



REBOOT SOCIAL MEDIA LAB

## Inclusive Social Media

Project for the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in social media

### Project lead

Team ELDA: Dr. Daniela Schwarz & Elke Langbein

### Authors

Anna Pflügler, Dr. Daniela Schwarz, Elke Langbein & Valentina Andreadou

### Design

Larissa Wunderlich & Anna Pflügler





RESEARCH NOTE

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**TUM THINK TANK**

# Is social media equally accessible to all?

Is social media accessible for everyone? As you can see, many posts and stories still do not contain subtitles or alternative texts on social media channels. Especially people with intellectual disabilities repeatedly encounter obstacles when using social media.

Fortunately, solutions already exist, such as the use of easy language, special icons and assistive technology. But so far, these approaches are still implemented far too rarely.

This is perplexing, as different social media platforms have become an inescapable part of our daily lives. According to the Bitkom association, 89% of German internet users over the age of 16 log in daily (bitkom, 2023).

Social media platforms fundamentally serve the exchange with others, but also fulfil a significant function of participation. From gathering information on news sites to cultural exchanges in Facebook groups to lively political discussions on Twitter - these are all important steps towards equal participation and inclusion, as required by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Bosse, 2016).

As part of a seminar at the Technical University of Munich in the field of sports and health sciences, a study was conducted to show which barriers people with intellectual disabilities face on social media. Our project "Inclusive Social Media", "InSoMe" for short, aims to improve the challenges of people with intellectual disabilities in the context of social media. As a participatory study, we want to find solutions based on research results with the involvement of the target group. Together, we aim to overcome barriers and create an inclusive digital world in which everyone can benefit equally from the advantages of social media.

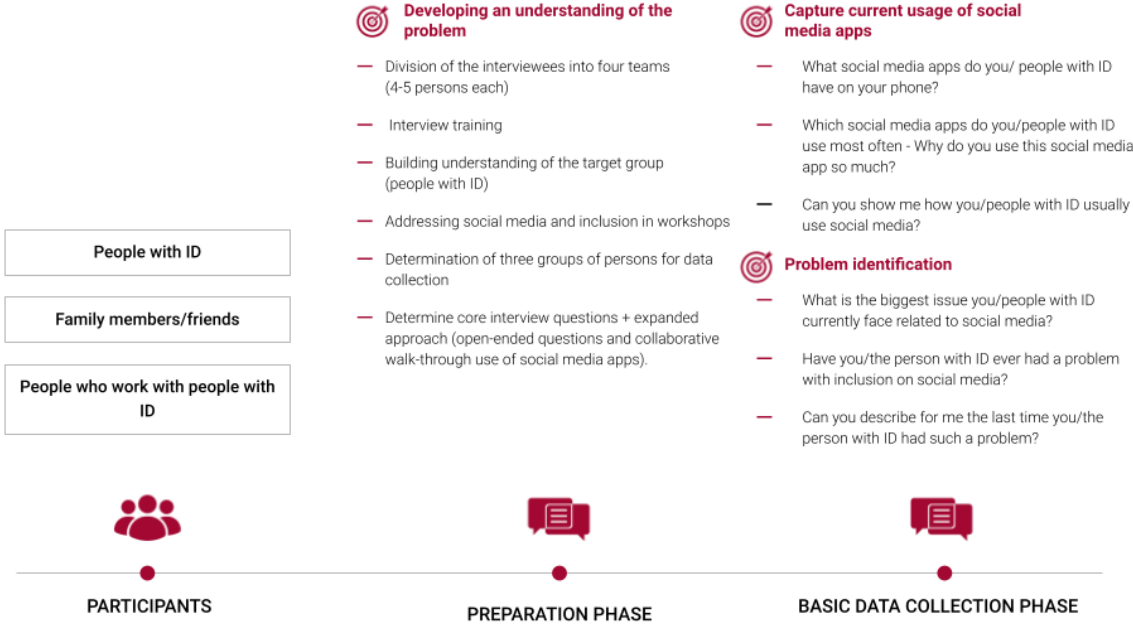
## Clarification of terms: What is an intellectual disability?



What is an intellectual disability? According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an intellectual disability is "a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and to learn and apply new skills (impaired intelligence). This reduces the ability to lead an independent life (impaired social competence)." (Special Olympics Germany, n.d.). This process begins before adulthood and has lasting effects on development." Although it is difficult to measure the number of people with intellectual disability, it is believed that there are 320,000 people in Germany alone (Special Olympics Germany, n.d.).

# What problems do people with intellectual disabilities face when using social media?

Our survey of people with intellectual disabilities, their relatives and people working with people with ID reveals a wide range of challenges and problems. 155 people were interviewed between November 2022 and February 2023. The following figure illustrates the research design and the core questions asked.



Our survey found that 41% of the participants feel overwhelmed by new developments such as roles or filters on social media platforms. The sensory overload on these platforms inhibits social interaction and makes people with intellectual disabilities feel isolated and affects their mental health. Instead, they resort to simpler functions and prefer direct interaction on WhatsApp (the most used social network with 35%).

**"More voice messages are used on WhatsApp because writing is difficult and often leads to misunderstandings."**

— Person working with people with intellectual disabilities.

The survey also showed that cyberbullying and hate speech in relation to intellectual disabilities are central issues for the respondents. Bullying is experienced as well as noticed on a regular basis by those affected. Nevertheless, the topic of bullying in relation to intellectual disabilities is only little illuminated by research, which shows that there is a need to catch up.

"People say I'm stupid."

– Person with intellectual disability

This is certainly related to the fact that people with intellectual disabilities are chronically underrepresented or stereotyped in social media.

"People with intellectual disabilities are underrepresented"

– Family member

However, the two biggest problems revealed by our survey are foremost the lack of media literacy of people with intellectual disabilities and their dependency on parents, other relatives or caregivers regarding the access and use of social media.

"Sometimes I have to ask my mom for help when I want to look for videos, and that makes me frustrated sometimes."

– Person with intellectual disability

This often limits the use of social media or deprives people from using these platforms without help.

"I would love to post something myself and show people when I see something I like."

– Person with intellectual disability



**Cybermobbing**

People with ID are regularly affected by cyberbullying and hate speech.



**Lack of media competence**

People with ID and their caregivers are often unsure about using social media



**Dependence on caregivers**

Often, people with ID cannot use social media on their own.



**Excessive demand**

Ongoing new technical developments and overloaded user interfaces overwhelm people with ID.



**Under- and misrepresentation**

People with ID are either barely represented or distorted and incomplete.



**Lack of use of assistance**

Existing technical tools that could facilitate inclusion for people with ID are underutilized.

## What specific actions is InSoMe taking to address these issues?

InSoMe is committed to researching the challenges that people with intellectual disabilities have with social media and introducing them as a component in the training of health scientists, for example. Specifically, students at the Technical University of Munich (TUM) conducted interviews to identify problems with people with intellectual disabilities and used the results to generate solutions (apps, websites, training, etc.).

During the Winter Games in Bad Tölz, Bachelor students brought the topic to the public excitingly and gained their own experience regarding posts that are appropriate for the target group by taking over the social media account of the Special Olympics Bavaria. From the insights gained here, the approach was continued and a separate Instagram account "SpecialOlympicsTUM" was created in collaboration with Special Olympics Bavaria. Currently, the international world games of the Special Olympics in Berlin and the visit of the Canadian delegation to Munich are portrayed on this channel. Both channels are intended to draw attention to the topic and, in particular, to address people with intellectual disabilities themselves, to bring them closer to social media and to get them excited about the topic of social media.

To directly address the problem of a lack of media literacy, training courses on social media are being developed for people with intellectual disabilities to answer their questions on the subject: What is social media? How do I deal with them? What do I communicate, and what do I not communicate? Which security-relevant settings do I choose?

## How does InSoMe address these complex problems in a multifaceted way?

InSoMe's work encompasses a variety of complementary activities and takes a holistic approach:



### Supporting research

Using scientific findings to contribute to more sound information



### International involvement

Cooperation with international organizations and scientists



### Student projects

Students and people with ID work cooperatively on research and solutions



### Public sphere

Through events and public relations, the topic gets attention



### Spread tools

The use of technical tools facilitates access to social media



### Expert perspectives

Achieving innovation through interdisciplinary collaboration and experts

**Accompanying research:** Through surveys of people with intellectual disability, their relatives and friends, and people with a professional connection, InSoMe tries to identify the problems and challenges of people with intellectual disabilities. In addition, approaches to solutions and initial prototypes for improving the situation are created in collaboration with students and people with intellectual disabilities in design thinking processes.

**International involvement:** InSoMe cooperates with Special Olympics on a regional, national and international level. [Special Olympics](#) is the largest movement for people with intellectual and multiple disabilities that organizes sports events worldwide, including mega-events with corresponding accompanying programs and promotes participation. This year, 2023, the World Games of Special Olympics will be held in Berlin. Here, InSoMe will discuss the topic of social media for people with intellectual disabilities with delegations and athletes from around the world, analyze how it can be made more open and inclusive, and further research. The integration into the international lecture series of the Special Olympics Organizing Committee of the World Games as well as the current cooperation, especially with Irish cooperation partner universities, extend the project to an international dimension. In addition, through the network of the Technical University of Munich (TUM), scientists from all over the world are reached.

**Student projects:** More than 60 students have been working on content to improve and understand social media since 2022: As part of the accompanying research, they create content for the social media account of Special Olympics Bayern and SpecialOlympicsTUM, which is also aimed for people with intellectual disabilities, and develop further solutions for inclusive social media in their bachelor theses. In addition, concepts for media competence training for people with intellectual disabilities are being developed and training courses are being held.

**Public space:** Especially through the cooperation with the TUM Think Tank, InSoMe tries to raise public awareness for the topic of inclusive social media. This is done through both InSoMe's own active public relations work and networking with politicians. Regional, national and international sporting events also help to draw the attention of the public to this issue.

**Tools:** Existing technical tools like Summ and accessiBe can facilitate access to social media for people with intellectual disabilities. While Summ quickly translates texts into easy language, accessiBe aims to identify and remove access barriers for people. InSoMe advocates for the everyday use of these tools and actively collaborates with Summ.

**Social media experts:** InSoMe works with a number of social media experts to get a holistic picture. These include Louis Kleemeyer (athlete and LOC staff member), OBA (Open Disability Project Team), Matthias Vollbracht (Media Tenor) and Amela Kadric (Health and Digitalisation Officer).

**Experts from complementary perspectives:** People from the target groups are consulted as experts in their own field as well as other experts from relevant fields. They are recruited from the national associations of Special Olympics and consulted as athletes, but also as experts from the field of digitalisation.

## What could the future of InSoMe look like?

The approaches gained in the research will be verified using prototypes during tests with the target group to then be translated into concrete measures in the future, for example, an app that offers explanations on social media in easy language and with simple design or a website that conveys information about cyberbullying in an easy-to-understand way with an avatar.

There will also be more training for people with intellectual disabilities as well as training for caregivers to give them the confidence they need to accompany people with intellectual disabilities in the most self-determined way possible. Research on social media and inclusion will be further expanded and will also be anchored more firmly in university teaching from an interdisciplinary perspective.

## InSoMe is part of the Reboot Social Media Lab at the TUM Think Tank.

Reboot Social Media Lab:

[Website](#)

Inclusive Social Media (InSoMe):

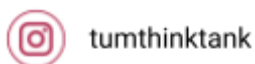
[Website](#)

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