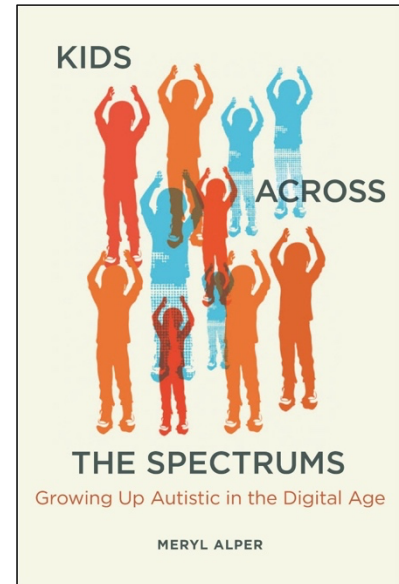


Meryl Alper, **Kids Across the Spectrums: Growing Up Autistic in the Digital Age**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, 324 pp., \$40.00 (paperback/eBook); open access.<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by  
Molly Martin  
University of Pittsburgh

Meryl Alper's ***Kids Across the Spectrums: Growing Up Autistic in the Digital Age*** is the "first book-length study" (p. 3) of how autistic children and adolescents engage with technology, exploring how technology can shape autistic identity and sense of belonging. She critiques overarching stereotypes that center autistic children, most often represented as boys, as "mechanical." This ethnographic study challenges assumptions that engagement with technology is only beneficial if it ameliorates a social deficit, which forces children to adapt to normative communication standards. She explores the theoretical implications of technology's role in shaping autistic sociality and offers an understanding of multiple *socialities* depicted in this book through individual case studies.



Alper engages with science and technology studies, sociology, communication studies, and disability studies to develop what she terms "the sociotechnical shaping of sociality" to describe technology's impact on identity and meaning-making practices (p. 6). Her research was conducted from 2013 to 2014 in Los Angeles, and from 2016 to 2020 in Boston. Her use of mixed methods speaks to the interdisciplinary nature of this work, including semistructured interviews with parents and autistic young people, observations of media use, and "maximum variation sampling" conceptualized by Lindlof and Taylor (2002) to account for racial, gendered, and economic exclusions and biases within autism research (p. 28). Notably, her ethnographic approach included the opportunity for child feedback and reciprocal questioning during the interview process.

The introduction begins with the diagnostic history of autism as a racialized, gendered, and classed phenomenon based on historically contextual criteria. Alper thematically notes the distinctions autistic children face with media across three primary themes that situate the text: cultural belonging (chapters 2 and 3), social relationships (chapters 4 and 5), and physical embodiments (chapters 6 and 7).

Chapter 2 considers autism and identity formation in autistic youth, focusing on childhood development and technological mediation. Her methodological focus changes based on the child's age in each interview—while she is primarily interested in how school-age autistic children construct their identity markers, she analyzes parental interpretations of autistic characters in mass media with younger children. Autistic youth often consume media pertaining to autism or autistic-coded characters, allowing them to form alternative relationships to their disability on individual and mediated, collective levels—including

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/5626/Kids-Across-the-SpectrumsGrowing-Up-Autistic-in>

considerations of autistic girlhood and gender identity. Digital characterization, or avatars, have been a means for people to conceptualize and explore their own identity formation. Alper focuses on how media changes material or symbolic attachments to identity markers, especially as it has been a dominant vehicle for stereotypes in autism representation. In noting self-diagnosis and “interpretative flexibility” that autistic people show when choosing to identify with representations of autism in the media, Alper honors different strategies for identity negotiation as a response to monolithic or deterministic research (p. 42). Her respect for her interlocutors is evidenced through a refusal to paint a monolithic picture of autistic identity and experience.

Chapter 3 explores the benefits and challenges of using media for learning outside of the classroom. This chapter acknowledges the multifaceted nature of autistic learning experiences because of stratified access to social services by considering informal learning environments as spaces for “flexibility and experimentation” (p. 70). Alper notes that although social media platforms may become new sites of learning and community formation, they also pose online safety and privacy concerns. What is considered “educational” is based on the sociotechnical shaping of sociality that centers normative metrics for progress.

Chapter 4 explores how media shapes relationships with parents, siblings, and extended family. Alper discusses “parental mediation” strategies, often including the granting or taking away of media—that parents use to foster certain types of technological interactions or to prevent others (p. 102). These strategies include active and instructive mediation, restrictive social mediation that involves the co-use of media, and supervision. The success of each strategy is compounded by socioeconomic, infrastructural, and cultural factors on top of the individual needs of the child and their entire family.

Alper details the dynamics that shape friendships and social interaction between young autistic people and their peers in chapter 5. Assumptions about autistic sociality, and interactions that are not favorable to autistic children, like bullying, detailed in this chapter, “lead to a cyclical denial of access to social roles” (p. 133). Children can learn to take on differing social roles through different forms of media play, such as collaborative gaming experiences in Minecraft—where media can offer social scripts that assist children in interactions outside of media platforms. She critiques the tendency to label technology exclusively social or antisocial, which reinforces neurotypical standards for friendship communication. This chapter explores how both technological affordances and sociocultural expectations shape which digital spaces are accessible to autistic individuals and how they engage within them.

In chapter 6, Alper considers sensorial experiences and how autistic children use media to cope with sensory stimuli. She engages with two concepts from critical disability studies to consider embodiment as a sensorial practice: the figure of the misfit and access intimacy. She surveys neurodiverse approaches to sensory information and processing, noting that disability changes how people understand their own sensory experience—one autistic person may be sensory-seeking, and another may be sensory-avoidant. This chapter details distinct types of sensory input (auditory, visual, tactile, etc.) and how autistic youth use media for self-stimulatory (stimming) purposes.

Chapter 7 considers media's influence on how young autistic people both recognize and process their emotions, critiquing normative and "linear understanding[s] of emotions" and theories that cast autistic people's emotions through deficit framings, that there is an intrinsic lack of empathy (p. 181). Her criticism of linear models of emotional development and the prominence of "theory of mind" within 1990s psychology ideologically aligns with current attempts to use facial emotion technology within behavioral intervention. This situates how autistic people's emotional responses are medicalized, where nonautistic researchers are given sole authority to interpret them—rather than engaging with individual autistic people. Alper identifies four primary themes, that technology may help children (1) understand, (2) experience, (3) express, and (4) manage their emotions—and that these themes can overlap and simultaneously apply as children navigate personal and familial obstacles. Her reflexive analysis leaves room for detailing potential challenges with media use alongside the benefits, including the risk of overstimulation or emotional dysregulation.

The conclusion names and makes recommendations to several audiences, including parents, media producers, the tech industry, policymakers, and future directions for researchers. These recommendations combine her concluding insights with points from the lived experience of her interlocutors. Central to her recommendations is the call for careful oversight and safeguards to protect children, consultation with autistic creators and producers, and greater attention to how media affects autistic children's emotional regulation, sleep patterns, and interests.

Meryl Alper's methodological engagement with individual autistic children is critically responsive to monolithic representations of autism by showcasing stories and encounters that respond to stereotypes about lack of emotion and desire for social engagement—which have defined autism research for decades. These research commitments come through clearly in the book's appendix, showcasing reciprocal engagement from her interlocutors about their participatory experiences being interviewed. Alper recognizes the sensitive nature and the challenges of doing ethnographic research with vulnerable populations, which is a reminder to scholars in the field to forefront research subject's autonomy and agency. While the book could have stronger engagement with nonspeaking autistic people and non-English-speaking families, she demonstrates reflexivity by noting that to her audience, incorporating nonspeaking autistic authors into her citational practices and discussing how stay-at-home orders in 2020 affected the trajectory of this project.

*Kids Across the Spectrums* speaks to a vast number of audiences, both in and out of communication studies contexts. There is an evident intention across each chapter to honor autistic perspectives and expertise, especially as she acknowledges her positionality as a nonautistic scholar. In noting the influences of behaviorism and therapies like applied behavioral analysis (ABA) in how technology is given or taken away, she makes good on her commitment to incorporate scholarship and conversations started by autistic and neurodiverse scholars. Impressively, PDF files of this monograph are available for free open access as part of the MIT Direct2Open initiative—demonstrating Alper's commitment to accessibility. Scholars across humanities disciplines would not only benefit from a broader understanding of the relationship between technology and disability but from a broader theoretical positioning of disability within communication, rhetoric, and media studies that challenges (assistive) technology's imperative to cure or remove difference.

**Reference**

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.