Autistic Adolescents’ use of social media

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Adolescence of autistic people

Childhood

Adolescence: Biological and social role changes

Adulthood

**Autism includes difficulties with:**
- Social perspective taking
- Social relating
- Change
- Executive function
- Sensory processing
- Emotional understanding
- Emotion regulation

**Some tasks of adolescence**
- Accepting change in the body
  - Identity formation
- Acceptance by a peer group / intimate relationships
- Greater autonomy in decision making
- Planning and future-orientated thinking
- Understand and regulate powerful and complex emotions
- Gain sophistication in perspective taking

**Poor outcomes for autistic people**
- Increasing mental health probs
- Poor quality of life
- Social isolation
- Unemployment and underemployment
- Educational under-attainment
- Lack of independence
“Social media is not an alternative to the real world – it is the real world”
Can we promote happier, healthier adolescence for autistic people by gaining a better understanding of how they use social media?

To what extent do they participate in the benefits of social media? Can we enhance these benefits?
- Identity formation – ‘finding your tribe’
- Broadcasting your perspective

To what extent do they suffer costs of social media usage? Can we minimise these risks?
- Bullying
- Sexual risk
- FOMO
- Manipulation by commercial and political interests

How can we study autistic teenager’s use of social media?
- Anthropology – Prof Danny Miller
- Autistic co-researchers
- Smartphones?
How do autistic teenagers use social media to construct identity and build communities?
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Key Themes

Control

- Choosing when and how to engage with others
- Meeting people’s expectations

Community

- Connecting with others in a unique way
- Online vs offline communities
Choosing when and how to engage with others

“The games give him a chance to interact with people who share a similar passion, but he can disconnect with that in a second if he’s feeling uncomfortable” (Parent of 13 yr old)
Meeting people’s expectations

“You have to reply really quickly in case someone goes offline. So, you could easily have a conversation and then you go to the toilet, come back and they’re gone. It gets quite stressful in the end” (15 yr old)
Connecting with others in a unique way

“You make a lot of friends using voice chat while playing a game and it’s really sociable because of the competitive and team play side” (22 yr old)
Online vs offline communities

“lots of people at school have or want Instagram and Snapchat, but I really couldn’t think of anything worse. You know putting pictures up of me for people to judge, they can say nasty things and I think, I suppose that sort of thing means that they can get to you even when you’re not at school, so I wouldn’t do that” (13 yr old)
Implications

Use of Social Media
- Do autistic teens use social media in similar ways to non-autistic teens?
- Important for developing communities based on shared interests
- Individual control makes it easier

Safety Online
- Parents need to be up to date on current social media trends
- Good levels of safety awareness - but some autism-specific risks
- Online and offline bullying

Transitions to Adulthood
- Can provide important social networks – but is this enough?
- Use of social media for work and relationships
- Independence vs security

“It’s peopling completely on my terms”

“There are risks. You just have to be aware”

“There is a huge conflict as a parent...it’s quite difficult because they have freedom of choice but also at the same time, they’re more vulnerable”