The Effect of Social Networks on Freshmen Students of the Education Faculty: A Comparative Study of the 2016 and 2022 Academic Year

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Abstract: The popularity of social networks has reached remarkable heights with users spending extensive time using them. Social networks have become a firm part of society especially in the lives of learners. Changes can be seen throughout the years regarding interest and usage of social networks. Accordingly, this study's objectives concentrate on the exploration and comparison of freshmen students' social network usage from the academic years of 2016 and 2022 in the Faculty of Education at Tishk International University. Further, the freshmen respondents were given the same quantitative questionnaire. The data disclosed the social network that was most favored, the device used to access social networks, their perception regarding the effective communicational format, its influence on grades, and difference amid learners considering a temporary social media hiatus from these academic years. Therefore, this study indicated that the freshmen contributors of the academic years of 2016 and 2022 regarded and handled social networks differently.

Keywords: Academic Years, Social Networks, Learners, Comparative, Effect

1. Introduction

Social networking sites are a type of virtual environment that allows users to establish a profile and engage or interact with others who share their preferences (Ellison, 2007). Social networks are websites or programs that enable individuals to interact with others by sharing content, photos, videos, and other material. University students spend numerous hours on social networking sites/apps such as Facebook, Instagram, Viber, Twitter, and YouTube. Social networking sites have become a central factor in current and social interaction and communication due to the ease it provides in connecting the users with content of various topics including education, business, family, friends, and health. Social network usage has become increasingly popular and influential among university students regarding their attention and focus. Hence, a majority of higher education facilities integrate social media into their programs to advertise or connect with future or previous pupils. Within the academic field, a popular modern method involves using social networks in the educational process to expose learners to the combination of media and education. The current focus resides on how this interest in social networks can be applied to raise pupils interest in their academics through their interest in social networks (Miller, 2020). Today, social events have shifted from face-to-face to online, due to the availability of computers or phones that are connected to the Internet (Topper, 2007).

Through these developments, pupils that use social media have encountered numerous benefits and drawbacks. According to Schill (2011), social platforms have a detrimental effect on pupils and may become a serious hindrance in their academic progress and success because they are always checking the content displayed on these accounts. In contrast, learners attain advantages by using social networks due to the development it evokes on communicating and creative capability. Younger individuals spend extensive hours on social networks each day and it clearly has become a significant part of their lives that affect other areas, such as education and work. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to collect data from the academic year of 2016 and 2022 on how social networks affect first year students at Tishk International University. These academic years were chosen due to a significant period of technological change and usage that has garnered interest in learners' academic behavior. This is a significant research because it provides greater information regarding the perspectives and focus of pupils upon social networks that can contribute towards identifying modern educational practices that generate greater academic interest.

1.1 Research Questions:

- How has the impact of social networking changed academic performance amid these two academic years?
- What exactly is the relationship between the effects of social networking and students' academics?
- What are the students perspectives regarding social media's effect on their studies?
- What are the respondents' thoughts regarding their social skills being affected by social media?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Students Use of Social Networks

Learners are constantly influenced by their social network accounts. Hence, it is critical to determine how much time most individuals use on social platforms because it is often assumed that students spend several hours per day on social media. As per the Nielsen Media Research, a survey displayed that pupils are on social networks twenty-five percent of the time within each day (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). Based on a longitudinal research conducted by Walsh et al. (2013) regarding women's use of social networks during their first year of university, it found that they used social media for approximately 12 hours daily while multitasking. Similarly, a study conducted at a South African University by Uys et al. (2012) used a questionnaire to conclude that students stay online for nearly sixteen hours in a day. Furthermore, a quantitative study performed by Tantarangsee et al. (2017) stated that a majority of the students spend about six to eight hours on the Internet while the second common time range was greater than eight hours.

Social media applications including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc. have gained several users worldwide with most of them incorporating it into their daily lives (Bicen & Cavus, 2010). The most commonly used site by university students is Facebook (Sutherland et al., 2018). Furthermore, the quantitative data collected from 350 contributors by Hadebe et al. (2016) exhibited that the most frequently utilized social media sites among their participants were Facebook and Twitter, with the primary reason of usage being chatting. However, a study by Knight-McCord et al. (2016) provided a

questionnaire to an American co-education university to reveal that the commonly used application among his participants was Instagram. Also, it was stated that the lowest usage was found to be on LinkedIn and Pinterest.

Based on a study done by Ohio State University, students who use social networking sites have lower grades than students who do not use it (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011). Similarly, a study by Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2015) found that social media usage could negatively affect students academic achievements. However, a study by Mushtaq and Benraghda (2018) revealed that there were no differences between the positive and negative effects of social media on academic success among pupils. Instructors and learners may utilize social media as a source of knowledge and collaboration to make the educational experience easier and effective.

2.2 Positives Aspects of Social Networks

Social media has helpful qualities that pupils are able to wield to help them in their academics (Lusk, 2010). Students can be in constant contact with their colleagues because of the ability of distant communication social media provides (Vural, 2015). For example, social networks provide a forum for students to discuss their passions or seek guidance from peers. It allows them to easily disclose knowledge about schoolwork and other educational topics. Also, their electronic communication abilities and cognition will improve due to their constant usage. Pupils will be accessing their social media to complete tasks using devices, which contributes to increasing their aptitude. Social networks gives university pupils and others the possibilities to exchange content, discuss, create, receive support, and form a strong presence or connection (Penni, 2017). For example, pupils can express thoughts about a discussion post that was shared online to gain support and a broader understanding of the subjects. This type of assignment can increase interest in academic topics, materials, and tasks. Hence, learners will be knowledgeable of the diverse uses of social networks for educational and communicative aspects.

During lectures, lack of confidence or timidity causes many pupils to be incapable of expressing themselves. Social media allows kids to join in intellectual discussions to express themselves and gain confidence (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). Depending on application, some instructional methodologies can be incorporated into social networking sites for academic goals (Vural, 2015). These methodologies include collaborative learning where the pupils' group up to finish an assignment, work out an issue, or produce an item (Laal & Laal, 2012). Also, student-centered learning focuses on the pupils leading the learning process while the educator takes the role of the guide to reach aims (Overby, 2011). Moreover, the emergence of innovative technological and web tools can be incorporated to improve learning methods (Brydolf, 2007). The advantage of social media apps is that they can provide a variety of resources that students may use to best fit their individual styles of learning and academic achievement (Raut & Patil, 2016). This contributes to pupils having access to various forms of materials that suit the manner that they learn including visual, auditory, and physical.

2.3 Negative Aspects of Social Networks

Social networks are able to become hindering and negative factors in learners' lives. Its constant ability to distract and disrupt the focus of learners from academics is a serious threat towards intellectual

growth. According to Jacobsen & Forste (2011), this might result in the students receiving poor scores and neglecting to perform well in school. This distraction will cause a rise in the procrastination ranges because attention is not placed on school related work, but on the activities and content provided by social accounts. Moreover, pupils are significantly depending on gathering data and information quickly on social networks (Balakrishnan & Gan, 2016). This prevents pupils from engaging in deeper contemplation and exploration for knowledge, which may result in less focus and unsatisfactory academic performance. Aside from this, face to face social skills suffer because of online communication, which arises from the lack of proximity. Pupils will form a habit of online communication that will weaken their physical interaction and connections.

Also, due to the reduced need of using verbal and bodily movements to communicate, students will likely not be comfortable or active in the lessons because they are used to providing responses through their devices. An instance is that an individual that frequently shares their opinions on social platforms will likely not be willing to have a discussion in person. These types of situations will most definitely pose an issue within subjects that require presentations and constant discussion to be conducted. It is still critical for students to be able to connect in person despite the fact that dependency on technological tools has grown to high ranges (Brannan, 2014). Hence, academic success can be jeopardized if social networks are the main focus and not used for the intended objectives.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This article worked to gain a greater awareness on social networks' effect upon TIU learners' educational focus. Based on this, information was compiled using a quantitative descriptive design that was structured to attain clear responses from the contributors. The descriptive quantitative method was chosen to attain clearer numerical and detailed data of the participants' perspectives to comprehend social media's effect on their social and academic lives. This approach provides numerical data that can be reliably evaluated to fulfill the objective of comparing social media usage within two academic years. A survey was the quantitative tool chosen to receive statistical findings that display learners' opinions on the social networking usage and its effects on their functionality. The survey questions were developed through drafting questions, pilot testing, and revision to ensure the validity and proper data collection.

3.2 Participants and Setting

Tishk International University's Education Faculty in Erbil, Iraq was the setting of this research. During the academic year of 2016, there were four departments that made up the Education Faculty. The respondents during that year consisted of seven English Language Teaching students, six Biology students, three students from Math, and two students from Physics. Moreover, for the academic year of 2022, the participants were from the five departments that make up this faculty. The respondents were four students from English Language Teaching, four from Physics, four from Computer, three from Biology, and three from Math. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 20 and they were all from Kurdish ethnicity. The collection of responses was conducted through an anonymous survey. The surveys were distributed among the first year learners that were randomly chosen by the researchers

from each of the Educational Faculty departments in two separate academic years. For the 2016 and 2022 academic years, a total number of 18 surveys were randomly collected each time from freshmen pupils. For the 2016 data collection, eight males and ten females randomly answered the survey; likewise, the 2022 respondents consisted of ten females and eight males. The required number of participants from each gender was shared with the different departments to ensure it was identical to the 2016 participants.

3.3 Instrumentation

Google Forms was the tool used to create and provide questions to the respondents. The questions were made in the multiple choice question formats, which either provided various options or simple Yes/No to ensure more specific and reliable results. The survey contained seven questions that were focused on students' use of social media, such as time period spent, their ability to communicate, effect on grades, and taking a break from social media to focus more on their studies. Prior to the distribution of the survey, the effectiveness of the survey was analyzed through test-retest reliability to ensure that the questions suited the objectives of this research and were reliable to gather valid responses. The survey was distributed through a link provided in different social media groups of the departments to ensure the participants voluntarily completed the survey. Also, this was done to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity was fully maintained by random students deciding to participate using the Google Forms link.

4. Results

The survey showed that the most popular forms of social networks among Tishk International University students in 2016 were Viber (56%), Facebook (29%), and Instagram (15%). Moreover, an inquiry was made regarding the electronics used to check social networking sites. The responses displayed that 58% of participants use mobile phones, 30% use laptops, and 12% use iPads. In 2022, it was discovered that the most used social networks consisted of Instagram (38.9%) and Facebook (27.8%). Additionally, all the contributors answered that they use their mobile phones to access social networks.
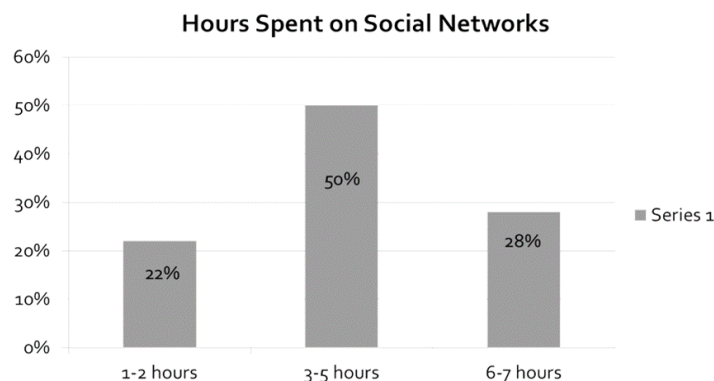

Figure 1: Hours Spent on Social Networks (2016)

How many hours do you spend on social networks?

18 responses

A. 1-2 hours
B. 3-5 hours
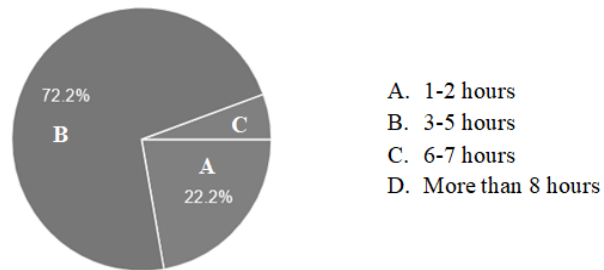C. 6-7 hours
D. More than 8 hours

Figure 2: Hours Spent on Social Network (2022)

The 2016 survey provided the knowledge that 50% of the participants spend 3-5 hours a day on social media, 28% spend 6-7 hours, and 22% said 1-2 hours a day (Figure 1). However, during the 2022 survey, 72.2% stated that they spend 3-5 hours on social media, 5.6% spend 6-7 hours, and 22.2% spend 1-2 hours (Figure 2). Furthermore, the participants were asked whether social media negatively affects their social lives. In 2016, 39% responded that social media does negatively affect their social lives while 61% replied that it does not (Figure 3). However, in 2022, 27.8% of the participants stated that social media negatively affects their social lives whereas 72.2% stated that it does not (Figure 4).

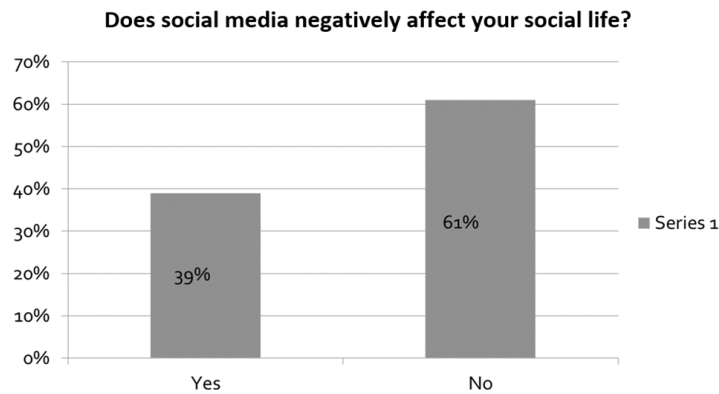Does social media negatively affect your social life?

Figure 3: Does Social Media Negatively Affect Your Social Life? (2016)

Does social media negatively affect your social life?
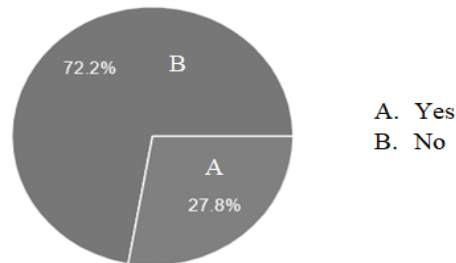
18 responses

Figure 4: Does Social Media Negatively Affect Your Social Life? (2022)

Furthermore, an inquiry was made regarding if social networking affects the respondents grades. During the 2016 survey, 61% agreed that it did affect their grades, while 39% replied that it does not (Figure 5). However, during the 2022 survey, 44.4% stated it does affect their grades, while 55.6% stated that it does not (Figure 6).
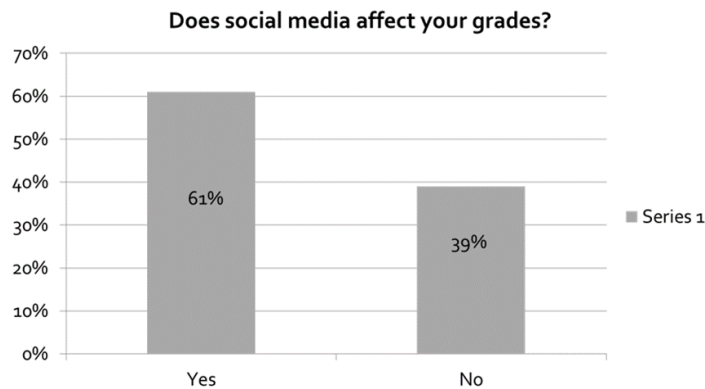

Figure 5. Does Social Media Affect Your Grades? (2016)

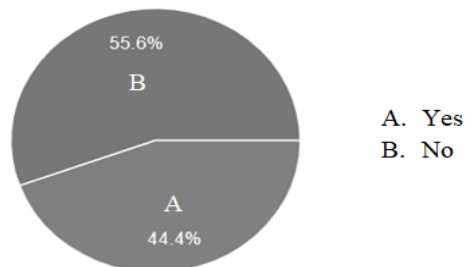Does social media affect your grades?

18 responses

Figure 6: Does Social Media Affect Your Grades? (2022)

Moreover, a question was presented to grasp the participants view regarding if they are better at communicating face to face or through social networks. In the 2016 survey, 56% selected that their communication is better through social networks, while 44% selected that their communication is better in person (Figure 7). During the survey in 2022, 88.9% of the participants stated that they communicate better through social networks, while 11.1% stated that face to face communication was better (Figure 8).
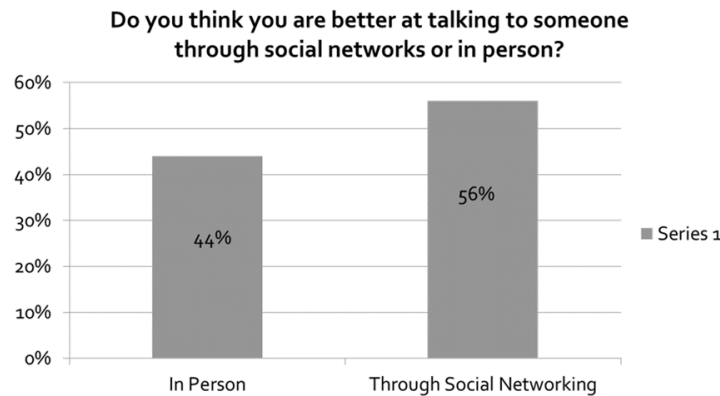
Do you think you are better at talking to someone through social networks or in person?

Figure 7: Communication Preference (2016)

Do you think you are better talking to someone through social networks or face to face?

18 responses

A. Social Networks
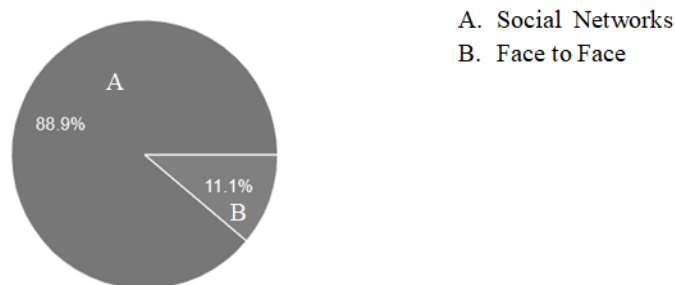B. Face to Face

88.9%

11.1%
B

Figure 8: Communication Preference (2022)

To add, an inquiry was made regarding if the contributors would consider taking a social media break to put complete attention on academics. The findings from the 2016 survey displayed that 33% were considering a break, but 67% objected to the notion of a break (Figure 9). In 2022, 88.9% stated that they are considering taking a break, while 11.1% stated they are not (Figure 10).
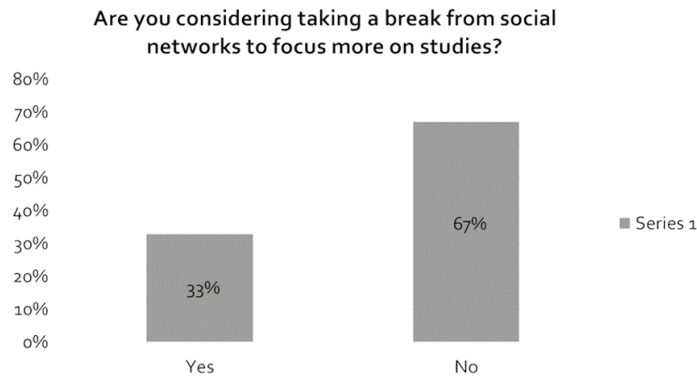
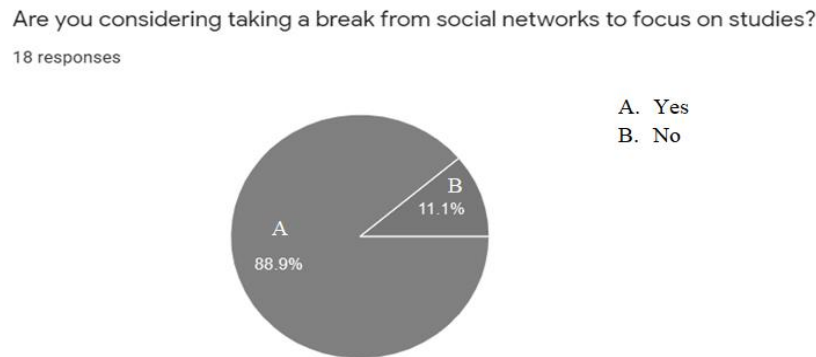Figure 9: Break from Social Networks for More Focus on Studies (2016)

Figure 10: Break from Social Networks for More Focus on Studies (2022)

5. Discussion

Students input an abundant amount of time and attention into social networks, which makes it a distracting factor in their educational progress and skill development. The comparison conducted on First Year students from the academic years of 2016 and 2022 shows that the preferences, attention, and awareness of the effects of social networks have changed throughout the years. The information gathered from the anonymous survey revealed that a majority of first year pupils at Tishk International University from the years of 2016 and 2022 favor using social networks. Social networks like Viber, Facebook and Instagram were popular among these respondents. These results are similar to the findings of Tayo et al. (2019) which stated that the frequently used social media tools were WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. The common results found in this study could be because of the purpose behind using such platforms, which is mostly for socialization. However, Oueder and Abousaber's (2018) research found that the most popular social media platforms used among 270 students were YouTube and Twitter. This difference may be due to the different sample sizes.

Regarding social networks usage and the effect on grades, there was a difference between the responses of students from 2016 and 2022. The majority of students from 2016 stated that social media has a negative effect on their grades; however, most of the students from 2022 stated that social media does

not affect their grades. Similar to the results of 2016, Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2015) found that a majority of respondents stated that social networks had a negative effect on their academic work. This clarifies that the majority of the contributors were aware that their usage of social media has an impact on their grades. The reason may be caused by a large percentage of responders utilizing social networking platforms for activities other than educational uses. The difference between students in 2016 and 2022 could be because people have developed skills in using social media, which helps them manage their time and use them as a source for academics.

Most of the students from both years (2016 and 2022) feel more comfortable communicating through social media instead of face to face. However, this differs from the study of Sponcil and Gitimu (2013), which found that a majority of the students prefer face to face communication. Nonetheless, the results of the current study might be due to students' lack of confidence and being shy, which leads to people avoiding face to face communication. The findings of a research by Baker and Oswald (2010) focused on the relationship between online social networks and shy people's relationship qualities, which found that social media sites created a comfortable setting for shy people to engage with others.

6. Implications

Educators should recognize the usefulness of applying social media in academics and utilize it in learning approaches to improve the students' performance (Boahene et al., 2019). Moreover, students should be taught the ways social media can be used for academics such as collaboration and research (Boahene et al., 2019). For instance, institutions should aid students by forming groups for their classes on social media platforms in order to discuss and work together on projects (Cao et al., 2023).

7. Limitations

A major limitation is the small sample size of 18 contributors from only one university in Erbil. Moreover, these participants all had Kurdish backgrounds. This makes generalizing the data for broader populations restricted due to the population and cultural limitations found in this study. Procedures were implemented to ensure anonymity of responses and effectiveness of the survey; however, the reliance on self-reported data does present the potential limitation of inaccurate or biased replies.

8. Future Research

The results emphasize the complicated association between using social media and academic performance as it shows that it can have a positive and negative effect. Moreover, such effects differ according to the applications used, reasons for use, etc. Researching the connection between using social media and the effect in academic performance is complex and needs a specific approach. One approach that can be used in the future is longitudinal studies. Such studies can facilitate the researcher in comprehending the underlying association between using social media and students' performance over time. Moreover, a longitudinal study can be beneficial in noting a difference in a student's performance in varying stages of their education, which can provide us with an understanding of long-term outcomes. Additionally, these researches should seek to gather data from contributors of different cultural backgrounds, expand their quantity of contributors, and broaden university settings to gather data that is diverse.

9. Conclusion

Social networking websites and applications are a firm part of undergraduate students' lives, which increase the influence it has on their priorities and focus in a positive or negative manner. Therefore, determining the range of time used for social networks is necessary because it is regularly presumed that learners use a majority of their time using social applications. Researched material has presented that social platforms can be useful or harmful toward individuals. Positive abilities social networks provide is the opportunity to have continuous contact and enables learners that are not as outgoing to make contributions to the discussion using posts. Moreover, negatives are that it can take up a majority of learners' attention, which would cause them to neglect their studies and receive low scores. Also, the ability to communicate face to face suffers due to their lack of practice using verbal and physical communication with other people. The objective for this comparative study was to reach a more profound comprehension of the influence social networking has on the focus of first stage students of two different academic years on their education. Interestingly, the results of the surveys conducted in the academic years of 2016 and 2022 shows that social networks usage and effect has changed significantly. This can certainly be seen in the electronics used to assess their social networks and the types of networks most popular during these times that prompt the respondents to spend hours on them. The progression of social media popularity seems to have seriously influenced 2022 respondents' face to face communication skills, while the 2016 respondents viewed it as a factor affecting their grades. Hence, stability needs to be established amid learners' academics and social networking activities, so that their attention span on education does not diminish and communication ability does not suffer. Recognizing and analytically addressing the extensive consequence or challenges of social media on academics is essential. The constant development of technological connections makes it a profound focus to uphold continuous efforts in preparing pupils with the necessary resources and awareness to use these socials appropriately. Educating pupils in digital citizenship, proactive procedures, and reinforcing consciousness of the role of technology in education will prompt social media to be assistive to academics. Thus, constant research on the social media's involvement with academics contributes to learners' intellectual welfare and management of challenges amid the growing technological interest.

Suggestions regarding the social networks and academics:

- Educators should increase the modern classroom characteristics by incorporating social networks into the lesson through activities, such as making an educational post on Instagram.
- Educators should prompt the learners to communicate through their social networks with one another regarding a specific topic, and then guide them to continue sharing their ideas in person to highlight the difference in communication and gain an understanding of their abilities.
- Digital citizenship should be taught to ensure proper and responsible use of social networks.
- Educators should harness social networks to foster collaborative learning and set guidelines of usage in academics to limit negative impacts.

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