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# Impact of social media and quality life of people who stutter



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Social media and people with disabilities

According to the Pew Research Center, 74% of all Internet users engage in social media, and that number jumps to 89% when 18–29 year olds are polled (Pew Research Center, 2014). But what exactly is social media? According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (11th ed.) **social media** is defined as, “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content.” This notion of extended virtual interaction was once thought impossible, but over the last decade the population has moved away from televisions, newspapers and radios in favor of the World Wide Web (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Interpersonal communication in the global community stands as the cornerstone of social media, as interaction between others is what drives users to upload and create content online (Ahlqvist, Back, Halonen, & Heinonen, 2008). Ahlqvist et al. (2008) described the phenomena that is social media with the keen metaphor of a “digital hand.” The hand is comprised of five fingers, each representing a core theme: identity, recognition, trust, belonging and creativity. Those fingers all culminate at the palm, which represents the overall effect social media has on members of society: empowerment.

Social media usage has multiplied tenfold in the past decade and has connected hundreds of millions of users worldwide, allowing interaction regardless of location (Amichai-Hamburger & Hayat, 2010). According to the Pew Research Center (2015), 65% of all American adults use at least one social networking site compared to 7% ten years prior. Unsurprisingly, young adults ages 18–29 are most likely to use social media (90% of young adults reported using social networking according to Pew Research Center). Meanwhile 77% of those ages 30–49, 51% of those 50–64, and 35% of those 65+ reported using social media. According to Pew's 2015 survey of the demographics of social media users, a remarkable 72% of all Internet users (62% of the entire adult population) report using Facebook and of that 72%, 70% report using it daily, and 43% several times a day. Of the most popular social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn), 52% of Internet users reported using two or more social media sites.

By forming online communities, people have the opportunity to reach out to others with similar interests and ideals, among large groups and over great distances (Viluckiene, 2014). Social media has also become an outlet for people with disabilities (including but not limited to motor, visual, hearing, and speech disabilities) to help enrich, revitalize, and trans-

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form both their real lives and their online worlds (Viluckiene, 2014). Social media usage of people with disabilities has been researched at length covering a wide range of disabilities. Bowker and Tuffin (2007) found that among participants from various disability organizations, three key linguistic resources came about through the online medium: uncontaminated judgement, exhibiting strengths, and operating independently. In sum, the study shows that through the Internet, people with disabilities have a greater sense of independence, freedom, control, and autonomy (Bowker & Tuffin, 2007). Caron and Light (2015) similarly found that through social media, people with disabilities are presented with increased opportunities for communication and a network of support which increased quality of life and independence.

Recent research has found that the strongest motivations for people with disabilities to participate in social media and social networking sites are to continue to maintain the connections they have made with people offline as well as expand their social network by reaching out to people with similar disabilities (Viluckiene, 2014). In sum, people with disabilities can largely benefit from social media to connect with others with similar life experiences. Through these online communities and through social media in general, people with disabilities are also given a rare chance to have only their textual words speak for them rather than any visual or verbal indications of their disability which have previously been a barrier to interpersonal communication (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

### 1.2. Social media and people who stutter (PWS)

Social media is ever present in our society, and PWS are using social media to their advantage; they are a prime example of a group of people with similar life experiences who have used social media to form a community (Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004). Stoudt and Ouellette (2004) completed extensive research on the positive effect that social media has had on PWS in terms of “providing a forum for collectivity, advocacy and (re)constructing selves,” along with “contending with disability and stigma through discourse” (p. 176). This research gives us insight about the benefits of social media in terms of forming a community, but what has not been researched is how social media affects a person’s stutter. “The Internet gives them unprecedented access to each other: ‘before now I never came in contact with another stutterer,’ remarked one woman. The technology is rapidly establishing itself as part of what another user labeled the ‘tremendous stuttering community’” (Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004, p. 176). Typing on the computer in the comfort of their own home also alleviates the pressure PWS feel when they have to communicate verbally (Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004).

Some may believe that social media is solely a positive factor in the lives of those who stutter, yet one must consider the implications of the vast improvement in communication the Internet presents to those who stutter. Is it too perfect? It has become clear that social media gives PWS unprecedented access to each other, but is this their main source of social interaction? Are PWS using social media rates at a significantly higher level when compared to the general population? Do PWS use the Internet as a crutch and a way to avoid verbal communication or is social media a stepping stone that builds their confidence and increases their likelihood to communicate verbally? Only more research will reveal such information. It can be hypothesized that by forming meaningful communities with other PWS, the Internet is a positive factor in the lives of those who stutter and increases confidence in their speech. While PWS may use the Internet on average more than the average speaker, it is hypothesized that it does not become their main source of communication but rather a tool for them to increase fluency.

### 1.3. Social anxiety and PWS

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), social anxiety disorder is characterized by marked or intense fear of social or performance-based situations where scrutiny or evaluation by others may occur. These fearful situations often include public speaking, meetings with strangers or authoritative figures, and talking on the telephone. Recent research has provided evidence of the link between stuttering and social anxiety disorder, particularly in the areas of social or performance-based situations (Iverach & Rapee, 2014). The study highlights the multidimensional effect of stuttering; while on the surface, stuttering appears to only affect fluency, yet a deeper look reveals that stuttering can have a debilitating effect on a person’s activities of daily living and overall quality of life.

Social anxiety is a common secondary symptom of stuttering. Roughly 40% of those diagnosed with a chronic stutter meet the criteria for social anxiety disorder (Craig & Tran, 2014), compared to a prevalence of 8–13% of the general community (Iverach & Rapee, 2014). Features of social anxiety disorder among PWS include fear of negative evaluation, expectancies of social harm, negative cognitions, attentional biases, avoidance, and safety behaviors (Iverach & Rapee, 2014). Research has also revealed that adolescents who stutter report a greater difficulty with functional communication compared to those who do not stutter which was significantly correlated with measures of trait and state anxiety (Mulcahy, Hennessey, Beilby, & Byrnes, 2008).

### 1.4. Negative self-concepts and personality

Lack of confidence due to social anxiety disorder can result in a profound negative effect on the overall self-concept of a person who stutters. Recent evidence suggests that chronic stuttering and its aforementioned secondary characteristics can impact personality (Bleek et al., 2012). Based on the NEO-FFI (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience Five-Factor

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