

ADHD & The Algorithm: Diagnosis in the Age of TikTok

by

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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Abstract

This project examines how TikTok has influenced ADHD awareness and self-diagnosis, with a focus on adult women who have historically been underdiagnosed and often misunderstood. Through a participatory ethnographic documentary film, the research captures the real-life experiences of women who first identified their symptoms on TikTok, prompting them to seek formal assessments. The film features interviews with women recently diagnosed, healthcare professionals, content creators, and researchers, and explores how the platform's algorithm promotes both accurate information and misinformation. It investigates TikTok's dual role in validating long-neglected struggles while potentially oversimplifying complex disorders. By centring the research on women's stories, this study highlights how digital spaces are transforming narratives around ADHD, providing visibility, language, and a community, sometimes for the first time. It considers whether the advantages of increased awareness outweigh the risks of misinformation, and what this means for women navigating this journey in the era of algorithm-driven media.

Keywords: ADHD, Women, TikTok, social media, digital health communication, misinformation, mental health awareness

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Please watch the documentary first: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYkqNsjVpEU>

Introduction

TikTok's surge in popularity in early 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, marked a significant transformation, particularly for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders. During the lockdowns, individuals who relied on daily routines to manage attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) found their coping strategies ineffective in the absence of structure (Shah et al., 2021). Amidst this disruption, TikTok became the most downloaded app in history, boasting over two billion active users (Doyle, 2024). Its unique algorithm and bite-sized video format revolutionized communication, including discussions about neurodevelopmental disorders. The hashtag “#ADHD” has amassed over 11.4 billion views and 3.3 million posts. This expanded sharing of information was particularly impactful for adult women, who are historically underdiagnosed and underrepresented in ADHD discourse (Attoe & Climie, 2023). The convergence of these factors created a perfect storm and led to an increase in individuals seeking an ADHD diagnosis (Abdelnour et al., 2022). This shift underscores the profound influence of digital platforms on modern health behaviours and diagnosis, revealing how emerging technologies can reshape both personal and clinical understandings of mental health. This study examined how TikTok has shaped the conversation around ADHD by fostering an open and inclusive space while addressing whether the platform’s accurate information outweighs the prevalence of misinformation for adults using the app to learn more about ADHD.

This interview-based research project attempted to answer the question, “How has TikTok shaped discourse on attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder?” In this written accompaniment to the [video](#), I delve into literature that traces the history of ADHD and how the

definition has shifted (Faraone, 2021). From there, I move on to examining why healthcare professionals have consistently overlooked women (Attoe & Climie, 2023; Karasavva et al., 2025) and how witnessing symptoms in people other than hyperactive boys was impactful (Milton et al., 2023). Finally, I explore the quality of the content and its sway on misdiagnosis (Yeung et al., 2022), and the impact of increased demand for diagnosis on the healthcare system (Abdelnour et al., 2022).

This project is presented as a participatory ethnographic documentary film (Vannini, 2018) entitled *ADHD & The Algorithm: Diagnosis in the Age of TikTok*, which features interviews with individuals who have sought an ADHD diagnosis, medical professionals and researchers, and ADHD content creators on TikTok. By engaging directly with a diverse range of people involved in this recent phenomenon, the documentary provides a comprehensive understanding of the broader impact and nuances of this shift in discourse and diagnosis. By speaking directly with these individuals, I determine whether the negative impacts of exposure to misinformation and algorithmically curated content on TikTok have been overshadowed by the relief they experience upon finally receiving a diagnosis that explains the struggles they have experienced for much of their lives. This medium has proven to be an effective way to share information and reach a broader audience (Borish et al., 2021; Poe, 2010). A film enables viewers to connect directly with the experience of this disorder while also providing the opportunity to share the findings on the app, where this community has emerged.

Literature Review

Redefining ADHD

Throughout the 20th century, the understanding and classification of ADHD have evolved (Epstein & Loren, 2013; Salari et al., 2023). Initially, it was regarded as a disorder primarily

affecting children, characterized by hyperactivity and impulsiveness. Over time, the diagnostic criteria expanded to include inattentiveness and persistence of symptoms into adulthood (Faraone et al., 2021). The presentation of neurodevelopmental disorders is often wide-ranging. Symptoms can overlap, and manifestations are often non-conforming (Cainelli & Bisiacchi, 2022).

In turn, social media platforms have evolved far beyond their origins as mere channels of social interaction. Today, they function as decentralized, flexible networks shaping cultural trends and influencing information dissemination (Christakis & Fowler, 2011). This evolution has particularly benefited neurodivergent individuals, offering a space free from the challenges associated with in-person interactions (Pinchevski & Peters, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this online community proved to be indispensable. Lockdowns, mounting fatalities, and enforced isolation heightened existing mental health challenges, prompting an unprecedented surge in social media use (Basch et al., 2020; Gerrard, 2020; Southwick et al., 2021). Individuals sought connections online, catalyzing a significant social movement that this study will investigate.

In the 21st century, there has been exponential growth in ADHD research (McBain, 2022; Yeung et al., 2022). Adults with ADHD who slipped through the diagnostic cracks as children turned to social media for answers (Attoe & Climie, 2023; Karasavva et al., 2025). Traditional methods of raising ADHD awareness have been slow and constrained in their reach. In contrast, TikTok's expansive user base and viral content have accelerated the widespread dissemination of educational and personal content concerning neurodevelopmental disorders. Current research examines the effects of social media as either positive (Milton et al., 2023; Simpson et al., 2023), negative (Gainsbury et al., 2018), or mixed (Weinstein, 2018). I investigate this balance to

determine if the positive aspects of TikTok outweigh its negative effects for those seeking answers.

Mental health and disability content from a first-person perspective has a substantial impact, and several disorders have large online communities (Clark, 2021). Patients can now share freely on public forums without the legal ties of doctor-patient confidentiality. The engagement is measured and provides clear evidence of the demand and consistent rise of people self-diagnosing or seeking diagnosis for ADHD after viewing content on TikTok (Abdelnour et al., 2022). Some adults over 30, particularly women, have recognized symptoms of ADHD for the first time, moving beyond the stereotypical presentation of hyperactive boys (Faraone et al., 2021; Ruskin, 2022). This highlights the transformative impact of open communication, creating opportunities previously absent in societal discourse. However, there are challenges associated with the proliferation of ADHD-related content on TikTok. Research found that over half of ADHD content on TikTok was misleading and posted by non-healthcare providers (Yeung et al., 2022). However, that same study showed that healthcare providers posting content to the app were overwhelmingly more accurate and valuable to consumers. This challenge of determining what is misinformation and what is fact is exacerbated by a national shortage of family doctors.

The endless stream of videos on a user's For You Page (FYP) directly results from TikTok's sophisticated, data-driven algorithm. The algorithm meticulously analyzes user behaviour to curate a personalized feed just for them, evoking a sense of cosmic connection (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). TikTok refines its content recommendations by tracking users' time on videos related to specific topics. After watching a video on ADHD symptoms, a user may find their FYP inundated with ADHD-related content within hours. This phenomenon can be revelatory. However, it also poses risks, as the inundation of similar content may prompt users to

question whether generalized symptoms could apply to them (Harrison & Edwards, 2023). Despite potential inaccuracies, users often prioritize access to information over its validity (Chochol et al., 2023; Milton et al., 2023). This delicate balance must be more represented in the available data. In the digital realm, individuals navigate a complex interplay between social media exposure, self-perception, and the stigma associated with diagnoses (Hasan et al., 2023), weighing the benefits of connectivity against potential drawbacks. This paradigm underscores the dual impact of social media on individuals with ADHD. While data-driven algorithms foster supportive communities and provide valuable information (Zsila & Reyes, 2023), these platforms can also worsen issues like anxiety and depression. The advent of TikTok and ongoing considerations of COVID-19's enduring effects underscore the need for continued investigation into long-term implications.

Method

The research is presented as a visual ethnographic video documentary (Vannini, 2018), employing qualitative methods to analyze and present interview-based data. Guided by interpretivism, the documentary entitled 'ADHD and the Algorithm: Diagnosis in the Age of TikTok' investigates the impact of TikTok on the discourse surrounding ADHD. Interpretivism recognizes that reality is subjective and socially constructed, emphasizing the importance of engaging with an individual's subjective experiences to understand their realities. The choice of a visual ethnographic approach, combined with semi-structured interviews, provides insight into users' experiences and TikTok's impact on their lives (Reeves et al., 2008). The video format also aligns with TikTok's visual nature, allowing for a reflexive analysis of how the platform visually communicates and shapes perceptions of ADHD. Examining TikTok through a visual

medium enables an authentic and compelling exploration of the platform's impact on the disorder.

For this research, my data were collected through semi-structured, recorded, one-hour interviews, face-to-face and online. The interviews were recorded via iPhone 14 Pro or Google Meet. The individual interviews have a conversational style, which creates a safe and comfortable space for vulnerability (Kerrigan & Callaghan, 2018). The interviews will be conducted with carefully selected individuals to understand the impact of TikTok on ADHD diagnosis. Examples of individuals I interviewed include:

- (1) Adult women seeking or receiving an ADHD diagnosis post-TikTok exposure.
 - A firsthand account of how TikTok has influenced their decision to seek a diagnosis will offer insight into the user experience and the platform's impact on self-diagnosis trends.
 - Recruitment was done through ADHD Edmonton to ensure they are local and can be interviewed in person.
- (2) Content creator on TikTok
 - By interviewing content creators, the research can explore how they perceive their role in shaping the ADHD conversation and influencing awareness or potential misconceptions.
 - Recruitment was done through the TikTok app by directly messaging the creators with the highest following.
- (3) Medical professionals who diagnose and treat ADHD.
 - This perspective is essential for understanding how TikTok-related diagnoses align with clinical practices and the implications of wait times and misdiagnosis.

- Recruitment was facilitated through collaborations with ADHD Edmonton and the Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada. These organizations connected me with professionals involved in their outreach activities and panel discussions.

(4) An academic researcher who has studied adult ADHD and its diagnosis trends before and after the rise of TikTok.

- Their experience provides valuable context for evaluating the broader impact of social media on clinical practices.

- Recruitment was done by emailing the researchers and requesting a virtual interview.

Questions were pre-written for each interview, focusing on the individual's expertise.

Examples of questions include:

- "What TikTok content led to you seeking a diagnosis?"
- "How did you feel seeing symptoms like yours for the first time?"
- "What are the dangers of a self-diagnosis?"

Additional questions were posed naturally, encouraging truthful and candid responses from the interviewees. By incorporating these diverse perspectives, I showcase a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of those with the disorder and those involved in that journey. In addition, statistics from the Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada, in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, offer a quantitative backdrop to the qualitative insights (Milton et al., 2023). ADHD-related videos from TikTok were also be used for analysis and b-roll purposes.

Interviews were filmed using an iPhone 14 Pro, a Small Rig tripod, and RODE wireless microphones. Natural and ambient lighting was used for in-person interviews, with the addition of a panel light if the environment requires it. In-person interviews were done in the individual's

home to ensure a comfortable setting. Following these interviews, additional videos were collected based on their responses, including scenes such as taking their medication, scrolling TikTok, performing tasks they found challenging before their diagnosis and interacting with loved ones.

The documentary is character-driven, detailing the highs and lows of going without a diagnosis and the relief of having answers. I provide narration to guide the viewer through the story, detailing my own journey with the app that ultimately led to a diagnosis and inspired this research (Rogers et al., 2021). Animation and graphics were used to illustrate statistics and concepts, such as the impact of ADHD on the brain. Additionally, I screen-recorded a selection of TikTok videos to demonstrate the endless scrolling experience typical of the platform. Audio from the TikTok videos was incorporated to emphasize the diversity of opinions, symptoms, and personal stories. The goal was to ensure my audience is immersed and, perhaps, overwhelmed by the abundance of ADHD content. This method ensures the documentary's tone is reproduced, using excerpts and stills to tell the story in a written format. A version was presented to the interview subjects before final submission.

Synopsis

The film begins by examining the historical bias in ADHD diagnosis, which long centred on hyperactive boys. Psychiatrist Dr. David Goodman reflects on how adult ADHD wasn't even recognized in the medical community when he started his work in the 1980s. Today, it's believed that it affects around five to nine percent of children and three to five percent of adults (CADDAC, 2021). Goodman states that women are often overlooked, as we frequently internalize or mask symptoms to meet social expectations. "She'll get by because she's likable and because she's blonde, she's probably not too smart. So, we shouldn't expect very much of

her, which is another issue. And that has to do with sexism in diagnosis.” In the film, I speak to three women who lived that experience: Jasmine, Tatiana, and Amelia, all of whom describe years of being mislabeled or misunderstood, constantly wondering why their efforts never seemed to be good enough. Finally, they received a diagnosis in their late 20s and 30s, partly thanks to TikTok.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought daily life to a halt, and TikTok surged in popularity. Isolated at home with hours to scroll, many women encountered ADHD-related content for the first time. For some, it was a revelation. Relatable videos flooded their feeds, acting like a mirror to years of their unspoken challenges. What began as entertainment quickly turned into a diagnostic awakening. As Tatiana shares in the film, the content she saw revealed symptoms she had never attributed to the disorder. “It was crazy to be watching these things and be like, wait, what? That's ADHD or wait, what, like people do that or, you know, or wait, what? That's not normal. Like not everybody is doing that.”

The documentary also explores why TikTok has become a powerful platform for neurodivergent communities. ADHD coach and content creator Sheila Hansen credits the app’s simplicity and low entry barrier, which make it highly accessible. “It's so ADHD friendly in that way that there is not a lot of mental effort that goes into making a TikTok. I think that allowed ADHDers to just like pump out a lot of ADHD content very quickly.” Amanda Brennan studies how communities form online and believes TikTok’s power lies in its ability to reflect lived experience, making people feel seen. “There's a lot to be said about, like, the literal seeing yourself reflected back to you, but also, wanting to know that you're not alone.”

Yet the same qualities that make TikTok empowering also make it risky. With no qualifications required to post, some creators chase views by sharing oversimplified or

inaccurate ADHD content. Psychiatrist Dr. Anthony Yeung's research shows that nearly half of the platform's most popular ADHD videos can be categorized as misleading. He and others caution that while TikTok may raise awareness, it cannot substitute for medical advice. However, for many Canadian women now seeking a diagnosis, access remains a challenge, waitlists for specialists continue to grow, family doctor shortages persist, and psychiatric assessments can cost hundreds of dollars. Yeung explains that the medical system was not ready for this surge. "There is just kind of this huge demand, but really just this absence of supply; there are all these different things that have popped up to try to meet the demand," Yeung said. "We're kind of playing catch-up."

For the women I interviewed and for myself, receiving a diagnosis later in life brought not just clarity, but grief. There was a mourning period for the decades of missed opportunities, or the time spent thinking their failures were character flaws. "I struggle with what I think my life should look like and how it has turned out." Jasmine said, "I'm still happy and very grateful, but I think I should be much further." While Amelia felt emotional, "I cried like in my car after I think I teared up in the doctor's office." "My life, like, kind of like, flashed before my eyes with all the struggles that I had in school and how hard it was for me." But they also found strength. The ability to give a name to their challenges came with a shift in self-understanding and the capacity to give themselves a bit of grace. As Dr. Goodman puts it, "This is what I have, but it's not who I am."

The film concludes with hope for the future. TikTok didn't discover ADHD, but it provided people with the language, validation, and a new community to support them as they begin advocating for themselves. For some, the algorithm delivered more than just content; it offered a turning point.

Conclusion

I began this research to explore how social media, particularly TikTok, has influenced women's understanding of ADHD. This research has always been deeply personal, and through my interviews with the three women featured in the film, I found comfort in hearing my own experiences and struggles reflected in their stories. ADHD-related content on TikTok has broadened the public understanding of the disorder, especially among women, by highlighting symptoms and experiences that often go unrecognized in clinical settings. This shift has changed how both individuals and society perceive what ADHD can look like. It is essential to further examine this shift through the lens of digital culture and the interplay between personal narrative and algorithmic exposure.

The women I interviewed for this film described profound moments of recognition when encountering ADHD content online. Yet, those same feeds can also amplify misinformation or reinforce surface-level stereotypes. It is a tricky balance between seeking authenticity and performing it, between discovering oneself or curating a self for digital approval. TikTok's algorithm serves as both a mirror and a magnifier, playing a pivotal role in shaping ADHD identities today. It draws users into emotionally resonant content loops that can validate and distort their understanding of the disorder. The sheer volume of content and TikTok's constantly evolving nature made it difficult to draw clear boundaries around what counts as "accurate." Still, the findings point to critical areas for future research: how gender, stigma, and identity shape ADHD narratives and how digital spaces have begun to enable or inhibit self-diagnosis.

I hope that *ADHD and the Algorithm: Diagnosis in the Age of TikTok*, will offer a window into the effects of a late ADHD diagnosis. If it succeeds, it will challenge oversimplified

narratives, reduce stigma, and invite others to reflect on their own stories. ADHD is real. The struggle is real. But so too is the strength that comes from finally being able to name it and to be heard. That, I believe, is at the heart of this project: a reflection of what it means to be a woman living with ADHD in a digital age, constantly navigating the space between self, screen, and society.

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