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Social Media Use among Students with Special Educational Needs: Educational Opportunities and Digital Challenges – A Narrative Review

Ilias Vasileiou¹ 

¹ Adjunct Lecturer, College for Humanistic Sciences–ICPS, University of Lancashire
Email: ivasileiou@lancashire.ac.uk
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0530-4463>

Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed communication patterns, learning environments, and social interaction among adolescents worldwide. For students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, and other developmental conditions, social media platforms represent both opportunities and challenges. The present article examines the role of social media in the lives of students with SEN by reviewing recent empirical and theoretical research on digital participation, social interaction, identity development, and educational engagement. The review explores how online platforms can support communication, peer interaction, access to information, and social inclusion, particularly for students who experience barriers in face-to-face communication contexts. At the same time, the literature highlights several risks associated with social media use, including cyberbullying, problematic digital engagement, difficulties interpreting online social cues, and potential impacts on mental health and well-being. Special attention is given to the ways in which neurodevelopmental conditions may influence patterns of digital participation and vulnerability in online environments. The article also discusses the role of educators, families, and educational policies in promoting safe, inclusive, and educationally meaningful use of social media. Emphasis is placed on the importance of digital literacy education, responsible online behavior, and supportive school environments that enable students with SEN to benefit from digital technologies while minimizing potential risks. The review concludes that, when accompanied by appropriate guidance and inclusive educational practices, social media can function as a valuable tool for enhancing communication, social participation, and learning opportunities for students with special educational needs.

Keywords: Social Media, Special Educational Needs, Digital Inclusion, Inclusive Education, Digital Literacy

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, social media has become an integral part of adolescents' daily lives, fundamentally transforming communication, information exchange, and social interaction. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook allow users to interact in real time, share experiences, and form online communities that extend beyond geographic and social boundaries. For young people, social media often functions not only as a

communication tool but also as an environment for identity exploration, peer interaction, and informal learning (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed communication patterns, learning environments, and social interaction among adolescents worldwide (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Masri-zada et al., 2025). The growing use of social media among adolescents has also raised questions about its influence on students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Students with SEN represent a heterogeneous group of learners who experience cognitive, emotional, developmental, or behavioral challenges that affect their learning processes and social functioning. These needs may include autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and communication disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) represent a heterogeneous group of learners who experience cognitive, emotional, developmental, or behavioral challenges that affect learning processes and social participation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Borgström, 2019).

Research suggests that individuals with SEN may experience difficulties in traditional social contexts, particularly in peer communication and social participation (Mazurek & Wenstrup, 2013). For many of these students, online environments may provide alternative opportunities for interaction and self-expression. Digital communication allows individuals to interact asynchronously, giving them time to process information and formulate responses. This can reduce social pressure and facilitate participation for individuals who experience anxiety or communication difficulties (Ellison et al., 2011). At the same time, the increasing integration of social media into adolescents' daily lives has raised concerns about its potential risks. These include exposure to cyberbullying, problematic internet use, and negative mental health outcomes (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Students with neurodevelopmental conditions may be particularly vulnerable to these challenges because they may experience difficulties interpreting social cues, regulating online behavior, or understanding digital safety norms (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Recent research has increasingly examined how social media affects individuals with disabilities and neurodevelopmental differences. Some studies suggest that digital platforms can promote social inclusion, peer support, and identity development among individuals with autism and other disabilities (Skafle et al., 2024). Online communities may allow individuals to share experiences, discuss challenges, and connect with others who have similar conditions, which can enhance feelings of belonging and self-acceptance (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014).

However, other research highlights that excessive social media use may contribute to problematic behaviors, particularly among adolescents with ADHD or difficulties in self-regulation (Dekkers et al., 2022). Problematic social media engagement has been associated with sleep disturbances and reduced academic performance among adolescents (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Given these mixed findings, there is a growing need to examine both the opportunities and the challenges associated with social media use among students with SEN. Understanding how digital environments influence social participation, identity development, and educational engagement is essential for developing effective support strategies.

2. Method

This article adopts a narrative literature review approach to examine research on social media use among students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Relevant peer-reviewed studies were identified through searches in academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as social media, special educational needs, autism, ADHD, and digital inclusion were used to locate relevant publications. Studies focusing on adolescents and young people with neurodevelopmental conditions were prioritized. Both empirical studies and systematic reviews published between 2010 and 2026 were included in order to provide a comprehensive overview of current research on the opportunities and risks associated with social media use in this population.

3. Theoretical Context

3.1 Social Media and Digital Participation

Social media refers to digital platforms that enable users to create, share, and exchange information within virtual communities. These platforms are characterized by user-generated content, interactive communication, and networked relationships. Recent studies indicate that adolescents spend a substantial portion of their daily time using social media platforms, which function as important spaces for social interaction and identity exploration (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). For many young people, online interactions complement traditional face-to-face communication. From an educational perspective, social media can support collaborative learning and information sharing. Digital platforms enable students to exchange ideas, participate in discussions, and access learning resources outside the classroom environment (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

For students with disabilities, digital communication may offer opportunities to overcome barriers associated with traditional forms of interaction. Online environments often reduce the complexity of social interaction by allowing individuals to communicate through text, images, or videos (Holmes & O'Loughlin, 2014). Research focusing on autistic individuals has shown that online environments can provide a more comfortable communication context compared with face-to-face interactions. Many individuals with autism report that digital communication allows them to control the pace of interaction and reduces the need to interpret complex nonverbal cues (Alon-Tirosh et al., 2023). Research suggests that online communication may provide more structured and predictable interaction contexts for individuals with autism spectrum disorder, reducing the complexity associated with face-to-face social interaction (Alon-Tirosh et al., 2023; Hassrick et al., 2021). Similarly, adolescents with ADHD may experience difficulties regulating digital engagement due to impulsivity and attention challenges (Barkley, 2015). These characteristics may influence how students interact with digital environments and social media platforms. Nevertheless, digital participation requires competencies such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and the ability to manage online interactions responsibly. Adolescents who lack these skills may encounter difficulties navigating online environments safely (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Successful participation in digital environments requires the development of digital literacy skills, including critical evaluation of online content, awareness of online safety, and responsible digital communication (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

3.2. Social Media Use Among Students with Special Educational Needs

The increasing accessibility of digital technologies has enabled many students with SEN to participate more actively in online communities. Research indicates that individuals with disabilities often use social media platforms to communicate with peers, seek information, and share personal experiences. For individuals with autism spectrum disorder, social media can serve as a valuable tool for communication and self-expression. Studies suggest that autistic adolescents often use online platforms to build friendships, share interests, and participate in online communities centered around common experiences (Leung et al., 2023).

Online autistic communities have become particularly significant spaces for identity formation and social support. Participation in these communities allows individuals to discuss challenges related to autism, share coping strategies, and advocate for neurodiversity (Skafle et al., 2024). Students with learning disabilities may also benefit from digital platforms that allow access to educational resources and peer support networks. Online forums and educational videos provide opportunities for students to explore learning strategies and seek assistance beyond the classroom environment (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Online communities may also promote neurodiversity perspectives and positive identity development among autistic individuals (Skafle et al., 2024; Davies et al., 2024).

However, research also suggests that individuals with SEN may face specific risks in online environments. Adolescents with autism may sometimes experience difficulties interpreting humor, sarcasm, or ambiguous language in digital communication, which may lead to misunderstandings or social conflicts (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014). Recent studies also indicate that patterns of digital engagement among autistic adolescents may differ from those of typically developing peers, with some individuals demonstrating higher levels of online activity and dependence on digital communication (Alhujaili et al., 2022; Cardillo et al., 2025). Furthermore, adolescents with

ADHD may be more susceptible to problematic patterns of social media use due to difficulties with impulse control and self-regulation (Dekkers et al., 2022). Meta-analytic research also suggests that problematic internet use may occur more frequently among individuals with autism spectrum disorder compared with the general population (Muris et al., 2025).

4. Benefits of Social Media for Students with SEN

4.1 Social Inclusion and Peer Support

One of the most frequently reported benefits of social media for students with SEN is the potential for increased social inclusion. Adolescents with disabilities often experience social isolation or limited peer relationships in traditional educational settings. Online communities may provide alternative spaces where individuals can form friendships and participate in supportive networks (Ellison et al., 2011). Digital environments may facilitate a sense of belonging among autistic adolescents who often experience difficulties establishing social relationships in traditional educational contexts (Gies et al., 2025; Leung et al., 2023).

4.2 Identity Development

Social media also plays an important role in identity formation during adolescence. Online platforms allow young people to present themselves through profiles, posts, and digital interactions. For students with SEN, online environments may allow them to construct identities that are not defined solely by their disabilities. Participation in online communities may foster self-expression and positive identity development (Skafle et al., 2024).

4.3 Access to Educational Resources

Digital platforms also provide access to a wide range of educational resources, including instructional videos, discussion forums, and peer support groups. Students with learning disabilities may use these resources to supplement classroom instruction and explore alternative learning strategies (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Technology-mediated learning environments can also support engagement and participation among students with diverse learning needs when appropriately integrated into inclusive educational practices (Hassrick et al., 2021).

5. Risks and Challenges

Despite these benefits, social media use also presents several risks for students with SEN. Cyberbullying is one of the most significant concerns associated with online environments. Students with disabilities are often more vulnerable to bullying and harassment due to social differences or perceived vulnerabilities (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Research indicates that children with disabilities may be disproportionately affected by cyberbullying and online harassment compared with their typically developing peers (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Ophir et al., 2023). Another challenge is problematic social media use. Excessive engagement with digital platforms may negatively affect sleep patterns, academic performance, and mental health. Adolescents with ADHD may be particularly vulnerable to compulsive patterns of social media use (Dekkers et al., 2022). Excessive digital media use has also been associated with sleep disturbances, emotional difficulties, and reduced academic engagement among adolescents (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Cuddihy et al., 2025). Additionally, difficulties interpreting online social cues may lead to misunderstandings in digital interactions. Individuals with autism may struggle to recognize sarcasm or implicit meanings in online communication (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014).

6. Discussion

The findings of the present narrative review highlight the complex and multifaceted role of social media in the lives of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). The literature suggests that digital environments may simultaneously function as spaces of opportunity and risk for adolescents with neurodevelopmental conditions. This dual nature reflects broader debates in the field of digital media research regarding whether social media

should be conceptualized primarily as a tool for empowerment or as a potential source of psychological and social vulnerability (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed studies concerns the potential of social media to promote social participation among individuals with disabilities. Adolescents with SEN often experience barriers to social interaction in traditional face-to-face environments due to communication difficulties, social anxiety, or stigma associated with disabilities (Borgström, 2019; Mazurek & Wenstrup, 2013). Digital communication environments can reduce these barriers by enabling asynchronous communication and providing users with greater control over the pace and format of interaction. Research has demonstrated that individuals with autism spectrum disorder frequently report feeling more comfortable interacting in online environments than in direct social interactions (Alon-Tirosh et al., 2023; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014). Furthermore, online communities may function as important spaces for peer support and collective identity formation. Participation in digital networks allows individuals with similar experiences to exchange information, share coping strategies, and discuss challenges related to disability and social inclusion (Skafle et al., 2024; Deng et al., 2026). These online communities often promote the concept of neurodiversity and encourage positive identity development among autistic individuals (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014). Such findings align with broader theories of online social capital, which suggest that digital networks can strengthen social connections and provide emotional and informational support (Ellison et al., 2011).

In addition to social benefits, the literature also emphasizes the educational potential of social media platforms. Digital environments can provide access to informal learning opportunities that complement formal educational settings (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Students with learning disabilities may use social media platforms to access video tutorials, collaborative learning communities, and educational discussion forums. These resources can support independent learning and provide alternative explanations of academic content that may be more accessible than traditional classroom instruction. Previous research has suggested that technology-mediated learning environments can enhance engagement and motivation among students with diverse learning needs (Hassrick et al., 2021). However, despite these potential benefits, the literature also highlights several significant risks associated with social media use among students with SEN. One of the most frequently identified concerns is exposure to cyberbullying. Studies have shown that children and adolescents with disabilities are more likely to become targets of online harassment compared with their typically developing peers (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Cyberbullying can have severe consequences for mental health, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. Another important issue concerns problematic or excessive social media use, particularly among adolescents with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Individuals with ADHD often experience difficulties with impulse control, sustained attention, and self-regulation (Barkley, 2015). These characteristics may contribute to compulsive patterns of digital engagement and difficulties limiting time spent on social networking platforms (Dekkers et al., 2022). Research has also linked excessive social media use to sleep disturbances, decreased academic performance, and reduced psychological well-being among adolescents (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

For individuals with autism spectrum disorder, additional challenges may arise due to difficulties interpreting online social communication. Digital interactions frequently rely on implicit meanings, sarcasm, humor, or culturally specific communication styles that may be difficult to interpret for individuals who rely on literal language processing (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014). Misinterpretations of online messages can lead to misunderstandings or social conflicts. Consequently, some researchers have argued that individuals with autism may require targeted support in developing digital communication skills (Gabarron et al., 2023). Another important dimension emerging from recent research concerns the role of families and support networks in shaping digital participation. Parents and caregivers often play a crucial role in guiding children's digital behavior and helping them navigate potential online risks (Naggar et al., 2024). Parental mediation strategies such as open communication, monitoring online activities, and providing guidance about online safety can contribute to healthier patterns of social media use. Parents often play an important role in shaping children's digital media use through monitoring, mediation, and guidance regarding online safety (Naggar et al., 2024; Gardiner et al., 2025). From an educational perspective, the findings of this review underline the importance of integrating digital literacy education into inclusive schooling practices. Digital literacy involves not only technical skills but also critical

thinking, ethical awareness, and the ability to navigate online environments safely (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). For students with SEN, digital literacy education may need to include explicit instruction on recognizing online risks, understanding privacy issues, interpreting digital communication, and managing screen time.

Teachers also play an important role in promoting inclusive digital learning environments. When used pedagogically, social media tools can encourage collaboration, peer interaction, and knowledge sharing among students (Holmes & O'Loughlin, 2014). Educational practices that incorporate digital communication, multimedia expression, and collaborative learning may support participation among students who experience difficulties in traditional classroom interactions. Despite the growing body of research on digital participation among individuals with disabilities, several gaps in the literature remain. Many existing studies focus primarily on autism spectrum disorder, while comparatively fewer studies examine social media use among students with other types of SEN, such as learning disabilities or intellectual disabilities (Borgström, 2019). Moreover, most research relies on cross-sectional designs, making it difficult to determine the long-term developmental effects of social media use. Longitudinal studies are needed to better understand how digital participation influences psychological well-being, social development, and educational outcomes over time.

Future research should also explore the effectiveness of digital interventions designed to support safe and positive online engagement among students with SEN. For example, programs that teach digital citizenship, online communication skills, and emotional regulation strategies could potentially reduce risks associated with problematic social media use. Additionally, technology-based interventions such as virtual social skills training programs or moderated online communities may provide new opportunities for supporting social participation among individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions. Recent systematic reviews also emphasize that the developmental impact of social media depends on individual characteristics, environmental support, and digital literacy competencies (Masri-zada et al., 2025). Overall, the evidence suggests that social media should not be viewed solely as either beneficial or harmful for students with SEN. Rather, its impact depends on a range of factors, including individual characteristics, digital literacy skills, family support, and educational practices. When supported by appropriate guidance and inclusive policies, digital technologies can contribute to the social inclusion and educational participation of students with diverse learning needs.

7. Conclusion

The present review examined the role of social media in the lives of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), focusing on both the opportunities and the challenges associated with digital participation. The findings from the reviewed literature suggest that social media platforms have become increasingly important environments for communication, social interaction, identity development, and access to educational resources among adolescents with diverse learning needs. As digital technologies continue to shape contemporary educational and social contexts, understanding the implications of social media use for students with SEN has become an essential issue for educators, researchers, and policymakers. One of the most significant conclusions emerging from this review is that social media can serve as a powerful tool for social inclusion. Students with SEN frequently experience social isolation or difficulties establishing peer relationships in traditional school environments due to communication barriers, social anxiety, or stigma associated with disabilities. Online environments can provide alternative communication channels that reduce these barriers by allowing asynchronous interaction, written communication, and greater control over social engagement. Research suggests that many adolescents with autism spectrum disorder report feeling more comfortable interacting in digital environments than in face-to-face communication contexts (Leung et al., 2023). Similarly, online communities may enable students with disabilities to connect with peers who share similar interests or experiences, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and emotional support (Ellison et al., 2011; Skafle et al., 2024).

Another important finding concerns the role of social media in identity development. Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by the exploration and formation of personal identity. For students with SEN, social media platforms may offer opportunities to construct identities that extend beyond their disabilities. Through online profiles, discussions, and participation in digital communities, individuals can express interests, talents, and opinions that may not always be visible in traditional school contexts. Participation in online neurodiversity

communities has been shown to promote self-acceptance and empowerment among autistic individuals, contributing to positive identity formation and advocacy (Skafle et al., 2024). These findings highlight the potential of social media to support psychological well-being by allowing students to engage in meaningful social interactions and develop positive self-concepts. In addition to social benefits, social media platforms can also provide valuable educational opportunities for students with SEN. Digital environments offer access to diverse educational materials, including video tutorials, discussion forums, and peer learning networks. Students with learning disabilities often use online resources to review academic content, access alternative explanations, and collaborate with peers outside the classroom environment (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Such resources can complement formal instruction and support independent learning. In this sense, social media can function as a bridge between formal and informal learning environments, expanding educational opportunities for students who may require additional support.

Despite these potential advantages, the literature also emphasizes that social media use among students with SEN is associated with several risks. One of the most significant concerns involves exposure to cyberbullying. Studies indicate that students with disabilities are more likely to experience online harassment than their typically developing peers (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Cyberbullying can have severe psychological consequences, including increased anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem. For students who already face social challenges, negative online experiences may further exacerbate feelings of exclusion or vulnerability. Another important risk concerns problematic or excessive social media use. Adolescents with ADHD, in particular, may be more vulnerable to problematic patterns of digital engagement due to difficulties with impulse control and self-regulation (Dekkers et al., 2022). Research has linked excessive social media use with sleep disturbances, reduced academic performance, and increased emotional difficulties among adolescents (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Meta-analytic research also suggests that problematic internet use may occur more frequently among individuals with autism spectrum disorder compared with the general population (Muris et al., 2025). These findings highlight the importance of developing strategies to support healthy and balanced digital habits. Furthermore, students with autism or communication disorders may encounter challenges interpreting online communication. Digital interactions often involve implicit meanings, sarcasm, humor, or ambiguous language that can be difficult to interpret. Misunderstandings in online communication may lead to social conflicts or confusion for individuals who rely on literal interpretations of language (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014). Consequently, students with SEN may require additional support to develop the digital literacy skills necessary to navigate online interactions successfully.

From an educational perspective, the findings of this review underline the importance of integrating digital literacy education into inclusive educational practices. Schools play a crucial role in preparing students to participate safely and responsibly in digital environments. Teaching students about online safety, privacy protection, respectful communication, and critical evaluation of online information can help reduce risks associated with social media use. Digital literacy education should also address issues such as cyberbullying, misinformation, and responsible digital citizenship. Teachers can further support inclusive digital participation by integrating social media tools into pedagogical practices in ways that encourage collaboration, creativity, and communication. When used appropriately, social media platforms can promote student engagement and provide opportunities for participation among learners who may feel reluctant to contribute in traditional classroom discussions. Digital learning environments that incorporate multimedia communication, collaborative projects, and peer interaction may be particularly beneficial for students with diverse learning needs (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

Family involvement is another critical factor in supporting healthy social media use among students with SEN. Parents and caregivers can help children develop responsible digital habits by monitoring online activity, discussing potential risks, and encouraging balanced use of digital technologies. Open communication about online experiences can help children feel supported and more confident in addressing potential challenges such as cyberbullying or inappropriate online interactions. Policy considerations also emerge from the findings of this review. Educational policies should recognize the importance of digital inclusion for students with disabilities and ensure equitable access to technology, digital learning resources, and support services. Inclusive digital education policies should promote accessibility, universal design principles, and targeted support for students who may require additional assistance navigating digital environments. Another important implication concerns the need

for further research in this field. Although existing studies have begun to explore the relationship between social media use and the experiences of students with SEN, many questions remain unanswered. Future research should examine how different types of disabilities influence patterns of social media use and explore the long-term psychological and educational outcomes associated with digital participation. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for understanding how social media influences developmental trajectories among students with neurodevelopmental conditions. Additionally, future research should investigate how educational interventions can promote positive digital engagement among students with SEN. For example, studies could examine the effectiveness of digital literacy programs, peer mentoring initiatives, or technology-based social skills interventions designed to support online communication. Such research could provide valuable evidence for developing targeted educational strategies that maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing potential risks.

In conclusion, social media represents a complex and multifaceted environment for students with special educational needs. While digital platforms offer valuable opportunities for social inclusion, identity development, and educational engagement, they also present potential risks related to online safety, mental health, and digital overuse. The impact of social media on students with SEN is therefore shaped by multiple factors, including individual characteristics, digital literacy skills, family support, and educational practices. When accompanied by appropriate guidance, digital literacy education, and inclusive policies, social media can become a powerful tool that supports the social and educational development of students with SEN. By fostering safe and inclusive digital environments, educators and policymakers can ensure that all students—regardless of their abilities—are able to participate meaningfully in the digital society of the twenty-first century.

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