


## Chapter 9

# How Social Media Contribute to Autists' Wellbeing: A Netnographic Analysis of Virtual Communities Content

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### ABSTRACT

*Electronic social networks have expanded communication possibilities. This chapter aims to present how such platforms allow the formation of virtual communities to support and exchange information and the inclusion of people with ASD (autism spectrum disorders) by comparing brand virtual communities from two countries, five from Brazil and one from the USA. Among interpretative methods, netnography and manual content analysis considering posts on each community were performed. Also, tweets about Autism Awareness Day were analyzed. As a result, it was possible to see that virtual communities' contribution allows dialogue among autists' relatives, releasing their suffering and sharing acceptable practices. Among contributions, this study helps to know the differences among various virtual communities and content in terms of viralization in health marketing.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A challenge for public policies is the inclusion of different people in the production process or the most diverse aspects of life. Communication, for example, is something essential and vital for coexistence. From the dawn of humanity, the human being transmits ideas and desires through various means, including speech, gestures, and expressions, to live in the community.

In recent years, communication has gained new contours with the advent of the internet and written communication through cellular devices. Written language in these media has become more accessible to those who might be excluded from the process of communication and living in society.

It is the case with ASD - autism spectrum disorders. Autism is a term that designates different degrees and types of disorders, including Asperger Syndrome, all linked to the way people communicate and perceive the world. It is a worldwide disorder (WHO, 2017). Individuals with ASDs frequently have issues in communication, for instance, difficulty in understanding non-verbal cues in a conversation in social environments, used have problems in keeping social ties and friends, and, as a result, are vulnerable to depression (Ahmed *et al.*, 2019; Ward *et al.*, 2018).

Patients and relatives need to deal with their Stigma (Ahuja & Williams, 2010; Mirabito *et al.*, 2016; Rusch *et al.*, 2005). Lack of information, suffering, and vulnerable positions turn this a potential area for policymakers' interventions (Yeh *et al.*, 2017). Health services, more than any service, demand empathy and compassion. Probably, mental health services are the most sensible of them. For this, consumers' journey is increasing and sophisticated, including internet searching and the dawn of several informational sharing options (Larson & Bock, 2016). Inclusively, access to the marketplace, helping consumers cope with their conditions is still a gap (Machin *et al.*, 2011). In this way, health campaigns can reduce Stigma, changing implicit worldviews (Meyer *et al.*, 2020). Traditional media can induce people in one-to-many communication. Nevertheless, what can be the contribution of other media? What is the effect of a direct-to-consumer advertisement and the received feedback from consumers? (McKeever, 2014; Spottswood & Wohn, 2019).

Considering that ASD involves different types of patients (Maenner *et al.*, 2013), this study may observe its performance in social networks and verify how social networks help differentiate the different ones, contributing to reducing the risks to which these consumers are subjected in their daily lives. Considering that about 4 billion people around the world (53%) have access to the internet; 3.1 billion (42%) are active users of social networks; 2.9 billion (39%) use social media on their mobile devices, especially smartphones, this is particularly relevant (Hootsuite, 2019). More, unstable social relationships, loneliness, depression, and anxiety are characteristic

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