



Article

Best Practices for Municipalities to Promote Online Citizen Participation and Engagement on Facebook: A Narrative Review of the Literature

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to identify the best practices of Facebook use for municipalities looking to communicate and interact with their citizens, with a particular impact for rural municipalities. A narrative review was conducted to identify the scientific and gray literature on research databases and Google, respectively. A thematic analysis of the data was conducted to summarize the main strengths, challenges, and recommendations to improve municipalities' Facebook use. Our results showed many benefits of Facebook use for municipalities and elected officials, such as communicating efficiently with citizens. The main challenge identified was developing an effective communication strategy. Finally, several recommendations were found, such as making Facebook posts that appeal to citizens and promote discussion. These results will be useful in helping municipalities develop an effective Facebook communication strategy to improve online engagement and citizen participation for local governments.

Keywords: engagement; participation; social networking sites; municipalities; Facebook



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1. Introduction

The first social networking sites appeared over two decades ago (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Today, over 90% of Canadians aged 15 to 34 years use social media regularly (Schimmele et al. 2021) to keep up with family and friends, follow current events, and share content both privately and publicly (Schimmele et al. 2021). One benefit of these sites from a public health perspective is that they can promote social participation (Ellison et al. 2007).

Despite substantial growth in user numbers on platforms such as TikTok, Reddit, and Twitch, Facebook remains the most popular social networking site in Canada as of 2022. An impressive 80% of online Canadian adults report having a Facebook account, and the platform boasts the highest percentage of daily users, standing at 70% (Mai and Gruz 2022). Facebook allows individuals and organizations to interact with each other and share information which can then be read, seen, or commented on (Magnusson et al. 2012), promoting participation, openness, conversation, engagement, and connectivity between users (Haro-De-Rosario et al. 2018; Lappas et al. 2022). Organizations can therefore use Facebook to disseminate information, initiate discussions, gather feedback, and bring their page's followers together (Magnusson et al. 2012). Facebook is also affordable and allows a large amount of information to be disseminated in real time to a wide audience, across several social groups (Bonsón et al. 2019). For example, Facebook can be used to communicate with people living in rural areas who are harder to reach than those living

closer to city centers, where the majority of public services, including healthcare, are usually offered (Flood-Grady et al. 2020). Rural areas can be defined in two ways: (1) Towns or municipalities outside the commuting zone of larger urban centers, defined as a center with a population of 10,000 or more, or (2) a city, town, or village with less than 150 persons per square kilometer (Alberta Urban Municipality Association & Alberta Association of Municipal District and Counties 2015).

Over the past decade, an increasing number of public administration bodies, including municipalities, have reported using Facebook to communicate and interact with citizens (Bonsón et al. 2019; Agostino 2013). For example, the number of municipalities in the province of Ontario (Canada) with a Facebook account increased by 672% over two years, with 25 municipalities present on the social networking site in 2010 compared to 193 in 2012 (Lambie and Michaluk 2012). In addition to its ability to spread information, Facebook plays a central role in the local information infrastructure, supplanting local news media (Guo and Sun 2022; Thorson et al. 2020). The platform also allows municipalities to know their citizens “personally” by establishing a dialogue with different audiences (Bonsón et al. 2017). This has many benefits for municipalities, such as making it easier to obtain citizens’ reactions, ideas, and opinions, which makes it possible to solve problems, improve public services, or encourage citizens to take specific actions (Bonsón et al. 2017). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook was used to communicate sanitary restrictions and recommendations (e.g., physical distancing measures) to citizens in many countries, such as the United States, England, and Singapore (Tan et al. 2021). It was also used in Poland to foster community building and engagement (e.g., encouraging citizens to help people in need) (Górska et al. 2022). Facebook can also help citizens learn about projects in their municipality and reinforce their social and political engagement (Bonsón et al. 2017; Faber 2022). However, many municipalities are reluctant to use this social networking site due to a lack of human and financial resources or a lack of knowledge (FuturoCité 2017).

Two previous reviews of the literature examined the use of social networking sites in governance and in politics. The first examined the use of social networking sites at the state and local levels (regional, county, and municipal governments), reporting that these governments use social media to spread messages regarding public safety (e.g., incidents, weather emergencies), transportation (e.g., road safety, traffic issues), and infrastructure and environmental management (e.g., infrastructure repairs and maintenance, noise pollution) (Perlman 2012). Another review explained how social media can be used by political actors, such as politicians and political parties, to encourage political participation and engagement (Ben Mansour 2017). Politicians can use social media to interact with citizens and present a personable political image, giving the impression that they are in touch with the population and its needs (Ben Mansour 2017). Two other systematic reviews explored related issues. The first systematic review examined the literature on barriers to citizens’ online participation and identified the following as challenges: digital illiteracy, Internet accessibility issues, lack of interest in political matters or public affairs, low levels of confidence in politicians, unclear content, privacy issues, lack of transparency, and lurking behavior (i.e., observing the posts of an online community but not participating) (Oliveira and Garcia 2019). The second systematic review conducted a meta-analysis on the link between social media use and citizen engagement and found that social media use was positively associated with citizen engagement, specifically social capital (e.g., bonding), civic engagement (e.g., volunteering), and political participation (e.g., voting) (Skoric et al. 2016).

These four reviews provide relevant information on how various social media can be used to promote citizen participation and engagement, especially during elections. They leave room for the present review for at least four reasons. First, none of them examined Facebook exclusively, and it was the most widely used social networking site in the world in 2021 (Tankovska 2021), including in Canada (Gruzd and Mai 2020). Second, none focused specifically on municipalities, though Facebook can be especially useful for reaching people in rural areas (Flood-Grady et al. 2020). Third, most reviews only included scientific articles,

while the gray literature (municipal and organizational documents, websites, newspaper articles) offers data on how small and large municipalities use Facebook to communicate with their citizens, the strengths and challenges of using this social networking site, and how to improve its use to promote online citizen participation and engagement. The meta-analysis on social media use and citizen engagement included dissertations and theses in addition to scientific articles (Skoric et al. 2016), but no gray literature. Fourth and finally, the most recent review was published in 2019 and included articles published until 14 September 2018 (Oliveira and Garcia 2019). It was thus conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had an impact on governments' social media use (Tsao et al. 2021) and may have encouraged more municipalities to use Facebook to communicate with their citizens (Tan et al. 2021).

To our knowledge, no review has yet been conducted on Facebook use by rural municipalities or its strengths, challenges, and best practices. This review aimed to fill this gap by reviewing the available scientific and gray literature.

2. Objectives

This study aimed to provide an overview of best practices related to the use of Facebook by municipalities. Specifically, the objectives were the following: (1) to identify the strengths and challenges of online citizen participation and engagement on municipal Facebook pages; and (2) to document rural municipalities' best practices for using Facebook to communicate with citizens and promote online citizen participation. The overarching goal was to enhance support for municipalities, with a particular focus on rural areas, in refining their communication practices through this social network.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

A narrative review was chosen for its ability to document new and emerging practices and to summarize all types of evidence, including gray literature (Baethge 2019). Narrative reviews address a specific research question and provide a summary of the included studies, without a systematic literature search (Baethge 2019). The Narrative Review Article Rating Scale checklist was used to guide this study (Baethge 2019). In the Results section, selected documents are indicated by their corresponding number (in parentheses), for the sake of clarity and concision. Bibliographic information on these documents, along with their corresponding numbers, can be found in Supplementary Material S1.

3.2. Search Strategy

The review was conducted in two parts. The first aimed to identify articles from the scientific literature published in databases (MEDLINE/PubMed, Web of Science, Érudit, and Google Scholar). The following keywords and their synonyms were used to search each database: "Facebook", "social network", "municipalities", and "online citizen participation and engagement". Synonyms included "public participation", "public engagement", "political participation", "civic engagement", "participatory democracy", "stakeholder involvement", "co-creation", and "activism" (Bonsón et al. 2019). For the purposes of our study, we define online citizen participation and engagement as the process of citizens voluntarily engaging in dialogue with municipalities on policy, decision making, and service design and delivery on Facebook to improve municipal life, services, or resources in a participatory, inclusive, and deliberative manner (Bracht 1991; United Nations 2014; World Bank 2016). For example, online citizen participation and engagement could take the form of citizens participating in discussions with municipalities in Facebook groups or forums on matters related to municipal management (e.g., elections and new regulations) or engaging in online interactions (e.g., commenting, sharing) with municipalities via Facebook on public issues. The second part aimed to identify relevant gray literature (research reports, municipal and organizational documents, websites, newspaper articles) and was carried out in Google using the exact same keywords.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Documents published between 2011 and 2021 were selected to include only articles published in the past ten years (at the time the literature search was conducted in 2021) and to cover the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had an impact on social media use. To be included in the review, the documents had to (1) explore the benefits and challenges of online citizen participation and engagement on municipal Facebook pages and (2) document best practices to promote online citizen participation and engagement on Facebook. Documents specifically addressing the use of social networks other than Facebook (e.g., Twitter, Instagram) were excluded, as these platforms are less commonly used by municipalities. To ensure that the data could be relevant to rural municipalities, documents addressing Facebook use by federal and provincial governments were excluded from the review, as these governments may have access to greater resources and their preoccupations may vary considerably from those of municipalities, especially small rural ones.

3.4. Data Extraction and Analysis

Data from the reviewed documents were extracted and analyzed using thematic analysis to qualitatively summarize the main benefits and challenges, as well as the authors' recommendations for municipalities using Facebook to communicate with their citizens and to promote online citizen participation and engagement. The process began with immersion in the data, where a researcher (LB) familiarized herself with the narrative content of the included studies. This involved multiple readings to gain a profound understanding of context, concepts, and content (Braun and Clarke 2006; Vaismoradi et al. 2013).

A data extraction form was then developed to extract the most relevant information from the documents included in the review (copied and pasted without reformulation). Data extracted covered the following themes: characteristics of the document (authors, title, year, and country), the objective of the document, the benefits and challenges of Facebook use by municipalities, and recommendations for optimal Facebook use to promote online citizen participation and engagement. The extracted data were then subjected to a thorough review to assess their relevance and significance to the study objectives, and coding was refined and adjusted as needed. Once reviewed, the same researcher (LB) proceeded to define each theme clearly, ensuring themes were distinct yet comprehensive in capturing the essence of the extracted data. A consensus was then reached with the research team on the themes and the coding. Finally, the analysis culminated in the drafting of the study, where the identified themes were presented in a coherent narrative. This narrative was structured logically and supported by illustrative quotes from the reviewed materials, offering insights and implications in the context of the overarching research question and objectives.

4. Results

4.1. Documents Included

A total of 35 documents were included in this review, with 20 articles from the scientific literature (57%) and 15 from the gray literature (43%) (see Table 1 for the descriptive characteristics of the documents included and Supplementary Material S1 for a list of the documents included in the review). The gray literature included four methodological guides, four municipal policies, four websites, two newspaper articles, and one research report. All documents were published between 2011 and 2021, though the year of publication was not available for one document. Most documents were from Canada (28.6%), the United States (14.3%), and Spain (14.3%). The presence of several documents from Canada underlines the pivotal role citizens play in this country in its decision-making processes (Mendell 2006) and the growing interest in online citizen and stakeholder engagement in recent years (Longo 2017). All other documents came from other European countries (9 documents), the Middle East (4 documents), Turkey (1 document), or South Africa (1 document). Results were organized according to three main themes: (1) Benefits associated

with municipalities' Facebook use, (2) Challenges associated with municipalities' Facebook use, and (3) Recommendations to improve municipalities' Facebook use.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of documents included in the review.

Characteristics	Number of Documents	Percentage	
Type of document	Scientific articles	20	57.14
	Methodological guides	4	11.43
	Municipal policies	4	11.43
	Websites	4	11.43
	Newspaper articles	2	5.71
	Research reports	1	2.86
	Total	35	100
Year of publication	2011	1	2.86
	2012	1	2.86
	2013	1	2.86
	2014	1	2.86
	2015	5	14.29
	2016	2	5.71
	2017	9	25.71
	2018	6	17.14
	2019	3	8.57
	2020	4	11.43
	2021	1	2.86
	Information not available	1	2.86
	Total	35	100
Country	Canada	10	28.57
	United States	5	14.29
	Spain	5	14.29
	Jordan	2	5.71
	Italy	2	5.71
	Sultanate of Oman	1	2.86
	Turkey	1	2.86
	Israel	1	2.86
	South Africa	1	2.86
	Germany	1	2.86
	Belgium	1	2.86
	Greece	1	2.86
	Netherlands	1	2.86
	Portugal	1	2.86
	Sweden	1	2.86
	Denmark	1	2.86
	Total	35	100

4.2. Benefits Associated with Municipalities' Facebook Use

The benefits of municipalities' Facebook use impact not only municipalities but also elected officials and citizens. The main benefits include promoting citizen participation and engagement in public affairs, improving electoral participation, fostering communication and a close link with citizens and stakeholders for both municipalities and elected officials, increasing visibility for elected officials and the municipality, enhancing citizens' sense of democracy and empowerment, and contributing to community development and citizens' sense of closeness and belonging to their municipality.

4.2.1. Benefits for Municipalities

Benefits of Facebook use for municipalities include promoting citizen and stakeholder participation and engagement, increasing efficiency of communications, establishing municipal brand image, and supporting the development of the local community and services.

Promoting citizen and stakeholder participation and engagement: Facebook use allows municipalities to listen to citizens' opinions and concerns (see documents 19, 21, 23, 25 in Supplementary Material S1); to engage with citizens and obtain measurable feedback on ideas, programs, services, and regulations (see documents 13, 15, 21, 23, 24, 25, 30 in Supplementary Material S1); and to encourage citizens and stakeholders to take specific actions, such as participate in social events or discussion forums (see documents 14, 21, 24 in Supplementary Material S1). In addition, Facebook use favors the participation of citizens with lower income (see documents 8, 17 in Supplementary Material S1).

Increasing efficiency of communications: It improves municipal communications and relations with citizens and stakeholders (see documents 4, 17, 19, 24 in Supplementary Material S1) and allows municipalities to share information to a wide audience within and beyond the municipality (see documents 1, 2, 5, 10, 13, 15, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 30 in Supplementary Material S1), easily reaching specific audiences on specific topics (see documents 21, 30 in Supplementary Material S1). It bolsters the municipality's transparency, openness, and accountability (see documents 1, 2, 4, 19, 24 in Supplementary Material S1). In addition, Facebook serves as a means to communicate quickly in emergency situations (see 2, 21, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 30 in Supplementary Material S1), present complex ideas and questions clearly and simply (see document 21 in Supplementary Material S1), share information and combat disinformation (see documents 21, 28, 31 in Supplementary Material S1), and communicate at a low cost (see documents 1, 30 in Supplementary Material S1).

Establishing a brand image: Facebook allows municipalities to build a positive reputation and humanize their organizations (see documents 13, 21 in Supplementary Material S1), to promote municipal activities, facilities, and events to tourists at low cost (see documents 2, 3, 5, 21, 24, 25, 26, 28 in Supplementary Material S1), and to symbolize modernity and dynamism (see documents 5, 25, 30 in Supplementary Material S1).

Supporting the development of the local community and services: Municipalities benefit by fostering community through sharing stories, pictures, and local content (see document 21 in Supplementary Material S1), by promoting collaboration between different public organizations (e.g., sharing best practices) (see documents 2, 4 in Supplementary Material S1), and by improving the efficiency of local public services (see document 19 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.2.2. Benefits for Elected Officials

Benefits of Facebook use for elected officials include the ability to communicate efficiently, enhance their visibility and image, foster connections with citizens and stakeholders, and strengthen electoral participation.

Communicating efficiently: Elected officials can use Facebook to strengthen their credibility by sharing accurate, respectful, and professional information (see document 21 in Supplementary Material S1) and by demonstrating transparency in initiatives (see document 21 in Supplementary Material S1). Other benefits include the opportunity to test messages with citizens (e.g., campaign slogans) (see document 28 in Supplementary Material S1), a forum for participating in important local conversations (see document 21 in Supplementary Material S1), and access to a large pool of people with diverse ideas, contributions, and experiences (see documents 21, 31 in Supplementary Material S1).

Enhancing elected officials' visibility and image: Facebook allows elected officials to promote themselves online (see documents 1, 31 in Supplementary Material S1) and build a personal brand image (see document 21 in Supplementary Material S1).

Fostering connections with citizens and stakeholders: The platform enables elected officials to establish direct, personal connections with citizens and stakeholders (see documents

21, 31 Supplementary Material S1), while providing a platform for hearing their concerns and ideas (see documents 21, 31 Supplementary Material S1) that allows officials to request feedback on their own ideas and decisions (see document 21 in Supplementary Material S1). It also helps strengthen participation in elections (see documents 1, 31 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.2.3. Benefits for Citizens

Benefits for citizens include learning about and participating in political social debates, feelings of closeness and belonging to the municipality, and a sense of democracy and capacity for action.

Learning about and participating in political and social debates: The platform allows citizens to take part in conversations without belonging to a public affairs elite (see documents 2, 21 in Supplementary Material S1) and to stay informed about political and social issues through quick, up-to-date information (see documents 2, 18, 20 in Supplementary Material S1). It also increases citizens' opportunities for participation and engagement in public affairs (see documents 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 15, 16, 18, 19, 23, 28 in Supplementary Material S1), fosters feelings that their knowledge and skills are being used to improve the quality of services (e.g., co-creation and evaluation of services) (see documents 2, 5, 11, 12, 18, 24 in Supplementary Material S1), and lets citizens participate in municipal conversations easily, accessibly, and intuitively (see documents 18, 20, 21, 23 in Supplementary Material S1).

Feelings of closeness and belonging to the municipality: It gives citizens a greater sense of closeness and belonging to the municipality through better dialogue, stronger relationships, and greater trust (see documents 1, 2, 4, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25, 28 in Supplementary Material S1).

A sense of democracy and capacity for action: It gives citizens a greater impression of taking part in democratic processes (see documents 4, 6, 16 in Supplementary Material S1) and empowers them (see documents 6, 20 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.3. Challenges Associated with Municipalities' Facebook Use

The main challenges municipalities encounter in using Facebook include creating posts that fail to encourage citizens' participation and engagement and a fear of negative comments from citizens. Municipalities also report a lack of human and financial resources to effectively manage their page and a lack of knowledge on how to encourage online citizen participation and engagement. Overall, these challenges for municipalities can be grouped into four categories: a deficient Facebook strategy, a reluctance to use Facebook, a reluctance to solicit participation and engagement on Facebook, and citizens' own reluctance to interact with municipalities on this platform.

4.3.1. Inadequate Facebook Strategy

Municipalities' strategies for this social network tend to fall short in that they include some fundamental errors in social media strategy and generally fail to provide engaging content.

Basic mistakes: These include prioritizing the number of followers or "likes" (see documents 1, 4, 5, 6, 30 in Supplementary Material S1), using municipal pages to promote the interests of municipal management (see documents 1, 3, 4, 10, 13, 24, 25 in Supplementary Material S1), a lack of marketing strategy for their page (see document 9 in Supplementary Material S1), maintaining an outdated page that generates little engagement (see documents 9, 14, 15 in Supplementary Material S1), not using the benefits of the site to their full potential (see documents 3, 14, 15 in Supplementary Material S1), and a lack of knowledge about how Facebook algorithms function (see document 38 in Supplementary Material S1).

A lack of engaging content: Municipal posts often fail to capture citizens' interest or encourage engagement (see documents 2, 6, 15 in Supplementary Material S1), using few images and videos (see documents 6, 8, 9, 10, 17 in Supplementary Material S1). Related problems include posting infrequently (see document 9 in Supplementary Material S1), posting low-quality content (see document 8 in Supplementary Material S1), posting at

non-optimal times of the day (see document 8 in Supplementary Material S1), neglecting to respond to citizens' comments (see document 9 in Supplementary Material S1), and posting about county or regional concerns or linking to websites (see document 9 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.3.2. Municipalities' Reluctance to Use Facebook

These challenges pertain to a lack of human and financial resources, undervaluing Facebook's utility for municipal communication, fear of negative comments and posts, a lack of knowledge of Facebook communication practices, and overestimating the time employees spend managing the account.

A lack of human and financial resources: This challenge manifests through a lack of qualified staff to run social networking sites (see documents 7, 19, 21, 23, 25, 30 in Supplementary Material S1) and disparities between small and large municipalities' budgets and resources (see documents 14, 17 in Supplementary Material S1).

Undervaluing Facebook's utility for municipal communication: This stems from the assumption that the social networking site is not a priority and that citizens would not be interested in participating and engaging through it (see documents 19, 21, 25, 30 in Supplementary Material S1) and decisions not to allocate communication resources to Facebook (see documents 1, 4, 5 in Supplementary Material S1).

Fear of negative comments and posts: This encompasses apprehension about receiving unfavorable or detrimental comments from both citizens and "trolls" (see documents 19, 21, 23, 31 in Supplementary Material S1) and fears that municipal employees or elected officials will make inadequate posts (see documents 23, 24, 25, 31 in Supplementary Material S1).

A lack of knowledge of Facebook communication practices: Some municipalities consider Facebook pages to have fewer advantages than websites (see documents 30, 31 in Supplementary Material S1), are unfamiliar with effective Facebook communication strategies (see documents 25, 30 in Supplementary Material S1) and regulations governing social networking sites (see documents 7, 21 in Supplementary Material S1), and struggle to comprehend the impact of a Facebook page (see documents 21, 23 in Supplementary Material S1).

Overestimating the time employees spend managing the account: There are concerns that municipal employees will dedicate excessive time to managing the page (see document 21 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.3.3. Municipalities' Reluctance to Solicit Citizen Participation and Engagement

This challenge includes concerns about citizens' use of Facebook, undervaluing innovation and citizen engagement, a lack of knowledge about online citizen participation, and difficulties faced by social media managers in establishing direct dialogue with citizens.

Concerns about citizens' use of Facebook: Concerns include that Facebook is not universally accessible (see document 7 in Supplementary Material S1) and that citizens would post inaccurate content (see documents 21, 23 in Supplementary Material S1).

Undervaluing innovation and citizen participation and engagement: This stems from an organizational culture or municipal leadership that underestimates the value of citizens' contributions (see documents 7, 13 in Supplementary Material S1), a lack of qualified employees and resources to engage with citizens on Facebook (see documents 7, 9 in Supplementary Material S1), undervaluing innovation and experimentation (see documents 6, 25 in Supplementary Material S1), undervaluing transparency and citizen involvement (see document 1 in Supplementary Material S1), and skepticism about the importance of social networking sites in fostering citizen engagement and participation (see document 19 in Supplementary Material S1).

Lack of knowledge about online citizen participation and engagement: Municipalities lack a clear strategy or guidelines on promoting online citizen participation and engagement (see documents 7, 16 in Supplementary Material S1) and interpretations of engagement and participation differ across municipalities (see document 19 in Supplementary Material S1).

Difficulties establishing direct dialogue with citizens: Social media managers experience tensions between their responsibilities and the possibilities social networking sites offer (see document 3 in Supplementary Material S1) and often lack direct relationships with key officials in the organization, which are necessary for optimal engagement (see document 16 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.3.4. Citizens' Reluctance to Interact with Municipalities on Facebook

An additional challenge to municipalities' Facebook use is citizens' own reluctance to interact with them on the platform, which includes limited intentions to actively participate on municipal Facebook pages, impressions of a one-way dialogue with municipalities, privacy concerns about the platform, and a lack of awareness of or access to municipal platforms.

Citizens' limited intention to participate on the platform: Citizens often merely "like" or read municipal posts, rather than interacting with them by commenting, sharing, or otherwise participating in the discussion (see documents 18, 20 in Supplementary Material S1). Citizens' intention to engage with municipalities on Facebook is low, relative to their positive attitude towards the platform, perceived effectiveness of participation, and perceived control over their participation (see document 12 in Supplementary Material S1).

Citizens' impressions of a one-way dialogue with municipalities: Citizens express doubts about whether their contributions are considered in municipal decisions (see document 11 in Supplementary Material S1), perceptions of little dialogue with municipalities (see documents 18, 20 in Supplementary Material S1), and frustrations with the asynchronous communication on social networking sites (see document 20 in Supplementary Material S1).

Privacy concerns: These include worries about the public nature of the platform and individuals' privacy on social networking sites (see document 20 in Supplementary Material S1).

A lack of awareness or access to the municipal platforms: Some citizens are unaware of the existence of municipal platforms (see document 20 in Supplementary Material S1) or lack access to technology (e.g., cell phone, computer) or the Internet (see document 20 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.4. Recommendations to Improve Municipalities' Facebook Use

The documents included in this review contain several recommendations for municipalities to optimize their use of Facebook. These recommendations were classified into four categories: getting started, effective posts, page administrators, and online citizen participation and engagement.

4.4.1. Getting Started

Recommendations to maximize the use of a municipal Facebook page from the initial stages include ensuring the security of the Facebook page when setting it up (see documents 22, 28 in Supplementary Material S1), linking to the Facebook page on the municipal website for promotion (see document 9 in Supplementary Material S1), and using Facebook instead of Twitter and sticking to one account per platform (see documents 4, 29 in Supplementary Material S1). In addition, it was recommended that municipalities determine and clearly communicate the purpose of the Facebook page (inform, gather information, or engage) from the outset (see document 5 in Supplementary Material S1) and that they use an incremental strategy, starting with simple communications and then gradually generating engagement (see document 24 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.4.2. Effective Posts

Recommendations for creating effective posts fall into three broad categories: content, form, and frequency.

Content: Municipalities should post content that is interesting to citizens, including topics related to daily life and municipal services (see documents 2, 6, 22, 29, 30 in Supplementary

Material S1). Municipalities should identify the most relevant and interesting topics for citizens (see documents 6, 28 in Supplementary Material S1), limit Facebook posts with uninteresting or uninviting content (see documents 2, 6, 10 in Supplementary Material S1), and favor posts that encourage participation over information or self-promotion (see document 3 in Supplementary Material S1). Posts that provide transparency on municipal actions, initiatives, and decisions are also recommended (see documents 2, 4 in Supplementary Material S1), while municipalities are advised not to use Facebook during election campaigns to promote incumbents (see documents 1, 21 in Supplementary Material S1).

Form: Social media managers should adapt their vocabulary, content, and style to target different groups (e.g., very engaged citizens, citizens with low income) (see documents 8, 31 in Supplementary Material S1); use pictures, videos, and hashtags to generate interest and engagement, especially for less interesting content (see documents 2, 5, 9, 10, 17, 22, 23 in Supplementary Material S1); and keep the content of Facebook posts simple, avoiding large chunks of text (see document 22 in Supplementary Material S1). When text is used, it should generate commentary and discussion to favor the cognitive processing of information (see documents 2, 9 in Supplementary Material S1). Titles for posts should be carefully chosen and pre-tested if need be (see documents 23 in Supplementary Material S1). Posts that elicit positive or negative emotions, rather than neutral ones, encourage citizens to react and foster engagement (see document 4 in Supplementary Material S1). When sharing relevant educational content from organizations outside of the municipality, it should be communicated simply and directly (i.e., no external link or long video) (see documents 2, 9, 10, 28 in Supplementary Material S1). Finally, directly posing questions to citizens encourages participation and helps the municipality gain a better understanding of their interests and needs (see documents 23, 28 in Supplementary Material S1).

Frequency: Municipalities should publish a minimum of two and a maximum of ten posts per workday during peak online hours (see documents 5, 8, 9, 22, 28 in Supplementary Material S1), republish the same content with different titles and pictures to increase message effectiveness (see document 23 in Supplementary Material S1), and make use online tools to set a publication schedule and schedule posts (see documents 23, 29 in Supplementary Material S1).

4.4.3. Page Administrators

Recommendations on page administrators covered identifying administrators, training administrators, the attributes of effective administrators, and establishing a social media policy.

Identifying administrators: Municipalities should dedicate adequate resources to develop, manage, and monitor Facebook content daily (see documents 19, 24 in Supplementary Material S1) and recruit qualified Facebook administrators (see documents 4, 5, 8, 19, 26 in Supplementary Material S1). Maintaining a Facebook presence need not be expensive: the administrator can be an employee who spends one hour a day managing the account (see document 26 in Supplementary Material S1). Finally, it is recommended that municipalities grant administrator status to employees from various departments to leverage their knowledge of specific topics (see document 29 in Supplementary Material S1).

Training administrators: Municipalities should provide social media management training for staff on tracking and reporting impacts, building trust, generating online citizen participation, using social media creatively, and implementing a social media policy (see documents 11, 12, 16, 24, 29 in Supplementary Material S1). Employees should also be trained on basic Facebook management principles, such as maintaining a cordial and professional tone, being responsive, and updating content regularly (see document 24 in Supplementary Material S1).

Attributes of an effective Facebook administrator: A good administrator should think about whether the content is useful, positive, productive, and interesting before posting it and, if unsure, wait (see document 26 in Supplementary Material S1). It is also crucial that administrators be diplomatic, build a loyal following, and avoid engaging in online

debates in response to negative comments (see document 26 in Supplementary Material S1). It is likewise important that they effectively manage crises on the platform, which involves recognizing it, communicating privately with the parties involved, apologizing if needed, informing and soliciting feedback from the administration, and extracting lessons to avoid a similar situation in the future (see document 31 in Supplementary Material S1). Furthermore, it is essential the administrator maintain a good relationship and direct access to key officials in the organization to create connections with citizens (see document 27 in Supplementary Material S1) and avoid micromanaging other employees, trusting them to post content and manage risks (see document 24 in Supplementary Material S1). An effective Facebook administrator also makes recourse to technology to moderate the page and block specific keywords to avoid inappropriate and spam comments (see document 23, 31 in Supplementary Material S1), to monitor engagement and promote the page (e.g., through tools like Social Sprout, Hootsuite, or Facebook Analytics) (see document 22, 23 in Supplementary Material S1), and to continuously improve social media strategy through performance indicators (see document 19 in Supplementary Material S1).

Establishing a social media policy: It is important to clarify the role of page administrators to ensure that the posts align with brand image and values (see document 26 in Supplementary Material S1). Establishing a social media policy is crucial to define acceptable content, outline roles and responsibilities, prevent abuse and harassment, and develop a response strategy for inappropriate users (see documents 12, 19, 23, 24, 29 in Supplementary Material S1). Ideally, municipalities should have three Facebook policies: one for all municipal staff to prevent reputational damage, one for employees authorized to post on behalf of the municipality, and one for elected officials (see document 26 in Supplementary Material S1). There are three golden rules for an effective social media policy: it should communicate clear and reasonable expectations for employees' online conduct, facilitate monitoring of posts that may generate negative impacts, and be consistently enforced when violations occur (see document 27 in Supplementary Material S1). For sample social media policies, see documents 32, 33, 34, and 35 in Supplementary Material S1.

4.4.4. Online Citizen Participation and Engagement

Recommendations for municipalities to generate online citizen participation included developing a strategic plan for Facebook use, fostering active dialogue, communicating to citizens that their opinions matter, changing organizational culture to integrate social media, and measuring social media impact with tools.

Strategic planning: Municipalities should develop their strategy for reaching citizens—defining their objectives, target audience, content, and evaluation methods—before setting up their page (see documents 14, 21 in Supplementary Material S1). Facebook should be viewed as a complementary tool, not a replacement for other means of citizen and political participation (see documents 1, 9, 19, 20, 21, 31 in Supplementary Material S1). It is advisable that municipalities consider using other social media to expand their audience (see document 19 in Supplementary Material S1), while bearing in mind that online citizen participation and engagement may vary across municipalities and audiences (see document 14 in Supplementary Material S1).

Fostering dialogue with citizens: The selected documents recommend favoring posts that encourage active participation in public affairs, such as posts that elicit discussion on issues important to citizens (see documents 2, 4, 5, 8, 11, 12, 15, 20, 22, 28 in Supplementary Material S1). Interacting promptly with citizens by answering their questions and comments on Facebook (ideally within one hour) fosters engagement (see documents 4, 9, 15, 18, 20, 28, 30 in Supplementary Material S1). Municipalities can demonstrate receptivity by allowing citizens to comment and post on their Facebook wall (see documents 5, 15, 18 in Supplementary Material S1) and creating thematic Facebook pages where citizens can discuss specific topics, such as the environment or culture (see documents 18 in Supplementary Material S1). Strategies that lead to new visits to the page, including calls to action, are also recommended (see documents 15 in Supplementary Material S1). A recom-

mended approach involves four simple strategies: inform, by educating citizens on topics of interest (see documents 21 in Supplementary Material S1); ask, by requesting feedback from citizens and stakeholders to clarify issues, test ideas, and identify potential solutions (see documents 15, 21 in Supplementary Material S1); listen and learn, by engaging citizens and stakeholders in conversation (see documents 21 in Supplementary Material S1); and collaborate, by working with citizens and stakeholders to make decisions—for example, through a private Facebook group (see documents 21 in Supplementary Material S1).

Communicating to citizens that their opinions matter: Municipalities should build citizens' trust that their contributions are being considered in municipal decisions, including by providing transparency on the process and outcomes of online participation and engagement initiatives (see documents 11, 18 in Supplementary Material S1) and giving them a sense of responsibility and faith in change when they participate (see documents 12 in Supplementary Material S1). To further build transparency, it is recommended that municipalities clarify how their social media is managed, including by stipulating rules and privacy policies (see documents 20 in Supplementary Material S1). Finally, launching communication campaigns about the municipality's social media and opportunities for online discussion is advised (see documents 12, 20 in Supplementary Material S1).

Changing the organizational culture: It is recommended that municipalities formally integrate social media as a channel for receiving input and ideas (see documents 12 in Supplementary Material S1) and provide training for senior management and politicians about the value of using social media to engage with citizens (see documents 13 in Supplementary Material S1).

Measuring the impact of social media engagement and participation: Municipalities should implement social media monitoring and measurement systems for key engagement indicators (see documents 19 in Supplementary Material S1). In addition, they should listen to the needs of citizens using a variety of techniques, such as social media analytics, online surveys, and focus groups (see documents 18 in Supplementary Material S1).

5. Discussion

The main objective of the present review was to identify the best practices for municipalities' Facebook use to promote online citizen participation and engagement according to the scientific and gray literature. More specifically, it aimed to identify the benefits of Facebook use and the challenges municipalities face with this social network, as well as the recommendations for best practices. Our ultimate objective was to help municipalities develop an effective Facebook strategy. A thematic content analysis of 35 documents, including 20 from scientific literature and 15 from the gray literature, identified the main benefits, challenges, and recommendations.

Some of the benefits of using Facebook by municipalities identified in our study corroborate the findings of previous reviews. Indeed, in terms of citizen participation, a meta-analysis also confirmed the presence of a positive association between social media use and citizen engagement (Skoric et al. 2016), which is also in line with previous research (Lappas et al. 2022). In terms of electoral participation, two previous reviews found that social media can encourage political participation, such as voting (Ben Mansour 2017; Skoric et al. 2016). Finally, in terms of citizens' sense of belonging to their municipality, a previous review on the use of social media in politics mentioned that politicians can use social media to interact with citizens and give citizens a sense of closeness to politicians (Ben Mansour 2017).

The main challenges for municipalities are mainly related to problems in their Facebook communication strategy, such as using the platform to disseminate information without promoting dialogue and collaboration or publishing content that is not interesting for citizens nor conducive to engagement. A previous systematic review found that one barrier to citizens' online participation was their lack of interest in political matters or public affairs (Oliveira and Garcia 2019), which may result from a lack of interesting online content. Another challenge is that some municipalities do not value Facebook as a strategy

to solicit online citizen participation and engagement. A previous review also reported that governments rarely use social media to promote governance, such as by encouraging citizen participation and engagement (Perlman 2012), instead mainly using social media during elections and electoral campaigns to promote voter participation and for fundraising (Perlman 2012).

The documents reviewed made several useful recommendations for municipalities interested in using Facebook to promote citizen participation and engagement. Of note, it is important their posts be effective: posts should be relevant, interesting, frequent, and feature attractive content (e.g., pictures and videos, surveys, questions, simple posts). In general, it is recommended that municipalities post content that appeals to citizens and promotes discussion, interactivity, and feedback, rather than information-dense posts, the interest and use of which may vary for different citizens. Similarly, a previous review highlighted that social media allows for interactivity and personalization (Ben Mansour 2017). Another study also reported that Facebook can be used by organizations to gather feedback from users who subscribe to their page (Magnusson et al. 2012). Finally, a systematic review mentioned that content that is difficult to understand can be a barrier to citizens' online participation (Oliveira and Garcia 2019), suggesting that there is a need to keep Facebook posts short and simple.

Five observations can be made from this review's findings. First, Facebook is a tool that rural municipalities should integrate into their communication strategies, considering its many benefits for the municipal organization, elected officials, and citizens. However, it is essential that they carefully manage their page to obtain optimal results. For example, the role of the page administrator should be clearly defined, as they are responsible for updating information, monitoring interactions, and searching for useful comments (Agostino 2013). Careful management of the municipal Facebook page is also essential to prevent other accounts from playing this role and sharing ambiguous or false information with citizens (Agostino 2013). In fact, privacy issues and lurking behavior were identified as two barriers to citizens' online participation in a previous systematic review (Oliveira and Garcia 2019).

Second, the documents reviewed offer two distinct types of recommendations: recommendations to improve reach and recommendations to improve engagement. Recommendations to improve the reach of Facebook posts (e.g., views, number of likes) are more numerous and detailed than the latter and pertain to the form, content, and frequency of posts. There are comparatively few recommendations of the second type—that is, recommendations for fostering two-way communication with citizens (i.e., discussion and interaction rather than a unidirectional, informational approach)—despite the fact that Facebook is presented as a tool with the potential to foster online citizen participation and engagement. For example, a guide for municipalities in Alberta, Canada, recommends four main strategies—inform, ask, listen and learn, and collaborate—but offers few concrete means to achieve them (Alberta Urban Municipality Association & Alberta Association of Municipal District and Counties 2015). There is thus a need for additional information on Facebook communication practices such as surveys, contests, and encouraging citizens to post comments, interact with municipalities, get involved in the community, and participate in online or offline discussions with municipalities (Bellström et al. 2016).

The third observation is that the terms “citizen participation” and “citizen engagement” can be confusing in a social media context. Bonsón et al. define citizen engagement as “individual or collective action behavior aimed at solving social problems in the community” and whose essence “resides in the interaction between citizens and the government” (Bonsón et al. 2019, p. 482). These authors also point out that the terms “citizen participation” or “participatory democracy” are often used interchangeably with “civic engagement” (Bonsón et al. 2019). However, the term “digital or online engagement” is also used by multimedia designers to refer to “active involvement with content and, in effect, other people in a web-based environment” (Alberta Urban Municipality Association & Alberta Association of Municipal District and Counties 2015, p. 46). The same terms may therefore be used in the documents included in the review to describe very different kinds of participation.

In a recent study, [Wukich \(2022\)](#) addresses this issue by proposing a structure–content framework to characterize and encompass the various forms of social media engagement in government.

The fourth observation is that integrating Facebook into a municipality’s communication strategy requires planning. According to the documents included in our review, this should involve drafting a digital communication policy. Better training for employees managing the Facebook page was also recommended, as well as support for municipalities in developing their social media strategy. In fact, a survey of Belgian municipalities on their use of social networking sites found that one of the main barriers to using Facebook was a lack of guidelines ([FuturoCité 2017](#)). Municipalities mentioned that their main needs were to receive social media training, to convince managers of the importance of a social media presence and of devoting time to managing social media, and to gather feedback and have opportunities to discuss good practices (e.g., reference guides, discussion forums) ([FuturoCité 2017](#)).

The fifth and final observation is that there are few practical guides on the use of Facebook or social networking sites for municipalities, especially rural ones. The scientific articles mainly focused on analyzing Facebook posts from European municipalities. There were also few scientific articles on the experiences and perceptions of municipal Facebook pages from the perspective of municipal officials and citizens. The needs of citizens and the impact of municipal Facebook use for citizen solidarity and mutual aid were not much addressed. This is surprising, given that a previous meta-analysis reported a positive association between social media use and civic engagement, such as volunteering for charities, raising awareness of community issues, and seeking help for particular groups ([Skoric et al. 2016](#)). Finally, the differences in social media management for small or rural municipalities versus large urban centers were not addressed in the documents reviewed, and the recommendations were often intended for large urban municipalities. Nevertheless, by bringing together knowledge and information that was previously scattered across many documents, some less likely to be accessed by public servants, we believe that this review can be useful to municipalities.

6. Conclusions

To our knowledge, this is the first review to explore the benefits and challenges of online citizen participation and engagement on municipal Facebook pages and to document best practices in this area for municipalities. However, this study also has limitations. First, considering the little documentation on online citizen participation and engagement on municipal Facebook pages, we could not limit our search to documents addressing rural municipalities specifically. Therefore, although the recommendations identified in this study can be used by rural municipalities, they were not all retrieved from sources focused on the resources or challenges specific to small rural municipalities. Second, our search strategy could have limited the documents from the gray literature, as municipal reports or guidelines are not always publicly accessible. To address these limitations, interviews could have been conducted with stakeholders from small rural municipalities to complete the data.

In addition to promoting online citizen participation in public affairs, Facebook can offer many benefits to municipalities, such as fostering citizens’ sense of empowerment and their sense of closeness and belonging to their community. The main challenge that municipalities face is developing a communication strategy that will support such citizen empowerment and sense of belonging. Recommendations on how municipalities can achieve these goals include drafting Facebook posts that appeal to citizens and that encourage discussion, interactivity, and feedback, and giving priority to such posts that lead to engagement over informational ones. Integrating Facebook into municipal communication strategies requires careful planning.

The present review also identified areas where additional studies are needed. Given the various definitions of “citizen participation and engagement”, it would be helpful

if a common definition were agreed upon; this would make studies more comparable, especially in terms of levels of citizen participation. There is little information on concrete social media strategies for municipalities. In fact, few documents were specifically intended for municipalities, and small or rural municipalities were especially neglected, despite the fact that Facebook could be particularly useful for reaching citizens living in sparsely populated or remote areas (Flood-Grady et al. 2020). Finally, we hope that the present results will support municipalities, and rural municipalities in particular, in using Facebook and social media to communicate with citizens and foster online participation and engagement.

Supplementary Materials: The list of the documents included in the review can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci13030127/s1>, Supplementary Material S1: Documents included in the review.

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