The Impact of TikTok on Self-expression and Public Cognition of Autistic Groups

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Abstract. This study explores the paradigm shift of autism cognition, from clinical stereotypes to self-constructed digital narratives. Drawing on Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation, this article discusses how the #ActuallyAutistic community on TikTok uses the platform as an algorithm-driven biographical lighting space for identity construction and public resistance. This study uses the multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) method. Conducting a purposeful analysis of four TikTok videos (original corpus) produced by creators of neurodivergent differences from May to November 2025 and 20 highly participatory audience comments (secondary corpus) from this period. The research results show that the creator strategically encodes a neurodiversity paradigm to express anti-discourse through patterns. Such as language (reinterpreting trauma as empowerment), visual/spatial (reclaiming physical environments) and auditory. At the same time, the audience decoding shows a high degree of discourse consistency and active power consultation, verifying non-standard behavior as a functional communication norm. In the end, this study shows that #ActuallyAutistic community have achieved effective ideological resistance by taking advantage of multimodal accessibility. And it have successfully shifted public discourse from defects and sympathy to informed acceptance, digital advocacy and social inclusion.

Keywords: TikTok, #ActuallyAutistic, Neurodiversity, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), Theory of Representation, Counter-Discourse.

1. Introduction

This study explores the process of transforming autism from pathological stereotypes in mainstream media to inclusive and self-advocacy digital narratives in cyberspace. In the past, media descriptions reinforced stereotypes and mainly presented autism from a defective perspective. However, this mode is challenged by the populairy of the #ActuallyAutistic topic tag on TikTok fundamentally. It has built an "algorithm-driven biographical lighting space" so that autistic individuals can participate in self-definition actively, challenge social stereotypes, and showcase the diversity of the autism spectrum [1].

Built upon Stuart Hall's legacy of Representation Theory, which believes that meaning is a cultural product generated through active use of symbology [3]. Under this framework, TikTok videos are considered complex multi modal text, and creators "encode" their true identity and experience through these contents. The analysis structure discusses two stages of meaningful negotiation: encoding (generation) and decoding (acception) [3].

This study revolves around two key research issues.

RQ1: In the TikTok topic tag #ActuallyAutistic, how do creators with autism use specific visual and narrative symbols to construct and present their personal identity and life experiences?

RQ2: In the video comment section under the topic tag #ActuallyAutistic, how does the audience interaction affect and reshape the meaning of autism presented by the creator?

2. Method

This study adopts Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as its basic methodological framework. Because it is good at deconstructing the complex and multi-level communication practices on TikTok.According to the MCDA paradigm, the construction of meaning in digital space is jointly promoted by the interaction of a variety of symbolic patterns such as language, image and

sound [5]. This holistic approach is crucial to the analysis of TikTok videos, because its meaning is generated through images, music and language interactions.

The “Critical”dimension of this methodology is crucial to the study of the characterization of marginalized groups. Based on the principle of MCDA, the analysis clearly explores how discourse practice can play a role by challenging or strengthening the dominant social hierarchy [8]. MCDA can systematically deconstruct the anti-discourse of creators in rhetoric and visual strategies, thus challenging the common, dominant and dehumanized “tragic discourse”in mainstream media [9]. By combining symbol selection with ideological function [10], the method ensures that the survey results can deeply assess empowerment and social change.

2.1 Data Collection and Selection

A rigorous purpose-based sampling strategy is adopted to build a corpus specially designed for multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA) [2]. The sample comes from the publicly accessible #ActuallyAutistic video on TikTok.

Data Source and Timeframe: The six-month data collection period from May 2025 to November 2025 covers a variety of changing subject trends and changes in community discourse, thus ensuring the empirical reliability of the research results.

Corpus Structure: the original corpus (for the video of RQ1) and the secondary corpus (for comments on RQ2)

2.1.1 Primary and Secondary Corpus Design

From May to November 2025, a dual-segment corpus was built from publicly available TikTok videos using a purposeful sampling strategy, all of which have the #ActuallyAutistic tag. The Primary Corpus contains high-quality videos produced by four autistic creators, through the maximum diversity selection covering key topics including camouflage and stimulating behavior. The Secondary Corpus contains 20 corresponding comments (5 comments with the most likes and the most replies in each video), which is used to evaluate the audience's decoding process. While maintaining qualitative rigor, this optimized corpus (4 videos and 20 comments) also meets the detailed semiotic analysis required for multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA).

2.1.2 Ethical Protocol

To protect user privacy and reduce the risk of being re-identified in the final report, metadata such as usernames and avatars were systematically removed. Although all data used is considered publicly available, all records are fully anonymized before analysis, and strict privacy measures are in place to protect the identities of participants.

2.2 Data Analysis Process

2.2.1 Phase 1: MCDA (Creator Coding - RQ1) of the primary corpus

Linguistic Mode: The focus of the analysis is on identity-first language, framework narratives (such as repentance and comparison) and metaphors used to convey inner experiences.

Visual Mode: Adopting the visual semiotics method proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen [5], the study analyzes creative characteristics (such as editing speed, camera perspective) and portrayal elements (such as deliberately presenting stimulating pictures and non-verbal hints) as intentional symbols.

Auditory Mode: The exam includes non-verbal resources like background music, sound effects and rhythm, which strengthen the ideological framework of the content. The main achievement of this stage is to comprehensively sort out and map the counter-discourse strategies adopted by the creators.

2.2.2 Phase 2: CDA (Audience Decoding - RQ2) of the secondary corpus

Conduct a thematic analysis of the selected 20 comments to describe the audience's acceptance and interpretation experience. At this stage, these three key discussion indicators are tracked.

Discursive Alignment: strengthen the identity and narrative presented by the creator

Ideological Contest: introduce the language based on the framework of neurotypical expectations or medical defects

Power Negotiation: analyze whether the text supports the social/neurological diversity model or replicates the pathological medical model

2.2.3 Phase 3: Organization and Discussion

In the final stage, the findings are triangulated. The identified coding strategy (Phase 1) is cross-compared with the resulting audience decoding mode (Phase 2). This comprehensive study has drawn a strong conclusion about the effectiveness of self-advocacy discourse. This comprehensive study yielded strong conclusions regarding the effectiveness of self-advocacy discourse. This demonstrates its effectiveness in driving positive shifts in public perception within inclusive societies and directly answers the research question.

3. Analysis

3.1 RQ1: Symbolic Strategies of Antiphonal Discourse (Creator Encoding)

The video corpus shows the exquisite use of counter-discourse, aiming to resist the widespread "tragic discourse" [9] and the pathological medical framework in the mainstream media. These strategies are realized through three main symbol patterns: language, vision and spatial/auditory.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Three Semiotic Schemes

Semiotic Mode	Counter-Discourse Strategy (Coding)	Video Examples (Titles)	Ideological Function
Linguistic	Reinterpreting Trauma as Empowerment	Video 3, Video 4	Shift the narrative from personal dilemma to systemic oppression. Establish joint struggle and affirmation with identity as the core.
Spatial/ Visual	Redefining the Space of Neurodiversity	Video 1, Video 2	Transform the environment (home, social place) into a space with differences in safety and function, challenging neurotypical norms.
Auditory/ Affective	Normalization of Difference	Video 1, Video 2	Through dialogue and music, non-mainstream behaviors (such as information pouring and maximalism) are presented as effective and positive experiences.

3.1.1 The Recoding of Language: From Inconvenience to Identity

The linguistic coding often involves hidden themes and deep traumas related to self-hiddening. Video 4, titled "I hid my autism for 26 years...", functions as an evocative confession-style text [1]. A focal quote, "No one had time for my autism, so I just hid it," illustrates a significant shift. Individual diagnostic challenges are redefined as the result of social exclusion, not personal failure. The creator has clearly reassigned accountability, stating: "I don't want to have to alter myself to make it more comfy for other people." This linguistic turning point adopts the expression of "identity first", emphasizing that the identity of autism is unconditionally valid and acceptable.

Furthermore, Video 3, titled "Why is social media so confusing," which is linguistically isolating and criticizing the mainstream normal social expectations. "Where was the rule book of how to use social media and why didn't I receive it." This rhetorical technique uses irony and interrogative sentences to depict the neurotypical sociality as an arbitrary and exclusive construction, thus providing legitimacy for the alienation experience of people with different neurodevelopment. Through this strategy, simple self-expression is promoted to positive social criticism.

3.1.2 Multimodal recycling of space and society

Multimodal analysis of Video 1 and Video 2 reveals that spatial aesthetics were intentionally used to encode neural diversity paradigms.

Video 1, titled “Autistic Friendship,” visually models ideal neurodivergent social interaction. The dialogue clearly rejects the traditional neurotypical model, which means abandons superficial gossip, and adopts functional communication methods instead. Such as “dumping information” to specific stakeholders and collaborative planning. The visual composition is friendly and supportive, indicating that once the expectations of people with normal neurodevelopment are broken, deep social connections will naturally arise. This provides a powerful counter-narrative for traditional media to portray individuals with autism as being pathologically isolated or defective.

Video 2, titled “My autistic maximalist home then vs now!”, reclaims the physical environment. The creator regards interior design as a “special interest”. And presenting a maximalist aesthetic through visual means, which intending to challenge the low-stimulating and minimalist environment advocated for autistic people in mainstream medical advice. The visual collage re-encodes the sensory "chaos" in the cheerful background music, transforming it into the embodiment of real sensory sense of security, identity expression and personal well-being. She transformed the house into a shelter defined by the differential needs of neurodevelopment, not a place for clinical supervision [5].

3.2 RQ2: Ideological Negotiation and Power Dynamics (Audience Decoding)

The audience decoding process shows a high degree of discussion consistency in 20 analytical comments. It provides a crucial verification basis for the creator's counter-discourse [7].

3.2.1 The Construction of Identity and Collective Identity

The main decoding pattern observed is Discursive Alignment. The audience members internalize the neurodiversity paradigm and promote the unity of the digital community. In the comments under Video 1, users actively validate non-normative social behaviors. For instance, one user asks, “Is this…not a 'normal' social interaction?” while another shares, “My autistic friend and I hadn't seen each other in two years so we made PowerPoints to catch each other up.” Presentation software, which is usually used for corporate or academic tools for intimate private communication, is recoded by the community into a highly functional and idealized form of communication. The feeling of describing interaction with individuals with normal neurodevelopment as a “verbal minefield” further strengthens this connection. It strips social friction away from individual pathological problems and attributes it to the exclusive social environment.

3.2.2 Power negotiations and the regaining of time

The most complex discursive work occurs within the category of Power Negotiation, particularly evident in the responses to Video 4. A poignant comment reads: “Yes you do. I am living this too. I found out this year and I am 60... I am time for all of it NO MATTER HOW YOU FEEL TODAY, ITS OK...” This text triggered a profound change in time and identity. It criticizes the cost of long-term hiding identity (“I am 60”) and uses the vulnerability of the creator as a catalyst to verify the whole life course. By claiming that "I am time for all of it", users regain the lost time in rhetoric and shift the focus of acceptance from external recognition to internal self-worth [6]. This collective sharing of systemic trauma shows how digital platforms promote a collaborative form of biography, which is crucial to the construction of marginalized identities [1].

4. Conclusion

This study shows that TikTok, as an important platform used by the #ActuallyAutistic group, has become a powerful tool for complex ideological resistance to the widespread defect-based and tragic narratives. Through Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, the research verifies that creators successfully deploy linguistic (reframing masking trauma), visual (reclaiming physical environments), and affective (normalizing behavioral difference) strategies to encode the neurodiversity paradigm.

The key is that the high degree of discourse consistency shown in the audience decoding redefines the non-normative expression. For example, information pouring and sensory-rich maximalism make it an effective and highly functional socialization model. This transformation highlights the transformation potential of the digital subculture. For shifting public dialogue from clinical pathology and passive sympathy to systematic digital advocacy, true acceptance and structural social inclusion. If governance institutions and media institutions provide an authoritative platform for #ActuallyAutistic self-advocates, public awareness can successfully shift from clinical pathology to cultural diversity. This shift will shift communication policies and social strategies from superficial sympathy to based acceptance, then promoting an inclusive society based on collective self-esteem.

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Appendix: Corpus Reference and Secondary Data

Platform: TikTok
Main Link: https://www.tiktok.com/
Video 1 of the Research
Creator/Username: @morgaanfoley (Morgan Foley)
Video Link: https://www.tiktok.com/@morgaanfoley/video/7569631036661845262
Release Date: November 7, 2025
Caption Text: "Skip the small talk, info dump, and parallel play for a couple of hours #actuallyautistic"
Selected Comments Segment:
1.“Is this…not a ‘normal’ social interaction? ”
2.“Absolutely love this manifesting this kind of friendship”
3.“My autistic friend and I hadn’t seen each other in two years so we made PowerPoints to catch each other up”
4.“Omg! The best social interactions! Really wish I had a friendship like this.”
5.“i thought i was getting better at socializing but then i tried talking with my coworkers and i realized it didn’t get better, i just surrounded myself with neurodivergent ppl that i can talk to like this so it was so much easier, meanwhile talking to neurotypicals feels like a verbal minefield”
Video 2 of the Research
Creator/Username: @candy.courn

Video Link: https://www.tiktok.com/@candy.courn/video/7516698192373632270
Release Date: June 17, 2025
Caption Text: “4 years of chronic pain, sweat, tears, and many hours...”
Selected Comments Segment:
1.“as someone with a very green room, your pink house makes me so happy! It looks awesome :D”
2.“this is what I imagine the Barbie Dream House looked like in the 70’s”
3.“but the resale value! its MINE right now if i want it pink let me make it pink! literally unrecognizable in the best possible way” (Author Reply: "Yes to that - also nothing that couldn't be updated with paint later!”)
4.“if you don't mind me asking, where do you work? I’m trying to find a job, or at least have a plan. also ur house is SO cute, I love the plushie wall” (Author Reply: “I work for myself as a freelance illustrator and graphic designer...”)
5.“the organization of those pokemon plushies makes me so happy”
Video 3 of the Research
Creator/Username: @morgaanfoley (Morgan Foley)
Video Link: https://www.tiktok.com/@morgaanfoley/video/7568509414785748237
Release Date: November 4, 2025
Caption Text: “Social rules make no sense and social media is weird #actuallyautistic”
Selected Comments Segment:
1.“omg they used a purple heart instead of a yellowheart' okay?” (Author Reply: “Oh my god emojis are a whole other thing that I don't understand!!!...”)
2.“If they Like my Instagram story, they just like it, right?” (Author Reply: “I’ll be honest I never like anyone’s Instagram stories. I forget that it’s even an option”)
3.“No bc I’ve been yelled at like 6 times for using 🤣 < that emoji to signify that I'm laughing/joking bc somehow it means I’m being backhanded and/or making fun of someone?? What??”
4.“Why is going back and looking at peoples old posts/highlights seen as obsessive and weird?? Like you posted them to be seen, why is it a problem if I see it a bit late”
5.“so me looking at everyones instagram stories once a month is a bad thing” (Author Reply: “I have no idea”)
Video 4 of the Research
Creator/Username: @keara.graves
Video Link: https://www.tiktok.com/@keara.graves/video/7558547035985661192
Release Date: October 8, 2025
Caption Text: “i vlogged the diagnosis process & put it on youtube”
Selected Comments Segment:
1.“No one had time for my autism, so I just hid it' hits hard as the eldest daughter who was the 'problem free child no one had to worry about'” (Author Reply: "exactly v relatable")
2.“I truly feel this. I was diagnosed this year and everything makes sense now. ”
3.“Yes you do. I am living this too. I found out this year and I am 60. ”
4.“I am time for all of it NO MATTER HOW YOU FEEL TODAY, ITS OKAY TO FEEL THAT WAY” (Author Reply: “YES”)
5.“I relate so much to this, I’m currently in the process of trying to get diagnosed but it feels like people aren’t taking me every seriously...” (Author Reply: “I went though the same thing & the same invalidation... don’t give up & keep advocating for yourself”)