Social access: role of digital media in social relations of young people with disabilities

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Abstract

Digital media have enabled people with disabilities (PWDs) to connect with each other, but online relations and gaming have been found escapist. We propose the analytical lens of social access to examine how the role of digital media in PWDs' social relations is shaped by (1) affordances of digital media, (2) mixedness of relations and (3) interaction of online and offline worlds. This article presents an ethnographic study in a school for young PWDs and highlights two observations. First, visual profiles on social media platforms could aggravate the social exclusion of young PWDs online and offline, marked by intra-disability and intersectional differences. Second, the co-presence afforded by digital media enabled young PWDs to resort to digital interactions in unwelcoming offline environments without changing the latter. Social access underlines the importance of studying how digital media interweave with offline social relations and inequalities, rarely altering but sometimes augmenting and ameliorating them.

Keywords

Digital inclusion, disability, social access, social inclusion, social media, stigma

Introduction

There is established literature on able-bodied young people's use of social media for enhancing social inclusion through building social capital and social networks online, which move offline (Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016; Steinfield et al., 2008). It has

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been found that people with disabilities (PWDs)[1] face significant barriers to using digital media, whilst digital devices may also enhance PWDs' social participation, social capital and belonging (Dobransky and Hargittai, 2016; Ragnedda and Ruiu, 2017; Sourbati, 2012). Empirical research on how PWDs use digital media to develop and maintain social relationships offline is scarce, but it has found that PWDs may connect with others with disabilities online and that online relations and gaming may become escapist (Asbjørnslett et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2018; Söderström, 2009). However, research on online contexts has observed that PWDs find acceptance and activism on disability forums and sites (Cole et al., 2011; Ellcessor, 2016; Ellis and Goggin, 2015) and benefit from the ability to hold off the body afforded by digital media in fostering relationships online (Furr et al., 2016; Saltes, 2013; Tsatsou, 2021).

We conducted a study in a school for young people with mainly physical disabilities on how they used digital media to create and maintain social relations, following some students to mainstream colleges. We made two main observations. First, the visual profiles and endorsements on social media platforms fomented both social exclusion and inclusion online and offline with intersectional and intra-disability differences. Second, social media messaging apps and games afforded the copresence of PWDs in rewarding virtual spaces when confronted with hostile or unrewarding school environments, typically not changing the latter.

Drawing on our findings, we propose the concept of social access to highlight and examine how the role of digital media in the social relations of PWDs is shaped by (1) affordances of digital media that encourage specific types of interaction and inclusion or exclusion, (2) mixedness of relationships – that is, between PWDs and able-bodied people and among PWDs of different disabilities, and (3) the intertwining of online and offline social relationships and contexts. In proposing the notion of social access, we take a lead from Ellcessor (2016) who argues that access should not only refer to availability of technology but can also be seen as multifaceted, encompassing technological forms, culturally meaningful content and a sense of self (see also Alper, 2017; Goggin, 2017a; Tsatsou, 2021). We suggest that examining the role of digital media in PWDs' social relations highlights another important facet of access.

In what follows, we elaborate on the conceptual contribution of the notion of social access to making sense of digital media and social inclusion and exclusion of PWDs. We then discuss our empirical study and its contribution to understanding digital media within social relations of young PWDs, highlighting that digital media rarely alters but sometimes augments or alleviates processes of social inclusion or exclusion rooted in inequalities between different people and institutional contexts.

Social inclusion and digital media

The social inclusion of PWDs usually refers to PWDs being accepted by peers, both able-bodied and those with different disabilities, bearing in mind intra-disability diversity (Goggin, 2017b; Tsatsou, 2019). Furthermore, social inclusion refers to both interpersonal relationships and community participation (e.g. activities, education, employment and representation; Simplican et al., 2015).

Studies indicate that PWDs experience social isolation, rejection and struggle with establishing friendships with able-bodied peers, and often they self-exclude themselves after having experienced rejection (Hall, 2009; Pijl et al., 2008). PWDs are less likely to take part in recreational activities and frequently engage mainly with family members, other PWDs and staff at school and residential homes (Clement and Bigby, 2009; Hall, 2009). A recent UK study found that young people with special educational needs (SEN) had fewer friends in mainstream education than in a school for children with SEN and that intra-disability differences between the children also contributed to bullying and othering in the latter (Holt et al., 2017).

Digital media can help PWDs to be included in social interactions (Dobransky and Hargittai, 2016), however, not many studies have investigated this. Asbjørnslett et al. (2011) and Söderström (2009) studied young PWDs in school settings and found that social media and instant chat helped them find new interest-based friends and develop friendships formed offline, such as on summer camps, especially relationships with other PWDs. However, both authors found that PWDs were often excluded by or had to adapt to the requirements of able-bodied peers at school, although a minority of them had friends at school and used digital media to strengthen these relations. Lin et al. (2018) found that Chinese PWDs of different ages used digital media for gaming and interacting with other PWDs, which were activities they considered valuable but also isolating.

Several studies have focused on how PWDs form relations and manage the disclosure of their disability to strangers in social media, using Goffman's (1963) notion of stigma. Tsatsou (2021), for instance, found that PWDs connected with other PWDs and able-bodied people on anonymous platforms to avoid stigma. Furr et al. (2016) found that individuals with physical disabilities managed stigma by coming out as disabled, choosing to disclose their disability in specific situations or by being reluctant to publicly share their disability, sometimes due to negative experiences of harassment and bullying. Saltes (2013) observed that PWDs seek to create a desirable impression on online dating websites, sometimes concealing and sometimes disclosing their disability, and that, while disability would be a turn off for potential participants, if PWDs hide their disability and later reveal it, potential partners would stop talking to them. Seymour and Lupton (2004) also observed that initiating a relationship online enables individuals with disabilities to hold off the body, which extends the time online for developing relationships that are at their early stages and empowers participants to reveal information at a time and manner that they consider appropriate.

Overall, research has found that PWDs struggle with social inclusion and that digital media may enhance their opportunities to develop and maintain social relations, especially with other PWDs. Also, research on digital interactions between PWDs and able-bodied people indicate that disability is perceived as a stigma that requires careful management in order to be accepted.

Stigma and social access

Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma has been used to make sense of how able-bodied people exclude PWDs from social interactions online and offline (Furr et al., 2016; Saltes, 2013). Goffman (1963: 13–15) defines stigma as 'an attribute that is deeply

discrediting' that marks, for example, a person with disability as different from those considered 'normal', namely from those without stigma. Goffman analysed how stigma is managed in mixed contacts, that is, when people with a discrediting difference like a disability interact with people considered 'normal' and manage their 'spoiled identity' through strategies of concealing, covering the obtrusiveness of the stigma, or by disclosing and resisting stigma (e.g. through activism). When someone's difference is not immediately apparent, the issue becomes whether 'to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell . . . to whom, how, when, and where' (Goffman, 1963: 57). Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma resonates with the medical model of disability that, associates disability to a form of social deviance and perceives its remediation to lie with PWDs (Turner, 1995). Goffman has been criticised for considering stigma an individual attribute rather than appreciating the myriad ways it arises from structural conditions that leads to inequality and exclusion of PWDs (Link and Phelan, 2001; Oliver and Barnes, 2010). The social model of disability moves beyond discussing disability in terms of (inter)personal tragedy and as arising from disabling social structures and processes (Shakespeare, 2014). Lately, critical disability studies have moved further and argued for the need to consider cultural representations of disability, differences based on intersectionality (race, ethnicity, gender, and sex/sexuality; Goodley, 2013; Goodley et al., 2019) and intra-disability differences, such as different types and combinations of impairments, that vary by severity and change across life course (Tsatsou, 2019, 2021).

We are interested in the role of digital media in how PWDs negotiate the perceived difference or stigma of disability within varied mixed social relations and social contexts. To make sense of these processes, we propose the concept of social access. This concept draws on Ellcessor's (2016) useful observation that access to digital media not only refers to availability of technology but it is multifaceted, including forms of technology and meaningful cultural content made available, and is constantly changing, different in different places and times and vis-à-vis different groups. Social access highlights another important facet of access, namely how affordances of digital media play a role in PWDs' peer relationships that are characterised by diversity and inequalities in social and institutional contexts, especially schools. The concept of social access resonates with other concepts, such as that of (social) affordances (Davis, 2020; Schmidt, 2007), which take an ecological approach to technologies that not merely afford actions through their mechanical properties but also, through social conditions, work differently for different people in different contexts.

Bringing together observations about affordances of digital technologies, diversities of PWDs and social contexts, we suggest that three aspects are crucial for understanding social access. First, social access is underpinned by the affordances of digital media mechanisms (Davis, 2020), which, similar to Ellcessor's (2016) approach, encourage particular interactions with concomitant inclusions and exclusions. Second, mixedness of relationships, for instance, between PWDs and able-bodied people and among PWDs of different disabilities, which are important to consider since inequalities between groups underpin social inclusion. Third, digital media interweave into online and offline relationships that are created, maintained and broken in specific contexts, such as in different schools.

Regarding social media platforms and their affordances, they may encourage the creation of a visual profile or allow individuals to be co-present in different social spaces using messaging apps. However, these features may work differently for different groups of people on the basis of the mixedness of relationships. So, the creation of a visual profile may become a particular challenge in terms of social acceptance for PWDs whose impairment affects their facial features, which may be perceived negatively or stigmatised (Goffman, 1963). These intra-disability inequalities (Tsatsou, 2019) are further complicated by inequalities between PWDs and able-bodied people and the related intersectionality patterns. For instance, messaging apps may allow PWDs to keep in touch with one another in school environments where they may be socially excluded by able-bodied peers (see also Asbjørnslett et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2018; Söderström, 2009), articulating both inclusion and exclusion and being complicated by affinities based on ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Regarding the parameter of digital media interweaving into offline social relations and contexts, one can argue that this suggests that social media profiles or messaging apps may alter but usually augment, ameliorate or consolidate existing exclusions and inclusions.

In what follows, we use the analytical lens of social access to analyse how young people with mainly physical disabilities use digital media in school settings, offering both conceptual and empirical insights into how digital media is implicated in broader processes of social exclusion and inclusion of young PWDs in schools and beyond.

Methods

The article is based on a 2-year ethnographic study, conducted between 2012 and 2014 in a school for young people mainly with physical disabilities. At that time, teenagers were more likely to use Facebook and Messenger than later, when Snapchat became popular with young people; however, the use of apps, including Instagram, chats and dating apps, through phones on the go was as prominent then as it is at the time of writing the article. The first author conducted overt participant observation (O'Reilly, 2012) for 19 months and spent time in the school observing lessons and places where students spent their free time (including a computer lab at break times) where informal discussions took place with students and school staff, including viewing occasional online chats. The ethnography was multi-sited (Marcus, 1998) and involved following 11 key participants across different sites – that is, in the school, at home and in mainstream colleges, where some participants moved to in the second year of the study. The ethnographic approach enabled the researcher to gain insights into the relationships participants were developing through digital media as well as how their relationships unfolded in their offline life.

The observations and informal conversations were complimented with semi and unstructured interviews (Burgess, 1984) with 11 students. The potential participants were discussed with the school principal who advised on recruiting students who would be able to give informed consent and could take part in the study without it being a burden on their everyday lives. The final sample consisted of four female and seven male 14- to 19-year-old students (the school had more male students); one participant was South Asian while the others were White. All but one of the participants used a

wheelchair and they had a range of sometimes progressive impairments, which in most cases affected their mobility and in some cases their appearance, communication, vision, cognition and behaviour. The majority could use digital media, such as mobile phones, independently without assistive technologies. In another article, we have discussed using video diaries produced by participants and how the participants moved in significantly different ways within and between digital media, highlighting how intra-disability diversity resulted in inequality of use in terms of range of sites, functions and devices used (Kaur et al., 2018).

The study was approved by the ethics committees of our institutions, the research was explained to participants in person and details were provided to them in a booklet form. Written consent was obtained from the participants and their parents. The participants chose their pseudonyms, and the material was anonymised to ensure confidentiality (e.g. names, specific impairments and other compromising information were removed or changed). In order to enhance the truthfulness of the analysis representations to the experiences of the participants, after preliminary analysis, the findings were shared with them for the purpose of feedback and/or corrections; for example, Lucy's case (see below) was modified in conversation with her, as she considered her words had been misrepresented in preliminary findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Data analysis was not distinct from data collection, and throughout data collection, key topics that required further attention were identified (e.g. social inclusion in online and offline relationships). There is no set procedure for analysing ethnographic data, but the various kinds of data produced from field notes, interview transcripts, observations and informal conversations with participants across research sites required us to analyse all data qualitatively, using thematic analysis, drawing on the comparative method (Strauss, 1987), including open coding of early data, and using initial analysis to guide further data collection. We identified the following two broad themes in the interview and observation material: (1) how visual profiles on social media platforms could aggravate the social exclusion of young PWDs online and offline with intra-disability and intersectional differences and (2) how the co-presence afforded by digital media enabled young PWDs to resort to digital interactions in hostile or unrewarding offline environments without changing the environments. We present these themes through six experience-near cases that have been chosen to illustrate diversity in terms of gender, disability and experience of digital media while drawing attention to similarities across these differences.

Findings

Profiles and social access

A recurring theme in both interviews and observations was the way in which social media platforms and apps, such as Facebook and digital dating apps, encouraged participants to create visual profiles, which became differently interwoven into processes of exclusion and inclusion in online and offline friendships and romantic relations.

For example, Lucy's progressive disability affected her bodily, including facial appearance, and her attempts to become accepted on social media was rebuffed by her former close friends who also excluded her from their social circle at school:

Lucy had had strong friendships with a small group of female students, but at the time of the study she struggled to maintain her two closest friendships at school with Vicky, an able-bodied girl, and Sarah, a girl with a physical disability who used a wheelchair intermittently. Lucy had been particularly close to Vicky, they had organised sleepovers and were engaged in activities as *best friends*. However, the friendship changed as Vicky became closer to Sarah.

Lucy felt rejected by Vicky, who started to dress up and make herself look attractive. Vicky and Sarah were described by their friends and Lucy as conventionally *pretty* and associated themselves with boys in and out of the school and took pouting selfies in the school toilets later uploading them to Instagram and Facebook. Lucy remarked that she did not consider herself *girly* but made efforts to apply make-up, dress up and post selfies on social media. Lucy frequently sent private messages to her friends asking them to *like* her images, when she frequently did not receive any. Matters escalated when Vicky and Sarah began avoiding Lucy at school and did not respond to her messages online. Lucy posted emotional status updates on social media expressing her feelings of being rejected and upset. The other girls reported the updates to teachers as being inappropriate and blocked her on social media. For an extended period the conflict and rejection or drama (Marwick and Boyd, 2014) between Lucy and the two other girls played out publicly on social media in front of their mutual friends as well as through avoidance at school and typically unfriendly private messages shared between the three girls and their friends through chat.

Lucy's story shows how affordances of social media (Davis, 2020), which encourage users to create visual profiles that attract endorsements, interweaved into Lucy becoming rejected by her former friends. Social media did not cause Lucy's rejection, but the affordances of the platforms augmented and rendered public her increasing inability to live up to the narrow, gendered norms of attractiveness and popularity, promulgated by both social media and teenage cultures. Lucy's case also highlights intra-disability diversity and strife (Tsatsou, 2019), as Lucy's disability became progressively more obtrusive, to use Goffman's (1963) term, and further removed from what was perceived as normal and desirable at a particular life stage by her peers, whose disabilities were less visible. It has been studied how some young PWDs may use digital media to reinforce their friendships at schools, but also how digital media do not help the majority of young PWDs who are socially excluded (Söderström, 2009). Lucy's story highlights how digital media plays a role in the offline processes of exclusion and inclusion, fomenting them, so that Lucy was blocked by her friends on social media and isolated at school, her rejection and hurt feelings being broadcast on public fora and gossiped about in private chats and school corridors.

Gary's case, in turn, highlights how intersectional differences are intertwined with digital media and social inclusion and exclusion. Gary was gay and his disability also affected his appearance, including face, which created an obstacle to his endeavours of finding a romantic or sexual partner on gay dating apps:

Gary was a popular pupil in the school with good relations with his peers with different disabilities, who considered him *funny.* In his teens, Gary became aware of being gay but kept his sexuality hidden from friends and family members until he decided to come out during the study. Gary explored his gay sexuality by watching online pornography and by subscribing to gay dating sites or apps after being unsuccessful in finding gay men on Facebook and Twitter where he interacted with his offline friends.

Gary avoided uploading his image on gay dating apps, not wanting to be recognised by people who knew him or his conservative Christian family. Without a profile image, Gary struggled to garner interest on dating apps. One day a male student from a foreign country messaged Gary. Within minutes Gary received an image of his genitalia and was asked to send one in exchange. Initially uncomfortable with the idea but scared to lose his interest, Gary exchanged an image of his private parts which he enhanced to avoid being identifiable. The enhanced image was evaluated by the other male as being *too dark* and he immediately blocked Gary. After coming out to his parents, Gary included a profile picture to his dating profile to avoid being rejected after investing his time and feelings interacting with potential partners. Gary continued to struggle to garner the attention of other men online, often having short interactions with other men with explanations of his condition, but these conversations failed to progress beyond casual online conversations and sexual banter.

Gary took several breaks from dating sites in frustration, but later established a friendship with a man called David online, who was in his thirties and in Gary's opinion *rather handsome* in his profile picture. David chatted to Gary regularly. Gary was anxious about losing the friendship with David and with trepidation revealed his appearance and disability to David by sending him a picture of himself early on at David's request. The disclosure helped the friendship and trust between the two, and their online conversations moved beyond the dating app to video calls and occasional offline meetings. Whilst Gary started to develop romantic feelings for David, David did not reciprocate his feelings but saw Gary as a friend. After years of using gay dating apps without being able to establish a romantic relationship, Gary likened them to fast food, *where . . . they eat with their eyes first. People scroll and like a picture. Talk to them, hook up for alliance, and then the next day, repeat.*

Gary's case illustrates how the affordances of gay dating apps, which encourage uploading a profile picture, made it challenging for him to garner the interest of or establish relationships with able-bodied gay men. The challenges were exacerbated by the pornographic code, which foregrounds young, white, sexualised gym bodies and has been criticised for being hostile towards men of other races and body types, prevailing on gay dating apps (Han, 2008; Mowlabocus, 2010). It has been observed that PWDs may be able to hold off revealing their body on digital dating sites, being able to get to know people first and go on to develop romantic relationships at their own pace (Saltes, 2013). Gay dating apps did, indeed, enable Gary to explore his sexuality and find companionships, such as the long-term friendship with David, but, to his frustration, he did not find a romantic partner. It has been noted that PWDs are often perceived as asexual (Shakespeare et al., 1996), and these dominant stereotypes make it challenging for PWDs to form romantic relations. Gary's case highlights the compounding effects of intersectionality, of being gay and with a disability, resulting in him facing a doubly thin market of partners and also accentuating the role of digital media, as the majority of gay relationships are formed online (Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012). Again, Grindr did not thwart Gary's romantic endeavours, but his social access to rewarding intimate relationships was complicated by the general affordances of digital dating apps and the pornographic code prevailing gay dating apps, which accentuated the visibility of his disability, with Gary at this life stage being able to use digital media to find gay companionship but not love online or offline.

The final example of Scott illustrates how PWDs with certain qualities may be able to create an attractive online persona, obtaining access to rewarding social relationships online, even if these do not necessarily translate into meaningful offline relationships:

Scott had a progressive physical disability and transferred to the school for PWDs from mainstream education and went from being the bottom of the class to being at the top of the class so my confidence just went through the roof, and I changed into a completely different child which is who I am today. Scott excelled in his academic work and was moved to class groups with older students. Scott became friends with the older students, however, once they moved onto further education, he spent most of his time in school socialising with staff or on his phone but also became a role model for younger students.

In his teens, Scott began using various online chat rooms and social messaging to find companionship. He related that he fell into a trap of creating a false persona on the boards with an exaggerated personal history in terms of alleged dramatic life events and imagined relationships with girls, which he used to impress other girls.

When Scott moved onto a mainstream college to study music, he was initially socially included by his able-bodied peers. However, the teaching practices of the college did not accommodate his needs and he eventually dropped out. Scott continued to socialise with his college friends online and began pursuing a disability sport. He became successful in his chosen sport and with the support of sponsors created a profile as a disability athlete, later getting involved in a YouTube project for youth producing videos about social issues.

These online experiences provided Scott an ego boost, social relationships and ways to express himself, while not being in education made his social life revolve mostly around online activities. Towards the end of the study, Scott occasionally met with his online friends offline, but these encounters were infrequent due to practical barriers of often long-distance travel.

In terms of intra-disability diversity, Scott had qualities, such as being academically strong in the school for PWDs, musical and sporty, which gave him social capital offline that was translated into online social capital (Ragnedda and Ruiu, 2017). Scott was also able to diffuse the perceived stigma associated with physical disability by his athleticism, especially online. Displaying himself on social media as a disability athlete aligned him with hegemonic, able-bodied concepts of masculinity such as endurance and countered stereotypes of men with disabilities as weak, inactive and dependent (Huang and Brittain, 2006), also fitting with the ideal sports-related image for men in social media (Farquhar, 2012). Scott was thus able to mobilise the affordances of social media platforms and his offline qualities to enhance his social access to various relationships online as well as to use digital media to cement his offline friendships in the mainstream school as also observed by Söderström (2009). However, as acknowledged by Scott himself, his online activities also became escapist, sometimes leading him to create an imagined life and relationships online. After Scott dropped out of the mainstream college, he continued keeping in touch with his school friends through social media and cultivate friendships online, including with his teammates. However, translating these into offline relationships was often challenging due to physical barriers to his travel. Scott's exclusion from education was not related to digital media but to the unaccommodating nature of the mainstream school; even though digital communication gave him social access to online interactions and friendships, it did not, in the end, help him gain access to education, which is an important aspect of one's social inclusion (Simplican et al., 2015).

Copresence, belonging and isolation

Another prominent theme in the study's observations and interviews was young PWDs' tendency to resort to messaging with their friends or gaming when finding themselves in a socially unrewarding or hostile offline environments. However, these experiences and social environments were varied.

Daniella, whose disability affected her mobility and oral communication, often used emails and messages to communicate with staff and friends. Messaging became increasingly important for her, as her close friends moved onto mainstream colleges:

> Daniella had developed strong friendships in her year group at school. When her peers moved on to mainstream colleges, Daniella was left behind with younger students and self-excluded from communicating with them. At this time she *hated* school and used her phone to message her former school friends, including Gary and Scott discussed in the previous section. Daniella messaged Gary every morning while travelling to school, noting that then she was not able to go *on WhatsApp until lunch time . . . to talk on the group conversation . . .about what they are up to . . . and that [she] wished they were here.* During lessons, Daniella sat by herself and played games on her computer when she finished her work early. During breaks, Daniella checked *on WhatsApp and* scrolled through Facebook to see if *anyone got anything interesting to say* before moving onto Twitter. On the way home she played on *Big Fish Casino to pass time and to see if dad was on it, as he*'s *always playing that time*. She checked notifications on Facebook, but disappointedly she often only found requests from her aunts to send lives for Candy Crush. Despite sending repeated messages and requests to Scott, she failed to receive responses. Overtime, Daniella found Gary becoming quieter on WhatsApp and she felt *no one was on WhatsApp, they*'ve *either gone sleep or ignoring me*. Outside of school, Daniella spent most of her time at home unless going out with family.

It has been observed that digital media enable PWDs to maintain long-distance friendships, especially with other PWDs (Asbjørnslett et al., 2011; Söderström, 2009). The affordances of digital media, especially co-presence and portability, enabled Daniella to stay in touch and play games with old peers when she found herself in a socially unrewarding environment with younger students. The chat function was also important for Daniella who was more comfortable with textual rather than oral communication.

However, Daniella's case also highlights complex intra-disability differences. Daniella's social isolation was accentuated by the sifting and sorting of young PWDs into ability-based groups in schools, which left her behind her former peers and with younger students. At the same time, Daniella found herself playing games online with relatives, as her old friends began to lose interest in communicating with her, beginning to perceive her as infantile, sending requests to play online games for younger people. While digital media first helped Daniella maintain friendships with old friends who were separated by different educational pathways, the online and offline separations slowly converged. Daniella found herself isolated from same age peers and unwilling to communicate with her younger classmates, highlighting how intra-disability diversity and ability-based sorting in educational settings played into the isolation of students. Young PWDs like Daniella often attempt to ameliorate this isolation through digital media, but, not always and necessarily successfully.

Dave had a physical and a learning disability, which affected his concentration. He also found himself resorting to digital media in socially unwelcoming environments but with a different experience from Daniella:

> Dave stated he enjoyed being in the school for PWDs, unlike his previous mainstream school where his needs were not accommodated to and his behaviour was not tolerated. The staff and peers were accustomed to Dave's actions, which could seem unusual to strangers, and whilst he did not have close friends at school, his peers accepted and joked with him. However, Dave was usually the only student in the class who required a one-to-one assistant to help him with tasks and this and his different behaviour set him apart from others.

> At break and lunch times, Dave was typically seen at the school computer where he played a game of virtual farm. He attended to his virtual farm that he had been working on for many years, completing challenges and feeding his farm animals to make virtual money. The farm game was a multi-user game, but since Dave had not managed to persuade anyone else to play with him, he had created multiple accounts for himself and sent challenges and presents to himself to be able to expand the farm. Occasionally, he asked his mother to log in to make sure his farm was being catered for when he was unable to do this at school.

> On Mondays, Dave took the school bus to a local college with four other classmates who did not want to be associated with him in this new environment. His peers kept their distance from Dave in class and during breaks. Dave found the work in mainstream school challenging and was frequently reprimanded for his behaviour. As a result, Dave's self-esteem was eroded each week, and he often sat in front of a desktop computer calling himself *thick*. Occasionally Dave logged onto a free desktop computer to check on his virtual farm, which often attracted the attention of able-bodied college students as they looked over his screen. He was most of the time oblivious to the way students stared or laughed at him and his online activities, escaping from the hostile social environment online.

The copresence afforded by digital devices enabled Dave to disconnect from a hostile offline reality and resort to another space. It has been argued that rather than seeing disconnection from reality as inauthentic it can be seen as offering users of digital devices a temporal autonomous space, providing a sense of control or even importance (Johnson, 2020). Dave's escape into mainly desktop computers to play his favourite farm game could indeed be interpreted as providing him with a temporal sense of autonomy and control. However, the autonomy the computer afforded him was undercut by the fact that he disconnected himself from offline reality, which was either overtly hostile to him (the mainstream college) or benignly tolerating of him (the school for PWDs). Dave's case highlights intersectional and intra-diversity othering, where young PWDs may be bullied and ostracised in mainstream schools by able-bodied peers and also they may be othered and excluded in schools for PWDs (Holt et al., 2017). Dave's playing on the computer did not lead to or even necessarily accentuate his isolation in the two schools, as he was not included in friendship groups in either school. Rather playing a multi-user game alone offered him a refuge in hostile and lonely offline environments but did not provide him with alternative social relations online or offline.

The final case of Bruna illustrates how digital media can, in a particular context, enforce online and offline social relations. Bruna came from a tight-knit South-Asian

Muslim family with strong religious and cultural values. She lived with her immediate family, including a sibling with the same physical disability:

> Bruna was close with her extended family, especially her female cousins. However, her family had also closely guarded her and when first interviewed she complained about not being allowed to see or communicate with her friends.

> In the school, Bruna was often in a class with students that were either younger or older than her, and Bruna struggled to make close friends. She often felt alienated from fellow female students because *all they talk about is dudes, boys* and due to her religious and cultural background she did not want to join in. She also limited her interaction with boys in class and focused on her studies or used her iPod touch to connect with her cousins, friends from her mosque or her former good friend, Gary, who had moved to college.

> Bruna's parents did not allow her to have social media accounts, but at one point she managed to create an anonymous Twitter account to use in the toilets to connect with friends and cousins. During lessons she received notifications and be excited to *argh really needing to check it.* Her communication with Gary was initially frequent, serving the needs of both, as Gary was socially isolated in the mainstream school and was frequently seen absorbed on his phone messaging with friends from the school for PWDs.

> When Bruna moved to a mainstream college, her family allowed her to create social media accounts and she was able to connect with cousins as well as same age able-bodied girls in college, who shared a similar cultural and religious background. Bruna felt more socially included in the mainstream college than in the school and she was the only participant who successfully completed her mainstream education.

In Bruna's case, the affordances of mobile digital media to enable people to connect with one another on the go and across distances was initially hampered by her family's protective and strict forbidding of social media accounts, highlighting intersectional differences where religion, ethnicity and culture at large seem to play an important role. Bruna managed to stay in touch with former peers and cousins at school using a clandestine account when feeling isolated due to not belonging at the school for PWDs as she was either too old or too young compared to her peers or she found herself in a social group that contradicted her ethnicity- and religion-based values. However, moving onto mainstream education was a positive experience for Bruna and her ethnicity-based affinities offered her a group of like-minded friends that included her in their social circle, which was reinforced by the use of digital media (Söderström, 2009). Bruna's case highlights the role of ethnicity, religion and culture at large, which restricted her friendships as well as the use of digital media but, at the same time, offered affinities that cut through the able-bodied and with disability divide and included her in a circle of friends and family who used digital media to strengthen their relations.

Discussion

To conclude, we suggest that the analytical lens of social access highlights how affordances of digital media interweave into everyday social interactions, shaping and being shaped by them with different outcomes. The study found that differences in outcomes for young

PWDs were often related to intra-disability and intersectional differences but were also importantly shaped by the social context and related conditions, such as differences between schools for PWDs and mainstream colleges.

Previous research that has explored PWDs' use of digital media, focusing on online activities, such as disability forums, advice, activism, or online dating (Cole et al., 2011; Ellcessor, 2016; Furr et al., 2016; Saltes, 2013; Tsatsou, 2021) has emphasised the possibilities devices and platforms offer for PWDs in terms of social relations and participation. Research that has approached the use of digital media from an offline perspective, such as research in schools, has often produced more pessimistic findings, noting that digital media does help PWDs in forming new relationships or maintaining existing ones but many or the majority remain socially isolated in school settings (Asbjørnslett et al., 2011; Holt et al., 2017; Söderström, 2009). Our findings align closer with the latter pessimistic research, as we also studied in digital media in an offline context and found that digital technologies typically did not enhance social inclusion in these contexts. Our study contributes to this research by offering an ethnographic, longitudinal findings and the analytical lens of social access that focuses on the interplay between affordances of technologies, diversity and inequality of people, and the offline and online contexts.

In terms of affordances of digital media our study highlights how, for example, visual profiles on social media play a role in offline social relations. Existing research has remarked that social media or dating apps enable PWDs to hold off the body, managing the potential stigma by choosing to reveal their disability after a personal relationship has been established (Furr et al., 2016; Saltes, 2013; Seymour and Lupton, 2004). In our study, young PWDs often knew the people they interacted with on social media; so visual profiles became part of existing, changing relationships, sometimes augmenting the negative impact or stigma of a disability by making it more visible and public (e.g. in Lucy's case) and sometimes boosting the positive impact of a socially valued attribute, such as athleticism (e.g. in Scott's case). The affordances of digital media enabled the young PWDs to stay in touch with distant friends as has been observed by others (Asbjørnslett et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2018; Söderström, 2009). Beyond that, using messaging apps on the go enabled young PWDs to be co-present chatting to their friends when finding themselves in an unwelcoming or unrewarding offline school environment. This observation further underlines the way in which digital media affordances interweave into offline social lives, playing different roles in different contexts.

Intra-disability and intersectional diversity importantly intersect with digital media use. PWDs are sometimes treated as a homogeneous group, although their experiences can be highly divergent (Tsatsou, 2019); research at schools has, indeed, identified different groups of pupils, such as a majority feeling excluded and a small minority having close friendships, reinforced digital media use (Asbjørnslett et al., 2011; Söderström, 2009). Our study highlights three issues. First, the study found that intra-disability diversity contributed to social exclusion both in situations where young PWDs were perceived as or are stigmatised (Goffman, 1963) as too different by able-bodied as well as by peers with disabilities that were less visible or obtrusive (e.g. in the cases of Lucy and Dave) and in situations where young PWDs felt they had been left behind with peers that were either younger or/and with impairments that are more significant than theirs (e.g. in the cases of Daniella and Bruna). These insights resonate with findings that students in mainstream

schools hold more positive attitudes towards students with mild or less obtrusive disabilities (Petry, 2018). Second, intersectional diversity shaped social relations and digital media use. For example, Gary was able to explore his gay sexuality and find companionship, although not a romantic partnership, using gay dating sites and apps. Bruna's ethnic and religious background both hampered and facilitated her social relationships and digital media use. Third, the diverse experiences of our participants illustrate that digital media often foment processes of inclusion and exclusion that are already in place, so those with social capital, such as Scott could reap more social benefits from digital media, whereas Dave who was socially excluded in both schools did not use digital media to build social relations but to seek refuge in online gaming (Lin et al., 2018). As such, digital media use among young PWDs may corroborate the 'rich get richer' hypothesis according to which individuals who have social relations offline also use social media to reinforce them online, as observed among able-bodied young people (Twenge et al., 2019).

The third aspect of social access, interaction between online and offline environments, highlights how digital media are interwoven into the everyday offline life of young people. This does not mean that digital media affordances did not play a role in social relationships, but that often affordances, such as the social media features foregrounding popularity and beauty, mirrored and reinforced social processes of exclusion undergirding the broader teenage culture. Digital media affordances that enabled young PWDs to keep in touch across space facilitated a sense of inclusion in sometimes hostile environments, although these interactions sometimes became escapist (Lin et al., 2018) and at some other times, they became part of a process of estrangement or inclusion which had their roots in offline developments such as the young person's move on to different educational settings. Our findings suggest analysing digital media use within broader social contexts and policies, including economic policy and labour relations (Saukko and Weedon, 2020) that shape inequalities, which is also suggested by the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2014) with regard to PWDs. In this study, the young PWDs' social and policy context was shaped by education and the debate of whether young PWDs should be educated in separate schools or integrated into mainstream education (Prince and Hadwin, 2013). Being educated separately disadvantages PWDs, but in mainstream education, they often find less support, struggle educationally and are socially excluded, even though there have been initiatives to create collaborative activities to help with this kind of social and educational exclusion (Petry, 2018; Pinto et al., 2019). This study illustrates that digital media use interweaves with these educational policies and their problems.

In conclusion, we contend that the analytical lens of social access opens a new perspective on digital inclusion of PWDs. By focusing on how the affordances of digital technologies interweave with intra-disability and intersectional inequalities in offline worlds, we found that digital media rarely alter but often augment, ameliorate or reinforce existing areas and instances of young PWDs' social exclusion and inclusion.

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Note

1. In this article, we use person-first language – that is, we refer to our participants as 'people with disabilities'. Person-first terminology is commonly used in the United Kingdom to put the person before their impairment and support disability rights and social inclusion (Shakespeare, 2014). This terminology was also used by the participants.

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