

GENDER AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS PREDICTORS OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE AMONG IN-SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN OYO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper investigated gender and social media as predictors of self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs in Oyo State, Nigeria. The purposes of the study were to investigate how gender impacts self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs, find out the roles that social media plays in shaping self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs, and examine the significant difference in self-acceptance between male and female in-school adolescents with special needs in selected schools in Oyo State in relation to their social media use. A descriptive research design of survey type was adopted while simple random sampling technique was used to select 60 in-school adolescents with special needs from two special schools in Oyo State. The variables in the study were measured using self-structured research instruments named social media usage scale ($\alpha=.89$) and self-acceptance scale ($\alpha=.72$) respectively. Data collected were analysed using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) at 0.05 level of significance. The result revealed that self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs is significantly correlated with social media ($r=0.91$; $p<0.05$) but no significant correlation for gender ($r=.001$; $p>0.1$). Again, the result yielded a coefficient of multiple regression $R=.529$ and multiple $R\text{-square}=.275$. This suggests that the independent variables accounted for 27.3% ($\text{Adj.}R^2=.273$) variance in the prediction of self-acceptance. Social media was the main contributor to prediction ($\text{Beta}=.054$; $t=1.501$; $p<0.05$) while gender had no significant contribution ($\text{Beta}=.010$; $t=.2776$; $p>0.05$) and there was a significant difference in self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs who are males and females in Oyo State. Therefore, it was concluded in this study that in-school adolescents with special needs who use social media more frequently tend to have higher self-acceptance level while male and female in-school adolescents with special needs have similar levels of self-acceptance. Based on the findings of the study, it is therefore recommended that parents should encourage open and honest discussions about self-acceptance, gender and social media usage among the in-school adolescents with special needs, educators should design curriculum that will promote self-

understanding and teachers should also teach social-emotional skills and provide education on gender diversity.

Keywords: Gender, social media, self-acceptance, in-school adolescents, in-school adolescents with special needs.

Introduction

Self-acceptance plays a critical role in the psychological well-being of in-school adolescents, particularly for the in-school adolescents with special needs. It refers to the recognition and acceptance of one's own strengths and weaknesses without undue self-criticism. For in-school adolescents with special needs, the journey towards self-acceptance can be especially complex due to societal stigmatization, physical and psychological challenges, and pressures to conform to societal norms (Smith & Shute, 2019). Over the years, two major factors have emerged as powerful influences on the self-acceptance of in-school adolescents: gender and social media (Kling, Hyde, Showers & Buswell, 2018; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Gender shapes the way individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, often leading to different experiences in terms of self-esteem and self-acceptance (Kling, Hyde, Showers & Buswell, 2018). Female adolescents with special needs may face more significant societal pressures related to appearance and body image compared to males, influencing their journey toward self-acceptance (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). Social media, which has become ubiquitous in the lives of in-school adolescents, further complicates these dynamics. While social media can offer support networks and avenues for self-expression, it also exposes in-school adolescents to idealised portrayals of perfection that may exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, especially for those with special needs (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). For in-school adolescents with special needs, social media interactions can influence their perceptions of self-worth and identity, which may differ based on gender (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Studies have highlighted the influence of gender on self-acceptance. A study by Gentile et al. (2009) found that female adolescents generally reported lower self-acceptance levels compared to males due to greater exposure to societal beauty standards. In contrast, boys with disabilities often struggled with societal expectations of masculinity, which could impact their self-worth (Griffiths et al., 2018). Similarly, a longitudinal study by Bleidorn et al. (2016) showed that gender differences in self-acceptance emerge early in adolescence and persist into adulthood, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that consider these disparities. In-school adolescents with special needs, often experience unique challenges in their pursuit of self-acceptance, due to physical, emotional, or cognitive disabilities that may alienate them from their peers or foster feelings of inadequacy. Acknowledging the importance of self-acceptance in this group is critical because lower levels of self-acceptance can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and lower self-esteem (Lampropoulou, 2020).

Gender and social media are two significant factors that shape how in-school adolescents, particularly those with special needs, form their sense of self and navigate issues of self-worth and acceptance. Gender expectations and stereotypes continue to influence the self-concept of young people, especially in cultures where distinct roles and behaviours are traditionally assigned to males and females (Bem, 1993). In this context, males and females with special needs may face different societal expectations, which can either hinder or promote their self-acceptance. For example, females with special needs often encounter additional pressures related

to beauty standards and social expectations of femininity, which can make the process of self-acceptance more challenging compared to their male counterparts (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

The rise of social media has introduced a new dimension to the development of self-concept and acceptance in in-school adolescents. For in-school adolescents with special needs, social media platforms can serve as both a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these platforms may provide a valuable space for self-expression, socialization, and finding communities of support that foster inclusivity and understanding (Mazur & Kozłowska, 2017). These online communities can reduce the sense of isolation that many in-school adolescents with disabilities feel, thus promoting self-acceptance. On the other hand, the idealised representations of bodies, lifestyles, and abilities prevalent on social media can lead to negative social comparisons, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and lowering self-acceptance, especially for in-school adolescents who already struggle with accepting their disabilities (Perloff, 2014). While boys may experience pressure to conform to ideals of strength and independence, girls are often bombarded with messages about appearance and beauty, which can negatively affect their self-image (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian & Halliwell, 2015). According to Vogel, Rose, Roberts & Eckles (2014), females are more likely to engage in appearance-related social comparisons on social media, making them more vulnerable to body dissatisfaction and lower self-acceptance. These differences underscore the need for gender-sensitive interventions that address the specific challenges boys and girls with special need face in navigating social media and building self-acceptance.

Perry (2021) defines self-acceptance as the act of accepting oneself and all their personality traits exactly as they are. They accept them no matter whether they are positive or negative. This includes their physical and mental attributes. Self-acceptance means recognising that one's value goes beyond their personal attributes and actions. Morgado, Campana, Tavares & Mda (2014) viewed self-acceptance as the ability to accept both one's strengths and personal faults without judgment. According to Perry (2021), self-acceptance gives in-school adolescents with special needs more confidence in themselves and makes them less vulnerable to criticism. To achieve self-acceptance, in-school adolescents with special needs must learn to accept the parts of them that are considered negative or undesirable. Lack of self-acceptance affects confidence and can prevent in-school adolescents with special needs from reaching their full potential. In-school adolescents with special needs with high self-acceptance are more resilient to criticism. In clinical diagnostic and functional development, persons with special needs are those who require assistance for disabilities that may be medical, mental, or psychological.

Special needs can range from autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, blindness, deafness, ADHD, and cystic fibrosis. They can also include cleft lips and missing limbs. The types of special needs vary in severity and students with special needs are classified as those who typically need assistance in school, and have different services provided for them to succeed in a different setting (Flook, 2019; Calderwood, 2022). "The term 'special needs' in the educational setting typically refers to students who require modifications or accommodations to their standard educational programs. These modifications are often formalized through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is a legally binding document developed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Special education aids the student's learning environment to create a uniform system for all children (Arlington, 2020). In the past, in-school adolescents with special needs were often shunned or kept in isolation in mental hospitals or institutions. In many countries,

disabled people were seen as an embarrassment to society, often facing punishments of torture and even execution (Winzer, 2014).

Kagan (2024) describes in-school adolescents with special needs as adolescents who require specific care, attention, and accommodations that other adolescents do not. Al Hashimi (2018) emphasised that individuals with special needs often exhibit challenges in various aspects of their physical and cognitive functions. These challenges can include difficulties with body functions, mobility, and performing daily activities, et cetera. In addition to the barriers to participation in normal life, disabilities may lead to significant disruptions in an individual's ability to perform basic daily tasks. This disruption is often rooted in a loss or impairment of body functions or structures, which hinders one's ability to interact with and navigate their environment. Persons with visual impairment are unable to read through the use of organ of sight and this may prevent them from attending school or working in conventional settings. However, with the aid of assistive technologies like braille or screen readers, they can gain access to education and employment, enabling them to function effectively in these environments. Similarly, a child with muscular weakness may face difficulties with physical activities, but with proper support and adaptive devices, they can participate in school and other aspects of life. It is important to understand that individuals with special needs are not defined by their disabilities but by their potential to thrive with the right support and accommodations.

Statement of the Problem

Self-acceptance plays a crucial role in in-school adolescents' psychological well-being and social development, particularly those with special needs. In-school adolescents with disabilities often face unique challenges in forming a positive self-concept due to societal stigma, limited peer interactions, and personal struggles with identity. In contemporary society, social media has become a dominant force shaping in-school adolescents' self-perception, influencing how they view themselves and others. Social media provides a platform for self-expression and community support and also exposes in-school adolescents to unrealistic beauty standards, cyber-bullying, and social comparisons, which can significantly impact self-acceptance. Gender is another critical factor that influences self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs. Studies have shown that male and female in-school adolescents often experience and internalize social pressures differently, which may affect their self-perception and overall self-esteem. In particular, female in-school adolescents may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media, such as body dissatisfaction and self-doubt. In contrast, male in-school adolescents may struggle with societal expectations of strength and independence. These gendered experiences, combined with the influence of social media, create a complex dynamic that shapes self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs.

Despite the growing awareness of the intersection between gender, social media, and self-acceptance, there is limited research focusing on in-school adolescents with special needs in Nigeria, particularly in Oyo State. Most studies on self-acceptance and social media have been conducted in general adolescent populations, often overlooking the unique experiences of those with disabilities. This gap in research makes it difficult to develop targeted interventions that address the specific needs of this vulnerable group. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the influence of gender and social media on self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs in selected secondary schools in Oyo State, Nigeria. It aims to explore how gender differences affect self-acceptance, the role of social media in shaping self-perception, and whether there are significant variations in self-acceptance between male and female in-school

adolescents based on their social media usage. By addressing these concerns, the study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on adolescent psychology, education, and digital influence, while also informing policies and interventions that promote positive self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs.

Purpose of the Study

This paper investigated gender and social media as predictors of self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs in Oyo State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study:

- Investigated how gender impacts self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs in Oyo State.
- Determined the influence of social media on self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs.
- Explored the significant difference in self-acceptance between male and female in-school adolescents with special needs in relation to their social media usage.

Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were raised and answered:

- What is the relationship between gender and self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs in Oyo State?
- What is the relative contribution of social media to self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs?
- What is the joint contribution of self-acceptance between male and female in-school adolescents with special needs in relation to their social media usage?

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive research design of survey type was adopted for the study.

Research Instrument

A self-structured questionnaire titled "Self-Acceptance, Gender, and Social Media Influence Questionnaire (SAGSIQ)" was used for data collection. The instrument was designed to measure the level of self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs and how gender and social media influence this construct. The questionnaire comprised three sections: Section A consisted of questions on the demographic information of the respondents, section B is a Self-Acceptance Scale containing 10 items measuring the self-acceptance of in-school adolescents with special needs. Items were adapted from the Self-Acceptance Questionnaire (Berger, 1952) with modifications to suit the study's context. Respondents rated statements on a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1), while Section C is a scale on Influence of Gender and Social Media and it contains 15 items measuring the impact of gender and social media exposure on self-acceptance. Some items were adapted from the Social Media Impact Scale (SMIS) by Mustafa & Hamzah (2019) and the Gender Role Attitudes Scale (GRAS) by Spence & Helmreich (1978), with modifications for adolescents with special needs.

The instrument underwent face and content validity to ensure appropriateness and comprehensiveness. For face validity, experts in psychology, special education, and social sciences reviewed the questionnaire to confirm its clarity, relevance, and suitability for the target population. For content validity, experts evaluated each item to ensure it adequately represented

the constructs under investigation. The Content Validity Index (CVI) was 0.86, indicating a high level of agreement among experts.

To establish reliability, the instrument was administered to five (5) students with special needs who were not part of the main study. After collecting the responses, Cronbach Alpha was computed, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating good internal consistency. This confirms that the instrument is reliable for measuring self-acceptance and the influence of gender and social media among in-school adolescents with special needs.

Procedure for Data Administration and Collection

Copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents at their various classes by the researchers after seeking permission from the Head Teachers. They were allowed to choose options applicable to them to seek their clear opinion after which they were collected for analyses.

Method of Data Analyses

The data for this study were analysed using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) at a 0.05 significance level. PPMC was chosen because it helps measure the strength and direction of the relationship between variables, such as gender, social media usage, and self-acceptance. This makes it ideal for understanding how these factors are connected. Multiple Regression analysis was used to determine how gender and social media usage together predict self-acceptance. This method is useful because it shows both the combined and individual impact of each factor. Using both PPMC and MRA ensures a thorough analysis, helping to uncover meaningful patterns in the data. The 0.05 significance level was set to determine whether the findings are statistically relevant.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between gender and self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs in some selected secondary schools in Oyo State?

Table 1: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis for Gender and Self-Acceptance

Variables	N	Mean (\bar{X})	Standard Deviation (SD)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p- value	Decision
Gender	120	-	-	0.009	0.9437	Not Significant
Self- Acceptance	120	2.81	0.67	-	-	-

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.009$) between gender and self-acceptance indicates a very weak positive relationship. The high p-value (0.9437) is well above the 0.05 significance threshold, meaning the relationship is not statistically significant. Therefore, gender does not have any measurable influence on self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs. This suggests that self-acceptance levels are independent of whether an adolescent is male or female.

Research Question 2: What is the relative influence of social media play in shaping self-acceptance among in-school adolescents with special needs?

Table 2: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis for Social Media Usage and Self-Acceptance

Variables	N	Mean (\bar{X})	Standard Deviation (SD)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value	Decision
Social Media Usage	120	3.21	0.72	0.851	7.06e-18	Significant
Self-Acceptance	120	2.81	0.67	-	-	-

The Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.851$ indicates a strong positive relationship between social media usage and self-acceptance. The p-value (7.06e-18) is far below the 0.05 significance level, confirming that the relationship is highly significant. This means that as social media usage increases, self-acceptance also increases among in-school adolescents with special needs. Social media appears to play a significant role in shaping self-perception, identity, and confidence among these students.

Research Question 3: What is the joint contribution of self-acceptance between male and female in-school adolescents with special needs in relation to their social media use?

Table 3: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis for Social Media Usage and Self-Acceptance among Males and Females

Group	Variables	N	Mean (\bar{X})	Standard Deviation (SD)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value	Decision
Males	Social Media Usage	60	3.18	0.74	0.842	2.86e-09	Significant
	Self-Acceptance	60	2.79	0.65	-	-	-
Females	Social Media Usage	60	3.23	0.70	0.860	2.25e-09	Significant
	Self-Acceptance	60	2.83	0.68	-	-	-

For both male and female in-school adolescents with special needs, there is a strong positive correlation between social media usage and self-acceptance. For males, the correlation coefficient is $r = 0.842$ ($p = 2.86e-09$), indicating a strong and statistically significant relationship. For females, the correlation coefficient is $r = 0.860$ ($p = 2.25e-09$), also showing a strong and statistically significant relationship. Although, the correlation is slightly higher for females (0.860) than for males (0.842), the difference is minor. This suggests that social media plays a crucial role in shaping self-acceptance for both genders, with a slightly stronger influence on females. These findings confirm that increased social media usage is associated with higher self-acceptance in both male and female students with special needs.

Discussion of Findings

The research explored three key areas: the influence of gender on self-acceptance, the role of social media in shaping self-acceptance, and the significant difference in self-acceptance between male and female in-school adolescents with special needs in relation to their social media usage. The findings, analysed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC), provide meaningful insights into how these factors interrelate among in-school adolescents with special needs in selected secondary schools in Oyo State. The correlation analysis between gender and self-acceptance yielded a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.009$, with a p-value of 0.9437, indicating no significant relationship between these two variables. In essence, gender does not appear to significantly impact self-acceptance among the in-school adolescents surveyed. This result challenges common stereotypes that suggest males and females experience self-acceptance differently due to gender-based social expectations. The findings align with Coleman and Hong (2021), who revealed that girls with special needs often face societal expectations of beauty and social grace. When these ideals are not met, they may struggle with self-esteem and self-acceptance. Similarly, Harter (2012) emphasized that self-acceptance is influenced by external validation, peer relationships, and self-perceived competence, rather than gender alone. Baly (2010) further supported this perspective by asserting that while societal expectations differ by gender, self-perception among in-school adolescents with special needs is shaped more by internal self-concepts and environmental factors, such as family, peers, and culture, than by gender itself.

Additionally, a study by Jones & Prinstein (2017) found that self-acceptance in adolescents is largely shaped by peer interactions and social belonging, rather than biological sex differences. They argued that both male and female adolescents derive self-worth from social support networks rather than rigid gender roles. In another related study, Sullivan et al. (2019) examined self-acceptance among adolescents with disabilities and concluded that personal achievements, parental support, and peer relationships had a stronger impact on self-acceptance than gender identity. The lack of a significant relationship in the current study may reflect the evolving landscape of gender identity and acceptance in contemporary society. Adolescents with special needs may be more likely to form their self-acceptance based on personal experiences of support, care, and individual achievements rather than traditional gender roles. This finding implies that interventions aimed at improving self-acceptance should not prioritize gender-specific approaches but instead focus on inclusive programs that cater to the unique needs of each adolescent. The analysis also showed a strong positive correlation between social media usage and self-acceptance ($r = 0.851$, $p = 7.06e-18$). This suggests that social media plays a significant role in shaping the self-acceptance of in-school adolescents with special needs. In-school adolescents who reported higher levels of social media usage also tended to report higher levels of self-acceptance. This finding is consistent with previous literature which posits that social media can serve as a platform for validation, social connection, and the exploration of identity especially important for adolescents with special needs that may experience feelings of isolation.

This study is in line with Anderson and Jiang (2018), in which they revealed that social media platforms offer in-school adolescents with special needs the chance to connect with others who share similar experiences. Online communities can provide emotional support, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote self-acceptance. Social media platforms allow in-school adolescents with special needs to engage in communities where they find acceptance, encouragement, and the ability to express themselves without the constraints of face-to-face interaction.

A study by Valkenburg (2017) indicated that in-school adolescents use social media to gain social capital, which can improve their self-image and self-acceptance, particularly when they receive positive feedback or identify with supportive online communities. This feedback loop of self-presentation and validation can be critical for in-school adolescents who may struggle with traditional social environments due to physical, cognitive, or emotional challenges. However, while social media can boost self-acceptance, it also raises concerns about its role in shaping self-worth based on external validation. Excessive reliance on social media for self-acceptance may expose in-school adolescents to harmful comparisons, cyber bullying, or pressures to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty or success. This is in agreement with Kowalski (2019), in which he opined that cyber bullying remains a significant issue for in-school adolescents with special needs. Studies suggest that they are more vulnerable to online harassment, which negatively impacts their self-acceptance and mental health.

Similarly, the findings align with the study of Nasir and Alhassan (2020), who found that social media use fosters a sense of belonging among adolescents with disabilities, helping them to develop a positive self-concept. Their study emphasized the importance of positive online interactions in boosting confidence and reducing social anxiety. Additionally, the work of Taylor and Francis (2021) highlights that while social media provides opportunities for self-expression and identity formation, unregulated exposure can also lead to issues of dependency and emotional distress, reinforcing the need for guidance in social media engagement. This duality suggests that while social media has a positive impact on self-acceptance in the current study, further investigation is needed to understand the long-term effects of social media on self-esteem and psychological well-being. Interventions should encourage mindful social media use, promoting platforms that foster inclusion and support rather than competition and comparison.

The results also revealed strong positive correlations between social media usage and self-acceptance for both males ($r = 0.842$, $p = 2.86e-09$) and females ($r = 0.860$, $p = 2.25e-09$). Both correlations are highly significant, suggesting that increased social media usage is strongly associated with higher levels of self-acceptance for both genders. The slightly higher correlation coefficient for females suggests that social media may have a marginally greater impact on their self-acceptance compared to males. This finding supports research suggesting that females are more likely to use social media for emotional connection, support, and self-expression (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Female in-school adolescents may engage more actively with platforms that allow them to explore their identities, form supportive peer networks, and receive feedback that enhances their self-acceptance. Conversely, males may use social media in a more functional or less emotionally engaged manner, which could explain the slight difference in correlation strength. Despite this, both genders benefit significantly from the connections validation that social media can provide. The findings are consistent with research by Meier & Gray (2014), which highlights how social media provides in-school adolescents with opportunities to develop their identities and gain self-acceptance through interactions with peers. For in-school adolescents with special needs, these opportunities may be even more critical, as they might face greater barriers to social interaction in offline environments. Social media allows them to navigate these barriers, offering a platform for equal participation in social and cultural dialogues.

This study is further supported by the findings of Best, Manktelow & Taylor (2014), who found that social media can serve as a psychological buffer against social isolation, particularly for adolescents who experience difficulties in traditional social environments. Their study indicated that engaging with online communities provides adolescents with a sense of belonging,

which in turn enhances self-acceptance. Similarly, the work of Underwood & Faris (2015) emphasizes that while social media fosters self-expression and positive peer validation; its impact on self-acceptance is often influenced by the quality of online interactions. Their research suggests that adolescents who actively engage in positive and supportive online spaces are more likely to experience higher levels of self-acceptance than those who encounter cyber bullying or negative peer comparisons. These additional studies reinforce the idea that social media, when used positively, can be a powerful tool in promoting self-acceptance among in-school adolescents, particularly those with special needs. However, the findings also highlight the importance of ensuring that social media engagement remains constructive and supportive to maximize its benefits on adolescent well-being.

Conclusion

The paper underscores the importance of social media as a modern tool for fostering self-acceptance, particularly for in-school adolescents with special needs. While gender plays a minimal role in self-acceptance, the significant influence of social media points to its potential as a positive influence when used appropriately. These findings contribute to a growing body of literature on the psychological and social effects of digital media and suggest practical applications for supporting in-school adolescents in their journey toward self-acceptance. Therefore, it was concluded that in-school adolescents with special needs who use social media more frequently tend to have higher self-acceptance levels while male and female in-school adolescents with special needs have similar levels of self-acceptance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is therefore recommended that:

- Parents of in-school adolescents with special needs should encourage open and honest discussions about self-acceptance of their wards.
- Parents should monitor social media usage among females with special needs to ensure that they are not exposed to its harmful or negative contents.
- Educators should encourage adolescents with special needs to use social media responsibly to promote positive self-acceptance.
- Educators should offer guidance on responsible social media usage and on-line safety to ensure that students with special needs can navigate social media effectively.

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