Exploring the role of internet memes in autistic communication and identity

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Autistic communication has often been pathologised as deficient and disordered (Prelock & Nelson, 2012), reinforcing stereotypes, stigma and limiting opportunities for self-expression, identity, and humour. Traditional interventions prioritise functional communication needs, such as requesting basic items (Bock et al., 2005), neglecting the complexity of autistic individuals' broader communicative expressions. In contrast, internet memes have become a prominent medium for cultural participation and communication in digital spaces (Shifman, 2015). This study examines how and why autistic individuals use memes to communicate personality, humour, and experience. It also contributes to a broader understanding of neurodivergent communication through the lens of the Double Empathy Problem, Neurodiversity, and Social Identity Theory. A qualitative, participatory methodology was employed, ensuring that autistic voices were central throughout the research process. Thirty-one participants from three private Facebook groups contributed 436 memes and 986 comments, which were analysed using semiotic analysis (Eco, 1976) to uncover symbolic and contextual meanings. Findings reveal that memes provide a predictable, structured format that helps reduce the anxiety and fatigue often associated with social communication, offering an accessible mode of emotional expression. Memes also enable autistic individuals to assert identity, humour, and personality—elements typically overlooked in conventional communication frameworks. These insights suggest that memes can be leveraged as a dynamic, underexplored communicative tool in both academic and therapeutic contexts, with significant implications for developing inclusive communication strategies. Future research should explore their potential to enhance communication for individuals with higher support needs, furthering both theoretical understanding and practical applications in neurodivergent communication.

Biography

Ashlea Cromby is a final-year PhD student at the University of East London, under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Wood and Dr. Darren Ellis. Her research explores the intersection of neurodiversity, identity, and communication, with a particular focus on how autistic individuals use internet memes as a means of self-expression and interaction. Alongside her academic work, Ashlea is a neuroinclusion advisor with auticon, an international IT consultancy employing autistic professionals, where she supports businesses in developing neuroinclusive work environments. She also works as a specialist mentor at the University of Oxford, providing tailored support to neurodivergent students. An autistic researcher herself, Ashlea is deeply committed to participatory research methods that empower neurodivergent voices. Her work advocates for broader understandings of communication and identity in neurodivergent communities, aiming to challenge pathologising narratives and promote inclusivity.