of 14,963 posts from the 18 business profiles under study were cataloged as of November 1, 2023. Out of these, 221 posts were qualitatively analyzed, yielding textual and audiovisual data that provided rich contextual detail and analytical depth to the research (Saunders et al., 2020).

3.2. Study Participants

This study focused on gathering insights from micro and small business owners in Brazil who operate firms in the bakery sector and maintain active Instagram profiles. The selection of this specific sector was driven by its composition, which is predominantly made up of family-owned micro and small enterprises (MSEs), and its significant contribution to the Brazilian economy. The bakery sector operates in 5,334 municipalities across the country and employs 2.5 million workers (SEBRAE, 2023a). Given that MSEs are typically managed in a highly centralized manner by the entrepreneur (Feltham et al., 2005), it was expected that these individuals would provide a holistic perspective on business operations and exhibit a stronger reliance on entrepreneurial competencies related to social media management (Goyal & Mishra, 2023). Additionally, social media presents a heterogeneous landscape for small businesses due to varying levels of digital maturity, which increases the potential to generate valuable insights across diverse organizational contexts (Qalati et al., 2021). Instagram was chosen as the primary platform for evidence collection, as it is the leading social media network in Brazil where influencers play a critical role in shaping digital engagement (STATISTA, 2023).

To select participants, the researchers initially utilized the professional network of one of the authors. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: (a) being registered as the owner of a bakery business in the official Registry of Partners and Administrators maintained by Brazil's Federal Revenue Service (RFB, 2023); (b) managing a micro or small enterprise with at least two years of operation, as approximately 35% of businesses in Brazil fail to reach this milestone (IBGE, 2021); (c) operating a business with an active Instagram profile, defined as having published at least one post within the 30 days preceding the data collection period (META, 2023). After exhausting the author's direct network, the Snowball Sampling technique was employed, where

initial participants referred new ones, who in turn referred additional participants (Bienarck & Waldorf, 1981; Fontanella et al., 2011). The validity of the results relied on replication logic rather than probabilistic sampling, aiming to identify patterns in the data and continuously compare findings with existing theories. Additional participants were included until theoretical saturation was reached, defined as the point where new participants no longer provided novel insights (Yin, 2016; Eisenhardt, 2021).

This methodological strategy resulted in the selection of 18 entrepreneurs from various Brazilian states as study participants. As the literature suggests that the personal involvement of the business owner in promoting their enterprise (Martens et al., 2007; Abu-Rumman et al., 2021) is a critical factor in enhancing the strategic use of social media (Li & Xie, 2020; Rietveld et al., 2020), participants were categorized into two analytical groups: (a) active in social media management: this group included participants who reported being directly involved in the strategic planning, content creation, and/or publication processes for their business's social media accounts (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Susanto et al., 2023); (b) not active in social media management: this group comprised participants who delegated social media management to third parties, including internal employees, external contractors, or automated tools such as bots (Nakara et al., 2012; Secundo et al., 2021; Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021). Table 3 presents the detailed characterization of the study participants.

Table 3
Study Participants

Participant	Active in Social Media Management	Interviews		Document Analysis – Instagram Profiles	
		Date	Lenght	Oldest Post Date	Cataloged Posts
Paula	No	22/06/2023	00:49:28	11/01/2019	1.190
Fábio	No	25/06/2023	00:52:21	04/02/2016	2.244
Pedro	No	03/07/2023	00:23:01	17/03/2017	229
Joana	Yes	05/07/2023	00:42:27	10/08/2013	2.331
Fátima	Yes	28/07/2023	00:40:25	19/08/2017	464
Carlos	Yes	01/08/2023	00:28:56	20/06/2019	1.383
Mário	No	03/08/2023	00:47:50	23/08/2018	208
Carolina	Yes	15/08/2023	00:46:20	14/09/2019	292
João	No	19/08/2023	00:47:03	20/05/2020	126
Alberto	No	27/09/2023	00:35:43	09/08/2017	1.707
Felipe	No	30/08/2023	00:34:24	24/06/2020	741
Isabela	Yes	06/09/2023	00:23:48	05/11/2021	390
Catarina	Yes	07/09/2023	00:34:48	28/0a8/2022	224
Priscila	Yes	15/09/2023	00:29:35	14/04/2019	489
Leonardo	No	16/09/2023	00:52:23	26/11/2020	61
Helena	Yes	18/09/2023	00:24:44	21/11/2016	1.747
Bárbara	Yes	21/09/2023	00:34:16	31/07/2017	481
Tadeu	Yes	13/10/2023	00:56:32	07/08/2020	656

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research data (2023).

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, with no coercion or financial incentives involved. The interviews and documentary analysis of evidence collected from social media were conducted only after participants signed an Informed Consent Form, granting permission for the use of their data. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all data were handled in a manner that safeguarded their identities (Parry & Mautner, 2004).

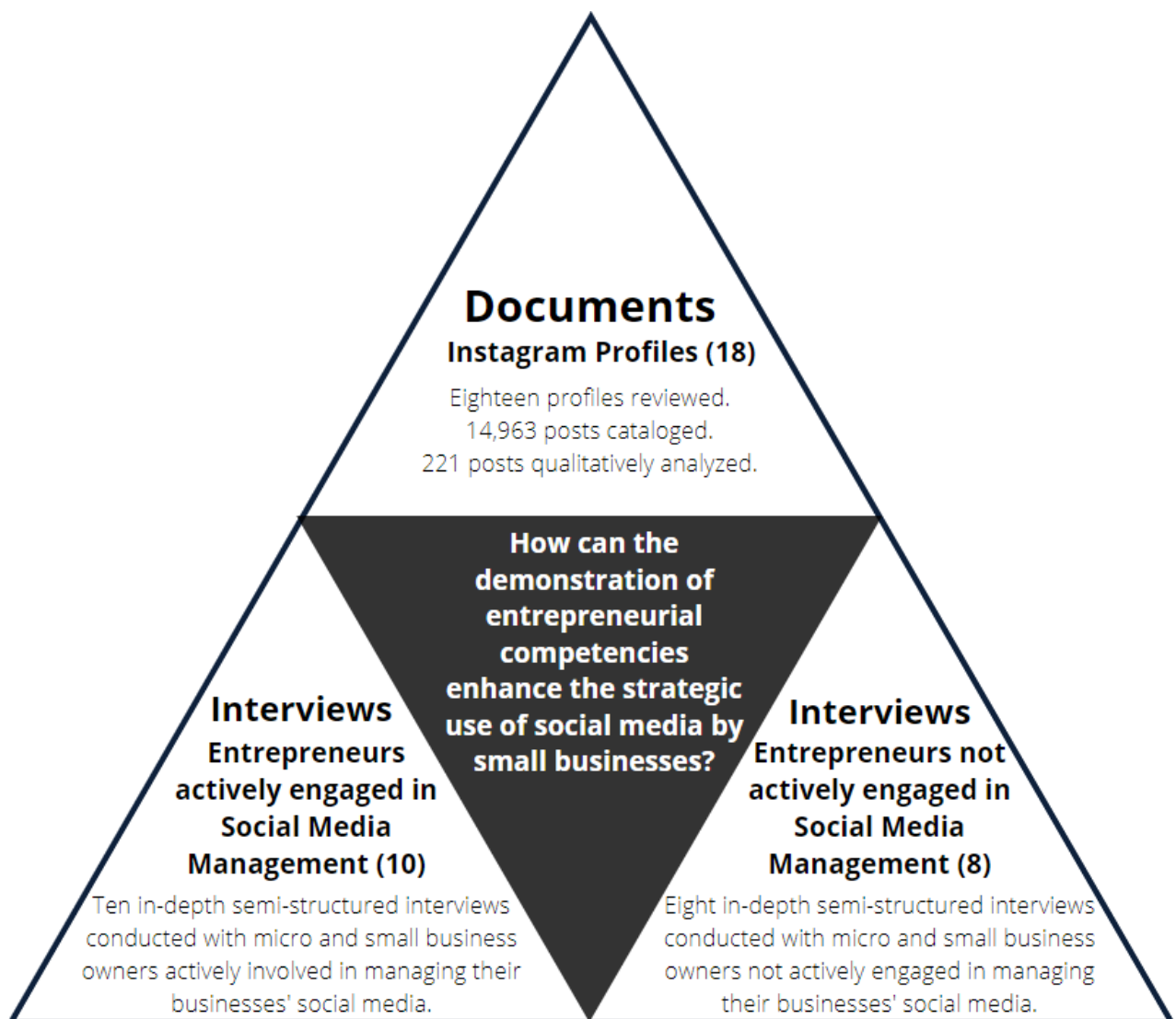


3.3 Evidence Analysis

The gathered evidence was coded using predefined categories and subcategories. This process was facilitated by the NVivo platform and followed the analytical cycle proposed by Yin (2016): (i) compiling data to create an organized database; (ii) breaking down the data into smaller, discrete elements; (iii) reassembling the data through graphical representations, lists, or tabulations; (iv) interpreting the reassembled data; and (v) drawing conclusions from the entire study. Given the predominantly deductive nature of this research, the coding and analysis process aimed to identify patterns that suggest potential relationships among constructs previously identified in the literature (Saunders et al., 2020). The gathered evidence is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Empirical Evidence



Source: Prepared by the authors based on Barbosa (2019).

The evidence gathered through the interviews was meticulously triangulated both internally and with data obtained from the documentary analysis of the Instagram profiles managed by the respective interviewees, ensuring a robust integration of multiple data sources. This systematic process of data screening and comparison aimed to identify common themes or categories, eliminate redundancies, and corroborate or challenge evidence, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the research findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Despite the rigorous procedures undertaken to strengthen the internal validity of the results, the study may still have been influenced by biases, such as response bias from interviewees, researcher interpretation bias, and selection bias associated with snowball sampling (Yin, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Creswell & Miller, 2000). This triangulation process also enabled a deeper understanding of entrepreneurs' perceptions regarding content creation, the quality of trust-based relationships established between firms and their clientele, and the level and quality of online audience engagement (Kozinets et al., 2017; Li & Xie, 2020; Rietveld et al., 2020; Nordin et al., 2023). These procedures contribute to greater transparency in the research process, enhancing its replicability.

Considering the importance of the uniqueness that characterizes qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016), this study does not rely on a statistically significant sample and is not intended to provide generalized statistical conclusions. Instead, it seeks to offer contextual explanations and insights that may be applicable to other scenarios. To this end, construct validity was strengthened by utilizing multiple sources of evidence, triangulated to capture in-depth perceptions of entrepreneurs regarding the strategic use of social media—an essential aspect for small businesses (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Alim et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the triangulation of evidence enabled a nuanced analysis of the constraints encountered by small businesses, thereby strengthening the applicability of the findings—particularly in elucidating the relationship between the demonstration of entrepreneurial competencies and business performance within challenging environments (Goyal & Mishra, 2023; Saunders et al., 2020). While the findings are specific to Brazilian micro and small business owners in the bakery sector, they offer valuable insights applicable to other contexts and, with appropriate adaptations, can be extended to other industries. This contributes to improving business competitiveness through the strategic use of social media (Susanto et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023).

This study is part of a broader research agenda focused on examining the impact of entrepreneurial competencies on the success and sustainability of small businesses. While it sought to identify evidence related to various types of entrepreneurial competencies (see Table

1) and the three key dimensions of social media management (see Table 2) previously outlined in the literature, the fieldwork revealed that certain entrepreneurial competencies emerged more prominently during the coding process, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Codes, Categories, and Subcategories Resulting from the Coding Process

Categories	Subcategories	Codes	Coding Frequency
Entrepreneurial Competencies	Strategic Mindset	Strategic Vision for Social Media	55
		Strategic Resource Assessment	35
		Risk Assessment	22
	Relationship	Personification	63
		Media Intuition	51
	Commitment	Dedicated Work	33
		Learning and Adapting	34
Organizational	Organizing, Motivating and Delegating	27	
Social Media Management	Commercial Dimension	Strategic Management of Instagram Profile	45
		Delegation of Management to Third Parties	24
		Paid Campaign Promotion	29
		Media Exposure of Products and Offers	24
	Communicative Dimension	High-Quality Graphic Content	22
		Spontaneous Content Creation	34
		Image Damage Risks	18
		Establishing a Broad Fan Base	18
	Relational Dimension	Generating Desire	22
		Acquiring Relational Assets	39
		Profile Audience Engagement	43
		Endorsement via Entrepreneur's Persona	49
	Customer Loyalty	17	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The prominence of codes related to entrepreneurial competencies such as Strategic Vision for Social Media, Personification and Media Intuition throughout the coding process suggests that these competencies may have a stronger potential to enhance the various dimensions of social media management. To assess the significance of this evidence, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of how these entrepreneurial competencies may shape and enhance the strategic utilization of social media by small businesses.



4 Presentation and discussion of results

This study centers its discussion and analysis on the three entrepreneurial competencies that demonstrated the strongest prominence during the coding and evidence analysis process (see Table 4). The dynamics of these competencies in driving the strategic utilization of social media by small businesses are examined through participants' perceptions, specifically regarding the impact of their presence—or absence—on key dimensions of social media management.

4.1 Strategic Vision for Social Media

The conceptualization of the competency Strategic Vision for Social Media draws upon well-established notions regarding the role of the entrepreneur: identifying, evaluating, and pursuing opportunities (Schumpeter, 1934; Mintzberg & Waters, 1982; Foss et al., 2008; Goyal & Mishra, 2023). To fulfill this role, entrepreneurs must not only be fully immersed in their business, maintaining a relentless focus on opportunities – what Fábio described as “*being entirely invested in the business, with total focus on opportunities*” – but also exhibit an innovative mindset (Man & Lau, 2000; Alim et al., 2023). This involves openness to new ideas, processes, and creative approaches that result in novel forms of value creation (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Aidara et al., 2021), as exemplified in Carlos's statement:

"An entrepreneur has to be an innovator—thinking differently and acting differently from others. Those who are not open to new ideas or unwilling to experiment and fail are dooming their business to failure" (Carlos).

The manifestation of this competency was identified through the emergence of themes in the participants' narratives that indicated their ability to perceive the external environment strategically, particularly in leveraging social media profiles to create and sustain value for their businesses (Kraus et al., 2010; Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Susanto et al., 2023). For instance, Fátima's case highlights this perspective, as she created her business's Instagram profile before the official launch of her company: "*Our profile started gaining traction even before we sold anything... First, we worked on generating interest and desire for the business, and only then did we open [the store]*" (Fátima). Table 5 summarizes the identified manifestations of the Strategic Vision for Social Media competency among the entrepreneurs participating in this study.

Table 5

Manifestation of the Entrepreneurial Competency: Strategic Vision for Social Media

Participants		Entrepreneurial Competency
Groups	Pseudonyms	Strategic Vision for Social Media (n=14)
<i>Not active in social media management</i>	Paula	X
	Fábio	✓
	Pedro	X
	Mário	✓
	João	✓
	Alberto	✓
	Felipe	X
	Leonardo	X
<i>Active in social media management</i>	Joana	✓
	Fátima	✓
	Carlos	✓
	Carolina	✓
	Isabela	✓
	Catarina	✓
	Priscila	✓
	Helena	✓
	Bárbara	✓
Tadeu	✓	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Among entrepreneurs actively managing their businesses' social media, evidence revealed consistent demonstrations of the *Strategic Vision for Social Media* competency. Helena's insights exemplify the critical role of the entrepreneur in perceiving external environments (Man & Chan, 2002; Van Ness, 2020) and identifying social media as an innovation capable of creating value (Man & Lau, 2000; Munir et al., 2019; Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Montenegro, 2024):



"I think you first need to recognize social media as an opportunity. I understood the opportunity, recognized the environment, and then decided to create [an Instagram profile for the business]. I think, above all, it's about listening to the customer and following what the market is telling you" (Helena).

Conversely, this competency did not manifest consistently among entrepreneurs who were not directly involved in managing their businesses' social media. Notably, some business owners failed to recognize social media as an opportunity to innovate within their operations. Although they adopted Instagram, participants such as Paula, Pedro, Felipe, and Leonardo admitted to doing so merely to keep up with competitors (Danhil et al., 2014; Marchand et al., 2021) and expressed no interest in being directly involved in managing their profiles (Nakara et al., 2012; Rugova & Prenaj, 2016; Fang et al., 2022). Paula's comment highlights this perspective:

"And this is a belief, and I know it's quite limiting on my part, but I always say I don't want to advertise because we can't handle the current number of customers visiting our store. The more I advertise, the worse it gets. I'll just bring in more people, and it'll be chaos" (Paula).

Interestingly, there appears to be a contrasting pattern among participants such as Fábio, Mário, João, and Alberto, who recognized the strategic potential of social media but did not see the need for direct involvement in its management. These entrepreneurs perceived social media primarily as a tool for visibility (Kotler et al., 2017; Munir et al., 2019), believing that personal involvement was unnecessary for success (Yang & Kankanhalli, 2014; Lou et al., 2019; Susanto et al., 2023). Some also expressed hesitation about taking on such a role, as illustrated by Mário:

"I'm definitely not utilizing even 10% of its potential, unfortunately... I could have amazing photos, I could be showing up, doing stories, reels, live sessions, collaborating with so many people. I know everything I should be doing, but I just freeze in front of the camera" (Mário).

For these entrepreneurs, the ideal strategy involves delegating social media management to third parties, such as agencies or professionals, to handle branding activities and promotional campaigns on Instagram (Wardati & Mahendrawathi, 2019; Marchand et al., 2021). This is exemplified by Felipe, who stated: *"I have an agency that handles everything for me, from content creation to publishing, and I'm very satisfied with the results."* This approach aligns with studies indicating that many entrepreneurs prefer to outsource digital activities to focus on other strategic areas and mitigate risks associated with ineffective use of these tools (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021; Felix et al., 2022).

However, evidence suggests that a lack of direct involvement in social media management (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Susanto et al., 2023) may lead entrepreneurs to delegate responsibilities to third parties who lack a full understanding of the unique nuances of their businesses (Nakara et al., 2012; Secundo et al., 2021). Bárbara’s perspective underscores this point:

"I don’t think outsourcing [Instagram management] is a good idea. I believe this work has to be done by the entrepreneur. These agencies post the same way for every business, but my business is unique. Some agencies have even shown me their work, but I know this is a task I need to handle myself" (Bárbara).

Bárbara’s statement highlights the potential loss of differentiation when social media management is outsourced, which could undermine its strategic value (Agustian, 2023; Barney & Hesterly, 2019; Secundo et al., 2021; Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021). Figure 2 illustrates the visual and textual similarities between two Instagram posts managed by third parties for different bakery businesses. Both images prominently feature fresh bread as the central visual element, accompanied by a red-toned graphic overlay with white typography. The textual content in both posts emphasizes the freshness and quality of the bread, using similar phrasing and marketing language. These similarities suggest a standardized approach to content creation, which may undermine brand differentiation and reduce the perceived authenticity of each business’s social media presence.

Figure 2

Similarity Between Posts Across Different Instagram Profiles Managed by Third Parties



Source: Prepared by the authors based on publicly available content on Instagram.

The findings highlight Strategic Vision for Social Media as a critical entrepreneurial competency, fundamentally shaping a business's digital presence and serving as a foundational driver for the strategic utilization of Instagram by small businesses. However, fully leveraging this powerful and innovative promotional tool (Munir et al., 2019; Marchand et al., 2021; Saura et al., 2023) also requires the demonstration of competencies related to the subjective and interpersonal dimensions of social media engagement (Rietveld et al., 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Nordin et al., 2023). The nuances of these competencies will be explored in the following sections.

4.2 Media Intuition

The Media Intuition competency was analyzed through the lens of an entrepreneur's ability to generate social media content that is both authentic and engaging. Its presence emerged in participants' narratives through counterfactual and intuitive reasoning – cognitive processes that are central to entrepreneurial decision-making (Baron, 2000; Van Gelderen, 2023). This cognitive ability is particularly crucial given the complexity and uncertainty inherent in managing small businesses (Alvarez & Buzenitz, 2001; Alves & Yang, 2022). As Joana vividly described: *"An entrepreneur's life is like skydiving—except you never know if the parachute is going to open or not."*

The competency was evident among participants who reported the ability to create content for their business's Instagram profile intuitively – that is, without the need for extensive pre-planning. Priscila emphasized this perspective, stating that an entrepreneur *"must be creative and, at the same time, cannot be afraid to make mistakes or try something new."* The *Media Intuition* competency was identified in 11 participants, as summarized in Table 6.

Table 6

Manifestation of the Entrepreneurial Competency: Media Intuition

Participants		Entrepreneurial Competency
Groups	Pseudonyms	Media Intuition (n=11)
<i>Not active in social media management</i>	Paula	X
	Fábio	X
	Pedro	X
	Mário	X
	João	X
	Alberto	X
	Felipe	✓
	Leonardo	X
<i>Active in social media management</i>	Joana	✓
	Fátima	✓
	Carlos	✓
	Carolina	✓
	Isabela	✓
	Catarina	✓
	Priscila	✓
	Helena	✓
	Bárbara	✓
Tadeu	✓	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

It is noteworthy that all entrepreneurs actively managing their businesses' social media demonstrated this competency in their narratives. In the social media landscape, the ability to swiftly and creatively determine the type of content and messaging to be published is critical for establishing an authentic and engaging communication strategy (Solomon, 2016; Rietveld et al., 2020). This perspective is reflected in Isabela's statement: *"More than anything, creativity is essential, and so is the ability to adapt your message to whatever is trending at the moment [on Instagram]."* Similarly, Catarina highlighted the importance of crafting content that generates consumer interest organically: *"You have to showcase your product creatively,*



sparkling desire without the customer even realizing it – it's an indirect, subtle form of selling." The ability to think quickly and creatively (Van Gelderen, 2023) is particularly crucial for entrepreneurs who take an active role in marketing execution (Bettiol, 2012; Pepple & Enuoh, 2020), often operating outside formal strategic planning frameworks (Foss et al., 2008; Susanto et al., 2023). Carolina exemplifies this dynamic approach:

"I'm good at coming up with things on the spot. While last-minute planning might seem problematic, it's essential in the bakery business because we constantly have seasonal items and new products... A cake that turned out differently, a unique tart we made, a new coffee variety we're trying—deciding in real time what to post works best for us."

In social media, the visual appeal of messages plays a particularly critical role in audience engagement (Rietveld et al., 2020). This suggests that the graphic quality of photos and videos could act as a limiting factor in the strategic use of social media by small businesses (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016; Li & Xie, 2020; Park & Namkung, 2022). When asked to define what constitutes high-quality content for their business's Instagram profile, participants expressed divergent perspectives. Among those who do not actively manage their businesses' social media, there was a prevailing belief that high-quality content is synonymous with highly produced, professional media. Leonardo exemplified this viewpoint: *"Either we do this in a more professional manner, or we don't do it at all... The company needs to project formality and sophistication, and for that, professional, high-quality photography is essential."* Similarly, Alberto emphasized the role of visual aesthetics in shaping consumer perceptions: *"The desire to eat must be cultivated in every photo, and for that, high-quality photography is crucial."*

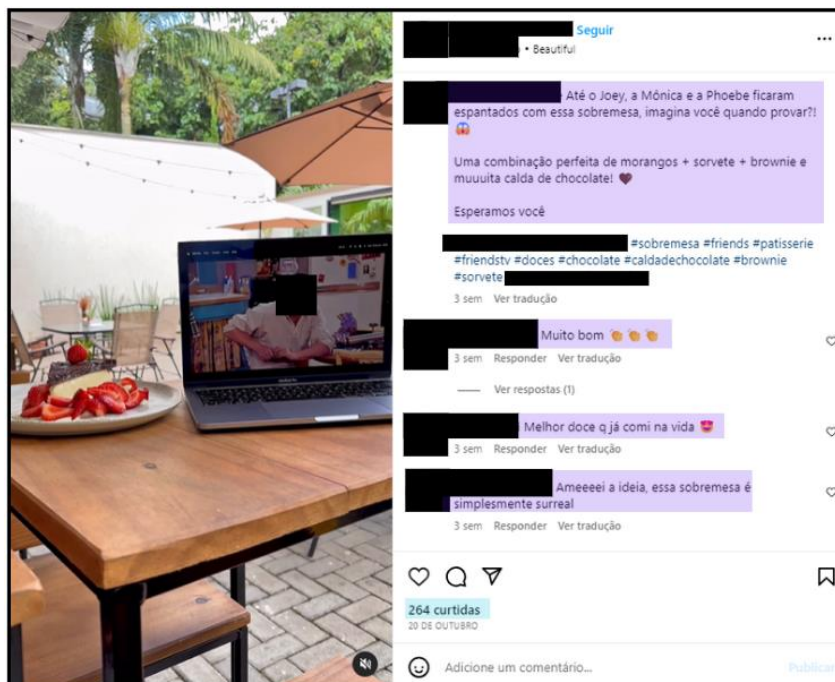
Conversely, participants who actively managed their social media highlighted spontaneity as a more important factor in content creation. As Tadeu stated: *"We prefer to be spontaneous when creating our content... Showing reality is better than being artificial."* For Carolina, this spontaneity fosters stronger customer engagement: *"That overly perfect, highly curated Instagram aesthetic doesn't create a real connection. People know when something isn't authentic."* These findings align with recent studies suggesting that authenticity and organically created content on social media generate higher consumer engagement and trust, particularly on visually driven platforms such as Instagram. Given that emotional connection is a fundamental driver of customer loyalty, maintaining authenticity in digital interactions becomes a strategic imperative (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021; Saura et al., 2023).

To engage consumers with increasingly shorter attention spans (Kotler et al., 2017; Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021), entrepreneurs must identify trending topics on social media and intuitively and creatively adapt their business promotions to capitalize on audience interests

and preferences (Silva et al., 2020; Herzallah et al., 2022). Figure 3 illustrates the application of Media Intuition through the spontaneous and engaging content strategy employed by Carlos in managing his business's social media presence. The post features a visually appealing setting with an outdoor café table, a plated dessert, and a laptop playing a well-known TV series. The caption creatively connects the dessert with the series, using an engaging and relatable narrative to capture the audience's attention. The comment section reflects high audience engagement, with users expressing enthusiasm and admiration for the post. Comments include phrases such as "The best dessert I've ever had in my life," and "This dessert is simply surreal," reinforcing the effectiveness of the content in generating emotional connection and interaction. Additionally, the post received 264 likes, further demonstrating its resonance with the audience. This example supports the argument that the ability to intuitively craft content that aligns with audience interests and trends enhances the strategic use of social media by small businesses. The entrepreneur's capacity to create relatable and culturally relevant content fosters stronger consumer engagement and contributes to the brand's online visibility and positioning.

Figure 3

Media Intuition: Generating Spontaneity



Source: Prepared by the authors based on publicly available content on Instagram.

Direct involvement by entrepreneurs in social media management is widely recognized as a critical factor for the success of small businesses (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021; Felix et al.,

2022). Insights derived from the interviews and the analysis of content posted on entrepreneur-managed profiles underscore the critical importance of adopting a dynamic and creative approach to content production, one that fosters meaningful engagement with the target audience. As Tadeu noted: *"It's important that the profile doesn't turn into some kind of flyer. No one wants to keep seeing ads on Instagram [...]. What we try to do is share information and exchange ideas with our customers"*. This observation is consistent with recent research underscoring entrepreneurs' intuitive capacity to effectively utilize social media – particularly Instagram, where the ability to produce rapid and consistent content is highly valued – as a potential source of competitive advantage (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Saura et al., 2023). The demonstration of the Media Intuition competency enables entrepreneurs to preserve their business's relevance in the digital landscape by cultivating genuine connections with consumers, ultimately enhancing engagement and fostering customer loyalty (Rahman et al., 2023).

4.3 Personification

Enhancing the intersubjective properties of social media's relational dimension is a fundamental component of its strategic use. Given the inherently interpersonal nature of social media (Kozinets et al., 2017), it becomes imperative for entrepreneurs to recognize the importance of building and maintaining close relationships with their customer base (Kotler, 2017; Nordin et al., 2023). This proximity can be fostered by bridging the gap between the brand and the entrepreneur's personal identity, thereby humanizing the business and strengthening consumer connections (Wang & Kim, 2017; Sharma et al., 2020). Fátima exemplifies this approach:

"I try to transform [my brand] into something that fosters connection, as if it were a person. I share my daily routine with my audience, but it's not just about product, product, product, sale, sale, sale. People connect with people. We don't feel any attachment to companies—we have no loyalty, no emotional connection to them" (Fátima).

To examine the manifestation of the Personification competency, this study explored participants' perceptions of how their personal presence in social media content influences customer relationships. Specifically, the analysis focused on the extent to which this visibility cultivates stronger connections, enhances brand reputation, and fosters consumer trust, as outlined in Table 7.

Table 7

Manifestation of the Entrepreneurial Competency: Personification

Participants		Entrepreneurial Competency
Groups	Pseudonyms	Personification (n=10)
<i>Not active in social media management</i>	Paula	X
	Fábio	X
	Pedro	X
	Mário	X
	João	X
	Alberto	X
	Felipe	X
	Leonardo	X
<i>Active in social media management</i>	Joana	✓
	Fátima	✓
	Carlos	✓
	Carolina	✓
	Isabela	✓
	Catarina	✓
	Priscila	✓
	Helena	✓
	Bárbara	✓
	Tadeu	✓

Source: Prepared by the authors.

This analysis reveals a clear distinction between entrepreneurs who actively manage their businesses' social media and those who delegate this responsibility. Among the former, all participants demonstrated the Personification competency. For these entrepreneurs, the business owner serves as a pivotal source of relational assets, fostering closer connections with their customer base (Kozlenkova et al., 2014; Nordin et al., 2023). As Bárbara described, the entrepreneur's role is to *"be almost like a blogger on their own social media."* In this sense, by positioning themselves as digital influencers (Brown & Fiorella, 2023), entrepreneurs can co-



create content and shared experiences with their audience, strengthening customer engagement and brand affinity (Wang & Kim, 2017; Crittenden et al., 2024).

Beyond enhancing relational assets, entrepreneurs' visibility and personal narratives on social media contribute to deeper consumer connections, reinforcing trust and brand loyalty (Kozlenkova et al., 2014; Rietveld et al., 2020). Figure 4 illustrates this dynamic, showcasing an entrepreneur leveraging *Personalized Communication* by incorporating personal storytelling into their social media content. The post features the business owner inside their bakery, standing beside a display of pastries and desserts, visually reinforcing their direct involvement in the business. The caption narrates the entrepreneur's journey, detailing the challenges faced in launching and managing the company – such as construction delays, demanding work hours, and emotional setbacks – while also expressing gratitude to those who supported them throughout the process. This form of storytelling humanizes the brand, aligning with research on the relational dynamics of social media (Kozlenkova et al., 2014; Rietveld et al., 2020).

Figure 04

Acquisition of relational assets via Instagram



Source: Prepared by the authors based on publicly available content on Instagram

Engagement metrics, including over 734 likes, further indicate strong audience resonance with the content. This example underscores how Personification can strengthen consumer trust and loyalty, positioning the entrepreneur's social media presence as a strategic asset that enhances brand differentiation and market positioning (Wang & Kim, 2017; Crittenden et al., 2024).

The increasing empowerment of consumers, driven by the rise of social media, has made the acquisition of relational assets particularly critical for businesses (Jayasingh, 2019). Entrepreneurs who successfully leverage the subjective and interpersonal aspects of social media—such as emotions, relationships, reputation, and trust, which are not easily replicable—can significantly enhance the strategic utility of these platforms (Li & Xie, 2020; Rietveld et al., 2020). Notably, the entrepreneur’s direct presence on social media increases engagement with business-related content (Li & Xie, 2020; Rahman et al., 2023), as highlighted by Joana: *"You can amplify your [social media impact] simply by showing up, by putting your face out there."* By incorporating personal elements into their digital presence, entrepreneurs can foster deeper audience connections (Rietveld et al., 2020).

"When the business owner actively engages with these platforms, they bring emotion, a sense of humanization, you know? Every time I show up, every time I say something, engagement increases. People want to know who is behind the scenes, who is the person making things happen" (Catarina).

Establishing a strong reputation and trust-based relationships is particularly critical in the food industry, where consumer perceptions of quality and safety serve as key drivers of customer loyalty in highly competitive markets (Malthouse et al., 2021). As Isabela noted: *"When it comes to food, trust is everything, right? You don't eat something made by just anyone. You're exposing your health, your life"*. In small businesses, the entrepreneur’s reputation is often indistinguishable from that of the company itself, as the owner’s personal image is deeply intertwined with consumer trust and perceptions of quality (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021). Carlos underscored this dynamic:

"I need to be [on Instagram] projecting a strong personal image and building a reputation. The customer feels like they are getting closer to you, so they're not just buying from a company—they're buying from a person. If they trust you, selling becomes much easier later on" (Carlos).

To fully leverage the relational dimension of social media, content must be designed to foster a trust-based relationship between the brand and its customer base (Lou et al., 2019). Given that the credibility of a message is inherently linked to the credibility of its source (Solomon, 2016), the manifestation of the Personification competency enables entrepreneurs to cultivate and capitalize on trust-based reputation elements, ultimately strengthening customer loyalty (Jayasingh, 2019; Riley, 2020). The interactive dynamics of social media necessitate the creation of a strong sense of community around the business (Alvarez & Buzenitz, 2001; Riley, 2020), as reflected in Tadeu’s statement:



"What's most interesting about social media is how it brings customers closer than ever. We have to pay attention to those who are always there—our core audience. That's how we built a community around [our business], making customers root for us the way they would for a sports team."

To build and sustain consumer trust, interviewees highlighted several critical factors, including transparency, consistency, content quality, perceived authority, and long-term commitment (Man & Lau, 2000; Pepple & Enuoh, 2020). Additionally, fostering consumer proximity requires entrepreneurs to actively engage in dialogue – creating content that resonates with their audience while leveraging their personal reputation – which, in turn, drives greater engagement on their business's Instagram profile (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016; Sharma et al., 2020). To achieve this, participants highlighted the importance of producing high-quality content (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016; Rietveld et al., 2020) that authentically portrays both the entrepreneur's daily routines and the operational realities of their business (Liu et al., 2018; Marchand et al., 2021). As Bárbara explained:

"There's a lot of me in my business, and I think it's important to show that reality. Showing up to work, receiving shipments, stepping into the kitchen from time to time – I believe committing to sharing the daily routine helps because it makes everything feel real."

However, it is essential to recognize that not all interviewees perceive social media as a strategic tool for cultivating relational assets in their businesses. The findings suggest that some entrepreneurs lack either inclination or capability to exhibit Personification competency effectively. Fábio's perspective challenges the notion that entrepreneurs should actively personify their brand's communication on Instagram (McCracken, 1989; Lou et al., 2019; Susanto et al., 2023):

"I don't believe digital marketing can create customer loyalty. It's more about showcasing the products I have for sale. In my view, people will always choose the best product or the best promotion, regardless of whether it's being advertised by a person, a company, or an influencer" (Fábio).

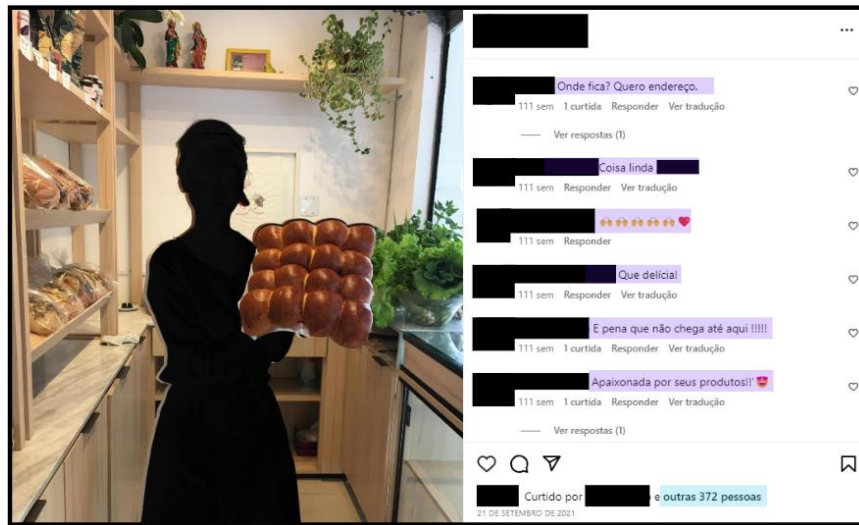
Among entrepreneurs who delegate social media management, several narratives challenge the assumption that effectively leveraging intangible relational assets (Alvarez & Buzenitz, 2001; Rietveld et al., 2020) is essential for achieving strong performance on digital platforms (Yang & Kankahalli, 2014; Lou et al., 2019). This perspective is exemplified by Alberto's statement: *"No, I don't believe the entrepreneur should be the one in the spotlight. The product should be the focus"*. Additionally, some entrepreneurs expressed concerns about

the visibility that comes with social media engagement, associating it with risks to privacy and a loss of autonomy in their work routines (Felix et al., 2022; Saura et al., 2023). Helena's account illustrates this sentiment:

"There are days when, honestly, I just don't have the patience. I think, 'Today, I don't want to show up, I don't want to post anything.' But the truth is, we end up trapped in this, right? You have to do it. You have to post stories, you have to show everything... I feel like I'm tied to the internet. It's like a prison. You can't disconnect, because if you do, you simply don't sell. I miss when things weren't like this" (Helena).

Evidence drawn from the Instagram profiles managed by the study participants indicates that the personal involvement of business owners in promoting their enterprises—by leveraging their personal narratives and credibility to endorse and market products or services (Martens et al., 2007; Abu-Rumman et al., 2021) – is a pivotal factor in optimizing the strategic use of social media by small businesses. Personification competency allows entrepreneurs to effectively capitalize on the relationships cultivated with their audience via Instagram, thereby enhancing the perceived credibility of their brand as a trusted source (Solomon, 2016; Jayasingh, 2019).

Figure 5 illustrates the strategic use of the entrepreneur's personal image as a form of endorsement on Instagram, reinforcing the brand's credibility and strengthening customer engagement. The post features a bakery owner holding a tray of freshly baked bread, visually reinforcing their direct involvement in the production process. This personalized approach not only humanizes the brand but also signals authenticity and quality, fostering stronger consumer trust (Solomon, 2016; Jayasingh, 2019). The comment section further highlights the effectiveness of this strategy, with users expressing admiration for the product ("*What a beautiful thing!*"), curiosity about purchasing ("*Where is it located? I want the address.*"), and emotional attachment to the brand ("*I'm in love with your products!*"). The presence of over 372 likes underscores the high level of audience engagement generated by this type of content

Figure 5*Endorsement on Instagram Through the Entrepreneur's Persona*

Source: Prepared by the authors based on publicly available content on Instagram.

Personification competency enables entrepreneurs to leverage their personal image as a relational asset, enhancing brand credibility and fostering emotional connections with consumers. By embedding themselves into their brand's social media presence, they can cultivate deeper customer relationships and establish a distinctive competitive advantage in an increasingly crowded digital marketplace (Martens et al., 2007; Rietveld et al., 2020). This strategic approach also amplifies the business's digital profile, allowing entrepreneurs to directly endorse (McCracken, 1989; Secundo et al., 2021) and legitimize the content published on their Instagram profiles. As illustrated in Figure 5, effectively harnessing established relationships and capitalizing on their personal brand (Agustian, 2023) enables entrepreneurs to transfer these relational assets to their business, strengthening market positioning and consumer trust.

5 Concluding remarks

This study investigated the relationship between entrepreneurial competency manifestation and the strategic utilization of social media by small businesses. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eighteen entrepreneurs – ten directly managing their businesses' social media and eight delegating this responsibility – the analysis revealed significant variation in the presence and intensity of entrepreneurial competencies previously identified in the literature. The findings underscore the heterogeneous ways in which these competencies materialize among entrepreneurs, shaping their approach to digital engagement and strategic decision-making.

Among the eight entrepreneurial competencies identified in the study participants, three stood out due to their frequent occurrence: *Strategic Vision for Social Media*, *Media Intuition*, and *Personification*. This article provided an in-depth analysis of the potential influence of these competencies—or their absence—on the strategic use of social media by small businesses. This analysis was guided by a triangulation of evidence from the interviews and documentary analysis of 278 Instagram posts from the businesses led by the study's participants. Key findings include: (a) participants' recognition of social media as a critical component of their marketing strategies; (b) the entrepreneurs' emphasis on direct involvement in the strategic conception and content creation for social media – particularly the exposure of their personal image – as a key factor in maximizing its strategic impact; and (c) strong indications that businesses whose owners actively manage their social media profiles benefit from enhanced relational assets.

The findings align with ongoing debates in the fields of strategic management, entrepreneurship, and social media usage, reinforcing the importance of entrepreneurial behavior in highly dynamic environments. Recent studies suggest that entrepreneurs' strategic decisions serve as microfoundations for competitive advantage (Barney et al., 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021), which aligns with our findings that intuition and adaptability in content creation are essential for effectively leveraging platforms like Instagram. Additionally, prior research highlights personified communication and relationship-building as fundamental strategies (Lou et al., 2019; Van Gelderen, 2023), a perspective further supported by our results, which demonstrate how small business owners' direct engagement on social media enhances customer loyalty (Felix et al., 2022). More broadly, this study contributes to the entrepreneurship literature by reinforcing adaptability and rapid decision-making as essential competencies for entrepreneurs operating in dynamic markets (Saura et al., 2023), further advancing knowledge on digital strategy and entrepreneurship in small businesses.

5.1 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study provide actionable insights for micro and small business owners aiming to optimize the strategic use of social media within their businesses. Strategic Vision for Social Media can be strengthened through data analysis, performance metrics, market research, and strategic planning, enabling entrepreneurs to align their online presence with business objectives and assess the impact of their content on consumer behavior (Montenegro, 2024; Saura et al., 2023; Marchand et al., 2021). This includes leveraging advanced analytics tools to monitor engagement levels, audience preferences, and campaign



effectiveness, allowing for real-time adjustments and optimization (Saura et al., 2023). Media Intuition can be cultivated by staying updated on digital trends, experimenting with different content formats, and refining strategies based on user feedback (Silva et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2023). This iterative approach is particularly crucial for small business owners who must rapidly adapt to platform shifts and evolving consumer behaviors (Felix et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Personification can be reinforced through the development of an authentic personal brand, the creation of engaging and relatable content, and direct interaction with consumers. Additionally, strategic partnerships with influencers who share similar brand values can further amplify reach and credibility (Agustian, 2023; Jayasingh, 2019; Solomon, 2016). By developing these competencies, entrepreneurs can maximize the impact of social media, fostering more sustainable and competitive growth in an increasingly dynamic digital landscape (Saura et al., 2023).

Beyond small enterprises, the findings also provide meaningful insights for managers in larger organizations. The need for a well-defined strategy, personalized communication, and an authentic social media presence extends to businesses of all sizes. Corporate managers can apply these principles to refine audience segmentation, strengthen consumer engagement, and optimize marketing campaigns to establish deeper connections and enhance brand loyalty (Felix et al., 2022). This strategic approach not only fosters competitive advantages but also humanizes the brand, facilitating the development of long-term relationships with customers and enhancing overall digital positioning (Saura et al., 2023).

5.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study presents limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it was not possible to assess the impact of the identified entrepreneurial competencies on business competitiveness, as the participating firms do not publish economic or financial performance reports. Second, there is a potential for response bias, as participant selection followed a replication logic aimed at generating new theoretical insights (Eisenhardt, 2021). Third, the sample size does not allow for population-wide generalizations (Yin, 2016).

Despite these limitations, the findings open multiple avenues for future research on entrepreneurial competencies and the strategic use of social media. In qualitative research, further exploration of these competencies across different economic sectors—such as technology, retail, or services—and in international cultural contexts would help determine whether their influence remains consistent or varies by industry or country. From a quantitative perspective, econometric studies could establish statistical correlations between the

manifestation of the three entrepreneurial competencies examined in this study and social media performance metrics, including engagement rates and conversion of content into sales. Additionally, future research could investigate how entrepreneurs' personal brand exposure influences relational metrics on Instagram, such as likes and comments. Such studies would deepen theoretical understanding while offering practical insights applicable across diverse business contexts, ultimately advancing both academic frameworks and managerial practices.

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