# Digital Information and Autism Awareness: How Modern Media Shapes Public Understanding

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## ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technology has transformed the ways in which autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is understood, communicated, and represented in public contexts. Social media sites, online communities and eLearning have allowed unprecedented opportunity for autistic individuals to advocate for themselves, express their identities, and create communities around those identities. We must also consider that these environments facilitate the dissemination of misinformation, stereotypical messages and ethical dilemmas related to algorithmic bias, data privacy, and use of AI-based diagnostics.

This narrative review brings together multidisciplinary literature written from 2021-2025 to understand the effects of digital media on autism awareness, identity development, and public discourse. Examples of positive effects included promotion of autistic voices, increased access to educational materials, and visibility of perspectives that affirm neurodiversity.

Negative outcomes included exposure to incorrect or harmful material, "surface" representations in the media, increased self-diagnosis and awareness supported by online content, and new ethical dilemmas related to the use of technology designed to support autistic individuals. There are glaring gaps in the current literature noted in this review including a lack of representation of marginalized autism communities, a lack of longitudinal studies on autism and digital technologies, limited examination of digital health literacy, and ethical considerations for algorithms and AI supported interactions/category tools.

Future projects and the field of public health will benefit from adopting a participatory and inclusive perspective, fostering an approach to autism that incorporates autistic experiences and perspectives at every stage of designing, disseminating, and generating knowledge that can inform society. These will help to enhance digital literacy, mitigate pseudo-information, and encourage ethical technology use to help build an informed, equitable, and respectful understanding of autism in society.

**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorder, digital media, social media, misinformation, self-advocacy.

## INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital media has fundamentally changed the way autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is framed, communicated, and understood in society. Among the social networking sites, *TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X* (formerly Twitter) along with online discussion forums, and interactive digital tools, have created additional pathways for autistic people to discuss and share their lived experiences, access community support, and promote a model of neurodiversity *(Skafle et al. 2024; Leadbitter et al. 2021*). These media have disrupted traditional, clinician-led models of communication about autism to move towards a user-generated model that promotes autistic voices and perspectives in society *(Jawed etal.2023).*

As institutional and medical sources of information continue to coexist with user-generated elements of information, digital media provides both access to knowledge and multiple forms of perspectives on autism in society. This provides autistic people new opportunities to experience self-advocacy, identity, and participatory engagement in discussions about inclusive neurodiversity. At the same time, online environments demonstrate the complexity of risks faced, including the rapid dissemination of misinformation, overly simplistic or stereotypical representations of autism, and algorithm-driven systems that support bias or ensure the representation of genuine autistic personhood remains hidden *(Silva et al. 2025;Farhah et al, 2025).* Additionally, ethical considerations arise in online contexts as AI-based tools are used, raising concerns around privacy and consent, and how digital traces may be exploited or repurposed for diagnostic or behavioral predictions *(Muris et al. 2025).*

Given the fast-moving nature of these contexts, understanding the role of digital media in amplifying awareness of autism is increasingly important for researchers, educators, clinicians, and policy-makers. This narrative review analyzes research published between 2021 and 2025 to explore how new information environments function to increase the visibility of autism, shape identity, shape communities, and engage or complicate public dialogue of autism. The review articulates both the possibilities and challenges of digital media, identifies emergent trends, the enduring gaps in the literatures, and possible implications for future research and practice.

## METHODS

To identify studies looking at how autism is illustrated, communicated, and engaged with, a systematic literature review was conducted around the topic of autism in digital media contexts. Searches were conducted on PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and preprint repositories (*i.e., arXiv and OSF Preprints*) using the terms autism, autism spectrum disorder, ASD, neurodiversity, digital media, social media, TikTok, internet use, self-advocacy, and media representation, and modified reporting with the use of Boolean operators (AND/OR).

### Inclusion criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

*1. Published between January 2021 and January 2025* in peer-reviewed journals or academic preprint archives.

*2. Written in English.*

*3. Focused on autism within digital* contexts (e.g., social media representation, online communication, digital communities, AI-based tools, or public perceptions of autism).

*4. Addressed at least one of the following:*

- ✓ autism awareness or public understanding
- ✓ digital media influence
- ✓ identity, belonging, or advocacy
- ✓ misinformation or algorithmic bias
- ✓ technological or ethical implications

### Exclusion criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- ✓ exclusively focused on offline clinical interventions
- ✓ were not related to autism or digital environment,
- ✓ were commentaries without depth of analysis,

- ✓ were duplicates between databases.

**Study selection**

The literature search generated 274 records. After duplicates were removed (n = 97), 177 abstracts were screened.

- ✓ *89* were excluded as being unrelated to autism or digital media.
- ✓ 61 were excluded for methodological limitations or commentary-only format.

In total, 27 studies met inclusion criteria and were included in the narrative review. This included content analyses, empirical studies, qualitative studies, and conceptual or theoretical papers (*Camilleri et al. 2024; Colón-Rodríguez & Pérez-Torres, 2025; Muris et al. 2025).*

**The Digital Information Landscape**

Digital platforms do not simply relay information they are responsible for contributing to the social meaning surrounding autism. The curation of content by algorithms, trending hashtags, and engagement as a factor of visibility will determine which stories are amplified, often prioritizing content that is sensational or emotionally impactful *(Jawed, Graham, & Smith, 2023).* User-created content also provides autistic individuals with opportunities to push back against narratives that focus on deficits and create the space for identity development, communities and advocate *(Leadbitter et al, 2021;Skafle et al, 2024).*

At the same time, the natural democratization of knowledge can also lead to misinformation, superficial representations, and bias through algorithms *(Silva et al., 2025).* Users are put in the position of making a variety of digital literacy and content discerning decisions filled with uncertainty surrounding the validity of claims while distinguishing between evidence-based or misleading/possibly harmful narratives *(Fletcher-Watson, 2024).*

**Positive Impacts Of Digital Media On Autism Awareness**

**Autistic Self-Advocacy**

Digital platforms give autistic people opportunities to share their lived experiences, advocate for neurodiversity, and challenge stereotypes, leading to influence on social and political levels *(Leadbitter et al., 2021).* Autistic users create online identities that resist deficit-based frameworks, exercise self-determination, and influence societal narratives (*Skafle et al., 2024).*

**Community Building and Belonging**

Online communities provide important social support and connection to autistic individuals, especially for those who are socially isolated in person. Engagement in these communities is associated with greater sense of social connection, shared knowledge, and enhancing sense of resilience *(Skafle et al., 2024; Leadbitter et al., 2021).*

**Digital Interventions and Educational Tools**

Technological innovations, including interactive social stories and AI-based individualised interventions, can facilitate social learning and communication skills (*Camilleri et al., 2024; Feng et al., 2024).* Such digital mediums provide adaptive potential, in turn supporting educational and engagement outcomes and acquisition of skills.

**Public Education and Neurodiversity Discourse**

Digital media allows for the widespread dissemination of neurodiversity-affirming narratives, including the dissemination of information and public education aimed at fostering understanding, acceptance, and stigma reduction *(Colon-Rodriguez & Perez-Torres, 2025).* Educational campaigns, and/or social media educational

content curated, and created by online influencers, have the potential to not only counter misinformation but elevate lived experiences and provide public and equitable access to evidence-based information.

**Challenges: Misinformation, Stereotypes, And Representation Issues.**

**Misinformation.**

Social media Social media is a significant vector for misinformation related to autism, including unproven treatments for autism, unsupported causes of autism, and conspiratorial narratives *(Silva et al., 2025).* Exposure to misinformation can warp public understanding of autism and contribute to stigma *(Kbaier, Al-Agha, and Al-Qarni, 2024).*

**Superficial or Entertainment-Based Representations.**

Content shared on TikTok and Instagram often prioritizes entertaining, dramatized, or s0tereotypical representations of autism *(Colon-Rodriguez and Perez-Torres, 2025).* Content that prioritizes neurodiversity tends to be more authentic and accurate in representations of autism, but has considerably less visibility and societal influence. Interactive tools and AI-driven frameworks will help with individualized learning, social skills, and overall mental health *(Camilleri et al., 2024;Feng et al., 2024).*

**Self-Diagnosis and Ethical Concerns.**

Media exposure can influence self-diagnosis, especially in adolescents and young adults, contributing to misdiagnosis and unfulfilled support (Mittmann, Steiner-Hofbauer, & Schrank, 2023). Furthermore, AI-based diagnostic models utilizing social media tracking has implications for privacy, consent, and ethics *(Farhah et al., 2025).*

**Algorithmic Bias and Digital Disparity.**

Algorithms that curate content or derive traits for users can amplify stereotypes and silence autistic voices. The need for neurodiversity-informed platform design and ethical oversight is demonstrated in studies looking to achieve systematic representation and epistemic justice *(Assoua, 2023; Baillargeon, Yoon, & Zhang, 2024; Muris et al., 2025).*

**Social Media And Autistic Self-Advocacy**

The online space has become a space for advocacy, identity construction, and community action. Autistic users engage in social media to contribute to policy change, take part in research, and act politically (*Leadbitter et al., 2021*). By naming their own narratives and resisting deficit-oriented depictions of autism, users work towards self-advocacy while contesting hegemonic stereotypes surrounding autism *(Skafle et al., 2024).*

**Digital Educational Resources And Communication In**

Public Health Interactive digital tools (e.g., social stories and AI tools, such as SS-GEN) allow learners to engage in a more individualized educational experience and build skills *(Camilleri et al., 2024;Feng et al., 2024). These* platforms will allow public health campaigns to share accurate, accessible and neurodiversity-affirming information, and anti-misinformation campaigns targeting wide neurodivergent audiences *(Fletcher-Watson, 2024).*

## GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Despite some progress in recent years, there are still a number of gaps:

1. Lack of research on underrepresented groups (e*.g., individuals who are non-verbal and individuals of color).*

2. Limited ethical evaluation of AI based diagnostics and social media algorithms.

3. No longitudinal studies examining longer-term impact of engaging with digital media.

4. Few interventions to counter misinformation effectively.

5. Need for digital platforms to be designed in a more inclusive and neurodiversity informed way.

6. A limited assessment of digital health literacy has not been tested in relation to neurotypical parents engaging with autism related content (e.g., *Silva et al., 2025;Farhah et al., 2025;Muris et al., 2025).*

# DISCUSSION

Digital technologies greatly shifted society's communication and comprehension regarding autism spectrum disorder (ASD). As a result of the ever-growing number of media platforms available on the internet today, including many forms of social networking, individuals with ASD are able to advocate for themselves, create their own identities, connect socially with others, and join communities *(Leadbitter et al.,2021;Skafle et al., 2024a, 2024b*).

Furthermore, social media has enabled users to promote cultural change from a predominant deficit-based view of ASD toward a neurodiversity oriented perspective and influence legislative, health-care, educational, and social policies (*Fletcher et al., 2023*). Although the emergence of digital media has offered individuals with ASD opportunities to interact with others in positive ways, it has also presented a number of barriers, including the widespread dissemination of inaccurate and unverified treatment options and unsubstantiated theories of causation, which confuse and mislead the public about ASD and contribute to the stigma associated with it *(Silva et al., 2025;Kbaier et al., 2024).*

There are numerous social media platforms that use algorithms, which often favour sensationalistic or entertainment style content over authentic expert authored content (*Jawed et al., 2023).* Recent developments in AI technologies for increasing user engagement further expand the ethical questions regarding privacy, consent, and bias related to how they will impact already vulnerable autistic populations *(Farhah et al., 2025;Muris et al., 2025).*

As of now, both non-verbal autistic individuals as well as those from racially/racially diverse backgrounds are not adequately represented in mainstream digital communities (*Fletcher et al., 2023*). As a result, both awareness and inclusive representation are diminished within these communities. In addition, the majority of recent longitudinal studies focused on exploring identity, relationships, and mental well-being are primarily based upon information gathered through online interactions; consequently, this limits their ability to provide definitive evidence regarding the long-term consequences of these types of interactions.

### Strengths and Limitations

The review summarizes literature regarding how digital media impacts the public's awareness of autism through an examination of multiple databases from 2021 to 2025. The main strengths of this review are the positive outcomes that come from using digital media to develop a sense of community, promote self-advocacy, and increase visibility, as well as the inclusion of negative outcomes associated with the use of digital media *(e.g., the potential for misinformation and the effects of algorithmic bias).* A systematic way was used to find and select studies used in this review, but there are still limitations in that there was no detailed analysis of any of the studies used, which creates questions about the level of methodological rigor in the selected studies and the degree to which these studies are comparable to one another.

There is a need for further understanding of what is meant by: algorithmic bias; AI-supported diagnostic tools; and digital health literacy (*all three need to be conceptualized and empirically investigated*). There is also significant structural redundancy throughout the review that demonstrates how formatting could be used to enhance the connection between thoughts expressed throughout the review. Furthermore, there is a noted gap in the representation of many marginalized autistic communities; although there are indications that many of these

individuals do engage with digital platforms/technologies, there is a little understanding of how socio-cultural and socio-economic factors will impact their level of digital engagement.

Given that the above-mentioned limitations exist, it is imperative that researchers in this area adopt a framework of intersectional; use longitudinal research designs; and employ rigorous methods of methodological evaluation in future studies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a variety of strategies that will enhance the benefits and mitigate any risks of digital media use in raising awareness of autism based on current findings.

***1. Inclusive/Participatory Research*:** Autistic individuals must be included at all levels of research design and technology development. This is particularly important for individuals from diverse and underrepresented populations *(Fletcher Et Al., 2023).*

***2. Ethical Oversight for AI and Algorithms*:** Digital tools that are AI-based should be governed by a transparent model, free from bias and have appropriate regulatory practices regarding privacy and consent *(Farhah Et Al., 2025; Prevalence of Bias Against Neurodivergent-Related Terms in AI Language Models, 2023).*

***3. Digital Health Literacy Initiatives**:* To help consumers expand their capacity to utilize AI-enabled tools responsibly, initiatives must promote governance and transparency by reducing bias *(Farhah Et Al., 2025; Prevalence of Bias Against Neurodivergent-Related Terms in AI Language Models, 2023).*

***4. Evidence-Based Counter-Misinformation Strategies**:* To assist users who are neurodivergent or neurotypical, strategies must be developed that teach them skills to evaluate the validity of online content, identify false information, and safely utilize digital devices *(Silva Et Al., 2025; Kbaier Et Al., 2024).*

***5. Reform at the Platform Level**:* Public Health Campaigns and Advocacy Groups should curate and distribute content to assist with patient education and create digital platforms that adopt neurodiversity informed design principles and utilize ethical algorithmic practices to provide equitable outcomes (*Fletcher, et al. 2023; Jawed, et al. 2023*).

***6. Conduct Longitudinal Research*:** Longitudinal studies should be conducted that investigate how digital engagement impacts a person's identity, mental health, the trends of self-diagnosis and related stigmas (*Muris, et al. 2025*).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, on the one hand, Digital Media can be used to advocate for the autistic community by raising autism awareness (autism being defined as a developmental disorder) and promoting acceptance by the general public. Digital Media can help to connect like-minded people through social networks, where they can share experiences with each other as well as with non-autistics *(Leadbitter et al., 2021;Skafle et al., 2024a, 2024b).* On the other hand, Digital Media is fraught with many challenges, such as the potential for the spread of false information, the reinforcement of algorithmic bias, and ethical issues surrounding the use of Artificial Intelligence and Data Privacy *(Farhah et al., 2025*). In order to ensure that people can gain the maximum benefits from Digital Media, while reducing the associated risks, future research and policies must emphasize the importance of inclusivity, ethical oversight, and the establishment of evidence-based initiatives for digital literacy in health and the use of Digital Media.

While AI-enabled interactive digital tools have the potential to assist with individualized learning, emotional wellness and the development of social skills, their efficacy relies on other interventions that help to combat misinformation, mitigate algorithmic bias and protect users' privacy(*Camilleri et al., 2024;Feng et al., 2024).*

Moving forward, digital media will continue to create both opportunities and challenges with respect to autism awareness, self-advocacy and building community. To ensure that these technologies contribute to a shared

understanding of autism that is accurate, equitable and respectful, continued longitudinal research, intersectional inclusion, and the meaningful participation of individuals with autism especially from historically marginalized communities - in research, policy development, and digital platform design is essential *(Fletcher et al., 2023; Prevalence of Bias Against Neurodivergent related Terms In A.I. Language Models, 2023).*

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