



Students with High Functioning Autism and Communication through Online Forums

Amelia Anderson, Bradley Cox, Jeffrey Edelstein, Taylor Locks, Amanda Mintz, and Abigail Wolz
Florida State University

Abstract

As the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) increases, so does the prevalence of individuals with ASD entering into higher education. Although a growing number of college and universities have begun developing programs to support these students, more efforts are necessary obtain a better understanding of how to best serve this population. Further, much of the relevant literature relies on secondhand reporting from parents, faculty, and administration rather than the student with ASD him or herself.

The Wrong Planet website allows for unique access to information about the experiences of individuals with ASD, described in their own words, providing researchers a better opportunity of understanding the needs of this population. In this study, findings emphasize how these students make sense of the college transition process and how they communicate with each other in an online forum.

Introduction

Transitioning from high school to college can be particularly difficult for students with autism. For this study, the research question is:

- How do individuals with autism use online discussion forums to make sense of the transition to college?

To answer this question, data was gathered and analyzed through qualitative coding from related threads from an online discussion forum, www.wrongplanet.net, which was designed for the sole use of individuals who self-identify as having autism.

Methods

Discussion board conversations, or threads, were collected from Wrong Planet if they fell within the following inclusion criteria:

- posts that began between 1/1/2012 and 12/31/2013 (a span of two years)
- included on the “education” forum
- included at least 5 total posts
- included important keywords within the initial post or title (e.g. starting college; finishing high school; dorm; first year of college)

Threads were excluded if it was later determined that concepts were not related to the U.S. higher education system or the student was transitioning to graduate school.

The selected discussion board threads were imported into NVivo, and coded by a group of researchers. The research team ensured intercoder reliability by coding some of the same documents and comparing results before any independent coding took place.

Codes were assigned within an *a priori* coding scheme, using the Inputs-experiences-outcomes (IEO) framework.

Coping In Life	Total Posts	Total Threads
Parents' Discussion This forum is for discussing the various issues related to parenting children with Asperger's Syndrome and Autism.	117,416 posts	8,676 threads
Love and Dating Whether you're a smooth-talking Adonis or a lonely heart, this forum can be used for discussing relationships and romance.	408,140 posts	15,488 threads
The Haven For those times when you're feeling blue and need to get a little help from your friends. Discuss all those issues that are not covered by the other forums in the Coping in life category.	200,779 posts	13,894 threads
Social Skills and Making Friends Having Autism means you may not have great social skills, but that doesn't mean you can't learn them! Discuss friendship and social skills here!	106,607 posts	8,618 threads
School and College Life How is life at school? Talk about anything from grades, to classmates to your favorite subjects. Whether you dislike or enjoy school this is for you.	46,114 posts	4,586 threads
Work and finding a Job When you grow up you'll be put in a container called a cubicle. The bleak oppressiveness will warp your spine and destroy your capacity to feel joy. Luckily you'll have a boss like me to motivate you with something called fear. Discuss work and your job in this forum!	49,641 posts	5,215 threads

Inputs

- Expectations for life after k-12 (Personal, familial, etc.)
- Destination – Institution & Major (Intended field of study, etc.)

Experiences

- Academics (With classes, academic performance, tests, etc.)
- Peer Interaction (With roommates, classmates, etc.)

Outcomes

- Academic Success (In classes, in college in general, etc.)
- Post College Success (Vocationally, personally, etc.)

Discussion

While thematic analysis is still in process, preliminary data indicates an emphasis on the following areas:

- Academics
- Peer Interactions
- Institutional Support
- Family Expectations for life after secondary school

We faced a number of challenges in coding, such as posts by individuals who were:

- unclear in their language
- reflecting on experiences from decades past
- or appeared to base their writing on others' experiences

Name	Sources	References
Experiences	36	925
_o-miscellaneous	19	49
academics - institution & major	27	144
Emotional	13	21
Environment	29	123
Finances	14	19
life skills	14	47
mental health and co-morbid conditio	15	41
self-disclosure	9	29
social	35	322
faculty interaction	14	25
peer interaction	33	272
student support services	23	90
Inputs	29	197
_o-miscellaneous	8	12
destinations - institution & major	17	35
expectations for life after k-12	22	74
Family	10	16
fears or concerns	5	17
External Pressures	15	36
Internal Pressures	12	18
knowledge about college	5	9
opportunities	6	18
Outcomes	24	122
_o-miscellaneous	12	24
academic success	13	40
credentials	0	0
General Advice	11	31
life skills	3	7
post college success	7	10

Conclusion

As communication is a particular challenge for many individuals with ASD, identifying and supporting alternate means for supportive communication practices might prove to be helpful for these students, and aid the gleaning of information about their higher education transitional needs.

Online forums such as Wrong Planet allow students with ASD the opportunity to communicate with one another in an unmediated environment. This communication also allows for researchers to gain a better understanding about the barriers these students face in making the transition to institutes of higher education and, in particular, the barriers they might only feel comfortable sharing with their online peers rather than with higher education administrators.

Findings from this study could help to guide higher education policymakers to better identify barriers and provide effectively targeted services to college students with ASD.