MUNI FSS

JOURNAL OF PSYCHOSOCIAL RESEARCH ON CYBERSPACE
CYBERPSYCHOLOGY

van Alem, J. L. L., Frielink, N., Penniga, W., & Embregts, P. J. C. M. (2026). Online connectedness: The meaning of online social interactions for young adults with mild intellectual disabilities. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 20*(4), Article 10. https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2026-4-10

Online Connectedness: The Meaning of Online Social Interactions For Young Adults With Mild Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

Young adults with mild intellectual disabilities are increasingly engaging in online social interactions. While online participation offers these young adults opportunities for connection, research on their perspectives remains scarce. Therefore, this study explores their experiences and interpretations of online social interactions. Six Dutch young adults aged 19–31 years old with mild intellectual disabilities participated in semi-structured interviews, which were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four experiential themes were identified: 1) online connections feel important, yet offline connectedness remains essential, 2) balancing between the wish and reality of fitting in online, 3) online safety as an ongoing learning process, and 4) feeling and dealing with the dark sides of online interactions. The current study concludes that online interactions can enrich, but do not replace, offline social relationships. Nevertheless, positive online interactions are not self-evident; our findings underscore the importance of strong and supportive offline networks for fostering safer, more meaningful online contact and enhancing resilience to negative experiences.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities; digital inclusion; online interactions; online risk

Editorial Record

First submission received:
November 13, 2025

Revisions received:
April 22, 2026
June 11, 2026

Accepted for publication:
July 27, 2026

Editor in charge:
Lenka Dedkova

Introduction

Like their peers without intellectual disabilities, young adults with intellectual disabilities are increasingly using the internet for social interactions (Anrijs et al., 2022; European Youth Portal, 2023). However, research shows that these young adults use the internet less frequently and for fewer purposes than their peers without intellectual disabilities (Ågren et al., 2019; Jenaro et al., 2017). For example, Jenaro and colleagues (2017) found that less than half (47%) of young adults with intellectual disabilities use the internet to communicate with friends and family, compared to 85% of those without intellectual disabilities. These differences, often referred to as the digital divide (van Dijk, 2017), can be attributed to the digital inequality experienced by people with intellectual disabilities (Glencross et al., 2021; Johansson et al., 2020; Shpigelman & Gill, 2014). This inequality often stems from limited access to digital devices, a lack of accessibility features, and insufficient support to participate in the online world (Chadwick et al., 2013).

Regardless of existing barriers, research indicates that online social interactions can have a significant impact on the social lives of young adults with intellectual disabilities, who often experience limited social interactions, few

friendships, and difficulties initiating peer relationships (Merrells et al., 2017). Online social interactions are ways of social internet usage, which can be defined as internet usage that permits (a)synchronous online social interactions with others, for example, through e-mail, social networking sites and video messengers (Nowland et al., 2017). Although Nowland and colleagues do not include online gaming in their definition, we chose to include it within the concept of social internet use in our study. While Nowland et al. argue that the primary aim of online gaming is the activity itself rather than social interaction, our decision was informed by literature emphasising gaming as a social activity ("social gaming") for both people with and without intellectual disabilities (Gonçalves et al., 2023; van Alem et al., 2025). As such, gaming is aligned with the concept of social internet use. These online social interactions offer various opportunities, including maintaining and strengthening existing relationships, forming new friendships, and pursuing romantic relationships (e.g., Ågren et al., 2023; Chadwick & Fullwood, 2018; Jacob & Pillay, 2023; Ramsten et al., 2018). Additionally, Ågren and colleagues (2023) demonstrated that online social interactions can foster a sense of belonging and enhance feelings of social participation among young adults with intellectual disabilities. On the other hand, research has also shown that despite these opportunities, online interactions can be especially challenging for these young adults, for instance because of their often limited social networks and thus limited social skills, which can lead to increased vulnerability to cybervictimization (Chadwick, 2022; Chadwick & Buell, 2023).

In response to this growing trend of online social participation and the persistent disparity in internet use, researchers have begun to explore how and why young adults with intellectual disabilities engage online. Studies indicate that they primarily use instant messaging, email, social media platforms, and online games (Delgado et al., 2023; Jenaro et al., 2017). Research into why they use the internet for social interaction has mainly focused on opportunities, benefits, risks, and barriers (Borgström et al., 2019; Caton & Chapman, 2016). Although many of these studies do not specify the level of intellectual disability among participants (Glencross et al., 2021; van Alem et al., 2025), it is generally assumed that most involve individuals with mild intellectual disabilities, given the digital skills required for online interactions. Therefore, the present study focuses specifically on young adults with mild intellectual disabilities.

Despite the growing body of literature on internet use among these young adults, little is known about how they experience and make sense of their online social interactions. To our knowledge, only one phenomenological study has examined general internet use among adults with intellectual disabilities (Hebblewhite et al., 2020). Although the study did not primarily focus on social interactions or young adults, Hebblewhite and colleagues discovered that online interactions led to feelings of visibility, freedom, and the fulfilment of personal needs. Our research expands on this by using a phenomenological approach to specifically examine the experiences of young adults with mild intellectual disabilities in online social interactions, a group whose online social lives remain underexplored. To this end, we apply Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodological approach that explores how individuals experience and interpret significant aspects of their lives (Smith & Osborn, 2014). IPA invites participants to reflect on personally meaningful experiences, allowing researchers to understand phenomena from the participant's point of view (Smith et al., 2009). The use of IPA allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complexity and nuance of social internet use. Existing research on these young adults' online social interactions is often dichotomous in nature, focusing either on benefits and/or risks (see, for example, Anderson et al., 2023), leaving limited attention to the experiences that fall in between. Adopting an IPA approach allows us to move beyond that dichotomy, capturing the layered nature of social internet use. Moreover, the study not only contributes to ongoing efforts to more centrally include young adults' voices in academic discussions on this topic, but also creates space for how they themselves interpret and make sense of their experiences, without imposing preconceived theories or hypotheses.

By providing in-depth accounts of the experiences and interpretations of online social interactions, our study aims to inform online support strategies that better align with the needs and preferences of young adults with intellectual disabilities - needs that are not always met in current practice (Borgström et al., 2019; Heitplatz et al., 2021). Strengthening digital support systems may also help reduce the digital divide between young adults with and without intellectual disabilities (Helsper & Van Deursen, 2016). Therefore, in this study, we address the following research question: *How do young adults with mild intellectual disabilities experience and interpret their online social interactions?*

Methods

Participants

Six participants took part in the interviews. This number is consistent with recommendations by Smith et al. (2009), who suggest that a sample of six is suitable for conducting in-depth, detailed analyses of each case while also allowing for exploration of similarities and differences across cases. The sample included three women and three men, with an average age of 25.8 years (range 19–31). All participants received formal support either in clustered care settings or in their own homes, with scheduled one-to-one support sessions and access to 24-hour assistance. A detailed description of each participant is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics.*

Variable	Olivia	Jack	Alex	Iris	Mike	Layla
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female
Age (years)	22	31	27	27	29	19
IQ	65	85	82	59	66	67
Additional Diagnoses	None	Autism	ADHD, attachment issues and separation anxiety	None	Autism	Autism, ADHD
Living Situation	Group home with other people with ID	Group home with other people with ID	Own apartment	Group home with other people with ID	Group home with other people with ID	Group home with other people with ID
Level of Support	24-hour support available	24-hour support available	Support at home, once a week for 1,5 hours	24-hour support available	24-hour support available	24-hour support available
Family	Father, mother, sister and brother	Mother, father (deceased), two sisters and two brothers	Foster care: Aunt and uncle, two brothers; Biologically: father, mother, two sisters, brother and half-brother	Father and mother (divorced): two sisters; Father and girlfriend: brother, sister	Father, mother and sister	Father, mother and sister
Daytime Occupation	4x a week	5x a week	4x a week	4x a week	4x a week	5x a week
Digital Devices Used	Smartphone, computer, game console	Smartphone, computer, game console	Smartphone, laptop, game console	Smartphone, tablet	Smartphone, laptop, game console, tablet	Smartphone, laptop

Procedure

Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of Tilburg University (reference number TSB_RP1668). Participants were recruited through seven partner organisations of the Academic Collaborative Centre Living with an Intellectual Disability (Tilburg University). These partner organisations are healthcare organisations that provide residential and community-based support to people with an intellectual disability, including young adults. The key contact persons within these organisations were contacted by the manager of the Academic Collaborative Centre. These contact persons then distributed information about the study to the direct support staff of both residential and daycare locations for young adults they thought would be interested in participating in the study. Direct support staff were then called by the first author and further informed of the study's aim, purpose and procedure.

After this phone call, direct support staff identified potential participants who met the following inclusion criteria: individuals who (1) had a diagnosis of mild intellectual disabilities, (2) were aged 18–34 years, (3) no longer lived with their families and received formal support (either residential or community-based), and (4) used the internet for social interactions. These criteria ensured a relatively homogenous sample in terms of social context, while still enabling exploration of psychological variability (Smith et al., 2009). The age group was based on evidence suggesting that these young adults have the highest internet access, digital skills, and engagement in diverse online social activities (Anrijs et al., 2022; Jenaro et al., 2017).

Eligible individuals were then verbally invited to participate by familiar direct support staff. When individuals expressed interested, staff notified the first author, who sent them an information letter and consent form by email. These materials were developed with input from an advisory board consisting of experts with experience in intellectual disability, and co-written with a co-researcher with an intellectual disability. They described the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, safety considerations, and the participation incentive (a €25 voucher).

The direct support staff then shared the contact details of interested individuals with the first author, who followed up by phone to further explain the study and answer any questions, to ensure that participants were fully informed and able to make an informed decision about participation. If the individual remained interested, the interview was scheduled. Before the interview, participants returned a signed consent form via email. At the start of each interview, the first author explained the study's contents again and asked the participants for verbal consent to participate and to be audio-recorded. This verbal consent was also recorded on tape. Because direct support staff, rather than the researchers, recruited participants, the number of individuals who declined participation is unknown. This recruitment method may have resulted in overrepresentation of individuals who were more communicative or willing to participate, potentially leading to an underrepresentation of less verbally expressive individuals. Nevertheless, all participants brought forward by direct support staff eventually participated in the study.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews followed the semi-structured, in-depth approach outlined in the IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009). The interview schedule, developed in collaboration with an expert by experience with mild intellectual disabilities, covered five thematic areas using open-ended questions and prompts to foster dialogue. To ensure the quality and rigour of the interviews and the subsequent analysis, closely followed the steps described in Smith and Nizza's 2021 book on IPA, as well as recommendations made by Rose and colleagues (2019) on how to conduct good IPA research with people with intellectual disabilities.

The thematic areas used in the interviews were based on previous research (van Alem et al., 2025) and conversations with two experts by experience with intellectual disabilities. The schedule was piloted with one individual with mild intellectual disabilities (not included in the final sample), leading to revisions that improved clarity and adjusted question length. For example, following this pilot, we realised that some questions did not challenge participants to interpret and reflect upon their own experiences because they were too long. As a result, we added several smaller probing questions for each of the topics raised, to invite participants to reflect in a step-by-step manner if necessary. Asking additional (shorter) questions has also been described as a way to make IPA research more appropriate for people with intellectual disabilities (Rose et al., 2019). Following the pilot, the interviewer also encouraged the participants to let her know if they found certain questions difficult to answer, so she could switch to the shorter questions if needed. Another adjustment that was made was placing more emphasis in the introduction on our interest in the participants' experiences and interpretations. Please see the appendix for the final interview schedule and the probing questions used. Interviews took place in September 2024 at locations chosen by participants: three in private offices at day activity centres, and three in participants' homes. All interviews were conducted in Dutch by the first author and lasted an average of 77 minutes (range: 64–142 minutes). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent. Each began with the prompt: "Could you tell me how you engage in online social interactions?"

Topics included expectations, positive and negative experiences, comparisons between online and offline interactions, and participants' wishes regarding online social contact. The order and phrasing of questions were adapted to participants' responses and interests. For instance, following the first question, some participants immediately started talking about their negative online experiences. In that case, the questions about such experiences were asked first, in order to stay as close to the participants' experiences as possible. In addition, the interviewer asked more questions about this negative view of the online social world, as it appeared to be an important topic in their life. Participants were thus encouraged by the first author to raise additional topics of personal relevance and elaborate further upon their responses, ensuring the interviews reflected their lived experiences.

It is important to note that both the interviews and the data analysis were led by the first author. At the time of the interviews, she had almost two years' experience working as a qualitative researcher in the field of intellectual disabilities, along with lifelong personal experience of having a sibling with an intellectual disability for whom she is an informal carer. The first researcher was aware that both her professional and personal experience with online

interactions by young adults with intellectual disabilities were generally positive in nature. To reflect on and critically consider how these experiences may have influenced data generation and interpretation, the first author kept a logbook in which reflexive notes were taken throughout the interview phase and the subsequent analyses in order to maintain an open stance. In the interview-phase this logbook aimed to 'bracket' assumptions, thoughts and emerging ideas (Smith et al., 2009). In the analyses-phase the logbook was additionally used to describe decisions/choices. Keeping the logbook helped to maintain an open stance during interviews and analysis, and minimized interpretive bias (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2009). The interview guide (translated into English) is included in the Appendix.

Analysis

Data were analysed following the step-by-step heuristic framework developed by Smith et al. (2009) and by Smith and Nizza (2021). All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author, who read and re-read the first transcript alongside the third author to ensure accuracy in both language and meaning. Ambiguities were revisited by listening to the audio recordings. The first author also bracketed reflections to approach the analysis with a fresh perspective.

Next, the first author made initial notes on descriptive (content), linguistic (language), and conceptual (interpretative) features of the text (Smith et al., 2009). These annotations were then discussed with the third author to ensure they were grounded in the data and reflected participants' lived experiences. Experiential themes were developed by synthesising the initial notes, with iterative returns to the transcript to refine meaning units. Themes were discussed with the second and third author to ensure coherence and depth.

Following this, personal experiential themes were clustered into higher-order concepts in discussion with all authors and a senior researcher, again using an iterative and interpretive approach. This process was repeated for each participant individually. Finally, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify patterns, similarities, and differences across participants. This resulted in the group experiential themes presented in the Results section. All analyses were conducted in Dutch. To preserve data nuance, the first author, who led the analysis, initially wrote the results in Dutch and later translated them into English (in which she holds a C2 CEFR certificate). Finally, the translated text was checked by a native speaker fluent in Dutch to ensure clarity and accuracy. This process supported the preservation of experiential nuance in the translated findings.

Results

The analysis yielded four themes, each with several interrelated subthemes, reflecting the participants' experiences and interpretations of online social interaction. These themes were: 1) Online connections feel important, yet offline connectedness remains essential, 2) Balancing between the wish and reality of fitting in online, 3) Online safety as an ongoing learning process, and 4) Feeling and dealing with the dark side of online interactions. Table 2 shows an overview of the themes and subthemes, which are further elaborated below.

Online Connections Feel Important, Yet Offline Connectedness Remains Essential

The participants emphasised the importance of their online communication as an additional pathway to feel connected, involved and supported as well as show such support to others, especially when offline meetings were scarce. It also served as a way to monitor and manage social relationships, by allowing the participants to check, probe and confirm their relations. Nevertheless, participants perceived offline communication as a more valuable way of connecting, offering more depth and a true feeling of connection.

Online Communication as an (Extra) Way to Feel Connected and Involved With Important Others

Participants' stories consistently emphasised the need for a comfortable and supportive social network, both online and offline. The degree of perceived support in offline networks varied: Olivia and Layla described strong, positive relationships with family and friends, whereas Alex and Jack reported weaker offline social ties. Regardless of these differences, online interactions were meaningful to all participants, providing a way to feel recognised, involved, and emotionally supported, even when offline connections were limited.

Table 2. *Overview of the (Sub)themes.*

Themes	Subthemes (Per Horizontal Theme)		
Online connections feel important, yet offline connectedness remains essential	Online communication as an (extra) way to feel connected and involved with important others	Confirming, probing and monitoring connections through online interactions	Offline connectedness is the most valuable connection
Balancing between the wish and reality of fitting in online	Online communication as a promising way to fit in	Even online, fitting in is not evident	
Online safety as an ongoing learning process	Learning by experience is the basis for online safety choices	Moving safely online with the comfort of a safety net	The balanced application of online safety considerations
Feeling and dealing with the dark sides of online interactions	Feeling the decline of compassion	Dealing with the impact of the dark side of online interactions	

Online communication also enabled participants to maintain and strengthen existing relationships and express support, functioning not only as a tool for receiving recognition but also for giving it. Olivia, Mike, and Layla described regular online conversations as part of their daily routines. These interactions enabled them to maintain closeness across physical distances, reinforcing feelings of support, closeness and involvement. For Layla, whose past experiences of bullying affected her self-confidence, online contact was an affirming and comforting source:

> "And then they [her family] also do show again [through online posts]: "Hey girl, leave those bullies alone". To put it bluntly: 'Don't pay any attention to those bullies, you are the way you are. And you're good enough for us that way.' And that gives me that very warm feeling." – Layla (R6)

Alex, in contrast, experienced meaningful connection primarily with idols such as bands and DJs, rather than peers or family. He valued these rare online exchanges as opportunities to feel acknowledged by people he could never reach offline. Iris, however, often felt frustrated when her online friends did not reciprocate engagement, leaving her with a sense of being unseen: "And with Facebook it is like if I, like, don't post anything… I don't get anything. Then I get no likes, there is not much [sent] to my Facebook, there is also not much chatting to me." – Iris (R5)

The contrast between Alex's and Iris's experiences highlights how online interactions can either fulfil or frustrate the need for social connection, depending on reciprocity and responsiveness.

Confirming, Probing and Monitoring Connections Through Online Interactions

Participants also described using online interactions to monitor and manage social relationships. Olivia and Layla used brief daily exchanges to affirm their presence and value with their social networks: "And then I have had a quick chat with them [friends and family] in the morning. And then I will go into my day positively." – Olivia (R1)

These short moments of contact gave Olivia and Layla the confirmation that they were visible and mattered in the lives of the people around them, even when they did not see each other. For Mike, such short moments of interaction served another purpose. It was important to him that the contact he had was enjoyable and smooth, and that there were no tensions in his friend group. He, therefore, used online interactions to probe the atmosphere in his friend group and monitor the relationships between them, giving him regular reassurance, in between offline meetings, that everything was still going well between them: "Just briefly checking in on how everyone is doing, apart from the times we actually see each other, just to keep an eye on the friendship." – Mike (R5)

Offline Connectedness is the Most Valuable Connection

Despite the significant role of online interactions, offline contact was generally perceived as deeper and more meaningful. Olivia and Mike reported that face-to-face interactions allowed for more nuanced understanding, greater attention, and more fluid conversation, fostering stronger feelings of connectedness. Because of this, Mike felt more connected to his friend group offline, and Olivia felt that offline conversations with her friend had more depth and were therefore more valuable.

Jack, Alex and Iris all felt that people generally seemed to have less and less space for others in the offline world and were mostly concerned about themselves. They all yearned for warmth and genuine attention; things they felt were increasingly disappearing, which in turn increased the distance they felt from the world around them. They found it disappointing and frustrating that, according to them, the online world was intruding on the offline world, and that people were increasingly concerned with gaining online recognition and contact rather than creating offline connections. Jack experienced that as a result, his already limited opportunities for offline contact were getting smaller: "And then I realise quite quickly that, especially with that generation [young people], going to talk with each other without a phone in between…that…I just witness it in front of me…just the conversation disappears." – Jack (R2)

Although Olivia, Jack, Alex, Mike, and Iris all felt a connection to their social environment online, they valued offline contact the most and felt the greatest depth and connection in their relationships with their social network offline. Olivia illustrated this by explaining how she felt when her friend asks her to meet offline, instead of online: "And that also gives me a sense of, like,… She trusts me, because she asks me to come over." – Olivia (R1)

Balancing Between the Wish and Reality of Fitting in Online

Online environments were seen by participants as promising spaces to experience a sense of belonging, especially for those who did not always experience this in offline environments. However, participants found that even online, fitting in required ongoing effort and adaptation in maintaining smooth and pleasant communication, illustrating the continuous balancing act between the wish to belong and the reality of navigating the online world.

Online Communication as a Promising Way to Fit in

In participants' daily lives, fitting in did not always feel effortless. Olivia, Jack, and Layla viewed online interactions as a promising way to experience the sense of fitting in they sometimes missed offline. Olivia and Jack shared that, offline, they often struggled to come across as they intended. They wished to expand their social world but found it difficult to keep conversations flowing or to interpret non-verbal cues correctly. As a result, they felt others did not see them as they wanted to be seen.

Online, Olivia and Jack noticed that communication flowed more smoothly. They could express themselves better by relying on tools such as autocorrect and speech notes, and the absence of confusing non-verbal signals made interactions easier. Jack, in particular, felt more in control because of the predictability of online communication, which gave him confidence. This also led him to overstep boundaries online more easily than he would offline. He described, for instance, how he dared—successfully—to ask a colleague for sexually explicit photos online, something he would never have attempted in person: "I entered a difficult path, but I found the easier way. I found a desire path that I perceive as far more accessible. I crossed a threshold that I would never cross in real life." – Jack (R2)

Layla went even further than Olivia and Jack. Whereas they seemed to compensate for their limited offline connections through online contact, Layla had almost completely replaced offline connections with online interaction. Her small offline social world, combined with distance and lack of time, meant that she rarely met friends in person. She explained:

> "Because sometimes I only see her twice a year. Like now. And we'd like to meet up and see each other more often, but either she's busy with school, or she's busy, or I'm busy, or I'm working. Yeah, and then it really does fall by the wayside sometimes. And that's why it's so important to us to just keep in touch every day on the app [WhatsApp]." – Layla (R6)

Having been bullied in the past and struggling with insecurity, she now relied heavily on close and frequent online contact with her best friend and others. These interactions gave her a strong sense of belonging, even if they rarely spoke offline.

Even Online, Fitting in Is Not Evident

Despite their efforts to fit in, five of the six participants noticed that even online, fitting in was not self-evident. Only Olivia felt she succeeded consistently in this regard. Jack, Alex, Mike, Iris, and Layla all reported how easily online communication could lead to misunderstandings. Alex explained that he preferred audiovisual

communication, such as video calling, over text-based messages. For him, seeing facial expressions and hearing intonation reduced misunderstandings and fostered mutual understanding: “You hear the intonation, you see someone's face. That is the best path you can take. Or you make a video of yourself and send it. But the best way is just when you can just see someone.“ – Alex (R3)

Mike, Iris, and Jack also described how much effort it took to communicate smoothly online. Each developed their own strategies. Iris and Mike deliberately limited their online interactions to people they already knew offline. Mike also made a conscious effort to improve his communication skills, learning from friends who gave him constructive feedback and encouraged reflection when misunderstandings arose. Jack, meanwhile, attributed his difficulties to generational differences, feeling caught between two online worlds—too old for the younger generation, too young for the older: ”I don’t do little TikTok dances. Because I just, I see myself there like… as if I don't really fit in. Among the youths.” – Jack (R2)

At the same time, he was convinced that there were online groups where he could belong. He seemed intent on creating such a place online, presenting himself as knowledgeable and tough, and attracting attention in ways that were sometimes transgressive.

Online Safety as an Ongoing Learning Process

Participants experienced online safety as something that developed over time through personal experiences, reflections and interactions with others. Past experiences served as important learning opportunities that informed future behaviour and provided participants with a sense of control. Supportive safety nets further enhanced this sense of security, enabling participants to balance caution with active partaking in online interactions.

Learning by Experience is the Basis for Online Safety Choices

All participants demonstrated a strong awareness of online (un)safety and reflected extensively on their experiences. Their narratives emphasised that learning from (negative) experiences, rather than the negative events themselves, was central to their understanding of safety online. For Olivia, Iris, Alex, Mike, and Layla, prior negative experiences were indeed impactful. These experiences sometimes made them feel a loss of control over online interactions or left them questioning their own judgment. Yet, rather than discouraging further online engagement, these experiences functioned as lessons that were carefully internalized and applied in subsequent online interactions. This approach allowed participants to gradually regain a sense of control and agency over their online behaviour. Jack, in contrast, reported having experienced few significant negative incidents and rarely feeling unsafe online, suggesting that online safety learning is highly individualised and dependent on one’s experiences.

Iris, Layla, and Mike reflected on the fact that many of their unpleasant experiences occurred during the early stages of exploring online social spaces, when they were less aware of potential risks. Their stories contrasted past ignorance with current growth and confidence, highlighting how experiential learning had increased their security and competence online. For Mike, one particular experience involved contact with an online scammer. Initially, this was a distressing experience, but over time it became a learning opportunity that illustrated not only his own growth, but also the importance of listening to others’ experiences in developing safety strategies: “But now when I look back on it, I now know a little how to surf around on the internet. Now I have read how many people actually already have experiences with bad people, and have ill intent.“ – Mike (R5)

Mike emphasised that discussing online experiences with friends and peers played a vital role in building safety awareness. He also actively contributed to these conversations by sharing his own stories about (un)safe online interactions. Olivia similarly engaged in discussions with friends to collectively learn from past experiences and safeguard each other against potential risks.

For Iris, these discussions were often one-sided; she took on the role of guiding and protecting her friends from unsafe online situations. Observing friends’ mistakes often reinforced her own confidence in her strict safety strategies: “But she [her friend] added literally everyone. Now, if I’m right, she doesn’t do that anymore, because she’s had quite a few unpleasant experiences. But then also I think well… you can also prevent it. Like me.“ – Iris (R4)

Moving Safely Online With the Comfort of a Safety Net

Building on the lessons from experiential learning, five out of six participants described feeling safe due to the deliberate strategies they had developed. Some, like Olivia, Iris, and Layla, additionally experienced protection through "safety nets"; sources of support they could rely on whenever they felt uncertain or when situations went awry. Parents often played an important role in these safety nets. Layla and Iris described how this support evolved with age: initially, parental supervision guided their online activities, but as they matured, parents became advisors and counsellors, offering support only when necessary. Layla explained: "And yeah... If I really don't know or don't trust or whatever, I go to them first. Like: Do you know this person?" – Layla (R6)

Olivia felt that she had several safety nets on which she could rely. She could talk about questionable or unpleasant experiences with her girlfriends and her mother, but she could also talk to a member of her support staff when something unpleasant occurred between her and another client online.

The nature of the safety net significantly influenced participants' perception of online safety. Whereas Olivia, Iris, and Layla felt reassured by the support they received, Mike described a contrasting experience in which his parents did not respond supportively after a negative online encounter: "At that moment, my parents just kind of hit me on my head [figuratively], like: "How stupid were you? Do you actually realise what you did? That I, in panic, also thought afterwards: why did I, actually [do that]?" – Mike (R5)

This lack of support led him to avoid discussing the experience, questioning his own judgment, and experiencing feelings of vulnerability, shame, and guilt. Mike reflected that open, unbiased conversations with friends or parents could have prevented the negative outcome he experienced and strengthened his sense of online safety.

The Balanced Application of Online Safety Considerations

All participants described applying a range of safety strategies informed by their experiences and guidance from their safety nets. Olivia, Alex, Mike, and Iris often approached online safety in a "protocol-based" or strategic manner: setting clear personal rules and preparing specific responses for potential situations. These strategies fostered a sense of control and security.

For instance, Olivia, Alex, and Iris preferred sharing social media handles rather than phone numbers when contacting people they did not know well. This choice was motivated by the ease of terminating unwanted online interaction, as opposed to telephone communication, which felt harder to disengage from. At the same time, participants recognized that some level of trust or risk-taking was necessary to develop online relationships. Olivia reflected on one such compromise:

> "I met someone on Instagram who has become a friend of mine [...]. And she [the girl] just asked: 'I haven't had a phone for a long time because my parents didn't let me have one yet. I'm only 17, I didn't have that many contacts. I just had my family, my neighbour girls and neighbour boy that I hung out with.' So I thought: Well yeah, that might be, I don't know." – Olivia (R1)

Olivia's strict, protocol-based approach allowed her to navigate online social spaces confidently while still taking measured risks necessary for social engagement. Iris, by contrast, focused on strict prevention, avoiding online contact with unfamiliar others:

> "But my Facebook or whatever, if I get a friend request and I don't know that person, then I don't accept it. But [so] then they have nothing on me. Then he has no phone number, no [mobile phone number]. Because I think a lot of people give out their [phone number] without thinking." – Iris (R4)

While this approach limited her social opportunities, the experiences of friends who encountered negative events confirmed to her that she had found an effective balance between safety and social interactions.

Feeling and Dealing With the Dark Side of Online Interactions

The participants highlighted the negative side of online spaces, noting a decline in compassion and attentiveness that sometimes extended into the offline world. They expressed their desire for more compassion, understanding and attentiveness, both in the online and the offline world. To cope, participants developed their own strategies, ranging from passive compliance to actively resisting or distancing themselves from the negativity.

Feeling the Decline of Compassion

Several participants highlighted clear negative aspects of online social spaces, noting a perceived decline in compassion and attentiveness within society. Olivia, Jack, Alex, and Iris described the extensive 'hatred' spread online and provided evidence of how minor online disagreements could escalate into extensive conflicts, often amplified by unkind comments and messages. Alex, in particular, expressed a strong aversion to social media, attributing the decline in societal consideration and civility to the online environment. He argued that social media not only reduced attention to others' needs but also encouraged transgressive behaviour offline, such as recording victims of violence rather than assisting them: "People have started caring about each other way less. [They currently care] More about their own [phones in their] pockets." – Alex (R3)

Iris shared a similar frustration, observing that people were increasingly preoccupied with their phones instead of the world around them. Both Iris and Olivia regularly received unwanted sexual messages from unknown men, reflecting a broader pattern of online harassment. Iris also witnessed others' provoking or harassing behaviour to gain likes or views, which she found shocking and in contrast to her own values of respect and kindness: "Then I think: I think that if you seriously participate in that, then you really belong in a [mental hospital]. Then you think like, you'd think, you know…you should get yourself checked." – Iris (R4)

The participants expressed a strong desire for more compassion, both online and offline. Olivia, Iris, Jack, and Layla hoped for more mutual attentiveness in social interactions, believing that greater consideration would make both online and offline interactions more positive and meaningful. Alex, however, voiced a more pessimistic perspective, contending that the disappearance of social media might be necessary to restore genuine attentiveness and connection. Only then, he suggested, could people truly engage with each other in meaningful ways. Across participants, these observations reinforced that while online spaces offered opportunities for connection, they were also sites where participants perceived a significant downfall of empathy and attentiveness. Importantly, all participants reported feeling most attentive and considerate of others in offline contexts, aligning with findings from theme 3.1.3.

Dealing With the Impact of the Dark Side of Online Interactions

Participants differed in their strategies for navigating the negative aspects of online interactions. Jack and Layla, for instance, described challenges related to the one-sided nature of online representation. For Jack, this was most apparent in dating apps, where emphasis on physical appearance created insecurity for him and his friends. However, he also understood that others are probably showing their best side online as well:

> "Because I find Tinder to be a bit like: You put on your best picture. And then you find out that they just sit at home in a tracksuit, with a bun on their head and 99+ prescription glasses. Because in the photo, they don't dare to put them on." – Jack (R2)

For Layla, the one-sided nature of online interactions was particularly evident in the emotions displayed. She felt that online posts were predominantly positive, leaving little room for more negative emotions, such as sadness, that she and others around her might experience. Despite recognizing this imbalance, Layla and Jack did not actively try to change these aspects of online life. Layla even sometimes participated by posting happy pictures when she felt sad. Nevertheless, both expressed hope that others online would eventually contribute to the changes they longed for.

Iris and Mike, meanwhile, were conscious of how the negative aspects of the internet influenced them and, in their view, those around them. They actively sought to counter these effects. Mike, for example, aimed to challenge what he saw as one-sided, negative news online. Iris resisted idealised images emphasising appearance and material possessions. Although these ideals affected her, she spoke out against them online to demonstrate, both to others and herself, that happiness does not require conformity to these standards.

Compared to the other participants, Alex experienced the dark side of online interactions as pervasive and overwhelming. He described feeling drawn into online negativity against his will. Even though he preferred to remain uninvolved, he sometimes felt compelled to respond when he disagreed with something. This exposure made it difficult for him to gauge the extent of negativity, occasionally leading him to unconsciously adopt opinions he later disagreed with:

> "With Linkin Park, it only became more and more clear to me how much effect it [online negativity] can have on someone. Even on someone who has absolutely no interest in it [online discussions]. That's me then. And I read those things, and I get mad. And I start saying things about Mike [bandmember] that I should have never said." – Alex (R3)

For Alex, the only effective strategy to escape the negative impact of online interactions was to delete most social media accounts and minimize his online presence.

Discussion

The present study aimed to provide detailed accounts of the experiences and interpretations of online social interactions for young adults with mild intellectual disabilities. Online interactions appeared to be a vital extension, rather than replacement, of the participants' offline relationships, enabling them to give and receive connectedness, support, visibility, and acknowledgement from friends, family, and important others. This finding aligns with recent findings that adults with intellectual disabilities use the internet to sustain social capital (van Alem et al., 2025) and with social capital theory itself, which states that social relationships contain valuable embedded resources that can be accessed and used by those in the relationship (Lin, 2001). In our study, and in line with theme 3.1, online interactions served as additional pathways for participants to experience connection and support, as well as to reinforce existing relationships, particularly when offline meetings were limited due to time or distance. This was reflected in the reciprocal nature of online social interactions described by participants, which contributed to feelings of support, closeness, and enhanced well-being, consistent with notions of social capital (Lin, 2001).

The current study also showed that offline interactions were generally experienced as more valuable than online ones, due to deeper conversations and interpersonal attention, consistent with earlier research on (young) adults without intellectual disabilities (Scott et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of a strong, positively experienced offline social network, which has been shown to foster feelings of support, well-being, and overall quality of life for people with and without intellectual disabilities (Thoits, 2011; van Asselt-Goverts et al., 2014). Moreover, these effects might also transfer to online experiences for young adults without intellectual disabilities (Zhang, 2017). Further research is needed to explore how the offline social network influences online social interactions for young adults with mild intellectual disabilities.

Interestingly, although staff constitute a large part of the offline social network of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Harrison et al., 2021), participants rarely discussed their online interactions with support staff. Although the interview schedule did not explicitly include questions about this topic, some participants mentioned how they often engaged in functional online interactions with their support staff, such as reminders for (household) tasks when asked about their general online interactions. Prior studies have described how (young) adults with intellectual disabilities view the online world as a place to communicate without staff oversight (Molin et al., 2017; Sorbring et al., 2017). Other studies, including ours, indicate that online interactions also serve as extra ways to interact with staff for encouragement (e.g., Heitplatz et al., 2021) and functional support (e.g., Ramsten et al., 2018). Future research would benefit from investigating the (different) roles that support staff may fulfil in the online interactions of young adults with intellectual disabilities.

Despite online social contact appearing to be a vital way of connecting with others, participants showed that (enjoyable) online interactions were not always guaranteed. While several reviews have reported the expansion or strengthening of the social circle as an opportunity for using the internet (Borgström et al., 2019; Louw et al., 2019), our study revealed that, despite participants' efforts, they struggled to fit in. While issues with non-verbal cues are commonly noted as challenges in online communication in the general population (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2019), difficulties fitting in online may also stem from offline social exclusion experienced by young adults with intellectual disabilities (Merrells et al., 2017). This may suggest that the difficulties fitting in online are not an isolated issue but part of a broader problem of social exclusion that occurs both offline and online. Subsequently, this indicates that the online and offline worlds might not be regarded as two separate realms that independently offer opportunities for social inclusion when one fails, but rather as interconnected environments where overall social inclusion should be promoted.

Our study also revealed individual differences in the experience of fitting in online, which may be understood in light of the third-level digital divide theory (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). This theory posits that, in addition to differences in access (the first-level divide) and usage and skills (the second-level divide), there are also individual

differences in the tangible outcomes of internet use (third-level divide). Van Deursen and Helsper discovered that certain social resources (e.g., living situation or marital status) can positively influence offline outcomes of online activities, for example, forming online friendships or partnerships that are later offline. These outcomes include increased contact with friends and family and forming new friendships that persist offline. As most digital divide research focuses on people without intellectual disabilities, more research is needed to understand how individual differences influence tangible outcomes of online interactions of young adults with intellectual disabilities.

The challenges and efforts of fitting also emerged with respect to online safety. Almost all participants had encountered online risks and negative experiences. Many described these experiences as important learning experiences that built resilience and strategies for handling similar situations in the future. This aligns with Chadwick (2022), who found that adults with intellectual disabilities focused less on the emotions associated with negative online experiences, emphasising instead the insights gained. The participants' continuous search for balance between online safety and opportunities for online interaction further highlights the importance of a 'positive risk-taking' approach when addressing technology use by young adults with intellectual disabilities (Seale, 2014). This approach involves supporting young adults in managing certain risks, such as actual engagement in online interactions, which, resultantly, allows them greater control over their lives and enhanced well-being (Seale, 2014). To engage in positive risk-taking, both risk management and shared decision-making between these young adults, and their supporters (such as parents and support staff) are crucial (Seale & Chadwick, 2017). Although participants often discussed risk management, shared decision-making was mentioned less frequently in the present study. Many participants instead described either online navigating independently or facing unilateral restrictions by caregivers, potentially limiting opportunities for positive risk-taking (Seale & Chadwick, 2017). Indeed, current research on supporting the online interactions of young adults with intellectual disabilities mainly reflects the perspectives of parents, teachers, and formal support staff (e.g., de Groot et al., 2022; Gómez-Puerta & Chiner, 2020; Sorbring et al., 2017). They often adopt a restrictive approach, emphasising control and risk avoidance (Chadwick, 2022; Seale, 2014). However, such strategies fail to meet the needs of young adults themselves (Heitplatz et al., 2021), which underlines the importance of more open, collaborative forms of support, such as positive risk-taking strategies. Although several scholars have already called for this shift (Borgström, 2021; Heitplatz et al., 2021), further research into both current and preferred support strategies from the perspectives of supporters as well as young adults with intellectual disabilities is needed to guide supporters and develop fitting support strategies.

When participants encountered negative aspects of online interactions, such as a lack of compassion for one another online, sexual solicitation and one-sided portrayals, the impact on their emotions and behaviours appeared to depend on individual resilience. Interestingly, although online hateful comments and sexual solicitation are widely discussed by young adults in several studies (Hebblewhite et al., 2020; Molin et al., 2017; Sallafranque-St-Louis & Normand, 2017), the impact of one-sided media portrayals is, to our knowledge, relatively neglected in the literature regarding online social interactions of young adults with intellectual disabilities. This resonates with insights from social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), which suggests that people are driven to evaluate their opinions and abilities in comparison to others, particularly similar peers, as a means of navigating social environments. Online spaces can amplify this due to the large amounts of idealised content, which has been shown to lead to reduced subjective wellbeing in (young) adults without disabilities (Verduyn et al., 2017; Verduyn et al., 2020). Differences in impact observed in our study may be explained by whether participants used social networking sites passively or actively, and whether they compared themselves to others they perceived as 'better' (upward comparison) or 'worse' (downward comparison) (Verduyn et al., 2020).

Implications

Studies show that caregivers often face challenges in relating to and supporting the online experiences of young adults with intellectual disabilities (de Groot et al., 2022). Understanding the impact that the online social world can have on young adults, as well as the link between offline and online worlds, can help caregivers to facilitate meaningful online interactions by building on offline connections. Additionally, the significance of various forms of support and a supportive offline network is emphasised across several themes, which can take many forms. Consequently, those designing support strategies and programmes must recognise that support comes not only from support staff but also from friends, family, and other important individuals. Those providing support in online social interactions could, for example, use network mapping (e.g., Social Network Guide, Forrester-Jones et al., 2006; Family Network Method, Giesbers et al., 2018) to map out support networks together with these young adults and ask them about their (online) support needs and preferences.

Limitations

The current study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. Firstly, as the IPA method aims to explore how individuals experience and interpret certain phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), the findings are not intended to be generalised. Instead, they provide an in-depth understanding of how the young adults in this study made sense of their online interactions, providing insight into the complexity and ambiguity of these experiences. Other limitations relate to the study's sample. Participants were excluded if they lived in their family home. Consequently, five participants lived in group homes for people with intellectual disabilities, where they had access to 24-hour support, while one participant lived independently and received ambulant support once a week. Moreover, three participants had been diagnosed with autism, and one had been diagnosed with ADHD. However, the researchers did not identify substantial differences in the participants' experiences based on their living situation or neurodiversity and concluded that the sample was homogeneous overall based on the interviews. Nevertheless, further research is required to ascertain whether factors such as living situation and neurodiversity influence the online interaction experiences of young adults with intellectual disabilities.

In addition, as participants were recruited through selective sampling by direct support staff, it is possible that individuals who were perceived as more communicative or willing to participate were more likely to be approached. This may have resulted in an underrepresentation of individuals who are less verbally expressive. While such sampling considerations are not uncommon in qualitative research, further studies could explore ways to include the perspectives of individuals who may be less outspoken about their online social interactions. At the same time, we found the sample of the current study to be homogenous in that participants shared several key characteristics: being young adults with mild intellectual disabilities, using the internet for social interaction, and receiving some form of formal support from a care organisation. This homogeneity was also reflected in the convergence across participants within several themes, indicating shared contextual perspectives, in line with Larkin et al. (2018).

Conclusion

To conclude, the current study shows that young adults with mild intellectual disabilities view their online interactions as ways to enrich, rather than replace, their offline social worlds. These online interactions provide additional pathways to show and gain feelings of support, visibility and belonging. However, enjoyable online interactions and fitting in online did not always come naturally and required continuous effort. All young adults also encountered negative experiences, such as risks and one-sided media portrayals. These experiences often served as valuable learning opportunities, contributing to the development of online resilience. Lastly, our findings underscore the importance of a strong offline network in fostering this resilience and supporting positive online interactions.

The participants' accounts highlight the complexities and nuances of such interactions beyond a risk and opportunities approach and centralise the perspectives of these young adults within the academic discussions on social internet usage. The findings can help support staff develop a deeper understanding of these interactions, enabling better, more informed guidance in navigating the online world. Furthermore, these experiences and interpretations can serve as valuable stories that may assist young adults in articulating their own experiences, needs and preferences when it comes to online social interactions, potentially contributing to greater understanding, and more positive online experiences.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Use of AI Services

The authors declare that they did not use AI for this manuscript or the data.

Data Availability Statement

The research data will not be shared.

Authors' Contribution

Johanna L. L. van Alem: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, visualisation, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. **Noud Frielink:** conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, writing—review & editing. **Wieneke Penninga:** formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing—review & editing. **Petri J. C. M. Embregts:** conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, writing—review & editing.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the young adults who participated by sharing their stories in this study.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview about social internet use. My name is Hannah van Alem, and I am a researcher at the Academic Collaborative Centre Living with an Intellectual Disability, part of Tilburg University.

I research how people with an intellectual disability use the internet for social purposes. In other words: I research social internet usage. By this I mean any form of internet use that allows you to connect with other people, such as friends, family or colleagues. Examples include social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat), chats (WhatsApp, Telegram), blogs (Reddit), email, video calls (Skype/Teams), online games (Wordfeud, League of Legends) and online dating (Tinder, Happn, ABCdate).

We know that people with intellectual disabilities are using the internet more and more often. And that they are increasingly in contact with others on the internet. We would like to know more about this. We therefore wonder what online social contact means to you. I am curious about:

- How you socialize on the internet
- How you experience this social contact on the internet
- How others influence social contact on the internet, and what you think about this/how you experience it.

I will ask several questions about this. Before I continue: Is the term “social contact on the internet” clear?

I will record the conversation on a tape recorder. I cannot remember everything you say, and I want to write down your answers so that I can better answer the research question. I will not mention your name when writing down the answers; no one will know who the answers come from. Everything you say will remain between us. This means you can say anything you want to say. Is it okay with you if I record the conversation? I will ask you again when I turn on the recorder.

I am curious to hear how you see or experience things, so there are no right or wrong answers. If I ask a question you do not want to answer, you do not have to. You don't have to say anything you don't want to say. If you want to take a break, have a drink or go to the toilet, just say so. If you don't understand a question, please let me know: that's perfectly fine. Before we start, do you have any questions?

General Background Information

- Age
- Gender
- Living situation
- Type of support
- Family composition
- Work/daily activities
- Use of digital devices

(*Note: IQ is requested from the healthcare provider; explicit consent is requested from the participant in the information letter/consent form.*)

Topic List

1. **Questions about social contact on the internet**

a. Could you describe how you have social contact on the internet? (Who do you contact? How often? When do you contact others? How do you contact them?)

b. Why do you have social contact on the internet? What does it give you?

c. What role does online social contact play in your daily life? If too difficult: Could you describe a typical day on the internet? / What do you do on the internet on a normal day? How important is online contact in your daily life? Why?

2. **Questions about expectations of online social contact**

a. What do you hope to gain from social contact on the internet? (To what extent does it meet your expectations? Why/why not?) Where did those expectations come from? If too difficult: What do you expect from contact on the internet? / What do you want to achieve with contact on the internet? Why do you want that? Why do you think that?

3. **Questions about experiences with online social contact**

a. What are some positive experiences you have had with social contact on the internet? (What made it enjoyable? How did you feel at the time? And why?)

b. What are some negative experiences you have had on the internet? (What made it unpleasant? How did you feel at the time? How did that impact how you used the internet afterwards?)

4. **Questions about the influence of social contact on the internet on social relationships in real life**

a. Earlier, you mentioned that you do X ACTIVITY online with X PERSON (for example, chatting with your best friend on SnapChat). How does that contact on the internet influence your social contacts in "real" life? (Why do you think that is? What do you think about that? How have your social relationships changed?) Or if you only have online friendships: What does that mean for the bond you have with someone? If too difficult: How is your contact with person X in real life? How is your contact with person X online? How does that contact (online/offline) affect you? And possibly: what are the differences between this online and offline contact? What do you think about that?

5. **Questions about preferences regarding social contact.**

a. What would you want online social contact to look like? If too difficult: if everything was perfect, what would contact on the internet look like?

b. What would you like to change about the current situation on the internet? If too difficult: What is the difference between that perfect online world and the online world now?

6. **Summarize, debrief, opportunity for questions/comments from the participant.**

a. Is there anything else we haven't discussed that you would like to talk about?

b. What did you think of this interview?

About Authors

Hannah van Alem is a PhD student at the Academic Collaborative Center (ACC) Living with an Intellectual Disability, part of Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on the online social interactions of young adults with mild intellectual disabilities and the support of such interactions.

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Dr. **Wieneke Penninga** is a post-doctoral researcher at the ACC Living with an Intellectual Disability (Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands). She specializes in meaningful moments of interaction, specifically among people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities.

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Dr. **Noud Frielink** is a senior researcher and research coordinator at the ACC Living with an Intellectual Disability (Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands). He specializes in self-determination and motivation among people with intellectual disabilities.

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Prof. Dr. **Petri Embregts** has been leading the ACC Living with an Intellectual Disability (Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands) since 2011. As a professor, she investigates how experiential, professional, and scientific knowledge reinforce each other to improve practice. Her research focuses on self-determination, experiential expertise, family, quality assurance, craftsmanship, e-health, and complex care.

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