Womanhood on the Spectrum – Self Representation of Autistic Women On TikTok

Student Name: Radhika Tak
Student Number: 742870

Supervisor: Dr. Amanda Paz Alencar

Media, Culture and Society
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

Autistic women have previously faced significant erasure, cultural misrepresentation and exclusion from broader medical and social autism discourses which have remained male centric. This thesis explored how autistic women navigated these forms of marginalizations through practices of self representation through social media posts on TikTok, a predominantly visual and algorithmically functioning social media platform. Using multimodal thematic analysis of 122 posts with 92 image based posts and 30 video based posts, this research explored how self representational practices of autistic women take form in response to diagnostic erasure, intersectional invisibility and the platform's affordances.

The research was guided by theories of representation by Hall (1997), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), identity performance by Goffman (1959) and social media affordance theories led primarily by Treem and Leonardi (2013). The thematic analysis followed a multimodal structure where audial, visual, text based, hashtag based and other affordances were taken into account while formulating analyses. Some affordances that guided the process were visibility as a high level affordance centering the analysis of platform logics supported by editability and searchability as low level affordances and the related concepts of imagined affordances and the algorithmized self.

The findings revealed how the narratives of self representation took diverse forms like distinguishing the autistic femininity, a focus on educational and humorous content and the use of advocacy as a representational practice. Visibility and vulnerability were closely tied with the engagement of affordances. Prominent inductive themes emerging from the dataset included the struggles of being misrecognized in earlier life, the reclamation of identity through resolving childhood memories of masking autistic traits, and subversion of stereotypes through humor,

irony and memes. Affordances added the nuance of platform logics directing and aiding the narratives to take form, be interacted with on both an interpersonal and an intrapersonal level on the platform while consequences of affordances included community building, validation of identity and exploration of the authentic self.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The engagement and impression of users online has been largely influenced by the introduction and popularizing of image based posting and short form video posting on social media networking sites. TikTok has emerged as a place of self advocacy and cultural involvement for particularly marginalized communities. The sociocultural influence of other social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter had been researched previously but the use of affordances like multimodal interaction, editability and distinct algorithm of TikTok distinguishes it from other social media platforms (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020, p.13, Bucher and Helmond, 2018, p.234). An investigation is made through this thesis into the self representation, asserted narratives challenging pathologization and stigma and advocated gendered experience of autism by autistic women users on the platform. To distinguish the content creators whose posted content became the data I used to conduct this research from other users that interacted with the platform and the content of the dataset, I refer to them as "creators" in this thesis. This was also in line with how the women who posted on TikTok chose to represent themselves as creators, evident in the use of hashtag "#autisticreator" under many of the posts.

The emergence of TikTok is tied to its facilitation of visibility for underrepresented users through various affordances like audio video mixing tools, trends, distinct algorithm following interests(e.g FYP), networking for shared narratives(Abidin, 2020, p.90; Bishop, 2021, p.4). It is through these distinct features it supports insight into how identity is performed, negotiated and networked. A public discourse is made accessible to users through TikTok's low barrier to content creation and is encouraged by the blend of entertainment and advocacy on the platform.

An opportunity through TikTok as a platform is extended for identity representation for autistic women, who have historically been clinically and socially marginalized and underrepresented in popular media. Davidson(2008, p.801) Dumitrica(2019, p.29-156) have noted that platforms aid identity expression and interactions, including community building especially for those who are challenged in real life social interactions. Previous research into social media representation for autistic individuals has not focused on how gender affects differing presentations among autistic individuals. This research fills the gap by accessing TikTok for representation and perception of identity distinctly resourced and influenced by algorithm, performance aesthetics and visual storytelling.

Other platforms like Twitter and Instagram facilitated autism related content but the stationary and textual content dominance restrained complex sensory, affecting modes through which autistic individuals usually experience and express identities. Whereas, TikTok is well suited for neurodivergent expression because of its affordances offering real time visual, auditory, performative storytelling (Serafeini and Reid, 2023, p.627; Jewitt, 2015, p.70). Excluded from mainstream diagnostic criteria, and representation (Hull et al, 2020, p.308) the multimodal interactive nature of TikTok is extremely relevant for autistic women on the platform.

I focus this thesis on exclusively self representational narratives on TikTok, studying how autistic women choose to represent themselves, instead of focusing on others' narratives about them. The direct agentic nature of self represented content gave a direct and honest insight into the lived experiences of women with autism. I also chose to include self diagnosed voices as valid in this thesis as my focus was not on determining the medical and diagnostic validity of the creators but rather to analyze the types of narratives emerging out of the autistic women's community on TikTok.

Intersectional erasure because of social stereotypes and ignorant clinical frameworks have led to many autistic women being undiagnosed, under diagnosed, diagnosed later in life way more frequently than their male counterparts (Gould and Ashton Smith, 2011, p.36; Bargiela et al, 2016, p .285). The manifestation of autism has been overlooked clinically primarily because of traditional research being male centric in nature. Despite the symptoms of tradition diagnoses criteria like social withdrawal and stimming manifestations of autism for women can also be tied camouflaging, which is suppression of symptoms, internalization of symptoms and masking(Dean et al, 2017, p 687; Hull et al, 2017, p 2530). This elimination often leads to consequences like delayed diagnoses or misdiagnoses with other disorders like BPD and anxiety and lack of adequate support(Loomes et al, 2017, p 467).

Autistic representation in media is already limited and has been further influenced by gender bias too, resulting in predominantly male characters portrayed through deficit lens representing male centric experience through depiction of dysfunction, social awkwardness and lack of empathy(Murray 2008, p.144). These inaccurate television and film portrayals encourage misinterpretation leading to erasure of autistic women's experiences. Leading up to autistic

women being left to take charge of their own representation utilizing digital spaces to assert alternative narratives, challenging medicalized view and stigma, further building communities for identification and interaction over shared experiences (Davidson and Orsini, 2013, p.156; Egner, 2022, p.358).

Self representation is looked at as a vigorous and performative effort in this research, drawing from Stuart Hall(1997, p.215) and Goofman(1959, p.22), and this thesis accesses convergence of feminist media studies, representation studies and affordance studies to explore the construction and representation of the 'self' by autistic women on TikTok.

When approached from this perspective the posts are not indirect remarks of identity but vigorous construction of it through multimodal interaction, algorithm and social context. Self representation over social media sites also supports interpretation of self for autistic individuals, especially when other discourses are insufficient for the sensemaking of their experiences(Egner, 2022, p.353).

Visual posts and TikToks shared by self-identified autistic women have been sampled and examined using qualitative multimodal content analysis for this research. The analysis is guided by a dual framework: first, by examining how creators represent themselves on the platform and secondly, by analyzing how TikTok's affordances, both high-level (e.g., visibility, persistence) and low-level (e.g., filters, edits, captions) that enable or constrain these representations (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 147; Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p. 3177).

The study approaches meaning as socially constructed, acknowledging it's dependency on context, and mediated through communication, adopting a constructivist epistemological stance(Bryman, 2016, p.129). By emphasizing convergence of platform design, gender and autism the thesis contributes to three scholarly areas: First, through accessing representation of a group on a specific platform it gives insights on identity performance on TikTok developing digital media studies. Secondly, by focusing on self representation of socially and digitally marginalized groups of autistic women it offers awareness in the field of disability studies. Finally, it expands intersectional feminist theory by exploring interaction between neurodivergence, technology and gender with experiences of autistic women creators.

Ultimately, this thesis attempts to study self representation of autistic women on TikTok, observing their stories and exploring broader reformation of cultural narratives surrounding autism and gender. It emphasizes the utility of affordances on the platform in aiding or limiting this representation, further denoting how digital media is interacted with by marginalized groups. It contemplates the representation, engagement and visibility of autistic women in a digital setting.

Therefore, keeping the stated insights and gaps in mind, and intending to advance the study I have explored the following research questions:

1) How do autistic women represent themselves on TikTok? And

2) What role do TikTok and its affordances play in their representational practices?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 History of Under Recognition and Under Representation of Women with Autism

Women on the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have been underdiagnosed, misdiagnosed or diagnosed much later in life in comparison to their male counterparts, not simply due to their lack of access to medical resources but due to a systemic diagnosis bias rooted in how autism has been medically defined and studied (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011, p. 36). Judith Gould and Lorna Wing, both pioneers in autism spectrum research, observed that it is only in the last decade that scientific research has begun to focus on gendered differences between males and females on the autism spectrum (Gould, 2017, p.703). This is evident in the first International Conference in the United Kingdom addressing this gender gap in autism research which was held in 2008 as a result of women questioning their late diagnoses (Gould, 2017, p.703). Previous studies show how "androcentric" research findings, which focused primarily on male subjects with autism spectrum condition (ASC), have influenced the diagnostic criteria, tools, preconceptions of health professionals, including psychologists who have reported unfamiliarity with females with ASC and dismissal of their symptoms that differ from their male counterparts (Bargiela et al., 2016, p.3285; Zener, 2019, Part 1, p.6).

The social biases and differing gendered expectations from autistic women continue to tell a similar story of marginalization. Autistic women who do not meet the conventional criteria of ASC are observed to be frequently ostracized, neglected with denial of support and mislabeled with other diagnoses such as personality disorders, depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders (Cridland et al., 2014, p.1269; Loomes et al., 2017, p.467). Social actors in autistic girls' lives such as teachers, parents and peers impose gendered expectations on them that they may fall short on displaying, including, missing social cues, being outspoken and committing social follies that their neurotypical female peers may chastise them for (Seers and Hogg, 2021, p.23). Meanwhile, more stereotypically gender confirming traits such as being a bookworm, shyness, and social withdrawal are overlooked by peers and figures of authority around them (Dean et al., 2017, p. 680; Ratto et al., 2017, p. 1699). This confusing response from the social world around them, often results in autistic girls developing a need or desire to "mask" their non confirming behavior (Bargiela et al., 2016, p.1272; Seers & Hogg, 2021, p. 23).

Masking or "camouflaging" autistic traits in women are more pronounced than in autistic men, where rather than exhibiting overt social withdrawal or repetitive behaviors, autistic women are more likely to internalize their symptoms and develop better social mimicry skills to fit into neurotypical social environments (Dean et al., 2017, p. 680; Mandy and Lai, 2017, p.645). Dean et al. called this "the art of camouflaging" explaining how autistic girls demonstrate superficially typical social behaviors that tend to mask underlying difficulties with emotional attunement and social belonging, which can over time cause anxiety, confusion around identity and burnout (Dean et. al., 2017, p. 687). In their book, *Spectrum Women – Walking to the Beat of Autism(2018)*, where seventeen autistic women narrate their lived experiences with autism, Catriona Stewart recounts how autistic women feel alienated in both the neurotypical and male-autistic communities due to gendered differences in presentation (Stewart et. al., 2018, p. 57). The authors argue that performing "acceptable" femininity becomes a social survival strategy in neurotypical and patriarchal social environments that reward compliance and penalize difference (Stewart et al., 2018, p. 60). Although camouflaging behaviors have been observed in both men and women with ASC, some women and other gendered autistic people emphasized that camouflaging was a reason for their late diagnosis or misdiagnosis, suggesting that societal demand for assimilation and social abilities is expected more strictly from female presenting individuals (Hull et. al., 2017, p. 2530).

It was also observed that many behaviors and characteristics of autism reported by the women who received ASD diagnosis are not included in the current diagnostic criteria for autism (Hull et al., 2020, p. 308). Behaviors like higher levels of social interaction than autistic males but inability to maintain long term relationships when compared with neurotypical women, having more typically feminine special interests and camouflaging are considered to be a part of the 'female autism phenotype' (Hull et. al., 2017b, p. 712; Hull et. al., 2020, p. 308). While research is ongoing about definitive characteristics that vary between female and the male experience of autism, it is clear that the differences exist and need to be researched and applied medically and diagnostically. Socially, the presentation of the characteristics of the female autism phenotype can be studied through documenting the lived experiences of women with ASD. One way to apply this is to identify and analyze the self-representation of autistic women on social media.

2.2 Representation and Intersectionality

Representation as theorized by Stuart Hall (2020, chapter 1), "is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between the members of a culture" (p. 75). Identities are neither fixed or consistent but rather constructed through representational practices and it is only through the way we present and imagine ourselves that we come to know who we are (Hall, 1997, p. 244).

To be able to study the different ways in which autistic women identify and posit themselves at the intersection of two marginalized identities which are female and autistic, the lens of intersectionality becomes a crucial concept to study their representation processes. To study the representation practices within female autistic spaces, situating their 'difference' from the male autistic experience and the female neurotypical experience becomes crucial as through exploring differences, meaningful representation can be constructed (Hall, 1997, p. 234). Hall (1997) explains that examining difference is crucial as meaning is constructed through making dialogue with the 'other' (p.235); here, the other being the autistic women in the male centered autism discourse. The false belief that despite administering male participants as research subjects, the results could be generalized to women as well, has been observed in the ASD research where women are neglected in the ASD research literature (Shefcyk, 2015, p. 130). Autistic women have three identities that contribute to their marginalization: their female gender identification which is still acknowledged as a group facing subjugation, they are disabled in a largely able-bodied society, and finally they are also a minority in the ASD research practices which have been predominantly male-centered (Gerschick, 2000, p.1265; Shefcyk, 2015, p.132 ; Saxe, 2017, p. 159). Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) theorized of intersectionality as a system to investigate how systems of oppression interlock to produce unique experiences of marginalization for individuals who occupy multiple social categories. It reveals how "single axis frameworks" obscure the complexity of identity, particularly for those situated at the crossroads of gender, race, disability and other axes of power (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 137-140).

The framework of intersectionality is crucial in highlighting how autistic women encounter distinct forms of marginalization within autism research, shaped by both gendered assumptions and methodological limitations that disproportionately center male experiences. This layered form of exclusion positions autistic women in a qualitatively different category—

not only in contrast to autistic men, who are typically the primary subjects of study, but also from women with other disabilities, due to the pervasive male bias in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) discourse. Moreover, intersectionality helps reveal the unique challenges autistic women face in striving for social belonging. This framework can be used to develop appreciation for the unique struggles faced by autistic women in representing themselves. Individuals with disabilities are described as

"...facing prejudices and attitudinal barriers such as the presumption of incompetence, infantilization, dehumanization, the belief that disabled people are incapable of being sexual beings, paternalism and the prevailing assumptions that our lives are tragic and that it should be normal for a disabled person to seek to be cured of disability" (Brown, 2012, p. 9).

2.3 Social Media as a Space for Self Representation

Marginalized groups are facilitated largely by the narratives they are able to form online, through these narratives people are often equipped to network, and to build and represent their identities(Egner, 2022, p.355). Often excluded and erased, autistic women's representation on social media may facilitate their expression of self, fostering reclaiming identities and communities. Egner (Egner, 2022, p.353) highlights how for autistic women this helps them also understand their distinct experience of femininity and neurodivergence hand in hand better, since for autistic individuals self expression is not only empowering but also helps them consolidate, understand and validate their experiences and identities. Marginalized individuals perform counter narratives, network and push back against various stereotypes over social media (Dumitrica, 2019, p. 308; Klier et al., 2014, p. 473; Szulc, 2019, p. 258, 260). A similarity can be drawn for the study by Lee(2017, p.732) of the activism reclaimed furiously by black Twitter users and how recently autistic women are reinforcing the importance of recognition of the gendered experience of autism, asserting the ways the spectrum goes far beyond and at times overlap the medically stated symptoms for the diagnosis.

As explored by Egner(2022, p ,.257) earlier for a broader consensus, for autistic individuals, TikTok visibility, networking and self representation through collective identity have been supported through shared narratives over social media. It is especially helpful since many autistic women specifically have faced challenges both diagnostically and socially over their identities overlooking the fundamental importance of it for individual experience (Kenny et. al,

2016, p.443) and acceptance of self. Over the past the traditional view of autism has been male centric and pathologized, however through emerging social media mediums, autistic women are able to assert their lived realities and represent a first-hand experience online without being limited by other difficulties they might face like social expectation in the real world of immediate responses and maintaining eye contact et cetera(Davidson, 2008, p.796). Such insider informed content is crucial for making more complex parts of the spectrum accessible, to be identified with and understood rigorously.

Social media has also aided constructing a positive identity (Dyck and Russel, 2020 p.183) for the online disability communities, by equipping them to form a collective that explores and validates a complex range of challenges and joys shared amongst specifically the autistic community which are oftentimes overlooked or suppressed in diagnostic framework(Egner, 2022, p. 357). We can further the debate about how the online space has been exceptionally useful for the neurodivergent community by recognizing how supportive experimental forms of communication through music and memes et cetera have been for the community(Dyck and Russel, 2020, p.185) to be able to advocate for themselves while sharing lived experiences.

Self expression through sarcasm, humor and irony has been common over social media for many marginalized groups (Lewin-Jones, 2015, p.183) including the autistic community. However my study remains women centric, in ways it also states reluctance towards conforming to male-typical autistic behaviors (Hull et al, 2017, p. 2520), as I go on to push further the argument of gendered experience of autism, supported by the study by Burgers et. al (2011, p 189) on usage of content with irony to critique misrepresentation within the autistic community remains relevant.

Through social media the posts made by these autistic women are crucial for their representation on both personal and political ground, because their lived experiences holds more self representational value than clinical information recorded or reported by observers. It furthers the argument that the social media presence of autistic individuals is reshaping how autism is understood by the public (Brownlow and O'dell, 2014, p 317-320). Through their rapidly evolving social media presence these individuals are able to vouch for themselves and persuade the spirit of acceptance instead of looking at it just as a disorder to be cured.

The way identity formation and management (Papacharissi, 2013, p.226) is aided through social media by various forms of self representation through multimedia, text, pictures, et cetera and its ability to support the "networked self", form or find a community for social connection(p 206), is considered to be the reason behind the very appeal of social media(Papacharissi, 2013, p.220).

Symbolic associations have also been deeply challenged and hence reformed by the self advocacy of autistic women online. And has a significant role in demarginalizing women in disability discourse, very similar to how Crenshaw(2013) noted proper representation aided demarginalizing experiences of Black women in the U.S (p.155). The symbols like the infinity sign in golden or rainbow colors have been accepted widely withing the community online to represent the spectrum nature of autism, and hence such symbols have been celebrated as symbols of solidarity and pride and widely circulated amongst the community a visual activism and shorthand for identity in the forms of emojis, bios et cetera(Johnson, 2021, para 16, TheLonelyRobot, 2022). On the other hand, symbols like "puzzle piece", used by organizations like Autism Speaks, associated with the medical model of autism for long have met with criticism. For looking at it as an incomplete cognitive function, demeaning individuals of the experience, and infantilizing them, which for women became a larger problem as it added to the casual infantilization faced by them in the society despite it. It was ridiculed for reinforcing a sense of missing something and further making autism being perceived as a problem to be resolved (Grensbacher at al. 2018. p. 118-119).

Identity formation on social media is directly connected to social interactions when we look at them in light of how Erving Goffman(1959) theorizes it. He highlights how social interactions are naturally a performance, not to deceive but to express authentic identity in a structured way (p .17) and the similar insight can be converted to how construction of identity happens through dramaturgy on social media. Goffman stated that to represent a controlled identity to the world where people engage in two kinds of presentations, "front stage" and "back stage". The front stage is the idealized and controlled identity they want to be perceived as, it often aligns with social expectations. And back stage the real identity asked for the spring of this performance(p.22). Real life interactions for autistic women's front stage presentations repair a lot of making of symptoms to be relevant to social expectations, revolving around gender norms

of emotional labor and conformity. However, a reorganization for the same is facilitated through social media sites representation like on TikTok. Online through dramaturgy autistic women gets the opportunity to create an identity that relates closer with their authentic selves, and further combat stigmatization and challenge gender stereotypes. Hence through affirmative content supporting neurodivergence in identities, autistic women challenge the stigma of a "spoiled identity"(p.19) while asserting self expression and reclaiming identity.

Through first hand perspectives framing autistic experiences shared on social media neurodivergent people have been noted to get a heightened visibility fostering accommodation and understanding as noted by Welch et al. (2022 p. 656). Extending this outlook to speed suppressed and often erased identities of autistic women is the goal of my research.

2.4 Affordance Theory and Social Media Platforms

The relationship between the materiality of a social networking site and the agency of the users is conceptualized by affordances (Bucher at. Al.,2017, p.11, Ellison & Vitak, 2015, p.220). The discourse around affordances does not center a particular technology but rather focuses on the dynamics of the social interactions and the communication practices employed through the various features made available on the social networking platforms (Bucher et. al., 2017, p.11). Previously, researchers have examined how social networking sites offer opportunities for action through affordances as well as how they also introduce limitations and constraints that influence user behavior (Baym, 2010, p.56; boyd, 2011, p. 46; Ellison & Vitak, 2015, p. 153).

Originally emerging from the field of ecological psychology, developed by James J. Gibson in his foundational book, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, he defined affordances as possible actions and choices that exist relative to the perception of an organism (Gibson, 2014, p. 321). According to him, affordances, "have to be measured relative to the animal" (p. 128), arguing that they are not fixed characteristics of objects or environments, but are relational features that emerge from the interaction between an organism with agency and its environment. The focus on analyzing this relationship between an agent and their environment through affordances became central in media studies, particularly in the context of social media (Ronzhyn et. al., 2023, p. 3177).

Affordances therefore emerge out of the interaction between the technological interface and the users of the platform and cannot be attributed individually to either the social networking platform or the individual user (Chemero et. al., 2003, p. 25). Due to their relational characteristic, affordances may enable different possibilities of action for different users depending on their skills, literacy, cultural contexts and motives (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). Consequently, affordances become contextual and platform specific and depending on their usage, may be referred to as "social media affordances", "technology affordances" or more specific categorizations such as "Facebook affordances" (Cabiddu et. al., 2014; Majchrzak and Markus, 2012).

As such, affordances enable opportunities for action on social networking sites and as explained by Majchrzak et al. (2013), they rely on "the mutuality of actor intentions and technological capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action" (p.39). This illustrates how affordances are neither pre determined nor completely neutral but rather play a role in shaping user intentions and actions. Their purpose is often reflected through terms using the suffix "ability" such as reviewability, editability, searchability and so on, highlighting the possible actions enabled by the social media networking sites (Faraj et. al., 2011; Treem and Leonardi, 2013).

Based on various characteristics of affordances, some fundamental criteria must be fulfilled for the affordances to be researched and analyzed in the context of social media. First, affordances are perceptional (Ronzhyn et. al., 2023, p. 3178; Norman 1988, p.145) and depend upon how the users perceive and interpret the characteristics of systems or functions available to them, therefore highlighting their contextual relevance. Contexts such as cultural and cognitive framing of the narratives constructed by the users become crucial in understanding affordances (Islam et al., 2020, p.163). Alongside the perceptual dependence, it is important to situate affordances within their specific context. They are shaped by the cultural, historical, social and psychological factors affecting the users and their environments, placing affordances as emerging from the soico-material practices that vary based on the users as well as the time and place of the interaction between the user and the technology (Ronzhyn et. al., 2023, p. 3178, Zheng and Yu, 2016, p.237).

Previously, Hogan (2009, p.89) initiated the idea of social affordances that act as perceptual cues that enable the framing of social structures and roles that shape specific user behaviors. The concept of "imagined affordances" as propagated by Nagy and Neff (2015, p.18) further solidifies the perceptual characteristic of affordances by outlining the expectations users have towards the technology and its abilities, even if the expectations are not always accurately met. These imagined affordances actively shape user behavior in situations such as users sharing vulnerable information about themselves relying on the expectation of a safe space on the platform regardless of the actual technical security of data on the platform.

Along with enabling possibilities for action, affordances can also introduce constrains which are not antithetical to affordances but rather play a different role in shaping user behavior. For instance, visibility of social media posts may encourage performance of identity but simultaneously limit their expression through self-censorship; such as in cases of Instagram users preferring to use euphemisms or emojis in place of triggering terms that may result in their account getting "shadow banned" and compromise their content visibility. According to Kennewell (2001), these limitations are as important for actions to take place (p. 106), arguing a nuanced perspective of affordances as both enabling and constraining.

Another characteristic of affordances is for them to be discrete and well defined to distinguish them from generalizable processes like "sharing" or "communication" which do not specify the relational mechanisms involved in the analytical lens of the affordance framework (Ronzhyn et. al., 2023, p.3179). Affordances are instead understood as identifiable opportunities for action such as the ability to amplify the reach of a social media post through the use of hashtags that may engage its searchability affordance which in turn results in effective communication by spreading a message across a platform efficiently and over a sustained time period. The separation between the affordance and its outcomes becomes crucial in the analysis of precise and platform specific affordances like visibility, searchability, editability et cetera in social media research (Evans et. al., 2017, p.320). Another example of this distinguishment between affordances and the outcomes of their actualization is apparent in how sharing content, giving feedback through comments or community building on a platform should not be seen as affordances but rather be analyzed as the practices and behaviors shaped by them (Ronzhyn et.

al., 2023, p.3181). This distinction allowed me to understand and analyze how platform features on TikTok enabled or limited the representational practices of autistic women more rigorously.

Affordance theory also accommodates for the non-user actors such as the algorithmic systems which also shape user experience (Albu and Etter, 2020; Sharma et. al., 2016; Ronzhyn et. al., 2023, p. 3179). The "algorithmized self" as a concept studied by Bhandari and Bimo (2020, p. 29) explored the scopes of self presentation on TikTok, accoubnting for its unique platform affordances and design features that enabled users to not just interact with the platform and other users but also engage with their own "algorithmized self". They compared it with other platforms like YouTube, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) and found that the design features on TikTok allowed users to engage deeply with their own sell-produced content, creating a feedback loop through which they constantly applied intrapersonal meaning making process like self reflection, re iterating their identities and redefining their personal narratives in response to algorithmic cues (Bhandari and Bimo, 2020, p. 31). The approach of incorporating both the interpersonal and the intrapersonal platform engagement marks TikTok as a unique space for studying self representational practices. It could be particularly significant when analyzing how marginalized communities like those of autistic women may negotiate their identities and navigate the different affordances within an algorithmic system.

I have further consolidated the conceptualization of two types of affordances: high level or abstract affordances and low level or platform feature affordances (Bucher et. al., 2017, p.12). High level affordances are derived from the dynamics and specific conditions that are employed by the technological features of the platform like visibility which is central to social media research; meanwhile low level affordances account for the material aspects of the platform design like buttons, 'for you' pages, et cetera (Bucher et. al., 2017, p.12). Despite relying on the platform features, these affordances do not represent a static function of the features themselves but rather introduce possibilities for various actions that are enabled by the interaction between the user and the platform design (Treem and Leonardi, 2013, p.153).

Visibility emerges as the most fundamental high level affordance of social media and therefore I consider it the most important pillar of my analysis of TikTok's affordances. The various creative ways in which users engage the platform features like the For You Page (FYP), hashtag systems, Stitches, short form video content, captions et cetera contributed to my

understanding of their negotiation of visibility on the platform. These features determine which content is made visible, to what extent and to whom. The scope of visibility can be further nuanced by the interplay of low level affordances such as anonymity, pseudonymity and association (Ronzhyn et. al., 2023, p. 3180). For example, TikTok creators may employ pseudonyms or emojis to limit their facial visibility to control their perception while still participating in visibility affordance by posting their outfits or self portraits without their faces.

Low level affordances like editability also shape practices of self representation. Unlike platforms like Twitter, TikTok allows the re-recording, drafting and editing videos extensively before getting published. However once published, the content cannot be edited but only deleted and re uploaded, which introduces some constraints around another low level affordance of persistence which accounts for the consistent availability and stability of content (boy, 2010; Treem and Leonardi, 2013, p. 157). Persistence can be further classified into accessibility or the ability to remain available on the platform and immutability or its capacity to remain unchanged (Ronzhyn et. al., 2023, p. 3185). For instance, TikTok's duet and stitch features allow other users to respond to and re iterate the messaging of a post, often without the consent of the original creator, making them interesting features, thus utilizing and limiting various affordances.

Moreover, searchability is another low level affordance that interplays with visibility and affects how easily content may be discovered on the platform. On TikTok, the algorithm and hashtags play a significant role in the degree to which content becomes searchable or suggestable which often create an opportunity as well as limitations to discoverability. Capitalizing the interplay of such affordances, I used this framework to analyze the specific self representational practices of autistic women on TikTok and the various roles these affordances play in solidifying their experiences and identities through social media.

3. Method

3.1 Methodology

This study focuses on how Autistic women on TikTok are aided by the affordances of the platform, and their communicated self expression. The following questions will be researched and answered:

1) How do autistic women represent themselves on TikTok? And

2) What role do TikTok and its affordances play in their representational practices?

A thematic multimodal qualitative research model has been utilized in an attempt to aid meaning making, cultural expression and construction of identity (Bryman, 2016, p. 396) to accurately provide an in-depth interpretation of their personal identities in light of social meanings, media forms and structural power (Bryman, 2016, pp 394-396). This study does not only consider what is being said but further also focuses on the communication of it across various modes, in other words the study does not discover meaning, rather constructs it through also considering its communication across various affordances on TikTok like through captions, hashtags, audios and visuals.

Since analyzing self expression along with how it is facilitated or constrained by the platform is relevant (Davidson, 2008,pp.797-798, Nadesan, 2013, pp 15-19) to the study centralizing autistic voices, it has been approached by a constructivist perspective. The constructivist perspective enables appropriate analysis of digital content through addressing self representation as a fluid process, impacted by sociocultural norms, users' agency and various logics of the platform. This approach towards social reality is co-constructed through interaction and representation grounds the study in constructivist epistemological paradigm (Bryman, 2016, p.394).

Previously, efforts had been made to broaden participation in medical interviewing since various previous studies are found to be often reflecting male biased view of autism and its reason can be traced to interviews and surveys being limited to often unspecified groups, and further also excluding people with distinct, no or limited communication (Courchesne et al, 2022, p.1126; Tesfaye et al, 2023, p.114). An effort to broaden partaking for non speaking and

minimally verbal autistic individuals, was offered through AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) devices and cards(Chapman 2019 para 2). However, the medicalized nature of these clinical studies so far has been deficit in terms of gender differences and at times restrictive while framing autism (Davidson and Orsini, 2013, p.189). Even the studies focused on representation of autistic individuals on social media, had committed majorly to Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, with insubstantial attention to newly emerging and more diverse platforms like TikTok(Egner 2022, Brownlow & O'dell, 2014). The previously marginalized and inappropriately represented individuals have taken TikTok for visibility since the increasing popularity of short form videos (Abidin, 2020, p.190, Bishop, 2021, p.94).

TikTok is multifaceted and complex, therefore when it comes to data analysis and collection, with visual, audial and textual material, hence multimodal content analysis (MMCA) has been adopted as the methodological proposition for this research. MMCA is suited to examine the various forms of communicative modes on the platform and access the way they combine to create cohesive narratives (Jewitt, 2015, p.70; Sarafini & Reid 2023, p.627). A multimodal approach has been adopted to facilitate investigation of meaning brought forth by interplay of communicative modes like visuals, videos, captions, hashtags, sounds etc, in contrast to a traditional approach which would isolate individual elements for analysis.

To understand the strategies of self representation by autistic women on TikTok, it is extremely necessary to access the multimodal setup of these videos, since representation through broadcasting on TikTok is rarely linear or solely verbal. The platform expands multimodal creativity through its very design utilizing: sounds, text overlays, facial expressions, transitions and participatory trends, hence each element has to be considered to understand overall meaning. For example a user might share an informational post about masking, a way neurodivergent people suppress their traits to appear more neurotypical (Hull et al, 2017 p.248), paired with a trending audio to resist stigmatization.

Autistic women on TikTok not only use the platform for representation of identity but also to challenge dominant biases around autism and to examine this, the qualitative dataset is studied through a thematic lens. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and interpreting patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2014, p.378), it is especially useful for exploring social identities and discourses, since it allows both semantic(explicit) and latent(implicit) levels of meaning making.

The data was examined through theory driven(deductive) and Data driven(inductive) strategies to develop themes. Theoretical concepts such as Goffman's (1959) self-presentation, affordance theory (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, pp. 233–235), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243) were utilized as the foundation for initial codes.

I nitial codes inductively guided by the data were alsodrawn capturing how the platform is used by autistic women (such as captioning for clarity and filters to aid masking) The research found theoretical grounding while remaining open to emerging insights from the data by utilizing a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (Schreier, 2013, pp. 178–180).

A nuanced and rich understanding of how autistic women navigate TikTok for self expression has been constructed through the chosen approach of methodological design of multimodal analysis. Through this research it was highlighted how in digital spaces autism in women is understood, represented and advocated, by reviewing agency of content creators, social media site affordances, and cultural discourses.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive sampling has been used to select the content for multimodal analysis to support exploration of how representation is approached by autistic women and further aided through the affordances on TikTok. This approach is consistent with qualitative research norms of considering depth and contextual insight over statistical generalizability (Bryman,2016 pp. 394-396). The units of analysis hence are TikTok posts shared by self identified autistic women on the platform, and selection has prioritized content that is expressive (visually, textually or auditorily) and information rich across various modalities in alignment with Serafini and Reids's (2023) suggestion.

The final dataset contains a selection of 92 visual and 30 video based TikTok posts, selected adhering with qualitative analysis guidelines for MA level research. Videos are roughly 3-4 minutes long, and contain information through gestures, speech and captions whereas, visual posts are dominantly carousel and still visuals, mostly containing audios, and posts with text overlays. The content selected is rich in multimodal information, depicting layered self representation, reflecting TikToks various affordances to facilitate the same to support

multimodal analysis(Jewitt, 2015 p 70 Serafini and reid 2023 p.627) as it will give insightful information about how platform is being resourced for self representational practices.

The accounts from which the posts were to be picked had to meet the following criteria:

1) To ensure the performed identity is consistent with self-claimed autistic experience, the accounts were screened for explicit identification as autistic woman through hashtags, bios, pinned posts or frequently repeated content (Davidson, 2008, pp. 798-801, Champman, 2019).

2) To ensure a high degree of community responsiveness and credibility accounts have been selected using micro influencer dynamics(Tafesse & Wood, 2021 p.4). So accounts with significant visibility through having more than 5000 followers were considered. Such a low number helped account for not just the most popular but diverse voices in the data pool.

3) To stay consistent with privacy and consent guidelines only public accounts have been considered. I believe although the research focused on the self representation of autistic women with public accounts and posts, to maintain their privacy, the faces and account names occurring in the visual posts referenced throughout the research will be distorted to prevent recognition as explicit consent was not taken from the individual TikTok creators to use their data for this research.

Purposive filtering for content based on hashtags commonly used among women in the autistic community, like #Actuallyautistic, #Autistimingirls and #AutismInWomen, has been done for selection. Posts found with these hashtags were accessed to identify further other commonly used hashtags in their posts. I found hashtags like #masking and #latediagnosedautistic are widely used, especially amongst women who were misdiagnosed or with delayed diagnosis. The key role played by hashtags in online autism activism has been studied before Egner(2022, p.355) supporting their significance in locating and spreading awareness. It has been made sure while sampling that amongst other identity significators the posts selected only included creators who explicitly identified as women. Further, to avoid linguistic barriers in data analysis sampling has exclusively selected posts in the English language.

It has been further ensured that data collected committed to heightened visibility and identification with autism, and also relative to gendered identity performance, by the time of data

collection (April and May 2024) coinciding with autism acceptance month in April, a period of amplified activist content on the platform connected to the topic of autism through increased disclosure and expression of identity (ASAN, 2021).

The focus of the research has been self representation through content and affordances of the platform excluding its audience reception and impact, hence the comments made on the posts are not considered. The decision has also methodologically attempted to consider ethical concerns surrounding comment analysis noting it violates anonymity and consent of users in the comment section. However metadata such as the number of comments engagement, likes, sound usage and hashtags trends have been considered since they facilitated additional insights about platform visibility and algorithm amplification. The focus on audience reception and public perception of autistic women's self representational practices falls out of the scope of this thesis but could in future enhance and broaden the scope to accommodate how their representation is validated or challenged. My focus needed to remain on the behavior and practices employed by the autistic women themselves using their agency to form narratives about their identities using TikTok as a platform to construct their representation.

On platforms like TikTok users are encouraged to consider not just audience responses but also their own algorithmized gaze (Bucher et al, 2012; Bhandari & Bimo,2020), further shaping intrapersonal performance anticipating algorithmic gaze. Hence, the visibility structured by algorithm is accessed through the metadata on the post level.

To preserve visual and textual elements like, filters, captions and hashtags in the sampled data the collection has been done for visual posts by screenshots and videos by screen recording. To maintain contextual integrity further a Word document has manually recorded relevant metadata for each post, like upload date, shares, like count, audio used etc. The screenshots of the posts with the metadata displayed on the screen were accompanied by a manual entry of the captions, the audio used and the hashtags as these metadata were not clearly identifiable just through screenshots. For the video based posts, instead of captions, a detailed transcription along with descriptions of factors like lighting, tone of voice, hand gestures etc were made and arranged in the dataset. Dataset was not published in the thesis as it revealed the personal data of TikTok content creators.

3.3 Operationalization

For this study to operationalize the concept of self representation, it is understood not as uniform self description but as an active performance fashioned through social media site affordances and sociocultural norms. It takes after the theory that representation is a cultural process where meaning comes into being through language and sign by Stuart Hall (1997, p.234; 2020, p.75). Attention has been given to how "the front stage" performances (Goffman, 1959, p 17, 22) represents strategically stylized or authentic selves of these users in relation to autism and gender in the TikToks and visual content sampled and examined for aesthetics, tone, hashtags, language and symbols. Content that uses humor (Lewin- Jones, 2015, p. 83), irony (Burgers et al, 2011, p. 189), or educational framing (Brownlow & O'Dell 2014, p. 317) has also been examined because it concludes further what it means to be an autistic woman for some, especially the individuals who challenge clinical or stereotypical biases of autism. Representation for such groups is a great part of them for making sense of their realities as pointed out by Egner(2022, p. 353). One creator made a TikTok with a trending audio the questioned "why are you so weird", overlaying it with text "when u unmask after a full day of eye contact and small talk", this video has represented educational resistance and ironic critique through a self aware performance.

The intensified marginalization of being autistic and woman in the society has been expressed in the sampled data, the intersectionality of which is operationalized using the framework of Crenshaw(1989 p.139) and Gerschick(2000, p 1.265) for this research. It has been noted that gender norms in the society at times conceal diagnostic visibility for the women of the experience(Hull et all, 2020, p 308, Dean et al, 2017, p 687), for example the same intersectional erasure can be seen communicated by user through a post captioned "it took me 26 years to get diagnosed. I was too polite, too sensitive and too smart". Another user stated "if iI had meltdowns instead of shutdowns, maybe someone would have seen me" critiquing the male centric criteria for autism diagnosis. Through these instances a gender gap is highlighted pointing at intersectional erasure by these users. Further denoting how through TikTok affordances their standpoint is communicated on margins of both autism and feminism (Sheftcyk, 2015, p.130).

For this study affordances are looked at as the emergent relational properties from the interaction between user and technological system, this understanding is credited to Treem and Leonard (2013). Affordances are seen as possibilities that are context dependent for how they enable and constrain the user based on their social position, intentions, and technical familiarity

(Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 147)" instead of perceiving them as static features of the platform. The study references Ronzhyn et al's (2023) frame work to distinguish between High level affordances such as visibility and persistence, and low level affordances, for example hashtags, duet mixing and filters referring to tools that are feature specific (Ronzhyn et al, 2023, p. 3177) in context to TikTok. For this study, for example a supportive community is not seen as an affordance as and in itself but as a favorable possibility that was equipped by the affordance of association that was extended through the platform. In other words outcomes and affordances are reasonably considered separate.

To the degree a content is accessible and seen by others is referred to in this context as visibility(Lane et al, 2018, p3). Visibility is a high level affordance which can be investigated keeping in mind algorithmic structures like the For You Page(FYP) that facilitates it. FYP uses engagement metrics to curate content for users. Visibility can be indicated through various features on the platform, like higher views and likes along with usage of trending hashtags(e.g. ActuallyAutistic, Autistic Women) or strategies limiting exposures through not revealing one's face or disabling comments et cetera. Such decisions can at times reflect things with broader meaning than content management like anxieties connected to exposure on public platforms.

TikTok offers various editing tools, providing creators ability to do voiceover, transitions, add on screen text and jump cuts, this facilitates refinement and revision of content before posting, and is often referred to as editablity, it is key to the platform. Practises like retakes and scripting when referenced in a post by the user clearly indicates a desire to control presentation of self through performance(Goffman, 1959, p 17-25). This performative nature is examined for curation of identity and masking- a common theme among autistic women suppressing their traits to represent neurotypical identity(Hull et al, 2017, p819).

Intervened with editability is the affordance of persistence, which demonstrates stability and fluidity of the content uploaded by users. Posts with higher interaction such as reuploading, responding and modifications through tools like stitches and duets are seen to have higher fluidity. This has been examined to explain how existing content is approached by autistic women on the platform, whether alternative narratives are pushed or attempts have been made to reposition themselves in broader discussion(Treem and leonardi, 2013, p147).

Matadata like hashtags, audio tracks and captions facilitate discovery and retrieval of posts on the platform, and hence is referred to as affordance of searchability. Strategic use of searchability can encourage discoverability and further portray alignment with comprehensive discourses, and communities(an example is #ActuallyAutistic movement). These practises will be examined not just as indexing strategies but preference of positionality within activist or counter narrative frameworks(boyd, 2010, p 39-46; Egner, 2022, p 357-358).

The concept of "Imagined affordances" by Nagy and Neff(2015, p.25) is adopted recognizing how content is tailored by users based on their assumed responses from audience and algorithm even with no actual feedback. Though comments have been excluded from this research, metadata such as likes, view count and hashtags have been analyzed to examine intended or achieved visibility.

The analysis attends to semiotic interplay between various communicative modes on TikTok considering its multimodal nature. The study Interprets by examining sound, text, gesture, image and interaction to access multimodal perspective following Serafieni and Reid(2023, pp 624-627) and Jewitt(2015, p 70). Captions will be examined for how they put forward or critique autistic stereotypes and their rhetorical tone, whether they are didactic, humorous or polemical. Visual signs for identity signaling or resistance are interpreted by examining elements like props(e.g infinity symbol or the gold theme), on screen text and body language. Emotional expression, masking and trend orientation will be made sense of through speech pacing, tone of the voice and audio usage in the content.

Ideological alignment and visibility both are facilitated by the usage of Tags and Hashtags on the platform. For example hashtags like #Autismawareness or #AutisticWomen do not only communicate belongingness to a community but also nuanced understanding of self. Conformity to TikTok conventions, critiquing norms and enhanced vulnerability is facilitated by editing using aesthetic functions of TikTok, such as jump scares, filters and transitions. The same can be examined for further insights related to creators' identity and representation. The relativity between these multimodal functions will be referenced for meaning making avoiding isolating one from the other, exploring how visuals and captions interact, enhancement of tune through music, and how features of the platform construct meaning.

Overall, the approach is to see autistic identity being structured and expressed through affordances on TikTok, and not TikTok being in backdrop of the communication. The approach is to understand the sociotechnical conditions facing which marginalized identities are expressed, constrained or reconstructed on the social media sites by thematically examining how various affordances are approached by these autistic women on the platform.

3.4 Data Analysis

For this research, a multimodal thematic analysis was chosen to analyze the TikTok posts. A thematic analysis with a multimodal structure ensured the analysis of not just textual narratives but also the interplay of visuals, audial and other elements that the technical affordances of the platform allow for. Since the dataset contained of a rich blend of multimodal content working in tandem with each other to produce narratives, it was crucial to expand the qualitative content analysis to a detailed multimodal thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2014, p.87).

Multiple copies of the Word document where the data was stored were used as primary tool for organizing, annotating and coding the data. Initial open coding was done directly in a copy of the raw data file where over 40 open codes arose based on the initial patterns in the data. For example, posts discussing the various traits of autism were coded under "types of uncommon traits" and the posts illustrating late diagnosed experiences were placed under the open code, "late diagnosis". Similarly some of the open codes that formed the initial coding process were, "childhood memories", "burnout symptoms", "unmasked identities", "funny memes", "relationship struggles" and so on.

In the next stage of axial coding, common patterns among the open codes were identified and were used to formulate broader categories that encompassed related narratives and concepts. For example, the open codes, "burnout symptoms" and "high masking traits" were put under the same axial category of "experiences of masking" and similarly, the open codes, "childhood nostalgia" and "undiagnosed experiences" were categorized under the axial code of "consequences of misdiagnosis" as they both represented different consequences of similar narratives of spending earlier life as misdiagnosed autistic women. 12 axial codes were achieved at the end of this process.

Finally reflecting upon the theoretical framework and the inductive patterns in the dataset, 4 themes were identified: the loss and reclamation of identity post diagnosis or discovery, the intersectional autistic femininity, the performance of identity for social change and finally, visibility and platformed self representation – affordances shaping identity construction.

Manual coding was opted for its feasibility and flexible nature, engaging with close, iterative analysis of the data (Schreier, 2013, pp. 175-177; Braun and Clarke, 2014, p.87). An overview of posts (anonymized) is provided in Appendix A.

3.5 Ethical considerations

It has been crucial for me to consider various ethics while examining this TikTok content because it involves Autistic Women, a community that has a history of marginalization, not only in social but also academic discourse. I attempted to minimize harm, and take into account digital identities by referencing guidelines for ethical internet research for data handling for this research(Bryman, 2016, p 131). However, the study is categorized as non-intrusive observational research since the data has been sampled from only the accounts publicly accessible over the platform.

Since the platform is used by these autistic women to share their lived experiences and for self representation, I have decided to reference their anonymized posts in my research while keeping their faces, account name and visible identities obscured to protect their privacy. The data has been collected from public accounts that identified with the autistic experience through bios, pinned posts, or repeated themes from frequently uploaded content, and intended audience engagement at the time of sampling.

The dataset only included textual content from creator posts, no other text from any user was referenced in the study as analyzing the comment section for my research is irrelevant. Further, i have been cautious to not include any reference to users not central to my study. On the other hand, affordances of the platform, like Visibility and reach have been examined through its non intrusive indications by metadata which is publicly visible like the likes, view count, sound and hashtags. Any sort of examination of unprompted responses by the users has been excluded to avoid further ethical challenges, specifically anonymity in user interaction and consent.

According to the university guidelines all the metadata, transcription, screen recording of videos and screen shorts of visual content have been stored and backed up securely in my password protected laptop. A separate file with all these transcriptions which is only accessible to my supervisor and second reader will be uploaded to the Thesis Management System(TMS). All the posts in the data set were anonymized using abbreviations(e.g. AW1, AW2 and so on as listed in Appendix A). Following institutional policy none of this data will be disclosed in the public version of the thesis.

It is further important to make a note that my consideration for the community also ties to my lived experience as an autistic woman myself and takes inspiration from my engagement with the online community over TikTok. This equips me to bring insider experience and academic training to the research. My provisional insightfulness is facilitated by my identity as an insider but also carries potential for bias(Tracy, 2010, p.842). Further to mollify this i have continuously memoed to ensure transparency and consistency in the research while relying on systematic data analysis procedures, including analytical instruments and multimodal coding(Silverman, 2011, p.361).

Further my goal has been to represent how autistic women engage with platforms affordances to represent themselves, challenge stereotypes, and build community, in academic conversation that has often excluded them. An effort has been made to amplify and not to appropriate these voices.

4. Results

4.1 The Loss and Reclamation of Identity Post Discovery or Diagnosis

The first prominent and recurring theme emerging from the dataset comprised of the autistic women voicing their misdiagnosed and late diagnosed experiences and the struggles that marked their experiences. Since the research was inclusive of both self-diagnosed as well as medically diagnosed autistic women, the narratives around both discovery and diagnosis were considered relevant. The emergent inductive themes, 'childhood nostalgia' and 'redefining authenticity' added more depth to the specific ways in which the late diagnosed and misdiagnosed autistic women chose to represent themselves through their posts on TikTok.

The narratives surrounding childhood nostalgia comprised of autistic women recounting their childhoods and their behaviors that were miscategorized by their parents and authority figures. By posting their autistic traits that were previously misunderstood alongside real photographs from their childhoods, often showcasing their younger selves, autistic women attempted to revisit and fill in the gaps of missed signs of autism from their past. For example, one of the texts on a post featuring a childhood image read, "because she learnt to copy everyone else just to fit in and lost herself in the process" (AW47); and in the first post before this, serving as the cover of the carousal style post, it was mentioned that she was doing this for "her" referring to her own misunderstood childhood self (AW47). Posts like these suggested a sense of closure for the autistic women who finally realized their autism much later into their adulthood. The loss of identity occurred in two broadly categorized ways, through remaining undiagnosed during childhood and being misdiagnosed with other disorders while growing up. However, the experiences and narratives of the posts of women coming from either of these possibilities shared the experience of losing themselves to fit in or make sense of the world around them and then finally "finding themselves" after discovering their autism and by re affirming their autistic identities in their posts. Nostalgia was observed to be a pivotal stage in their journey because it represented revisiting the past virtually through posting childhood pictures to provide a sense of justice and empowerment to their younger selves who faced a loss of identity and hence attempt to reclaim their own identity narratives where previously their environments decided how they should perform their identities.

The posts that frequently referenced delayed or incorrect diagnoses, with creators explicitly stating phrases such as *"I got diagnosed in my late 20s because no one thought girls could be autistic"*(AW60), or *"Things I was told my entire life were anxiety disorder but were actually autism"*(AW25) exemplified how these narratives were used to expose gaps in clinical recognition, reflecting Gould's (2017, p. 703) observation that gendered autism traits were only recently brought into the research agenda for autism. This narrative of re negotiating their identities after the correct diagnosis contributed significantly to the narratives of self representation through their posts on TikTok. By exposing their misdiagnoses and reclaiming their correct diagnosis, these posts served as emotional catharsis as well as evoking a sense of ownership over their own representation. Posts like these were often accompanied by audios that alluded the metaphor of the sun coming out of the clouds such as in post AW36, the sound "Here Comes the Sun" by The Beatles and in post AW39, the song. "The Sun is Shining" by Stefy De Cicco which signified owning their true identities as autistic individuals after spending most of their lives in confusion.

Many posts framed these revelations as moments of personal clarity, yet implicitly critiqued broader social neglect. In doing so, they reflect what Hall (1997, p. 215) describes as representation as a discursive practice, a process by which individuals reframe the meaning of their experiences in relation to broader cultural narratives. In this case, aligning themselves with the narrative of autism redefined their identities, solidifying their sense of belongingness to the autistic community that relieved their previous sense of loss of identity.

The discourse of the 'female autistic phenotype' (Hull et. al., 2017b, p. 712) was also evidently quoted in the dataset, where creators expressed their lived experiences of being a woman with autism and asking healthcare professionals for a *"diagnostic criteria to be developed that reflect a 'female phenotype' of autism"* (AW53). This added the nuance of being misunderstood to the framing of the autistic experience for these women. In the post below (see fig. 1.) the creator identifies not just as an autistic woman but also a psychologist working in the field of mental health and she notes from her experience how the symptoms of girls with autism were misconstrued with overlapping symptoms from other conditions like BPD, depression and anxiety and how autistic women are more prone to PCOS, more sensitive to medications, chronic illness etc (AW53). She called these 'presentations' of the female phenotype of autism which

differ from the mainstream medical understanding of autism which as established by Judith Gould and Ashton Smith (2011) have led to the late or misdiagnosis of women with autism due to a systemic diagnostic gender bias (p.36).
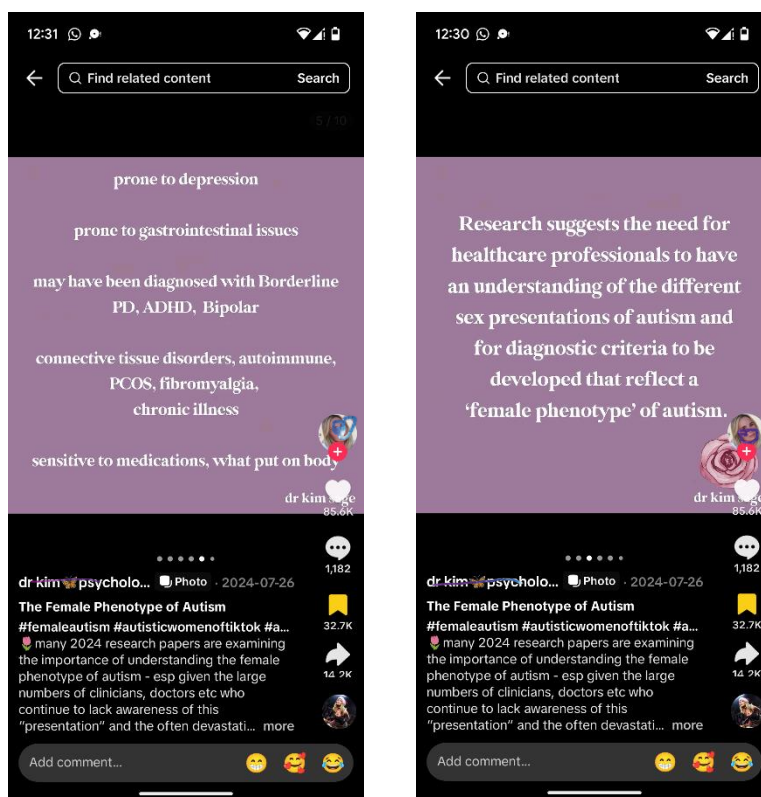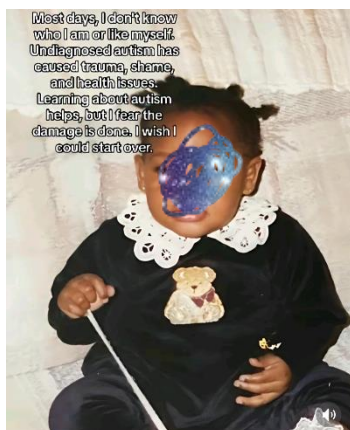

Fig.1. screenshots of carousal post AW53 on the female phenotype of autism

In the same line of discussion of late diagnosis, usually during their late twenties or early thirties as revealed by the data, they also expressed a focus on reclaiming the previous loss of identity through making sense of their experiences in the context of their discovery or diagnosis of autism. Here, the focus on authenticity seemed to have become significant in the narrative of self representation for these autistic women. The hashtag "#authenticity" was used under several posts to further solidify the message of self realization and asserting their true identities in the posts.

In one of the posts, the creator mentioned,

"Most days, I don't know who I am or if I like myself. Undiagnosed autism has caused trauma, shame, and health issues. Learning about autism helps, but I fear the damage is done. I wish I could start over" (AW12).

Fig. 2 screenshot of AW12 explaining her late diagnosed experience

The creator used her childhood picture as a background image to relay the feelings of going back in time and how she wished that life could have turned out differently for her had she known about her autism earlier on. The post did not represent regret but rather a sense of self acceptance and asserting one's truth by owning their autistic identity after years of being misrepresented. The accompanying music on the post, "As Time Flies" by Ty's Music added a sense of nostalgia and counting losses to her message. Her post carried a dual message, first reflecting on the sense of loss of time and her own identity and secondly, an attempt to regain her sense of self as she mentions in the caption, *"...It's been a tough road but I'm learning to embrace my true self"* (AW12, see figure 2.), accompanied by the infinity symbol which reinforced the narrative of self awareness and authentically owning the experience of being autistic. As previously established, this is a symbol used by individuals in the autistic community, signifying an empowering sense of autistic identity which eliminates stigma surrounding autism and may contribute to less negative identity construction, thus toppling the narrative of previous symbols like the missing puzzle piece which signified a sense of loss (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021, p. 19, 23). Her revealing the consequences of being undiagnosed

for twenty seven years resulting in "trauma, shame and health issues" (AW12) also echoed Hull et. al.'s theorization of how late diagnosed autistic women face intense exhaustion because of high demand of social assimilation from female presenting individuals (2017, p.2529). In the post she also mentioned,

"For years, I asked people around me whether they thought I should do art, make music, or do anything I love because years of rejection/criticism made me scared to make decisions for myself" (AW12).

This reflected how the pressure of fitting in that altered the way many of these women presented themselves socially to other people, ultimately leading to exhaustion from performing an inauthentic identity.

Another creator explained in her video how her late diagnosed autism was due to her initial misdiagnoses with social anxiety disorder leading to her being confused most of her life regarding her symptoms and facing dismissal from people around her (AW122, see figure 3.).
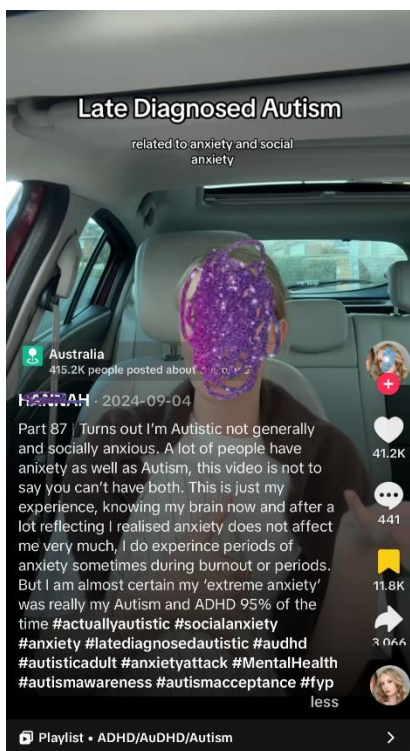

Fig. 3. Screenshot of video (AW122) explaining struggles of misdiagnoses and late diagnosis

Many creators expressed their pre-diagnosis life as marked by profound confusion, self-doubt, and identity diffusion, often stemming from misdiagnoses such as anxiety, depression, or

borderline personality disorder (AW122). This experience reflects what Hull et al. (2017, p. 2530) and Bargiela et al. (2016, p. 3285) identify as the consequence of gendered diagnostic bias: when clinical criteria fail to capture the female autism phenotype, women are not only misdiagnosed but also led down interpretive paths that alienate them from their authentic selves as seen by the use of the hashtag "#authenticity" used under the posts.

In the example of creator AW122 (see figure 3), her misdiagnosis of social anxiety disorder led to years of internal confusion and social invalidation, a common narrative among autistic women's TikTok posts. The conflation of autism with anxiety in women, noted by Cridland et al. (2014, p. 1269), obscures their ability to accurately narrate their own experiences and to receive appropriate support. This placed autistic women who posted about also experiencing symptoms of anxiety along with autistic traits in a position where self identification and self expression by recounting their experiences through social media posts became crucial to the process of reclaiming their narratives.

The erosion of the self was further compounded by the social pressures of normative femininity, which demanded emotional conformity and relational ease, traits that often conflicted with autistic women's ways of being as explained in their book, *Spectrum Women – Walking to the Beat of Autism* (Stewart et al., 2018, p. 68). These women internalized a sense of personal failure, attributing their social struggles not to neurological difference but to character flaws. The narratives from the dataset also reflected upon their past selves that faced such internalization and misunderstanding of their traits as personal failures.

However, the eventual autism diagnosis became a moment of reclamation. As several TikTok posts explained, receiving the correct diagnosis allowed for a re-framing of past experiences, not as social incompetence, but as expressions of a different neurotype. This shift aligned with Goffman's (1959, p. 22) theory of identity performance: having the correct label as enforced under the posts by frequent use of #ActuallyAutistic empowered them to consciously express a new "front stage" presentation of self, grounded in self-acceptance.

This transformation was framed in the posts through affirmative self-statements like "I'm not broken, I'm autistic," (AW41) or through the symbolic use of hashtags such as #ActuallyAutistic and #Latediagnosedautistic. As Hall (1997, p. 215) theorizes, such representational acts are not mere reflections of identity but discursive constructions, a means

through which identity is actively formed and claimed. In these performances, through the posts and their multimodal elements such as accompanying sounds, captions, the infinity sign emoji and the use of hashtags, TikTok emerged as both a therapeutic outlet and a political space for reclaiming identity and the rejection of the pathologizing narratives of misdiagnosis.

4.2 The Intersectional Autistic Femininity

The second major theme emerged from posts that explicitly navigated the compounded structural marginalization faced by autistic women. The intersectional space portrayed how gendered social norms and medical frameworks interact to obscure recognition and mischaracterize the lived experiences of autistic women (Gerschick, 2000, p. 1265). Guided by Crenshaw's (1989, p. 139) theorization of intersectionality, it was revealed how women who inhabit multiple marginalized identities, such as being both autistic and female, are often rendered invisible in spaces designed to accommodate singular axes of identity, such as the male-centric clinical paradigm of autism or the mainstream perception of the performance of gender on social media.

TikTok creators in this study used the platform's multimodal tools to articulate this erasure while expressing not only the psychological toll of being misrecognized or undiagnosed for years but also critiquing the structural conditions that produced such erasure. Their posts frequently surfaced gender-specific diagnostic barriers such as camouflaging or "masking" (Dean et al., 2017, p. 680), the dismissal of internalized symptoms (Ratto et al., 2017, p. 1699), and the pathologization of "socially acceptable" feminine behaviors like people-pleasing or emotional labor. In doing so, they resisted being folded into generic or pathologized narratives of autism and instead presented a self-authored, gendered autism identity, thus making visible the toll on their identities due to exclusion from both clinical recognition and social belonging. One creator, for example, posted a video recounting her experiences of dismissal of her autism based on her gender conformity. She noted, *It took me 26 years to get diagnosed. I was 'too polite,' 'too sensitive,' and 'too smart'"* (AW92). Her tone was reflective, and she paired the narration with clips of herself as a child, smiling, withdrawn, and fidgeting, visually juxtaposing society's perception of normalcy with the internal reality of autistic experience. This post was coded under the axial code, 'intersectional erasure', as it exposed the way gendered social expectations of

agreeability, emotional attunement, and social adeptness, actively inhibit recognition of autism in women (Dean et al., 2017, p. 687; Loomes et al., 2017, p. 468).

4.2.1 "But You Don't Look Autistic" – The Frustration of Being Unseen

As I continued my analysis of the self expression of autistic women and their presentation of femininity, I came across a recurring trope in the content published by the creators in which they posted about being policed on their looks and told that they "don't look autistic" by neurotypical people, implying that autistic people have a stereotypical physical look and that their autistic traits were invisible to the people around them. As evident from the posts, this aroused a sense of being 'othered' in the narratives of autistic women's posts within the context of the stereotypical autistic identity.

One of the most frequently expressed frustrations in the dataset was the repeated invalidation autistic women face through statements captioned as "But you don't seem autistic", followed by the creators explaining how their physical appearance, body languages and facial expressions do not confirm to the mainstream expectation of an autistic appearance. These remarks, often recounted in a tone of exasperation or disbelief, point to a pervasive stereotype rooted in neurotypical and male-centric assumptions of what autism should look like. As several creators noted in their posts, these microinvalidations contributed to their delayed or missed diagnosis, identity confusion, and an ongoing struggle to be taken seriously within both medical and social contexts. For example, a creator expressed her frustration of not being believed about her autism because of her conventionally attractive appearance and said,

"The way appearances factor into the believability of an autism diagnosis is crazy to me. I have had people tell me that there's no way I'm telling the truth because 'I don't look Autistic AT ALL!!'" (AW45, see fig.4).
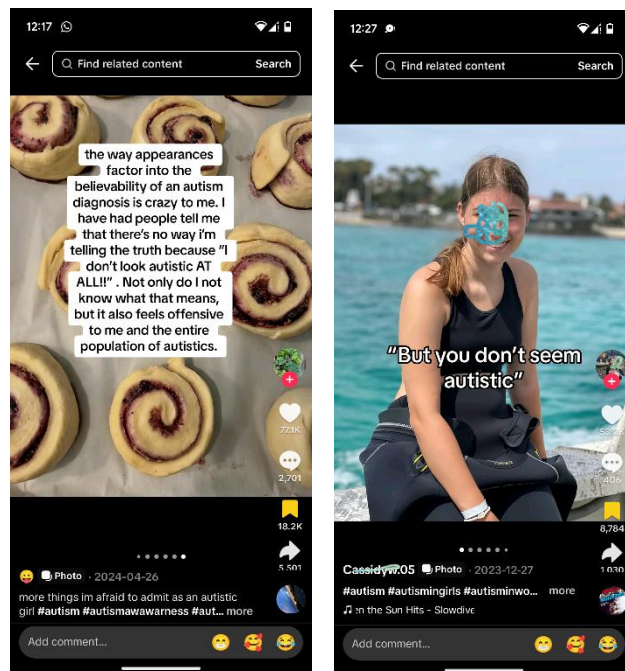

Fig. 4. Left: Screenshot of AW45 expressing frustration of not looking autistic enough. Right: AW46 expressing the same theme

Reflecting upon their experiences of being constantly dismissed as not physically seeming autistic enough, these posts sought to expose the intersectional invisibility these women faced in their daily lives. By calling out these statements as "offensive to the entire population of autistics" (AW45, see fig. 4), posts like these recounted the experience of not being socially recognized as autistic or woman enough due to failing to confirm to the stereotypical presentations of autism or socially acceptable feminine traits. Reflecting upon diagnostic frameworks of autism that were constructed around male presenting individuals (Gould and Ashton Smith, 2011, p.36), this marginalization echoed what Crenshaw (1989, p.139) explored as structural intersectionality, in which institutional and social systems often failed to situate individuals existing at the intersection of multiple identities, resulting in erasure of their diverse identities. Creators in the dataset voiced how their "sensitivity", "quietness" or "compliance" were perceived and interpreted socially as feminine traits rather than as sings of underlying autism, mirroring the findings of Hull et. al. (2020, p.308) where they argued how diagnostic criteria diluted and overlooked the possible signifiers of the female autistic phenotype.

Through the posts I analyzed, it became clear from the narratives of recounting dismissal of autism in women how women were expected to perform a certain neurotypical femininity as a social survival strategy, that compounded to further invalidation of their authentic selves which were judged incongruent to what autism was "supposed" to look like as opposed to how these women chose to present themselves as. A post described being invalidated by a clinical psychologist on the basis of appearance which read, "…she told me that I looked too well dressed and sociable to have autism" (AW41), while another post read, "I was known as the polite kid, always smiling, so no one ever looked deeper" (AW26). These framing of these messages did not just narrate stories of invalidation and discrimination of autistic women but rather revealed how visual and behavioral conformity to stereotypical gender expectations contributed to diminish the recognition of autistic traits in women to the point where social norms failed to recognize female autism as its own distinct identity divorced from the common narratives of autistic behaviors more aligned with male presenting autistic individual. By publicly vocalizing and documenting these stories, these creators questioned the narrow social perception about autism pervasive in not just the clinical discourse of autism but the socio cultural narratives of autistic identities that tended to minimize the nuances of characteristics of female presenting autistic individuals. Gerschick's (2000, p.1266) conceptualization of cultural invisibility was reflected in these self aware narratives where autistic women's lived realities did not align with the dominant social norms of autism, rendering their experiences invisible in both clinical and social settings. The focus on their outward presentations, overlapping traits like the ability to maintain eye contact, dress in a socially acceptable style, adhering to normative femininity, contributed to a sense of dislocation or alienation in their narratives. In the posts, they expressed feeling excluded from autism communities that prioritized "male centric" traits like stimming in public and limited verbal communication (AW68, AW97, AW103).

Moreover, posts also revealed the tension between the invalidation and the narratives of self advocacy about their presentations of autism. For example, one creator expressed that despite having a formal diagnosis, people around her still continued to challenge her identity because she "appeared too articulate and well spoken" and "made a lot of eye contact" (AW62). Although it could not be singularly determined that the self advocacy in multiple posts arose consequently as a pushback against the invalidations expressed by the creators, but the

relationship between both narratives reproduced resistance as closely tied with the identity of publicly active autistic women content creators.

Another dominant narrative reflecting upon representations of autistic femininity expressed through many posts revolved around how empathy and heightened sensitivity in autistic women were misperceived as "personality quirks". The expression of emotional sensitivity and empathy as traits of autism were some of the most misunderstood characteristics according to the narratives of self representation in the dataset. Many creators narrated experiences of a high degree of emotional awareness, relational attunement and a heightened sense of sensory sensitivity. However, they explained how these traits were too often dismissed as overly emotional dispositions and eccentricities, all labels that undermined their autistic identities and instead misrepresented them as exaggerated or dramatic anomalies. Through self aware posts calling out such mislabeling, the posts exposed an underlying gender bias. This also reflected a layered issue of intersectional erasure, where both autism as well as femininity were shaped by a normative lens upheld by gendered and ableist expectations (Crenshaw, 1989, p.142; Shefcyk, 2015, p.129).

In a post, the creator expressed how she was always a "super sensitive and empathetic girl, to the point that I was called dramatic when something seemingly small would upset me" (AW84).
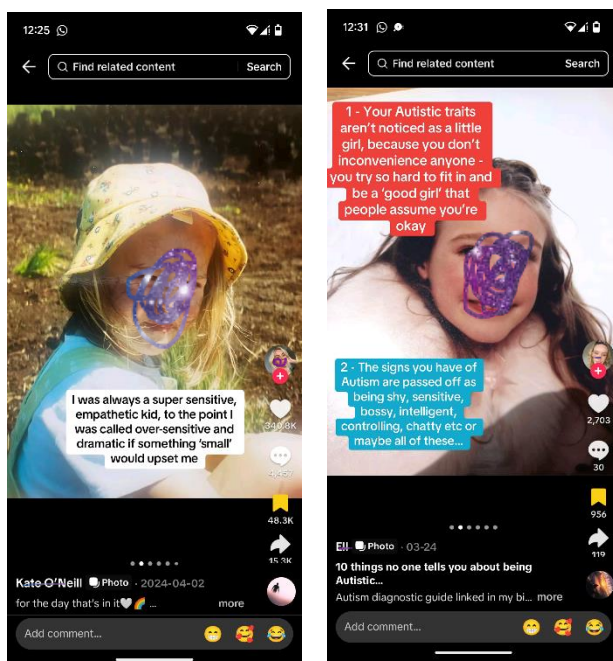

Fig. 5. Left: AW84 explaining empathy masked as over sensitivity. Right: AW32 depicting masking as a 'good girl'

Through many posts, creators expressed how their characteristics of empathizing deeply with others and responding to the world around them in a highly sensitive way was misperceived as an eccentric charm. In a post, a story of falling apart of a relationship of an autistic girl and her neurotypical partner was mockingly commented upon (AW13, see fig. 6). The partner in focus admitted that he had expected her to "…fix my low self esteem, my financial problems…through the sheer power of her Tinkerbell energy" (AW13). Some other labels he used for her had included, "mystical and whimsical" and "cutely quirky" which were mocked in the post to showcase neurotypical expectations of romantic partners from autistic women. The comparison of the autistic woman to fictional characters and genres like 'Tinkerbell', 'whimsical' and 'mystical' revealed an othering narrative of how they were perceived. Characters like Tinkerbell from popular animated films like Peter Pan (Walt Disney, 1953) represent a subservient, infantilized and minimized version of femininity that is charming but unable to assert its own agency and often appeared in a supportive role to aid the male main character, like Peter Pan. In this post the comments of the man represented a childlike, fantastical femininity that could be called out as a dehumanizing representational logic for the daily struggles and symptoms experienced by autistic women that the post attempted to explore. It revealed how autistic women were fetishized for their innocence, difference and emotional vulnerability which too often got "othered" through drawing parallels with fictional or fantastical characters.

In intersectional terms, as Crenshaw (1989, p.188) emphasized, marginalization cannot be studied through a single axis frameworks, posts like these explored the dual struggle of being an autistic woman in interpersonal relationship dynamics. First, as women, they were expected to perform emotional labor and be compliant in relationships and secondly, as autistic individuals, their emotionality, sensitivity and differences were romanticized and pathologized. The creators of the post attempted to subvert these expectations by critiquing this dynamic through recounting real life stories and using sarcasm to express their dissent using the statement in the caption, "He loves the hair dye but hates the meltdown", commenting on how neurotypical demands in relationships led to a rejection of the full range of expression of the autistic women's identity.

Egner (2022, p.348) argued that digital self presentation enabled people to reclaim their own narrative authority. Some creators used their posts to subvert the trope of the 'manic pixie dream girl' (AW13, see fig. 6) which called out the aesthetic commodification and fetishization

of autistic femininity. The 'manic pixie dream girl' is a term coined in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin which explored the quirky, ethereal female figure in media who lacks a strong narrative purpose beyond enlightening the life of an apathetic, white, male, heterosexual, middle class protagonist (Gouck, 2021, p.1). Signified by her lack of narrative agency, the manic pixie dream girl symbolism was used in the posts to reveal how interpersonal relationship dynamics enforced a similar expectation of agentic erasure from autistic women. The post served a dual function of not just exposing these misrepresentations but also re-humanizing autistic traits and behaviors in women by questioning the normalized rejection of their misunderstood characteristics.

Some creators spoke of going undiagnosed into their twenties or thirties because they were able to "perform" neurotypical femininity, a performance that was shaped by years of adapting to patriarchal social norms. This exemplified what Stewart et al. (2018, p. 60) framed as a "survival strategy" by adopting socially rewarding behaviors that mask their difference, often at the expense of emotional wellbeing, self-understanding, and authentic self-expression. In these posts, creators used text overlays, voiceovers, and ironic audio trends to illustrate the disjuncture between how they were perceived as quirky, interesting personalities and how they felt internally, which was predominantly misunderstood. One creator used a popular song by Billie Eilish, called, 'Bittersuite' with the lyrics, "I gotta be careful, I gotta watch what I say, gotta hope it all goes away…" (Eilish, 2021) along with her post talking about her lesser known traits that were fetishized and dismissed as personality eccentricities. The use of these lyrics demonstrated the constant push and pull between the choices of conforming to the social and gender norm for survival or to express their authentic selves safely without the fear of being misperceived.
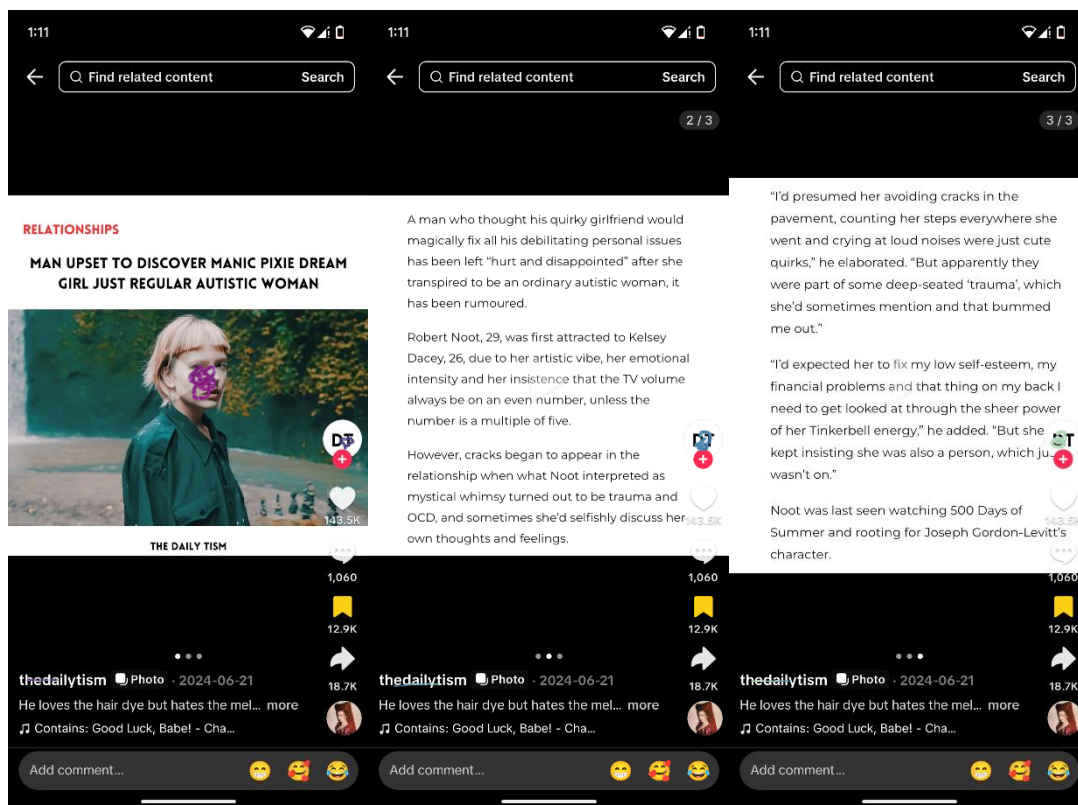
Fig. 6. Post AW13 autistic woman being mislabeled as a 'quirky manic pixie dream girl' by her partner

Posts also referenced the female autism phenotype, a term that encompassed traits such as greater social and communication skills, internalizing emotions, and more "feminine" or gender confirming special interests like an interest in human psychology, makeup and art. These traits are often excluded from standardized diagnostic criteria, contributing to widespread underdiagnosis (Hull et al., 2017b, p. 712). For example, one user explained, *"My intense obsession with makeup wasn't seen as autistic, it was just 'cute' because I was a girl"* (AW32).

This category exemplified the gendered dimensions of misrepresentation, where autistic women were often disbelieved or misread due to their ability (or succumbing to social pressure) to mask autistic traits. The phenomenon of camouflaging, as described by Dean et al. (2017, p. 680), entails the suppression or strategic modification of autistic behaviors in order to conform to expected gender norms such as being polite, emotionally expressive, or socially accommodating. TikTok posts describing these experiences frequently highlighted how socially "acceptable" traits like making eye contact, being academically high-achieving, or engaging in emotional labor were used against them to dismiss the possibility of autism.

4.2.2 Masking and Unmasking – TikTok as a Safe Space

Another prominent subtheme that emerged within the categorization of autistic femininity was the journey of oscillation between masking and unmasking. From the posts, the narratives surrounding the processes of masking were framed not as personal compulsions or conscious choices of self expression, but as socially conditioned performances of identities that were deeply intertwined with hegemonic gender norms and ableist social expectations. Dean et. al. (2017, p.680) and Hull et. al. (2017, p. 2532) conceptualized the act of camouflaging or masking as a set of behaviors that involve the conscious or unconscious suppression of autistic traits to navigate neurotypical social standards to achieve a sense of social safety. The narratives of the TikTok posts revealed how the processes of unmasking were not simply abandonment of their masked selves but a radical initiative to reclaim their selfhood and challenge the neurotypical social scripts that had previously rendered their authentic identities invisible.

Several posts referenced childhood photographs of autistic women captured doing activities where they were unknowingly masking their autistic traits and were, at the time, misperceived and ignored. In a video, a creator explained using a smiling childhood photograph with the on-screen text reading, *"This was me learning to be 'normal'"* (AW87). In her caption, she mentioned how she was constantly praised for her well-behaved nature and quietness but later realized that those were indicators of anxiety and masking her autistic traits. The post, combined with the caption and her childhood photograph explored a layered performance, with the childhood photograph with the smile evoking a sense of normalcy and ease, while the caption deconstructed the internal feelings of discomfort and masking.
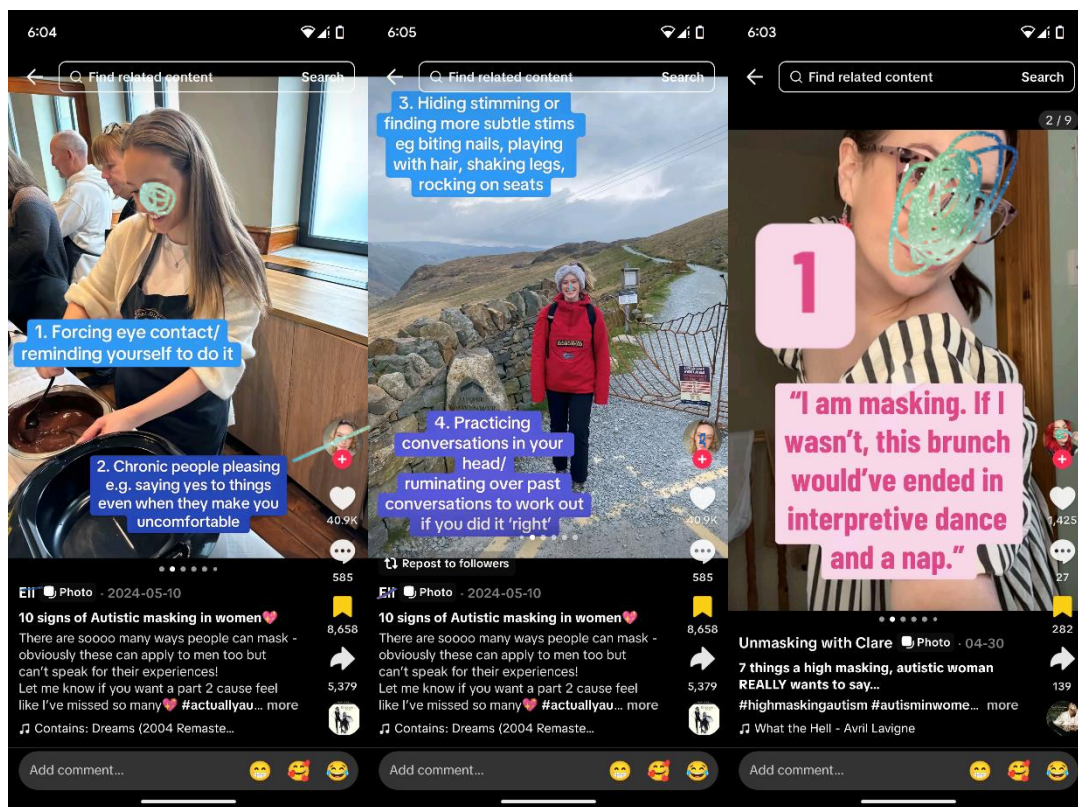
Fig. 7 right: AW93, center: AW78, left: AW96 all depicting high masking traits in autistic women's posts

This subtheme was also guided by Goffman's dramaturgical model, where socializing was conceptualized as a performance through which individuals construct their identities in response to the normative expectations (1959, pp. 17-22). Through posts outlining the processes of masking, creators expressed a front stage behavior such as people pleasing, controlled eye contact, quiet stimming was arising not from comfort but survival. In a video, the creator explained, "…I would mask because if I didn't people around me would observe how different I am and would not be able to support my needs and would probably question or exclude me from the friend group" (AW33). The tension between the inner experiences of having different needs and the outward presentation of masking, reflected the idea of framing representation that happens not due to mirroring reality but as a socio-cultural process of meaning construction, circulation and contestation (Hall, 1997, pp. 234-236). From the posts, it is evident that the masking was not simply a result of the inherent tendency of autistic individuals to camouflage their autism but rather a result of how autistic women were influenced by the social pressure from their environments and social groups to perform an "appropriate" femininity under the gaze of dominant gender norms and an ableist culture.

Unmasking was discussed as a process to gradually start expressing the authentic autistic identity traits in safe spaces after a lot of late diagnosed autistic creators felt comfortable in their identities. Some creators chose to post unfiltered videos of themselves expressing vulnerable emotions such as crying and physical stimming using their bodies or objects like stress balls or toys. In one video post, the creator was wearing no makeup, she was in her bed, wrapped in her quilt, wearing her pajamas and recording her video while crying vulnerably and saying,

"...no one understands how hard it was for me to unmask after suffering from intense burnout after masking constantly for all my life...I was not prepared for the burnout that comes with realizing you're autistic...it has affected every single part of my life and allistics don't seem to care and call me lazy...." (AW117).

From her expressive tone, comfortable body language without the pressure to make eye contact with the camera and her ability to show vulnerable emotions in her post intentionally, she attributed TikTok and her account as a safe space to begin to unmask and document her journey. Unmasking in this sense appeared in the dataset to be a deeply impactful, emotional and a political gesture of reclaiming space and one's authentic self expression. These acts of self expression and disclosure can be read as what Egner (2022, p.360) called as critical sense making where self representation became a way to rewrite stereotyped narratives of autism. Unmasking did not just represent the shedding away of formerly learnt social scripts but rather it signified reclamation of agency and identity; particularly for autistic women who had been excluded from timely recognition due to the gender biases in the diagnostic criteria (Gould and Ashton Smith, 2011, p. 43).

The discussion of autistic burnout was frequently appearing in the narratives on the posts accompanying the discourse around masking. The experiences of burnout were talked about not as regular fatigue symptoms but a consequence of sustained emotional repression and prolonged sensory overload. In a post, the creator narrated, *"I mask with my facial expressions even when I'm with my friends and close family and when I get burnt out I require at least 48 hours of complete isolation to be able to function again."* (AW94). Masking leading to burnout was established as a common pattern in the dataset which lead to the understanding of why many narratives centered around masking through story telling, recounting their past experiences and documenting their live emotional responses, all practices used to make the experiences of

masking and burnout associated with it significantly visible through their narratives. This compounded in toppling the effects of years of gaslighting and erasure of their identities medically as well as socially.

Evidence of facial expressions being perceived as rude in social contexts while they were just muted expressions authentic to autistic women's natural demeanor, gave more insight into the pressure of masking on autistic women. A creator wrote in their post, *"My resting bitch face was just me feeling unmasked and relaxed after years of masking, I'm finally burnt out"* (AW46). These representations resonate with Hull et al. (2020, p. 312), who described autistic burnout as a condition marked by cognitive fatigue, loss of functioning, and withdrawal which was often exacerbated in women who masked to meet socially constructed gender roles. Morever, creators did not depict burnout as a personal failing, but as a systemic outcome of existing in a world that demanded constant conformity and penalized their difference.

### 4.3 The Performance of Identity for Social Change

Further analysis of the various forms the performance of autistic identity for autistic women on TikTok revealed a focus on they use the practice of constructing their identities on the platform not just for self expression but also for advocacy and educational purposes. This broader theme used deductively guided concepts such as Hall's (1997, p. 234-237) theory of representational practices, Goffman's (1959, p.17-30) dramaturgical model of identity performances using the metaphors of the front and backstage identities and Egner's (2022, p.353-359) framing of self representation as constantly evolving processes of critical sense making. These conceptualizations aided the interpretation of how creators actively constructed and negotiated their identities in unique and creative ways to encourage a social change and awareness in the autistic communities centering autistic women. Rather than framing static narratives of the autistic self, the analyzed posts depicted the women's autistic identities as fluid and contextual constructions which were performed through various visual aesthetics, memes, use of text captions, symbols and tone of voice. Two distinct sub themes emerged inductively from the dataset : First, the use of humor and irony through which relatable, comedic narrative techniques and meme formats were engaged as tools for subverting dominant stereotypes and asserting new ways of self expression and deeper insight into everyday lives of autistic women. Secondly, education and self advocacy through which creators illustrated their own experiences

as guidance tools and advice mechanisms about traits of autism in women, meltdown and burnout stories and other storytelling for awareness. These subthemes gave insight into how self representation on TikTok formed a dynamic stage enabling the reclamation of narrative authority and reframing public understanding of autistic women.

4.3.2 Humor and Irony as Modes of Resistance

This subtheme drew on Lewin Jones's (2015, p.83) argument that humor functions as a rhetorical tool to make sensitive topics more socially acceptable and accessible and Burgers et.
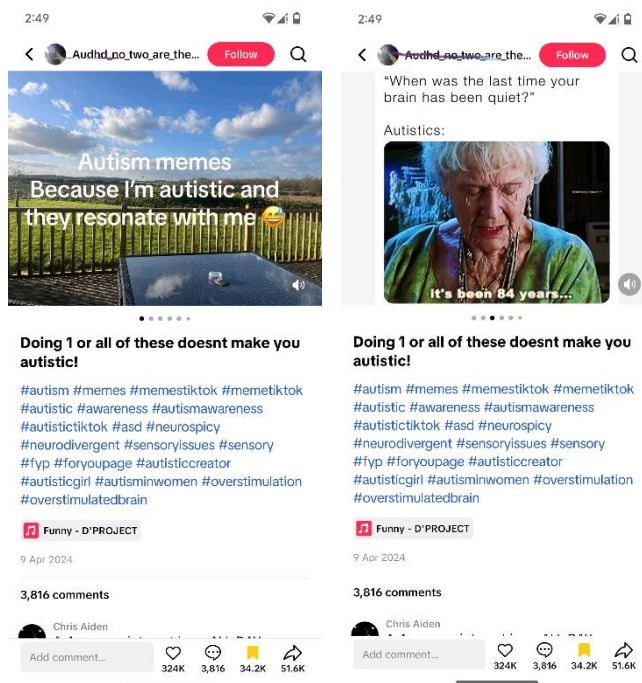
al.'s (2011, p.189) conceptualization of irony as a device for implied critique on an issue. These lenses allowed to interpret the use of humor and irony in various forms in the posts as intentional communicative strategies used by the creators to convey specific messages. They used memes, stitched videos and trending sounds to narrate their lived experiences in a lighthearted and satirical manner.

Fig. 9 post carousal of AW106 Autism memes the creator found relatable

One creator posted a carousal post listing the autistic memes she found relatable which contained images from popular media which were turned into memes (see fig. 9). This post articulated the use of irony to explain with the help of a Titanic reference how the creator's mind was under a constant state of restlessness because of her autistic nervous system. Although the

tone of the memes was humorous, the post itself discussed serious daily life struggles of autistic women like in this case, the lack of self regulation that affected her mental capacity. The choice of meme format in the post served as both a self aware performance of her traits as well as an underlying critique of neurotypical expectations of a peaceful and "quiet brain" (AW106) as the general way of functioning. The audience was intentionally invited to laugh but not at the experience of the autistic woman herself, rather at the social norms that invalidate or make the autistic experience obscure.

A different post featured the creator performing her uncommon autistic traits in the format of a short comedy skit. Traits like meltdowns and stimming were exaggerated with theatric delivery. For acting out sensory overload, she pretended to be surrounded by loud noise in a night club and shook her body, letting her hands fidget with her clothes to express overwhelm (AW114). The background music used in this post was a funny sound that gave the impression of a lighthearted comedy skit. Despite the overt 'front stage' impression of the humorous skit, the implied meaning or the 'back stage' presentation behind the video revealed a sense of channeling frustration and bonding with the audience over demonstrating the lived experience of going through sensory overwhelm. The form of self expression that posts like these took were of educational storytelling reflecting what Lewin Jones (2015, p.83) assessed as the use of educational content to destigmatize narratives. The use of humor and irony reframed the traits that were pathologized by medical languages of autistic traits like 'autistic burnout' as everyday realities of autistic women that could be communicated through relatable content.

4.3.2 Advocacy and Education as Forms of Self Representation

This subtheme arising inductively from the dataset captured how autistic women used the platform as a space to inform, educate and advocate about their own experiences to potentially influence and aid other undiagnosed audiences or those exploring their autism. These advocacy initiatives served as performances of the self where communicating knowledge became a form of asserting identity, taking authority of their own experiences as well as supporting a collective understanding of the unique ways autism could potentially manifest in women.
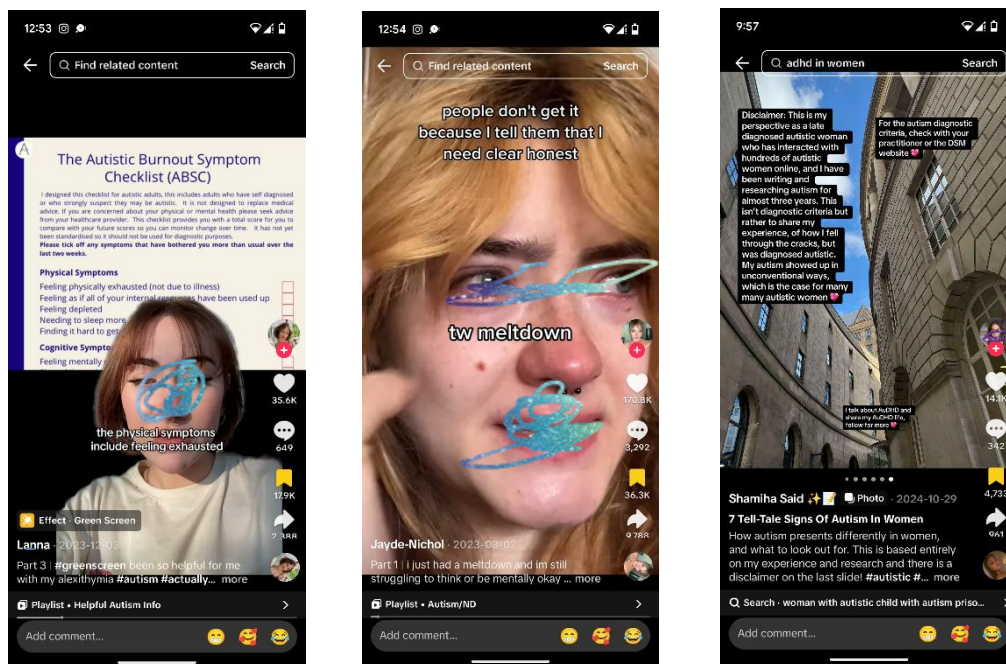
Fig. 10. Posts AW78, AW85 and AW95 recounting their experiences while advocating for audiences looking for signs of autism

The narratives in the dataset frequently discussed videos titled, "15 less talked about signs you might be autistic" (AW78) or "what an autistic meltdown may look like" (AW85) where creators listed traits in informatively organized posts and text based posts which had a clear educational tone and intent behind them. These posts were directed at potentially autistic women seeking help in identifying traits of autism or who might not feel represented in the mainstream media narratives evident from usage of phrases like, "telltale signs of autism." or "uncommon traits.." etc (see fig. 10).

One creator, appeared in a softly lit space and narrated her video in a grounded choice explaining how "meltdowns can have different looks and don't always look like loud screaming" (AW89). The visual choice of appearing without makeup, as if unmasked, and seated at a distance in a clean environment suggested the intention to create safety and intimacy with the audience, signaling a shift from a front stage performance to a more laid back and vulnerable back stage self presentation. This served a dual purpose of spreading awareness, as the post was accompanied by the hashtag #autismawareness and to also validate the lived experiences of other autistic women.

Another way in which forms of advocacy showed up involved creators rectifying the misconceptions about autistic women and their traits. In a viral video, the creator said, "you can be autistic and make eye contact or be social or have long term partnerships." This post received millions of likes and it linked the individual experience of the creator with the broader narratives surrounding stereotypical and restrictive ways of viewing autistic women's lives. Egner's (2022, p.362) concept of sense making made relevant parallels here demonstrating how narratives can be built and rebuilt in an evolving discourse especially in the context of marginalized groups such as autistic women.

The posts also outlined their clear educational and informative purposes by adopting an informal but serious tone, mimicking the format of informational guides which embed personal advice through anecdotes. Some posts included relevant resources and mentioned, "visit my bio for a diagnostic guide" (AW115). These rhetorical framings positioned them as not just content creators but also the brokers of information in an alternative space that prioritized recognition and wellbeing of people from their community. This is what Brownlow and O'Dell (2016, p.169) would frame as the online discourse where the boundaries between personal narratives and public advocacy would become fluid.

These posts also challenged the traditional power dynamics of medical discourse and community support by effectively going beyond the traditional barriers of medical gatekeeping and revealing their experiences with diagnosis, clinical help etc with the audiences to help them with their experiences. Advocacy, became a reparative process which prioritized the agency of the lived experiences of autistic women and promoted the idea of a supportive community that had been neglected.

The performance of advocacy was not just about sharing symptoms and facts but rather a political act of self representation through empowerment.

In several cases, creators used meme culture to subvert traditional labels associated with autism. By participating in viral trends and remixing them with autistic-themed overlays, these users inserted neurodivergent perspectives into mainstream digital discourse. This reflects what Brownlow and O'Dell (2016, p. 168) describe as educational framing: the reappropriation of public discourse to highlight marginalized experiences through accessible, peer-created media.

4.4 Visibility and Platformed Self Representation – Affordances shaping Identity Construction

Visibility on the multimodal platform of TikTok was more than just modes of being seen but rather narratively charged and technologically engaged, structured process of presenting oneself to both human and algorithmic forces that shape the platform. This theme brought together the amalgamation of both high level and low level affordances where high level affordances mainly, visibility was guided and aided by lower level affordances like editability, searchability worked in tandem to structure and shape the narratives that autistic women attempted to convey through their posts. Drawing on Treem and Leonardi's (2013, p. 148) conceptualization of affordances as relative elements that support and shape the emergence of narrative communication, I explored how the practices of self representation were further molded by the platform logics of TikTok.

High level affordances namely, visibility and persistence emerged as crucial modes shaping how autistic women's narratives were represented on the platform. TikTok's algorithmically curated "for you page" was used as a hashtag under many posts to push the narratives on the forefront of the discourse of autistic femininity and content related to the autistic women's identity. This hashtag enhanced the searchability of the content curated by the creators thus pushing the visibility of their content upwards. Lower level affordance use like this, contributed to the wider traction received on the viral posts that were most interacted with not just within the autistic community but also reaching wider and more diverse audiences as was evident in the number of likes that surpassed 1 million on some of the posts that exceeded the number of followers on their accounts. This provided a deeper insight into how by capitalizing on the affordances of the platform, narratives of self representation may diversify into practices going beyond the self and into community building by connecting more like mined and relevant audinces.

The various forms of performances of self I explored took advantage of a myriad of affordances that allowed the creators to not just produce narratives but also interact with them repeatedly by playing out the algorithmized self that Bimo and Bhandari (2020, p. 15) conceptualized as the intrapersonal engagement of users with their own content. This was relevant in my study as the narratives centered self representation processes that involved and

reproduced narratives that were deeply self aware and hence extremely personalized and well curated using for example, childhood photographs, selfies, personal photographs etc.

The narratives themselves primarily centered meaningful visibility since the focus stemmed from mis representative narratives that the creators sought to resolve and drift from. Visibility in the posts as well as the narratives being communicated through them echoed a sense of self understanding, documenting, and piecing together the fragments of their lives that had previously been fractured. This is why the use of intimate language, personal photographs, unmasked physical presentations in videos signified reclaiming their lost visibility. The use of platform features and the lower level affordances supported and encouraged this process of repositioning the marginalized narratives within the broader discourse communities of autism and neurodivergence without gatekeeping barriers like less follower counts or non viral videos that also reached wider audiences with the effective use of hashtags. Many posts included diverse hashtags like #Audhd #neurodivergence #autismawareness etc that went beyond the niche of autistic women.
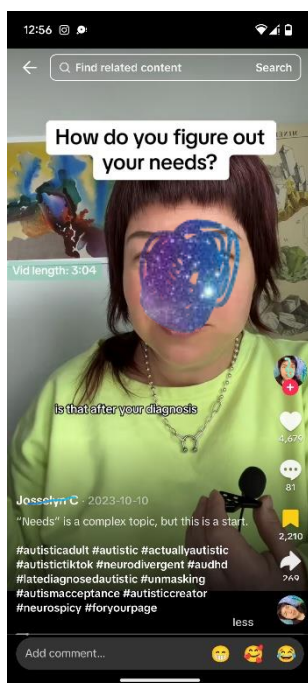

Fig. 11 Post AW12 professional setup with microphone, high quality video and audio with bright lighting and targeted hashtags

Many creators used two contrasting visual techniques, one with highly well composed and "professional" setups and the other candid and raw. These aesthetic decisions were

strategically executed to support the meanings and the narratives they were carrying. For example, one creator who discussed common signs of autism appeared in a well lit room, seated in a minimal environment, speaking into a microphone(AW12). Her appearance was blending well with the background, signifying a planned and rehearsed delivery. The presence of a ring light further suggested a front stage setup.

fig. 12 post AW44 showcasing a candid setup with unmasked appearance to show vulnerability

In contrast, another creator (AW44) uploaded a video filmed from a lower angle in her bedroom, wearing casual clothes and expressing a breakdown about her meltdown symptoms. This deliberate level of vulnerability demonstrated a different type of visibility, one grounded in intimate vulnerable self expression that relayed messages of spontaneity, communicating a sense of direct, personal connection with the audiences (see fig. 12).

As established by Ronzhyn et. al. (2022, 3165), community building is an outcome of the interplay of different affordances, so was observed through the patterns in the dataset. The posts although individually collected represented a well networked sample of autistic women's voices connected not just by their shared themes in the content but also by the use of common hashtags like #autismawareness or #latediagnosedautistic, recurring relevant audios like 'Anxiety' by Doechii and emojis like the infinity sign and the rainbow emoji, both of which symbolized autistic identity. These factors determined that not only were creators aiming to represent

themselves individually but also intending to consolidate a community of like minded people through the usage of such elements that enhanced the searchability of their content. The popularity of the hashtag #actuallyautistic underpinned the trend of autistic women naming their previously misunderstood symptoms and correcting them as 'autistic traits'. For example, a creator stated, "All those years of suffering unexplainable anxiety about basic tasks while being perceived by others, and now I realize I was never lazy but I am #actuallyautistic" (AW64). The use of the hashtag in such posts became a way to not only identify misrecognized symptoms but to encourage others to come out with their own stories by using this hashtag and be seen for who they really are, marking their public recognition as a means of relating with one another and participating in a movement of uncovering misdiagnosed narratives. Hashtags did not simply serve a searchability function but rather became symbols of coming out stories and tangible identifiers of the autistic women's most shared experiences.

The hashtag #autistiktok also stood out as not just a searchable function but an active label for the niche community for autistic women's voices and narratives. TikTok does not explicitly outline tangible spaces demarcated for specific audiences or users but through what Nagy and Neff referred to as "imagined affordances" (2015, p.15) such assumed communities with negotiable but assumed shared characteristics were formed. #Autistiktok which resembles other subcultures on TikTok such as #Booktok represented a collective movement towards the visibility of autistic women with no gatekept factors that exclude users unlike the medical models of autism. Through this feature, a space of inclusivity, accommodating diverse narratives related to the autistic experiences were represented. The sense of "imagined" community did not come through merely a label such as #autistiktok but through its intended purpose of an assumed safe space evident in the encouragement to bring forth personal experiences through the use of the hashtag, the assurance of acceptance and validation from the other users that interact with the posts by liking, sharing, commenting and saving them, and the sense of belonging through being able to identify as a member of the "autistiktok" shared space.

Visibility was a contested and complex issue in the narratives shared on TikTok for autistic women. As investigated before, the shared experiences of "not appearing to be autistic enough" formed a dominant narrative of being perceived as invisible. The attempts for these creators to make themselves visible were constructed not only through verbal narratives but also

through how they chose to make their representations "appear". In several video based posts, creators shared their authentic selves, allowing themselves a space to express their unique identities through demonstrating how they process their own emotions and thoughts. These performances took the form of documenting their personal journeys. For example, a creator made several videos documenting living through each day as an autistic girl, by using the introduction, "Welcome to day four of a girl on the spectrum going to get my braces removed at the dentists" and in another video from the same series she said, "get ready with me, this is day eight of a girl on the spectrum…" (AW117). These string of videos documenting each day did not just get posted with the intention of reaching an audience but also to engage with their own selves to assert their agency, document their lives and had an intrapersonal tone to them as they interacted with their own "algorithmized selves". As Bimo and Bhandari (2020, p.143) outlined, the emerging new ways of interacting with oneself on social media has paved way for a nuanced understanding of self representation. For autistic women whose narratives established a push and pull dynamic with regards to visibility, reclaiming their own voices outside of the involvement of the 'other', in this case, educating the audiences, creating relatable content for other autistic women etc, solidified a sense of reclaiming individual agency and impact. This was especially impactful as many of the narratives carried the essence of a loss of identity and negative perception and involvement of others that lead to an othering of the unique individual perspective of autistic women in forms of consistent marginalization, generalizations and other forms of erasure. Through making content that engaged with their own contextual realities like vlogging everyday mundane tasks while giving commentary on being an autistic woman, these narratives reclaimed and attempted to resolve their previous othering by re asserting their personalized spaces in their vlogs where they controlled the media logics of their own posts and storytelling, for example, through decisions like deciding chronology of the videos, their own intro and outro catch phrases, taking a five second stimming break during the video etc were unique ways to reclaim space within the autistic community.

These contrasting and diverse self representations illustrated how visibility was not a static state but a strategic and personalized practice to translate the narratives and communicate their meaning making on the material platform of TikTok. Creators modulated their voices or dressed up to convey their unique messages, while exploring TikTok as their space of self expression. The construction of narratives and the curation of content created this niche

community of TikTok a safe space for autistic women's diverse representations, capitalizing upon the concept of imagined affordances (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p.5) to assume TikTok as a space facilitating and encouraging their self representation.

5. Conclusion

The research analyzed how autistic women represent themselves on TikTok and the role the platform and its affordances played in mediating their self representations. Analyzing a sample of 122 posts and having used qualitative multimodal thematic analysis, the study aimed to explored the themes of self representation and platform affordances and responded to the research gap of under recognition of autistic women's self representational practices on social media.

5.1 Key Findings

The research questions investigated how autistic women represented themselves on TikTok and how the affordances shaped their narratives. The findings revealed how creators engaged in intentional, complex and diverse forms of identity performances that questioned and challenged existing stereotypes about autistic women, in regards with the assumed appearances and overt identifiers of autism in women which were discussed as male centric ideas about autistic identity. Autistic women's narratives distinguished themselves from those stereotypes and established their own self expression grounded in diverse intentions ranging from representing the undiagnosed and misdiagnosed childhood experiences, to distinct traits of autistic femininity aligning with Hull et. al.'s (2020, p.308) conceptualization of the female autistic phenotype which was also referenced in some of the posts.

By utilizing TikTok's multimodal capacities like sounds, on screen captions, hashtags and affordances, the posts explored a full range of emotional expression including vulnerable and personal video content and humorous memes that exposed and educated the various facets and traits of autism in women.

One of the most significant and pervasive findings, which emerged inductively, included the recurrent usage of childhood photographs and videos in the posts presented with captions or voice overs such as "I went 26 years undiagnosed" or "I am doing this for her". This narrative not only reclaimed a sense of lost identity in childhood for a lot of these autistic women creators, but it also discussed the rampant long term effects of diagnostic and social invisibility.

The creators used the imagery of their past selves as evidence of misrecognition which illustrated a form of retrospective and speculative sense making that echoed the concepts of symbolic resistance (Egner, 2022, p.243; Hall,1997, 214).

Another significant theme that emerged was the high frequency of educational and informative content where narratives revolved around discussion of lists of signs of autism, burnout and meltdowns. While I set out to explore the dynamics of identity performance on social media for autistic women, the study also revealed how creators leveraged the affordances of the platform for activism and advocacy where they did not just represent but also taught about autism in women. this advocacy and educational content was not a straightforward delivery of information but engaging and creative ways of storytelling through skits, theatrics as well as the use of humor, irony and memes to resonate with broader audiences.

Finally, the interplay and tension between visibility and vulnerability were significant in posts that produced on one hand curated and well directed, scripted narrations and on the other hand raw and unfiltered content displaying vulnerable emotions and the onset of a meltdown in real time., suggesting a highly reflexive engagement with the platform and its imagined affordances producing a safe space for self expression, also reflecting its interactive and robust algorithmic setup.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research set out to contribute and reflect upon the theoretical discussions on self representation, intersectionality and affordances in social media spaces like TikTok. While Hall's (1997) notion of representation and othering had long been central in media studies, my research illustrated the urgency and relevance of extending such analysis to autistic and gender marginalized communities. In particular, it reinforced Egner's (2022, p.351) assertion for understanding online self presentations as critical acts of meaning making that challenge marginalized perspectives.

The findings encouraged a crucial gendered dimension to research on autistic identitites. The conept of the "female autism phenotype" previously speculated by Hull et. al. (2020) was evident directly and indirectly in the posts that outlined the traits like sensitivity, high masking and internalized emotions that were unique to autistic women. Crenshaw's (1991) foundational

theory of intersectional provided a grounded and traditional feminist framework for analyzing the distinct features of the women's autistic identity representation on TikTok. It problematized how autism converges with gender to produce intersectional struggles and experiences as revealed by the narratives of the TikTok posts.

Affordance theory was pervasive throughout the analysis as TikTok as a platform engaged with each practice of self representation by engaging low and high level affordances with a centralized focus on visibility and the algorithmized self that worked in tandem to refine, locate and distribute narratives across the platform to form an interpersonal as well as intrapersonal engagement with the narratives of self representation of autistic women.

5.3 Future Research and Limitations

Despite its contributions, the research was not without its limitations in the field of autism studies. The primary limitation lay in the exclusive focus on self representation, with less integration of audience reception of the representational practices that could reveal the extent of consequences of the self representation for autistic women on social media. While comments were omitted for ethical and methodological justifications, future research could analyze them to expand the narratives of how autistic women are perceived and how people respond to their self representation. Such work could benefit from exploring identity situated in the broader autistic and allistic communities, relevant for marginalized creators and narratives.

The research did not analyze the medical discourse surrounding autistic women directly however it did address issues and questions about how they respond and interpret the discourse. Future research could examine how creators explicitly engage with or challenge clinical discourse through interacting with clinical professionals online. Personal interviews could be a more suitable medium to investigate such narratives.

From the platform logics perspective, the research explored the interplay of visibility and vulnerability and how the affordances were used by the creators to amplify their messages in diverse ways. However, as Treema and Leonardi (2013, p.151) argued, affordances arose from the relational interaction between users and the platform technologies, and therefore imposed a possibility of limitations instead of affordances when user intents and platform logics could misalign. Affordances could also introduce constraints when issues like self censorship, shadow

banning, the platform penalizing non conformity etc arise. Thus visibility could turn into surveillance and restrain self expression.

Finally, future work could examine the cultural differences in how autistic women across national and linguistic backgrounds engage with representational practices on TikTok. Given my study only analyzed English language narratives and posts, there remains scope to expand into more globalized representations as the intersection of race, class, queerness and neurodivergence also warrants deeper investigation.

Appendix A - Overview of TikTok Posts

Anonymized posts	Brief description
AW1	Accommodations for self-employed autistic girl
AW2	Shame disguised as politeness
AW3	Misreading corporate relationships
AW4	Autistic girl's hobbies centering pattern recognition
AW5	Exposing criticism for undiagnosed autism from her comment sections
AW6	Personality difficulties and struggles with others
AW7	Explaining intense eye contact as a trait
AW8	Funny and relatable autistic memes that resonate with her
AW9	Being shamed for symptoms in childhood resulted in masking
AW10	Asking audience to identify her in pre diagnosis picture where she is masking in public
AW11	Duality of being sensitive and hurtful when emotional dysregulation is triggered
AW12	Things she's embarrassed to admit about her autistic lifestyle by being vulnerable
AW13	'Manic pixie dream girl' trope is autism in women
AW14	Neurotypical vs neurodivergent stare while posing for pictures
AW15	List of traits misdiagnosed as depression in anxiety instead of autism
AW16	Taking authenticity in workplace literally and getting criticized
AW17	Taking school education for passion instead of means to make money
AW18	6 autism symptoms in girls
AW19	Spongebob meme about positive social interaction makes life worth living
AW20	Spongebob meme about being able to tell you have autism by looking in your own eyes in selfies because of the intense eye contact

AW21	Signs of autism in women – only 5% studies done on autistic women. To spread awareness
AW22	Common signs of autism in women – informational post
AW23	Text message meme - I showed you my autism please respond
AW24	"but you don't look autistic" – exposing how clear her autism is but is often dismissed
AW25	Scary realities to admit as an autistic girl
AW26	My journey into realizing I'm autistic – going through several other diagnoses like anxiety, BPD etc
AW27	Daily life routine as an autistic girl with her unfiltered pictures
AW28	Statistics about autistic women – misdiagnosis, self harm, diagnosed with other conditions etc
AW29	Meme about having to force a crush just to connect to her feelings temporarily
AW30	Proving how autistic women feel deeply contrary to autism stereotypes about not having feelings
AW31	7 things a high masking autistic woman wants to tell you about herself
AW32	Demonstrating burnout, imposter syndrome because of masking and loneliness because of being misunderstood through pop media stills
AW33	Traits of autism in women that are often missed – using her own picture
AW34	Things she normalized before finding out they're autistic symptoms
AW35	7 things autistic women struggle with during pregnancy
AW36	Female autism signs she has ignored all her life but now at 31 got diagnosed finally – detailed experiences
AW37	Signs of autism that went undiagnosed for 26 years
AW38	Under represented, unpopular signs of autism in women
AW39	Signs of autistic burnout in women

AW40	"everyone is autistic now" her perspective on this myth as a late diagnosed, high masking autistic woman spreading awareness
AW41	Fantasy meme about internal experiences of being a beautiful, awkward autistic girl
AW42	Sharing her own identity and experience to help someone else struggling with the same traits – using her own candid pictures
AW43	Call for dropping book suggestions for autistic girls in the comment section to create their own #booktok community
AW44	10n lesser known signs of autism in women
AW45	"But you don't look autistic" showing her disturbed, overstimulated face captioned with the times her traits were being expressed but ignored
AW46	Explaining autistic women's "resting bitch faces" through masking– educational post
AW47	Why is neurodiversity awareness important for women – pictures from her childhood
AW48	10 signs of autistic masking in women – sharing her pictures and experiences
AW49	12 less known signs of autism in women – her experiences along with her candid pictures
AW50	Pictures from her childhood – questioning how did her parents not suspect her autism despite the clear signs
AW51	High masking autistic girl sharing how her examiner recognized her symptoms through her essay writing style
AW52	Symptoms of girls with autism – informational post
AW53	Features of female phenotype of autism – educational, informational post
AW54	Autism signs in women – sharing her selfies and her traits
AW55	10 things no one tells you about being an autistic girl – her own pictures and educating others based on her experiences
AW56	Things she struggles with as an autistic girlie – her own pictures and experiences

AW57	Emotional, psychological and behavioral traits related to "female autism" - educational
AW58	7 experiences of a high masking autistic woman – her unfiltered pictures and experiences
AW59	List of autistic traits that made her realize she's autistic – her picture for the cover
AW60	10 things that made her realize that she's autistic – her picture for the cover
AW61	10 signs of autistic masking in women
AW62	Things she found confusing about herself until autism diagnosis
AW63	Less talked about autistic traits based on her experience
AW64 (video)	Video clips from her childhood explaining missed autistic behaviors
AW65 (video)	Late diagnosed autistic woman explaining benefits of therapy
AW66 (video)	Multiple types of empathy as an autistic woman
AW67 (video)	High masking autistic traits that are not obvious
AW68 (video)	Late diagnosed autistic woman identifying differences between meltdown and anxiety attacks
AW69	Spend the day with me post – going for autism diagnosis, with pictures throughout the day
AW70	Struggles of living with autism and not having normal qualifications, jobs and everyday routine
AW71	the autism that doesn't "look" like autism – with her pictures
AW72 (video)	Explaining what a meltdown looks like for her
AW73 (video)	Skit demonstrating struggles catching social cues because of literal thinking
AW74	Less spoken about autistic traits
AW75	Addam's Family meme about unmasking to find the ideal partner
AW76	10 things she thought were anxiety but were actually autism traits
AW78	Struggles with having intense desire for romance but not being able to express it

AW79	Naming her worst sensory issue causing objects with pictures
AW80	Ironic post about autism being very serious and not a quirk with her pictures while struggling
AW81	Meme – "you're the kind of girl they write books about", book in question being DSM-5
AW82	Things she thought were quirks but was actually autism – along with her pictures
AW83	Autistic burnout is not dramatic but really disabling – along with her pictures while crying
AW84 (video)	Autism awareness month post – dealing with self criticism of her autism
AW85 (video)	Neurotypical people don't want to talk about autism or don't want to accommodate her
AW86 (video)	Difference between self diagnosis and medical diagnosis based on her experience – demanding accommodation
AW87 (video)	Difficulties with long term partnership and boundaries – abusive relationships
AW88 (video)	Burnout and its negative effects – showing vulnerability by breaking down
AW89 (video)	Sharing what masking cost her as a late diagnosed autistic woman
AW90 (video)	Autistic burnout symptom checklist – educational post discussing the official list
AW91 (video)	Difficulties of being autistic girl in female friend groups
AW92 (video)	Being a teenager in school thinking you have anxiety but actually it turned out to be autism – discussing her stress and difficulties
AW93 (video)	Crying – difficulties with misunderstanding and being confused in communication
AW94 (video)	Sharing difference between neurotypical tiredness and autistic burnout which is more difficult
AW95 (video)	5 things that happen to her when she is having a meltdown
AW96 (video)	Advice for recently diagnosed autistic people from an experienced autistic woman
AW97 (video)	Sharing advice for accommodations after late diagnosis – figuring out your needs

AW98 (video)	What an autistic meltdown looks like for a high masking, late diagnosed autistic adult
AW99	Emotional post about understanding why she always struggled as a child with undiagnosed autism
AW100 (video)	Autistic women being called 'quiet' a lot but it is being misunderstood because of lack of expressions
AW101 (video)	Things in her life that are signs of autism
AW102 (video)	All the stuff she didn't realize were autism before
AW103	How most autistic women need to reach crisis point in their anxiety to even get suggested with autism diagnosis – scientific evidence post for misdiagnosis in women
AW104 (video)	How to identify other autistic people as an autistic woman working in the medical field
AW105	12 stages of autistic burnout in adults
AW106	Autistic memes she relates to as an autistic girl – pop media references
AW107	List of autism signs in girls
AW108	Pictures from her camera roll – 7 tell tale signs of autism in autistic women
AW109	"but you don't look autistic" – her pictures crying, captioned with times her autism disabled her
AW110	Pride and Prejudice meme – the autism in me recognizes the autism in you
AW111	Autistic traits she showed as a child that were overlooked – her childhood pictures
AW112	7 autistic signs of a high masking woman – along with her pictures
AW113	Trend – "I'm bored, tell me your most autistic story"
AW114	Late diagnosed autistic – most obvious symptoms that got dismissed as a child
AW115	Things she's afraid to admit as an autistic woman because of guilt and shame
AW116	Identifying autistic meltdown symptoms in women
AW117	The ugly side of autism – difficult personality traits – along with her childhood pictures
AW118	Validity of self diagnosis

AW119 (video)	Skit roleplaying a neurotypical pointing out how different and weird she is resulting in her getting excluded
AW120 (video)	Spend a day with me – sharing her routine
AW121 (video)	Doing her makeup while talking about the annoying stuff neurotypical people have said to her dismissing her autism
AW122 (video)	How her autistic traits are not the stereotypical traits but her autism shows up in different ways and how most autistic women relate to these traits because of masking

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