

What Is Happening to Students on Social Media?*

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Abstract: Do you think that social media is harmful to students? Do you think that social media should be controlled? If your answer to these questions is ‘Yes’ this study is for you. These days, technology is advancing quickly and every day a new social media tool gains popularity. Using these platforms is becoming more and more popular among the students. However, there are not very many studies on the effects of social media. In this study, the effects of social media on students’ academic and social lives are explored. The study also looks at how social media tools and platforms affect students’ academic and social lives, based on focus group meetings with both students and parents. While confirming some previous ideas, findings indicate that we might have to revise other ideas that have been promoted in the past.

Key words: Effects of Social Media on Students • Social Media • Social Media Tools and Platforms • Focus Groups

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, technology is advancing at head-spinning rates. To keep up with technology, people are being forced to pick up their pace, or risk being left behind by the new age. People today avoid technologies that are static, not sharable and, perhaps most importantly, slow. They thus constantly seek new products. One of these new products is social media. Social media is an environment that is the epitome of information sharing and open expression of ideas, functions instantly, is widely discussed, dynamic and represents the pinnacle of keeping in touch. Based on the idea of Web 2.0, social media is important for the way it brings the masses together interactively and focuses on its users. Changes have arisen in a variety of areas in the past few years, alongside information and technology. We are experiencing a social transformation that includes changes in social life and environments, social communication and social relationships. This transformation, which is continuing to play out today, affects both technology and the use of technology [1].

The term “social media” includes online tools and websites that provide users with the possibility of interacting by sharing information, views and interests with each other. Social media is a term that combines technology and social entrepreneurship with pictures, videos and sound files.

Social media is especially important in terms of the way that it affects social behaviors [2]. Put differently, we can say that social media presents many advantages in terms of influencing the behavior of other people. According to Erdem R. Erkul [3], in order for a web site or application to meet the definition of social media, it must possess the following qualities.

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- It must have users independent of the publishing company.
- It must have content created by users.
- It must include communication among users.
- It must not be limited to a certain time or place.

For Mayfield [4], social media is one of the newest ideas to emerge and present opportunities, a new type of online media that offers the highest level of exchange and sharing and has the following characteristics:

- *Participation*: Social media encourages contribution and feedback from each user. This blurs the distinction between the media and the audience.
- *Openness*: Most social media services allow feedback and participation. These services encourage participation, voting, commenting and information sharing. They seldom restrict communication.
- *Communication*: While traditional media is about transmitting information (the transfer of information or content to the audience), social media can be better understood as creating the possibility for two-way communication
- *Community*: Social media provides for the rapid shaping of communities and establishment of effective communication. The communities share the things that they are interested in, for example a photograph that they like, political subjects, or a TV program that they enjoy.
- *Connectedness*: Most types of social media broaden their connections by allowing links to other sites, studies or people.

Social Media Tools and Environments: Along with the development of the internet, social media networks have taken on various different forms. From the oldest examples of Xanga, Open Diary and Livejournal to the present, very different services with very different content have emerged. There are sites that offer the possibility of loading and sharing videos, like Facebook, Youtube and Dailymotion and sites that allow users to share photographs, like Picasa and Flickr. Such sites go beyond the mere exchange of text. There are sites like Grooveshark and Fizzy, which focus on Music and microblogging sites, a concept popularized by Twitter and other social media networks focusing on a specific type of content. Another type of social media is social tagging. This type of social media network gives users the opportunity to share among themselves content like web sites and other things that have been distributed on the internet.

The majority of this type of site gives users the ability to put a tag or label on the contents that they have chosen to share with other users. Social media environments also have structures that allow the addition of new content and users with each passing day.

Recent studies have shown that the number of people using social media is growing. The goal of this study is to understand the viewpoint of students with respect to the fast-developing social networks being used today for various purposes. It also looks at the views of the parents of these students on the subject. To accomplish this, the study will seek answers to the following questions:

- How often do they use the internet?
- For how long do they use the internet?
- What is the purpose of their internet usage?
- Which social media environments do they visit?
- What changes has social media brought about in their lives?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data come from people living in the Çubuk district who have children attending 9th, 10th and 11th grades at the Çubuk Anadolu Öğretmen High School, a total of 49 volunteer parents were divided up into three focus groups and their children were also divided into three focus groups.

Table 1: Some examples of social media environments can be classified in this way

Communication	Bloglar (Blogger, Wordpress) Micro Blogging (Twitter) Social Networks (Facebook, MySpace) Social Network Aggregators (Friendfeed) Activities (Eventful)
Collaboration	Wikis (Wikipedia) Social Tagging (Delicious) Social News (Reddit, Bildirgec)
Multimedia	Photo Sharing (Picasa, Flickr, Photobucket) Video Sharing (Youtube, Dailymotion, İzlesene) Music and Sound Sharing (Fizy, Kavun, Playlist)
Views and Opinions	Product and Job Reviews (Epinions, Sikayetvar) Question and Answer Communities (Yahoo! Answers, Sorucevap)
Fun	Virtual Worlds (Secondlife, Yoğurtistan) Game Sharing (Miniclip King.com)
Other	Information Aggregators (Netvibes) Social Media Review and Analysis (Sysomos, Ubervu)

Social Media, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media10.02.2012 [5]

Table 2: Characteristics of the Student Participants

Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11
• 8 Female	• 10 Female	• 7 Female
• 5 Male	• 9 Male	• 10 Male

Table 3: Characteristics of the 49 Parent Participants

Gender	Age	Education	Use of Social Media
Male: 32 (%65,4)	30-39: 12 (%24,5)	Elementary: 15 (%30,6)	None: 5 (%10,2)
Female: 17 (%34,6)	40-49: 27 (%55,1)	High School: 19 (%38,7)	Seldom: 8 (%16,3)
	50-59: 10 (%20,4)	University: 12 (%24,5)	Sometimes: 22 (%44,9)
		Postgraduate: 3 (%6,2)	Constantly: 14 (%28,6)

Of the parents participating, 12 had a university education, 3 had a postgraduate degree, 19 a high school degree and 15 had completed elementary school. It was ensured that there were individuals from each educational background in all of the focus groups. In the groups of students, it was ensured that there were students from each class level in each group. During the 2011-2012 school period, each group took part in 4 meetings, each lasting around 2 hours.

In the first of the focus group meetings, information was given to the students and to the parents regarding social media. The participants were asked which social media tools they used, how often they used them and for what reasons. Later, the topic of discussion was “The positive and/or negative effects of social media environments and tools on students’ lives”. After the first meeting, a summary of the topics discussed was prepared and sent to the participants. This summary was taken as a starting point for the following meeting.

After the completion of the final meeting, the participants were asked to write down their opinions regarding social media tools and environments, as well as their thoughts on the possible effects such tools and environments could have on students’ lives, based on the results of the discussions carried out. The data collected from the participants were analyzed along with the meeting summaries. Finally, the opinions that had been presented regarding the use of social media environments and tools and its effect on students’ lives were analyzed and interpreted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Behaviors Related to Visiting Social Media Environments and Using Social Media Tools

Interest in Technology and Technological Skills Increased: All of the group members agreed that the interest their children had for technology had increased. The participants said that after their children began to use social media environments and tools, they followed technology more closely. They even said that the students had kept up with comments on the subject of technological products and that they had made recommendations to other users on these sites regarding new products.

On the subject of interest in technology, the students agreed with their families. The students stressed that they didn't want to be left behind, that using technology was essential and than being left behind in this area would mean being disconnected from life. Additionally, they said that knowing and being up-to-date on technological developments elevated them to respected status in the eyes of their families and friends and that this made them happy. Participants also agreed in the discussions that the technological skills of their children increased significantly. The students were responsible for updating programs on the computers at home, some of the students had created their own blog pages and a few were reported by their parents to have started to learn hacking skills. It was observed that rather than considering whether hacking was ethical, the parents tended to praise the students' abilities in this regard.

The students agreed with their parents on this subject. The students, who stressed that computers were now a part of life, said that when there were technological problems to solve, they drew upon other technological sources to solve them. They took advice from forums in which they had posted their questions about technology or watched videos showing how to solve the problems.

Success and Lack of Success in Classes: The group members were unable to reach an agreement on this subject. Some of the parents said that their children were performing better in, for example, English classes. They said that the students had previously had a negative view of English, but that with the use of social media they viewed the subject more positively and their written English skills had improved. Others said the opposite—that their children were spending time on social media rather than on classes and despite the fact that they were successful students, they were not spending enough time on classes.

A majority of the students disagreed with their families on this matter. They said that they were successful in school and that the fact that they were studying at a good school demonstrated this and that social media environments were not a hindrance to their class work. Only 10 students said that spending a lot of time using social media harmed them, that they could not control themselves and that they were less successful because they were not spending enough time on their classes.

Being More or less Social: 32 of the parents said that social media environments and the use of social media tools did not make the students more social, but rather that they were becoming accustomed to virtual friendship and were less able to function in normal social environments. They said that while the students felt more free to express themselves in social media environments, they did not show the same self confidence in actual friendships. The other parents said that social media environments did not contribute to making the students more social.

A majority of the students espoused the idea of "Virtual Sociality". They said that they feel more comfortable in these environments than ever before and behave accordingly, but that they could not replicate this level of comfort and success in school life. In contrast, 13 of the students said that they had gained self confidence after beginning to use social media and that they were now more able to establish social relationships.

Rise in Telecommunications Costs: The students and the parents in the focus groups all agreed on the subject of rises in costs. The participants spoke of a constant need to update computers and especially cell phones to newer models and constantly renew internet packages. They said that they especially had to spend more on Twitter and Facebook connection packages so they could constantly share and update statuses.

Adding Friends You Don't Know Well: On this subject, 24 parents said that they had warned their children about virtual friendships and sharing things with people they did not know. 17 of the parents said that their children had friends on social media that they did not know in real life, but that this did not hurt them. The remaining parents were uncertain about this subject. While the parents agreed about precautions regarding adding friends the students do not know personally, they did not agree about whether limits should be set. 32 of the students said that some friends they made on social media stayed there and that they had never spoken with these people personally. They said also said that these friends had helped them

with their classes and that they even had friends whose native language is English, who had helped them with the language and helped check over their class work. 17 of the students said that they used to have such friends, but after hearing warnings in the media, they no longer accepted purely virtual friendships.

The Social Media Tools Used by Students, Goals and Periods of Use: The student participants mostly use the most popular social media tools. While their usage periods and frequencies vary, their goals are fairly consistent. The table below shows this data.

Social Media Tools	Goal	Periods of Use
Facebook: 49	Sharing: 40	Every Day: 18
Msn: 49	Research: 23	3-5 times a week: 22
Youtube: 40	Fun: 32	1-2 times a week: 9
Wikis: 10	Playing Games: 14	
Twitter: 15	Communication: 49	
Dailymotion / İzlesene: 17	Music / Watching Video: 24	
Myspace: 3		
Flicker: 4		

The Effects of Use of Social Media Tools in General on Students' Lives and Specifically on Their Success in School and Family/Social Relationships: This subject was one that drew a great deal of interest in the focus group discussions. While a few parents said “there hasn't been any change in these relationships”, the parents generally agreed that the children were “influenced”. They disagreed, however, on the extent of this influence.

For instance, 17 of the parents said that their children were strongly influenced in every sense of the word. The children of these parents were said to use the excuse that they needed to do homework on the internet to avoid family interactions and to spend long periods online every day and that they now almost didn't speak at all. 2 of the parents said that they were now better able to communicate with their children via “MSN” than directly.

7 of the participants with students in the 9th grade said that their children's grades had dropped significantly. 13 of the parents said that being in social media environments had not particularly affected their lives, because they did not spend very much time using them, usually just 1-2 times per week for short periods.

While the students agreed with their parents that they were influenced, they insisted that the influence was not as strong as the parents thought. 10 students said that their grades had dropped, but that this was not related to social media, but to the difficulty of the courses and the fact that they did not like them.

14 students said that they were not very successful in social relationships, that they preferred to be alone and that while using social media they were more social and more popular.

13 students said that using social media tools did not negatively influence their coursework and on the contrary, that it contributed to their success.

These students said that some courses were very boring and monotone and that this was why they were not motivated. They said that social media environments were very dynamic and strongly interactive and that class videos shared on social media were more visual and interactive, which made them understand the material better.

New Regulation on Safe Internet Use: After long discussions, the 49 parents tentatively agreed that for safe internet use, some websites should be banned. However 18 parents said that bans were not really a solution and that things that are forbidden create even stronger interest among children. They said that the children would be able to get around these bans and that it was thus more important to teach the children to be responsible users of social media environments and tools.

The students were in complete agreement that bans were not a solution. All of the students said that they knew enough that if they wanted they could definitely find a way to get around bans.

Could Students Be More Successful If They Did Not Spend Time on Social Media?: The data from the focus group discussions showed that the parents thought that the students were successful, partly because they were already going to a good school. But when speaking about their present concerns, the parents indicated that the students would be more successful if they used social media less often.

41 students insisted that they would not be more successful if they did not use social media and that they were not influenced in this way by their usage.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On the subject of how students' use of social media influenced their lives, it was observed that the students and the parents were not in agreement. In contrast to their parents' opinion that they were influenced negatively, the students themselves thought that they were influenced in a consistently positive way. In contrast to the opinions of their parents and teachers, they said that social media is not harmful to them, but that it helped them feel more free and social. The parents, after long and intense discussion, reached a tentative agreement that if care is taken and the periods of access are limited, use of social media environments and tools is not harmful. It emerged in the discussions that some of the parents also used social media frequently and for hours at a time.

In conclusion, it seems like the most reasonable and constructive approach to this issue would be to learn and teach children about how social media and social media tools can be used in a way that has positive effects. But just how prepared and how informed are we, the parents and teachers on this subject?.

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