



The use of Facebook by people on the autism spectrum.

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[http://www.bath.ac.uk/psychology/research/castl/
south-west-autism-group/](http://www.bath.ac.uk/psychology/research/castl/south-west-autism-group/)

digitalbubbles.org.uk



A Facebook user with ASD

'I never knew I could talk so much!! Normally I don't speak much...but with the computer I can be quite articulate but I know if I met people I chat to on here I wouldn't be able to speak as I do on the computer'.

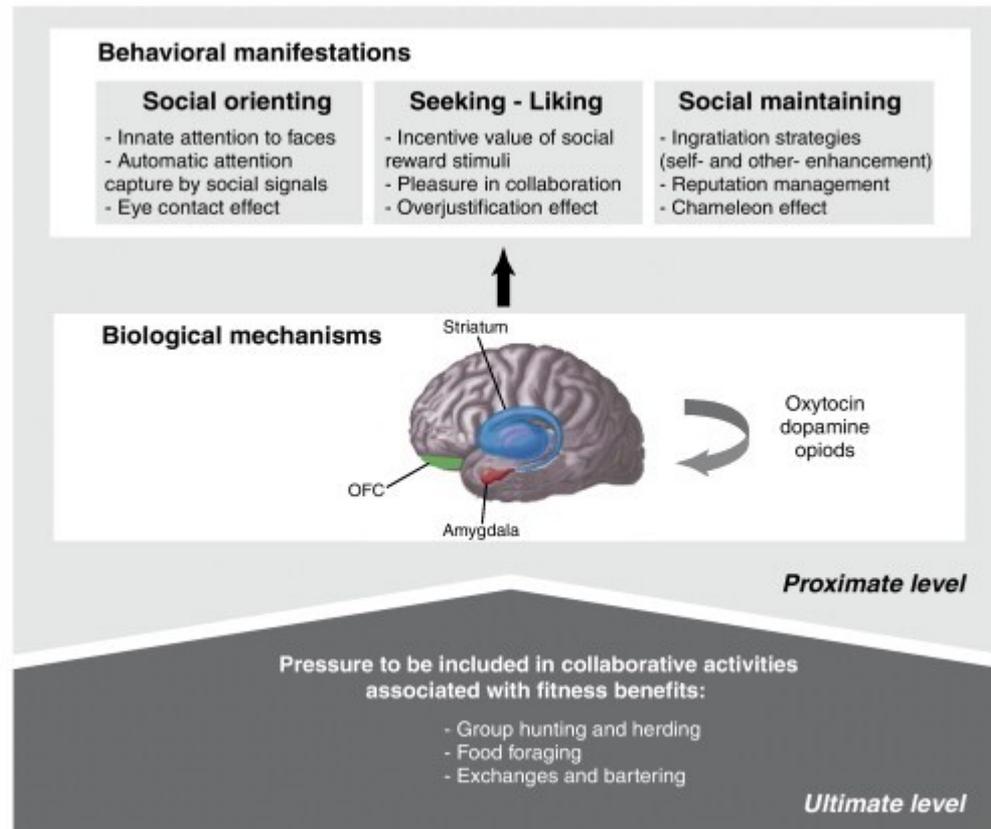


APA Definition

Autism is the most severe developmental disability. Appearing within the first three years of life, autism involves impairments in social interaction — such as being aware of other people’s feelings — and verbal and nonverbal communication.

Some people with autism have limited interests, strange eating or sleeping behaviors or a tendency to do things to hurt themselves, such as banging their heads or biting their hands.

The social motivation theory of autism (Chevallier et al., 2012)





Seeking and liking (Chevallier et al., 2012)

- Typically, social bonds are indispensable for achieving happiness and people who lack positive relationships are likely to experience a range of negative psychological states ranging from loneliness to depression.
- Half of those with ASD report not having a friend, and this does not relate to social involvement or feelings of loneliness.
- Aloof: Social interaction in ASD (Wing and Gould, 1979)

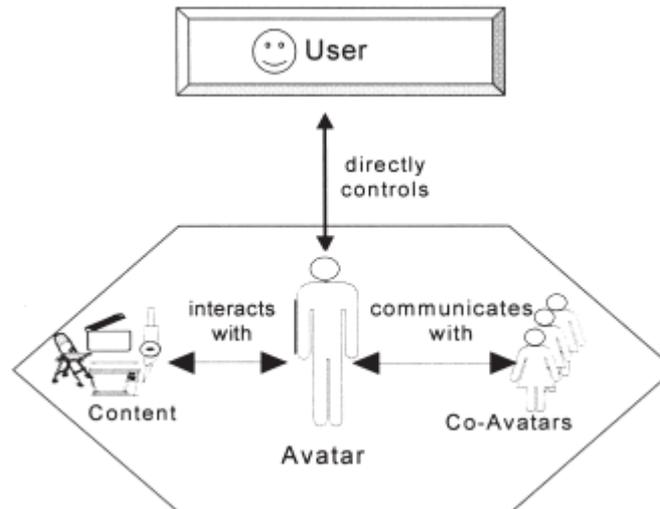
The benefits of technology for ASD

Many people with ASD like using technology (Swettenham, 1996; also Moore et al., 2000; 2005; Parsons and Mitchell, 2002):

Reduces social factors

Computers are consistent and predictable

The person with ASD can take active control and determine the pace of activity



Burke et al. (2010) quote:

- Many adults with ASD write extensively online. Blogs and forum posts by adults with ASD reveal no discernible differences between their writing and that of other posters. Bloggers with Asperger's use the Internet as a way to role-play neurotypical behaviour. Clinical psychologist Tony Attwood encourages adults with Asperger's to use the Internet as a way to communicate with "greater eloquence".



So what about 'online social interaction'?

Can technology help overcome the social communication weaknesses associated with ASD?

- Are people with ASD motivated to interact socially online?
- 2/3 of adults are (with and without ASD; Burke et al., 2010); fewer children with ASD are (though 8-18; Mazurek & Wenstrup, 2013)
- Social Networking Sites (SNS)...



Facebook groups/ communities

facebook

Name: Asperger's Awareness Community

Status: Are you an artist, a poet, a musician? Whatever...

Fans: 84525



John Elder
28,412 likes · 493 talking about this



Play Therapist
296 likes · 17 talking about this



facebook

Name: Aspire, The Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland

Status: A Coffee Morning for the Dublin 10 ASD Support...



Artists and Autism
17,154 likes · 1,051 talking about this



Autism Support Network
10,726 likes · 314 talking about this



Non-Profit Organization
Autism Support Network provides a free peer-to-peer global network of people helping people with autism. Visit us at AutismSupportNetwork.com for the latest grant info, news, conferences, and help from others!

About · Support at \$28



Autism with a side of fries
13,144 likes · 6,139 talking about this

Humor and a side of fries.

11,168 likes

Photo · Like · Suggest To Friends

MSO Lives of All
Autism Soc Chapter



Artists and Autism
17,154 likes · 1,051 talking about this

Photo · Like · Home 2/1 · Video

17,154 likes

Member: By Bekky Smith
Participate in this as the whole of this for

AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH – APRIL 2013 SHARE & WIN

1. Share
2. Like AAPC's Facebook page
3. Comment

The Hidden Curriculum of Getting and Keeping a Job: Navigating the Social Landscape of Employment

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ASD Facebook study (Brosnan and Gavin, forthcoming)

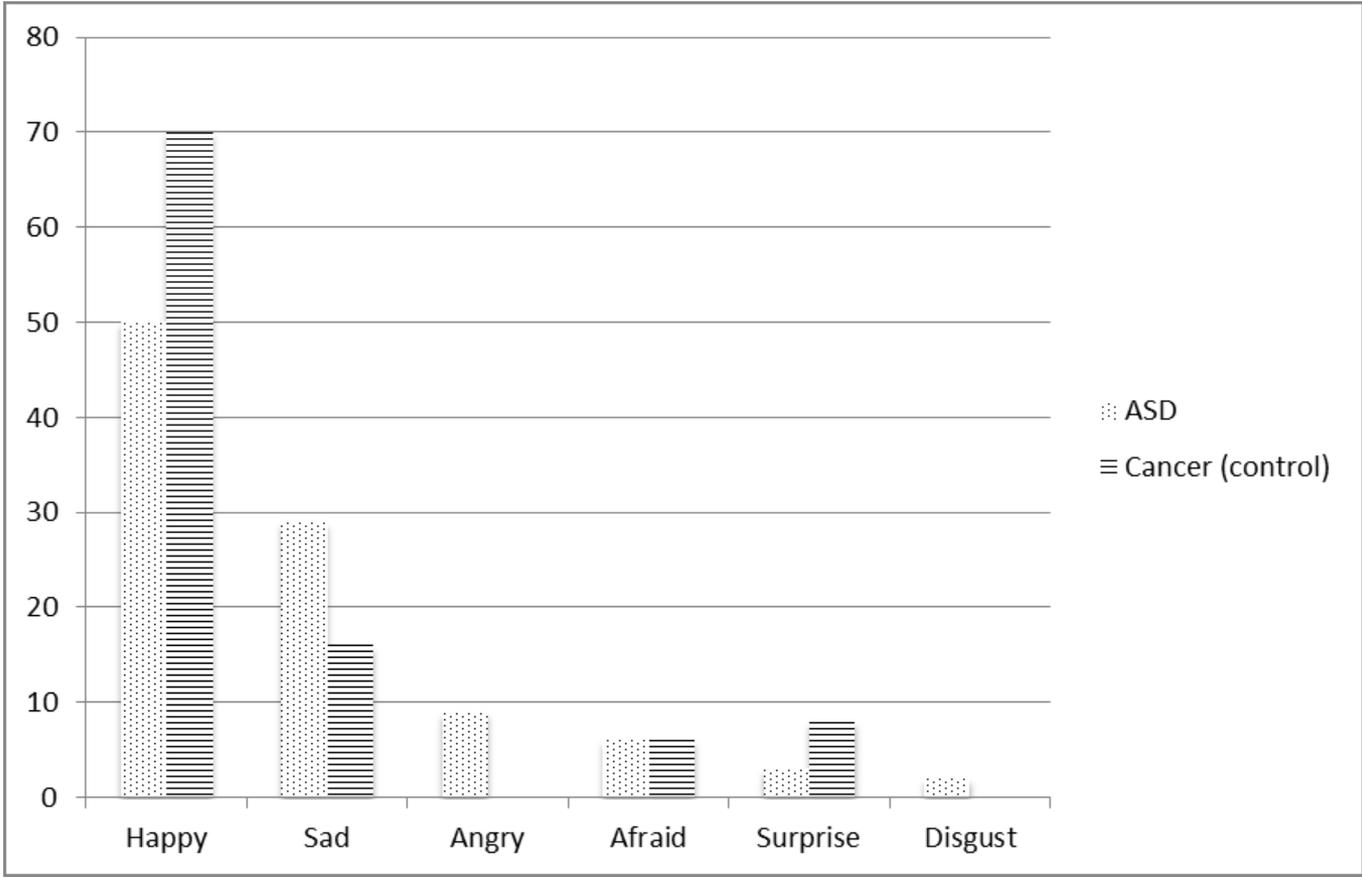
ASD group, 45 active members, 108 posts, 48% contained emotion words

- Cancer group, 41 active members, 102 posts, 49% contained emotion words

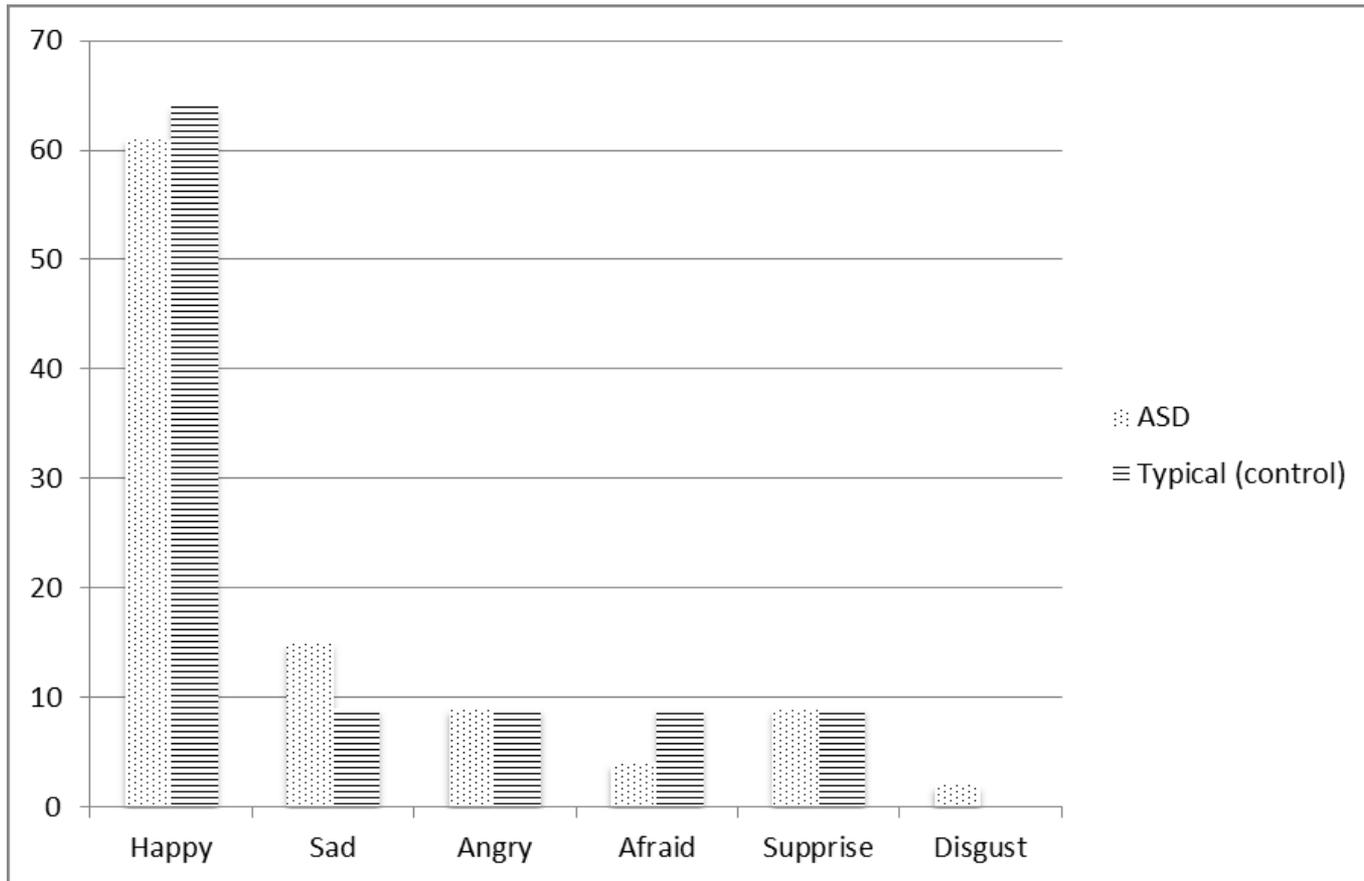




Proportions of emotions expressed



Proportions of emotions expressed by typical population





Overall

Average 2-3 responses per post (i.e. interactive)

- Appropriate.
- Examples of empathy?
- ‘Doing Empathy’ (Pudlinski, 2005)



In response to a post about parents
making him feel bad:

Its sad that they make you feel that way and
at 15 it probs feels like your just stuck? But
they can't be all bad cos after all I assume
they buy your food, clothes n pay the bills to
keep a roof over your heads...



In response to concern about getting frustrated over every minute detail:

Don't worry. It's normal. Trust me, I cry if I miss the bus.



In response to a post about being bullied at school:

a) It is wrong that people treat you that way. I know it doesn't seem like it now but it will get better.

- b) I know how you feel man. Except for being spat on, all those things you have mentioned have happened to me too...
- c) I wish there was a way I can help!!



Summary

Appear to be demonstrations of emotion and empathy in online contexts.

Do not know about these individual's diagnostic status or offline behaviour.

- Do not know about these individual's behaviour in other online contexts.
- Is there something about online communication that allows those with ASD to express emotions and empathy?



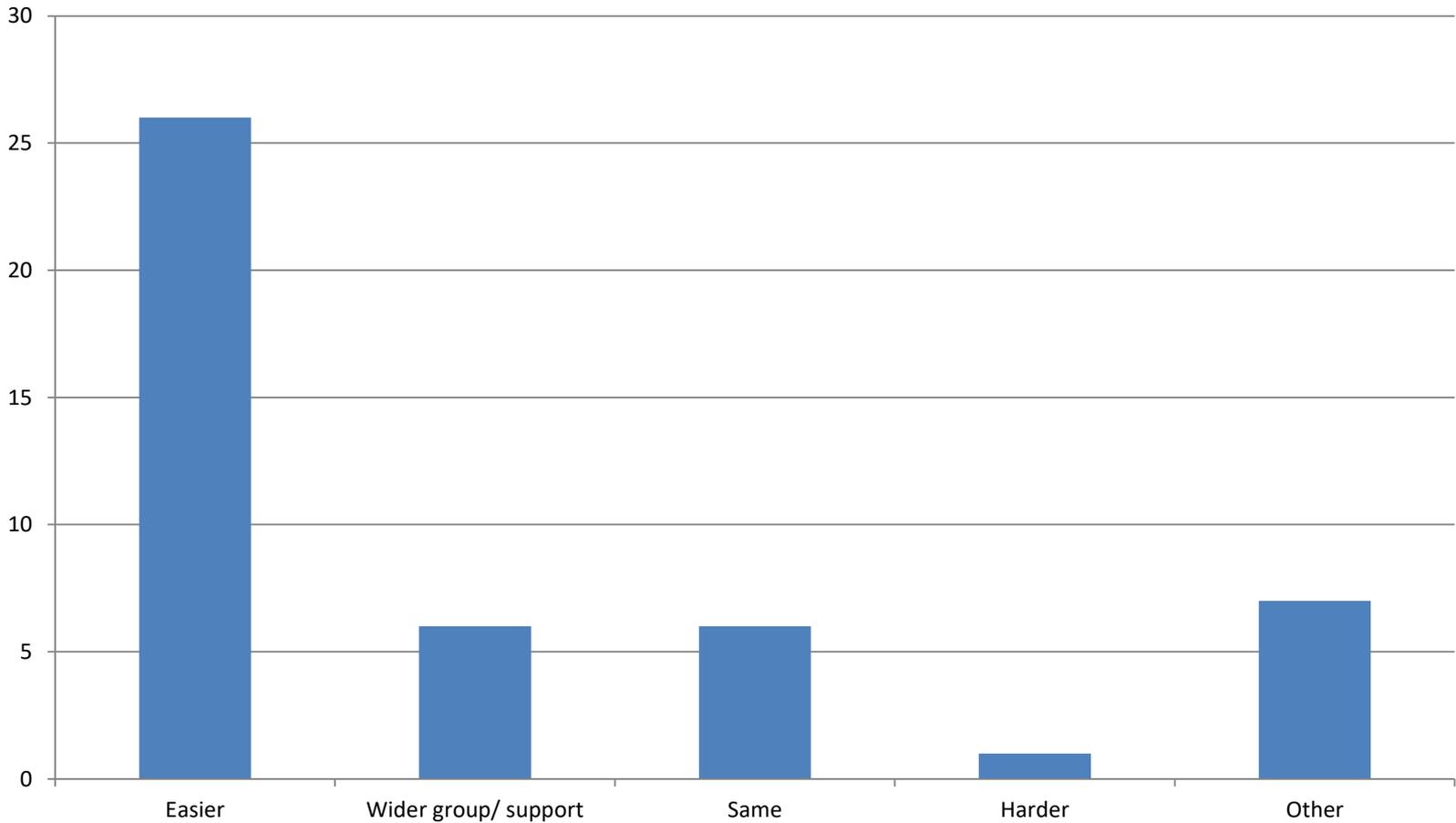
Question:

How has your ASD changed since having the freedom to talk to people online instead of face to face?

- 46 respondents, self identifying as having ASD.



Internet compared to face-to-face





Easier

Although I've learned to talk to people face-to-face, it's still ten times easier and more comfortable to talk on-line.

Social cues

- When talking online I feel so much more ease and a lot less pressure to understand social cues
- **Timing**
- On-line is better for the same reason why I don't use a telephone. I need time to think through my replies before typing or talking. On-line gives me the freedom to do that.



But, generalising...

...It's much easier for me to talk online, email, text. Problem is, I get too comfortable with it and it makes it harder for me to people face to face.

- ...it's better to talk online...but the internet does not help in learning how to deal with people face to face – and for me at least doesn't make me feel less lonely.
- Yes it's easier to socialize online, though I still have a lot of trouble in everyday life, I keep very much to myself offline...



Summary

Those with ASD can find online communication easier due to the removal of social cues and the time to think before responding.

Though these benefits do not extend to face-to-face interactions.

- People with ASD seem motivated to communicate effectively if the environment is structured appropriately, minimise social cues and allow time to consider and respond.
- OR motivated to use technology?



DSM-5 (APA, 2013):

All of the following symptoms describing persistent deficits in social communication/interaction across contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays, must be met:

- Problems reciprocating social or emotional interaction, including difficulty establishing or maintaining back-and-forth conversations and interactions, inability to initiate an interaction, and problems with shared attention or sharing of emotions and interests with others.
- Severe problems maintaining relationships — ranges from lack of interest in other people to difficulties in pretend play and engaging in age-appropriate social activities, and problems adjusting to different social expectations.
- Nonverbal communication problems such as abnormal eye contact, posture, facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures, as well as an inability to understand these.



But...

Those with ASD communicating with each other, not the general population.

Is this empathy?

Understanding Facebook-specific social norms (Burke et al., 2010).

- Is technology colluding with the social deficits of ASD?
- The need for 'real world' (face to face) social interaction is minimized, thus reducing this source of anxiety for people with autism.
- (cf Parsons and Mitchell, 2002)



From a mother of a child with ASD:

I sometimes send my 14 yr old son a message on facebook to say thank you when he has helped me with something around the house, and then when I see him next he is more open to a hug. However if i'd say to him verbally, he rarely responds ... I have heard from other families of teenage boys with aspergers that they too use email, text and messaging with their child in the same house as they get a better response.



A Theory of Problematic Internet Use (Caplan, 2007)





And finally...

...thanks to facebook I have known parts of the human being I had never experienced before, I've fallen in love and I've seen the world with different eyes, both the real and the virtual one! So encourage your ASD friends to use facebook, because it can really, really help

A LOT.



Discuss...

- 1) To what extent is social communication and interaction impaired in ASD when the social interaction occurs online?
- 2) Is it possible to have ASD in the offline world but not in the online world?
- 3) To what extent should we encourage people to engage in offline (face-to-face) social interaction?