



Educational opportunities and risks of social media use for individuals with intellectual disability

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ABSTRACT

Background:

Social media platforms are increasingly recognised as both an opportunity and a challenge for individuals with intellectual disability. While these platforms can foster social inclusion, self-expression, and access to informal learning, they also present significant risks related to digital exclusion, cyberbullying, and privacy concerns.

Method:

Narrative review of the literature that integrates findings from sources identified through database searches, manual searches, and key reference works.

Results:

Findings indicate that social media can significantly enhance social participation, peer relationships, and digital agency among people with mild and moderate intellectual disability, provided that adequate support from families, caregivers, and institutions is available. However, users with more profound intellectual disability remain underrepresented in research, and all groups face heightened vulnerability to online risks without targeted digital literacy education and systemic safeguards.

Conclusion:

To maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of social media for individuals with intellectual disability, it is essential to ensure equitable access, tailored digital literacy programs, and ongoing support from both families and institutions. Future research should address the diverse needs of this population, especially those with profound disability, to inform inclusive educational and policy interventions.

Keywords: *intellectual disability, social media, educational opportunities, educational risks.*

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Introduction

Social media have become a pervasive force in contemporary society, deeply embedded in the daily practices of individuals across all age groups. Defined as user-driven technologies that facilitate the creation and exchange of information within self-selected social networks (Papacharissi, 2013), platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter serve not only as communication tools but also as emerging sites of informal learning, identity construction, and civic engagement. Particularly for adolescents and young adults, social media environments reflect and amplify key developmental processes such as social connection, autonomy seeking, and exploration of self and others (Goodyear & Armour, 2021). The educational potential of social media has been increasingly acknowledged by researchers and policy-makers alike. Studies have shown that these platforms can function as dynamic learning ecologies, enabling access to diverse perspectives, peer collaboration, and interest-driven learning outside formal schooling contexts (Greenhow & Askari, 2017). In health and well-being education, for example, young people use social media to explore sensitive topics like body image, mental health, and nutrition - often in ways that feel more private, relevant, and accessible than traditional classroom instruction (Goodyear & Armour, 2019). Moreover, the interactive and multimodal nature of these platforms supports both cognitive engagement and emotional resonance, making them promising tools for fostering student agency and media literacy (Jenkins et al., 2009).

However, alongside these educational affordances lie significant risks. Social media use (SMU) has been associated with a spectrum of ill-being indicators including depression, anxiety, disordered eating, and problematic social comparisons (Valkenburg, 2022). While some users report feelings of inspiration and enjoyment, others - especially adolescents - experience heightened self-scrutiny, envy, and cyberbullying, particularly when exposed to algorithmically curated and idealized content. Meta-analyses have revealed inconsistent associations between SMU and mental health outcomes, yet the most robust correlations emerge in the context of problematic social media use - a pattern marked by compulsivity, emotional dependency, and the neglect of offline responsibilities. These concerns are further intensified by the spread of misinformation, algorithmic amplification of polarizing content, and the manipulative practices of bots and coordinated campaigns (Ferrara, 2015). Educational institutions thus face a dual imperative: to harness the pedagogical potential of social media while developing policies and pedagogies that mitigate harm and build digital resilience.



Despite ongoing public debates and regulatory initiatives, many schools either restrict or entirely prohibit mobile phone and social media use during class hours. This reactive stance overlooks the reality that young people are already engaged in extensive informal learning online, and that formal education must evolve to bridge the gap between school-based instruction and lived digital experience (Goodyear & Armour, 2021). While the role of social media in shaping the experiences of adolescents and young adults has been widely examined, considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding their significance for individuals with intellectual disability (ID). This population faces unique cognitive, communicative, and social challenges that can affect the ways in which they access, interpret, and participate in digital environments. At the same time, research indicates that, when adequate support is provided, social media can open vital avenues for self-expression, peer connection, and informal learning for people with ID (Chadwick et al., 2013; Caton & Chapman, 2016; Anderson et al., 2023). These platforms may thus serve not only as tools for social inclusion but also as environments that foster agency, digital literacy, and civic engagement—provided that barriers related to accessibility, digital safety, and institutional support are addressed from the outset.

In this context, it becomes crucial to reframe social media not merely as a distraction or threat, but as a cultural and pedagogical resource - one that, if guided appropriately, can foster critical thinking, digital literacy, and civic agency. This reframing is particularly important for individuals with intellectual disability, who often remain on the periphery of mainstream digital discourse. For this population, social media may offer vital opportunities for self-expression, peer connection, and participatory learning across formal, informal, and non-formal contexts. However, these benefits are accompanied by significant risks - including exposure to cyberbullying, manipulation, and exclusionary content - which are often exacerbated by limited digital literacy and insufficient institutional support. Ensuring that social media serve as inclusive educational tools therefore demands both empirical insight and thoughtful policy: educators, caregivers, and institutions must develop frameworks that promote access while protecting users with intellectual disability from harm.



Aim and Methodology of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore the educational opportunities and risks associated with social media use among individuals with intellectual disability (ID). In particular, the review sought to identify how digital engagement may support or hinder cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as to examine the systemic, technological, and relational conditions necessary for meaningful and inclusive participation in online environments.

To address this aim, a narrative review of the literature was conducted, drawing on peer-reviewed studies, reviews, and theoretical contributions relevant to social media use among individuals with intellectual disability. Sources were identified through searches in major academic databases, manual exploration of reference lists, and consultation of key texts in the field. Consistent with the interpretive nature of narrative reviews, the selection of literature was guided by its relevance and contribution to the research question rather than by rigid inclusion or exclusion criteria. This approach allowed for the integration of diverse perspectives, methodological approaches, and disciplinary insights, supporting a comprehensive and nuanced synthesis of current knowledge (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006; Sukhera, 2022).

Social Media and Education

The educational affordances of social media have been extensively discussed in recent pedagogical literature. Studies rooted in socio-cultural learning theories emphasize that platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok constitute complex learning environments where adolescents construct knowledge through interest-driven participation, peer feedback, and informal mentorship (Jenkins et al., 2009; Greenhow et al., 2019). These digital spaces support hybrid forms of knowledge construction, blending formal content with vernacular expressions, personal narratives, and multimedia artifacts. The literature identifies several pathways through which social media can enhance learning outcomes. First, interactive functionalities such as commenting, liking, and sharing encourage dialogic engagement and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Second, the accessibility of multimodal resources supports diverse learning styles and expands the boundaries of classroom discourse. Third, participatory cultures foster by social media cultivate 21st-century skills such as digital literacy, collaboration, and civic engagement (Livingstone & Third, 2017).



In addition, studies have shown that structured use of social media in classrooms can support higher-order thinking skills and motivation. For example, platforms like Facebook have been employed to enhance critical reading in science education and collaborative writing in language learning (Callaghan & Bower, 2012). Nevertheless, the literature also notes that these interventions are often fragmented and rarely sustained beyond pilot implementations.

While the positive dimensions of social media are well documented, the literature also reveals substantial risks associated with their use. Valkenburg's (2022) umbrella review of 27 meta-analyses and systematic reviews confirms that the relationship between social media use (SMU) and well-being is complex and often inconsistent. General time spent on social media shows small but statistically significant associations with both increased happiness and elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety. More concerning are findings related to problematic social media use - characterized by compulsive engagement, emotional dependency, and withdrawal symptoms - which consistently correlate with poorer mental health outcomes. These effects are not uniform across user populations. Factors such as age, gender, purpose of use, and type of interaction (active vs. passive) moderate the psychological outcomes of SMU. Passive consumption, especially when driven by social comparison, has been linked to decreased life satisfaction and increased depressive symptoms (Valkenburg, 2022). At the same time, some users report feelings of inspiration or entertainment, pointing to the highly individualized nature of media effects.

Beyond individual risks, structural concerns have emerged regarding the role of social media in spreading misinformation and facilitating manipulation. Ferrara (2015) details how malicious actors - including political groups, terrorist organisations, and coordinated bot networks - exploit platform algorithms to disseminate disinformation, manipulate public opinion, and provoke panic during crises. The lack of effective moderation and verification tools contributes to the vulnerability of users, particularly adolescents, to exposure to false health information, conspiracy theories, and harmful subcultures. Ferrara's analysis underscores the urgency of equipping educators and students with critical media literacy skills capable of navigating the affective, epistemic, and social dimensions of digital participation. Without such interventions, the democratic and educational potential of social media risks being eclipsed by their more exploitative and destabilizing uses.



Social media use among individuals with Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability (ID) is a neurodevelopmental condition defined by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning—encompassing reasoning, learning, and problem-solving—and adaptive behaviour, which includes a wide array of conceptual, social, and practical skills. These limitations originate prior to the age of 18 and may range in severity from mild to profound (Deutsch-Smith, 2008; Johnson et al., 2023; Plichta, 2013). Individuals with ID frequently experience persistent difficulties in areas such as communication, decision-making, and autonomous social participation, all of which may significantly constrain their capacity to navigate and engage with digital media in an independent, informed, and secure manner.

Access to and effective participation in digital environments by individuals with ID is typically contingent upon the presence of sustained support systems—including family members, caregivers, educators, or institutional personnel (Chadwick et al., 2016; Seale, 2014). Moreover, cognitive and psychosocial characteristics specific to this population—such as reduced processing speed, limited abstract reasoning, and difficulty interpreting nuanced social cues—are associated with heightened vulnerability to various forms of online risk, while simultaneously impeding the full realisation of digital affordances. Accordingly, a nuanced conceptualisation of digital inclusion must extend beyond mere access to technology, incorporating a recognition of the individualised, context-sensitive scaffolding necessary to render such inclusion both meaningful and equitable (Johnson et al., 2023; Plichta, 2013). Within this diagnostic and functional framework, the increasing scholarly focus on the digital engagement of individuals with ID—particularly in the realm of social media use—emerges as both timely and justified. This intensifying academic interest reflects broader socio-technological discourses concerning digital inclusion and the empowerment of populations at risk of systemic marginalisation. Individuals with ID, as evidenced by a growing body of research, remain disproportionately excluded not only from traditional forms of social participation but also from digital spaces. Barriers such as technological inaccessibility, limited availability of assistive tools, and insufficient institutional investment in digital skills education contribute to this exclusion (Chadwick, Wesson & Fullwood, 2013; Caton & Chapman, 2016). This multidimensional exclusion has far-reaching implications, effectively constraining opportunities for full civic and interpersonal participation.



As such, efforts to ensure digital inclusion for people with ID acquire not only a practical dimension but also a normative and axiological one—anchored in a commitment to affirming their right to visibility, voice, and agency in the digital public sphere (Seale, 2014). Social media, in this context, constitute both a site of opportunity and of contestation.

Anderson et al. (2023), in a comprehensive review of the literature spanning the years 2000 to 2021, observed a marked increase in the use of social media among adults with intellectual disability (ID). Crucially, this engagement is not characterised by passive consumption alone. On the contrary, individuals with ID actively participate in a wide range of online activities, using social media platforms to maintain interpersonal relationships, express themselves, and derive satisfaction from participation in digital leisure environments. The literature highlights a diverse spectrum of engagement—ranging from passive browsing of content to active commenting and, in many cases, independent content creation and relationship-building within virtual communities (Ågren, Kjellberg, & Hemmingsson, 2020; Chadwick, Wesson & Fullwood, 2013). Particularly noteworthy is the subgroup of adolescents and young adults with ID, who often demonstrate usage patterns that closely mirror those of their neurotypical peers. In a cross-national study conducted by Jenaro, Flores, Vega, Cruz and Pérez (2018), involving 269 adults with ID across three countries, over three-quarters of participants reported using social networking platforms primarily to maintain contact with family, friends, and acquaintances, as well as for entertainment. At the same time, the study underscored important challenges faced by users with ID, including difficulties in understanding implicit and complex communication codes and in exercising adequate control over online privacy and data protection.

One of the most commonly identified benefits associated with the use of social media by individuals with ID is the promotion of social inclusion. Digital platforms allow users to engage in mainstream social interactions by participating in virtual communities that extend beyond their immediate environments—typically comprising caregivers, family members, or therapeutic professionals. This type of digital engagement fosters a stronger sense of belonging, enhances social recognition, and enables individuals with ID to be perceived—and to perceive themselves—as legitimate and valued members of the broader social fabric (Anderson et al., 2023).



A systematic review conducted by Jacob and Pillay (2023), covering studies published between 2015 and 2023, demonstrates that social media may play a pivotal role in mitigating social isolation, particularly among individuals with intellectual disability who face limited opportunities for initiating and sustaining interpersonal relationships in offline contexts. However, the authors emphasise that the full potential of social media in this regard can only be realised if adequate environmental and systemic support mechanisms are in place. Effective and safe digital engagement for individuals with ID is contingent upon the active involvement of close networks—such as family members, caregivers, and support personnel—as well as institutional responsibility for providing access to digital education, training in online safety, and the necessary technological infrastructure. Such support is not merely supplementary; rather, it constitutes a foundational condition for meaningful participation in the diverse forms of social life mediated by digital platforms.

It is important to note, however, that a substantial proportion of the existing literature focuses primarily on individuals with mild to moderate intellectual disability. This emphasis stems from the fact that these individuals are more frequently represented among active users of social media, as they often demonstrate relatively high levels of autonomy in navigating digital environments when provided with appropriate technological and educational support. In contrast, as van Alem, Frielink, and Embregts (2025) observe, there remains a notable lack of in-depth research addressing the experiences of individuals with more profound levels of intellectual disability. Their perspectives are often overlooked or only marginally represented in empirical studies. This gap suggests that the current state of knowledge may not fully reflect the diversity of needs and barriers within this user group. The authors further highlight the importance of developing more accessible technological solutions and of actively involving users with more complex needs in the co-design of digital tools and platforms.

In this context, the role of the immediate social environment acquires particular importance. It is parents, caregivers, educators, and therapists who often serve as *de facto* gatekeepers, determining both the extent and the conditions under which individuals with intellectual disability access online environments. In their study of teachers' and parents' perspectives on internet and social media use among students with ID, Molin, Sorbring, and Löfgren-Mårtenson (2015) identified a characteristic duality of attitudes: on the one hand, respondents recognised the internet as a potentially valuable space for fostering social competence; on the other hand, they expressed strong concerns



regarding the digital safety of children and adolescents. In practice, this ambivalence sometimes translated into restrictive measures—such as rigorous monitoring of internet use or even outright exclusion from social media platforms. While these actions were often motivated by care and protective intent, they may have inadvertently curtailed opportunities for independent digital exploration and the development of online identity.

By contrast, other studies, including that of Chadwick and Fullwood (2018), indicate that appropriately targeted support can profoundly alter this landscape. Individuals with disability who received assistance in managing their online presence were found to engage with social media in more autonomous ways—often without needing to disclose their disability—leading to enhanced feelings of competence and a reduction in experiences of social infantilisation. Similarly, Patrick et al. (2020) argue that a lack of access to digital education and consistent, ongoing support constitutes one of the principal barriers to realising the full potential of social media. This limitation affects not only everyday functioning but also critical aspects of life such as health management, relationship-building, and personal decision-making. In light of the foregoing analyses, it becomes clear that social media use by individuals with ID cannot be meaningfully examined in isolation from their broader social and relational contexts. On the contrary, their presence in the digital environment is co-constructed by the quality and availability of support, the level of trust afforded by caregivers, access to educational opportunities, and the extent to which their personhood and agency are recognised. Consequently, any attempt to assess the opportunities and risks associated with this domain must account not only for the perspectives of individual users, but also for the structural and cultural factors that shape and condition their digital participation. It is also essential to emphasise that, beyond their communicative and entertainment functions, social media can play a significant role in supporting the psychological well-being and identity formation of individuals with intellectual disability. Research indicates that active engagement in digital environments may foster a sense of agency, facilitate the development of a positive self-concept, and strengthen self-esteem within this user group (Bakkum, Schuengel, Sterkenburg, et al., 2021). Interactions with other users in online spaces have also been shown to reduce feelings of loneliness, increase life satisfaction and enjoyment, and contribute to improved confidence, self-worth, and social connectedness (Caton & Chapman, 2016; Bakkum et al., 2021).



Furthermore, social media platforms provide important opportunities for the construction and expression of social identity—an aspect of relevance given the frequent experiences of marginalisation and exclusion encountered by individuals with disability in offline interactions. As scholars have noted, social media create spaces in which individuals with disability can initiate and sustain friendships, present themselves in a desired and empowering manner, and experience greater levels of social inclusion and social capital (Shpigelman & Gill, 2014; Caton & Chapman, 2016). As such, social media activity may serve not only as a form of self-realisation but also as a vital compensatory mechanism that reinforces a sense of belonging and identity within a broader societal context.

Educational opportunities resulting from social media use among individuals with ID

When supported by appropriate assistance and adaptations tailored to individual needs and abilities, social media can serve as a valuable tool in promoting the educational development of individuals with ID. Their potential in this domain derives not only from the accessibility of information and entertainment, but also from their interactive nature, which facilitates the development of social, cognitive, and communication skills within this population. One of the key advantages of social media lies in their capacity to enhance informal learning processes. Individuals with ID who engage with platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok gain access to educational content presented in accessible, often visual formats—well-suited to their cognitive profiles. This enables them to independently explore areas of interest, develop knowledge and skills at a self-directed pace, and learn through peer observation and modelling (Clements, Chadwick, & Orchard, 2023). Particularly significant in this context is content created by other individuals with ID, which serves not only as a source of inspiration but also as validation of personal agency and a model for emulation—fostering the development of a positive self-identity and belief in one’s own capabilities. Research findings indicate that social media platforms empower individuals with disability to express their interests, participate actively in the digital sphere, and establish and maintain interactions with audiences. These processes contribute positively to the promotion of acceptance and respect for diversity (Bonilla-del-Río, Castillo-Abdul, García-Ruiz, & Rodríguez-Martín, 2022).

Platforms such as Instagram, therefore, emerge as powerful tools for fostering and disseminating inclusive values while simultaneously enhancing the social visibility and empowerment of individuals with disability, and challenging objectifying narratives and stereotypical



perceptions of this social group. In educational practice, social media can function as a supportive element in fostering inclusive learning environments. Examples of their use for managing classroom groups, moderating discussion forums, or facilitating collaborative educational projects illustrate the potential for integrating students with ID alongside their neurotypical peers through shared activities. Such practices not only promote the development of social bonds but also enhance communication competencies, teamwork, and peer-to-peer learning (Borgström, Daneback, & Molin, 2019; Caton & Chapman, 2016; Martins, Freitas, Cristina, Pereira, & Santos, 2021).

Moreover, social media platforms can serve as effective tools for cultivating functional skills. The use of text-based messaging supports the development of writing abilities; interaction with visual content encourages the interpretation of non-verbal cues; and participation in topic-specific groups enables users to deepen their knowledge in areas of personal interest. These activities can also provide opportunities for practising essential life skills such as decision-making, planning, and problem-solving within meaningful and contextually relevant digital interactions. (Chiner, Gómez-Puerta, & Moltó, 2017). A particularly important educational dimension of social media use lies in its potential to foster self-determination and an active orientation toward one's own learning. Individuals with ID who are afforded real agency over what content they engage with, whom they communicate with, and how they present themselves in digital spaces report increased feelings of competence and independence (Chadwick & Fullwood, 2018). In this context, social media should be understood not merely as platforms for content consumption, but as environments in which identity construction and user agency are actively supported. Personal digital profiles serve as spaces for presenting achievements, interests, and individual learning narratives. These self-representations contribute to dismantling stereotypical notions of disability and reinforcing the role of people with ID as capable and engaged participants in educational processes.

Digital activity—such as running thematic channels, participating in educational campaigns, and commenting on current social issues—promotes a sense of community, civic engagement, and intrinsic motivation for continued development. A key reinforcing mechanism in this regard is the immediacy of feedback. Likes, comments, and shares function as forms of social recognition, which in turn contribute to enhanced self-esteem and motivation (van Alem et al., 2025). Contemporary analyses increasingly highlight the broad spectrum of additional educational opportunities that social media platforms offer to individuals with ID.



Beyond supporting informal learning processes and the development of communication skills, these platforms also facilitate more complex forms of personal and cognitive development. One such domain is the cultivation of reflective thinking skills. In dynamic, polyvocal digital environments, users are continually required to make evaluative decisions—regarding the credibility of information, the interpretation of messages, or the selection of modes of self-expression. For individuals with ID, such contexts may present valuable opportunities to enhance their capacity for information analysis, critical questioning, and independent reasoning—skills that are especially significant in relation to their broader participation in social and civic life (Chadwick, Quinn, & Fullwood, 2016). Another key opportunity arising from engagement with social media is the development of linguistic and cultural competences. Online interactions—both within one’s own community and in broader international contexts—enable users to become familiar with linguistic diversity, encounter a range of cultural perspectives, and engage in learning through dialogue. Such experiences foster openness and empathy while enhancing communication skills that are essential for effective participation in an inclusive society (Borgström et al., 2019).

From an educational perspective, it is particularly important to support proactive, action-based learning—commonly referred to as “learning by doing.” Individuals with ID who engage in content creation—such as recording videos, managing social media profiles, or participating in social campaigns—develop not only technical and cognitive skills but also a strengthened sense of agency and control over their own development. Such activities enable them to become not merely consumers, but creators of digital realities, which is crucial for reinforcing identity and autonomy (Bakkum et al., 2020). Regular engagement with social media can also contribute to the development of self-discipline and the organisation of personal activity. Tasks such as planning publication schedules, managing one’s account, or deciding how to engage in online initiatives offer valuable developmental experiences. These activities support the acquisition of executive functioning skills, which are often underdeveloped in this user group (Chadwick, Wesson, & Fullwood, 2013). Equally significant is the role of online support groups and peer communities. For many individuals with ID, these spaces provide accessible and safe environments in which they can share experiences, seek advice, and strengthen their sense of belonging and acceptance. Such interactions have a direct impact on psychological well-being, helping to counteract social isolation and encouraging greater participation in other domains of life (Chadwick et al., 2013).



Furthermore, participation in social media offers opportunities to develop media literacy—understood as the knowledge and skills required for protecting personal privacy, navigating the internet safely, recognising potential threats, and managing one’s digital identity in an informed manner. The acquisition of these competences is not only of practical importance, but also of symbolic value, as it affirms the capacity of individuals with ID to function independently in a complex digital environment. In doing so, it contributes to the enhancement of self-determination and intrinsic motivation for learning (Martins et al., 2021).

Educational risks associated with social media use among individuals with ID

Despite the numerous educational benefits associated with social media use among individuals with ID, the scholarly literature consistently highlights significant risks related to inadequately supported or unsupervised usage. These risks may undermine the educational potential of digital media and exert a negative impact on the cognitive, emotional, and social development of individuals within this group.

1. Cognitive risks

One of the most frequently reported challenges associated with social media use is cognitive overload. Due to specific information-processing needs, individuals with ID often experience difficulties in filtering content, interpreting messages, and managing the overwhelming volume of stimuli characteristic of social media interfaces.

Chaotic updates, linguistic shortcuts, interactive advertisements, and intensive visual elements can contribute to confusion, frustration, and, in some cases, withdrawal from online activity altogether (Skulmowski & Xu, 2022; Firth et al., 2019). Such experiences may result in reluctance to engage with social media as educational tools, thereby limiting their potential for constructive use. In educational contexts, the constant flow of online information and the availability of digital content can affect how material is processed and retained. Habitual “googling” has been linked to reduced reliance on long-term memory and less reflective engagement with content (Sparrow, Liu, & Wegner, 2011). For individuals with ID, whose cognitive profiles may already pose challenges for information retention, these effects can be particularly pronounced. A related cognitive risk is difficulty evaluating information credibility. Limited analytical skills may hinder the ability to distinguish between reliable and false content, increasing exposure to misinformation and manipulative practices. For example, Chadwick, Quinn, and Fullwood (2016) found that individuals with ID often fail to identify false



information and cannot readily discern the motives of content providers. This vulnerability is magnified in environments where misinformation is algorithmically amplified.

2. Social risks

Another set of challenges relates to privacy, safety, and interpersonal harm. Many users with ID have limited knowledge of privacy settings, which heightens susceptibility to cyberbullying, data exploitation, identity theft, and other forms of online abuse (Caton & Chapman, 2016; eSafety Commissioner, 2020). A limited understanding of how shared information can be used contrary to their intentions may lead to unintended exposure to harmful content, including violent, sexual, or discriminatory material—factors that can have a detrimental effect on psychological well-being and a sense of personal safety. Patterns of passive social media use—such as only browsing photos, videos, or posts without interaction—are another concern. This behaviour, noted by Chadwick, Wesson, and Fullwood (2013), may reinforce superficial learning, limit opportunities for social reciprocity, and diminish motivation for educational engagement.

These risks are further intensified by the absence of structured educational support from teachers, therapists, or caregivers. Without guidance and clear learning objectives, social media use can become sporadic and unstructured, reducing its value as an educational resource (Chadwick, Quinn, & Fullwood, 2016; Caton & Chapman, 2016).

3. Infrastructural risks

Barriers to accessibility in platform design constitute a third risk category. Many social media interfaces are developed with neurotypical users in mind, leading to challenges for users with ID in navigating non-intuitive layouts, unclear icons, and complex privacy menus. Research by Bakkum et al. (2023) shows that the absence of simplified language and accessible navigation features can discourage participation and perpetuate digital exclusion.

Concrete examples of mitigations include purpose-built platforms such as “amik@” (Martins et al., 2021), which integrate simplified layouts, visual supports, and moderated spaces to encourage safe participation. However, such initiatives remain exceptions rather than the norm. In light of these challenges, increasing attention is being directed towards the implementation of dedicated educational programmes aimed at developing the digital, media, and social competences of individuals with ID. Effective educational models should be grounded in the principles of inclusive education, incorporating activating instructional methods—such as social stories, video modelling,



and simulations of risky scenarios—while also ensuring continuous support from trained professionals.

A critical gap identified in the current body of research concerns the limited attention devoted to individuals with severe or profound intellectual disability. While the majority of studies focus on those with mild to moderate levels of disability—often because they demonstrate higher levels of autonomy in navigating digital environments—this emphasis risks reinforcing the exclusion of those with more complex needs from both scholarly discourse and practical interventions. The scarcity of empirical data on their experiences, challenges, and potential benefits of social media use constrains the development of inclusive policies, accessible technologies, and tailored educational programs. Addressing this gap is essential to ensure that digital inclusion efforts encompass the full diversity of the intellectual disability community, and that no subgroup remains marginalized within the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Table 1. Summary of educational opportunities and risks

Dimension	Educational Opportunities	Educational Risks
Social Participation	Peer connection, reduced isolation	Cyberbullying, social exclusion
Communication Skills	Improved language and digital literacy	Miscommunication, exposure to offensive content
Cognitive Development	Informal learning, problem-solving, reflection	Cognitive overload, distraction, superficial content
Identity Formation	Self-expression, empowerment, digital self-advocacy	Risk of dependency on feedback, identity manipulation
Media Literacy	Skills in navigating digital content and misinformation	Vulnerability to manipulation and disinformation
Support Needs	Training, accessible platforms, caregiver engagement	Lack of tailored tools and structured guidance

Note. Table created by the authors based on a synthesis of findings from Anderson et al. (2023), Chadwick et al. (2013), Caton & Chapman (2016), van Alem et al. (2025), and others.

Practical Implications

The findings of this review highlight several practical implications for educators, caregivers, policymakers, and technology developers seeking to leverage social media as an educational resource for individuals with intellectual disability.



1. Designing Inclusive Digital Learning Environments

Educational institutions should recognize social media not merely as a potential distraction, but as a valuable pedagogical tool capable of fostering social inclusion, self-expression, and informal learning among students with intellectual disability. Schools and community centers can implement structured programs that integrate social media activities into curricula, such as collaborative projects, digital storytelling, or peer support groups. These initiatives should be tailored to the cognitive and communicative needs of students with varying levels of intellectual disability, ensuring that all participants can engage meaningfully and safely.

Potential barriers include limited institutional willingness to integrate social media into formal learning due to safety concerns, lack of teacher training in digital pedagogy, and rigid curriculum frameworks that leave little room for innovation.

2. Digital Literacy and Safety Training

Given the heightened vulnerability of individuals with intellectual disability to online risks—including cyberbullying, manipulation, and privacy breaches—it is essential to provide targeted digital literacy education. Training should cover basic navigation skills, privacy management, recognizing and responding to inappropriate content, and strategies for seeking help when encountering online threats. These programs should involve not only students but also their families, caregivers, and educators, fostering a shared understanding of safe digital practices and building a supportive network around the learner. Barriers to implementation may include insufficient funding for dedicated training programs, limited availability of accessible instructional materials, lack of staff with specialized expertise in both digital literacy and special education, as well as inconsistent access to appropriate technology across socio-economic contexts.

3. Ongoing Support and Scaffolding

Effective use of social media in educational contexts requires continuous support from teachers, support staff, and families. This includes regular monitoring of online activities, providing accessible guidelines, and offering individualized assistance as needed. Digital mentors or peer buddies can play a valuable role in helping users with intellectual disability navigate social media, resolve conflicts, and participate in online communities. Institutions should also establish clear protocols for addressing incidents of cyberbullying or digital exclusion.



Key obstacles may involve limited staffing capacity to provide sustained one-on-one assistance, high turnover among support personnel, and a lack of clear institutional policies or resources to ensure consistent implementation of support measures.

4. Policy Development and Institutional Commitment

Policymakers and educational leaders should develop and implement policies that promote equitable access to digital technologies for individuals with intellectual disability. This includes investing in accessible devices, adaptive software, and high-quality internet connectivity, as well as ensuring that digital platforms used in educational settings comply with universal design principles. Institutional commitment to digital inclusion should be reflected in staff training, resource allocation, and ongoing evaluation of program effectiveness. Challenges in this area may arise from budgetary constraints, competing institutional priorities, limited awareness of accessibility standards, and bureaucratic inertia delaying policy changes.

5. Involving Stakeholders in Co-Design

To maximize the relevance and effectiveness of social media interventions, it is crucial to involve individuals with intellectual disability, their families, and advocacy groups in the design and evaluation of digital learning initiatives. Participatory approaches can help identify specific needs, preferences, and barriers, leading to more user-centered and empowering solutions.

Potential barriers include logistical difficulties in organizing inclusive consultation processes, lack of experience among project teams in participatory design, and possible underrepresentation of individuals with profound intellectual disability in co-design activities.

6. Future Research and Innovation

There remains a significant gap in research focusing on individuals with profound intellectual disability and their experiences with social media. Future studies should explore the unique needs of this group, develop innovative tools for digital participation, and assess the long-term impact of social media use on educational and psychosocial outcomes. Barriers here may include the methodological challenges of conducting research with individuals who have complex communication needs, limited funding for long-term and inclusive studies, and difficulties in recruiting diverse and representative samples. The practical implementation of social media in education for individuals with intellectual disability demands a holistic, collaborative approach - one that combines inclusive pedagogy, targeted



digital literacy, robust support systems, and ongoing stakeholder engagement. By addressing both opportunities and risks, educators and policymakers can help ensure that social media becomes a tool for empowerment, connection, and lifelong learning for all learners.

Conclusion

The findings of this article confirm that social media platforms offer both significant educational opportunities and notable risks for individuals with intellectual disability. As highlighted in recent literature, social media can facilitate social inclusion, self-expression, and participatory learning for people with ID, allowing them to engage in peer relationships and access diverse forms of digital content much like their neurotypical peers (Anderson et al., 2023; Ågren et al., 2020; Chadwick, Wesson & Fullwood, 2013). These platforms can be especially valuable for combating social isolation, offering spaces where users with intellectual disability can feel more included and recognized as full participants in social life (Anderson et al., 2023). However, the benefits of social media use are closely linked to the presence of adequate support systems. Family members, caregivers, and educational institutions play a crucial role in facilitating safe and meaningful online engagement for individuals with intellectual disability (Jacob & Pillay, 2023). Without such support, users may face substantial barriers, including difficulties in understanding complex communication codes and managing privacy settings, which can increase their vulnerability to cyberbullying, manipulation, and exclusion (Jenaro et al., 2018). It is also important to note that most research to date has focused on individuals with mild or moderate intellectual disability, who are more likely to use social media independently when provided with appropriate support (van Alem, Frielink & Embregts, 2025). There remains a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of those with more profound intellectual disability, whose perspectives are often underrepresented. This gap limits our understanding of the full spectrum of needs and challenges within this population.

In summary, social media platforms represent both an opportunity and a challenge for individuals with intellectual disability. On one hand, they can enhance social inclusion, agency, and access to various forms of activity; on the other, they require systemic support and the development of digital competencies to minimize risks such as exclusion and online harm (Chadwick, Wesson & Fullwood, 2013; Caton & Chapman, 2016). Ensuring equitable access to technology and creating supportive environments for safe and informed social media use are essential. Future research should address the diversity within the intellectual disability community, especially the needs of those with



more severe disability, to ensure that educational and support strategies are tailored to real-world requirements (van Alem, Frielink & Embregts, 2025). Priority actions include curriculum-embedded media literacy for ID learners, minimum institutional standards for privacy and reporting, and co-designed accessibility features with users who have severe/profound ID.

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