

Between Connection and Overload

Digital Media as Spaces of Social Participation for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *By Tom Zinram*

The following paper deals with the opportunities and challenges of digital media for individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Zinram approaches the topic from a communication studies perspective, as digital media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Discord have fundamentally transformed communication and created new spaces for social interaction, particularly for individuals with ASD. Social networks allow access to communities in which people with similar interests can exchange ideas without having to face the demands of direct social interaction that are often burdensome to them.

Autism spectrum disorder is a pervasive developmental disorder that is characterized by impairments in social interaction and communication as well as stereotypical patterns of behaviour (cf. Asperger 1944, 87; World Health Organization 1992, 252). As a result, digital media present specific challenges that individuals must learn to navigate, such as excessive media overconsumption, difficulties in interpreting online communication and withdrawal into digital worlds (cf. Begara Iglesias et al. 2019, 35; Coutelle et al. 2022, 2248).

In light of a progressing digitalisation and a rising influence of social media, it is increasingly important to address the needs of autistic individuals in order to support their social participation and integration into a digital society. As such, the topic is not only of scientific relevance, but of significance to societal development as well. While quantitative studies such as from Begara Iglesias et al. (2019) and Mazurek et al. (2011) identify general trends, individual usage patterns remain largely unexplored.

Therefore, the aim of the study was to examine the potentials for integration through digital media and the influence of psychological, emotional and sensory characteristics on the media use of individuals with ASD. Based on these findings,

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practice-oriented measures have been developed to optimise media use and support social integration.

The following research questions guide the study:

- ▶ What potential do digital media offer for the social participation of individuals with ASD?
- ▶ How do psychological, emotional and sensory characteristics influence the media use of individuals with ASD?

To achieve the aim of the study, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. In contrast to previous studies, the paper does not focus on quantitative results but instead explores the individual experiences of the target group. To this end, fifteen individuals on the autism spectrum were interviewed using a semi-structured narrative approach. The analysis was conducted primarily inductively based on the interview material. Though the development of inductive categories, potential for social integration as well as psychological and sensory influences were identified. The current state of research on media use among individuals with ASD was used to contextualise the findings.

The analysis shows that digital media offer some participants with ASD specific opportunities for social interaction, particularly through platforms such as Discord, Boo and Virtual Reality. The platforms facilitate communication and provide a sense of safety and control. As a result, some participants are able to form new contacts, maintain existing relationships, and overcome social anxiety and inhibitions. Thus, digital media not only support social interaction but may also contribute to the integration of this group – although not to the same extent for all individuals.

Media use is also influenced by emotional, psychological and sensory factors. Participants use music, podcasts or anime to regulate their emotions – for example to calm down, block out noise, or cope with experiences of bullying. Emotional expressions in anime also contribute to a better understanding of emotions and foster positive experiences.

At the same time, many participants experience visual and auditory overstimulation, especially in online learning environments. Some male participants with ASD exhibit a context-dependent intensive media use, during which they lose track of time and suppress external cues like fatigue or hunger. Additionally, there are difficulties in interpreting emojis in text messages.

The study provides important insights into the potential of digital media as well as the influence of emotional, psychological and sensory characteristics among young adults with ASD. It complements existing quantitative findings with individual usage experiences, thereby addressing part of the current research gap and highlighting the need for accessible and practically adaptable media offerings that meet specific needs.

As a result, concrete recommendations can be derived: emoji explanations in messenger services, calming media offerings, or visual progress indicators to support time perception could better meet the needs of individuals with ASD. Furthermore, interpretation of digital forms of communication could be integrated into therapeutic programs.

To validate and develop these findings, further studies could combine qualitative and quantitative methods. The use of standardised questionnaires and psychometric tests, as well as a larger sample size, could complement the qualitative results and contribute to more generalisable conclusions.

Longitudinal studies could additionally examine how digital media use influences career integration and the well-being of individuals with ASD, for example in workplace communication and coping with overstimulation.

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Full Article

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