THE USAGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AT THE LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT LEVEL: THE LINK BETWEEN MUNICI-PAL COUNCILLORS AND CITIZENS

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ABSTRACT

Social networks perform a highly important role in public governance, especially in its communication processes, since they are an alternative to usual methods of communication and the dissemination of information, and it is becoming easier and quicker to publicise the political content, to receive feedback, and to form one's opinion. Citizens can express their viewpoints on issues which are relevant to self-government, whereas representatives of the municipality can inform citizens about activities and ongoing changes, seek the support of citizens, and pursue their political career goals. The purpose of this research is to reveal how social networks can be employed for citizen engagement at the local self-government level, by identifying the characteristics of the link between municipal councillors and citizens. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative research approaches, using methods such as the content analysis of 335 account entries (posts) on the social network Facebook by four municipal councillors and semi-structured interviews with said councillors. The empirical research demonstrates that municipal councillors use their Facebook accounts to disseminate information on important matters of local self-government, raising questions which are relevant to society, and receiving feedback from citizens (assessment of problems, suggested solutions); however, there is a lack of other kinds of engagement of citizens, i.e. institutional (applied by a municipality), via Facebook, even though there are possibilities available for not only the dissemination of information but also for discussions and the submission of suggestions via social networks.

KEY WORDS
Social networks, citizen participation, citizen engagement, Facebook, municipality.

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Introduction

Modern society is characteristic of continuous change, and the implementation of innovations in various fields. Innovations in the public sector are treated as a search for new technologies, methods, procedures, and forms which contribute to the improvement of interaction between public institutions, their representatives and citizens. Meeting the challenges of an information society, the public sector is attributed with digitalisation processes, the implementation of information and com-

munication technologies (hereinafter ICT) as an inseparable part of public governance reforms at the local self-government level (Bučinskas et al., 2012, 5).

The role of social networks as innovative channels of communication is becoming more significant in the public sector as well, since they stimulate subjects of public governance to change the settled order and focus increased attention on informing citizens (Roengtam et al., 2017). Social networks provide an opportunity to increase the speed and ease of the relationship between local self-government institutions and citizens; therefore, they are put into action for the purposes of citizen participation and engagement. Tretiakova (2016) has emphasised that social networks are the most attractive part of the Internet, embracing ideas on interpersonal interaction and communication. As such, social networks increasingly often replace traditional means of communication, create reciprocal communication and dialogue (Veerasamy, 2020), and assist in promptly reaching a target group and receiving feedback.

Citizen participation in local self-government is considered a valuable element of citizenship and the democratic decision-making process, which ensures the quality of democracy (Michels and De Graaf, 2017). According to this process, citizens who have not been officially elected or appointed to make decisions participate in forming an agenda and/or making decisions related to relevant issues or public policy which have an influence on their interests, together with officials (Stasiukynas, 2010). Citizen participation is closely related to the notions of both citizen self-engagement (personal initiative arising from citizens) and citizen engagement (an institutional initiative of a municipality). Citizen engagement is a practice that ensures citizen participation in managing public matters and allowing governing institu-

tions to make the feedback received from citizens part of public policy decision-making (Repo and Matschoss, 2019; Sideri et al., 2019; Wamsler et al., 2020). Local level government institutions, i.e. municipalities, are obliged to provide citizens with information on their performance, make decisions, and disseminate the political agenda. The COVID-19 outbreak especially has highlighted the need to enhance engagement through advanced digital technologies at the local self-government level (Costopoulou et al., 2021).

Local self-government increasingly often employs social networks as a means of citizen engagement and information. This has also been proven by earlier research (Aurylaitë, 2017, 2019; Bonsón et al., 2017; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Alarabiat et al., 2021). However, the available research does not reveal the answers to the following questions: how may social networks contribute to citizen engagement in local self-government? What are the dimensions of the usage of social networks in the context of interaction between municipal councillors and citizens? What possibilities and key problems are viewed by councillors in terms of citizen participation in local self-government when social networks are used? The present article attempts to answer these questions.

The research aims to reveal how social networks can be employed to engage citizens at the local self-government level, while identifying the characteristics of the link between municipal councillors and citizens.

The paper is structured as follows: the subsequent section analyses the literature devoted to the usage of social networks for citizen engagement. This is followed by the methodological part. Research results are presented thereafter; and finally we present the discussion and conclusions.
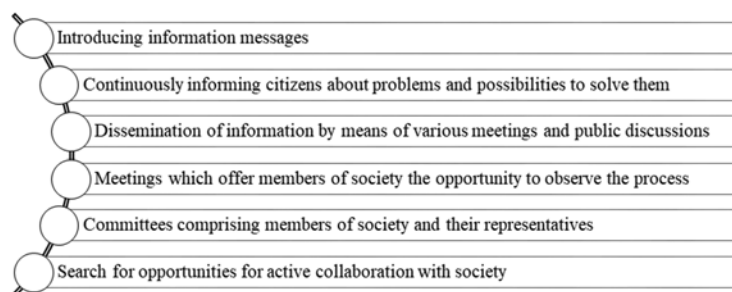
1. Literature review

1.1. Significance of citizen engagement

Two main notions are usually mentioned in scholarly literature: citizen participation and citizen engagement. According to Stasiukynas (2010), three aspects of this process are important when dealing with citizen participation: 1) participants; 2) level of citizen engagement (participation); 3) the governance process, a stage that society is engaged in. Therefore, members of society are participants in this process. Citizen participation and engagement are not identical; nevertheless, they are highly interrelated processes. Citizen participation in the decision-making process is the right of each citizen, which is specific because citizens engage in this process by themselves (a bottom-up initiated process). Citizen engagement is described as a process or activity by means of which citizens are allowed to participate in management of public matters or policy formation, i.e. activity of public administrations that seek citizen engagement in public governance processes by using specific communication channels (a top-down initiated process). Citizens' engagement in processes of public governance makes finding the solution to problems easier, and it is important because of challenges which occur in relation to the aging society, a lack of democracy at various levels of public governance, and more frequent economic crises (Stapper et al., 2020; Vaidelytė et al., 2016). According to Smalskys and Đilinskytė (2016), the benefits and public value of engagement of citizens, communities, NGOs or other organisational formations in governance are major reasons stimulating institutions to engage citizens in decision-making processes at the local self-government level. Public policy is more transparent and open when citizens (or groups of citizens) engage in public governance.

Citizen engagement is influenced by the willingness and possibilities of governing institutions to actively share information, find solutions to problems, communicate with citizens, and have regard for citizens' comments. The methods by means of which local self-government institutions can implement this process are singled out (Figure 1). Thus, in the case of engagement, conditions are provided for citizens to directly participate while expressing their interests and representing them.

Figure 1. Measures used by government institutions to engage citizens

- Introducing information messages
- Continuously informing citizens about problems and possibilities to solve them
- Dissemination of information by means of various meetings and public discussions
- Meetings which offer members of society the opportunity to observe the process
- Committees comprising members of society and their representatives
- Search for opportunities for active collaboration with society

Source: Own elaboration based on Marcinkevičiūtė and Petrauskienė, 2008.

Two parties – citizens and government representatives – participate in citizen engagement as well as in the decision-making process. Formally, the top-down process of citizen engagement is initiated by a municipality and its representatives; therefore, various challenges often occur: it is difficult to identify the most important problems faced by citizens, to persuade citizens to engage, to provide all necessary information to citizens on grounded decision-making, to collect feedback from them, and to respond to feedback by making decisions (Lodewijckx, 2019). In order to become more accessible to citizens, government representatives use new and popular ICTs as well as new channels such as social networks.

1.2. Potential of social networks

In modern society, increased attention is paid to communication strategies and social networks as factors which can either limit or facilitate more opportunities for citizens (Calder and Beckie, 2011). The reason is that social networks belong to the most popular communication tools (Nadanyiova et al., 2020). A social network is a programme or a web-based application that enables two-way communication - end-users exchange ideas and information while mutually sharing various information and data, allowing users to classify an individual audience by directing attractive information thereto (Schauer, 2015; Mazurek et al., 2019). The number of users of social networks (such as Facebook) is increasing annually (Skulme and Praude, 2016); thus, public sector organisations as well as their representatives take advantage of social networks, learning more about the needs of stakeholders, developing the relationships established with them, increasing the level of engagement, and promoting their ideas (Mazurek et al., 2019). However, some research emphasises that digital deprivation might be the cause of economic, social, cultural and political marginalisation (Polat, 2012; Kuc-Czarnecka, 2020); therefore, it is important to ensure the balance between ICT usage (including social networks) and traditional ways of informing citizens when it comes to the spread of information. Nonetheless, said research does not neglect the importance of ICT, as the increasing employment of social networks for public governance is observed.

Subjects of public governance use social networks to represent their main mission, seeking to raise the interest of society or encouraging the participation of interested parties. This practice creates a new model of performance which emphasises civic participation when significant attention is focused on the priorities and needs of citizens, as well as the provision of public services (Sideri et al., 2019). According to Aurylaitë (2017), local self-government insufficiently ensures the functions of information dissemination and transmission; therefore, electronic means stimulate citizens to engage in the process of political decision-making at the local self-government level. Methods of communication based on new technologies provide space for self-government institutions to communicate more actively to citizens and engage them in the political process (Table 1).

Table 1. Links between social networks and citizen engagement

Aspect	Category	Description
Social network platforms	Blogs	Online blogs
	Social networks	Social networks (Facebook, Instagram etc.)
Types of usage of social networks	Informational	Various information is searched for, collected, and shared, including news, information on communities and campaigns
	Expressive	A wish to express oneself, one's opinions, ideas, and thoughts
	Rational	Relationships with others are initiated, maintained, enhanced
	Identity	Personal identity is created and maintained, new contacts are sought, status is enhanced
	Entertaining	Used for entertainment (leisure, hobbies, contests, events, invitations etc.)
Means of usage of social networks	Usage vs lack of usage	Measuring how social network users use or do not use networks
	Intensity	Intensity, frequency or time spent on social networks are measured
	Usage of groups	Created groups are used
Settings of participation / engagement	Online participation / engagement	Political participation and citizen engagement online, social capital maintained and formed online
	Participation / engagement without logging in	Political participation and citizen engagement online, social capital maintained and formed without logging in

Source: Own elaboration based on Skoric et al., 2015.

The observation has been made that it is possible to achieve the active engagement of citizens when set goals are reached by integrating social networks, when intensity is visible, and when other implemented measures are used, not only by posting information. Social networks provide opportunities to identify the intensity of citizen engagement online, while also forming and maintaining the accumulated social capital. This is highly important especially when regarding the declining levels of civic trust in government, and social networks are often mentioned as a measure by which to avoid this.

1.3. Social networks for interaction

The purpose of using a social network is usually connected to maintaining contacts and good relations with one's friends and acquaintances, as well as the enhancement of one's own, usually positive, image (Kwon and Wen, 2010; Maximova and Lukyanova, 2020). Social networks become relevant for acquiring political knowledge, as it is formed by formal education and the people with whom we interact, even if it takes place on social media and networks (Campbell, 2013). Scientific studies explain that people with large social networks are more likely to participate in politics (McClurg, 2003, 2006). Therefore, by using social networks, the level of political participation (representation as well as engagement) may be increased. Communication in social networks should contribute to the increase of inter-personal trust, as it facilitates the exchange of information between councillors and citizens (as partners), the open communication and reduction of conflicts, and allows for an easier transfer of knowledge leading to effective cooperation (Chow, 2008; Sroka, 2011). Most politicians are very cautious about how they use social networks and how much they interact with their online audiences as it leads to political strategies for mobilising and engaging with citizens (Howard et al., 2016).

At an institutional level, social networks allow elected representatives (such as municipal councillors) to disseminate information and consult their constituents, closing

some gaps in the circuits of representation, while at a societal level, social networks allow constituents to organise and represent their own interests influencing representatives (Deseriis, 2020). According to Charalabidis et al., (2014), from a technological perspective, the programming for social networks is used intending to disseminate political content and later to automatically guarantee the interaction among citizens (e.g. reviews, likes, and comments). From a political perspective, representatives of government institutions (including municipal councillors), when seeking to review opinions, needs, and concerns, tend to use a number of social networks as communication channels covering a larger circle of citizens. This allows politicians to utilise broad political content. Based on this, it is possible to analyse opinions and obtain actual results which demonstrate the efficiency and benefits of such actions. Finally, based on the results obtained, one may take actions, i.e. form opinions, upload additional press releases, and use other information channels or measures. Social networks may become a valuable, efficient and convenient tool for municipal politicians (councillors) (see Table 2); however, both the strengths (benefits) and weaknesses (threats) have to be taken into account and considered carefully.

Recently, local self-government institutions (municipalities or counties) have begun to create their own guidelines for councillors on using social media and networks to prevent council members from digital threats and legal conflicts. Such guidelines are usually provided as appendices to the Code of Conduct for Council Members, i.e. Toronto City (Office of the Integrity.., 2016), City of Brantford (The Corporation of…, 2020), Darebin City (2020), etc. But this regulating practice is still not applied in all countries (including Lithuania).

Table 2. Dimensions of the usage of social networks in the context of interaction between municipal councillors and citizens

Social networks		
Dimension	**Municipal councillors**	**Citizen**
Information and communication	To communicate with citizens and inform them directly about municipal council work and councillors' activities.	To find out more about municipal council work and councillors' activities, and to give feedback.
Power and influence	A tool used to represent and advocate for the interests of the electorate.	To influence the position (attitude) of councillors.
Trust building	To improve trust and confidence in local self-government.	To honestly and openly share opinions about policy, decisions formed and made by the municipal council. To observe the difference between policy making and citizens' opinions.
Costs of maintenance	An official account should be created by the councillor. It is not completely "free of charge". City logos, computers, smart phones, products, services, or goods are municipal resources and can only be used for municipal purposes. Personal political campaigns can be announced and supported using a separate (election) account.	It is free of charge as both citizens and councillors may use personal accounts on social networks.
Confidentiality	The Code of Conduct prohibits councillors from disclosing, releasing or posting confidential information. They should not use social media and networks in any form during in camera or other confidential meetings.	Citizens may require the open and transparent provision of information, including material from meetings.

Social networks		
Dimension	Municipal councillors	Citizen
Ethics and responsibility	Councillors, as representatives of the municipality, should not engage in or encourage bullying, blaming, or shaming of any other social networks users.	People cannot bully, blame, or shame any other social networks users. Such behaviour can be subject to criminal liability.

Source: Own elaboration based on Office of the Integrity.., 2016.

In summary, many countries including Lithuania have a practice of using social networks for citizen engagement; however, interactions between councillors and citizens are not regulated and such practice is quite different from modern tendencies. Therefore, the empirical research as a case study has been conducted in one Lithuanian municipality to reveal the content of citizen engagement to local self-government enabling links between local politicians and citizens.

2. Methodology

2.1. Background for the case study

The chosen research strategy employed both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The research aimed to identify the forms used by social networks for citizen engagement at the local self-government level, revealing the links between municipal councillors and citizens. Previous research studies on citizen engagement using ICT show that the *case study* is a suitable method allowing researchers to more profoundly reveal characteristics of the phenomenon which is the subject of analysis (Garau, 2012; Bojic et al., 2016; Katsonis, 2019; Masiya et al., 2019); therefore, it was employed for this research. The case of Šiauliai City Municipality was chosen with regard to the Index of Lithuanian Municipalities (Lithuanian Free Market Institute, 2016) and the results of recent research conducted in 2016 demonstrating that said municipality is ranked first according to the assessed e-democracy index. This shows that this municipality is advanced in the usage of various ICT

means and channels in the aspect of citizen engagement. Moreover, the mayor and councillors of Šiauliai City actively use social networks (this is revealed by means of the daily activity of their personal accounts on Facebook); therefore, the content of posted entries can be analysed to reveal how this promotes citizen engagement. Facebook was the only social network chosen because the municipality chosen for the present research only disseminates information via Facebook and YouTube social network channels; however, it uses a YouTube channel only to present videos, there is a lack of feedback from citizens, and moreover a lower number of followers. All councillors of the municipality have accounts on Facebook and use them for active communication.

2.2. Content analysis

By employing the *content analysis* method, pertaining in this particular case to *Facebook posts*, the researchers aimed to find out what content was shared by the councillors, how actively and for what purposes the information was shared, and what type of feedback was received from citizens on Facebook.

Four Šiauliai City Municipality councillors were selected for the case study using the criterion-based selection method (all interviewees had to meet the set criteria): 1) to have at least two years of experience in the political field, 2) to be an active user of a social network (Facebook) (uploading at least one post daily), 3) to be a participating candidate in the elections to the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania to be held in October 2020. The age of re-

search participants varied from 35 to 62 (the average age was 44); and experience in the political field also varied from two to 20 years (the average was 10.5 years). The research participants had a significant amount of experience (not less than eight years) in using Facebook. As both quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to the four research participants were collected throughout the case study, they will be referred to as interviewees in the research results section of this paper for the sake of precision.

The content analysis (method) of Facebook account entries (posts) uploaded by the councillors interviewed in 2020 was carried out to find out how the councillors use Facebook for political goals – personal and citizen engagement.

A list of features designed on the basis of the theoretical approach, i.e. correlation between social networks and citizen engagement (Table 1), was chosen as the research instrument. This list of features included both quantitative and qualitative data.

The research sample comprised 335 posts from the Facebook accounts of the interviewees. Recent posts, i.e. those covering the period from 1 January to 31 October 2020, were analysed. The period was chosen purposefully because at that time the interviewees already held the position of council members and were candidates for election to the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania; moreover, it was a politically difficult and intensive period due to the beginning of the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysed sample of posted entries was formed by applying the criterion-based method of selection and the following criteria: 1) recently posted entries (not older than 2020); 2) uploaded on interviewees' accounts as authorial posts (created as opposed to shared); 3) the entries mentioned matters related to the interests of the inhabitants of Šiauliai city.

All posted entries on Facebook accounts are publicly available. Seeking to ensure confidentiality, contractions are used to identify posts of the interviewees; these short forms corresponded to the codes given to the research participants according to the method of interview: Face_I1, Face_I2, Face_I3, Face_I4.

2.3. The semi-structured interview method

The *semi-structured interview* method aimed to find out more about how and for what purposes representatives of local self-government (councillors) used Facebook and how they assessed the possibilities of engaging citizens in coming up with solutions for local self-government questions via these social networks. Based on the theoretical approach (see Table 1), a research instrument – *guidelines for an interview questionnaire* – was used during the research; the guidelines consisted of seven blocks and groups comprising 26 questions.

The sample for the interview method consisted of four members of Šiauliai City Municipality who were selected on the basis of the criterion-based selection method, and their Facebook posts were analysed during the quantitative research. The interviewees indicated that they not only used Facebook but also other social networks, including another major social network, Instagram. The interviewees had a great deal of experience (not less than eight years) in using Facebook.

Interviews were conducted in October 2020 during face-to-face meetings or using the Zoom video-conferencing platform. The interviews were recorded and supplemented by taking notes. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed.

The interviewees were able to acquaint themselves with the interview guidelines and the consent form in advance. A pre-prepared form confirming consent to participate in the scientific research was presented to interviewees; they signed it before taking part in the interview. The research participants were verbally informed that they were taking part in interviews of their own free will and could refuse to continue participation at any time. Seeking to ensure confidentiality, the responses of the research participants were coded as I1, I2, I3 and I4, where I is short for "an interviewee" and 1–4 indicates the order in which the interviews were conducted.

3. Research results

3.1. Results of the content analysis

It has already been emphasised in the theoretical section of this paper that councillors of certain municipalities are required to have a separate account for activities on social networks as a municipal councillor or a politician (as regulated by documents) and disseminate information via this account. The research revealed that only one of the four interviewees used an account created especially for politicians, whereas others used their personal Facebook accounts.

335 individual entries posted by the interviewees in their Facebook accounts were analysed during the research. The number of followers and friends of the analysed accounts are presented in Table 3. It was found that the numbers varied greatly: from almost 5000 to less than 600. While carrying out the research, only authorial entries related to posting relevant information to the cities' inhabitants were dealt with.

Table 3. Number of followers of interviewees' accounts on Facebook

	Account/ Web site	Number of friends	Number of followers	Number of analysed posts
Face_I1	Account	4973	-	72
Face_I2	Web site	-	1833	26
Face_I3	Account	-	575	130
Face_I4	Account	3969	1082	107

Source: Own elaboration.

It was observed that all interviewees not only uploaded information which was relevant to their city, but also personal information. The second interviewee shared personal entries along with personal information in their Facebook account; hence, it displayed only 26 posts including information which was related to municipal and political activities. The first interviewee posted numerous entries (sometimes five or six posts per day), but only 72 were analysed as meeting the set criteria of the research, because the majority of entries were simply shared or related to personal information, such as leisure activity.

Programming indicators for interviewees' Facebook posts are presented in Table 4.

It was found that all interviewees mostly received "likes" constituting approximately 90 percent of all received responses. Other reactions were diverse and constituted a small part of all responses, even below one percent in some cases. Among the total number of reactions received, the most responses were received by the third interviewee who posted the largest amount of entries, but who nonetheless had the smallest number of followers. This means that they share information which is relevant to inhabitants who usually respond more frequently to it. The fewest responses were received by the second interviewee; this was because they posted fewer entries and had a smaller number of followers. It was found that the posts were shared at least 10 times and commented

upon 34 times each. Some interviewees received more feedback; therefore, the assumption is made that these interviewees present more concrete information which might be more relevant to their followers in particular, and thus more feedback is received. Moreover, it is observed that followers of the interviewees tend to discuss and comment on the entries rather than share them. This tendency towards a higher number of comments exceeding the number of shares was noticed in the accounts of three interviewees.

Table 4. Received reactions to the interviewees' posts on Facebook

|		Number of likes								Number of shares	Number of comments
		👍	❤️	😆	😆	😮	😢	😠	Total reactions		
Face_I1	Number	3205	346	11	21	28	16	1	3628	162	571
	Percentage	88.3	9.5	0.3	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.0	100	-	-
Face_I2	Number	1817	101	5	79	3	14	25	2044	417	322
	Percentage	88.9	4.9	0.2	3.9	0.1	0.7	1.2	100	-	-
Face_I3	Number	22952	2510	97	219	241	130	50	26199	2251	6627
	Percentage	87.6	9.6	0.4	0.8	0.9	0.5	0.2	100	-	-
Face_I4	Number	15585	1096	47	169	125	37	52	17111	744	3961
	Percentage	91.1	6.4	0.3	1.0	0.7	0.2	0.3	100	-	-

Source: Own elaboration.

The Facebook accounts of the interviewees include many posts which are relevant to citizens. The content of the posts is diverse, i.e. from congratulations to topicalities and news. An analysis of the content of posts reveals that information which is relevant to Šiauliai City inhabitants, e.g. on reconstruction work taking place, the civic budget, participatory budgeting, elections, and live broadcasting, is shared. Furthermore, entertaining content related to events, ceremonies, the commemoration of festive occasions, and recommended entertainment events in the city is disseminated. The dissemination of surveys conducted by the municipality via interviewees' accounts allows them to take part in public governance. The interviewees try to present news in brief, to evoke discussions, and to influence the opinions of citizens. Their own opinions are also willingly expressed and feedback is awaited.

In terms of the types of usage of social networks, the content of Facebook posts mostly corresponds to the informational type. It was identified on the basis of the content analysis in relation to the types of usage (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Interviewees' posted entries on Facebook according to type
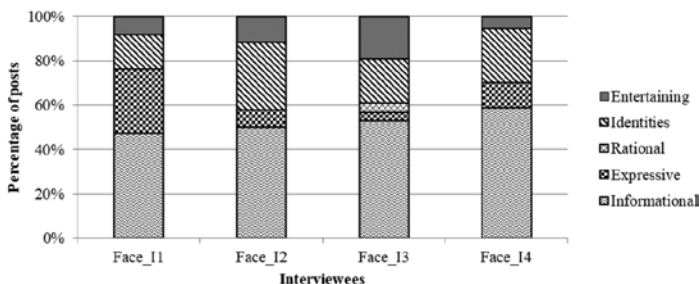
Source: Own elaboration.

Thus, the interviewees mostly use social networks for informational purposes. By contrast, social networks are used for initiation, support, and the enhancement of relationships with others the least. One interviewee published several entries attributed to the rational type. A somewhat large amount of attention is paid to individual identity formation during the period which was the subject of analysis. It is mostly observed that one's image and status is enhanced before the upcoming elections because social networks were very often used by candidates while running for parliament, as stated by the interviewees during the interviews. Moreover, it can be observed that the entertaining type of usage of social networks is also relevant. This usually took the form of sharing photos, congratulations, and newly appeared entertainment sites.

The analysis of Facebook posts also focused on the frequency of publishing entries (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Frequency of interviewees' posts on Facebook, 2020
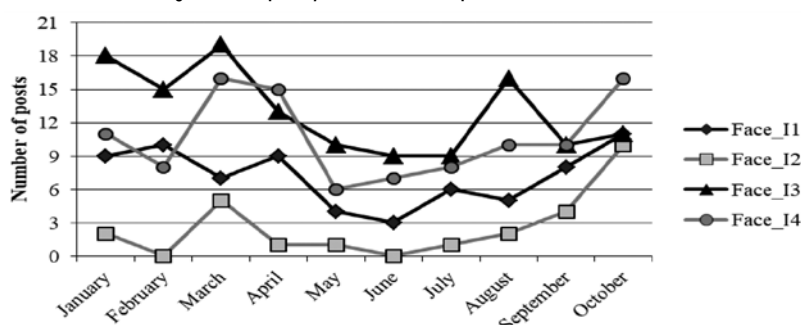
Source: Own elaboration.

The highest frequency of publishing posts was recorded in March. Such intensity is linked to the beginning of the lockdown period, because the interviewees published many posts related to the restrictions, made decisions, and offered encouragement to stay at home and in self-isolation. At that time, a large amount of information was being shared on the Facebook account of the municipality itself. It was found that posts including the same information were presented in different ways by each of the interviewees, pointing out key information in short; therefore, the posts received more reactions.

As displayed in Figure 3, the intensity of posted entries decreased. In individual terms, an increased number of posts in May, June and July is observed again. The increase in May and June was influenced by the end of the lockdown period and the start or finish of infrastructure redevelopment works, which were reflected in Facebook posts. In July, entries on the upcoming parliamentary elections increased in frequency. The tendency toward such an increase was observed until October. All interviewees shared information related to the elections, such as asking for help to collect signatures of supportive citizens, sharing political advertisements, asking for support, publishing information on participation in debates, etc. Such information was most relevant until the elections, and later the number of posts declined.

During interviews, the interviewees mentioned that they received a great deal of feedback. This was also found when analysing the number of comments. Moreover, the complexity of their content is revealed

as well. It was observed that positive feedback is usually received. Inhabitants support their ideas, express their approval when work is completed, and suggest solutions. Furthermore, they support council members, and are proud of them and their work. Negative comments are expressed as well. Usually, the same individuals are observed writing negative comments. Inhabitants express their dissatisfaction with governing bodies, and do not support some or all decisions. There are also cases when the activities of the mayor meet with disapproval; some express the opinion that financial measures are ineffectively used by the municipality. There are also cases of neutral feedback which manifests as specified information or enquiries, as sometimes citizens have questions regarding the content of information, confusion or drawbacks in its presentation.

3.2. Results of interviews

The interviewees were asked about the intensity of their Facebook usage. All interviewees stated that they used social networks every day. It turned out that the interviewees remain logged-in all day and actively participate in social networks. One log-in session on social networks lasts approximately two hours on average. It is obvious that social networks have changed their communication habits. As one of the interviewees says, it is not polite to call someone after working hours; however, it is acceptable to write something on social networks late in the evening. Thus, as communication moves to the social network space, barriers framed by official communication gradually disappear, i.e. people can casually communicate on Facebook, the length of the workday is no longer important, and the possibility of seeing if a particular person has read a message exists. It can be stated that communication in social networks erases social status boundaries, i.e. despite one's position, there are no difficulties in communicating with fellow citizens or colleagues via social networks even after working hours.

The interviewees were asked about their activities on Facebook, with the aim of finding out for what purposes the interviewees made use of social networks (Table 5). Based on the answers given by the interviewees, it was found that they usually communicate and maintain correspondence with citizens on Facebook seeking to obtain a particular benefit (political, civic and personal). For that purpose, they use Facebook groups which comprise large numbers of people; therefore, the scope of dissemination increases as a result. Social networks help to build contacts and receive feedback. Moreover, it appears that this is a favourable measure by which to search for information (for opinions, personal and communication history etc.) and sharing (photos, videos, documents etc.).

Table 5. Content of interviewees' activities on Facebook

Category	Sub-category	Citations
Activities	Communication in Facebook groups	I have several groups <...> (I1).
	Seeking to generate benefits	<...> I have friends whom I try to be useful to <...> (I1).
	Building contacts with citizens	<...> this way, I build contacts with inhabitants, receive feedback <...> (I3).
	Correspondence with citizens	I share and correspond with citizens <...> (I2). <...> I mostly maintain correspondence with citizens (I3).
	Search for and dissemination of information	I search for information, disseminate information myself and communicate <...> (I3).

	Rendering of emotions	*<...> I post an entry with my emotions every morning <...> (I1).*
Purpose of shared information	Sharing relevant information with followers	*<...> First of all, this is to render information to inhabitants <...> (I3).*
	Political discussions	*<...> since I am a professional politician, I keep it to our disputes <...> (I1).*
	Publicising political decisions	*<...> it allows me to demonstrate these political decisions, all subtleties and specificity <...> (I2).*
	Publicising questions and decisions relating to the municipality	*<...> questions which will be discussed at a meeting of the council <...> (I2).* *<...> the questions are related to particular projects and their implementation in the city <...> (I4).*

Source: Own elaboration.

During interviews, the interviewees were asked to express their opinions on the usage of social networks for citizen engagement in the municipal decision-making process (see Table 6).

Table 6. Opportunities provided by the municipality for citizens to engage in decision-making via Facebook

Category	Sub-category	Citations
Social networks facilitate the attraction of attention by municipality heads	Mayor	*I think that it helps in the cases of heads, especially the mayor <...> (I3).*
	Deputy mayor	*The deputy mayor also pays a great deal of attention <...> (I3).*
	Director of administration	*<...> as far as I know, the director of administration hasn't got much time <...> (I3).*
	Councillors	*Very much, because we really respond <...> (I4).* *<...> Did the same very actively <...> (I1).*
Opportunities provided by the municipality	Participatory budgeting	*<...> there is the participatory budgeting in our case <...> (I3).*
	Municipality account on Facebook	*The municipality has also got a Facebook account <...> (I3).* *<...> we have a Šiauliai Municipality account on Facebook <...> (I4).*
	Such opportunities are not provided	*Perhaps direct acceptance via Facebook and other social networks is not provided <...> (I2).*

Source: Own elaboration.

It was found that Facebook facilitated the attraction of municipality heads' attention, especially that of the mayor. It appears that citizens increasingly use social networks more actively in order to express and submit their observations, and are not afraid to write directly to the mayor, the deputy mayor and councillors. The interviewees note that the director of administration does not use social networks, whereas the mayor, the deputy mayor, and members of the council willingly communicate with citizens via social networks and declare that it is a good and quick measure facilitating reciprocal communication. The interviewees have emphasised that citizens are visible on social networks and attention is focused on the problems they point out. There are cases when citizens' opinions and suggestions are noticed, and treated by councillors as important; therefore, they were included in the decision-making processes (at least at the stage of discussing alternatives). Nevertheless, based on the results of the interviews, there is a lack of opportunity for citizens to suggest specific solutions via Facebook, because this and other social networks are not regulated and an opinion expressed there may remain unnoticed, unless citizens themselves take the initiative to submit suggestions via official channels.

The interviewees, as members of the Municipal Council, participated in the elections to the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania (the Seimas) as well. All interviewees utilised Facebook to the greatest possible degree: they actively disseminated their activities, uploaded relevant information, communicated with citizens, used

various functions and tools of Facebook, and introduced themselves to the electorate via Facebook, whereby their Facebook friends could share information and support their election campaign. In the opinion of interviewees, in the course of elections social networks provided all of them with the possibility to take part on equal terms regardless of the available financial resources, because the content posted by the candidates is valued here (Table 7).

Referring to the interviewees, despite putting Facebook into action at its maxi-

mum capacity, some specific difficulties still occurred. The interviewees emphasised that they lacked knowledge on marketing and skills, particularly how to make full use of Facebook functions. However, in their opinion, this was compensated for by employing professionals (paying for their services). Based on interviewees' opinions, a lack of time was the biggest challenge, because they ran out of time to answer all enquiries which required feedback, which thus required time or additional resources.

Table 7. Usage of Facebook while running for election to the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania

Category	Sub-category	Citations
Usage of Facebook while running for election to the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania	To introduce themselves	*I used it for dissemination of information about myself at its maximum capacity <...> (I3).*
	Provides opportunity to all, despite financial capacities	*<...> It provides an opportunity for, let's say, a candidate when one hasn't got much money, not a millionaire. This provides a possibility to participate and be heard at equal terms <...> (I4).*
	Helped to achieve the desired results	*<...> I would not have made it through to the second round if not for social networks <...> (I4).*
	More diverse tools were used	*<...> I tried to communicate in video format, not only via text (I2).*
	Benefited from the support of friends on Facebook	*<...> while engaging people, asking them to share <...> (I2).*
Lack of knowledge and skills to make full use of Facebook	Complete usage of Facebook functions	*<...> I simply became aware that I needed to hire a person who would upload everything on Facebook for me <...>. (I1).*
	Knowledge on marketing	*<...> when to share a post is relevant <...> (I2).*
	Finances	*<...> money because one must pay for advertising <...> (I3).*

Source: Own elaboration.

To sum up the results of the empirical research, Facebook accounts are most actively used by the councillors to disseminate information and form their political identity. A great deal of feedback is received from citizens, which manifests through "likes", comments, and the sharing of posts. Usually, positive responses and encouragement were expressed; however, there were some negative comments as well, expressing dissatisfaction with the governing bodies and decisions, a negative attitude towards a situation, the environment or even individuals. The interviewees used social networks properly because the uploaded information reached target groups. It may be easier for them

to reach target groups because citizens choose whether they want to follow particular politicians. Nevertheless, there are attempts to engage citizens only indirectly, i.e. while presenting information and hoping that citizens will actively participate in decision-making processes – with the exception of participatory budgeting where citizens participate in the decision-making process, yet which covers only a small fraction of the total number of decisions indirectly engaging citizens. However, Facebook is used in the case of participatory budgeting only as a means (tool) by which to inform society, but not as an instrument for the direct engagement of citizens.

4. Discussion

It can be observed that the results of research carried out by scientists in Lithuanian municipalities demonstrate that the usage of social networks in public administration has a tendency to strengthen. According to Grunda et al., (2011), successful functioning of social networks and their interaction is one of the main conditions of public administration into more ideal forms of public administration. Thus, in 2011, a conversation took place on the usage of social networks as an instrument of an ideal public administration model. Aurylaitė (2017) emphasises that e-participation would be a proper measure stimulating citizens to engage in the process of political decision-making at the local self-government level, and social networks are an effective means by which to share news. Thus, six years later, the fact that social networks were a means of dissemination of information that could be used for citizen engagement in decision-making and were already in active use was identified. Toleikienė et al. (2020), who analysed the practice of e-governance in municipal administrations during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed that communication (volume, type, channels, tools) had changed, i.e. physically present face-to-face bilateral communication was replaced by virtual multi-directional communication. Even before the 2020 outbreak of the pandemic, the channels usually used by heads of municipal administrations to provide orders and tasks, such as "Avilys" or "Stradas", were supplemented with social networks – Facebook groups or the Messenger app (linked to Facebook) – as administrators sought to save time, to promptly reach employees and to receive feedback. Such people changed their behaviour only during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and paid more attention to the formulation and clarity of messages transmitted through these channels. Therefore, the research carried out in 2020 demonstrates that social networks are becoming not only a means for dissemination of information or external communication (with citizens), but also a channel for internal communication.

The present research proved not only the theoretical approaches earlier emphasised by Grunda et al., (2011) and Aurylaitė (2017), but also enriched scientific knowledge on the characteristics and dimensions of the usage of social networks for citizen engagement by municipal councillors using Facebook. It was revealed that citizen engagement in local self-government when social networks of municipal councillors are put into action is characteristic of broader opportunities to provide feedback freely and personally on alternative decisions, the expression of arguments, and by doing so have a greater influence on councillors' points of view when making decisions.

It was found, however, that the majority of the interviewees who took part in the research did not use their professional accounts or web pages; therefore, they do not meet global recent trends in relation to the requirements set for communication of representatives of local governance institutions taking place on social networks – they do not follow the cost of maintenance principle. The interviewees (municipal councillors) share information related to self-governance, discuss questions which arise or alternative solutions with inhabitants, i.e. they comply with the principles of information and communication, confidentiality, ethics and responsibility, and implement the requirements of the power and influence principle (Office of the Integrity.., 2016). The feedback received by councillors from citizens is diverse; however, the majority of posts or reactions are of a positive character, which may be linked to the successful implementation of the

trust-building principle.

Based on the results of research into municipal councillors' opinions, the network Facebook is too seldom used for citizen engagement in decision-making at the local self-governance level, and such activity uses measures of direct engagement to stimulate activity of citizens poorly; therefore, Facebook is not sufficiently often used for citizen engagement, but rather for the purposes of political participation: influencing citizens' opinions, or creating the political image of candidates for election to Parliament. Problems of communication experienced by the councillors on Facebook, e.g. posting particular (selective) information, or having difficulty responding to all citizens' enquiries, are observed as well. However, in the opinion of interviewees, citizens themselves are still not actively engaged in finding solutions to local self-governance questions via Facebook because the actual opportunities for engagement are linked to only one instrument – participatory budgeting.

Conclusions

The research reveals that social networks (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc.) can be used for citizen engagement in the decision-making process as an excellent communication channel. Municipal councillors can and do contribute. Social networks are used to search for, collect, provide, and publicly disseminate information which is relevant to target groups of citizens. The content of social networks perfectly reveals the opportunities for the expression of initiatives of political participation (enhancement of political power and influence) and citizen (self-) engagement. The main dimensions of the usage of social networks for citizen engagement when representatives of local self-government become active are embedded in information and communication, power and

influence, building trust between politicians and citizens, costs of maintenance, confidentiality, ethics and responsibility.

After analysing the content of the entries posted on Facebook, it was found that the accounts of the councillors were mostly used for the dissemination of information. The empirical research (case study) has revealed that the intensity of the posted entries was changeable, as entries were mostly posted when responding to problems occurring in society (especially when the pandemic broke out). Moreover, the councillors receive a great deal of feedback from citizens and they did not always respond to it in a timely manner. As such, dimensions of information and communication as well as power and influence play the main role in councillors' social network posts. Thus, citizens are informed by the councillors via social networks, whereby relevant new information is presented to them; however, there is little engagement in the municipality decision-making process via this channel. In councillors' opinions, the direct engagement of citizens in the decision-making process using social networks manifests only through the participatory budget, whereas the use of other measures for citizen engagement was not found.

Interviews with councillors of one of the municipalities of Lithuania (a case study) revealed that the council members used their personal social networks for dissemination of information and maintenance of political identity perfectly. They also support citizen engagement through social networks; however, practice demonstrates that the methods utilised are not the proper measures by which to stimulate engagement. Investigation of the interviewees' opinions proves that Facebook is an excellent means (tool, channel) of communication with citizens and finding out their opinions; however, it is still not effectively used for such engagement. Moreover, more at-

tention should be paid to such dimensions of the usage of social networks as the costs of maintenance, confidentiality, ethics and responsibility. Building trust between municipal councillors (politicians) and citizens via social networks is at the primary stage; therefore, its development will require additional efforts and time at the local self-government level in Lithuania.

Our research is not free of limitations. The research includes some limitations pertaining to the sample and time aspects. Not all councillors of one municipality were surveyed. Only one social network, Facebook, was analysed. The attitude of citizens towards the level of engagement was not investigated. Facebook posts were analysed for the period of the last year, not counting shared, personal posts. The research results are of an exploratory character, but offer some insights into the existing gap between theory and practice as well as implications for future research.

The research could be continued by surveying a larger sample of councillors, or extending the number of municipalities chosen for the investigation. Moreover, the opinions of active citizens or groups thereof, or non-governmental organisations, on their engagement in making decisions at the local self-government level by using Facebook and other social networks could be analysed as well. It would be useful to analyse the Facebook accounts of all municipalities in Lithuania and the situation concerning citizen engagement via social networks. Such an analysis could encompass other social networks, such as LinkedIn, Instagram etc., identifying how citizens are engaged in the process on these forms of social media and networks. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of the usage of social networks in Lithuanian and foreign municipalities also seems a promising direction for future research.

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