

## **SocialMirror: A Specialized Social Networking Service for Young Adults with Autism**

**Problem Statement:** The rise in the number of children diagnosed with autism began in the early 1990s. Since then, these individuals have transitioned from a protective school system to a much less protective adult world. The successful transition to adulthood requires that they become independent. However, young adults with autism face challenges in self-care and social communication that adversely impact the attainment of independent functioning. Social support can be crucial for achieving independence. Individuals have access to trusted social networks that may include parents, siblings, friends, volunteers, residential staff, therapists, and other professionals. These care networks can play a key role in their personal growth, the acquisition of new skills, expanded social benefits, and access to community resources.

**Proposal:** An evolving aspect of technology is that it is *socially empowering*; such technologies harness on-demand human intelligence, empower individuals to contribute to a community, and leverage distributed networks for the collective social good. The increasing proliferation of socially empowering technology such as an online social networking service allows individuals with autism to leverage their personal contacts and gain access to a distributed care network that provides on-demand contextual help. Our research raises the following question: *How can technologies that promote the independence of individuals with autism be socially empowering?* We address this question by designing an application that will leverage the relationships young adults with autism have with members of a trusted network of caregivers and allow them to practice life skills by facilitating quick responses from the network.

**Schedule of Work:** We first identify design principles by integrating theoretical and empirical investigations of the challenges and opportunities of social networking to support the individuals with autism. Second, we propose to design a social technology called *SocialMirror*, which leverages natural social networks and promotes collective care. SocialMirror consists of two parts. First, an interactive display integrated into a mirror provides the opportunity to ask and receive advice with an attached day's calendar. Second, the system is connected to an online social network that sends questions to a trusted set of family, friends, and professionals.

**Expected Results:** We will conduct focus group interviews with adults with autism and caregivers. We expect to have a result that SocialMirror has a potential to prompt independent behavior among individuals and in turn foster collaboration among a more distributed network of caregivers. The central features of the SocialMirror will include a natural form factor, blended functionality and sociability, and community empowerment leveraged by the distribution of labor associated with supporting an individual. SocialMirror could be socially empowering because it runs with the help of the collective intelligence of the network of caregivers.

**Conclusions:** Our research aims at providing young adults with autism in transition to adulthood with a responsive social network that allows them to get information and advice about their everyday life. Our study will investigate the potential for a social networking system that promotes independence and facilitates collaboration. In so doing, independent living can become a reality for other segments of the population who require extended support.