

## New Em@ncipatory Landscapes? Young People With Intellectual Disabilities, Internet Use and Identification Processes

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**Abstract:** *Although research on young people's identification processes on the Internet is a growing field, few studies illustrate conditions for young people with intellectual disabilities (ID). Previous studies have shown that young people with ID are worried about being marginalized, and that many in fact are lonelier than other young people. Internet and social networking sites might be of vital importance as a space for exploring alternative and less stigmatized identities. This article reports findings from individual interviews with 27 young people with ID in Sweden. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a thematic content analysis. A prominent finding concerned the informants being well aware of both risks and opportunities using Internet and Social Networking Sites. Consequently, the more they interacted with non-disabled peers, the more they experienced negative consequences of Internet use. These circumstances rather lead to downsizing than upsizing Internet use, and less participation on Social Networking Sites. The experiences of the informants are discussed in a conceptual framework of social identity, participation, and emancipation. We recommend that social work practitioners reflect upon the ways that support can be arranged in order to empower young people with ID to participate on the Internet.*

**Keywords:** *Intellectual disability; Internet use; participation; identification processes; social networking sites (SNS)*

Although research on young people's identification processes on the Internet is a growing field, there are few studies that illustrate conditions for young people with intellectual disabilities (ID). Previous studies show that young people with ID are worried about being marginalized from other young people, and that many in fact report experiences of loneliness and living more isolated lives than others (McVilly, Stancliffe, Parmenter, & Burton-Smith, 2006). Internet and social media might be of vital importance as a space for exploring alternative and less stigmatized identities. However, Scandinavian research has shown that a new generation of young people with ID is emerging who have developed somewhat new ways of relating to issues of participation and identity (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2005; 2008; Mineur, 2013; Molin, 2008). These strategies mainly concern the possibilities of expressing alternative self-presentations, which are not necessarily connected to a specific functional impairment or a certain welfare institutional belonging (e.g., special need student or care user) (Molin & Gustavsson, 2009). One such strategy can concern attempts to, in an online setting, present a preferred identity (e.g., that of a hockey fan or a musician), which may differ from their disabled identity, which would be apparent in an offline setting. A Swedish research project—*Particip@tion on Internet? Pupils with intellectual disabilities and identification processes on Internet*—aims to investigate these

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processes based on the perspectives of young people with ID, school staff, and parents.

The concept of intellectual disability can be used in different connotations across national affiliations. In this article we refer to intellectual disability in terms of the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) put forward by Schalock et al. (2010): “Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates before age 18” (p. 1). In the context of Swedish school legislation, an intellectual disability (utvecklingsstörning) along with an assessment of not being able to attain the regular knowledge goals is considered as a requirement for being enrolled in the special program schooling for pupils with ID (särskola).

The number of studies concerning young people’s use of the Internet has radically increased in the last decade (Boonaert & Vettenburg, 2011). However, rather few studies include young people with disabilities in general and young people with ID in particular. *EU Kids Online*—Europe’s largest study of these issues—stresses the need for research focusing on groups that could be considered as extra vulnerable for content and consequences following Internet use (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Livingstone, Haddon, & Ólafsson, 2011). On this matter, Chadwick, Wesson, and Fullwood (2013) concluded:

More needs to be done to consider what proportion of individuals with an ID actually can access the Internet as well as the barriers which may preclude access. Attitudinal barriers need much further consideration, with a view to altering negative attitudes. Issues of safety, risk and protection online for people with ID have yet to be adequately investigated and these currently serve as reasons given for hindering people from gaining online access. (pp. 390-391)

On the one hand, Chadwick et al. (2013) describe an emerging *digital divide* in which some individuals and groups (e.g., elderly people with severe impairments) tend to be marginalized along with an increased and more advanced use of technology in society. On the other hand, there are indications exemplifying young people and young adults using Internet and Social Networking Sites (SNS) for the purpose of exploring alternative self-presentations. In this study we define SNS broadly as an overall concept including both social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat) and other kinds of communicative platforms such as Blogs, Vlogs, online chat forums, discussion threads on YouTube channels, etc. According to Chadwick and colleagues (2013), there are several combined factors that influence whether people with ID will gain access to the Internet, such as individual functional variation, education/training, support and assistance, but also the broader political, economic and attitudinal climate. Within these factors one could find both limitations and opportunities. In this regard Thoreau (2006) concluded, “the reality of the Internet may not be as emancipatory for disabled people as has been claimed” (p. 443). Chadwick et al. (2013) stresses—with references to Bowker and Tuffin (2003)—“hiding ID is likely to do little to reduce the stigma or increase the acceptance of people with ID within society” (p. 386).

Managing and shaping social identities in different settings have been of vast interest for different disciplines over the years. The concept of social identity is often referred to as a sense of who a person is in relation to a group membership. Jenkins (2007) put forward a distinction between a more static concept of *identity* towards a

more dynamic and negotiable concept of *identification processes*.

Too much contemporary writing about identity treats it as something that simply *is* [...] Indeed, identity can only be understood as process, as 'being' or 'becoming'. One's identity – one's identities, indeed, for who we are is always singular *and* plural – is never a final or settled matter [...] we should probably only talk about 'identification.' (Jenkins, 2007, p. 5)

Internet and SNS could be considered as a prominent context in which these identification processes can take place. Shpigelman and Gill (2014) claim that “when using social networking sites disabled people have the opportunity to project a preferred identity to the online world which may differ from their disabled identity projected in the real world” (p. 1603). Gustavsson and Nyberg (2015) similarly argue that people with disabilities can choose to highlight, reject, or renegotiate their disability identity in different contexts. Empowerment researchers have further suggested that people going from an excluded identity to a more included identity often display a civic identity (Borland & Ramcharan, 2000). In this sense, different SNS on the Internet could be of vital contextual importance for expressing these alternative civic identities in which, for instance, belonging to a special program or care user identity is not salient. Beart, Hardy, and Buchan (2005) claim that people with ID sometimes have problems understanding the terms that are used to categorise them, in particular, many people with ID “experience the stigma of their social identity through their interactions with others” (p. 54).

In a pilot study based on focus group interviews, we found that professionals expressed a concern that young people will get hurt and end up in undesirable situations (such as being cheated or abused), while parents mainly consider the Internet as a possible future venue for the development of new and on-going social relations (Löfgren-Mårtenson, Sorbring, & Molin, 2015; Molin, Sorbring, & Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2015). Another result from this pilot study was the informants' emphasis on the Internet as a tool that could promote both more and less participation in society. Consequently, “the pendulum seems to strike higher in both directions” (Molin et al., 2015, p. 27), as one of the informants claimed.

Drawing upon this background, the aim of this article is to describe and analyze how young people with ID view risks and opportunities on the Internet and, in addition, how they reflect upon emancipative strategies and issues of online and offline identification processes. Of relevance for the disability perspective in social work, the voices of young people with ID are put forward in order to shed light on both the individual's limitations and opportunities and “how this interacts with supports to affect capability and subsequent agency in engaging with the online world” (Chadwick et al., 2013, p. 391).

### **Previous research**

Previous research on disability and the Internet has often focused on limitations, risks, and shortcomings that people with ID face when using the Internet. For example, Didden et al. (2009) discuss cyberbullying among pupils within special educational settings. Furthermore, Normand and Sallafranque-St-Louis (2016) have shown in a literature review that young people with intellectual or developmental disability (IDD) run a greater risk for sexual solicitation. Contributing risk factors like sexual and physical abuse, isolation, loneliness, depression, and chatting were found to be more

prevalent within the target group compared with a general population (c.f., Buijs, Boot, Shugar, Fung, & Bassett, 2016; Priebe, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013; Wells & Mitchell, 2014). Notably, Maïano, Aimé, Salvas, Morin, and Normand (2016) conclude in another systematic review that when youth with ID were compared with other disabilities or so-called typically developed (TD) youth, no clear differences of victimization were found. Seale (2014) discusses issues of risk and safety in relation to the quality of technology access. The author argues that the concept of positive risk-taking could be useful in order to understand how the relationship between supporters, technologies, and people with ID is mediated by risk. Positive risk-taking involves strategies for enabling people with ID (among others) to have greater control over their lives. With reference to Morgan (2004), it is generally about “managing risk not avoiding or ignoring it; taking positive risks because the potential benefits outweigh the potential harm” (Seale, 2014, p. 228). Shared decision-making (between support workers and people with ID), possibility thinking (in terms of *What happens if something goes right?* rather than *What happens if something goes wrong?*) and resilience (achieving good outcomes in spite of various threats) are put forward as central dimensions of positive risk-taking.

Another common focus concerns topics of friendship and loneliness (Emerson & McVilly, 2004; McVilly et al., 2006). Sharabi and Margalit (2011) compared of how young people with and without ID participate in online activities. The study revealed several similarities between the two groups in how they used the Internet (c.f., Shpigelman & Gill, 2014). Though, it was the motives for Internet use that separated the groups. Young people with ID reported to a much higher extent that online activities were mostly a way to handle feelings of being lonely.

Another focus often highlighted in recent research concerns issues of accessibility (Karreman, van der Geest, & Buusink, 2007). Studies have investigated how the Web could be made more accessible for people with ID, in order to facilitate participation within the *intellectual disability community* (Kennedy, Evans, & Thomas, 2011). Even if people with ID often use the Internet in the same way as others, they also report challenges in handling privacy settings and literacy demands following a more technically advanced and online society (Shpigelman & Gill, 2014). Several studies have shed light on how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can be arranged in different settings, such as in daily activities and residential services (Näslund & Gardelli, 2012; Parsons, Daniels, Porter, & Robertson, 2006). Parsons et al. (2006) concluded that ICT promoted more accessible communication, but it was still linked to within-service activities rather than to those external to service provision. These findings could be related to Molin and Gustavsson’s (2009) discussion of how young adults with ID sometimes ascribe self-expectations of being *like* others and sometimes self-expectations of being *with* others.

Studies examining ICT use among people with ID in special program schools and caring services show that professionals' commitment and curiosity in the area plays a crucial role in determining, for example, how the Internet is used in different contexts. It is also noteworthy that the staff paying attention to students' own interests and experiences through ICT contributed greatly to increasing user agency (Näslund & Gardelli, 2012). These findings could be linked with several studies stressing that young people with ID and their Internet use are greatly influenced by the attitude and support approach from the nearest parental and/or staff in their surroundings (Chadwick et al., 2013; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2005; Molin et al., 2015; Palmer,

Wehmeyer, Davies, & Stock, 2012).

Finally, research on the Internet, identification processes, and the role of support seems to have received less attention in comparison with the above-mentioned topics. Though, there are a few exceptions (Holmes & O'Loughlin, 2012; Johansson, 2014; McClimens & Gordon, 2009; Salimkhan, Manago, & Greenfield, 2010). Löfgren-Mårtenson (2008) reports how young people with ID handle issues of sexuality and social relations on the Internet. The study describes Internet and digital spaces as a new *free zone* for people with ID where they can socialize with others in a unique way without insight from care staff and/or parents. These new meeting places create both risks and opportunities for the users, specifically when it comes to the development of alternative identities, which is not connected to otherwise ordinary experiences of stigmatization and alienation. However, Seale (2001; 2007) has a specific interest in aspects of belonging and identification in relation to Internet use among people with ID. In an early study she analyzed how people with Down syndrome manage their identities on their own personal websites. The study examined how the informants choose to present their self-images in relation to their disability, that is, to what extent they accept or deny a group membership for people with Down syndrome. One result was that the websites give people the opportunity to express "multiple identities" in the sense that the informants' identifications were both similar and different from other people with Down syndrome. Correspondingly, Molin and Gustavsson (2009) characterize the so-called new generation of integration, i.e., those who grew up during a time when reforms in a number of areas have been salient and they have also participated in various social arenas in a completely different way from previous generations. Some representatives of this generation tend to strive for a "third way" between, on the one hand, reconciliation to a special program or care user affiliation (belonging) and on the other hand, trying to break free from the stigma and low-valued belongings. Many also exhibit a strong belief in the right to be involved and participate (Gustavsson, 1998).

The literature shows a gap in knowledge regarding a more nuanced understanding of issues of participation and identification processes on the Internet among young people with ID. Rather few studies have put forward young people's own voices. We will argue that these voices are of vital importance in order to understand the complexity of Internet use and intellectual disabilities.

## Method

### Participants

This article reports findings from individual interviews with pupils in an upper secondary special program for pupils with ID (n=27). Altogether 15 adolescent boys and 12 adolescent girls were interviewed. Their ages ranged between 16 and 20 with a mean of 17.2 years. The pupils and their parents were informed about the aim and method of the study in accessible writing and that their participation was voluntary. In connection with the interview, both oral and written information about the study was provided and written consent was collected. The individual interviews were conducted at two similar upper secondary special program schools for pupils with ID in the western part of Sweden. At the first school 9 interviews were held with 4 boys and 5 girls. At the second school 18 interviews (11 boys and 7 girls) were conducted. The experiences of the informants are presented with pseudonyms and age.

Upper secondary school for individuals with ID in Sweden is a four-year voluntary type of school that pupils can choose to attend once they have completed the nine-year compulsory school. It is divided into two programs. The individual program is primarily designed for pupils with a severe or moderate ID. The national program is mainly designed for pupils with a mild ID. There are in total nine national upper secondary school programs for pupils with ID, spanning program-specific courses and assessed coursework. The interview participants were all enrolled within national programs such as the programme for health and care-providers, hotel, restaurant and bakery workers, vehicles mechanics, or media.

### **Procedure**

First, the principal of the special program school was contacted so that the researcher received approval to proceed with contacting the school's teachers and pupils. In the next step, the teachers were contacted by written letter/mail and by telephone and in turn they informed parents and pupils of the study. Pupils that were interested in participating in the study registered their interest with the teacher, who drew up a list of pupils that wanted to be enrolled in the interviews. The interviews were conducted by one of the authors in a quiet room located at the special program schools. The length of the interviews averaged 22 minutes. The ethical board of West Sweden approved the project (Dnr 048-15) and the study was adapted to comply with the Swedish code of ethics concerning requirements of information, consent, usage of data, and confidentiality.

### **Measures and analysis**

The individual interviews were semi-structured following a pre-designed interview guide with the following themes: (1) the Internet as an arena for identity formation, love and sexuality, (2) attitudes and experiences of young people's self-presentations and Internet relations, (3) the Internet and its participative opportunities and (4) parents' and professionals' attitudes and coping strategies for how young people use the Internet. These themes, with related questions, were influenced by the pilot study prior to this study (Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Molin, et al., 2015). All 27 interviews were recorded (in total, 9 hours and 51 minutes of recorded material).

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data sets. In the first step the interviewing author read the transcribed material several times in order to "get to know the data" and to illuminate characteristic statements. The next step was to systematically code interesting features of the material in relation to the research aim and objectives. Eleven main codes were then organized into different themes. The themes that emerged were designed to capture the content of the data set. In order to ensure this, the data were systematically reviewed and refined by all three authors, and empirically derived themes were then redefined in a dialectic process with the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. This analytical step has generally been inspired by Willis and Trondman (2002) TIME-model—*Theoretically Informed Methodology for Ethnography*. The use of MAXQDA 12 (2015) assisted in the analysis.

The analysis resulted in the following themes: 1) risk awareness and positive risk-taking, 2) quest for authenticity, 3) participation *like* others or *with* others, and 4) the

role of support. Excerpts from the data set were selected from the transcript in order to highlight characteristic experiences of the participants with regard to a specific theme. In the following phase of the analysis, three characteristic and categorical groups were identified in the material, namely: *the consumers*, *the insiders*, and *the outwardly directed*. In order to maintain confidentiality, no names or identifying information appear when presenting the results.

## Results

The findings in the study are structured according to four different themes: risk awareness and positive risk-taking, quest for authenticity, participation *like* others or *with* others, and the role of support.

### (1) Risk awareness and positive risk-taking

The theme of risk awareness and positive risk-taking is divided into two different sub-categories. The first sub-category contains experiences of *the risk of being hurt* or ending up in undesirable situations. Most of the informants seemed to be well aware of the risks of Internet use and they could articulate how to handle difficult situations (“bring someone with you if you are going to meet someone offline...”).

*I am very, very careful on the Internet, because you never know if you will get into trouble [...] I would rather not meet people on the Internet because I'm afraid something bad will happen, e.g., me being abused by someone. There are those dating-sites...I have visited those sites, looked at them – but you have to be very careful visiting those sites!* (Mia, 17 years)

Several informants put forward the risks associated with gaming online and, especially, public chat forums linked to different types of online games. The second sub-category was represented by *risk experiences of missing something or ending up lonely*. Several informants reported that they did not block unknown friend proposals on Facebook (FB) immediately. Either they intended to check out who it is or they would ask a friend who it might be. However, they would block unknown people if they behaved inappropriately.

*I'm not afraid of adding people, but if they behave badly I put them away* (Ninni, 18 years)

*Well, if it's a girl...I usually babble widely, but if it's a guy I block him. TAKE HIM AWAY!* (Abeba, 17 years)

*Even if it a normal person, or a girl who looks nice I block them. I dare not. I added a girl once who looked fairly nice, but then she put up some sort of porn video and 56 other names – so – I blocked her right away. I manage. More and more people remove their Facebook accounts, I hear* (Thommy, 19 years)

Some informants reported experiences of developing a romantic relationship with others through SNS. Either they had these experiences of their own or they knew people in their immediate surroundings who had become a couple on the Internet. In some cases, the relationships have lasted for quite a long time. In other cases, the relationship only lasted for a short period. In both cases, the informants stressed that it was “worth trying,” but they made a point of saying that offline-based relations had better potential.

*I have been together with people I have met on the Internet. But it didn't last long...so I probably prefer meeting people in real life (laughter) (Ninni, 18 years)*

## **(2) Quest for authenticity**

One salient feature of the theme of self-presentations and Internet relations was related to issues of authenticity and striving for greater honesty on the Internet. One common experience was that people often exaggerated too much on the Internet. In addition, that things taking place online were not ascribed as much importance as things happening offline.

*Its important to be as clear as possible on the Internet, and not to exaggerate [...]...guys can be so crafty and wacky [...] I usually say that it is of great importance to bring things up face to face (Ester, 18 years)*

*You can make things up on the Internet. It's not always that serious... (Sara, 18 years)*

Some participants reported experiences of behaving differently online and offline. Some informants stressed that they mainly wanted to have and maintain genuine, close relations on the Internet and SNS. They called for more honesty online. Axel, Anton and Dragan illustrate this in the following excerpts:

*If you are a girl, don't show yourself naked. Don't try to be tougher than you really are. Try to be softer [...] you can say nice things, but it is often too exaggerated on the Internet (Axel, 20 years)*

*I just want to have people who really know me on Facebook (Anton)*

*On the Internet you can fool around so to speak – like being cool...uploading pictures. But in real life – it's only you. (Dragan, 16 years)*

Some informants had a skeptical approach to the presence of online conversations replacing the everyday offline relations. Therefore, the content of the material shows a shared quest for authenticity both online and offline as illustrated by the following quotes:

*Nowadays, people sitting next to me on the bench are sending me Facebook-messages. Hey, look! I'm sitting right in front of you! I mean, It's crazy. We, I mean us young kids, we are so desperate for the Internet. [...] It was better in the old days – when Internet was smaller...back then everybody was more "social" (Patrick, 17 years)*

*...most people live their lives on the Internet, and they have the Internet as their lives. Unfortunately, they don't live their lives! [...] Going out dancing, or whatever. If you meet someone at a dance, rather than meeting someone on the Internet, that's love for real. (Thomas, 17 years)*

*Maybe it's easier to say that you like somebody on the Internet ...rather than face-to-face. Honestly, I think I have only used the Internet to tell girls that I like them (laughter). You want to say it face-to-face, but it's really hard... (Thommy, 19 years)*

### (3) Participation *like* others or *with* others

Informants stated that they predominantly have contacts in their immediate surroundings (peer mates from their school class, family members, relatives) on SNS. Other informants shared that they have between 200-300 friends on Facebook. Having mostly contacts with peer group members was a general feature in the material. Some respondents expressed that they wanted to use the Internet and SNS like everybody else, or so to say, participate *like* others. But some informants distinguished themselves from others by highlighting their everyday contacts with people outside their immediate peer group. One example came from Peter who described himself as a “seeker” on the Internet (“I like to dig deep into things that I find interesting on the Internet”). Though Peter did not strive for participation like others on the Internet, he was mainly aiming to establish new contacts *with* others in a wider context. It was Peter’s gaming experiences that provided him with this opportunity.

*When I play an online game on the Internet I chat with people from...all over the world. So, when I have chatted for a while I contact them...on social media rather than within the game...I speak English every day. Actually, I don't think I have one single Swedish contact... (Peter, 16 years)*

Another example of participation with others outside the nearest peer group was reported from Lovisa, who claimed that she received about ten new friend proposals on FB every day.

*I had a YouTube-channel but I took it down...I had three very popular music videos...with a lot of views. [...] ...but I still work with my music. You never know, maybe I'll bring it back someday...because it's a bit hard to be famous – if you consider it. I remember when I had that YouTube-channel and when I walked in the streets downtown. Everybody said, 'Oh, it's you!! Please, make us another song!' ...and a lot of other stuff, so it can be too much sometimes – you have to set limits! (Lovisa, 17 years)*

Notably, those informants who were striving for participation in a wider society also reported experiences of hate comments, threats, and cyberbullying. Patrick reported one example of this scenario. He had for many years developed great gaming skills and had recently become a participant on a gaming team competing at the international level. But Patrick had ambivalent experiences with this situation:

*I am a member of the Gaming team called [name] and there's another team called [name]...and they have started to threaten me [on FB and in online chat forums]...saying 'if you win this match I will look you up and kill you'...it's my everyday life so to say. Getting hate comments. Of course, you get both hate and cheering comments. But mostly hate I think. (Patrick, 17 years)*

Stefan, also a gamer, reported similar experiences:

*If I write (on FB) that I'm happy or something like that, it will be followed with a long discussion thread with quarrel. I just try to be nice. But such friends I have now deleted. I was almost up to 1000 friends on FB, but now I have deleted about 300. I'm pretty satisfied. Now, only real friends left... [...] Don't bully each other on the Internet. Otherwise life proceeds pretty*

*well. Don't write stupid things about committing suicide and such crap. Be kind, Be gentle. Behave!* (Stefan, 19 years)

The more the pupils expressed experiences of interaction with peers outside the ID community, the more vulnerability they experienced. As a consequence, they seem to avoid participation in a wider society.

*I'm not sitting by the computer so much lately. Mostly I watch films nowadays...It's more relaxing...* (Stefan, 19 years)

#### **(4) The role of support**

The theme of the role of support was divided into two sub-categories, namely *Technical support* and *Moral and emotional support*. Most informants expressed little need for technical support. And if they needed that kind of support they knew whom to turn to: mostly siblings, cousins, or close friends. There were several reports of parents who still did not understand technical issues (e.g., safety adjustments, etc.). The vast majority of informants claimed that adults in general should increase their involvement, responsibility, and control of young people's Internet use, especially at younger ages. Lovisa and Ester came to similar conclusions on this issue:

*Well, I have my brother's daughter, she's soon to be six years old, and she's already started checking out Bloggers and stuff. And I have told him that he has to keep an eye on her. Because, in the end, it won't turn out well. She's gonna get addicted and perhaps forget her friends...* (Lovisa, 17 years)

*Oh, Yes!! Some adults should take more notice of what young people do on the Internet. Of course, some adults take more notice than others...* (Ester, 18 years)

Participants noted difficulties in turning to parents, particularly when it came to handling cyberbullying tendencies. They think the situation could get even worse if their parents found out. Even if there was a common trend in the material on the absence of parental discussions of Internet use issues, there were several reports of parents willing to give advice on Internet behaviour.

*I'm not the one who tells my mother about everything. Let's say something happened in school. She asks 'how was school today, Patrick?' And I say 'Good!' ...but actually it wasn't that good. So, I'm the one who keeps things inside so to say...* (Patrick, 17 years)

*From Mum and Dad I've got the advice that 'don't sit too much with the Internet' or 'don't upload so much from the Internet, it would lead to less bullying'...so I have not uploaded so much the last couple of weeks – and nothing has happened! The world's best advice, actually!* (Stefan, 19 years)

Nevertheless, some issues concerning sexuality and relationships could be easier to discuss with parents than with others. The majority of the informants stated that they had a girlfriend/boyfriend (often a peer pupil in the special program school), and sometimes there was a need for discussing certain eventualities.

*Somehow, if my girlfriend got pregnant ...what should I think about? What would happen? Economy? Will they (the parents) support me? Well, questions like that...* (Jonny, 17 years)

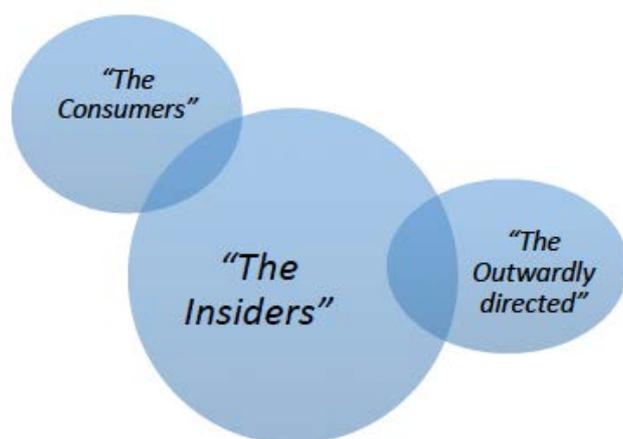
## Discussion

In the pilot study that preceded the youth interviews parents and school teachers put forward the perception that young people with ID were often naive and had difficulties in understanding the consequences of Internet and SNS use. Although some of the excerpts from the results above could be interpreted as a bit naive (e.g., Ninni and Abeba on risks and Stefan on having just nearly 700 “real” Facebook friends left after deleting those who behaved strangely) it is interesting to note the common awareness of potential risks when using the Internet and SNS. Especially, when it comes to addressing the factor of so-called *positive risk-taking* (Seale, 2014)—what happens if something goes right? The young people’s own voices in the study also stress the risk of being lonely, isolated and perhaps missing vital life experiences if you opt out of potential Internet relations. On the one hand, it could be a methodological dilemma that the young informants’ awareness is basically a repeat of what the adults in their immediate surroundings have told them. Then again, the material gives self-reflective examples of the informants having made risk-related choices, where they have learned something from the consequences of their actions (e.g., Ninni and Peter).

### Identification processes and emancipation

The main question this article poses concerns if and in what way the Internet and SNS could promote new emancipatory landscapes for young people with ID. In order to answer that question, the informants could be divided into different categorical groups with certain characteristics, namely “*The insiders*”, “*The consumers*” and “*The outwardly directed*”.

Figure 1. Three Types of Internet Users among Youth with ID



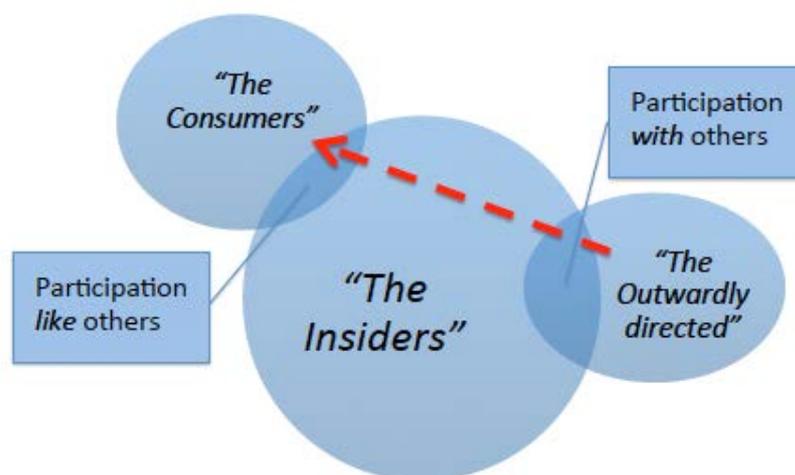
First, in general, those interviewed could be characterized as “*The insiders*” The vast majority of the interviewees reported daily use of the Internet and SNS. The purpose of their Internet use was mainly for interacting with others in their immediate surroundings. Consequently, they had their contact network predominantly within their peer group (e.g., FB friends from their own special program class, family members, and relatives) within the specific school setting (c.f., Näslund & Gardelli, 2012). They

chose to immediately ignore new and unknown friend proposals on social media and the most common pattern was to first become friends In Real Life (IRL) and then ask if someone wanted to be added as a friend on Facebook, for instance.

Secondly, "*The consumers*" (e.g., Dragan, Thomas, Ester and Sara) mainly use the Internet for content-consuming purposes, e.g., watching funny YouTube clips, checking out cool cars on E-bay, or checking out news or sports results. These kinds of activities seem to bring little harm to the informants. Some of the informants within this categorical group reported that they also used social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat) but they hardly ever contributed anything. They were just following what others were doing. Consequently, there were rather few negative experiences of Internet use within these two categories. On the other hand, the Internet and SNS do not seem to promote new contacts and participation in a wider society for these groups. These findings are in line with Sveningsson's (2014) study on (mainstream) young Swedes' understandings of social media use for political discussion; they take part but they do not participate. Another way of saying this is that these two groups participate on the Internet *like* others (and not *with* others outside their peer group)

But—thirdly—the last categorical group stood out compared to the other ones. This small third group could be designated as "*The outwardly directed*", namely The Gamers (Peter, Patrick and Stefan) and The Vlogger (Lovisa). It could be argued that online gaming and vlogging with open public access can promote both more and less participation. All of the informants within this group had a broad online network, widely—both nationally and internationally—spread outside their own peer group. In many ways it seems that they used the Internet and SNS as a "free zone" in which they could disclose so-called alternative identifications in relation to otherwise lowly valued and stigmatized identities as a special program pupil (c.f., Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008). In terms of participation it could be stressed that they had high levels of involvement in everyday activities and, in contrast to the other two groups, they participated—not just *like* others but also—*with* others in the wider community. In return they also reported experiences of cyberbullying, harassment, and threats, as well as positive experiences of appreciation and high status within their peer group. As a consequence, several informants have chosen to tone down their Internet involvement becoming "consumers" again (e.g., Lovisa and Stefan).

Figure 2. Types of Internet Users with ID and Their Strategies for Online Participation.



#### Limitations of the study

The analysis is based on a small sample and it is difficult to generalize. Compared to studies of mainstream youth and their Internet use, there are several similarities in how youth with ID use the Internet and SNS (c.f., Shpigelman & Gill, 2014). Young people with ID could be considered more vulnerable to what the Internet has to offer. In addition, there is also a possibility of so-called social desirability, namely that the informants' answers are put forward in order to be viewed favourably by others (e.g., saying things they think the researcher wants to hear).

#### Implications and Conclusions

So, do the Internet and SNS promote new emancipatory landscapes for young people with ID? Mainly, no. Maybe in a few cases it could be said that the Internet and SNS have helped them to stimulate emancipative strategies for alternative identifications. But in these cases they have chosen to downsize their involvement on SNS due to experiences of cyberbullying and/or unwanted exposure. The result is partly in line with previous studies, which identify both positive and challenging dimensions of the use of social media for people with ID (Caton & Chapman, 2016). Recall that Thoreau (2006) argued that the emancipatory possibilities of the Internet may be overstated. The results of our study shed light on how the Internet and SNS can contribute to both more and less participation for young people with ID. This could be viewed as a paradoxical development for young people with ID when, as Chadwick et al. (2013) point out, "in terms of self-expression, the Internet affords an opportunity for people with disabilities, including ID, to present themselves outside of their disability, having the option to disclose, or not, their disabled identity at will" (p. 385). One implication for social work practice is to be aware of the different meanings of participation experienced by young people with ID rather than measuring social participation in terms of the number of social contacts (c.f., Guillen, Coromina, & Saris, 2011). Piškur and colleagues (2014) raise the crucial question: is more [participation] always better? Another implication for the adult world in general and for social work practitioners in particular, is awareness and reflection upon how support can be

arranged in order to empower young people with ID to participate on the Internet. Adults' lack of awareness of the online world and, as Chadwick et al. (2013) point out, negative attitudes towards Internet use and SNS, commonly function as reasons for hindering people with disabilities from being digitally included. In social work practice there is a need for enhanced listening and understanding of the voices of young people with ID: Which possibilities can emerge in a space beyond potential problems and obstacles? In line with Seale (2014)—empowering young people with ID to use the Internet is often about managing risks, not avoiding them.

Future research may further investigate identification processes on the Internet for young people with ID. A mixed method design or a netnographic approach could be useful in order to capture new dimensions of understanding—i.e., not only what informants state that they do or what their experiences are, but also what they actually do in everyday online settings.

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