

From stigma to being cool: Neurodiversity in social media

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Keywords: netnography, neurodiversity, TikTok, vulnerable consumers.

The social model problematizes neurodiversity not as an individual medical condition but as a phenomenon that is socially constructed. Being neurodivergent is just a different expression of human existence (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012), involving different ways of sensing, communicating, and socializing. It is increasingly being recognized, moreover, that these differences are not necessarily a disadvantage to the individual (Ortega, 2009) but are alternate and acceptable forms of human neurology (Wolbring, 2007).

This paper investigates how social media platforms play a significant role in challenging the stigma associated with a neurodivergent condition, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) by fostering awareness, providing support, and promoting understanding. Social media seems to erode a social stigma of shame and defeat through easily digestible, rapid-fire information. However, ADHD is also increasingly portrayed and embraced as a socially trendy, fun, and even desirable condition. What role does social media play in shaping these contrasting perspectives?

Methodology:

The research adopts an interpretive phenomenological approach, emphasizing the lived experience of individuals and revealing their reflexive, subjective accounts (van Manen, 1990). The focus is on understanding how ADHD consumers experience and share online the condition of neurodiversity. In alignment with this focus, we employ a netnographic approach (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2024), offering a unique perspective into ADHD's experiences enabling the exploration of the struggles and coping strategies that are shared online.

Findings:

While recognizing that the social media digital traces we've examined represent trends in the use of visual media and digital space, not broader societal trends, a paradox still appears to emerge. The preliminary results of this study highlight that individuals with ADHD encounter more than just societal stigma; the most significant impact often arises from self-stigmatization. In this process, individuals with ADHD internalize negative stereotypes, expressing sentiments such as "I just can't make it". Nonetheless, while social media provides a platform for individuals with ADHD to

express and confront this stigma, it also fosters an intense identification among non-diagnosed individuals who resonate with the symptoms discussed online. This shared connection appears to serve as a justification for daily frustrations, failures, and inefficiencies, functioning as a coping strategy that de-responsibilizes individuals from these challenges.

Conclusions and Implications:

This study sheds light on the ambiguous, interdependent relationship between vulnerable consumers with ADHD and those without particular diagnoses. Social media fosters a space where individuals with ADHD can find community and reduce self-stigma, yet it also enables non-diagnosed users to adopt ADHD characteristics and cultural traits as a way to rationalize everyday challenges. This shared space of identification suggests a dynamic where the experiences of vulnerable consumers influence broader self-perceptions and coping mechanisms in the general population.

References upon request