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# SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION THESIS

## Efficient communication of SMEs with geographically limited target groups

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České Budějovice 2023

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# Bibliographic data

# 1 Introduction

The business environment is becoming increasingly complex and dynamic (Škodová Parmová, Líšková, Sdrolias, & Kain, 2017). According to Parmová, Líšková and Kain (2018), this phenomenon can be found in almost all industries (Škodová Parmová, Líšková, & Kain, 2018) and goes far beyond the desirable lively competition. According to Meyer (2020), healthy competition provides positive impulses, but Enz & Škodová Parmová (2020) now identify destructive competition in many markets, which ultimately leads to market concentration and thus a worse position for consumers (Enz & Škodová Parmová, 2020, p. 141). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) risk being forced out of the market by large companies (North, 2007). This evolution can be attributed to the fact that professionally managed, profit-oriented corporations make targeted use of market opportunities (Enz, Škodová Parmová, & Wolf, 2021) or leverage synergy effects (Enz, 2020b). In contrast, SMEs often do not base their strategic steps on rational considerations. This behaviour arises from decision-makers legitimized by family structures sometimes have little business expertise and act on gut instinct (Enz, 2019b, p. 9).

At the same time, however, SMEs play a decisive role from an economic perspective. As Zehrer (2018) notes, numerous small-scale enterprises make an enormous financial contribution in their entirety (Walter, 2017, p. 57). SMEs must increase their competitiveness, if diversity of supply and jobs shall be preserved, (Eßer, Hillebrand, Messner, & Meyer-Stamer, 1990, p. 186; Škodová Parmová et al., 2018) to be able to hold their own alongside competing large enterprises.

As Enz (2020) and Homburg (2017) agree, marketing communication can make an important contribution. This option results from marketing communication being the basis of every purchase transaction (Enz, 2020a; Homburg, 2017, p. 865). Sales goals and, thus, economic success can only be realized if it is possible to address customers effectively. For this reason, the business discipline of marketing communication has often been the subject of research. Today there is a multitude of communication models (Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Valackiene, 2010). These communication models aim to realize the most efficient possible address of the recipients through a target group-oriented combination of different communication channels, the so-called communication mix (Feigl, 2015, p. 74). (Freter, Naskrent, Hohl, & Staub, 2008, p. 25). The so-called average customer is always at the centre of considerations (Enz, 2019a, 2019c, p. 186). A widespread practice, which, however, has been subject to continuous criticism since the 1960s (Sathisch & Rajamohan, 2012; Tang, Thomas, Fletcher, Pan, & Marshall, 2014, p. 631; Yankelovich, 1964, 89 ff). Enz (2020) adds to this criticism that regional specifications are also largely disregarded (Enz, 2020b, p. 28). This situation poses particular challenges for SMEs with geographically limited business areas. These challenges are because media diversity varies significantly between rural areas and conurbations, as does the acceptance of communication channels (Enz, 2010, p. 3). This setting could offer the chance of a competitive advantage. Such an advantage occurs when SMEs reach their target groups with less wastage than is possible for nationally or internationally operating groups (Enz, 2019a).

This dissertation develops a model that enables the management of SMEs to build a compelling marketing communication mix tailored to the individual business area. In doing so, the existing concept of flow distance is used. The model developed by the author is so trivial in its application that it can be used without external advice or relevant expertise. This simplicity is essential, as SMEs usually have limited financial and human resources for communication. Furthermore, this PhD thesis analyses consumers' current and future media consumption. Companies' current and future communication behaviour is also examined with primary data collected by the author. It is shown that SMEs with above-average effective corporate communication can generate a cost advantage up to a practical competitive advantage.

# 2 Aims and Methodology of the Dissertation

This dissertation has two objectives.

1.) Investigate the current communication behaviour of SMEs and identify expected changes in B2C communication.
2.) The aim is to investigate whether regional differences exist in the effectiveness of communication channels and to what extent more significant consideration of differences can be used to increase efficiency in SME marketing communication.

The work aims to develop a communication model that enables the management of SMEs to communicate efficiently with customers. It considers the requirements on the company side and special regional conditions in media consumption on the customer side. In this way, the work represents the sender and the receiver, i. e. both sides of the communication process.

## 2.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

A literature review was conducted as part of the research work. Research questions were identified, operationalized, and expressed in research hypotheses. The hypotheses refer primarily to the quantitative part of the work, which is descriptive in nature. In the context of causal research, the statistical hypothesis test provides information about the connection between cause and effect concerning the current state of the communication mix of SME (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy, 2016, p. 203; Magerhans, 2016, p. 48). The tested hypotheses are set up as null hypotheses.

*Research question 1: To what extent can SMEs develop a better competitive position by optimizing their corporate communication?*

*Research question 2: To what extent can the flow distance model enable SME management to implement a marketing communications mix optimized for regional conditions?*

*$H_A$: There is no difference in the number of communication channels used in Czech and German companies.*

*$H_B$: There is no correlation between the size of a company and the number of communication channels used.*

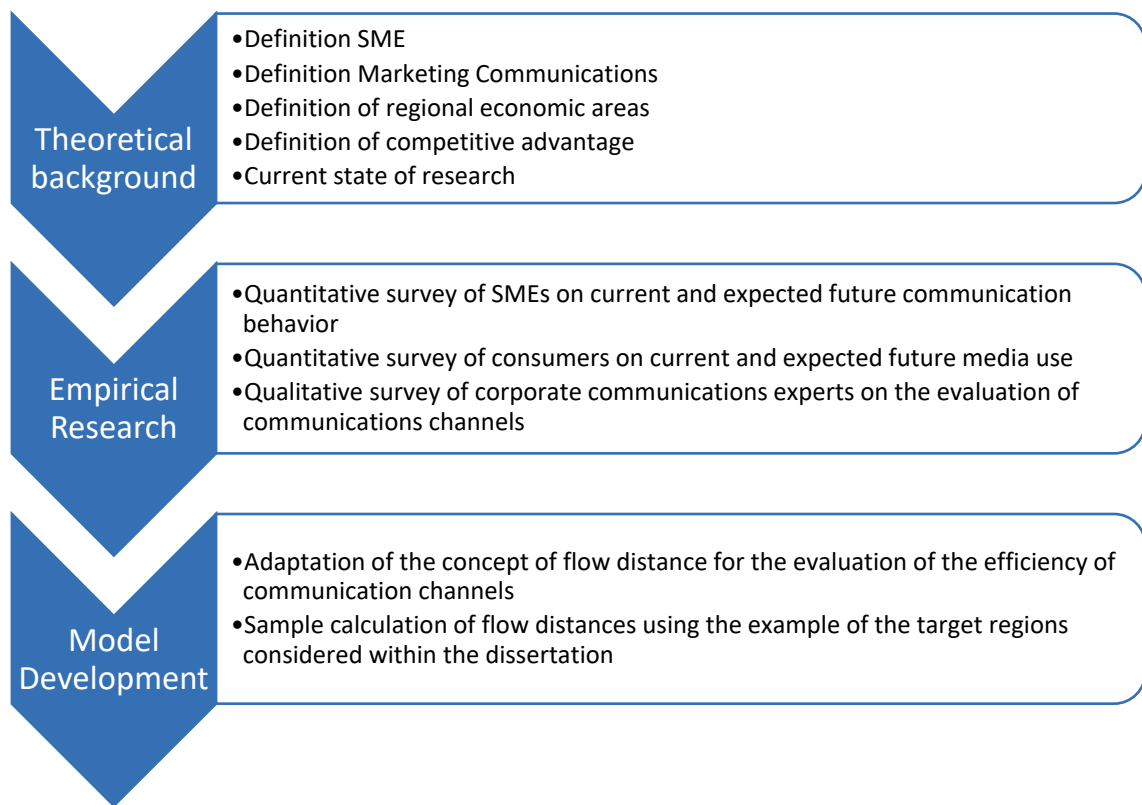*$H_C$: There is no correlation between the location of a company and the importance attributed to a communication channel for the future.*

*$H_D$: There is no correlation between the location of a company and the future budgeting of communication channels.*

## 2.2 Structure of the Analytical Part

The dissertation is divided into different sections. Figure 1 shows the sequence of the sub-steps of the analytical part.

*Figure 1: Outline of the analytical part of the dissertation*

**Theoretical background**
- Definition SME
- Definition Marketing Communications
- Definition of regional economic areas
- Definition of competitive advantage
- Current state of research

**Empirical Research**
- Quantitative survey of SMEs on current and expected future communication behavior
- Quantitative survey of consumers on current and expected future media use
- Qualitative survey of corporate communications experts on the evaluation of communications channels

**Model Development**
- Adaptation of the concept of flow distance for the evaluation of the efficiency of communication channels
- Sample calculation of flow distances using the example of the target regions considered within the dissertation

The first step is the development of the theoretical background. For the start it is necessary to define terms that are important for the dissertation. Subsequently, it is demonstrated that there is a research deficit in the field of marketing communication about the optimal communication mix for SMEs (Enz, 2020a; Winkler, 2020, p. 61).

The second part of the thesis builds on the author's findings, already published in a separate article (Enz, 2019c), that the effectiveness of communication channels can vary from region to region. First, the dissertation surveyed the management of SMEs in the four target regions on which the work is based: Prague, Southern Bohemia, Nuremberg-Fürth-Erlangen and Central Franconia. The extent to which there are currently regional differences in the communication behaviour of SMEs was recorded. It was also analysed to determine what time differences exist in the communication behaviour to be expected in the future.

This thinking is followed by a large-scale survey of consumers in the four target regions. The generated data collection will be used to analyse to what extent media usage behaviour is subject to regional differences. Both surveys ultimately identify whether there are differences in the desired and used communication channels.

The empirical research concludes with a qualitative survey of experts from corporate communication. At this point, the specialists evaluate individual aspects of a communication channel, from which a suitability profile can later be generated.

In the third step of the PhD thesis, the author develops a key figure for the simple evaluation of communication channels from the concept of flow distance established in software development. Exemplarily, the key figures are then calculated for the target regions. On the one hand, this demonstrates the practicable application of the findings provided. On the other hand, the dissertation becomes apparent, offering a basis for further research.

## 2.3  Fundamentals of Empirical Research

Before testing the hypotheses already presented, obtaining primary data was necessary. For the survey of companies, companies were considered for this purpose:

1.) Which are considered SMEs from the EU's point of view. This definition is the case if they employ no more than 250 people and their annual turnover does not exceed 50 million euros (Enz, 2020b, p. 29; Enz & Škodová Parmová, 2020, p. 143).
2.) Which are located in one of the four target regions. For the work, a company is considered to be resident if its head office is in the target region or if a location with independent management exists in the area.

For the consumer survey, test persons were used who had the following characteristics:

1.) Resident in one of the four target regions
2.) 18 years or older

For the qualitative survey of communication experts, subjects were used whose professional position was

- Head of Corporate Communications
- Head of Marketing and Sales
- or a senior position at a higher education institution.

## 2.4  Research Methods

The primary data needed for the dissertation was obtained through online surveys. Online surveys have established themselves as a way of data collection in the social sciences and are increasingly used in qualitative research (Kirchmair, 2022, p. 52). However, online surveys offer clear advantages compared to other forms of surveys. In particular, they are comparatively inexpensive. At the same time, the data are available at short notice (Brandt, Vogel, & Briedis, 2022, p. 7). In addition, the data collected online are available electronically and can be transferred to analysis programs such as Excel, SPSS or R without further intermediate steps. The risk of transmission errors can thus be largely excluded.

However, Puschmann (2019) defines the sole reference to an online survey as a methodological weakness (Puschmann, 2019, p. 556). The criticism is based in particular on the fact that the result of the online survey does not rest on the total population but only on the proportion of the people that use the internet (Blom et al., 2017; Schaurer & Weiß, 2020; Wagner-Schelewsky & Hering, 2019, p. 791). As the proportion of internet users in the total population continues to rise (Initiative D21, 2022; ITU, 2022), as is the intensity of use (IfD Allensbach, 2022), the online survey method can be accepted for this dissertation.

In the first part of the empirical research, SMEs are surveyed on their current and future communication behaviour. Due to technical progress and linking analogue and digital communication channels, marketing communication has constantly growing possibilities for addressing customers (Kochhan, Elsässer, & Hachenberg, 2020, 22 f). Nevertheless, not every conceivable communication channel was included in the context of the company survey. Considering all options would have prolonged the processing of the questionnaire for participants or made it impossible. However, the selection of marketing communication channels should not be understood as an evaluation of their effectiveness. Piwinger & Zerfaß (2022) and the author of this paper agree that it is incorrect to assign strategic relevance to some instruments in general. Against this background, the author arbitrarily selected the communication channels analyzed in

this paper, but not at random. The aim was to cover all the essential categories with the sectors 'Online', 'Point of Sale' and 'Media'. The following were included in the survey:

**Online:** Social media, e-mail, newsletter, internet bannering, Google Ads

**Point of Sale:** Events, Field Sales, Customer Service, Telephone Marketing

**Media:** Newspaper, Letter post, Magazines, Radio, Official journal, TV, Out of Home, Cinema

A total of 522 (n=522) companies participated in the survey. Of these, a total of 249 participants were from the Czech Republic. On the German side, 273 companies took part. In the Czech group, 203 participants came from rural areas and 46 from the metropolitan region. In the German group, 195 participants belong to the rural area, and 78 enterprises are assigned to the metro region. The responses were analyzed using R (packages: psych, ggplot2) and Microsoft Excel (add-on: XLSTAT).

In the course of the dissertation, a large-scale consumer survey was conducted. This Interview was conducted between October 2022 and December 2022. The survey was conducted online among people who live in one of the four target regions. In the target countries, a distinction was also made between metropolitan areas (where the respondent lives in a town with more than 50,000 inhabitants) and rural areas (where the respondent lives in a city with less than 50,000 inhabitants). The internet platform Easy Feedback was used to offer the questionnaire bilingually in Czech and German.

A total of 1,102 online questionnaires were submitted during the survey period. Among them were four participants under the age of 16. These were removed from the survey. Seven questionnaires were also deleted, in which no information was provided except for the mandatory questions (nationality, size of place of residence). Thus, 1,089 questionnaires were included in the analysis (n=1,089). Of these, 159 surveys were for the region "Germany - metropolis), and 522 questionnaires were for "Germany - rural area". In the metropolitan region of Prague, 177 questionnaires were collected, and South Bohemia accounted for a total of 231.

The consumer survey aims to analyze the extent to which communication channels have different impacts in different regions. The question thus comprises six hypotheses, each with 12 subordinate assumptions. The six hypotheses stem from the possible combinations of the four target regions. Here, the pairings can be

- 'Germany (metropolitan region)' - 'Germany (country)',
- 'Germany (Metropolitan Region) - Czech Republic (Metropolitan Region)',
- Germany (metropolitan region) - Czech Republic (country)',
- 'Germany (country) - Czech Republic (metropolitan region)',
- 'Germany (Country) - Czech Republic (Country)' and
- 'Czech Republic (Metropolitan Region) - Czech Republic (Country)'.

are formed. The 12 subordinate hypotheses are formed from the 12 queried communication channels: social media, newspapers, personal advice, e-mail newsletters, internet banners, magazines, TV, out of home (posters), brochures, company websites, media websites, websites of consumer protection organizations and comparison portals. This enumeration is not a list of all possible marketing communication channels. Instead, the author made a selection based on literature research. The aim was to represent currently relevant channels without previous traditional media. At the same time, it was to be ensured that the respondents were not overwhelmed by too large a number or deterred from participating in the survey (Bannwart, 2021, 76 ff; Fehringer, 2021, p. 148; Mörixbauer, Gruber, & Derndorfer, 2019, 43 ff). However, the

available sample sizes only have power for a maximum of two hypothesis tests. For this reason, the author determines a priori two hypotheses that want to be tested for statistically significant differences in the context of the present research work. These are selected in a structured way so that one classical medium and one modern medium are tested. Radio, TV and the press are considered as classic media. The category 'modern medium' includes the internet and communication offers based on the internet, such as social media (Enz, 2019a; Georgi, 2022, p. 32). For the present work, the statistical analysis was carried out using the programming language R and the software RStudio. The packages used are in the bibliography (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria, 2022; Wickham, 2016). The alpha adjustment was performed throughout the analysis, according to Bonferroni-Holm. Accordingly, the subjects' assessment is interpreted as pseudo-metric. The adjustment is made to keep the probability of making at least one false positive statement (FWER) below the α-level. The overall level chosen for the present work is 5 %. In the final part of the empirical analysis, the individual communication channels are evaluated by experts. For this purpose, an online questionnaire was created, which was answered by 72 experts. Ten questions quantified the aspects of costs, time expenditure, personnel intensity, necessary frequency and required know-how. To present the suitability of each item in an easily understandable way, it is converted into school grades. The German grading system (1=very good, 2=good, 3=satisfactory, 4=sufficient, 5=insufficient, 6=poor) is used. The values are distributed according to the linear grading system based on a point-note-table for a maximum of 10 achievable points (Lehrerfreund GmbH, 2022).

The research is intended to enable laypersons to find an individual and efficient communication mix. This goal requires an easily understandable key figure. One such is the FLOW distance, which is transferred to the field of corporate communication in the third part of the dissertation. The basis of the concept is the flow effect, which can be observed in different contexts. For example, in sports or computer games (Sommer, 2008, p. 2). The flow distance symbolizes the imaginary space a message has to cover from the sender to the receiver.

The flow distance is calculated using the formula:

$$d_{i,j} = 1 - \frac{c_{i,j}}{c^*}$$

First, the product ci; j is formed by multiplying the perceived intensity of the influence of companies on target persons by the sum of the weighting of the suitability for all communication channels used by both the company and the recipients. In the second step, the product c* is formed, representing the theoretical maximum of communication. For this purpose, the maximum possible perceived influence of the communication is multiplied by the sum of the weighting of the influence strengths for all communication channels used. At the end, the FLOW distance is calculated in step 3. This calculation is done using the formula shown. If the result is small, the FLOW distance is short. This finding makes it a good channel for activating the target group.

The calculation of the FLOW distance is, therefore, straightforward. However, preliminary work is needed to generate the required data. It is necessary to operationalize the intensity of a communication channel for the calculation. For this purpose, the author of this paper understands the power of a communication channel as an expression of a recipient's satisfaction with the chosen form of information delivery. Thus, metrics for the evaluation of customer feedback can be used for the assessment of the statements. Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) has established itself as a central customer feedback metric. The weighted suitability must also be operationalized. This proceeding is done in the context of the dissertation based on the expert survey results. This value will be determined later based on the individual company communication.

# 3 Discussion and Socio-Economic Interpretation of the Results

The dissertation clarifies whether SMEs can achieve a better market position by optimizing communication. This topic is an actual question because regardless of whether it is a question of acquiring a new customer or reactivating an existing customer, every consumption presupposes the prior establishment of contact between supplier and consumer (Bruhn & Stauss, 2000, 141 f). In addition, corporate communication has many usable channels at its disposal. These numerous options force them to set a focus. The aim is to activate target groups effectively and efficiently (Bruhn & Ahlers, 2014, p. 708). A communication channel is considered adequate if it reaches the desired target group with low contact costs. However, the efficiency of a communication channel results from the two factors of impact and success (Bunk, 2018, p. 102). This statement is where the author of this PhD thesis comes in. Within the scope of this research work, he develops a concept that enables decision-makers in SMEs to evaluate the effectiveness of communication channels for their own company without external service providers. This thesis provides the basis for an individual communication mix that could lay the foundation for a better competitive position.

## 3.1 Research Question 1

The literature research of this thesis proves that a competitive advantage can be achieved through efficient corporate communication. How strong this can be is questioned in the first research question. The literature also shows that the optimization potential depends on the existence and extent of regional differences in media use. This basis is to be considered for SMEs as well as consumers.

**Media use by SMEs**

Four null hypotheses were formulated and tested to determine regional differences in media use. ***Hypothesis H_A*** states: *There is no difference in the number of communication channels used in Czech and German companies.* A t-test with Welch correction is used for testing. The effect size is calculated according to Cohen (Cohen, 2013). The result is that the number of communication channels used is significantly smaller ($t(421.64)=-10.6$, $p<0.001$) for Czech companies (MW=3.19, M=3, SD=1.89) than for German companies (MW=5.81, M=5, SD=3.57). The mean difference is 2.62 (95%-CI [2.13, 3.10]). According to Cohen (1988), the calculated effect is significant (d=0.734). Thus, the null hypothesis must be rejected in favour of H1. Accordingly, the formulated theory $H_A$ must also be dismissed. It can, therefore, be assumed that nationality influences the number of channels companies use in the communication mix.

***Hypothesis H_B*** states that there is no correlation between the size of a company and the number *of communication channels used.* The analysis uses the Jonckheere-Terpstra test (IBM Deutschland GmbH, 2021). This statistical test shows a significant growing trend in the medians (JT=51968, p=0.001). Larger companies use more different channels for customer communication (Very small median=3, Small median=3, Medium median=6, Large median=10).

***Hypothesis H_C*** states that there is no correlation between the location of a company and the importance *attributed to a communication channel for the future.* The theory was tested using a chi-square test. This test is carried out between the expected future significance of a communication channel and the region where the company is located. It shows a statistically significant correlation between the characteristic future importance of a communication channel and the area where the company is located, $x^2 =75.895$, p= 0.003, alpha=0.05.

***Hypothesis H~D~*** assumes that there is *no correlation between the location of a company and the future budgeting of communication channels.* This hypothesis is also verified utilizing a chi-square test. This test is carried out between the expected future budgeting of a communication channel and the region in which the company is located. The result is $x^2 = 0.513$, p= 1.000, alpha= 0.05. The calculated p-value is greater than the significance level alpha.

Similarly, the observed value $x^2$ (0.513) is smaller than the critical value $x^2$ (65.171). Thus, there is no reason to reject $H_0$ for $H_D$. It can be assumed that there is no correlation between the location of the company and the future budgeting of marketing communication channels.

**Media use by Customers**

Without examining media use, i.e. how consumers deal with communication channels, no adequate understanding of the function of communication instruments can be gained (Hasebrink, 2002, p. 324). Therefore, in this thesis, the behaviour of consumers in four target regions will be investigated. For this purpose, a large-scale survey will be conducted. The survey aims to identify possible regional dependencies in media use. A descriptive analysis carried out first assumes the existence of such dependencies seems plausible. To clarify whether there are significant dependencies, the communication channels "Social Media" and "Newspaper" are analyzed using one-factor ANOVA. Cohen's d is used to interpret this, and strength is assigned to the effects determined. The presence of medium and large products underlines that, in practice, there are noticeable dependencies between a recipient's place of residence and media use behaviour.

## 3.2 Research Question 2

This paper aims to provide SME management with a decision-making basis for the composition of an individual communication mix. The FLOW distance is a new metric introduced into corporate communication to achieve this goal. The concept of FLOW distance has existed since 1993 (Csikszentmihalyi, 2010) and has established itself in different contexts.

Research question 2 asks to what extent the FLOW distance model can enable SME management to assemble a marketing communication mix optimized for regional conditions. The FLOW distance of a communication instrument depends on the instrument's nature and the respective regional conditions. Against this background, the present research work cannot provide generally valid FLOW distances. However, the dissertation develops a concept with which SMEs can independently determine the weighted intensities necessary for calculating FLOW distances. For this purpose, the idea of the CSAT score is used. The CSAT score is calculated by dividing the number of respondents who expressed satisfaction by the total number of respondents. Since it is customary to report the CSAT score as a percentage, the result is multiplied by 100. Respondents who gave the best or second-best rating in their feedback are considered satisfied. (Momentive UC, 2020; Qualtrics LLC, 2018; Stobitzer, 2022).

In addition to the weighted intensity, a weighted suitability is required to calculate the FLOW distance. This second Research question is determined in the dissertation for the communication channels considered. For this purpose, a survey of communication experts is conducted. They evaluate the aspects of 'costs', 'time expenditure', 'personnel intensity', 'necessary frequency' and 'required know-how' for each channel with school grades. An average value is calculated from the results, representing the weighted suitability. The results per communication channel are shown in the following Table 1 below:

*Table 1: Determination of the weighted evaluation within the framework of the expert survey per communication channel*

| Communication channel | Rating Question A | Rating Question B | Rating Question C | Rating Question D | Rating Question E | Rating weighted |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Personal advice in the shop | 4,3 | 1,6 | 4,9 | 3,8 | 2,1 | 3,34 |
| Personal advice from field service | 4,9 | 1,6 | 5,4 | 4,3 | 2,1 | 3,66 |
| E-mail newsletter | 2,70 | 2,7 | 2,7 | 3,2 | 4,3 | 3,12 |
| Mail | 3,8 | 3,2 | 3,2 | 3,2 | 4,3 | 3,54 |
| Company website | 3,2 | 2,7 | 3,2 | 4,3 | 4,3 | 3,54 |
| Corporate blog | 3,2 | 2,7 | 3,8 | 4,3 | 4,3 | 3,66 |
| Internet banner | 2,7 | 2,7 | 2,7 | 3,8 | 4,3 | 3,24 |
| Social media | 03 Jan | 3,2 | 3,8 | 4,3 | 4,9 | 3,88 |
| Search engine marketing | 3,8 | 2,7 | 3,2 | 4,9 | 4,9 | 3,9 |
| Newspaper | 4,9 | 3,2 | 2,7 | 3,8 | 4,3 | 3,78 |
| Magazines | 4,9 | 3,2 | 2,7 | 3,8 | 4,3 | 3,78 |
| Official Journal | 3,2 | 3,2 | 2,7 | 3,8 | 4,3 | 3,44 |
| Radio | 4,9 | 3,2 | 3,2 | 4,9 | 3,8 | 4 |
| TV | 5,4 | 3,2 | 3,8 | 4,9 | 3,8 | 4,22 |
| Cinema | 4,9 | 2,7 | 3,8 | 4,9 | 3,8 | 4,02 |
| Podcast | 3,8 | 3,2 | 4,3 | 4,9 | 4,3 | 4,1 |
| Out of Home | 3,8 | 3,2 | 3,2 | 4,3 | 3,8 | 3,66 |
| Video portal | 3,8 | 3,2 | 3,8 | 4,3 | 4,3 | 3,88 |
| Brochures | 3,8 | 3,2 | 3,2 | 3,8 | 3,8 | 3,56 |
| Free weekly Newspapers | 3,2 | 3,2 | 2,7 | 3,2 | 3,8 | 3,22 |
| Events | 4,9 | 2,7 | 4,9 | 4,9 | 2,7 | 4,02 |
| Product packaging | 3,8 | 3,2 | 3,2 | 4,3 | 3,8 | 3,66 |

Thus, in accordance with relevant literature, the dissertation shows that the FLOW distance is suitable as an indicator for the management of SMEs. It can enable them to develop a communication mix tailored to regional conditions without specialist knowledge.

# 4 Conclusion

The dissertation shows that an individual communication mix is crucial for efficiency in customer communication and the possibility of generating a competitive advantage from it. This finding is in contradiction to practice. Communication channels are still evaluated based on contact costs (Oberpichler, 2019). Media with a high reach, such as newspapers and radio stations, were considered advantageous for a long time. Because through them, a large target audience could be addressed at relatively low costs per advertising contact (Baumann, 2004, p. 9). The associated scattering losses already preoccupied Henry Ford. The industrial pioneer was convinced to spend half his advertising budget for nothing and struggled with not knowing in advance (Milz, 2022, p. 33). Today, of course, the efficiency can be much higher. This efficiency is possible because modern marketing communication is planned based on extensive findings from market and behavioural research. However, Strott (2022) states that the right advertising path with suitable messages for an appropriate target group must still be taken (Strott, 2022, p. 21). Scattering losses are, therefore, still part of marketing communication and are even accepted (Kühnapfel, 2021, p. 127). This deficit of established communication instruments can be seen as one reason companies increasingly use digital communication channels. Due to seemingly comprehensive knowledge about users and target groups and extremely detailed success measurements, internet providers suggest that they can work with less wastage than traditional channels (Seufert, 2019). However, in the meantime, various formats have also proven to be sham-efficient in online communication (Kes, 2020, 1 ff). This proceeding is in the nature of things because companies are oriented towards their paying customers. Everything is done to meet their requirements and to avoid migration to other media types and service providers (Rappard, 2021, p. 75).

## 4.1 Deficits of Current Corporate Communication

It is often ignored that corporate communication corresponds to a triangular relationship. Companies want to send a message to stakeholders, for example, customers. To do this, they need communication tools from service providers such as media companies, agencies or internet providers. With these service providers, communicating companies themselves act as paying customers. Often, planning services are purchased in addition to the actual communication service. The conflict of interest that arises when consulting and service provision is, on the one hand, not dealt with in the context of this paper, as it is not relevant to the research questions formulated (Kuhlmann, 2020, 184 ff). However, it should be taken into account that for marketing communication channel providers, the communicating company is the customer - not the recipient. In other words, when creating communication services, the interests of the communicating companies are the focus, not the generation of the most positive user experience possible for the addressees. The example of private television clearly illustrates this lack of development. Films are interrupted to broadcast commercials, even though viewers are known to find this disturbing.

As a result, the bothered viewer is not grateful that the advertisers offer him a free television experience (Nöcker, 2021, p. 8). He instead switches off, turns down the sound or leaves the room during the advertising break (Heiser, 2021, p. 1466). Consequently, communicating companies have to deal with another variant of scattering loss. The general scattering loss is based on the fact that not every recipient of a communication channel can also be considered a customer. The second-degree scattering loss also means that potential customers are not reached because the delivery form of the message is not accepted.

The dissertation shows that corporate communication is generally considered from the sender's perspective. This point of view has essentially pragmatic reasons. From the author's point of view,

limited human and financial resources and the diversity of stakeholders can be cited. In addition to regional and cultural differences, there are also different customer milieus, especially in companies active on national or international markets (Weber, 2020, p. 256). The situation is different for SMEs with a regionally delimited business area. They can assume social competence leadership in their business field due to more proximity to their customers and detailed knowledge of the local conditions (Benölken, 2021, p. 250).

Social competence, which supra-regional market participants can hardly imitate, can form the basis for more efficient corporate communication. This increase in efficiency requires thinking about communication channels from the receiver's perspective and not according to the sensitivities of the sender. However, even regionally active SMEs do not automatically have social competence leadership. Regional banks are a case in point. In 2003, Thum & Semmler (2003) demanded that customer-oriented banks and savings banks should not dictate the rules of the game (Thum & Semmler, 2003, p. 45). Nevertheless, Benölken (2021) states almost 20 years later that regional banks still try to bind customers to their rules of the game - and thus steadily lose customers (Benölken, 2021, p. 145).

The thesis shows that SMEs with a regionally defined business area can develop their corporate communication into a competitive advantage. This development ensues because regional corporate communication can be designed more efficiently than supraregional or even international communication concepts allow. The dissertation demonstrates, utilizing variance analysis for the communication channels 'social media' and 'newspaper', that significant regional differences exist in media use. If these differences are optimally considered in a regional communication concept, an increase in efficiency compared to general communication concepts is possible.

## 4.2 Marketing Communication can be Developed into a Competitive Advantage

Professional public relations is subject to current trends (Graßl, 2023, p. 1317). Rommerskirchen & Roslon (2020) attribute this to the fact that corporate communication must permanently react to environmental changes. This finding leads to the fact that more and more communication channels are to be considered. At the same time, it is necessary to react ever faster (Rommerskirchen & Roslon, 2020, p. 266). Currently, the corporate communication discipline is following the mantra of digitalization. This procedure is not limited to using new digital communication channels, such as presence in social media networks. Instead, companies are trying to build their media landscape and become corporate publishers. This strategy makes it possible to communicate directly with the respective target groups without detouring via classic media. This kind of communication reduces the importance of classic media work in the communication mix (Mast & Spachmann, 2020, 174 f).

Companies that follow the current corporate communication zeitgeist are confronted with two challenges: an increasing need for financial resources and specialized personnel. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that with increasing size, a more extensive portfolio of marketing communication channels can be served. This thinking is a hypothesis confirmed within the framework of this research work. The author proves that the number of communication channels used significantly depends on a company's size. In addition, the author examines the dependence of the number of communication channels used on the location of the company headquarters. A corresponding hypothesis is tested using a t-test and Welch correction. Here, too, a significant dependency can be identified.

From the two analyses mentioned above, it can be deduced that there are current trends in corporate communication. Communicators try to follow these as best they can. However, smaller companies have fewer options because they have less money and human resources. At the same time, companies in different geographical home regions approach the design of the communication mix in different ways. The reduction to specific channels can follow strategic considerations, but it can also arise by chance - for example, from the gut feeling of the management. The phenomenon of following the entrepreneur's intuition rather than a scientifically based strategy is widespread among SMEs (Enz, 2019b, p. 9; Järvenpää, Kunttu, & Mäntyneva, 2020, p. 42). In the author's view, this offers the opportunity to design regional communication mixes that work more efficiently than random portfolios or supra-regional strategies can do. This view aligns with Nalluri et al. (2023), who attribute particular success to marketing messages with local references. This success ensures closer attention and a better understanding of the recipients, as they feel more directly addressed than through global campaigns (Nalluri, Mayopu, & Chen, 2023, p. 20). The view contrasts with another trend in corporate communications: PR's concern for ethnic diversity. Baker (2021) sees this as an evolution of corporate communication. He interprets diversity marketing as a concept that recognizes new differences on the part of consumers. In his view, this makes it possible to address consumers even more precisely (Baker, 2021). In practice, however, the new political correctness leads to brands and corporations saving costs by producing only global content. In addition, there is an increasing use of low-cost stock media. These also deliver material involving all international ethnicities (DIM Deutsches Institut für Marketing GmbH, 2023). This diversity can lead to the opposite - and remove messages from the reality of the life of the intended target groups (Jakobi, 2023). In this context, it becomes clear that creating a regional communication mix that considers the specifics of a geographically delimited business area can make sense.

The dissertation also shows a proven corporate strategy to work with lower costs than the competitor. The literature research also indicates that communication is a classic cost factor directly influencing a company's bid prices. However, due to size disadvantage and limited resources, SMEs usually have disadvantages concerning production costs (Yu, Shi, & Wang, 2020). At the same time, it should be noted that marketing communication expenses are highly industry-specific. While the ICT industry spends 5.4 % of its total turnover, companies in the service sector invest 8 to 10 % (Löschke, 2021). However, even in industries with high budgets for corporate communication, the share of total corporate costs is relatively low.

For this reason, the author of this paper does not assume that cost leadership can be achieved by optimizing the communication mix. Nevertheless, a noticeable contribution to improving the cost structure can be made. This improvement can provide a practical competitive advantage, especially for SMEs with a regionally defined business area.

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