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**Ekaterina Klimovich**
ORCID: 0009-0003-5761-2841
Department of Social Communication and Media
Institute of Journalism and Social Communication
Faculty of Humanities
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

# Development of Social Media: a Diachronic Analysis

**Keywords**: social media, diachronic analysis, Facebook, TikTok, audience characteristics, popularity factors

**Słowa kluczowe**: media społecznościowe, analiza diachroniczna, Facebook, TikTok, charakterystyka odbiorców, czynniki popularności

## Introduction

In 1954, the English sociologist John Arundel Barnes published in the scientific journal "Human Relations" the article *Class and Committees in a Norwegian Island Parish*, which later came to be regarded as a foundational work in the field of network analysis. In this article Barnes examined the decision-making structures in the Norwegian parish community of Bremnes on the island of Bømlo and illustrated the processes of establishing connections between people of different ages and occupations by means of *sociograms* – visual diagrams in which individuals were represented as points and the relationships between them as lines. As a result the sociograms revealed network-like patterns, for the description of which Barnes introduced the term *social network* (Barnes, 1954).

In 1997, nearly half a century after the publication of Barnes's article, the platform SixDegrees.com provided a visible embodiment of the principle of establishing interactions between different people through online connection algorithms. From that moment the term *social network* acquired a global significance and the defining characteristics of *social media*.

If at the turn of the 20th–21st centuries social networks were online services that allowed users to interact with one another, then by the 2000s these "sites for communication" had transformed into a multi-layered system of digital

communications. This system now includes not only social networking platforms for contacts (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), but also microblogging (X (Twitter), Tumblr), messengers (WhatsApp, Telegram, WeChat), video-hosting and streaming platforms (YouTube, Twitch), content-sharing platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest), platforms for collaborative work and communities (Reddit, Quora, Discord) and more. This suggests that, by now, social media have acquired the functions and characteristics of social media, since they enable *user interaction* (commenting, sharing posts etc.), *user-generated content* (photos, video and audio recordings, texts, memes etc.), *networked connections* (the formation of a "social graph": friends, followers, groups, communities), *dynamic information dissemination* (news and content spread instantly and are broadcast in real time) and so on.

In today's world the influence of social media on mass consciousness represents a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that affects the sociocultural, psychological, and political processes of modern society. The key features of social media are their ability to rapidly disseminate information to a wide audience and to cover events in real time, which fosters users' trust in the published content. This, in turn, according to researcher Sergey Krainyukov, "contributes to the formation of stable collective representations, norms, and attitudes, which, unfortunately, often turn out to be far removed from objective reality" (Kraynyukov, 2019, p. 24).

This article aims to identify the characteristic features of the formation and development of popular social media, as well as to classify the factors that enabled them, over the course of just a quarter of a century, to evolve from niche communication projects into global media platforms that shape the trends of contemporary culture, politics and economy.

The methodology of this study is based on diachronic analysis, which involves examining the changes and development of social media over time. Unlike synchronic analysis, which considers a given phenomenon at a specific moment, diachronic analysis focuses on its history, evolution and dynamics (Porshneva and Mazur, 2011). This approach makes it possible to identify not only the trends of transformation of a phenomenon but also the characteristic features of its development (Koval'chenko, 2003). In the context of diachronic analysis, each social media is viewed as a set of "nodes" (individual users, organizations, interest groups, etc.) and the connections between them, which reflect the nature of social interactions. Studying the dynamics of the formation and development of social media across different periods of time makes it possible to observe how new connections between nodes were created and old ones disappeared, how the overall structure of the platform evolved, and, on this basis, to understand the causes and assess the long-term consequences of these changes.

The total number of social media worldwide is difficult to quantify, since many are highly specialized, regional, or corporate, and in some cases a single corporation may operate several digital platforms (an *intranet* – an internal communications network with no access to the World Wide Web) (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012).

It's much easier to count the social media whose platforms have over 100 million registered users. At present, there are 16 of them, including Facebook (3.07 billion users as of early 2025), YouTube (2.53 billion), Instagram and WhatsApp (2 billion each), TikTok (1.59 billion), WeChat (1.38 billion), Telegram (950 million), Facebook Messenger (947 million), Snapchat (850 million), Douyin (766 million), Kuaishou (714 million), Reddit (606 million), Weibo (599 million), X (Twitter) (586 million), QQ (562 million), and Pinterest (537 million) (Shul'ts, 2025, p. 16).

The above-mentioned social media exert a tremendous influence on public consciousness in many countries, and almost each of them has had its own distinctive path of formation and development, reflecting both the characteristics of the era and the specifics of rapidly changing user preferences.

Thus, a diachronic analysis of social media provides a deeper understanding of their evolution and dynamics, which is especially relevant today, when social media have essentially transformed from a means of communication into an effective tool for shaping public opinion and mass consciousness. Recognizing this influence calls for the development of media literacy and critical thinking, both among users and at the level of government policy and education.

## The emergence and development of social media at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries

In 1997, American entrepreneur Andrew Weinreich launched a platform called SixDegrees.com, which was an online service for communication and information exchange. The name of the service was inspired by the *six degrees of separation* theory, according to which any person in the world is connected to any other through six intermediaries (Milgram, 1967, p. 64). A distinctive feature of SixDegrees.com was that its users could create profiles, add friends, view not only their own networks but also those of their friends' friends, send messages within the system, and invite acquaintances via email. In essence, this was the first website where one could see a social graph – a visual representation of connections between people (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 220).

By the end of 1998, the platform had over 3.5 million users – an enormous figure for the time. Most SixDegrees.com users were U.S. residents interested in the latest internet trends. However, despite its innovativeness, SixDegrees.com faced challenges, the most significant being: first, a limited audience (at the end of the 20th century, internet access was still unavailable to most people worldwide); second, technical issues (the platform was slow to load and operate); and third, a lack of monetization, as there was no well-designed business model or advertising focus. As a result, the project was shut down in 2000 (Patyukov and Kovriga, 2017, p. 76).

Although SixDegrees.com existed for only three years, its impact on the modern media landscape is undeniable, as it was the first in history to demonstrate

that digital social connections could be visualized and used for communication. The interface and core principles of SixDegrees.com – such as the user profile, friends list, network connections, and more – later became the foundation for platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, and others. This has led some researchers to regard SixDegrees.com as the *zero stage* of social networks (Papacharissi, 2011).

In 1998, SixDegrees.com saw its first competitors – the social networks Asian Avenue, MiGente, and BlackPlanet. Their interfaces and functionality were similar to SixDegrees.com's; they faced the same challenges and likewise ceased to exist soon afterward (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 64).

The fate of LiveJournal, created on March 18, 1999, by American student programmer Brad Fitzpatrick, turned out to be much more successful. This service became a large-scale blogging platform, gained enormous popularity among students, and is still active today. In Russia, it became known under the name Живой Журнал (Zhivoy Zhurnal, meaning Live Journal) (Veber and Pimenova, 2014).

Since the early 2000s, humanity's entry into the Global Network has accelerated rapidly, and hundreds of social media have become an integral part of millions of people's daily lives. As a rule, social media were initially created with a focus on local audiences, but some managed to gain worldwide popularity. Among them, for example, are MySpace (founded in 2003, most popular among musicians and performers), LinkedIn (launched in 2003 as a platform for building professional connections), Tumblr (founded in 2007, the first social media to host microblogs on its multimedia platform) and others (Chen', 2012, p. 224).

With the acceleration of internet adoption and globalization, such social media gained impressive prominence as the U.S.-based YouTube (launched in 2005 as a video platform) and Twitter (created in 2006 as a microblogging service that became popular in media and political circles; renamed X in 2023), the Russian VKontakte (created in 2006 as a Russian-language analogue of Facebook) and Odnoklassniki (launched in 2007), as well as China's Weibo (created in 2009 as a Chinese analogue of Twitter, featuring only content that does not contradict communist ideology and therefore often cited in PRC media), among others (Barker, 2009).

Special attention should be given to the world's largest social media today – Facebook. It was founded in 2004 at Harvard University by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. Initially, the platform was called TheFacebook and was intended for Harvard students to share information, photos, and contacts. Within six months, the site expanded to other U.S. universities, including Yale, Stanford and Columbia. Facebook's appeal lay in its simple interface, which allowed users to create a profile with a photo, a friends list, and personal information (Alhabash et al., 2012).

In 2005, TheFacebook was renamed Facebook and received funding from venture investors, which enabled the platform's growth. That same year, the ability to create groups and pages for companies and public figures was added. In 2006, Facebook became available not only to students but to all users aged 13 and older. The introduction of the News Feed allowed users to see their friends'

updates in real time. In 2008, Facebook began actively developing a platform for application developers, allowing third-party companies to create games and services. In 2009, Facebook became the most popular resource in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. In 2010, the Like button was introduced, which became one of the platform's signature features (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012).

In 2012, Facebook held its IPO (initial public offering), raising $16 billion and becoming one of the world's largest technology corporations. That same year, Facebook acquired Instagram for $1 billion, followed in 2014 by the acquisition of the WhatsApp messenger for $19 billion and Oculus VR for $2 billion. These acquisitions enabled Facebook to actively develop advertising tools, allowing businesses to target users based on their interests, behavior, and geolocation (Kim and Chock, 2017).

In 2021, the company Facebook announced a rebrand to Meta Platforms, Inc., reflecting its strategic focus on developing the *metaverse* – a virtual environment that brings together social media and AR/VR technologies for work and entertainment. As a result, Facebook as a social media kept its name but became part of the broader Meta ecosystem, which also includes Instagram, WhatsApp, and Oculus (Alzubi, 2023, p. 7).

In global media, Facebook's activities receive mixed evaluations. On the one hand, Facebook expanded and deepened social communication worldwide, created new promising opportunities for monetization and network marketing, and became an important news source for the media. On the other hand, the company has faced justified criticism for tolerating the spread of disinformation and fostering user online addiction, as well as for its influence on elections in various countries and issues related to the privacy of personal data (Zhao et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, Facebook continues to play a key role in maintaining social connections, shaping users' identities, and facilitating the dissemination of information and the organization of public activity. In practice, this is evident in Facebook's ability to help people stay in touch with friends, relatives, and acquaintances regardless of distance. Through posts, photos, and participation in groups, users form and display their identities and craft the image they wish to present to others. Facebook helps strengthen personal ties that can be useful for job seeking, moral support, and access to technical resources. Numerous companies and organizations use Facebook to promote products, engage with their audiences, and run marketing campaigns. The platform is also used to distribute up-to-date information, educational materials and discussions on professional and scientific topics. Moreover, it plays an important role in organizing social movements, charitable initiatives, and political activity, as it enables the rapid mobilization of people (Seidman, 2013).

While the effective integration of communication, identity, social connections and information within a single digital platform was characteristic of other social media as well, Facebook was among the first to implement these qualities at scale – enabling it not only to maintain a leading position in the global media landscape but also to continually attract new users.

## The development of social media in the 2010s and the first half of the 2020s

With the advent of smartphones and the growth of mobile internet in the first half of the 2010s, such social media gained wide popularity as the U.S.-based Instagram (created in 2010) and Snapchat (launched in 2011), China's WeChat (developed in 2011 as a hybrid of a messenger and a social network), and Russia's Telegram (created in 2013, which transformed from a messenger into a popular social media after incorporating channels, communities, and user comments) (Kuznetsova, 2023).

In the early 2020s, the widespread lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic fueled the unexpected popularity of the U.S. social media Clubhouse, which was created by Instagram specialists in mid-2020. The platform primarily featured audio chats and positioned itself as a channel for distributing reliable information about the nature and scale of the pandemic around the world. However, as the impacts of COVID-19 subsided, the hype around Clubhouse waned. Instead, the Instagram team offered users Threads – an application focused on text posts, comments, and discussion. Threads became the fastest-growing application in history, reaching 100 million users within five days of its launch on July 5, 2023. By December 2024, Threads' monthly audience had surpassed 300 million users, and the social media is now regarded as a serious alternative to X (Twitter) (Taylor, 2024).

We will now take a closer look at the rise and development of a platform that, on the one hand, induces strong online addiction among young people and teenagers worldwide, and on the other, demonstrates the possibility of a technological "breakthrough" under a totalitarian regime. We are talking about TikTok, which was created as an international short-video platform and is now extremely popular among youth thanks to its personalized recommendation algorithm, viral trends and cultural impact on music, fashion and marketing (Pilati et al., 2025).

The history of this social media began in 2014, when the Chinese company ByteDance launched a digital platform called Douyin, designed for creating and sharing videos no longer than 15 seconds. The service was distributed as a smartphone application and quickly gained popularity among teenagers thanks to its ease of use, musical effects and recommendation algorithm. In 2016, ByteDance launched the international version of Douyin under the name TikTok. Initially, the application was aimed at Asian markets, but it soon spread worldwide (Mulida and Silma, 2025).

In 2017, ByteDance acquired the U.S. digital platform Musical.ly, which was popular among American teenagers thanks to its feature for creating short music videos. The official 2018 merger of Musical.ly with TikTok made it possible to combine audiences in America and Asia and create a single international application. As a result, TikTok became one of the most downloaded applications in the world among teenagers and young adults. TikTok's personalized recommendation algorithm helped keep users' attention and generate "viral"

trends. In 2019, challenges emerged on TikTok, turning the platform into a cultural phenomenon – featuring dances, comedy sketches, educational clips, and short reviews. TikTok content began to influence global music, fashion and marketing: songs popular on the platform often became hits on national and even worldwide charts. Many brands and celebrities started using TikTok to promote products and create "viral" content (Zakharov, 2024).

In 2020–2021, global media outlets such as "Associated Press", "Bloomberg", "Reuters" and others accused TikTok of negatively influencing the consciousness of the younger generation and intensifying their online dependency. Government leaders in India, the United States and several other countries discussed the possibility of restricting TikTok's presence in the global media space due to concerns over insufficient protection of personal data on the platform. In response to the criticism, ByteDance's leadership pledged to introduce moral filters on posted content, urged young users to practice self-restraint online and observe "digital hygiene," and expanded TikTok's functionality by adding longer videos, live-streaming services, shopping features and educational content. These measures allowed TikTok to remain a leading platform among social media in terms of young users' engagement and its influence on youth culture (Podosokorskiy, 2022).

Thus, TikTok's popularity is explained by its personalized recommendation algorithm, the ease of creating and consuming short videos, and the opportunity to participate in "viral" trends and self-presentation – all of which stimulate social interaction and engagement, primarily among adolescent and young adult users worldwide.

## Characteristics of the audience of modern social media

According to Shubham Singh, founder of the authoritative international digital marketing agency MyDigital.io, in the first half of 2025 there were 5.24 billion active social media users (63.9% of the world's population), representing 94.2% of all internet users. This is 24 million more than in 2024 and 480 million more than in the first half of 2023 (Singh, 2025).

Of course, the number of actual users is lower, since a significant share of the reported accounts are bots, as well as duplicates or artifacts of multilingual usage (Liu et al., 2016). Even with this adjustment, however, one can assert that more than half of the planet's population is engaged with social media. For example, in the United States in 2025, 253 million people used social media (78.5% of the country's internet users and 73% of its total population); in the People's Republic of China, the number of registered social-network users exceeded 1 billion; in India – 862 million; in Indonesiav – 228 million; in Brazil – 171 million; in Russia – 118 million; in Japan – 106 million and so on (Devyatkin, 2025, p. 54).

Worldwide, male social media users accounted on average for 54.6% of the total user base. At the same time, in the United States the gender distribution

was more balanced: women made up 50.2% of social media users. This near-equal split shows that social media activity across regions depends on cultural, social, and technological factors (Huang et al., 2019).

The penetration of social media into people's everyday lives also varies by region. As of 2025, the global average stood at 63.9%. The clear leader in this area is the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where penetration is 100% – which in practice means that registered users are not only active on multiple digital platforms but also use social media to solve most day-to-day needs, from online shopping to consulting specialists. Saudi Arabia trails only slightly, at 99.6%, indicating that virtually all residents use social media. South Korea likewise shows a strong presence, with a penetration rate of 94.7%, reflecting both high digital literacy and a rich, diverse digital culture. Rounding out the top ten countries with high social media penetration are Singapore (88.2%), Qatar (84%), Hong Kong (83.1%), Spain (82.9%), Sweden (81.4%) and others (Valyulina, 2025, p. 29).

In 2025, each real user spent an average of 5 hours 10 minutes online per day, of which 2 hours 21 minutes were devoted to visiting 6–7 digital platforms (on average, 6.8) – clearly showing how integral social media have become to our daily lives (Singh, 2025).

According to the results of a global survey conducted in 2025 by specialists at MyDigital.io, the main reason people use social media is the desire to stay in touch with friends and family: 50.8% of respondents named this as their primary motivation. For 39% of users, social media serve as a means of entertainment and leisure. Another 34.5% use them to find news and commentary. Meanwhile, 19.5% interact with social media because they fear missing important events. Other reasons users spend time on social media include searching for products to buy (27.3%); watching live broadcasts of major events or sports competitions (23.6%); establishing new contacts and conducting work-related research (22.1%); exchanging opinions and discussing current trends (21.9%) and consuming content related to celebrities or influencers (19.7%), among others (Singh, 2025).

Although social media effectively help people stay connected, spending excessive time online can also have negative consequences. As early as the previous decade, experts at the American Psychological Association (APA) warned the public that prolonged use of social media may contribute to the development of anxiety and depression (Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky, 2010, p. 1290). Excessive use of social media leads to problems with physical and mental health, as well as social risks. Today, the need for a balanced and mindful approach to using social media remains as relevant as ever.

## Key factors behind the popularity of modern social media

The dynamics of the emergence and formation of social media over the past two and a half decades suggest that the reasons some become popular while others do not depend on a combination of technological, social, cultural, and economic factors. These include:

1. **Interface convenience and user experience**, i.e., ease of sign-up and navigation. For instance, Instagram quickly gained popularity thanks to its intuitive, minimalist design, whereas Google+'s idea of "circles" (grouping contacts by category) proved cumbersome in practice and confused users. Moreover, many Google+ users didn't understand how to manage privacy settings, which led to hundreds of thousands of personal data records leaking online (Johnson, 2021).
2. **Mobile accessibility and timely launch.** For example, Facebook emerged just as the hype around its main rival at the time – MySpace – was fading. Facebook managed to surpass its chief competitor by offering more user-friendly content management (Ellison et al., 2007).
3. **Understanding the needs of the target audience.** Facebook focuses on addressing a specific social need – facilitating communication among users; Instagram and TikTok – enabling self-expression; LinkedIn – building professional connections; X (Twitter) – delivering concise, timely news and so on (Davis, 2012).
4. **Network effects.** Often summarized as "the more users, the more valuable the platform," this implies self-reinforcing growth: the more friends a person has on a platform, the stronger their motivation to join and participate. For example, WhatsApp and Telegram overtook numerous competitors primarily thanks to network effects (Stillman et al., 2009).
5. **Innovation and distinctive features.** TikTok offered a short-video format curated to individual interests – something competitors didn't have – while Snapchat introduced disappearing messages and filters, which Instagram later copied (Smith, 2020).
6. **Celebrity and influencer activity.** Promoting a social media's brand through influencers (people who shape their audience's opinions and behavior) and celebrities sharply accelerates user growth. Thanks to this, X (Twitter) became popular among politicians and journalists, while Instagram took off among fashion brands and celebrities. The commercialization of social media and the rise of influencer culture have reshaped consumption patterns and career aspirations for many users, especially teenagers and young adults. Professions such as blogger or influencer – which did not exist in the early 2000s – had become realistic career goals for part of the younger generation by the end of the decade (Ellison et al., 2010).
7. **Accounting for cultural and regional contexts**. For example, VKontakte is popular in Russia because Facebook failed to adapt to local realities, while

in the People's Republic of China, WeChat has become not only a messenger but also a platform for payments and for accessing business and government services (Van Dijck, 2013).

8. **Privacy and reputation of social media.** Privacy violations typically drive users away and can bring a social media down, as happened to Google+ in 2018.
9. **The ability to design algorithms that drive audience engagement and then effectively hold users' attention.** Examples include the algorithms behind TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, which serve a continually updated stream of personalized content.

Thus, an analysis of the emergence and development of popular social media over the past quarter century suggests that the engagement of billions of users is explained primarily by meeting the informational and communicative needs of different audience segments, offering new user experiences or formats, and successfully adapting to changes in technology and mass culture. In light of these trends, social media have been – and are likely to remain for a long time – an important instrument for shaping public consciousness in many countries.

## Conclusion

From 1954 – when the British sociologist John Barnes first introduced the term *social networks* into academic discourse – up to the present, this phenomenon has acquired technical and substantive dimensions that have given it the characteristics of social media and exert a tremendous influence both on the contemporary media landscape and on the consciousness of billions of people.

Since the launch of SixDegrees.com in 1997, social media have transformed from platforms for exchanging text messages into multimedia environments with video, audio, and interactive services. The shift from text-based communication to visual formats (photos, video, memes, infographics, etc.) has become the primary mode of interaction and self-presentation for users. The emergence of short-form video on TikTok and Stories on Snapchat reflected a clear trend toward rapid content consumption. Whereas the social media of the 2000s served largely the same content to everyone, today's platforms use algorithms that tailor feeds to a user's interests, behavior, and interactions – boosting engagement. Modern social media encourage participation through likes, comments, reposts, and live streams, strengthening users' sense of belonging to platform communities. The rapid development of tools for digital marketing, commerce, and education has turned social media into multi-purpose platforms for communication, entertainment and business. The most popular media set global trends in music, fashion, education and politics, serving both as vehicles of cultural exchange and as instruments for shaping public opinion.

Unfortunately, alongside the positive features of social media, negative ones have also emerged – including cyberbullying, online addiction, and shifts

in personality during the formation of a "digital identity," among others. Overcoming these problems should be a pressing priority for society and public policy.

The analysis conducted allows us to assert that the principal characteristics of social media – formed over nearly three decades of development – are: the evolution of functionality, the growth of personalization and algorithmic recommendations, a shift of emphasis toward visual and multimedia content, increased social engagement and interactivity, cultural and global influence, the growing complexity of social dynamics and the risks of negative impacts on the minds of adolescents and young users.

Factors contributing to the popularity of modern social media include: interface convenience and user experience, mobile accessibility and timely launch, understanding of target-audience needs, network effects, innovation and distinctive features, the activity of celebrities and influencers, consideration of cultural and regional contexts, privacy and reputation, the ability to design algorithms that drive user engagement and then consistently retain users' interest.

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Summary

This article identifies the characteristic features of the emergence and development of popular social media by using a diachronic analysis. The article outlines the main stages in the formation and growth of social media, examines the specific trajectories of Facebook and TikTok, and analyses the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the audiences of today's leading social media platforms. It also highlights the factors that have enabled social media, in just a quarter of a century, to become global media platforms shaping trends in contemporary culture, politics and the economy. These factors include a user-friendly interface and user experience (including ease of registration and navigation); mobile accessibility and timely launch; understanding of target-audience needs; network effects; innovation and distinctive features; the activity of celebrities and influencers; sensitivity to cultural and regional contexts; privacy and reputation; and the ability to design algorithms that drive user engagement and then consistently sustain users' interest.

## Rozwój mediów społecznościowych: analiza diachroniczna

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest wskazanie charakterystycznych cech kształtowania się i rozwoju popularnych mediów społecznościowych. Jako metodę badawczą wybrano analizę diachroniczną. W artykule opisano główne etapy powstawania i rozwoju mediów społecznościowych oraz specyficzne cechy ewolucji Facebooka i TikToka; przeanalizowano także

ilościowe i jakościowe charakterystyki audytorium współczesnych popularnych mediów społecznościowych. Wyróżniono czynniki, które pozwoliły mediom społecznościowym w zaledwie ćwierć wieku stać się globalnymi platformami medialnymi wyznaczającymi trendy we współczesnej kulturze, polityce i gospodarce. Do takich czynników należą: przyjazny interfejs i doświadczenie użytkownika (w tym prostota rejestracji i nawigacji); dostępność mobilna i terminowe uruchomienie; zrozumienie potrzeb grupy docelowej; efekt sieciowy; innowacyjność i oryginalne funkcje; aktywność celebrytów i influencerów; uwzględnianie kontekstów kulturowych i regionalnych; prywatność i reputacja; oraz umiejętność projektowania algorytmów zapewniających zaangażowanie użytkowników i konsekwentne utrzymywanie ich zainteresowania.