

Toward the Destigmatizing the Autism Label: Conceptualizing Celebratory Technologies

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Abstract : From the perspective of self-advocates, the biggest unaddressed problem is not the symptoms of an autism spectrum diagnosis but the social stigma that accompanies autism. This societal perspective is in contrast to the focus on the majority of interventions. Autism interventions, and consequently, most innovative technologies for autism, aim to improve deficits that occur within the person. For example, the most common Human-Computer Interaction research projects in assistive technology for autism target social skills from a normative perspective. The premise of the autism technologies is that difficulties occur inside the body, hence, the medical model focuses on ways to improve the ailment within the person. However, other technological approaches to support people with autism do exist. In the realm of Human Computer Interaction, there are other modes of research that provide critique of the medical model. For example, critical design, whose intended audience is industry or other HCI researchers, provides products that are the opposite of interventionist work to bring attention to the misalignment between the lived experience and the societal perception of autism. For example, parodies of interventionist work exist to provoke change, such as a recent project called Facesavr, a face covering that helps allistic adults be more independent in their emotional processing. Additionally, from a critical disability studies' perspective, assistive technologies perpetuate harmful normalizing behaviors. However, these critical approaches can feel far from the frontline in terms of taking direct action to positively impact end users. From a critical yet more pragmatic perspective, projects such as Counterinterventions lists ways to reduce the likelihood of perpetuating ableism in interventionist's work by reflectively analyzing a series of evolving assistive technology projects through a societal lens, thus leveraging the momentum of the evolving ecology of technologies for autism. Therefore, all current paradigms fall short of addressing the largest need—the negative impact of social stigma. The current work introduces a new paradigm for technologies for autism, borrowing from a paradigm introduced two decades ago around changing the narrative related to eating disorders. It is the shift from reprimanding poor habits to celebrating positive aspects of eating. This work repurposes Celebratory Technology for Neurodiversity and intended to reduce social stigma by targeting for the public at large. This presentation will review how requirements were derived from current research on autism social stigma as well as design sessions with autistic adults. Congruence between these two sources revealed three key design implications for technology: provide awareness of the autistic experience; generate acceptance of the neurodivergence; cultivate an appreciation for talents and accomplishments of neurodivergent people. The current pilot work in Celebratory Technology offers a new paradigm for supporting autism by shifting the burden of change from the person with autism to address changing society's biases at large. Shifting the focus of research outside of the autistic body creates a new space for a design that extends beyond the bodies of a few and calls on all to embrace humanity as a whole.

Keywords : neurodiversity, social stigma, accessibility, inclusion, celebratory technology

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