

# FACTORS PROMOTING SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN LATVIA

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## **Abstract**

*Use of the social media in local governments has expanded around the world on the basis of development of internet and technology. Although each social network offers substantial benefits and opportunities, not all local governments use them or do not use them efficiently enough. Most local governments in Latvia use social media un do it for variety of reasons, but studies on the factors that promote the creation and maintenance of social network accounts in local governments in Latvia remains scant. The aim of the study is to analyse factors that promote social media use in local governments in Latvia and make proposals to policy makers. In order to achieve the purpose, the tasks are formulated as follows:*

- 1. to review theoretical background of social media use in local governments;*
- 2. to review existing research of social media use in local governments;*
- 3. to analyse factors that can promote social media use in local governments in Latvia.*

*Research methods used in preparation of the paper: recent scientific publication studies, analysis of social media of municipalities of Latvia, survey on social media use in municipalities in Latvia realized on April 2021. For data analysis there were used indicators of descriptive statistics: indicators of central tendency or location (arithmetic mean, mode, median, quartiles), indicators of variability (variance, standard deviation, standard error of mean), cross – tabulations.*

*The results show that most local governments generally have positive views of their social media use but the real application of social media is not consistent in each local government. Majority of local governments in Latvia use at least two social media and one of them is Facebook. The results of the research can provide valuable pointers for decision makers how to improve social media use in local governments in Latvia. Thus, this study contributes to the debate on local government transparency and provides important guidelines for developing appropriate social media strategies and policies.*

**Keywords:** Internet, local governments, regional development, social media

**JEL classification:** O33, M31, R11

## **Introduction**

Social media is a powerful tool that have proven their effectiveness in disseminating information, diversity of opinion and strengthening communication. Many public institutions have begun to use social media for various purposes, including local governments, because it

is relatively easy way to improve communication and engagement with citizens without involving large financial and human resources. However, studies on factors promoting social media use in local governments in Latvia remains scant.

The aim of the study is to analyse factors that promote social media use in local governments in Latvia and make proposals to policy makers.

In order to achieve the purpose, the tasks are formulated as follows:

1. to review theoretical background of social media use in local governments;
2. to review existing research of social media use in local governments in EU;
3. to analyse factors that can promote social media use in local governments in Latvia.

Research methods used in preparation of the paper: recent scientific publication studies, analysis of social media of municipalities of Latvia, survey on social media use in municipalities in Latvia realized on April 2021. For data analysis there were used indicators of descriptive statistics: indicators of central tendency or location (arithmetic mean, mode, median, quartiles), indicators of variability (variance, standard deviation, standard error of mean), cross – tabulations, statistical tests of hypotheses and analysis of variance (ANOVA).

## **Literature review**

Potential of social media opportunities for local governments has gained interest in researchers worldwide - Rodriguez-Galvez et.al. analysed social media use in local governments in Mercosur countries, Omar et.al. (2014) in Australia, Criado and Villodre (2021) in European local governments, but Gintova (2019) in Canada. Major advantages of social media are that they do not require specific technical skills, are reasonably intuitive to use and enable individuals to generate content, and interact with other users (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010). They are widely available at low cost, but are powerful tools that offer citizens increased ability to engage and participate with government and offer local governments opportunities for additional interactivity (Howard, 2011). Other important benefits of social media adoption by public authorities are promotion of transparency (Guillamon, et.al., 2016), participation and collaboration (Criado, Villodre, 2021). Lu, Zhang and Fan (2015) describe three levels of interaction among citizens and government on social media where the first level is the simplest one and most used technique for government – one-way interaction without any citizen engagement. Second level includes greater citizen involvement – forming a dialogue between citizens and local government. Third level is the highest possible level of engagement.

According to the *Norstrom & Hattinger* (2016) often local governments create social media accounts, but do not use them to the full potential. Promotion of local government, providing with information in fast and easy way, increase of democracy and building extensive network are the main reasons of creation of social media accounts in Sweden. Overall, local government are not traditionally known as innovative users of IT. The conservative culture of local government and the consequences of losing the trust of citizens are powerful inhibitors to social media use (Omar, et.al., 2014).

Public authorities of the world's largest cities prefer Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, followed by Google, LinkedIn, Instagram (Mainka, et.al., 2015). There are several authors who analyse benefits and social media content in social media platform *Facebook* (Mital & Jozef, 2020; Silva, Silva & Lameiras, 2019; Teiu, 2020) indicating that in Slovakia local governments mostly use one-way communication by posting informational posts about past and future events, *Facebook* in Portugal is more used for increasing visibility of newly elected officials

and to foster the political engagement of apathic voters, while in Romania content of social media depends on the type of local government, for example, more touristic cities, posts more information to promote local tourism.

Study about *Twitter* use in Netherland's local governments (Faber, Budding & Gradus, 2020) indicate that longer use of *Twitter* makes more advanced use of its functions in local governments, while study in Italian local governments (Bonson, Perea & Bednarova, 2019) indicate that *Twitter* is widely used, because it helps to promote the municipality with very low costs or no costs at all, however there is no significant relationship between population of the municipality and its citizens' engagement and there is a significant negative relationship between *Twitter* audience and engagement and between activity and engagement.

Research about *Instagram*'s use in local governments are very limited. Study in Spain showed that in the region of Andalusia, which has 29 municipalities, *Instagram* accounts are maintained by 17 municipalities, and found that those municipalities with high debts do not maintain or actively use Instagram (Perea, Bonson, Bednrova, 2021).

Factors influencing social media use in local governments from public authority's point of view differ, for example, population, financial independence, level of government, the entity operating social media, median age and whether social media is used for interaction or to gather opinions are the most influential factors that make a difference in utilization in local governments in South Korea (Jae-In, Anderson & Jin-Wan, 2019). But from citizen point of view *Guillamon, Rios, Gesuele and Metallo* (2016) found evidence that the lower the income level of the population, the more actively local governments use social networks, because low-income people are interested in social services, benefits and financial support, which is a sign to local governments that such information can be published more and more often on their social networks. In the same way, municipalities should use appropriate measures to encourage different interest groups to use social media in cooperation with the local governments. Aspects of such use are reflected in several researches (Sloka, Lase, & Vitols, 2021; Seimuskane, Vilka, & Brekis, 2017) with stressing importance of marketing (Batraga et al., 2018; Savrina, & Seimukane, 2018), with importance of financing aspects (Romanova et al, 2018) and digitalisation aspects (Rivza, & Rivza, 2020).

## **Methodology**

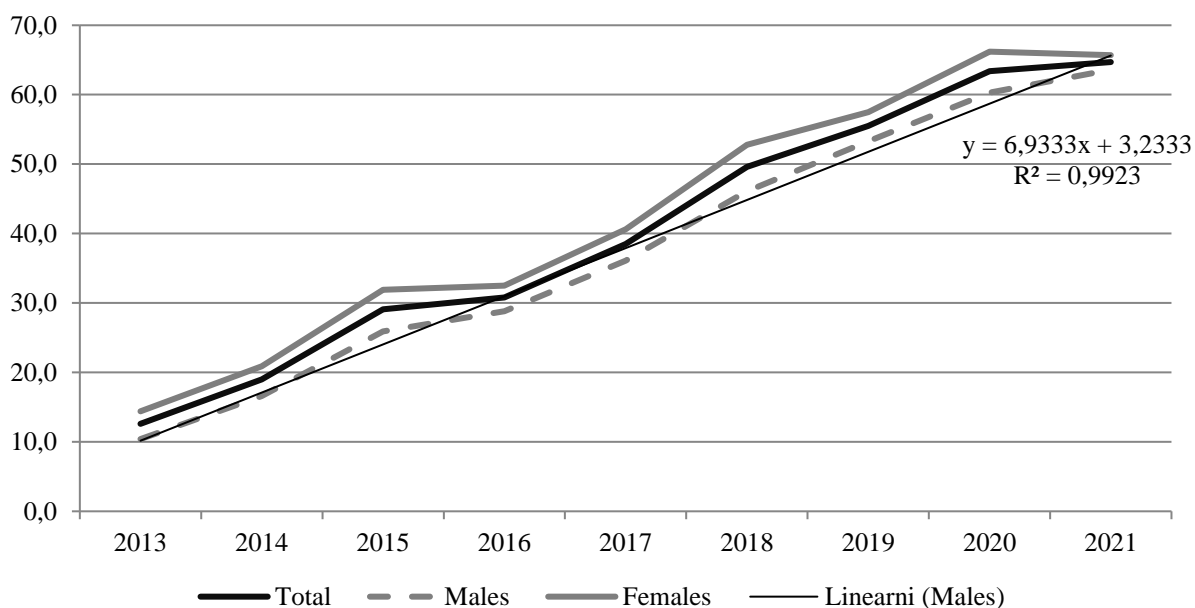
To analyse digital divide among local governments in Latvia there were used three types of data sources – publicly available data from Central statistical bureau of Latvia, social media analysis of local government of Latvia and survey of local government representatives. The survey questionnaire was sent out and collected from April 20 to April 29. The questionnaire was created using survey tool *QuestionPro* and sent to 119 local governments of Latvia on *Facebook* or to the e-mail if the local government did not have a *Facebook* account. The results of the survey were analysed using SPSS. For data analysis there were used indicators of descriptive statistics: indicators of central tendency or location (arithmetic mean, mode, median, quartiles), indicators of variability (variance, standard deviation, standard error of mean), cross – tabulations, statistical tests of hypotheses and analysis of variance (ANOVA).

A total of 87 responses were received and local governments from all regions of Latvia participated in the survey.

## Research results

Since the rapid development of the internet and technology, information sources of government have expanded, however there are differences in the use of the internet for contacting or interacting with public authorities. In figure 1 is included development of internet use by gender in Latvia 2013-2021 including use of information sources by local governments for communication with society in Latvia.

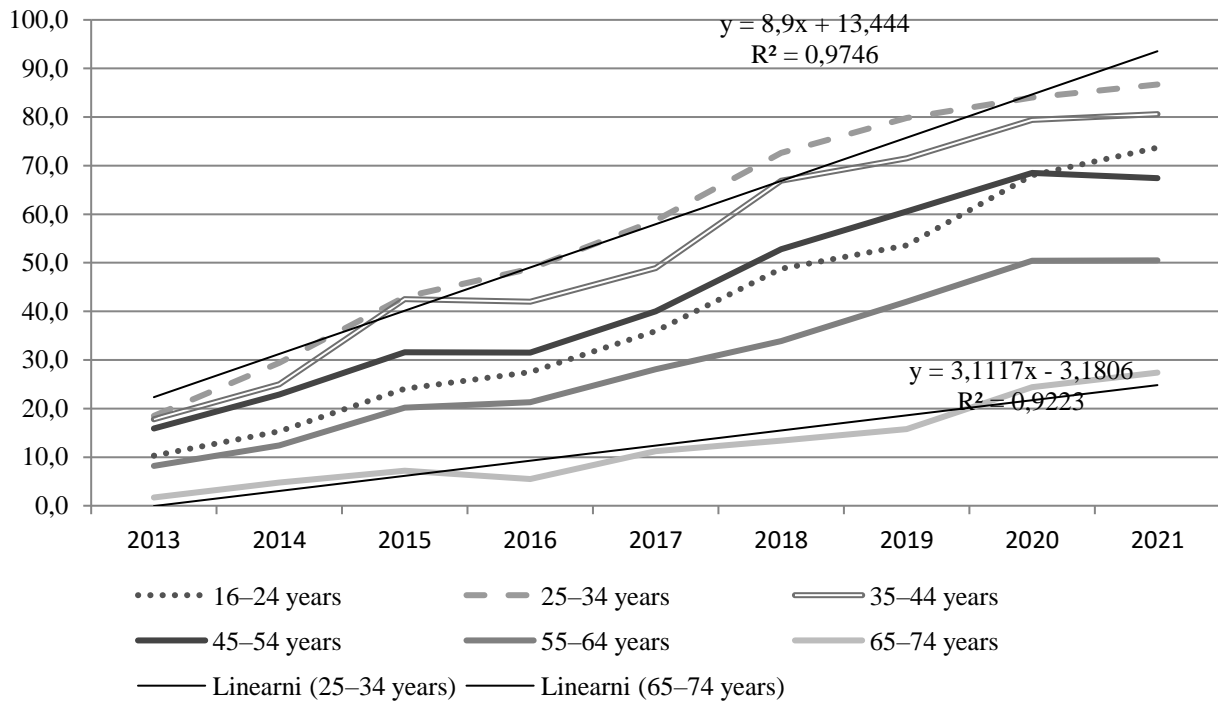
*Figure 1: Contacting or interacting with public authorities or public services over the Internet by individuals for private purposes (per cent of total) for submitting completed forms online by gender in Latvia in 2013-2021*



*Source: Authors construction and calculations based on Official Statistics portal database, Republic of Latvia, DLM040*

Data indicate that share of inhabitants is increasing but lower levels are for male persons, but also for male persons use of internet is increasing in average by 6,9 percent points annually. In figure 2 is included development of internet use by age groups in Latvia 2013-2021.

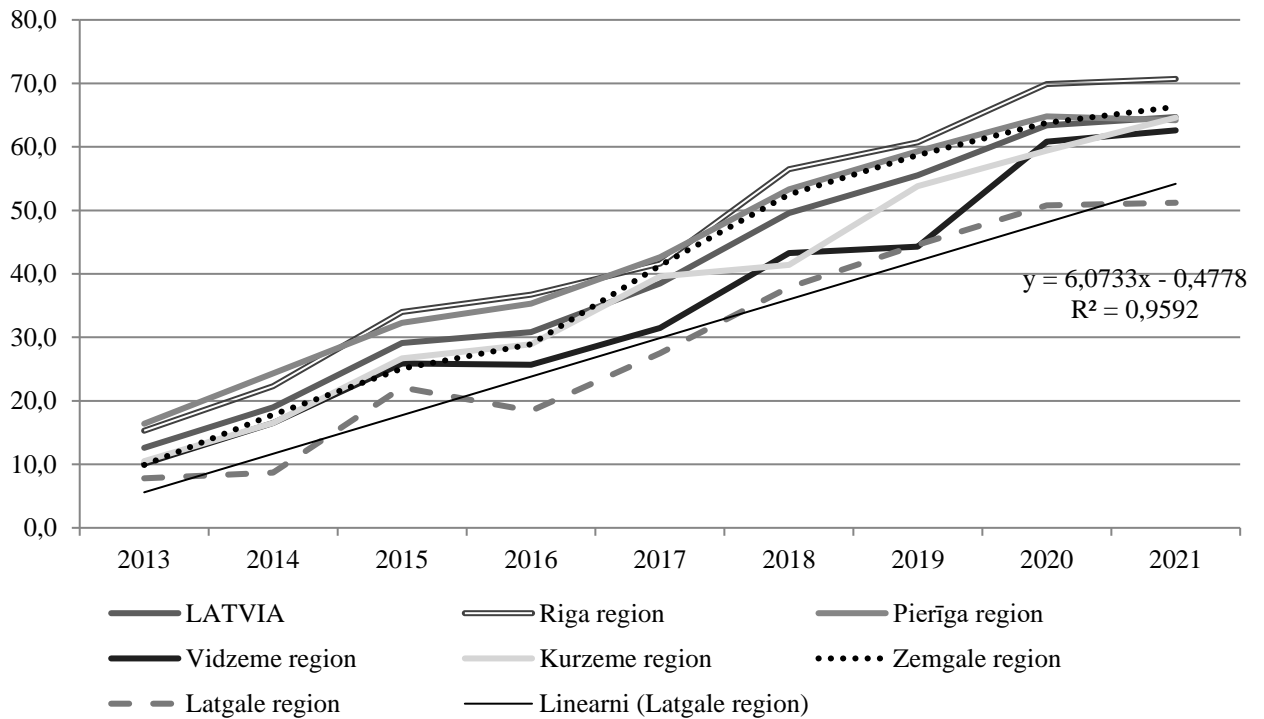
Figure 2: Contacting or interacting with public authorities or public services over the Internet by individuals for private purposes (per cent of total) for submitting completed forms online by age groups in Latvia in 2013-2021



Source: Authors construction and calculations based on Official Statistics portal database, Republic of Latvia, DLM040

Data indicate that share of inhabitants is increasing in all age groups but lower levels are for persons 65-74 years old, but also those persons use of internet is increasing in average by 3,1 percent points annually. The biggest increase is for persons in age group 25-34 years where use of internet is increasing in average by 8,9 percent points annually. In figure 3 is included development of internet use by regions in Latvia 2013-2021.

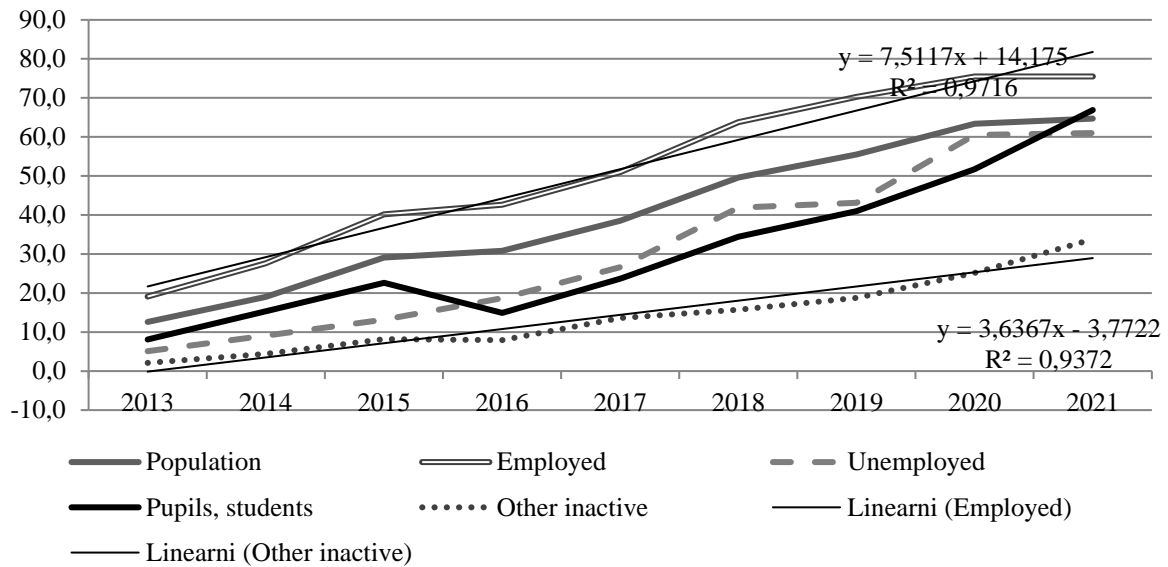
Figure 3: Contacting or interacting with public authorities or public services over the Internet by individuals for private purposes (per cent of total) for submitting completed forms online by regions in Latvia in 2013-2021



Source: Authors construction and calculations based on Official Statistics portal database, Republic of Latvia, DLM040

Data indicate that share of inhabitants is increasing in all regions, but lower levels are for persons from Latgale region, but also those persons use of internet is increasing in average by 6,1 percent points annually. In figure 4 is included development of internet use by labour status in Latvia 2013-2021.

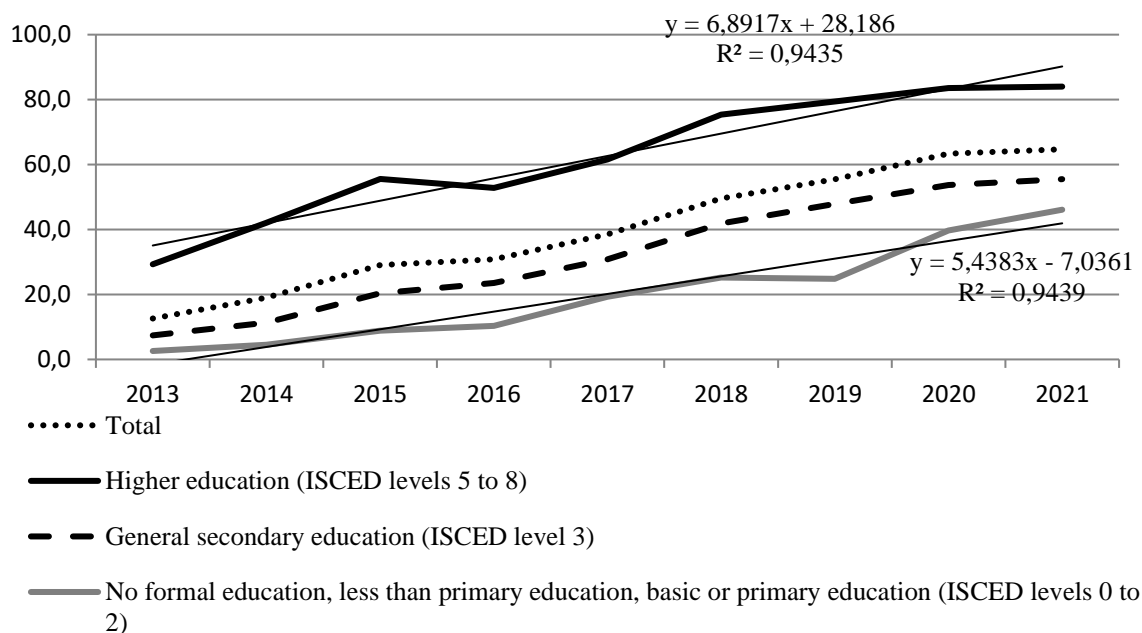
Figure 4: Contacting or interacting with public authorities or public services over the Internet by individuals for private purposes (per cent of total) for submitting completed forms online by labour status in Latvia in 2013-2021



Source: Authors construction and calculations based on Official Statistics portal database, Republic of Latvia, DLM040

Data indicate that share of inhabitants is increasing in all labour status but lower levels are for other inactive persons, but also those persons use of internet is increasing in average by 3,6 percent points annually. The biggest increase is for employed persons where use of internet is increasing in average by 7,5 percent points annually. In figure 6 is included development of internet use by education level in Latvia 2013-2021.

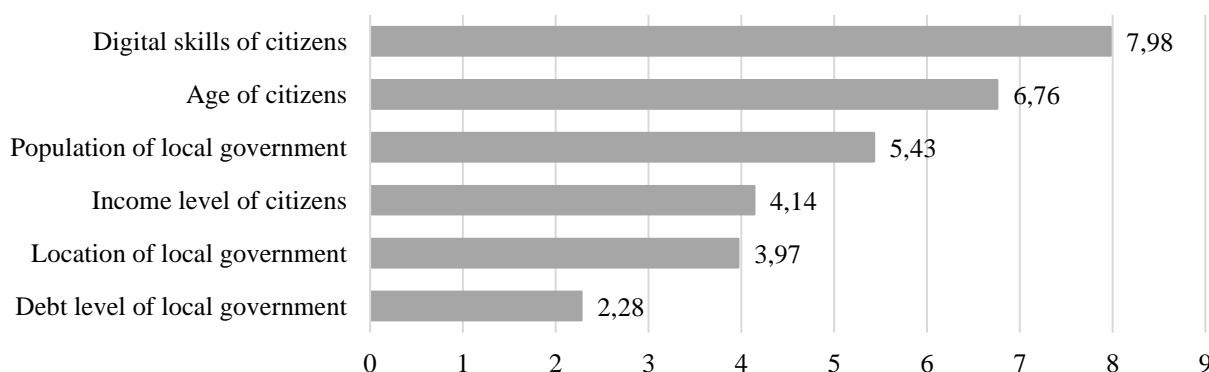
Figure 5: Contacting or interacting with public authorities or public services over the Internet by individuals for private purposes (per cent of total) for submitting completed forms online by education level in Latvia in 2013-2021



Source: Authors construction and calculations based on Official Statistics portal database, Republic of Latvia, DLM040

Data indicate that share of inhabitants is increasing in all education level groups but lower levels are for persons with no formal education, but also those persons use of internet is increasing in average by 5,4 percent points annually. The biggest increase is for persons in age group with higher education where use of internet is increasing in average by 6,9 percent points annually. Data of figure 6 reveal reasons for creating and maintaining social networks in local governments in Latvia in 2021.

Figure 6: Main reasons of creating and maintaining social networks in local governments in Latvia in 2021 (arithmetic means)



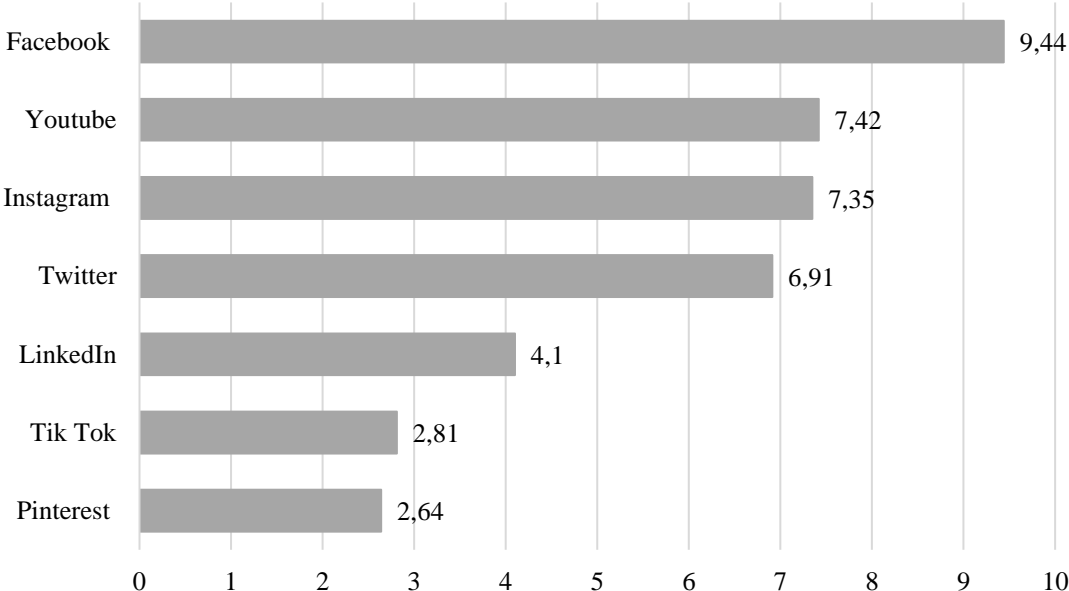
Source: Authors construction and calculations based on survey "Social media use in municipalities in Latvia", n=87

According to representatives of local governments, the main reason why local governments create and maintain social networks is the digital skills of the population. Although digital skills in Latvia are below EU average, they are still evolving. With the acquisition of digital skills,



citizens are making greater use of the opportunities offered by the internet, including communication with local government via social media. The age of citizens is the second reason of creating and maintaining social networks, i.e.i. it is easier to reach a young audience that is very difficult to reach in traditional ways today. Third reason of creating and maintaining social networks in local governments is population of local governments. Representatives of local governments commented this as an opportunity to reach a large audience more easily and with less financial resources, which is important for large local governments. Also results of social network analysis (Sloka, Lase & Vitols, 2021) revealed that there are 13 local governments which do not use any social network at all - and one of the reasons is that smaller local governments do not have an employee who can take care of it. Less important factors why local governments create and maintain social networks are income level of citizens, location of local government and debt level of local government. Survey data on use of social media in local governments in Latvia are reflected in figure 7.

Figure 7: Social media use in local governments in Latvia



Source: Authors construction and calculations based on survey “Social media use in municipalities in Latvia”, n=87

Data of figure 7 indicate that the most important social network in reflecting information on local government is *Facebook*, followed by *Youtube*, *Instagram* and *Twitter*, but the least used social networks are *LinkedIn*, *Tik Tok* and *Pinterest*.

**Conclusion, proposals, recommendations**

Use of social media in local governments has brought many opportunities, however there are challenges that need to be overcome. Gender, age group, education level, region and labour status are some factors that have influence on contacting or interacting with public authorities. There are 13 local governments in Latvia that do not use any social network at all – in some cases the reason is lack of digital skills and small population in local government resulting in lack of quota for position of social media specialist. Most important social network in reflecting information on local governments is *Facebook*, followed by *Youtube*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*, but the least used social networks are *LinkedIn*, *Tik Tok* and *Pinterest*.

Study revealed that main reason why local governments create and maintain social networks is the digital skills of the population, the age of citizens and population of local government. While less important factors why local governments create and maintain social networks are income level of citizens, location of local government and debt level of local government.

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