

INTRODUCTION

- Autistic individuals have called on researchers to consider the point of view of the experts – autistic people themselves.
- The X social media platform is a common channel for online identity expression and conversation in the autistic community.

METHODS

- Reviewed discourse on X to identify hashtags regularly used by the autistic adult community.
- #askingautistics was chosen to follow because of its robust and frequent conversational activity.
- We followed every post and reply for #askingautistics for three weeks each over two different timepoints, in winter and summer.
- Images (memes, emojis, or GIFs) were described qualitatively.
- Themes identified in NVIVO qualitative analysis software, coded by 3 independent raters (including an autistic adult) who met weekly in debriefing sessions to reach consensus.
- After cleaning: 8,468 posts for analysis.

THEMATIC RESULTS

- Autism diagnosis: Benefits and disadvantages of diagnosis, challenges with the diagnostic process, and the experience of late diagnosis.
- Autism traits: Struggling with emotion regulation, struggling to understand emotions, unique sensory experiences, experiencing burnout or exhaustion, and shame related to autism traits.
- Tension with neurotypical society: Pushback against societal expectations and how autistic people are perceived.
- Communication challenges: Emotional expression and intent not understood by others.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Self-reported social media frequently discusses themes of autistic experience and identity.
- Consistent themes support ideas highlighted by the double empathy movement, including the benefits of interaction in an autism-friendly community balanced with feelings of being left out from a society with narrow expectations for behavior.
- Highlights the value of listening to autistic voices in autism research and the importance of online forums that provide the autistic community a safe place to express identity.



Emory Autism Center

Themes of Autistic Adults' Conversation and Identity Expression on X (Formerly Twitter)

Molly Berman, BA, Abby Furey, William Storey, and Mikle South, PhD



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#ACTUALLYAUTISTIC: 6 WEEKS OF X DATA

PRIMARY THEMES

How an autism diagnosis changes perspectives on identity

"It felt like coming home. I like myself for the first time in my life and that comes from finally feeling like I understand who I am."

How autistic traits impact daily life

"My autism has always pushed me to aim for perfection & overachievement, but I seldom actually get there. Instead, my brain & body become overloaded by the effort & by how hard life always is around it."

Tension around interaction with neurotypical society

"Two traps you need to avoid: 1) Caring what they think. 2) Thinking that they care."

Communication challenges

"Apparently my three 'modes' of speaking are monotone, sarcastic, and angry. I called my sister beautiful once and she started crying cause she thought I was being sarcastic."

SECONDARY THEMES

Feeling othered

"I'm not human. I'm a biological organism in a hostile, unfamiliar ecosystem, whose ways are not my own. I spend more time working that system out, than I do being myself. I resent this... I suffer...And it hurts."

Openness to nonconventional or nonconforming identities

"I'm so autistic that organized religion doesn't work for me, so I have to homebrew it."

Discrimination or oppression

"Some countries will not allow us to immigrate. We can have medical decisions taken out of our hands. A school can refuse to take an autistic kid."

Difficulty with relationships, especially romantic ones

"I really don't do well with text conversations... and maybe this comes across a lot on dating apps. I just feel like I'm never given a chance for people to get to know me properly."

Scan the QR code for an online copy of the poster!

