

Social media can provide connections for children and adults on the autism spectrum

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In a series of studies, Micah Mazurek and her colleagues used a variety of methods to learn more about the role of screen-based media in the lives of children and adults on the autism spectrum. Credit: Dan Addison, University Communications

Through her work as a clinical psychologist 15 years ago, Micah

Mazurek first became interested in understanding the role of technology in the lives of teens and adults on the autism spectrum.

At the time, [online gaming](#) was growing in popularity, and many of the teens she worked with were especially drawn to this [media](#).

Mazurek learned a lot from these teens and their families as they shared about the role of screen-based media in their lives, including both positive and negative aspects of this technology. To learn more, Mazurek conducted a series of studies that focused on gaining a better understanding of the role of screen-based media in the lives of children and adults on the autism spectrum.

Mazurek and her colleagues used a variety of methods, including surveys, experimental studies and qualitative interviews to learn more about their perspectives and experiences with both video games and social media.

Now, with people confined to their homes—and screens—more than ever due to the pandemic, the knowledge gleaned from that work has never been more germane.

UVA Today caught up with Mazurek—now an associate professor in the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development and the director of UVA's [Supporting Transformative Autism Research](#) program—to learn more.

Q. What were some of your major findings from the studies? Any surprises?

A. One of the things we learned across several studies was that online gaming and social media can offer important social connections for

autistic teenagers and adults. In one study of 108 autistic adults, we learned that most participants used social media (such as Facebook) for social connection, and that using social media was also associated with offline friendships.

Participants shared that they especially appreciated the fact that social media allowed them to engage with others without the demands of in-person social interactions. As one person said, "I feel more comfortable expressing myself" online. Another participant added that he used social media to "connect with others" without having to "worry about physical or in-conversation cues."

In another study, we asked autistic adults to share about the positive negative aspects of video gaming in their lives. Among other reasons for gaming (including stress relief and entertainment), many individuals noted that multiplayer gaming provided a social outlet by offering opportunities to meet and interact with friends.

Q. For parents of autistic teens, what are some key takeaways pertaining to social media use? Do you have any tips?

A. Social media and other [online platforms](#) may offer a great way for autistic teens to connect with friends, family and their communities. Without the demands for eye contact, vocal communication or nonverbal social cues, the online format may provide a more comfortable way to interact, share interests and express their thoughts and feelings.

It's also important for parents to help their teenagers maintain a healthy balance, to make sure [social media use](#) isn't getting in the way of other activities and responsibilities.

Q. How do you think the pandemic has affected autistic teens' use of social media? Quarantines have obviously been challenging for so many families, but have there been any silver linings?

A. That is a great question—and it would be really interesting to explore this in a future study! Everyone has been forced to rely much more on technology to maintain connections during the pandemic. One silver lining is that I think we are becoming much more creative in figuring out new ways to connect, play and engage online—through [social media](#), videoconferencing, texting, instant messaging and other platforms. For autistic teens and families, another silver lining may also be that many services and supports are now available through telehealth—making them much easier to access.

Q. In the aftermath of your studies, have there been any developments you've been keeping your eye on? Any new things you're working on that you're excited about that you can share with readers?

A. There have been so many advancements in technology over the last several years—including the growth in popularity of video-sharing apps like TikTok and YouTube, or apps that are popular among gamers, like Discord. These platforms may provide a great way to build connections and a sense of community, and may also serve as a forum for elevating neurodiverse voices. I'm really interested to explore this in future research and to learn more about leveraging technology to create more welcoming and inclusive spaces.

Provided by University of Virginia

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