“How Does TikTok Know I Have ADHD?”: Examining Algorithmically Mediated Identity and ADHD Publics

Hannah Gold-Apel

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By: Hannah Gold-Apel

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

_____ Chair
Dr. Fenwick McKelvey

_____ Examiner
Dr. Jessica Rauchberg

_____ Supervisor
Dr. Stefanie Duguay

Approved by:

_____ Chair of Department
Elizabeth Miller

_____ Dean of Faculty
Dr. Pascale Sicotte

Abstract

“How Does TikTok Know I Have ADHD?”:
Examining Algorithmically Mediated Identity Formation and ADHD Publics

Hannah Gold-Apel

I didn’t know I had ADHD until I downloaded TikTok. As it happens, neither did thousands of other people, specifically girls and women. Some undiagnosed users report being shown algorithmically curated ADHD-related content on TikTok which propelled them to seek their own diagnoses. Drawing on platform studies and disability studies, this thesis employs the persona studies research method (Bounegru et al., 2022), walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to provide insight into how TikTok’s algorithmic content curation and platform affordances foster and affect communities who unite over themes of ADHD. It finds that TikTok's algorithmic interpellation plays an influential role in identity formation and fostering networked publics around ADHD. It identifies key topics and themes prevalent in ADHD-related TikToks, illustrating the influence of the algorithm and medical authority in representations of ADHD on the platform. Overall, this thesis provides a nuanced understanding of TikTok’s ADHD publics, adding to the growing corpus of literature about identity formation and disability publics on algorithmic social media.

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Not to be dramatic, but this is the hardest thing I've ever done. It took me longer than expected to write this thesis, and there were times when the shame and guilt of not progressing as planned loomed so large I felt I could barely breathe. But I did it, and now that I can breathe again, I'd like to acknowledge the people to whom I will be eternally grateful for getting me through.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I didn't know I had attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (henceforth ADHD) until I downloaded TikTok. Within just a few days of opening the application for the first time, I was seeing video after video about ADHD—specifically, about how ADHD often goes unnoticed and underdiagnosed in girls and women, and about common signs and symptoms of ADHD. My experience isn't unique. Learning you have ADHD via TikTok or being 'placed on ADHDTok,' as it is colloquially referred to, has garnered media attention, and become a meme within the app itself (e.g., Boseley, 2021; Jennings, 2021).

This phenomenon has raised fears about an onslaught of inaccurate ADHD diagnoses brought on by young people's interaction with popular ADHD content on TikTok (Biggs, 2022; Gilmore et al., 2022; Yeung et al., 2022). That said, there are some potentially positive impacts of these algorithmically influenced ADHD communities. Proper diagnosis often leads to access to care, a better understanding of one's identity, and systems of support, but scholars estimate that half to three-quarters of girls and women with ADHD are undiagnosed (Walters, 2018). Some undiagnosed TikTok users, many of whom identify as female, report being shown ADHD-related content which propelled them to bring up symptoms they saw in themselves to health professionals and get formally diagnosed (Hammer, 2021).

Initially popular for its dance trends and viral challenges, recent research has situated TikTok as a powerful site for youth identity formation and community support (Hautea et al., 2021; Leveille, 2024). This collective potential of TikTok has been credited in part to the platform's affordances, in particular its powerful content recommendation algorithm, which can foster a sense of affinity with other users (Kaye, 2021; Şot, 2022). One such community that has

formed is known as ADHDTok (a portmanteau of ADHD and TikTok, which is a popular naming convention on the platform) and is made up of users who unite over themes of ADHD.

Many members of ADHDTok suspect that TikTok's proprietary content recommendation algorithm is eerily accurate and may know things about users that they may not yet know about themselves (Williams, 2022; Munson, 2021). Similar folk theories have also surrounded Facebook and other social media platforms (Bucher, 2017). While the technical realities of these claims are disputed, it is undoubtedly a reported experience. TikTok is famously vague about how their recommendation algorithm functions (Smith, 2021), and as a result an analysis of its technical properties is beyond the scope of this project. However, the opacity of TikTok's algorithm does not preclude an analysis of how the algorithm shapes the experiences of users with ADHD and the ADHD-related publics which have formed on the platform. To a certain extent, what matters is not just what the algorithm is doing but what people understand it to be doing.

This project seeks to consider how personalized recommendation algorithms like that of TikTok shape social networks and identity formation processes by examining ADHD-related communities on the platform, sometimes referred to as ADHDTok. It analyzes how users' encounters with and understandings of TikTok's algorithm may shape their identities and can foster in them the feeling of being part of an ADHD public.

Given that individuals with ADHD are purportedly accessing mental health information and building community on TikTok, this study poses these research questions:

1. How do TikTok's affordances and its personalized recommendation algorithm interpellate users into feeling like part of an ADHD public?

2. What themes and topics are revealed from thematic analysis of ADHD-related TikToks?

People, in particular youth, have long found social support in online communities or networked publics where individuals bond over shared experiences or interests (boyd, 2011). Since TikTok does not offer or emphasize traditional social networking affordances like group messaging, membership in an ADHD public is difficult to describe and usually self-defined. I use theories of interpellation (Althusser, 2001) to describe the process by which TikTok's algorithm, based on user characteristics and data, curates video content which may engender in users a feeling of it accurately representing facets of their identities. RQ1 is explored through closely engaging with TikTok and its recommendation algorithm while employing the research persona method (Bounegru et al., 2022). I use thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) on a sample of thirty ADHD-related TikToks to answer RQ2. In attempting to answer these questions, I hope to uncover how TikTok's unique affordances, structured through its personalized algorithmic recommendation system, re-contextualize identity formation and networked publics formed around ADHD.

This thesis contends with the potential broad social and cultural ramifications of the entanglement of cultures of algorithmic personalization with networked publics as spaces of identity formation, specifically for people with ADHD. It adds to existing literature within platform studies and disability studies about identity formation, online disability communities, and algorithmic influence. It uncovers and outlines the process of TikTok's algorithmic interpellation which provides a sense of community on a platform that is not necessarily geared towards a social ethos. Then, it provides a snapshot of ADHD TikTok and its key themes that show how influential the algorithm and formal diagnosis are in shaping ADHD-related content

on the platform. Finally, it situates the research persona method (Bounegru et al., 2022) as effective for studying highly personalized algorithmic media and for sampling content within hyper-curated video feeds.

Thesis Overview

This thesis proceeds as follows:

Chapter 2 provides an overview of relevant literature from within platform studies and disability studies and provides key information for understanding TikTok and ADHD. Then, I situate my analytical and theoretical approaches within existing frameworks with a specific focus on identity, interpellation, and authenticity.

In Chapter 3, I detail the methodological approaches used to explore TikTok's algorithmic curation and its impact on users with ADHD. I explain how I adapt the research persona method and walkthrough method to gain insights into how TikTok's algorithmic curation and other features create a sense of community among users. Additionally, I give readers a base understanding of reflexive thematic analysis, which I later use to identify and analyze key themes within ADHD-related content on the platform. Finally, this chapter discusses ethical considerations related to user privacy and includes a researcher reflexivity statement that highlights my positionality as a researcher with ADHD.

In Chapter 4, I reveal my findings from employing the research persona and walkthrough methods on TikTok. I present the content curation process on TikTok's main feed, the For You Page (henceforth FYP), identifying four distinct phases that new users experience as the algorithm tailors content to their preferences. The chapter highlights how ADHD publics can emerge through user interactions with the algorithm (and vice-versa), often without direct engagement with other users. Ultimately, I discuss both the potential harms of TikTok's

algorithmic curation processes on users and the empowering social connections that can arise, contributing to a nuanced understanding of algorithmically influenced identity and community formation on the platform.

In Chapter 5, I use reflexive thematic analysis to dive into the world of ADHDTok. This chapter investigates the themes and topics prevalent in a sample of ADHD-related TikTok videos, exploring how users express their identities, experiences with ADHD, and understandings of TikTok's algorithm. This chapter deepens this thesis' analysis of the question of how the platform and its algorithmic affordances can engender identity formation as well as a sense of community among users. Additionally, I discuss the influential role of female TikTok creators in reshaping narratives around ADHD.

My conclusion highlights this thesis' key takeaways and contributions to knowledge. It also presents some of the study's limitations, specifically reflecting on how the use of the research persona method to sample videos for thematic analysis may have obscured marginalized perspectives. Additionally, it offers some musings on the challenges of being a researcher with ADHD doing research about ADHD. It ends with a discussion of the broader application of my findings and how this research may prove useful to various stakeholder groups, including platform and disability scholars, TikTok users, and parents, teachers, and medical professionals. Ultimately, it encourages a nuanced and simultaneously critical and hopeful understanding of TikTok's ADHD publics.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

In order to answer my research questions about ADHD identity on TikTok and algorithmic interpellation into an ADHD TikTok public, I consult the fields of platform studies and disability studies. This chapter provides an overview of literature about ADHD on TikTok, algorithms, publics, affordances, and models of disability. The latter half of the chapter familiarizes readers with key concepts that provide this thesis's theoretical frameworks, including theories of interpellation, identity, and authenticity.

Literature Review

To date, there is not much academic literature about ADHD and TikTok, but the corpus is growing. In 2022, Yeung et al. published the first academic article to take ADHD-related TikTok videos as its subject. The article, published in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, sought to investigate the quality of TikTok videos about ADHD by assessing the top 100 most popular videos about ADHD on TikTok and classifying their content as either misleading, useful, or personal experience. The authors used the Patient Education Materials Assessment Tool for Audiovisual Materials (PEMAT-A/V) and Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) benchmark criteria to assess the overall quality, understandability, and actionability of the videos. The study was undertaken in response to:

> The popularity of the platform [appearing] to have contributed to an increased awareness of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), with some individuals seeking a diagnosis after watching videos about ADHD on the platform … Although social media can reduce mental health stigma and improve health literacy, there is also concern about misinformation and the potential for illness/health anxiety (“cyberchondria”) due to the volume of unmoderated, user-generated content online (Yeung et al., 2022, p. 1).

Ultimately, the study finds that over 50% of the analyzed top 100 TikToks about ADHD contained misleading information. The article has faced some criticism from members of ADHDTok for its methods and quality assessment criteria—some argue that the sample of the top 100 most popular ADHD-related TikToks was too small and/or failed to contend with the personalized nature of different users' FYPs. One user writes, "I went and looked at the most popular [TikToks about ADHD] and from someone who is entrenched in ADHD TikTok: I've never seen those in my fyp" (@assassassassassassa, 2022). Others critiqued the assessment criteria, accusing the researchers of not "[taking] into account satire and humor [which is] so much of tiktok too" (Patch, 2022). The critiques of Yeung et al.'s study that come from within ADHD TikTok indicate a sense that the researchers failed to adequately consider TikTok's platform vernaculars, which are "shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users" (Gibbs et al., 2014, p. 257).

Leveille's (2024) study responds directly to Yeung et al.'s (2021). The author uses critical discourse analysis of videos found under the hashtags #actuallyADHD and #ADHDprobs to examine the content of the videos as they relate to the self-disclosure of creators' ADHD identities. In it, she finds that many of these videos use humour as part of their identity performance to "demonstrate resistance against medicalized narratives of the disorder and introduce neurodivergence as an identity signifier with emerging group understandings" (p. 8). She argues that performance strategies in ADHD-related TikTok videos, such as self-deprecating humour, are used to increase visibility on the platform and also indicate that, for most creators, these videos serve as identity work rather than as sources of accurate medical information.

These articles inform the way this thesis analyzes algorithmic curation and ADHDTok to understand the identity work at play on TikTok. They also impact the way this thesis approaches the analysis of ADHD-related TikToks not for their medical accuracy but rather to unearth the themes and topics most prevalent in videos about ADHD on the platform. The critiques of Yeung et al.'s research by TikTok users as well as Leveille's study highlight the need for nuanced ADHD TikTok research which takes seriously the implications of TikTok's ADHD communities while keeping in mind its platform vernaculars.

Platform Studies

This thesis draws on perspectives, mainly situated within platform studies, concerning affordances to better understand TikTok's platform vernaculars and the communities that form on the platform. The concept of the affordance emerged originally from James Gibson (2015) in the field of ecological psychology to refer to a specific relationship between an animal and its environment in which the animal perceives the environment through what it offers or provides. The key insight derived for affordance theory from Gibson's use of the concept is that we "do not perceive the environment as such, but rather perceive it through its affordances, the possibilities for action it may provide" (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 235). The concept of affordance was adapted in the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) by Donald Norman (1990) who puts forward the concept of perceived affordance to advise designers to constrain and shape how a user should interact with a technology. Gaver (1996) posits that affordances exist for social interaction as well as individual action, stating that different technological affordances may impact the social conventions that surround them. He situates the concept of affordances as a "useful tool for user-centered analyses of technologies" (Gaver, 1991, p. 97). Following Gaver, communication scholars have begun to use the notion of social affordances to

discuss how technology impacts sociality. Postigo (2016) defines social affordances as "the social structures that take shape in association with a given technical structure" (p. 5).

Moving away from the technological determinism implicit in the concept of the social affordance, Ian Hutchby (2001) develops the concept of communicative affordances to simultaneously consider the ways in which technologies are socially constructed and socially constraining. This term is useful in social media research as it "uses an affordance approach to focus attention not on any particular technology, but on the new dynamics or types of communicative practices and social interactions that various features afford" (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 239). Building on this, Nagy and Neff (2015) coin imagined affordances which are what "emerge between users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers" (p. 2). Such conceptualizations inform this thesis' use of the term affordance for its analysis of TikTok user experiences and practices.

Some of TikTok's affordances, especially the centrality of the FYP, position it as a prime location for identity work and the formation of publics. Zhao's (2021) study details the process by which the algorithm employs users' interest characteristics, identity characteristics, and behaviour characteristics to create user profiles and user clusters. Identity and behaviour characteristics are formed from individual user data—identity characteristics are determined based on data like user location, age, gender, and occupation, while behaviour characteristics are determined through analysis of specific user actions, such as when the user tends to open the application, for how long, and how often. Interest characteristics are made up of the categories, creators, and specific labels or hashtags with which users tend to engage. TikTok then employs user clustering to form groups of users that share similar interest characteristics. The platform

also creates hierarchical relationships between potentially related interests to determine what new content a user may enjoy based on their interests or those of other users within their interest clusters (Zhao, 2021). These insights into how user data is used to determine what content they are shown are useful in interpreting the results of the research persona study.

As TikTok curates content on certain users' FYPs based on shared traits, small clusters of users who are shown content related to hyper-specific themes or niches may begin to recognize and engage with creators whose content they are seeing frequently. Kaye's (2021) study explores a global community of jazz musicians collaborating on TikTok who claim that the algorithmic curation of their FYPs plays an important role in fostering digital community. He writes, "Many of the original members of JazzTok met and began to duet each other after repeated interaction on individually curated FYPs. The factors and variables that algorithmically designated their content as being quantitatively similar was mirrored by the kinds of deep qualitative connections they formed with one another" (Kaye, 2021, p. 15). Kaye's interview subjects reveal how TikTok's algorithmic sorting can create an affective response to the seemingly happenstance effect of randomly meeting (or viewing the content of) a new person online with whom you share interests or characteristics, leading to fast feelings of affinity. These feelings of affinity and community based on algorithmic curation are affordances of users' interactions with the algorithmic features of TikTok's FYP.

Kaye details how, even though TikTok does not offer multi-user direct-messaging or grouping features, like Facebook groups or Instagram group chats, the platform's video creation features further afford community. TikTok contains a few special collaborative features such as 'use this sound,' which allows users to integrate audio from an existing video into a new video, and 'duet,' which allows users to produce a video side-by-side with someone else's published

TikTok. TikTok also has ‘stitch,’ which lets users cut a short segment of another user’s video to play at the beginning of their new video, and ‘video replies to comments,’ which allows users to create a new video speaking directly to a commenter on one of their previous videos rather than writing a textual reply (Kaye, 2021). Hautea et al. (2021) further explore how TikTok’s affordances and features are used by video creators to “facilitate the (re)production of affective publics” (p. 3). The clusters, communities, and collaborations that emerge through use of these features are all examples of TikTok’s communicative and imagined affordances. This research demonstrates how integral a consideration of TikTok’s affordances is to a comprehensive study of ADHD publics on TikTok.

This thesis understands communities that form on TikTok as existing somewhere between what boyd (2011) calls networked publics and what Gillespie (2014) terms calculated publics. Both concepts derive from Habermas' (1989) concern with access to information and the creation of a public sphere. Networked publics (boyd, 2011) are communities shaped by networked technologies and “the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (p. 39) Networked publics are shaped by the affordances of networked technologies “both directly and through the practices people develop to account for the affordances” (boyd, 2011, p. 46). Gillespie (2014) argues that not only do algorithms structure our interactions as members of networked publics, they also give rise to new social structures known as calculated publics. These are “publics that would not otherwise exist except that the algorithm called them into existence” (p. 189). On a platform driven by personalized recommendation algorithms like TikTok, the line between networked publics and calculated publics grows increasingly thin.

Also underpinning this thesis is the way that TikTok users form their own understandings of how the opaque content recommendation algorithm functions. To analyze how these understandings come to be and how they shape the publics that emerge on the platform, I engage Bucher's (2017) concept of the algorithmic imaginary. The algorithmic imaginary is "the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible" (Bucher, 2017, p. 31). Bucher explores the affective dimensions of algorithms by assessing what gives rise to statements wherein an awareness of a social media platform's algorithm is explicitly stated. This thesis' use of the research persona method enlists my algorithmic imaginary as a researcher as I interact with and interpret TikTok's FYP. Taken together, the concepts of algorithmic imaginaries and networked and calculated publics will inform how this thesis understands the impacts of algorithms on the formation of TikTok ADHD publics.

This project takes seriously the social and cultural implications of algorithms, especially as it investigates algorithmic influence on the formation of ADHD publics. Gillespie (2014, p. 167) broadly defines algorithms as "encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations." In response to algorithms' role as a key feature of our informational ecosystem, Gillespie (2014) urges an interrogation of how algorithms shape public discourse which resists a simplistic technological determinist stance to unpack the mutually shaping sociological and technological factors at play in the production of algorithmic knowledge. Accordingly, an understanding of algorithmic influence must be grounded in the knowledge that "algorithms are made and remade in every instance of their use because every click, every query, changes the tool incrementally" (Gillespie, 2014, p. 173). Gillespie's invitation to grapple with the relevance of algorithms in daily life informs this thesis'

understanding of TikTok's algorithmic influence and its choice of research methods that focus on accessing and noticing these incremental changes.

Disability Studies

Disability cultures underwent a notable shift in the 1970s and 1980s, thanks to disability rights movement activists advocating for a move away from the medical model of disability and toward the social model. The medical model is the historically dominant understanding of disability, which views disability as a problem that exists within a person's body and that should be fixed, solved, or minimized by medical professionals (Buder & Perry, 2024). The social model, on the other hand, suggests that it is society that is disabling because it is inaccessibly constructed, both physically and socially (Miele Rodas, 2015). In other words, the social model of disability sees impairment as the result of limiting mental attitudes and physical structures of society, rather than as an inherent deficit within an individual. This thesis' understanding and use of the social model of disability is akin to Kafer's (2013) political/relational model which builds upon the social model and in which "the problem of disability no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being" (p. 6). As such, this thesis employs the social model in an inherently politicized way that recognizes that viewing disability as socially constructed is a key political concept and mode of resistance to "constructs of the social majority and received forms of knowledge that insist on disability *exclusively* [emphasis added] as a medical condition or fact of the body" (Miele Rodas, 2015, para. 2). This thesis primarily takes up work by disability scholars who employ the social model of disability with recognition of its political potential.

Also central to this thesis is an understanding of the role of medical authority and diagnosis in defining ADHD identity on TikTok. Throughout, I use the term ADHD as a shorthand for Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The American Psychiatric Association (2024) provides a basic overview of the symptoms of ADHD:

> Symptoms of ADHD include inattention (not being able to keep focus), hyperactivity (excess movement that is not fitting to the setting) and impulsivity (hasty acts that occur in the moment without thought). ADHD is considered a chronic and debilitating disorder and is known to impact the individual in many aspects of their life including academic and professional achievements, interpersonal relationships, and daily functioning (Harpin, 2005). ADHD can lead to poor self-esteem and social function in children when not appropriately treated (Harpin et al., 2016). Adults with ADHD may experience poor self-worth, sensitivity towards criticism, and increased self-criticism possibly stemming from higher levels of criticism throughout life (para. 1).

This definition seems straight-forward, but there has been historical debate over the very existence of ADHD which has gone on since the disorder was first introduced to the second edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1968 (Honkasilta & Koutsoklenis, 2022). Some argue that what are formally recognized as symptoms of ADHD are dependent on cultural, societal, and political-economic contexts, and that the disorder is a label created to mark those who do not function 'normally' within those contexts (Ibid). Sociologist Peter Conrad suggests the category was created so that various "deviant behaviours such as hyperactivity and aggressiveness [could be] pharmacologically managed" with methylphenidate, a stimulant medication used to treat ADHD (Lusardi, 2019, p. 3). On the other hand, receiving an ADHD diagnosis can be quite liberating; being diagnosed with ADHD has

been found to legitimize challenges and socially unacceptable behaviours, therefore improving a person with ADHD's self-worth, as well as other people's perceptions of them (Hansson Halleröd et al., 2015). Receiving an ADHD diagnosis from a medical authority allows individuals with ADHD, particularly adults who are diagnosed later in life, to better understand themselves and explain themselves to others, advocate for their needs, find community, and access professional help (Ibid). These positive outcomes of diagnosis explain the desire for individuals to align themselves with medical authority through a formal diagnosis. This relationality between medical authority, diagnosis, and self-understanding is key to an analysis of how the concept of formal diagnosis appears on ADHDTok.

Social Media and Disability Studies

This thesis sits at the intersection of platform studies and disability studies. Having provided an overview of key literature from within those distinct fields, this section highlights foundational work by scholars whose work explores the overlap between the two. Much of the research in this area focuses on the positive potential social media may afford disabled people while simultaneously recognizing that many disabled people face barriers to accessing these technologies. Ginsburg's (2012) work on the implications of digital technology on disabled people highlights how "as groups of people with similar diagnoses— such as autism, Down syndrome, attention deficit [hyperactive] disorder— begin to recognize each other through [online] practices, their emergent sense of kinship and identity makes these spaces potentially radical in their implications for an expanded understanding of personhood" (p. 108). Sweet et al.'s (2020) systematic study of literature about how disabled people use social media highlights the beneficial aspects of social media use, such as accessing knowledge and building community. They also emphasize how accessibility for disabled people must be built into platform design;

without inclusive design, individuals with disabilities face barriers that limit their participation and potential to benefit from social media. Similarly, Ellis and Goggin (2014) write, "A central reason why the internet has been important for people with disabilities is something shared by many other groups: namely, the internet provides new opportunities for communication, information, and media" (p. 131). They, too, call attention to the paradox of social media affording access while often being inaccessibly designed. They advocate for platforms to increase accessibility as an ongoing essential step for fostering equity on social media.

Alper et al.'s (2023) study about autism communities on TikTok explores the interplay between TikTok, autism diagnoses, and identity. Though autism and ADHD are different diagnostic labels, there is a high rate of co-occurrence (Lai et al., 2019), and, since they share many diagnostic traits, they are often grouped together under the umbrella category of neurodivergence. As such, Alper et al.'s study of autism communities on TikTok is highly relevant to this thesis' understanding of ADHD communities on TikTok. They find that TikTok functions as a platform for discussing autism and facilitating positive personal transformation related to autism diagnoses. This transformation, however, is deeply intertwined with the platform's politics, design, and cultural context. They put forth "algorithmically mediated biographical illumination" as a concept to describe how "the personal explanations that medical frameworks potentially provide are increasingly mediated by algorithms" (p. 11). This is a helpful framework for understanding the type of identity work at play on ADHDTok which pays specific attention to the roles of algorithmic influence and formal diagnosis.

Not only are these illuminations increasingly mediated by algorithms, but the expression of these biographies on TikTok is not straightforward as they are often shaped by algorithmic censorship and shadowbanning. Rauchberg (2022) explores how TikTok, while promoting itself

as a platform for political representation, engages in practices of shadowbanning and algorithmic oppression of disabled, queer, and transgender creators that undermine its marketing narratives of advocacy and visibility. She argues that TikTok's algorithmic moderation replicates existing systems of hegemonic oppression, making it difficult for marginalized creators to benefit from potential remuneration through the TikTok Creator Fund, which rewards high view counts, or engage in community building. In short, despite the platform's capacity for enabling visibility and education, its discriminatory and ineffective moderation against cyberbullying leaves marginalized users vulnerable. Rauchberg emphasizes the importance of critically examining the dominant frameworks embedded in TikTok's curation algorithms and how these affect disabled, queer, and trans people's experiences on TikTok.

Taken together, these works point to a fundamental contradiction in social media and disability studies. The tension is that social media simultaneously affords accessibility in the form of community building and knowledge acquisition and creates inaccessibility through hostile platform architecture and policies.

Theoretical Frameworks

This thesis aims to understand how TikTok's algorithmic affordances may influence how a user with ADHD identifies. To do so, I draw on theories of identity from disability studies and platform studies with a specific interest in identity which is co-constructed by individuals and algorithms.

How a disabled person chooses to talk about or understand their experience is ultimately up to them—the concept of identity within disability studies is complex, and all disabled people are not a monolith. It is impossible, and perhaps undesirable, to codify a unitary identity for all disabled people (Johnstone, 2004). That said, a disability can be a crucial part of one's self-

understanding. Linton (2015) writes, “Despite its medical origins, a premise of most of the literature in disability studies is that disability is best understood as a marker of identity” (p. 12). Within disability studies, the claiming of one’s disability as an identity can be an act of agency (Friedner & Weingarten, 2019). This thesis understands ADHD as an identity which can be claimed by an individual as an act of self-definition.

This thesis also draws on Cheney-Lippold's (2017) algorithmic identities, which are “who we are in the face of algorithmic interpretation” and “who we are computationally calculated to be” (p. 5). He coins “datafication” as the term for “the transformation of part, if not most, of our lives into computable data” (p. 11). This data forms the basis for platforms that are ambivalent about who we *actually* are to interpret us according to their algorithmic logics, resulting in algorithmic identities which reflect an ongoing interaction between the data we generate and the algorithms analyzing and utilizing that data (p. 25). Cheney-Lippold argues that, “through various modes of algorithmic processing, our data is assigned categorical meaning without our direct participation, knowledge, or often acquiescence” (p. 5). Our algorithmic identities are unknowable to ourselves, and they frequently change as algorithms respond to new inputs. These identities impact us both online and offline as the two “bleed into each other” (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 11). Lee et al. (2022) provide further insight into how algorithmic identities impact TikTok users by coining “the algorithmic crystal,” an analytic frame which:

> captures user understandings of how personalized algorithms (1) interact with user identity by reflecting user self-concepts that are both multifaceted and dynamic and (2) shape perspectives on others encountered through the algorithm, by orienting users to recognize parts of themselves refracted in other users and to experience ephemeral, diffracted connections with groups of similar others (p. 11)

Through interviews with TikTok users about their experiences with TikTok's personalized algorithms, the authors found most users felt that the platform learned who they were by analyzing their inputs on the platform. Then, they felt, the platform accurately reflected these 'learned' parts of themselves to them on their curated feeds, which connected them to other users whose content they saw themselves in. They draw on Walton et al.'s (2011) theory of mere belonging, which is a sense of social connection with unfamiliar others, to explain the type of connection TikTok users felt with others who were being served similar content, or on the same 'side' of TikTok. Crucially, per Lee et al., this mere belonging on TikTok has little to do with direct interpersonal connection and much to do with recognizing aspects of one's self-concept reflected through others. Lee et al.'s interview findings showed that users' self-concepts were multi-faceted and complex, but they had more simplified, one-dimensional perceptions of others as they "tended to view others' content through the lens of their own self-concepts as curated through algorithmic personalization" (2022, p. 9). These theories of algorithmic identity provide key frameworks for this thesis' understanding of how algorithms influence user identity on TikTok.

Additionally, this thesis takes up the concept of interpellation as an important algorithmic process at work in producing identity on TikTok. Althusser's (2001) concept of interpellation claims that an individual's identity is intertwined with and, further, produced by, dominant ideologies within a society. Interpellation is typically understood as a kind of hailing—the most well-known example being when an authority figure such as a police officer calls out 'Hey, you!' and an individual turns around in response to being addressed. Althusser argues that this is because the individual is aware that the hailing was addressed to them, making them subject to the ideology of democracy and law. As a result, individual subjects are presented principally as

being produced by social forces, rather than as powerful autonomous agents with self-produced identities. Poster (1996) takes up the concept in the context of the database, where the interpellation of the subject is always open to reconfiguration and resistance (p. 177). “As a meaningful text, the database is no one's and everyone's, yet it ‘belongs’ to someone, to the social institution that ‘owns’ it as property, to the corporation, the state, the military” (p. 182). In the case of databases, “the one being surveilled provides the information necessary for the surveillance” (p. 184). The data stored and characterized in databases “become additional social identities as each individual is constituted for the computer, depending on the database in question, as a social agent” (p. 185). Following this, he posits that interpellation may prove a useful concept in a critical interpretation of databases. Writing on interpellation as occurring through social media technologies, Kangaskoski (2020) uses the term “we-interpellation” to describe the use of the “we” pronoun by social media platforms and content creators, among other social media affordances, to form groups and communicate group membership to others—interpellation which is “effectuated by the interface and mostly hidden from view” (p. 38). Kangaskoski argues that interpellation on social media is affected by algorithmic profiling which “influences [what] users encounter as well as the implicit group they are set in … [but users] do not know precisely what information is used to construct our profiles and what criteria the profiles and subsequent tailoring of the interface are based on” (39). Going forward, I apply these theories of interpellation to TikTok’s FYP algorithms and the various ways they interpellate their users.

Moving away from algorithmic identity and interpellation, this thesis also explores how creators perform identity on TikTok, where displays of authentic self-expression can engender positive feelings while simultaneously significantly bolstering engagement (and therefore profit).

As such, this thesis examines authenticity as it pertains to identity formation and performance. In their article about authenticity on TikTok, Barta and Andalibi (2021) provide an in-depth literature review which traces the concept from its earliest philosophical origins all the way to modern understandings taken up in digital research. They source authenticity's modern conceptualization to Heidegger's work on existentialism (Hardt, 1993, as cited in Barta & Andalibi, 2021), which positions authenticity as at once socially and individually determined. Focal to this thesis is an understanding of authenticity in online contexts, where shows of authenticity are often understood primarily as *performing* authenticity (Gaden & Dumitrica 2015; Gilpin et al., 2010). Authenticity on social media is informed by the self-presentation standards on a given platform (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Therefore, authenticity may be better understood as one facet of or tool for self-presentation, shaped through platform specific affordances, vernacular, and audiences (Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011). In TikTok's case, Barta and Andalibi (2021) find that "particular features and affordances of the platform—such as "the 'For You' page, commenting mechanisms, associations between content, and perceived anonymity—contribute to and uphold authenticity as a self-presentation norm on TikTok" which leads to what they call a 'just be you' attitude on the platform (p. 11). They also found that videos where users were 'just being themselves' and speaking about personal experiences, in a seemingly casual or unrehearsed manner, received better engagement on the platform (p. 12).

Barta and Andalibi's findings are in line with pre-TikTok social media conceptualizations of authenticity. Scholars have documented how amateur aesthetics are performed on visual social media such as Instagram and YouTube to increase relatability and profitability (e.g., Hund, 2023;

Kanai, 2020; Lovelock, 2016). Abidin (2017) calls this "calibrated amateurism" which she defines as:

> The practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice, by relying on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital. (p. 1)

Drawing on these theories, in this thesis, I take up Barta and Andalibi's definition of authenticity as a "socially constructed, artificial category, in which effortless yet sincere presentations of self that conform to the expectations of an audience as well as the context of expression (i.e., social media) are read as authentic by onlookers (e.g., networked others)" (2021, p. 6). This definition acknowledges that authenticity is socially determined on TikTok, where one must *appear* effortless and sincere so that others will interpret them as being authentic.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid the groundwork for the analysis to come about ADHD identity on TikTok and the role of algorithmic interpellation in shaping ADHD TikTok. By engaging with platform studies and disability studies, I have outlined key literature about TikTok, algorithms, publics, and affordances. Further, this review contextualized existing literature on ADHD diagnosis, and social media and disability. Then, it has established my theoretical frameworks for understanding identity, interpellation, and authenticity, and foreshadowed the intersecting nature of these concepts as they relate to answering this thesis' research questions. With these frameworks established, the next chapter will delve into my methodology, offering insights into how I explore the dynamics of algorithmic influence and ADHD identity on TikTok.

Chapter 3: Methodology

To explore how TikTok's affordances can interpellate users into feeling like a part of a public, this thesis adapts the research persona method (Bounegru et al., 2022) to access TikTok's algorithm via lived experience. It also employs reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to reveal and analyze themes prevalent in ADHD-related content shared on TikTok. In this chapter, I provide an overview of both methods, and outline how they were chosen and employed. I also address some ethical considerations and provide my reasoning for decisions made vis a vis protecting user privacy, drawing on franzke et al.'s (2020) *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. Finally, this chapter features a short researcher reflexivity statement which positions me as a researcher with ADHD, and addresses how this identity is woven into my project.

Research persona method

In chapter 4, I employ an adapted version of the research persona method (Bounegru et al., 2022) and the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) to gain insight into TikTok's affordances and personalized recommendation algorithm, and their role in individual and collective identity formation for users with ADHD. The research persona method is a tool for investigating algorithms that seeks to understand the dynamics of personalization by analyzing the relationship between user practices and algorithmic curation. The term persona is widespread in various scholarly and industrial fields—personas are used in user experience (UX) and human-computer interaction (HCI) design to depict an individual archetype that represents a collective target user group (Tomlin, 2018), and in marketing as instruments for audience research used to determine the desire of various target consumers. The concept of a persona is also present in new media studies and has led to the emergence of a persona studies field

(Marshall et al., 2015) in which the use of personas helps to illustrate how media affordances shape user behaviours (Bounegru et al., 2022). Marwick (2015) employs the persona in celebrity studies to inform the study of the everyday performance of the self on social media. In short, a persona is an imagined person or type of person employed across fields for a variety of reasons, usually with the aim of understanding human behaviour. The research persona method employs personas to "allow access to situations that enable the researcher to understand how digital infrastructures respond to user practices and how these responses are in turn experienced by the users" (Boungeru et al., 2022, p. 7). Summarily, it is a research device for studying personalized information flows on platforms.

Similar methods like the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) call for researchers to fabricate a user persona to acquire access to and evaluate platform features and interfaces. With the walkthrough, Light et al. (2018) incorporate "the methods of the medium" by engaging with an app directly to understand how it guides users. The walkthrough method is theoretically grounded in science and technology studies (STS) and cultural studies—the method combines both to analytically identify connections between culturally contextual elements and an app's technical interface. Within STS, the method is grounded in the principles of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) which focuses on a relational ontology in which sociocultural and technological factors are shaping one another (Callon, 1989; Latour, 2005, as cited in Light et al., 2018). Within this framework, the walkthrough considers app user interfaces and functions as non-human actors that mediate meaning to make an app's system of actors visible for analysis. The walkthrough method is composed of two phases—the establishment of the app's environment of expected use, and a technical walkthrough of the app. Phase two, the technical walkthrough, is "the method's central data-gathering procedure" in which the researcher assumes "a user's

position while applying an analytical eye" to an app (Light et al., 2018). As they walk through, researchers pay close attention to the app's user interface arrangement, textual content and tone, and presence of symbolic representations within the app.

This thesis understands the research persona method as building on the walkthrough method by essentially asking researchers to perform long-form technical walkthroughs of a given app with a serious consideration of the imagined user. This method explores the "interplay between user practices and algorithmic recommendations" by choosing to ask not "what do [existing users of platforms] see?" but rather "what would I [a specific research persona] see?" (Bounegru et al., 2022, p. 79). Accordingly, this thesis uses the research persona method as an extended walkthrough to investigate TikTok's affordances and what affective responses those affordances, specifically the platform's algorithmic personalization, may engender.

Following the steps for configuration as outlined by Bounegru et al. (2022), I constructed a research persona with which to explore TikTok's affordances. According to these steps, researchers are encouraged to imagine a persona's life story, appearance, and daily life to evoke empathy for the persona which is crucial to thinking through how this persona would react to different types of content and behave within the app under analysis. Before even opening TikTok, I started by creating a list of her attributes and interests, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

My Research Persona's Attributes and Interests

Basic Data	Attributes	Likes/Interests
Name: Phoebe Bier Birthday: March 9th, 2000 Age: 22 Location: Montreal Hometown: Montreal Neighbourhood: Plateau Relationship status: Long-term, live-in boyfriend Family: Made up of mom, dad, and one older brother. Occupation: Undergraduate student at Concordia in Literature (Arts)	• Leftist • Communist "in theory" • Votes NDP in practice • Environmentalist - vegan • Feminist • Atheist • Has ADHD - late diagnosed • Kind, inviting to talk to • Terrible memory • Disorganized • Socially conscious • Blunt manner of speaking • Low self-esteem at times • Dry sense of humour	• Cats • Sitcoms (Community, Parks and Recreation, 30 Rock. Grew up watching NBC Thursdays with her family) • Stand-up comedy (John Mulaney, James Acaster, Chelsea Peretti are her favourites) • Yoga • Oat milk lattes • Long walks in the summer • Cross-country skiing in the winter • Hiking • Reading fiction (good fiction–is kind of a snob about it) • Gossiping (but not in a mean way)

I then drafted a detailed biography for my persona. Here is a short excerpt from this biography which details her journey to receiving an ADHD diagnosis:

> Phoebe is a 22-year-old woman with ADHD from Montreal who creates a new TikTok account just for fun. She has only recently been diagnosed with ADHD, and is interested in learning more about the disability. She is an undergraduate student in the last year of her literature program, who excels in school in adulthood but had significant challenges with focus and academic performance in her youth. She has been in therapy on-and-off from adolescence to treat anxiety, depression, and a general lack of motivation. At thirteen, she was taken to be assessed for learning disabilities by her parents due to her poor academic performance and disorganization in high school, despite higher-than-average elementary grades and high school entrance examination scores. The assessment revealed no diagnosis, and the psychologist who performed the assessment chalked her academic struggles up to a lack of interest in school. She is not suspected of having ADHD by any mental health professional, teacher, or parent, until she starts seeing a new therapist at the age of twenty-two.

After developing a well-rounded picture of my persona, I began the official study period. During this time, I screen-recorded the process as I spent one hour watching TikToks per day for a period of just under one month (27 days), to roughly replicate the average 25.7 hours of monthly engagement users spend on the platform (Ahmed, 2022). Throughout, I kept a field notes document in which I kept track of how I interpreted and understood my persona's time on TikTok and the videos I encountered.

I took specific note of ADHD-related content by noting how frequently I saw it and at what time of day, as well as brief notes about what topics, creative practices, and mentions of the

algorithm occurred in the video. As my persona began to be recommended more and more ADHD-related content, which I detail more precisely in the following chapter, I replicated how she, a user who is newly diagnosed with ADHD, would interact with that content by watching them through, liking, and saving some videos. I wished to see how the algorithm, in turn, responded to this increased interaction with ADHD-related content. I concluded the study period once I felt that my user had become a member of ADHDTok, a feeling and decision upon which I will elaborate in the following chapter as well.

In using the research persona method, a researcher's experience and interpretations become the primary object of analysis. This "allows the researcher to encounter and thus map specific interactive moments between themself and the digital figures and entities surrounding them … bringing to the fore automated data exchanges, taken-for-granted communicative affordances, and (pre)conscious habits and reactions that previously avoided critical analysis" (Bounegru et al., 2022, p. 93). This approach follows other experimental ethnographic methods that reconfigure traditional subject-object relationships and position the researcher's experience within the site of study (Pollock, 2006). Since TikTok's algorithmic curation features so heavily in user experience on the platform (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020), I was drawn to this method's focus on a researcher's in-app experience to understand how TikTok's algorithm played a role in identity and community formation for users with ADHD.

While the research persona study phase was ongoing, I collected a sample of TikToks to be closely analyzed at a later date. To collect the videos to be analyzed, I used a spreadsheet to manually record the links to ADHD-related videos that came across my persona's FYP between days 13 through 27 of the persona study period. Since I had already decided to closely analyze only thirty TikToks to maintain a realistic scope for this project, I chose to only save videos from

those latter two weeks as a way of constraining my data collection. Also, I only saved links to videos I interpreted as being about ADHD. For example, a video about autism that did not mention ADHD but featured ADHD-related hashtags such as #ADHD and #AuDHD would be excluded. I chose to manually save links to the TikToks rather than downloading them for two reasons: the first being that downloaded TikToks have eye-catching automatic watermarks that move around, and, since TikTok is such a visual medium, I thought they may be distracting during later reflexive thematic analysis. The second being that I wanted to respect the privacy rights of creators who may have deleted their TikToks prior to reflexive thematic analysis for whatever reason. Once the study period was completed, I went back and manually noted other information about each video, including the number of likes, comments, and shares, the creators' name and perceived gender, the video's captions and any hashtags included in the captions. I narrowed the sample down from the original 43 videos to 30 to better suit the scope and time constraints of this thesis project. Some of this narrowing was done for me, as seven of my saved TikToks had been removed from the platform in the time between my having linked to them in the spreadsheet and returning to the data to begin coding. I then deleted six videos by creators from whom I had more than one video in my dataset (in these cases, I removed whichever video appeared further down in the spreadsheet) so that my data would represent content from as many creators as possible.

The creators represented in my sample are mostly women (90%). The location of these creators was not always stated, but I inferred that most are based either in the U.S., Canada, or the U.K. based on information in some creators' TikTok bios such as country names or flag emojis used to denote country of residence, and through listening to creators' accents. Judging by physical appearances, the inferred age range of these creators is roughly late teens to mid-30s.

Every single creator in my dataset is white. While thematic analysis does not call for much critical discussion of the raw data, I will reflect on these demographic characteristics in this thesis' conclusion.

Without repeating too much from the following chapter which details my research persona study, findings, and analysis, I wish to point out here that my use of the research persona method was somewhat experimental, as it is quite new to the field of platform studies. This study made two things clear to me: firstly, the persona method is incredibly effective for gaining access to algorithmically curated social media spaces, which is crucial for understanding their diverse effects on various kinds of users. It also proved to be a useful tool for sampling content—by selecting TikTok videos algorithmically curated for my persona during the study period, I could ensure that the dataset was a realistic reflection of the types of content a user like my persona may be served. This latter finding is especially pertinent given critiques of Yeung et al.'s (2022) large-scale content analysis of ADHD-related TikToks, which many felt was misrepresentative of their experience with ADHDTok (Leveille, 2024).

Reflexive thematic analysis

To expose the topics and themes present in my collected sample of 30 ADHD-related TikToks, reflexive thematic analysis serves as the primary methodological approach. Thematic analysis is a versatile qualitative method that allows for a systematic exploration of themes and meanings within data. Drawing on the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) for reflexive thematic analysis (or TA), this section provides a detailed account of my analytical process, from data collection to familiarization and coding to theme development and interpretation. Braun and Clarke (2021) describe reflexive TA as a method by which a researcher can investigate and gain knowledge of the patterns and meaning present in the dataset in order to

generate a persuasive and cohesive interpretation of the data. Reflexive TA allows researchers to construct patterns of meaning as an output from the data, and, like the persona method, centers researcher subjectivity as "the primary tool … as knowledge generation is inherently subjective and situated" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 69). As such, reflexive TA is a fitting approach for this analysis. This analysis is specific to a small sample of 30 TikToks and is not, therefore, meant to be generally and widely applicable to every ADHD-related TikTok ever posted on the platform. Rather, it serves as a temporally specific snapshot of the themes and topics present in TikToks seen during my data collection phase in late 2022.

Reflexive TA involves six key phases for analyzing data and identifying patterns or themes within it (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These phases provide a structured approach to understanding and interpreting qualitative data. I outline my process for these six phases below.

Phase 1: Familiarization

This phase involves immersing oneself in the data by thoroughly viewing and re-viewing the qualitative material, in my case the 30 TikToks collected during my time in the persona phase of the study. This step is crucial for gaining a deep familiarity with the content and beginning to identify potential patterns or interesting features within the data. In a way, I got a head start on familiarization before I actually began the TA process since I had watched (and sometimes rewatched) all of the videos in my dataset during the time spent scrolling TikTok in the research persona phase. I furthered my familiarization once formally beginning phase one of TA by watching each video in my dataset multiple times, paying close attention to their topics, captions, and aesthetics, though at that point I had no explicit goal of ascribing codes or finding patterns of meaning.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

In phase two, I began coding the data. Coding is a process of systematically labeling and categorizing meaningful segments of the data, which can range from descriptive codes (capturing explicit content) to interpretive codes (capturing more latent meanings). This coding process allows initial ideas and patterns to emerge directly from the data. This phase is not meant to be objective, but is rather a highly reflexive process which is deeply informed by the researcher's previous knowledge of the subject. This was fitting for this thesis, as many TikToks are highly intertextual, often employing sounds or visual meme trends (Kowalchuk, 2024) which leaves viewers to derive meaning from their own situated knowledge of the platform (Hautea et al., 2021). This may sometimes make it difficult for those not familiar with the platform's culture to discern the meaning of TikToks. As such, my familiarity with TikTok through personal use was a key asset to my ability to generate codes. As mentioned, I was working in a spreadsheet created during the research persona study period, in which I manually recorded the links to every ADHD-related video that came across my persona's FYP. After TA phase 1, I added another column to this spreadsheet for codes. At first, my codes were more explicit as I was mostly paraphrasing things said in videos, such as 'ADHD does not mean you are lazy.' Later in the process, I began noticing more latent meanings such as 'reverence to the algorithm.' I did this coding process twice for each video. When all was said and done, I had a final list of roughly 50 codes.

Phase 3: Constructing themes

Moving to phase 3, I began to search for themes by organizing and grouping relevant codes into potential clusters (Braun and Clarke, 2021). This step involved systematically reviewing codes and identifying recurring patterns or concepts that represent important clues as

to how to answer the research question at hand. Theme development is an active process—themes do not emerge, they are constructed and informed by the data, research questions, and the researcher's knowledge and experience. At the end of this phase, I had identified five rough potential themes that I felt captured the data and addressed my research question.

Phase 4: Refining themes

In phase four, I reviewed and refined my rough identified themes. This process included checking the coherence and relevance of each theme in relation to the coded data and ensuring these themes accurately captured the essence of the data. Thematic analysis is all about reviewing and re-working what one has done in the previous phases, and is guided by the principle that there will never be a perfect 'first try' and analysis will be strengthened through its iterations (Braun and Clark, 2021). This phase involved a lot of drafting and re-drafting themes to try to capture the findings just right, and negotiation over whether my themes were specific enough and could be adequately supported by the examples in the data.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

In phase five, each theme is given a clear and concise description that reflects its content and significance within the dataset. Choosing appropriate and meaningful labels for themes is essential for accurately representing the data, but is really challenging. Here, too, Clarke and Braun (2021, p. 216) encourage a non-perfectionist approach—there are no such things as 'perfect' theme names and one should not waste time trying to find them. Despite these guidelines and my best intentions, I absolutely wasted time trying to find them. However, after careful consideration, I was able to land on three themes that I felt accurately reflected my findings, which I present in chapter 5.

Phase 6: Writing up

Finally, in the sixth phase, researchers produce a report of the thematic analysis. This report documents key reflections on the themes identified. It presents the themes and supports them with illustrative quotes or examples from the data, and makes up the bulk of chapter 5.

Overall, I chose thematic analysis to analyze the content of my sampled TikToks because it provided me with a systematic yet flexible framework for analyzing qualitative data and uncovering meaningful patterns or themes that contribute to a deeper understanding of ADHD TikTok. Its emphasis on researcher reflexivity and iterative meaning making worked well given my position in relation to the research topic, lived experience with ADHD, and familiarity with TikTok's cultural vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Use of the persona method requires ethical consideration and precautions in relation to the study's context, mostly to do with the use of an undisclosed (to other users) fabricated account. Tiidenberg (2020) advocates an ethic of care with regard to the specific circumstances when using such research accounts. So as not to mislead any vulnerable individuals, my persona did not post any content, nor did she interact with users via private messaging. Technically, TikTok's terms of service forbid the creation of a false identity (TikTok, 2021). That said, I align myself with Bounegru et al. (2022) in saying that creating one user profile on a large platform like TikTok, with its millions of users and countless fake accounts (Ceci, 2024), is not as ethically troublesome as creating a fake profile in more intimate settings such as a closed Facebook group. Bounegru et al. (2022), in defending the use of research personas, speak to how the practice of banning identities deemed false or inauthentic by a platform has itself been deemed unethical by many and is an item of ongoing debate in Internet research (e.g.,

Tiidenberg, 2020; Marres, 2017). As such, the terms of service did not preclude me from undergoing this research, but I did take seriously the ethical considerations of creating and using a persona on TikTok and acted accordingly to protect communities or individuals from harm.

There were different ethical considerations regarding my data set for reflexive TA, specifically with regard to the selection process and the choice to include identifying information of users in screenshots and excerpts of videos. Although every video in my dataset was publicly available, there were still ethical gray areas to consider, as I did not receive explicit consent from any participants whose videos or comments I sampled. Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda (2017, as cited in franzke et al., 2020) say that "ethically-informed research practices come out of processes of deliberation and decision making under great uncertainty" (p. 23). Three informed assumptions played a role in my deliberation and ultimate decision to not obscure identifying details in videos in my data set: i) A number of studies about TikTok user practices suggest that most users have enough of an understanding of TikTok's algorithmically curated FYP to know that, in theory, any video posted publicly has the potential to go viral (e.g., Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Le Compte & Klug, 2023; Lee et al., 2022). ii) The creators featured in my dataset happen to all have relatively large followings (with an average follower count of 341,370 at the time of sampling) and their sampled videos had high engagement numbers (an average of 85,754 likes per video at the time of sampling). iii) As this thesis will discuss at length in chapter 5, many creators with ADHD on TikTok use their videos as opportunities to very intentionally make something personal to them (e.g., a lived experience, a past trauma) public for a variety of reasons, including finding the act of sharing empowering and identity-affirming. As such, I thought it would be a removal of these creators' agency, an almost performative way of saying: "Look! I'm doing ethics!" which would actually serve to obscure and anonymize these creators

and separate them from their work in a way their creative output did not suggest they wanted. With these three considerations in mind, I felt comfortable assuming that my use of non-anonymized content in my thesis would not be calling unwanted or potentially harmful attention to the creators with videos in my dataset.

Researcher reflexivity statement

I wish to include a statement positioning myself in relation to this research as both methods undertaken for this project draw on my personal experience, which is inextricably linked to this thesis' findings, analysis, and discussion. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that thematic analysis requires deep researcher reflexivity at every step. They write, "Coding is a process of interpretation – or meaning-making – and researcher subjectivity fuels that process" (p. 129). The interpretation of my data set through reflexive thematic analysis is not objective, nor is it meant to be. The research persona method is also deeply reflexive, and requires an ongoing acknowledgement of a researcher's positionality and experience throughout the persona study period (Bounegru et al., 2021). Further, I explicitly position myself in this work to dissolve the traditional split between subject and object present in much qualitative research (Spiel et al., 2022) and to draw on my lived experience as an analytical asset.

That said, I am a woman who, in my early twenties, was formally diagnosed with ADHD. Like my research persona and several of the creators whose videos are in my dataset, I found out about my ADHD in adulthood. Despite early-in-life psychiatric intervention and educational assessments, I slipped through the cracks and went mis-diagnosed. Like many, I downloaded TikTok during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and used it regularly for leisure and distraction. After my TikTok FYP began showing me videos about ADHD, specifically about lesser-known symptoms of ADHD and how it is underdiagnosed and presents differently in

women, I brought up the possibility of my having ADHD to my psychologist, who agreed it was likely. I then went through a lengthy and expensive formal diagnostic assessment, after which I was diagnosed with severe ADHD. I am approaching this research as someone with experience as a 'member' of ADHDTok. My analysis and takeaways are sound and academically rigorous, but this work is also deeply subjective and coloured by my deep familiarity with TikTok (through personal use), knowledge of ADHD (through lived experience, therapy, and previous research), and hours of my life spent on ADHDTok.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the importance this thesis placed on selecting appropriate methodologies for studying highly personalized platforms like TikTok. I selected the research persona method (Bounegru et al., 2022) and walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) to engage with TikTok's algorithm through lived experience, enabling a deeper understanding of how its affordances can interpellate users into a sense of belonging to an online community. My experience using this novel research method has shown its effectiveness for the study of algorithmically personalized platforms, both in terms of accessing the user experience in real-time and for facilitating the collection of a representative sample of content for later analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) has allowed for a nuanced exploration of prevalent themes in ADHD-related content on the platform. I have also discussed some ethical considerations surrounding user privacy, outlining the process of deliberation (Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017) that led to my decision not to obscure identifying details in this thesis. Finally, my researcher reflexivity statement has illustrated how my personal experience with ADHD informs this project. Together, these methodological elements allow for a rich

exploration of ADHD TikTok and its impact on users with ADHD, which we dive into in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Uncovering TikTok's Algorithmic Interpellation with a Research Persona

On a cold November evening in 2022, I sat down on my couch, ready to open TikTok. This wasn't unusual behaviour for me, except that at that moment I wasn't me, or at least not entirely. I was Phoebe, the research persona I had created for this study, whose biography I had carefully crafted and memorized, and whose selfhood I was preparing to embody for the first time. She was my way in, my method of having a close encounter with TikTok's algorithmic affordances. Before opening the application, I typed a quick thought in my (then nearly empty) field notes document: "Who will TikTok think I am?"

This chapter serves as an analysis of the data I collected while employing the research persona method on TikTok in November 2022. As such, it stands as a temporally specific analysis of TikTok's user experience, features, and affordances. In analyzing my field notes and screen recordings, four distinct phases of interacting with TikTok's recommendation algorithm emerged. The four phases ("Phase 1: Putting out feelers," "Phase 2: Niche-ification begins," "Phase 3: Saturation," and "Phase 4: Pushing related niches") are best understood through the metaphor of a "niche-ification" funnel (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The 'Niche-ification Funnel'

The funnel represents the process of "niche-ification," a term I use to describe the feeling that the TikTok content recommendation algorithm narrows its focus to show users increasingly relevant or niche content. As the algorithm gets to know them and reacts to their input and behaviour, this process can make users feel interpellated into a part of a TikTok public. After narrowing, the funnel widens again at the bottom to present different but related content they are likely to enjoy. This funnel metaphor represents how the algorithm works quickly to learn and respond to user interests and characteristics to show relevant content to users.

Analysis of my field notes and screen recordings from the data collection period revealed four distinct phases of content curation that occur on a new user's primary content feed, the FYP, as the TikTok algorithm reacts to user inputs and data, and the content shown becomes more

niche and specific to that user. This chapter presents and details those four phases. It then uses affordance theory and the concepts of interpellation (Althusser, 2001), algorithmic identity (Cheney-Lippold, 2017) and a variety of theories about online communities or publics to analyze how users' understandings of TikTok's recommendation algorithm shape ADHD networked publics and how users become interpellated into ADHD publics on TikTok. It reveals how users cultivate a sense of belonging on the platform by accessing and exploring the mechanisms of TikTok's recommendation algorithm through a research persona. The analysis focuses on how my persona's interactions with the algorithm shaped their sense of belonging to an ADHD community (ADHDTok). It acknowledges valid critiques of TikTok's algorithmic sorting as potentially exploitative, while also emphasizing the potential for user agency that can emerge from these experiences. Overall, these insights contribute to a deeper understanding of TikTok's algorithmic sorting, and how users' interactions with the results of this curation can shape their collective and individual identities.

Findings

Phase 1: Putting out feelers

Upon setup of my research persona's new TikTok account, the only demographic data I provided for TikTok to work with was my persona's birthday (and therefore age), email address, and username. Since TikTok's content recommendation algorithm relies heavily on user behaviour and app usage (TikTok, 2020), this initial input seemed to have little effect. Immediately after creating the account, I landed on the FYP where I was shown a wide variety of content. I saw videos about Montreal's best restaurants and cafés (somewhat unnerving given that I had intentionally turned off location services), videos of (mostly conventionally attractive, young, affluent, and white) people smiling and doing viral dances, makeup tutorials, *America's*

Funniest Home Videos-style slapstick pranks, and a whole gamut of other content. During this phase, TikTok seemed to be putting out feelers for my specific interests by showing me a broad catalogue of popular videos. This is consistent with TikTok's messaging about how its recommendation algorithm functions when a new user logs in for the first time and does not manually select any interest categories from a pre-determined list (some examples: Comedy, Outdoors, Animals, and Family) when creating their account: "For users who don't select categories [of interests], we start by offering you a generalized feed of popular videos to get the ball rolling. Your first set of likes, comments, and replays will initiate an early round of recommendations as the system begins to learn more about your content tastes" (TikTok, 2020).

Accordingly, during this phase, small interactions with videos were quite influential. The simple act of scrolling away from a TikTok before it had played through negatively affected the likelihood of seeing another similar TikTok for the rest of the day. Following this logic, the first video I intentionally interacted with (by liking) was one of a cute cat, as cats were one of my research persona's pre-determined special interests. This was on day two of the study period, when I came across a video of a cat purring loudly and watched it through twice. On the second watch-through, I clicked like. At first, I thought the like was much less impactful than I had been expecting, as the rest of the content I saw that day continued to be random and varied. However, when I opened TikTok to my FYP on day three, almost every other video was cat-related, despite not having liked or otherwise directly interacted with any cat-related content since liking that first cat video. It was here that I determined that the start of a new day or at least re-opening the app after a period of inactivity seems to be a point at which the FYP's algorithmic curation refreshes based on one's interactions the previous session.

During the first phase, the algorithm was learning from my behaviour within the app and sorting it as if through the widest part at the top of a funnel, so that each day felt more curated than the last. At first, the recommendation algorithm curated the broadest range of content I might potentially like based on very little behavioural or demographic data, and as I interacted indirectly and directly with this content, even over just a matter of days, it began the process of narrowing down particular niches I may have interest in.

Phase 2: Niche-ification begins

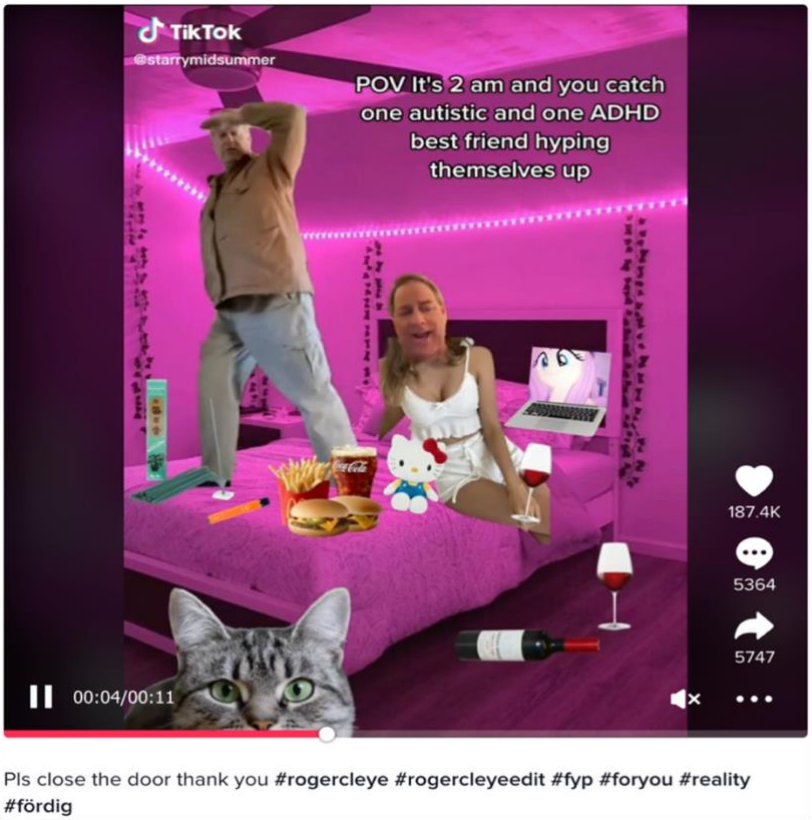
After the first few days of scrolling TikTok, on day four of the study period, I got the sense that the recommendation algorithm was beginning to process the implicit characteristics of my persona. Here is an excerpt from my field notes on day four: "Didn't see any viral dance videos today, which is a first. Videos also starting to have more varied number of likes/comments/views, not all majorly viral content anymore, but still pretty high engagement numbers. Way more women than men on my FYP." Beyond the demographic data provided during account set-up, such as my age and gender, the videos I was shown during this phase seemed to reflect my persona's broad sense of humour and cultural context. At this point, I was still not interacting directly with many videos, so the algorithm was responding primarily to my watch time on videos, with specific importance placed on which videos I scrolled immediately away from before they played through, which I watched through, and which were played through more than once. I was careful to scroll away from videos that did not feel representative of my persona's interests, such as video game playthroughs, pranks/physical comedy (especially anything violent), and influencer dance trends. It was also in this phase that I began to see humorous content about mental health which I would usually interact with indirectly by watching through all the way once or twice, and would occasionally like. To understand this

phase in terms of the niche-ification funnel metaphor, this phase represents the lower half of the top part of the funnel, as it remains broad but begins to taper more drastically towards the thinnest section.

During this phase, on day five of the study, I saw the first TikTok to explicitly mention ADHD (Figure 2). The video was an edit of a TikTok phenomenon at the time involving Roger Cleye, an older man known for doing straight-faced acapella renditions of popular songs. In the video, his head is edited onto the body of a young woman sitting on a bed next to an edited-in picture of another man. Around them are images of wine bottles, take-out food, vapes, and a cat. The on-screen text reads “POV It’s 2 am and you catch one autistic and one ADHD best friend hyping themselves up” (@starrymidsummer, 2022).

Figure 2

@starrymidsummer’s Meme About Autistic and ADHD Friend Pairings



This excerpt from my field notes describes my interaction with the video: “Roger Cleye video grabbed my attention at first because of the cat, then read the text and chuckled. Phoebe would find it relatable, as she has ADHD and many autistic/neurodivergent friends who often ‘hype each other up’ or socialize in potentially amusing ways, like through singing the songs perennially stuck in our heads with no fear of annoying the other.” This video had the word “ADHD” in on-screen text, but it was not found in the video’s caption or hashtags. Given this, I was not sure what (if anything) my liking the video would do to affect my FYP’s algorithmic suggestions, and wondered if it would make a significant change in the amount of ADHD-related content I would see thereafter.

Lo and behold, as of the following day (day six of the study period), I began reliably seeing at least three ADHD-related TikToks per hour-long session, most of which were popular videos with 15,000-100,000 likes. My field notes from this time in the study detail how Phoebe, who has ADHD but had only recently been diagnosed, was interested in learning more about ADHD and how it presents differently in women. Continuing to interact with the ADHD-content I saw on days six, seven, and eight by consistently watching through, occasionally liking, and even saving one video about symptoms of ADHD in women seemed to be the most significant inputs to get me to ADHDTok. I suspect this phase would have gone on much longer without my frequent direct interaction with mental health and ADHD-related content, but as it was, I saw my FYP respond to my increased interactivity and start to consistently present me with content related to my persona’s interests and characteristic traits.

Phase 3: Saturation

I call phase 3 the saturation phase because no other word fully encapsulates just how entirely my FYP went from being a mishmash of everything in phase 1 to video-after-video-

after-video of ADHD-related TikToks in phase 3. In terms of the niche-ification funnel, phase 3 is represented by the most tapered section. From my field notes: “Seems like once a user ‘bites’ by showing consistent engagement with a topic, the algorithm quickly adjusts. Feeling like a member of ADHDTok just over a week after opening this account.” As someone so familiar with TikTok both through this thesis project and my own personal use, it feels somewhat challenging to describe what makes for member status of a TikTok niche. I address this more directly in the analysis to come, but for now it is best described by saying that during this time, I saw almost entirely ADHD-related videos.

Throughout this phase, I created a Favourites folder on TikTok entitled “ADHD” and started saving videos about ADHD, primarily those that spoke to an imagined audience of newly diagnosed and undiagnosed women. I also used the follow function three times to follow some female ADHD content creators whose content I found particularly relevant to my persona, as they had been diagnosed late in life and were actively trying to share their experiences with others who may be going through the same thing. As I got deeper into the saturation phase, I started seeing videos about ADHD with fewer views as well as more recently uploaded TikToks, whereas previously most videos shown to me had significantly higher view counts. Comparing my findings from phase 1 and phase 3, I noticed that newer users who have produced less in-app behavioural data tend to see more popular, slightly older, reliably “crowd-pleasing” videos while users with more established interests and behavioural characteristics are more likely to be served up fresher, more niche content that had yet to reach mass popularity or perhaps never would. This is consistent with previous findings about how TikTok recommends content to newer users based primarily on popularity within the content traffic pool (Chen & Shi, 2022).

I also began to recognize some content creators I was seeing multiple times per day, which led to an affective response brought on by a sense of familiarity with those creators. An excerpt from my field notes captures this feeling: “Starting to be shown the same creators which is exciting. Sort of like bumping into a friend, like it’s nice to see a familiar face. You never know what you’ll see next when you swipe so it’s exciting/nice to see ‘good’ tiktok people again.” Phase 3 was by far the longest stage of the study, lasting for two weeks or just over half of the total study period. It was also during this phase that I was able to observe my curatorial influence over my FYP the most. TikTok explains that it assigns a weighted rating to user interactions, video information (like captions, hashtags, and sounds used), and device and account settings depending on the age of a given account which then influences the content shown on the FYP: “A strong indicator of interest, such as whether a user finishes watching a longer video from beginning to end, would receive greater weight than a weak indicator, such as whether the video's viewer and creator are both in the same country. Videos are then ranked to determine the likelihood of a user's interest in a piece of content” (TikTok, 2020). Per my experience, the first like on a new TikTok account is weighted more heavily than subsequent likes on an older account. Once an account ages, the hierarchy shifts. For example, scrolling away from a video quickly, within the first few seconds, seems to be given more curatorial weight (i.e. you are less likely to see a similar video again) to a veteran user than to a newer user being exposed to a broader range of popular, viral content.

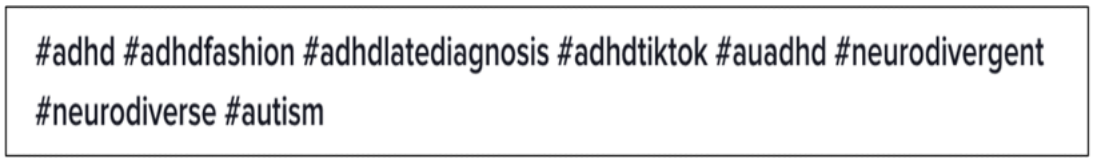
Phase 4: Pushing related niches

After reaching complete saturation on ADHDTok and seeing little else for just over two weeks, my recommended content once again became more varied during phase 4. This variation felt different than that of phase 1, when it felt like the algorithm was essentially throwing things

at the wall to see what would stick. Rather, the variation in phase 4 seemed more informed, based on my past few weeks of in-app behaviour. I was still seeing a good amount of ADHD-related content, but I also began to be recommended videos from interrelated niches about other mental illness or disability identities such as autism, borderline personality disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Most of this content featured seemingly female creators and still spoke about how women in particular experience these things. In many cases, these recommended TikToks about different but related niches used portmanteau hashtags (see Figure 3) that combined the terms autism and ADHD like #audhd or #audhdtok, as well as a long list of hashtags which included some exclusively-ADHD related hashtags (i.e., #adhdinwomen) along with autism-related hashtags (i.e., #autisminwomen).

Figure 3

Screenshot of Hashtags on @adhdlavidaloca's TikTok Video



This may be because, according to TikTok, though it seeks primarily to show users content relevant to their interests, its algorithm also actively works to diversify user's feeds:

> Diversity is essential to maintaining a thriving global community … To that end, sometimes you may come across a video in your feed that doesn't appear to be relevant to your expressed interests … bringing a diversity of videos into your For You feed gives you additional opportunities to stumble upon new content categories … and experience new perspectives and ideas (TikTok, 2020).

The FYP is curated with TikToks based on what the algorithm *thinks* users want to see (TikTok, 2020). As a result, TikTok users are exposed through their FYP to potentially diverse content they might not have actively sought out. The algorithm employs data about users' interests, identities, and behaviours to cluster them into groups (Zhao, 2021). The platform then establishes a hierarchy of interrelated interests to identify new content that might appeal to a user, drawing on their own preferences as well as those of others within the same cluster (Zhao, 2021).

This information adds context to my previous sticky definition of what it feels like to be a member of ADHDTok. Users are literally clustered together by the algorithm, albeit not to their knowledge as these cluster labels are not visible on the user end. As TikTok curates content on certain users' FYPs based on shared traits and/or behavioural patterns, small groups of users who are shown content related to hyper-specific themes or niches are created. So long as users continue to interact with videos inside of those niche categories, the algorithm keeps showing them content by other creators within the niche. As this occurs, users begin to recognize and engage with creators whose content they are seeing frequently. It is also common practice for TikTok content creators to employ hashtags which are thematically linked to the content of their videos to increase searchability and discoverability within the app (Abidin, 2020). Accordingly, one of the ways TikToks are algorithmically sorted and recommended to users is through hashtags—users who engage with a post featuring a hashtag are more likely to see more content with the same hashtags or see content engaged with by other users who have engaged with said hashtag (TikTok, 2020). It follows, then, that a TikToker posting about ADHD in women and using the hashtag #ADHDinWomen may also use the hashtag #AutisminWomen in the hopes that more neurodivergent users will be recommended their content, as experienced by my persona.

Analysis

Analysis of my findings from time spent as a research persona who is a new user on TikTok with ADHD reveals some key insights into how TikTok's algorithmic content curation can foster a sense of belonging or interpellation into a TikTok community and enable identity formation for users. This section analyzes these findings by drawing on theories about networked publics, online identity formation, and interpellation.

TikTok's algorithmically curated and personalized FYP can be understood as a space for identity formation and fostering community. TikTok's mission statement of "building a global community where [users] can create and share authentically, discover the world, and connect with others" situates the FYP as a crucial part of what "enables that connection and discovery" (TikTok, 2020). Similarly, some studies of user practices on TikTok indicate that users understand the FYP as central to fostering a sense of connection with others who share similar interest or personality characteristics, or of belonging to a certain "side" of TikTok (e.g., Kaye 2022; Şot, 2022). Zulli and Zulli (2020) further illustrate how users can find themselves belonging to a TikTok community by engaging with recommended content on the FYP without needing to "discursively communicate or express sentiment." In phase 1, my persona was not placed onto a clear "side" of TikTok or shown consistent content relating to her topics of interest. The staggering difference in content and the speed with which the algorithm learned from my in-app behaviour between phase 1 and phase 4 engendered an affective feeling of being known by the algorithm as well as a sense of identifying with other users/creators as part of an ADHD public. This sense of belonging as a result of the incredibly quick algorithmic adjustment of recommended content underpins the serious social and cultural implications of TikTok's algorithms.

During my time using TikTok as my research persona, I felt as though I was placed on ADHDTok and identified as belonging to an ADHD community on the platform. This occurred despite not interacting directly with other users with ADHD, but rather was a reaction to the swaths of ADHD-related content I was being shown and engaging with on the algorithmically curated FYP. Hautea et al. (2021) speak to TikTok's FYP algorithm as one that engenders a sense of togetherness for faraway individuals. "Algorithmic closeness" is the term Şot (2022) uses to describe how a sense of intimacy and understandings of algorithms are inextricably linked on social media platforms. Eriksson Krutrök's (2021) work on practices of mourning on TikTok also highlights the ways "algorithms [on TikTok] also create culture, and specifically, digital community practices … these algorithms allow individuals to find similar content to what they have previously engaged with and find community within these spaces" (p. 9). My experience on TikTok during the persona study illustrated how the platform's algorithmic recommendations can foster a sense of community where users can feel connected to members of an intangible ADHD public without one-to-one interactions.

While TikTok's creative affordances encourage collaboration (Kaye, 2022), the platform minimizes classical networked interactions like direct messaging. In my experience during the research persona study period, I found the centrality of the FYP in the app the single most powerful actor for reflecting and reifying facets of my persona's identity (while excluding or obscuring others) in the content recommended. TikTok's algorithmic content recommendations and the gestures I commonly performed while physically scrolling through TikTok created in me an affective response to the seemingly happenstance effect of randomly meeting (or, more accurately, viewing the content of) a new person online with whom you share interests or characteristics, leading to fast feelings of affinity (Kaye, 2022).

TikTok's algorithmic content recommendation system informs both how users come to self-identify as individuals and as members of various TikTok publics. danah boyd's (2011) concept of networked publics is useful for answering some (but not all) of the questions about how to understand these TikTok publics. Networked publics are shaped by affordances of social media platforms "both directly and through the practices people develop to account for the affordances" (p. 46). In the case of TikTok, the algorithmic curation of content and the FYP, as well as how users understand this algorithmic curation to function, are central to forming publics. Bhandari and Bimo (2020) see TikTok as a social networking site (SNS) that "offers a fundamentally different conception of what it means to be social" since "the experience of using TikTok is one of repeatedly engaging with one's own self: intra rather than interpersonal connection" (p. 3). This is true also of the self-reflexive process of using TikTok through a persona whose identity you have intentionally crafted; as I interacted with content and scrolled through my curated feed, the more TikTok presented me with content that resonated with that identity, the more I felt more certain of and familiar with my persona's identity. It can be challenging to clearly define what it means to identify as a member of a TikTok public. However, by phase 3 of my time on TikTok, I confidently felt my persona would identify as being on ADHDTok. But how, exactly, does one come to feel a part of an ADHD public on TikTok? What technological, social, and cultural phenomena are at play when this feeling occurs?

Here I take up the concept of interpellation (Althusser, 2001) as an important process at work in producing this sense of belonging to the TikTok ADHD community. When the algorithm serves up content to a user and the user responds with engagement, that is an act of responding to hailing in which a user becomes an "individual subject" (Ibid). Kangaskoski

(2020) gives us “we-interpellation” to describe this process as it plays out on social media brought about by affordances and algorithmic profiling which “influences [what] users encounter as well as the implicit group they are set in … [but users] do not know precisely what information is used to construct our profiles and what criteria the profiles and subsequent tailoring of the interface are based on” (39). This speaks to how my persona was interpellated primarily as a user with ADHD despite showing interest in other areas, such as cats and environmental activism. This was my algorithmic identity (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Algorithmic identity is assigned when data is extracted from a user to define and determine a category, such as ‘ADHD’, so that it becomes a concrete characteristic of one's algorithmic identity even if that differs from how this facet of identity may (or may not) show up offline. In other words, once my persona had interacted with the FYP enough to generate sufficient behavioural data, she was interpreted according to TikTok’s algorithmic logics, resulting in an algorithmic identity of a user with/interested in ADHD. Like Kangaskoski, Cheney-Lippold argues that this algorithmic processing and assignment of identity takes place without “direct participation, knowledge, or often acquiescence” from the user (p. 5). However, Cheney-Lippold does crucially recognize that we as individuals voluntarily log into algorithmic platforms and accept their terms of agreement, and that this voluntary participation “reconfigures the character of surveillance and its subjects” (p. 21).

I argue that on TikTok, users are often participating in their own categorization more substantially than just accepting the terms of use. While I never explicitly ticked a box saying, ‘Put me on ADHDTok!’ I certainly felt a sense of agency and control over the algorithmic outputs on the FYP as I could clearly see the platform responding to my in-app behaviour in almost real-time. I knew that, should I stop interacting with ADHD-related content, the algorithm

would respond quickly and change its content recommendations to try to keep me engaged on the platform. Further, Kangaskoski's (2020) 'hailing' occurs through social media as its affordances enable "quick affective engagement" (p. 42). In the case of my study period engaging with TikTok's FYP, this quick affective engagement can be understood as the acts of liking, sharing, saving, or commenting on videos, watching them through, or following their creators (rather than scrolling away from a video without watching it through). These gestures and the quick affective engagement they provide engendered a sense of active participation in an online community, despite no direct communication with any other users. In essence, my persona was interpellated into an "imaginary collective" of users with ADHD (Kangaskoski, 2020, p. 45), similar to Papacharissi's (2015) affective publics which produce feelings of community but are not actual communities.

In my experience on TikTok as my research persona, the content recommendation algorithm and the funnelling of recommended content from broad in phase 1 to hyper-specific in phase 3 and finally to re-broadening in phase 4 gave me the sense that the algorithm was beginning to interpellate my persona as a specific subject. In suggesting content popular with other TikTok users with similar disability identity characteristics, it also exemplified how interpellation through the datafication of identity is an ongoing process which creates algorithmic identities that change by the input and through which we become "temporary members of different emergent categories" (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 4). But what, if any, kind of group is actually created through algorithmic we-interpellation? Is this interpellation merely a result of, as Kangaskoski and Papacharissi argue, the clever and manipulative use of marketing strategies to increase views and engagement by social media creators and platforms alike to engender feelings of community in users without meaningfully encouraging users to form actual communities?

Perspectives which focus on (we-)interpellation and datafication often emphasize the commercialization of algorithmic identity and the potentially harmful effects of this. While these perspectives are valid and crucial to a critical understanding of TikTok's monetary interests, they fail to address the positive social aspects of TikTok's affordances by downplaying users' agency and understanding of the platform. Writing on the capacity for users to find social support on TikTok, Barta and Andalibi (2021) speak to how one of TikTok's primary affordances is association (between users and users, users and content, and content and content) which is most exemplified through the FYP: "The "For You" page as default landing page encourages users to interact with content and *build networks based on affinity and similarity of content* [emphasis added], rather than promoting users who may be connected to others in one's network" (p. 7). In phase 3 of my findings, I report feeling like a member of an ADHD community on TikTok, due to my sense of recognition and familiarity with certain ADHD creators and the volume of relatable ADHD content coming across my FYP. Being able to see how my persona's interactions with this content and these creators through watching, liking, and saving was influencing algorithmic video outputs also gave me a sense of agency and ownership, brought on by sensing that TikTok had identified me as belonging to a niche group and *choosing* to remain there as it aligned with my persona's sense of identity.

Lee at al.'s (2022) concept of the algorithmic crystal is a useful framework for understanding how TikTok users engage with personalized algorithms in a way that informs their understandings of their identities and shapes their orientation to others with similar identities. As a reminder, the algorithmic crystal describes how many users believe TikTok effectively understands their identities through interpretations of their interactions with the platform. Users see reflections of themselves in similar others whose videos they are served, fostering a sense of

belonging that is more about self-recognition than direct connection. Despite users having complex self-concepts, they tend to perceive others more simplistically, viewing content primarily through the lens of their own curated identities. In this metaphor TikTok's recommendation algorithm acts as a crystal, enhancing self-reflection rather than facilitating genuine social interaction. In other words, it's a solitary platform that feels social.

I think much of the answer to questions about what kinds of ADHD communities really exist on TikTok lies in understanding this somewhat contradictory solitary social media use and consumption, and the identity formation and feelings of sociality and connectedness it produces. During phase 3 of the data collection period, I wrote in my field notes: "When you scroll on TikTok, it's just you there, but so is everybody else" to describe how the act of using TikTok *felt* social even though I was sitting alone in my apartment, not directly interacting with anyone. This was due in part to the algorithmic reflection of facets of my persona's identity in other users. The positive feelings of recognition and relationality felt towards other users with ADHD on TikTok were real, despite never directly interacting through traditional means of social networking sites like messaging. Consistent interaction with the TikTok algorithm made it obvious enough for my persona to know that the users whose content she was being shown were, in some metaphysical way beyond her actual comprehension, categorized as sharing a foundational aspect of my persona's identity. On top of this, the responsiveness and manipulability of the algorithm fostered a sense of being at once algorithmically assigned to *and* choosing to belong to ADHDTok.

This sense of agency in the feeling of belonging to a TikTok community aligns with work within disability studies about disability being understood as an identity which is claimed by individuals as a liberatory act of self-determination, rather than as something which is dictated or

placed upon them by some medical or state authority (e.g., Linton, 2015; Friedner & Weingarten, 2019) as well as with studies about the capacity for disabled people to find community on social media. Many studies about people with disabilities' social media focus on how disabled people use social media to create community, build knowledge, and access social support (Sweet et al., 2020). Hearing stories posted on social media by others with the same disability facilitates identity formation (Dolphin, 2011) and creates informal support groups (Cole et al., 2011). In my study, I did not explicitly seek out content about ADHD, but responded to it when it was algorithmically presented to me in a way that allowed me to see how a user with ADHD may feel seen by the algorithm. Continuing to be shown this type of content throughout phases three and four developed a sense of belonging to the informal community of users on TikTok who post about ADHD, which was an overall positive feeling.

Conclusion

This chapter sheds light on the various phases of interaction with TikTok's recommendation algorithm as a new user: "Phase 1: Putting out feelers," "Phase 2: Niche-ification begins," "Phase 3: Saturation," and "Phase 4: Pushing related niches." The "niche-ification" funnel metaphor provides a useful framework for understanding how the algorithm works to rapidly learn user interests and characteristics to show relevant content to users. The application of theoretical concepts about interpellation, publics, affordances, and identity further illustrates how users come to feel part of a public on the platform. By reflexively examining how my persona's interactions with and understanding of the algorithm shaped their experience on TikTok, this analysis highlights the importance of considering the algorithm's impact on identity formation and self-identification within a community. It finds that engaging with TikTok's recommendation algorithm can engender a sense of belonging to an ADHD community, leading

to feelings of closeness with similar others and providing a space for identity work despite no direct interaction with others. It contends with valid critiques of this type of algorithmic sorting as predatory and done solely to maximize profits by increasing engagement, while also acknowledging users' agency and participation in these processes as well as the positive social outcomes they may afford. Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of TikTok's recommendation algorithm and its role in shaping user engagement, identity, and publics on the platform. The following chapter builds upon these findings by analyzing the topics and themes in a sample of the ADHD-related content my persona was engaging with.

Chapter 5: Is ADHD a TikTok Trend? Thematic Analysis of ADHD TikToks

If you've ever opened TikTok, you've probably seen a video of a teenager performing a viral dance trend. These videos have a very 'Popular TikTok' feel to them—the direct eye contact with the camera, the 'I'm too cool to go full out' dancing, the fragment of a chart-topping pop hit to which the dance is choreographed. Or perhaps you've seen a 'get ready with me' video, where a creator 'catches up' with their audience by sharing life updates and anecdotes through voice-over narration over a satisfying, quick compilation of short clips of them applying makeup products. You may have also heard about TikTok voice (or its predecessor YouTube voice), the cadence some influencers adopt in their videos that "strikes the perfect balance between buoyant yet flat" (Hall, 2023). It's hard to define, but you know it when you hear it, and it is another recognizable feature of many TikToks. These practices aren't new (I myself was posting now scrubbed from Facebook 'contemporary' dance videos to Taylor Swift songs from a young age). Still, TikTok videos often have recognizable qualities and production styles that make them feel unique to the platform.

Similarly, ADHDTok has its own aesthetic conventions, presentation norms, and creative practices. In this chapter, I delve deeper into the actual content and themes of ADHDTok videos. I use reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to undertake this investigation, identifying and discussing themes present in 30 ADHD-related TikTok videos. These findings offer significant insight into how ADHD is represented on TikTok as a disability identity that is performed as authentic. Additionally, it shows how the platform's affordances create a space for users with ADHD to legitimize their identities and experience through sharing their stories of diagnosis, and through encounters with similar others and 'all-knowing' algorithms. This chapter explores how TikTok's algorithm delivers tailored ADHD-related content, which in turn

validates identity and fosters community among users. It also examines the role of authenticity in portrayals of ADHD on the platform. Finally, it demonstrates how female creators on TikTok are disrupting years of biased medical history by sharing their experiences and contributing to an uptick in ADHD diagnoses in women. This investigation reveals how ADHD TikTok serves as a pivotal space for sharing ADHD experiences, legitimizing ADHD identities, and addressing gender disparities in diagnosis.

Findings and Analysis

This section outlines the topics and themes I identified through thematic analysis of my dataset of 30 ADHD-related TikTok videos and their captions. Through data familiarization, I identified multiple points of potential analytic interest. My coding initially produced nearly 50 codes, but upon reflection, these often captured ever-so-slight differences in the dataset, and clustering reduced these to a more reasonable number. The process of coding and theme development led to one overarching topic for three themes present throughout the sampled TikToks. “Diagnosis” was the topic present throughout. From there, I was able to develop three themes reflecting dominant messages within this broader topic category of diagnosis: 1) TikTok’s algorithmic curation is accurate; 2) ADHD diagnosis and education is the key to self-acceptance; 3) ADHD is underdiagnosed in women, and ADHDTok is changing that. I explore the overarching topic of diagnosis as well as each of the three themes in detail below.

Diagnosis

Analysis of my sample of ADHD-related TikToks revealed that the topic of diagnosis existed, latently or implicitly, within each video. In a societal and medical context which ascribes legitimacy through adherence to social norms and scientifically established fact, and in a platform context where algorithmic curation pushes creators and viewers to label themselves as

part of various TikTok niches, diagnosis serves as a means of claiming an ADHD identity on TikTok.

Claiming an ADHD diagnosis connects one to medical and scientific authority which serves as a form of legitimization. This longing to align oneself with medical authority is demonstrative of the positive outcomes, such as less self-criticism and a better understanding of one's needs, that a formal ADHD diagnosis can bring about (Hansson Halleröd et al., 2015). When creators make reference to their ADHD diagnosis, their videos become a declaration of 'This is me!' which at once legitimizes their lived experiences through adherence to established diagnostic standards and makes their personas immediately legible to viewers with similar life experiences. This emphasis on diagnosis also emerges as a response to the dismissal of, and uproar around, self-diagnosis and misinformation about ADHD on TikTok (e.g., Biggs, 2022; Joho, 2021; Yeung et al., 2022). In other words, it does the work of attesting that a creator's lived experience is real and that they can speak authoritatively on the subject of ADHD. In one TikTok from my dataset, creator Laura Middleton (2022) performs a satirical skit which pokes fun at the belief that anyone can get an ADHD diagnosis these days. The video begins with on-screen text that says, "How people see getting diagnosed with ADHD in 2022." In the skit, Middleton plays the role of a doctor and multiple patients, and uses different outfits and camera angles to clearly distinguish between the characters, a creative technique commonly seen in humorous TikTok videos. As the patients, she is dressed casually, with her hair down. In contrast, the doctor character is portrayed more formally, in a beige blazer overtop a white turtleneck. The doctor character is also wearing glasses, so as to connote authority and expertise. In the video, the patients describe purposefully vague symptoms such as "I, like, forget my keys all the time" or "I'm, like, really messy" to which the doctor replies, "That sounds like a bad case

of ADHD" and hands the patient a piece of paper (presumably a written diagnosis or prescription for ADHD medication). Middleton uses the video's caption to make the satire explicit, writing:

> It is SO over diagnosed these days 👀😂 I've had a few comments recently referring to how "everyone had ADHD" these days etc. For those who don't know, being diagnosed in the UK can take YEARS. Especially for adults. Mental health screenings, multiple psychiatrists appointments, screenings, forms - trust me. If everyone knew just how stressful the process was, they'd certainly change their minds! And don't get me started on the medication process 🤯 GP's aren't handing out diagnosis like smarties. Contrary to popular belief. (Middleton, 2022)

As someone who has been through the process of getting a formal ADHD diagnosis within the Canadian healthcare system, I can confirm that it is lengthy, involved, and often expensive. There are many hoops to jump through and lots of paperwork to submit in a timely manner (ironic, no?) in order to be diagnosed with ADHD. Still, there are pervasive media narratives that 'everyone has some ADHD' or 'It's easy to get diagnosed with ADHD these days.' Given these underlying debates about (self-)diagnosis and attempts to call the legitimacy of ADHD into question, it makes sense that creators feel compelled to align themselves within medically and socially recognized frameworks and emphasize the formal procedures they have gone through to receive their diagnoses.

Additionally, TikTok creators using their platforms to share content about ADHD are doing so on a platform where it pays to fit within a certain niche and have a strong, recognizable identity which permits users to see facets of themselves reflected back to them (Lee et al., 2022). Having a niche allows creators to establish a distinct identity on TikTok, which can help them stand out from the vast pool of creators and attract users who relate to their specialized content.

Most users interact primarily with recommended content on the FYP rather than with content from creators they follow, and understand their feeds as being algorithmically tailored to them (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). Knowledge of this personalized algorithmic curation can lead to feelings of closeness with similar others through repeated exposure to videos about a given topic or in a TikTok niche, such as ADHD TikTok, as discussed in this thesis' previous chapter. Claiming a diagnosis is a way of aligning oneself with the niche of ADHDTok, through which creators can foster those feelings of community which can be beneficial for increased engagement, as well as provide those creators with validation and recognition. Further, for creators aiming to monetize their TikTok presence, having a niche can help as brands and advertisers often look for creators popular in specific niches to target relevant audiences effectively (Martel, 2024).

These two factors taken together explain why diagnosis exists as an overarching topic in my dataset. In the following section, I explore how the topic of diagnosis appears in relation to three themes: (i) TikTok's algorithmic curation is accurate; (ii) ADHD diagnosis and education is key to self-acceptance; (iii) ADHD is underdiagnosed in women, and ADHDTok is changing that.

Theme 1: TikTok's algorithmic curation is accurate

Spending time scrolling TikTok's FYP means continuous interaction with the platform's hyper-individualized curation algorithm (Duguay & Gold-Apel, 2023). In Chapter 4, I laid out the processes of interpellation, identity formation, and community grouping this algorithmic curation can engender. These were also present in theme one, which is the belief that TikTok's algorithmic curation is accurate. In other words, if you are seeing ADHD content on your FYP, there is a reason for that. In developing this theme, I was first tempted to use more forceful

language like ‘TikTok’s algorithm makes people think they have ADHD,’ because of previously published moral-panicking, technologically deterministic articles about TikTok and ADHD with larger datasets and more quantitative research approaches (e.g., Gilmore et al., 2022; Joho, 2021; Yeung et al., 2022). However, closer analysis of my dataset and coding reveals these users are addressing the role of the algorithm in a much more nuanced way.

In my dataset, what was actually present was people sharing their personal experiences of the accuracy of the personalized recommendation algorithm showing them relatable content and leading them to seek diagnoses, and mention of how TikTok’s profiling *can* be a helpful tool in directing individuals toward seeking psychological care. These allusions to the power of the TikTok algorithm highlight some common algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) about TikTok’s FYP. Bucher explores the affective dimensions of algorithms by assessing what gives rise to statements wherein an awareness of a social media platform’s algorithm is explicitly stated. On TikTok, the proprietary, highly accurate curating algorithm is the draw, and users tend to have a heightened awareness of this, which affects their behaviour and use of the platform (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020; Lee et al., 2022). Following this, analysis of my dataset suggests that users imbue the algorithm with authority and believe in the accuracy of its recommendations. There seems to be a belief that the algorithm is powerful, accurate, and may even know you better than you know yourself.

An illustrative example of this imaginary can be seen in a TikTok featuring an original, jaunty song performed by creator Sophie Frear. In the video, Frear sits at an electric keyboard which she plays while singing, and occasionally snapping on beat. At first, she is framed from the waist-up, but as the 27-second video progresses, the camera slowly zooms closer and closer, creating an eerie effect of her being watched or pursued. As she sings, her lyrics are displayed

on-screen in bold white text with a thick red border. The video starts with her singing “I think my phone has diagnosed me with a mental disorder / ‘cause my feed is full of memes designed for certain traumas” and ends “Did the algorithm figure out my mind?” As the song crescendos to a close, on-screen text reads “Has anyone else figured out they have some sort of illness because of the internet?” (Frear, 2022). The video’s caption reads: “Is this too niche?” which, given the 155,000+ likes the video has received, I take as a resounding no. Frear is speaking to the common sentiment that TikTok’s algorithm is highly accurate and can, on some level, read your mind.

This sentiment is echoed in many of the videos in my sample. In rare cases, like in Frear’s video, this is done explicitly through direct mention of the algorithm and its accuracy. Other times, however, this is more implicit in the sense that creators were addressing their audiences as though they knew for sure that any viewers seeing their content (especially those seeing it through to the end) about ADHD would find it relatable. In many videos, creators insinuate that if viewers were being algorithmically served their content and could relate to the creator’s personal experience of having ADHD, they may want to consider seeking professional support. These were almost always followed by disclaimers about not being medical professionals, or how their content was not intended to be used as a diagnostic tool, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Caption for @abbyreywhite's TikTok about ADHD Symptoms

Trust in the accuracy of the algorithm was made apparent in the ways that creators were addressing their imagined audiences; there was lots of use of "we" and "us" pronouns—as in, 'you, who has ADHD like me' or 'those of us with ADHD'. This is an example of what Kangaskoski (2020) calls "we-interpellation," as discussed in the previous chapter. This language creates an in-group and denotes a faith in the algorithm's ability to show this content to the right people which, in this case, is users with ADHD. Trust in the algorithm was also implicitly present in questions about having ADHD directed to video audiences, which signalled that creators assumed their videos were specifically reaching others with ADHD thanks to algorithmic accuracy. For example, @theweirdocoach's minute-long TikTok video about people with ADHD masking their depression begins with "Do you want to have your ADHD mind blown?" (theweirdocoach, 2022). Some videos about ADHD symptoms and experiences had captions that asked users "Are there any you can relate to?" (Theobald, 2022) or "What would you add?" (happinessinmovement1, 2022). In another example, creator Claire Bowman (2022a) lists "Things I didn't realize were undiagnosed ADHD symtoms [sic]" such as interrupting

conversations, perpetual tardiness, being unaware of bodily needs, and impulsive spending. The video's caption is simply "How many did you get?" Ending the video with a question of this kind assumes that viewers will relate to the video's topic and is a common manner of addressing viewers which I often observed in my dataset. Beyond an implication from the creators that the algorithm is working properly, this type of prompt is also, no doubt, an attempt to increase video engagement from users, specifically in the form of comments. At a surface level, the use of personal pronouns like "you" or "we" that speak to an imagined user who has ADHD, as well as calls for participation through open-ended questions can be understood as efforts to increase engagement through interpellation. Appealing to users' algorithmic imaginaries can serve as a technique to increase reach and monetization.

However, the algorithmic imaginary that imbues TikTok's algorithm with a sort of all-knowing quality can (and does) lead to positive outcomes for certain users. There is a strong implication that if you are seeing videos about ADHD on TikTok, you may have the disorder yourself. It makes sense that people draw conclusions about themselves—seeing so many videos of this kind in a repeated, systematic fashion, curated by an algorithm that purports to know you, allows people to come to seemingly natural conclusions about their own psychology from which a culture of diagnosis-seeking can arise. Algorithms are often perceived as impartial, so people come to think of algorithms as more objective decision makers than humans (Helberger et al., 2020). Cotter et al. (2022) coin the term "algorithmic conspirituality" which "represents a vision of algorithmic media not just as a node in the contemporary digital infrastructure, but as a kind of omnipotent force" (p. 2918). They highlight how "people—specifically, TikTok users—sometimes read algorithmically curated content as akin to a sign from a higher power predestined for them" (Ibid). This algorithmic conspirituality can be seen in the context of ADHDTok; many

people (myself included) credit TikTok's algorithmic recommendation of ADHD-related content with being the reason they sought out ADHD diagnoses. We know that these moments of "algorithmically mediated biographical illumination" (Alper et al., 2023) can lead to life-changing access to social and medical support, and play a role in someone's self-understanding.

There are implications for how these algorithms and the imaginaries that surround them influence identity formation, especially given TikTok's young userbase, which this thesis has already discussed in depth in the previous chapter. These implications (or morally panicking assumptions about them) are the crux of most alarmist media and academic discourse about algorithmically recommended ADHD content on TikTok. A common narrative is that young people are self-diagnosing with ADHD after repeated exposure to ADHD TikToks (Bobby & Sandhu, 2023; Gilmore, 2022). This thesis (and its author) lives firmly within the world of media studies and not psychology and therefore cannot (and frankly, does not wish to) take up the issue of self-diagnosis from a psychiatric perspective. What it can do is contrast this media discourse with the much more nuanced messages that TikTokers within the dataset are putting out there—that they recognize the algorithm as a presence, that they understand it as often accurate, and that (for some) it has led to positive outcomes of accessing healthcare and social support, and better self-understanding. If only we could listen to and validate these experiences, there may be much less reason to panic and more reason to recognize the validity of these algorithmic encounters, learn from them, and implement changes to our social and medical systems.

Theme 2: ADHD diagnosis and education is key to self-acceptance

Video creators frequently evoked the notion of diagnosis of ADHD as a positive thing. They often referred to this when talking about people with ADHD's sense of identity and ability to manage their overall mental health. In speaking of their own experiences of receiving ADHD

diagnoses, creators lauded this formal step as the most important starting point for self-acceptance and developing a well-rounded, confident sense of identity. Take, for example, one user's educational video about how household tasks can be monumentally challenging for people with ADHD but can be adapted to be easier for ADHD brains. The minute-long video is by ADHD content creator and influencer Claire Bowman, whose name on TikTok is Claire Bowman - ADH-She ✨🖤. It is made up of clips of the creator, a blonde, white woman, seemingly in her mid-20s, vacuuming carpeted stairs. At first, the camera is stationary, and we see the creator's full body as she maneuvers her cordless vacuum. Later in the video, we see first-person shots of the vacuum at work on the carpet from the creator's point of view—an aesthetic choice commonly seen in satisfying cleaning videos, which are big on the platform. The video has no diegetic sound. It features voice-over narration about how overwhelming everyday tasks can be to people with ADHD over an instrumental backing track of pensive piano music. There is on-screen text overlaid in the centre of the video that reads "Why do people with ADHD struggle with simple tasks?" in a sans-serif white font which is immediately recognizable to most TikTok users as one of the fonts available on the in-app editing suite. She begins her voice-over with a question, saying "Have you ever noticed that people with ADHD often find the simplest tasks the most difficult?" and goes on to explain how she used to think of herself as lazy because she would get overwhelmed by even the smallest cleaning tasks, but since learning she has ADHD has become gentler on herself and adapts to-do lists into smaller, bite-sized steps to reduce feelings of overwhelm. She ends the voice-over by saying "This is why an ADHD diagnosis is so monumental. We understand the way that our brain works … The way that we function goes against everything that society preaches. It's very common to have low self-esteem and think that we're unintelligent" (Bowman, 2022b). Another video skit in my sample shows

TikTok creator Emma Llewelyn acting out “Things I thought were personality flaws but turned out to be ADHD” (Llewelyn, 2022). In this 30-second video, Llewelyn does not speak (diegetically or in voice-over) and instead uses the on-screen text function to list some of her ADHD symptoms such as teeth grinding, extreme impatience over silly things, and bumping into corners because of spatial unawareness, and acts them out in short clips edited together. The video is set to Beyoncé’s high-energy pop song “Cuff It.” Both of these TikToks tell a story of these creators overcoming negative self-narratives with the help of their ADHD diagnoses. This type of story was commonly found throughout the dataset, which featured numerous videos about how acknowledging and understanding ADHD as part of one’s identity leads to a sense of self-acceptance and community support.

The promotion of diagnosis as key to self-understanding and therefore self-acceptance in TikToks may have benefits to users with ADHD, such as decreasing stigma and providing social support. Studies show that many people with ADHD report lower self-esteem or an inherent sense of failure when comparing themselves to neurotypical peers (Çelebi & Ünal, 2021; Cook et al., 2014; Kooij et al., 2010). Pedersen et al. (2024, p. 3) write, “Recognizing challenges and stigma faced by adults with ADHD may therefore be an important first step to help promote a more positive self-esteem in these individuals.” In other words, open acknowledgement of having ADHD and how it affects your life can reduce negative stigma placed upon individuals with ADHD by society and, as a result, by themselves. TikToks by individuals with ADHD about the power of an ADHD diagnosis were used to share stories about how, for the longest time, people thought something was wrong with them that they could never get right, despite trying. Through receiving a diagnosis of and learning about ADHD, however, many were able to reframe years of disparaging self-talk into a nuanced understanding of these so-called character

flaws as symptoms of ADHD. This can result in learning how to manage these symptoms or, at the very least, being able to explain them in a way that legitimizes the struggles and takes the blame off the individual by connecting them to an (online) community of others with similar life experiences (Hansson Halleröd et al., 2015).

These videos about diagnosis and self-acceptance heavily suggest that many creators proudly (or at least overtly) claim their ADHD disability identity. As discussed in the literature review, disability identity underwent a shift in the 1970s due in part to critical disability studies' move away from the medical model to the social model. As a result of this shift, activists began recognizing the political and personal potential of claiming disability as a minority identity, useful for enshrining rights and freedoms to disabled people as a political entity (Zames & Fleischer, 2011). As discussed in the previous chapter, there is some agency and power offered by claiming disability as a part of one's identity. Membership in disability cultures is usually self-defined (Gabel, 2001). The act of self-defining can be liberatory for disabled people and can facilitate finding communities of support, allowing people to find networks with whom they share this facet of their identity, either in localized ways within their communities or through technology.

It is within this context that we must understand the significance of TikToks which feature the theme of diagnosis as the key to self-acceptance. By proudly sharing uplifting stories about how much easier life is due to understanding their ADHD, creators are rejecting the stigmatizing medical model's 'problem to be fixed' framework and embracing their disability as an act of self-identification, whether labelled explicitly as such or not. Since identity is "most empowering when it is self-described and defined as an individualized experience" which, when

shared voluntarily, can create "communities of common experience" (Johnstone, 2004, p. 7), this makes ADHDTok a notable space for young people with ADHD to do important identity work.

That said, what is also present in TikToks with this theme (and muddling already complex understandings of disability identity) is the concept of diagnosis allowing for true authenticity, which further creates positive feelings of identity and self-acceptance. Of course, there is no singular definition of authenticity or even consensus that such a thing exists, and the way authenticity is discussed in public discourse differs from scholarly understandings of it as contextual, relational, and performed. As a reminder, in this analysis, I take up Barta and Andalibi's (2021) definition of authenticity as "a socially constructed, artificial category, in which effortless yet sincere presentations of self that conform to the expectations of an audience as well as the context of expression (i.e., social media) are read as authentic by onlookers (e.g., networked others)" (p. 6). ADHD TikTok exists on a platform where users are incentivized (financially and otherwise) to maximize engagement and go viral, and performing authenticity is a big way to increase your chances of doing just that (Abidin, 2019). Amateur aesthetics are often performed on visual social media to signal authenticity, which Abidin (2017) calls "calibrated amateurism" (p. 1). This practice is evident in the analysis of my dataset. The overwhelming majority of my sampled TikToks (and, in my experience, videos on the platform in general) *feel* casual and un-polished, with creators using a relatable and informal manner of expression in their speech, on-screen text, and video captions. It is also present in the casual and seemingly low-tech production of most TikToks. Aesthetically speaking, most videos have an 'I just picked up my phone and started filming out of the blue' quality to them. In terms of clothing, hairstyles, and makeup, creators rarely appear to have made themselves up for the camera, another presentation norm that further produces a sense of authenticity and a just-be-yourself

attitude of acceptance on ADHDTok. These creators' aesthetic choices demonstrate a seemingly intentionally calibrated amateurism through savvy use of TikTok's affordances and platform vernacular and recreation of popular video aesthetics. As a result, TikTok viewers see people who may look like them or talk like them, which may increase relatability and feelings of shared experience.

Since being perceived as authentic can lead to greater success and engagement, positioning ADHD as a concrete, authentic identity serves purposes of monetization and engagement. There is some tension, then, when considering videos with themes about ADHD diagnosis and education being the key to self-acceptance. The emotionality and vulnerability present in these TikToks feel real, with creators seeming to genuinely want to spread awareness about ADHD and encouraging similar others to share their experiences and seek mental health care. At the same time, the popularity, status, and careers of many of these creators suggest they are working very hard to maximize their reach. Most of the TikTokers whose videos I analyzed had very large followings—the highest being ADHD influencer Tarah Elizabeth with 1.4 million—and the average follower count of creators in my dataset was 341,370. Analysis of the profiles and bios of creators in my dataset reveals that most use TikTok as a revenue source. Some do this through brand partnerships, which are generally more financially rewarding the larger your following is, while others are selling some sort of ADHD-related product like an 'ADHD survival guide' or 'ADHD planner'. A third of the creators call themselves ADHD coaches or ADHD lifestyle mentors—titles which, as far as I know, come with no official certifications or licenses.

TikTok is an attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) existing within a platform capitalist framework (Srnicek, 2017). Content creators are workers "whose success is bound up with the

creation and maintenance of a particular branded persona" (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). As such, we must understand that most of these creators producing content featuring narratives about self-acceptance, identity, and authenticity to create supportive, non-judgmental support networks are simultaneously working to grow their audiences and increase profitability. These two things can exist at once, and need not necessarily diminish our understanding of their authentic presentations of ADHD diagnoses. It is not inherently morally reprehensible if authenticity *is* being employed for financial gain by disabled creators, especially when one considers that most of the creators have intersecting female and disabled identities. These identities often face systemic barriers and economic disadvantages (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2022), which can make the pursuit of financial stability through establishing an authentic online presence a pragmatic survival strategy (Cat-Wells, 2023). Thus, the context of these creators' lived experiences complicates judgments about the ethical implications of their commercial strategies.

Theme 3: ADHD is underdiagnosed in women, and ADHDTok is changing that

"How can an algorithm on the internet know a thing my doctor should've noticed in me so long ago?" (Frear, 2022). This is another lyric in creator Sophie Frear's original song about getting "diagnosed" by the TikTok algorithm. It is also a fitting introduction to theme 3, which is that ADHD is historically underdiagnosed in women, and ADHDTok is changing that. The vast majority of TikToks in my dataset (roughly 90%) were posted by female-presenting creators, most of whom address the issue of under- and misdiagnosis of ADHD in women in their videos. Whereas the previous theme was about the benefits of a diagnosis, this theme, while similar, speaks to specifically gendered experiences of diagnosis (or a lack thereof) addressed in some ADHD TikToks. Some do this through sharing their own experience of re-contextualizing their negative self-perception after getting a late-in-life diagnosis. In one example, creator

@thementalhealthmum shares her experience of growing up as a girl with undiagnosed ADHD. In the short 17-second video, the creator uses on-screen text to list various symptoms she later learned were caused by ADHD and acts them out. Some of these include “social anxiety” which she demonstrates by peering out of a window and closing the blinds to the outside world, “lack of attention but high achiever” which she shows by trying to read a paper document but instead fiddling with a pen, and “anger issues” which she acts out through an imaginary screaming match. The creator has on seemingly no makeup and is wearing a non-descript athleisure outfit. The video’s caption is “Always the “problem child”” (@thementalhealthmum, 2022). She uses a common video style (acting out on-screen captions) to relive negative past experiences in a humorous and relatable way.

Other creators’ videos aim to educate viewers about the differing symptoms of ADHD in women and girls versus men and boys, again through sharing their lived experiences as women with ADHD. In one particularly salient example, recently diagnosed creator Beth Theobald toes the line between assuming medical authority and simply sharing her personal experience for educational reasons by quoting directly from her psychologist’s report from her ADHD assessment. Her video uses similar techniques to the previous example—instead of speaking, she uses the on-screen text function to list various symptoms while acting them out. The video’s caption reads “Here are a few of my ADHD symptoms/traits/behaviours as a woman that my psychiatrist noted down on my report! ADHD in girls/women can look completely different to men - don’t forget that!” (Theobald, 2022). By citing her psychologist’s words directly, she is providing insight into the traits mental health professionals look for, but she is doing so in an intensely personal way by sharing the very specific details of *her* report and letting people hear some rather intimate information about her. Some of these include: "Beth struggles to stay on top

of tasks as her mind is always on the go. Beth makes impulsive purchases leading to poor money management. Beth has never felt like she fitted in and has few friends. Beth finds social situations exhausting as she is constantly overthinking" (Theobald, 2022). These videos about ADHD in women are seemingly created with the goal of educating others so that, if they relate, they can potentially better understand themselves and seek support.

Building upon the previous section's discussion of performed authenticity, these videos commonly employ a type of vulnerability that is common on TikTok. This permissible display of challenging emotions suggests that TikTok is a favourable avenue for expressing and processing difficult emotions, as well as a space for social support exchange (Barta & Andalibi, p. 25). These moments of vulnerability also have the potential to foster a powerful connection with viewers who share similar experiences, potentially in life-changing ways. This is because late-diagnosed female creators with ADHD are using TikTok to educate similar (but relatively unknown) others, contributing to an unprecedented uptick in ADHD diagnoses for adult women (Lynch, 2024). This is, to put it plainly, huge. It is estimated that half to three-quarters of women with ADHD are undiagnosed, and when they are diagnosed, it usually happens later in life than it does for men (Foley, 2018). This is likely because early studies of ADHD, which were primarily of young boys, led to a list of diagnostic criteria that are more applicable to boys than girls. Additionally, ADHD symptoms in girls often worsen with puberty due to increasing estrogen, contrary to boys whose symptoms typically improve with puberty. Beyond this, onset can often appear to occur even later in life for girls, as symptoms sometimes do not cause issues until post-high school, when girls leave the structured, familiar supports and routines of home (Yagoda, 2013). Girls are less likely to be referred for treatment due to displaying less disruptive behaviour than boys (Walters, 2018). Clinical psychologist Kathleen Nadeau, recognized as an

authority on women with ADHD, attributes this to "masking, or how people socialized as female tend to find ways to compensate for their symptoms due to societal expectations" (Lynch, 2024, para. 11). This underdiagnosis of women is evidence of a societal, medical, and historical tradition of women's suffering being overlooked. Feminist disability studies scholar Susan Wendell (2006, p. 24) highlights that disabled women face both gender discrimination in male-dominated societies and disability discrimination in primarily non-disabled societies. Given these barriers to diagnosis for women, it is rather incredible that TikToks about ADHD in women are contributing to a changing mental healthcare landscape.

Not only do these TikToks have educational benefits and the potential to change the underdiagnosis of ADHD in women, but they also provide emotional outlets for the creators who are posting this content. Women diagnosed with ADHD later in life often experience years of anxiety and/or depression prior to diagnosis. Teenage girls with ADHD have notably high rates of self-injury and suicide attempts, underscoring the severity of the condition in women (Hinshaw, et al., 2012). Most adults with ADHD also have at least one other psychiatric disorder such as an anxiety disorder, alcohol abuse, hypomanic episodes, or major depression (Yagoda, 2013). In sharing deeply personal, educational TikToks about late ADHD diagnoses, women are getting the chance to unmask, be disruptive, and change the way we understand ADHD. They are mourning the childhood and adolescence they might have had had their symptoms been recognized earlier, they are sharing strategies for self-acceptance and living with ADHD, and they are working to help other TikTok users, young and old, prevent the same heartache of a missed diagnosis and/or experience the relief of a late diagnosis. By sharing these stories, they can find validation and connection with others facing similar challenges. The TikTok comment section plays a crucial role in this support, as it is commonly used as a space for other users to

express empathy, share their own experiences, or offer practical advice (Barta & Andalibi, 2021, p. 19). This interaction can be incredibly affirming for women who have felt isolated, misunderstood, or dismissed due to their late-diagnosed ADHD. Positive reactions to videos about their experiences are validating, and transform creators' personal struggles into a collective conversation. This demonstrates the potential power of TikTok to foster feelings of community and support for women navigating these challenges.

Conclusion

Through reflexive thematic analysis, I have provided a snapshot of how ADHD is portrayed and discussed on the platform, drawing upon 30 TikToks sampled in late 2022. This analysis revealed an overarching topic of diagnosis present in the videos, out of which three distinct themes emerged: 1) TikTok's algorithmic curation is accurate; 2) ADHD diagnosis is the key to self-acceptance; 3) ADHD is underdiagnosed in women, which the ADHDTok is changing. Firstly, videos often discussed or implied the accuracy of TikTok's algorithmic curation in delivering ADHD-related content to users, reflecting the platform's role in community-building and user identity formation. Here we can see how specific algorithmic imaginaries surrounding ADHDTok have emerged, solidifying the trust of both creators and users in TikTok's algorithm to distribute relevant and meaningful content to users (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020; Bucher, 2017). Building upon this general trust in the algorithm, the second notable theme in these videos was that ADHD diagnoses are pivotal to self-acceptance and greater self-knowledge. This process particularly highlights the complex relationships between diagnosis, identity, and authenticity as they play out on TikTok, as users are served highly relatable content from creators whose performance of ADHD identity is perceived to be authentic and compelling (Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). The final theme that emerged in this dataset was that

of the underdiagnosis of ADHD in women and the potential of ADHD-focused TikTok communities to challenge and change this. The two previous themes of accurate algorithmic curation and ADHD diagnosis being key to identity come together to support this third theme of underdiagnosis in women. Female creators use TikTok as a platform on which to take on the project of sharing how ADHD symptoms present and develop differently in girls and women due to the historic and structural minimization of women's pain and suffering in medicine, as documented by numerous feminist disability scholars and theorists (Lynch, 2024; Wendell, 2006). As ADHD assessment criteria have for decades skewed toward the diagnosis of men and boys, the high number of female-presenting creators on ADHDTok pointedly name this phenomenon in efforts to correct this bias, and help more women and girls seek the diagnoses they have found to be so transformative. Taken together, the three themes that emerge from my dataset are mutually constitutive, platform-specific phenomena which demonstrate how TikTok (and its personalization algorithm) have become important spaces for the legitimization of ADHD identity.

Conclusion

Five years ago, I learned I may have ADHD on TikTok. Since then, I've read dozens of news stories, blog posts, and academic articles about others having that experience. I've come across many relatable stories of this sort shared in TikTok videos and comment sections. I've also engaged in countless real-life conversations with people who either know someone with what I jokingly call 'late-diagnosed-TikTok-informed ADHD' or who have navigated this journey themselves. As I set off on this thesis, this phenomenon felt important to me, both because of the sheer amount of buzz surrounding it and because of the revelatory self-acceptance and self-forgiveness my own ADHD diagnosis had afforded me. I knew there was a lot to understand about how and why this was happening to so many people.

From that jumping-off point, this thesis has investigated ADHD publics on TikTok. Specifically, it asked how TikTok's affordances and personalized recommendation algorithm interpellated users and engendered a sense of belonging to an ADHD community. It also sought to uncover what was actually going on on ADHDTok, i.e., what themes and topics came up in ADHD-related TikToks. To do so, it adapted the walkthrough method and the research persona method to access and assess TikTok's algorithmically curated For You feed from a user perspective, paying specific attention to how my inputs affected algorithmic outputs. This time in-app also served as a means to collect a sample of 30 TikToks which were then used for reflexive thematic analysis to identify what themes were present in my sampled videos about ADHD.

There are three key takeaways from this research. Firstly, I have uncovered TikTok's algorithmic interpellation which provides a sense of community on a platform that might otherwise have an entertainment focus. TikTok is home to publics or communities that bond over

being served similar content relating to certain niche topics despite a decentering of user-to-user communication and a focus on algorithmic interaction. This algorithmic interaction provides users with increasingly niche content recommendations, giving rise to a sense of connectedness with creators whose content reflects parts of themselves and other users who self-identify as belonging to the same online communities.

Secondly, I have found key themes that provide a temporally specific snapshot of ADHD TikTok at the time of my study. These findings demonstrate how influential the algorithm (or user understandings thereof) and medical authority are in shaping how ADHD is discussed on the platform. These two actors are given the authority to define someone as having ADHD—on ADHDTOK, creators elevate their diagnoses as the most legitimate verification of ADHD and allude to the role of the algorithm in effectively funnelling users who likely have ADHD to their content.

Lastly, by putting the novel research persona method to the test, I have found the emerging method to be useful and adaptable depending on your research needs. My thesis shows it to be effective for studying highly personalized algorithmic media through a specific user lens. I have also demonstrated that it may be used for sampling content that is representative of what a certain kind of user may be served on TikTok, which is a new application of the method that could serve in future content analysis of highly personalized media feeds.

While providing invaluable access to certain user experiences, however, this same method may have obscured others. In my use of it, at least, the persona method was not attuned to what is *not* algorithmically served up to a user. This was not so much of a problem in Chapter 4, where my goal was to interact with TikTok's content recommendation algorithm. For Chapter

5, however, the method was used as a means for content sampling, leaving the question of who or what might have been excluded from this sample.

TikTok has a history of shadowbanning (limiting the visibility of someone's content without alerting them) certain demographic groups through algorithmic censorship. A whistleblower report from 2019 showed how TikTok suppressed videos by creators who were "apparently disabled" (D'Souza & Rauchberg, 2020) transgender, queer, or fat (Köver & Reuter, 2019). Further, leaked documents from TikTok revealed their content moderation guidelines included directives to suppress videos featuring people with "'abnormal body shape,' 'ugly facial looks', 'disabled people,' 'too many wrinkles'" (Biddle et al., 2020, as cited in Nicholas, 2022, p. 19). In response to those leaks, TikTok claimed that the guidelines were aimed at protecting creators from bullying, and are no longer in place (Ibid). While that may be true, the very nature of shadowbanning means that unless further internal content moderation documents are made public, we have no way to confirm what guidelines are in place currently and which marginalized groups' content they may suppress.

Reflecting on this research, I am somewhat troubled that the vast majority of creators in my dataset were young white women with no other apparent disabilities. Never did I make my research persona's race explicit to TikTok, yet almost no creators of colour with ADHD came across my For You feed, especially in the latter half of the study. Many TikTok users and creators believe that Black voices are algorithmically suppressed on the platform (Harris et al., 2023). Do my findings confirm this? No, at least not definitively—the technical realities of the claim are impossible for this thesis to prove. One thing this research has instilled in me, however, is a deep appreciation of user experience as a highly valuable resource in understanding

TikTok's algorithmic governance. In other words, if Black creators think they are being shadowbanned, I'm inclined to believe them.

This thesis has already addressed how women and girls with ADHD have historically been under or misdiagnosed because of the centring of male experiences of ADHD in scientific literature. Recently, more research has emerged which addresses this gap and studies how the disability may manifest differently according to gender. There is, however, a striking lack of research which addresses how these diagnostic disparities may be made greater depending on race. There is some evidence which shows that Black and Latinx people are much less likely to receive an ADHD diagnosis, despite showing symptoms at the same rate as white people (Seven, 2023). This disparity exists for a variety of reasons, not least of which are inherent racial bias in medicine and healthcare providers' lack of knowledge of diverse ADHD symptomology.

As Rauchberg (2022) writes, "technology is not neutral: it is an extension of dominant political, cultural, and ideological views" (p. 197). How does TikTok serve to reify dominant ideology by making white women with ADHD highly visible and obscuring the experiences of people with other intersecting disability or racial identities? This thesis has found that much content on ADHD TikTok aims to reduce the diagnostic gap between men and women with ADHD. Further research could consider how access to the potential benefits of TikTok's ADHD communities, such as education and social support on the user end, or the potential to support oneself monetarily on the creator end, differ given a user or creator's race or disability, and what role TikTok's algorithmic curation plays in those differences. Given the pervasiveness of discrimination and inequity, intersectional analyses of algorithmic filtering are a necessary line of future inquiry.

Another of the study's limitations is its temporal specificity which roots my findings rather firmly in 2022 (which is basically a decade ago in platform years). I started working on this thesis in earnest two and a half years ago. In that time, TikTok has no doubt undergone some user-facing and backend changes to its technical structure which ultimately affect my study's relevance. Public discourse and knowledge about neurodivergence and ADHD on TikTok have surely changed as well. I know this is a reality that I have to contend with, but it is a bitter pill to swallow. To some degree, I know that any social media research is likely to be outdated by the time of its publishing. Even with this knowledge, I interpret this delay as one of the harsh realities of doing ADHD TikTok research as a researcher with ADHD. Though I generally subscribe to fellow TikTok scholar Saskia Kowalchuk's (2024) view that "My situatedness [is] an asset, not a methodological sin" (p. 76), my disability has been really… well, disabling, slowing down the completion of this largely self-driven, amorphous, and at times soul-crushing project. Of course, I'm not suggesting that further research about online ADHD communities be conducted by researchers without ADHD so as to avoid the likelihood of these delays—I generally believe this work should be led by those with a direct stake in it. In retrospect, though, more explicit autoethnographic reflection may have been helpful in adapting to and reflecting on these challenges. Broadly speaking, I suppose I'm just acknowledging that this was really hard, and I urge those with a similar positionality who undergo future projects of this sort to be nice to themselves. This work is important, your experience is an asset, and it takes as long as it takes. "Does that count as a study limitation or direction for further research?" you ask, to which I say: this is my thesis, and I've decided that it does.

This thesis' findings are relevant to platform and disability scholars as they add to the growing corpus of literature about TikTok and online mental health and disability publics. While

online sociality and support are not new, this thesis finds that on TikTok, these things take on new forms, becoming increasingly about personal sense-making. It also recognizes the significant role the algorithm plays in interpellating users into given identity and group formation processes. While this thesis provides a nuanced understanding of TikTok's algorithmic personalization, I recognize that these same technologies are often at least partially responsible for facilitating radicalization and polarization by creating filter bubbles and echo chambers. With that knowledge in mind, I also hope platform scholars take note of the research persona method as a digital research method that can be adapted in myriad ways to make possible socially useful algorithmic platform research.

Users of TikTok may find this thesis interesting to supplement their intuitive and experiential knowledge of algorithmic curation. Given that TikTok's algorithm is a trusted authority figure when it comes to the phenomenon of diagnosis-via-TikTok, I hope this analysis also offers a nuanced and critical understanding of algorithmic power in processes of identity formation. While this power is, in this instance, often seen as positive and empowering, users (especially young ones) should remain cognizant of its risks. Yes, you might learn about a facet of your identity thanks to recommended content, but consider how much authority you lend to the algorithm in deciding how you understand yourself. Users should keep in mind the context of how and where this self-discovery takes place—TikTok is a massive corporation whose bottom line is always going to be increasing profits. As such, I urge users to remain critical of the commodification of their self-narrativization. Put plainly: these positive outcomes and extractive platform logics can (and do) co-exist. Recognizing one does not mean you have to ignore the other.

Lastly, this study should be taken as part of a broader project for ADHD awareness and destigmatization. I believe the path to destigmatization is education. However imperfect, TikTok's ADHD publics are an important space in which this work is happening. It currently fills a gap in the healthcare system by providing access to medical information and social support. As it stands, parents, educators, and medical professionals are the most likely to flag a child for ADHD assessment, making them all crucial gatekeepers to accessing care. ADHDTok could be a meaningful resource in expanding their knowledge and understanding of how women and girls have different symptomatic presentations and often slip through the cracks, undiagnosed. While ADHDTok creators are generally not licensed practitioners or peer-reviewed scholars, their experiences still hold educational value and should not be disregarded. As I say to my partner whenever he's struggling to understand one of my ADHD symptoms and I'm too overstimulated to explain: "I don't know, look it up on TikTok."

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