

RESEARCH BACKGROUNDER

Research Study Overview: Exploring the complex factors that lead autistic adults' engagement in online and offline hate forums

- The gap:
 - There have been sporadic and disturbing media accounts of autistic individuals who engage with extreme ideologies, but little research has been done to explore the motivations behind their actions – until now.
- Study objective:
 - To better understand the personal and contextual factors affecting autistic adults' participation in online and offline hate forums.
- Methodology:
 - interviewed 12 autistic adults, most who reside in the U.S. and one in Canada, about their experiences with both online hate forums as well as offline groups such as attending rallies or meeting with people in-person.
 - Most of the adults have been involved for a fairly long length of time but varied in the type of participation. For example, some adults' involvement was listening to neo-Nazi music online while others had leadership roles with the more well-known hate groups.
- Key findings:
 - Research team identified three key themes that emerged from the interviews: early wounds, missed formative opportunities, and finding a fit for neurodivergence.
 - These individuals experienced traumatic or abusive situations, did not feel they belonged, felt angry or were bullied in part because they were neurodivergent. Many also did not receive a timely diagnosis so they missed out on the critical understanding of who they were, which may have contributed to a lot of stress in their lives.
- Conclusion:
 - Autism, on its own, does not explain why these individuals made the choice to engage in these groups.
 - Key findings highlight that these individuals have found a sense of friendship and being valued in some of these hate groups and found a sense of belonging that they haven't experienced in the rest of society.
 - To prevent these and other negative outcomes for neurodivergent people, the authors stress a need to create a more inclusive society for autistic people where they feel understood, have a sense of belonging, and have meaningful ways to contribute to society.

- **Uniqueness of study:**

- Little research has been done to date on why autistic people have chosen to engage in either online or offline hate forums
- This ground-breaking study comprises an international multi-disciplinary team: autism experts, healthcare practitioners including psychiatrists, autistic people, and a counter-extremism/ disengagement expert
- This is the first study to directly interview a group of autistic people who were engaged with extreme ideologies
- Study is co-created with autistic people and the research team has taken great care to approach this work in a way that is respectful and considers the complexity of this issue.
- The study is part of a larger research [study](#) funded by a New Frontiers in Research Fund grant that is examining the link between autistic people and online hate.

Researchers:

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Download the study, *Neurodivergence and the Rabbit Hole of Extremism: Uncovering Lived Experience*, [here](#). The study was published online in the journal, *Autism in Adulthood*, in August 2024.

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