

Amplifying youth voices: Piloting a structured interview tool to explore social media use in adolescents with communication disability

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Background:

Young people with communication disability are often excluded from being directly involved in research that explores their digital lives, despite social media being a key avenue for connection and wellbeing. This pilot study evaluated the feasibility of the Digital Dialogues Interview (DDI), a new structured interview tool that was designed to better understand the experiences of adolescents (aged 12–17) with language and/or literacy difficulties about how and why they use social media.

Methods:

The study was conducted in three phases: development of the DDI, consultation with a youth advisory group (YAG) of young adults ($n = 4$), and structured interviews with adolescents ($n = 5$) with communication disability. The DDI was co-designed to be accessible, multimodal, and engaging, incorporating visual supports, simplified language, and both written and spoken formats. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results:

The structured interviews revealed that the DDI was feasible and well-received, with minimal challenges in administration. Thematic analysis of interviews showed participants primarily used social media to maintain relationships with known communication partners, highlighting its role in fostering connection, emotional wellbeing, and practical communication. Challenges using social media included difficulties with expression, interpreting tone and social cues, and navigating platform-specific language. Participants employed both self-reliance and support strategies to overcome these barriers.

Conclusion:

This study contributes to inclusive research practices by demonstrating that a co-designed, structured interview tool can effectively capture the voices of adolescents with communication disability and their experiences with social media. The DDI shows promise for broader application in youth health research, particularly in understanding digital engagement among marginalised populations. Findings underscore the importance of accessible tools and youth involvement in research design, to ensure authentic participation and relevant outcomes.

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