‘Happy and excited’: Perceptions of using digital technology and social media by young people who use augmentative and alternative communication

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## Sample

Twenty-five young people (aged 14–24) who used voice output communication aids (VOCA)

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Stepping up awareness and empowerment

# Abstract

Young people are using digital technology and online social media within their everyday lives to enrich their social relationships. The UK government believes that using digital technology can improve social inclusion. One well-recognized outcome measure for establishing social inclusion is to examine opportunities for self-determination. Individuals with physical disabilities and complex communication needs who use forms of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) have lower social participation opportunities. The integration of mainstream digital technology into high-tech forms of AAC (voice output communication aids), and the recent appearance of voice output applications, or ‘apps’, on Apple and Android products, has provided increased opportunities for people who use AAC to engage with digital technology. Research exploring this area, especially in regard to online social media, with people who use AAC is extremely limited, and a specific gap for self-reported experiences exists within the UK. This article describes qualitative, interview-based, grounded theory research with 25 adolescents and young adults who use AAC about their use of digital technology and online social media. The data presented here are part of a larger study, and the findings within this article suggest that participants have a desire to use the internet and online social media as it is perceived to increase opportunities for self-determination and self-representation whilst enriching friendships. The wide diversity of literacy and language skills amongst participants, as well as accessibility challenges, mean collaborating with others and receiving technical support from educational settings, families and friends are vital.

# Outcome

"Difficult
controls prevented participants from using entertainment activities, which are known to be popular
among young people (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Soderstrom, 2009). A lack of knowledge
about specialized equipment prevented independent use, and certain participants did not have the
right equipment to overcome their mobility limitations. These difficulties can socially construct
disability by denying access to cultural material (Goggin and Newell, 2003) and create forms of
digital exclusion (Macdonald and Clayton, 2012). The other main barrier to independent access was literacy... Collaborating and sitting beside a literate companion to co-create content, watch content being
constructed, observe written responses and hear them read aloud as witnessed within this study
could act as a motivational form of exposure that may support the development of literacy skills... The participants described using a range of entertainment and social media sites reflecting
the typical interests of young people... The participants in this
study demonstrated how frustrated they feel if they cannot go online, and there was evidence that
they would like to use DT [digital technology] OSM [online social media] more frequently....he limitations for self-representation within face-to-face conversations appear to be alleviated by the use of OSM sites. A Facebook identity offered the participants an opportunity to show their humour, create personal narratives and use the timeline to create
an historical framework, all of which can be limited on traditional AAC [ augmentative and alternative communication] technology... the participants demonstrated a strong
interest in using OSM to keep in touch over distance." (Hynan et al., 2014: 181-2).