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Critical Disability Studies: Theory and Practice

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3 March 2023

An Exploration of Social Media's Portrayal of Disability

Social media is an outlet used by millions of people in order to have their frustrations heard, relieve stress through humor, educate viewers, or share a glimpse into the creator's life, among many other reasons. Available to the public in 2018 ("TikTok," 2020), Tik Tok represents one of these platforms and is used by millions of creators and viewed by billions. As such, Tik Tok is an excellent platform for spreading information; activist groups, political candidates, educators, professionals, and everyday members of society alike create content on almost any subject matter imaginable. Many people with disabilities and disability activists have turned to posting on Tik Tok for not only education and activist content, but also as an outlet for the frustrating ableism that surrounds their daily lives, often turning their frustrations into humor in order to reach the broadest audience in a palatable manner. In the following paragraphs, an exploration of the services Tik Tok can provide users will be outlined, with a particular focus on its use in service of disability education and justice as well as the ways in which the platform is used to put down people with disabilities or spread misinformation about disability diagnostics. In particular, the idea of intent versus perception will be explored as posts are free to be interpreted by the public once posted.

The first post to be explored portrays a woman speaking directly to viewers with the idea that the video has appeared on the "for you page" because the algorithm clumps all neurodivergent people together. Her first words are: "this video appears on your for you page

because you are both neurodivergent and nocturnal" (*Emily on TikTok*, n.d.). While Nick Walker defines neurodivergence as "the diversity of human minds" (*NEURODIVERSITY*, 2021), this is not the implication made by the creator of this Tik Tok. Rather, this creator implies that there is something "wrong" with the viewer because the video ended up on that viewer's for you page. Later in the video, she states that the people who view her video "always need dopamine" which points to the idea that she has a particular form of neurodivergence in mind because not all subcategories of neurodivergence involve dopamine. In addition, there is no educational component to this video, nor does it seem to be a joke in order to alleviate stress from the viewer. The creator is misrepresenting the disability community on the assumption that only people falling under her definition of neurodivergence view her video. Finally, the last statement the creator makes in this video is "keep watching Tik Toks, you're fine". This statement belittles the potential mental struggle that some neurodivergent people go through, and assumes that the viewer feels better while spending time on Tik Tok.

In her bio, the creator of the video includes that she has ADHD, so her intention of the post may be that of searching for people that relate to her experience with ADHD. However, this does not discount the fact that she is potentially giving people the false impression that they also have ADHD as well as misconstruing what having ADHD looks like by not only generalizing it to encompass all neurodivergent people, but also by assuming that all people with ADHD act and feel the same. Overall, though the intent of this creator may not have been to mislead people or belittle members of the disability community by telling them they are fine, the perception is such that the viewer likely leaves the video with the impression that they might be neurodivergent.

The second [video](#) begins with an example of the stereotypical idea of self-diagnosing autism followed by the creator's perspective on her own self diagnosis. This post is important to

spreading information about how the misconceptions around self diagnosis influence people into believing they have autism while also introducing one of the various avenues for self diagnosis from a personal anecdote. The first part of the clip is reminiscent of the post from the previous paragraph of this paper; it emphasizes the misconstruing of elements of stimming and other signs of autism as factors that can be used for diagnosis. However, the creator does not leave her video as simply an explanation of the misconceptions. She furthers the educational content with her own story about self diagnosis in which genuine signs of autism were present in addition to an immense amount of research she did prior to concluding that she is autistic. She also acknowledges that autism presents differently for many people, despite the stereotypical presentations such as those seen on other Tik Tok videos.

Not only does the author point out problems with self diagnosis through social media alone, but she also points out another issue with the many people who self diagnose based on social media: the idea that they are "one of the cool kids" and "get to call themselves disabled" (*Mads 🌿 Autism & OCD on TikTok*, n.d.). The tone used in this part of the Tik Tok implies that the character in the first part of the video is naive to the struggles and lack of accessibility that people with disabilities go through. While joining a new community such as the disabled community for social support is beneficial for many actual members of the disability community, this portrayal of self diagnosis goes beyond social support and instead belittles the disability community as if it were a group of friends that faced no discrimination from society. By placing this portrayal before the creators actual experience with self diagnosis, the juxtaposition between assumptions about self diagnosis and the reality of self diagnosis is better actualized.

Stereotyping common signs of attention disorders and other I/DDs is an extremely common sighting on Tik Tok, as seen in this video (*Megan Bergsma on TikTok*, n.d.). This

creator does not mention ADHD in any of her other videos nor in her bio and does not proclaim to be knowledgeable in the field of attention disorders. However, her video mentions a behavior that is stereotypically associated with people that have ADHD or other I/DDs. She is not educating the public on the origins of this behavior nor is she explaining why it is stereotypically associated with ADHD. Instead, it appears as though she found this information through a non-credible source. Looking through the comments section reveals additional insight into the behavior. For example, one comment states that the "t-rex" arms the creator mentions might simply be a comfortable way to sleep while another comment points out the readiness of creators to jump to the conclusion that any atypical behavior is a sign of ADHD "these days". In addition, the behavior the creator highlights is not uncommon in the public eye. By associating this behavior with ADHD on such a public interface, the creator is spreading misinformation about the signs of ADHD. One comment states "I sleep like that… does that mean I have ADHD?" This post was likely not intended to do damage to any viewers. However, the questions being asked in the comments as well as the lack of a holistic understanding of the signs, symptoms, and diagnostic process for ADHD incites concern regarding the perception of this post and similar social media posts.

The [Deal family](#) Tik Tok account spreads information about cochlear implants, sign language, and other issues related to hearing differences in a comedic and easy to understand manner, particularly for viewers that might not be familiar with cochlear implants or the deaf community. For example, in many of their videos, the father in the family is shown flicking the lights on and off in order to gain the attention of his deaf daughter, Kenzie (*The Deal Family (@deal_family)*, n.d.). While this action may appear unimportant or trivial at first glance, the true impact of this small gesture goes a long way. Flicking the lights shows the father's willingness to

adapt to the needs of his child rather than forcing his child to adapt to his comfortable or typical mannerisms. Another aspect of their family that shows caring and willingness to support their daughter is giving her the opportunity to tell her family when she is tired of hearing for the day or when she prefers to communicate with ASL. By sticking her cochlear implants to the fridge, she signals to her family that they must change their communication style to ASL. Thus, despite the fact that she is able to hear while wearing her cochlear implants, her family acknowledges that wearing them can be tiring and does not force her to ignore her discomfort in order to make life easier for the rest of the family. In addition to allowing Kenzie the freedom to select when she wants to hear versus when she does not, the family appears to give Kenzie the agency to have her voice heard, with no misrepresentation from other sources. The videos are purely a glimpse into the life of a family with a deaf member and serve not only as an outlet for the family, but also as an educational tool for other families in similar situations or community members seeking to make everyday activities more accessible to the deaf community.

The final [video](#) (*Ahren Belisle Stand-up Comedy on TikTok*, n.d.) to be explored here provides excellent content regarding language, who can use certain disability language, and tackles a problem regarding the power structures in disability language. Not only does he tackle these problems, but he does it in a comedic manner that his audience can easily digest. The creator of this video is mute, among other physical differences, and uses the word handicapped to describe himself. He was told by a non-disabled internet user that he is not allowed to use the word handicapped because it is offensive. His response of questioning who gets to decide what language is appropriate or not leans in on the idea that people identifying as disabled can use whatever term they would like to describe themselves and should not be reprimanded by "some two legged, white woman on Facebook". While he continues on in the video to make a negative

assumption about the woman that made the comment, this commentary enhances the comedic effect of his set in addition to outlining a problem faced by many people in the disability community: the accommodations that are laid out to help people with specific disabilities are taken advantage of by non disabled people, such as the larger bathroom stall that exists for wheelchair accessibility and other mobility issues. Thus, while this comment sounds harsh, not only is it an outlet for frustration for the creator, but it also informs viewers about accessibility problems faced by people with disabilities in addition to the already scarce resources. Finally, this post is authentic to the creator; it shares his voice and does not blur his ideas with any other motives. His content is not only comedic, but also subconsciously educational. The use of humor engages the audience more than simply stating frustrations or lecturing about disability language.

Tik Tok provides a platform for all voices, regardless of status, ability, or neurodivergence. For many, simply watching Tik Tok is enough of an escape from daily life. However, for those that choose to post on the platform, there is an increased sense of autonomy and agency as well as an increased ability to spread a wide variety of messages. Because of this agency and the inability to deny people the freedom to express their opinions (with some exceptions), Tik Tok is at risk of becoming a platform that misconstrues the message in posts due to the differences between intent and perception by the public. Thus, it is imperative to explore methods that platforms like Tik Tok can employ to ensure not only equality in who is able to post, but also to ensure that posts are monitored for harmful content or misinformation. Modifications may bring up the dilemma of censorship. However, one solution would be a content preface before videos that either involve political views or politically based opinions. This way, the video can still be viewed by anyone interested in the content, but acknowledges the idea that the video has a purpose beyond being supportive for creators on a purely personal level.

Overall, social media is used in a variety of ways to either promote individuals, groups, or entire institutions. People should have the ability to express themselves and/or educate others without being censored, though the spread of misinformation and negativity towards equality puts social media platforms in danger of causing damage to the public as a whole.

Note: There are many more forms of disability content on social media that were not addressed in this paper. Additionally, not all videos posted by disabled creators need to be educational. In no way is this paper meant to categorize posts nor lump disability content into one large category. However, it is important to recognize the different intentions and perception of disability content on social media and the impact it has on the public, as social media is extremely influential. Fads and trends emerge from social media, so creating misleading content or content that does not share a holistic view of the presentation of disability can lead the public to misconceptions about disability, creating another barrier to an already inaccessible environment.

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