

**Neurodivinity: Multimodal Strategies for Life, Learning, and Identity Expression in
the Post-Pandemic Digital Economy**

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Abstract

This integrative project examines the transformative potential of digital media and participatory learning strategies in creating neurodivergent-affirming educational spaces. Situated at the intersection of critical pedagogy, neurodiversity studies, and digital culture, the study employs bell hooks' intersectional framework to analyze how race, gender, and class shape neurodivergent experiences in educational and digital spaces. The research investigates how social media platforms have catalyzed a paradigm shift in neurodivergent identity formation, community building, and knowledge acquisition—particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of traditional education systems. The research employs a multi-method approach combining theoretical analysis of frameworks by Freire (critical pedagogy), Jenkins (participatory culture), hooks (intersectionality), and Love (Hip-Hop-Based Education) with qualitative examination of neurodivergent digital communities. Building on hooks' critique of systemic oppression, key findings reveal: (1) the racialized and gendered dimensions of late neurodivergent diagnosis and social media accessibility; (2) the effectiveness of multimodal, algorithm-driven content in meeting intersectional learning needs; and (3) how traditional education systems perpetuate marginalization by failing to accommodate cognitive diversity within broader structures of power. The project proposes a radical reimagining of curriculum design through three interconnected interventions: First, adapting engagement strategies from successful neurodivergent content creators while addressing algorithmic biases that disproportionately silence marginalized voices. Second, integrating Hip-Hop-Based Education principles to leverage neurodivergent strengths through culturally sustaining pedagogies. Third, developing critical digital literacy training that empowers students to navigate platform paternalism while harnessing participatory spaces for collective liberation. Extending beyond formal education, the study applies an intersectional lens to neurodivergent experiences in digital

labor economies and interpersonal relationships—areas where systemic barriers compound for multiply-marginalized individuals. By centering neurodivergent epistemologies and the pandemic as a catalyst for educational transformation, this work contributes to conversations about inclusive pedagogy while challenging pathological interpretations of cognitive difference.

The concluding framework offers intersectional recommendations for creating learning environments that honor neurodivergent ways of knowing in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: neurodivergence, intersectionality, participatory culture, critical pedagogy,

Hip-Hop-Based Education, digital equity

Introduction

This project seeks to bridge the intersections of culturally responsive design, neurodivergent visibility, and digital media to create a transformative and participatory learning experience. By centering the voices and experiences of neurodivergent individuals, the project aims to challenge traditional educational paradigms and offer a more inclusive and empowering approach to learning. Using a qualitative research approach, the study identifies key engagement strategies from social media—such as participatory learning, algorithm-driven personalization, and multimodal storytelling—that hold significant potential for fostering inclusive educational practices. The findings advocate for a shift away from traditional, hierarchical models of education toward participatory, constructivist, and intersectional approaches that better support neurodivergent learners. This research highlights the transformative role of digital media literacy and participatory learning strategies in reimagining educational spaces, emphasizing the importance of fostering agency, collaboration, and identity formation in the digital age. Key themes include addressing algorithmic bias, the critical need for media literacy, the experiences of neurodivergent adults, and the evolving role of creativity and digital labor in the post-pandemic economy.

This Integrative Project is complete with a multimodal media index, found in the appendix, containing a combination of original content, credible content sourced from other creators, and “remixed” content that interrogates how context and meaning change as content is shared and evolves. The purpose of this catalog is to embody the strategies in the paper through demonstration of deepening understanding of concepts in this paper, as well as to serve as examples for the curriculum proposed in the project. By integrating insights from digital culture into educational practice, this project contributes to the growing body of research on inclusive

education and digital learning. It offers practical recommendations for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers, calling for a rethinking of educational paradigms to better align with the diverse needs and potentials of learners in an increasingly digital world.

What is Neurodivergence?

Neurodivergence is defined as the recognition that cognitive functioning varies among individuals, encompassing conditions such as [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) (or ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ([ADHD](#)) or a combination of both known as [AuDHD](#), as well as many other [neurodevelopmental](#) differences. The term itself emerged from the broader concept of neurodiversity, which views neurological differences not as deficits but as natural variations in human cognition (Singer, 1999). Within this framework, neurodivergence is not solely a medical diagnosis but also an evolving social and cultural identity. Over the past two decades, and particularly following the COVID-19 [pandemic](#), there has been a significant rise in neurodivergent diagnoses, particularly among adults and women who previously went undiagnosed (Zablotsky et al., 2019). This increase can be attributed to multiple factors: heightened awareness due to social media discourse, improved diagnostic criteria, and an increased understanding of how neurodivergence presents outside of traditional male-centric models of study (Schuck et al., 2022). For many, diagnosis has become a key component of identity formation, offering language to describe their lived experiences and access to a supportive community of peers. The accessibility of social media platforms has furthered this shift, allowing individuals to self-educate, connect with others with shared experiences, and advocate for systemic changes in education, employment, and healthcare (Walker, 2021).

However, understanding neurodivergence cannot be reduced to static definitions. Identity, language, and discourse surrounding neurodivergence are fluid, shaped by ongoing research, lived experiences, and evolving cultural attitudes. The way neurodivergence is defined today is different from how it was defined in past decades—and will likely continue to evolve. As such, it is critical to avoid essentialist definitions that confine neurodivergence to rigid clinical criteria. Instead, this project adopts a working definition of neurodivergence, grounded in both academic literature and the self-advocacy movements that shape how individuals understand and experience their neurodivergent identities. For the purposes of this paper, neurodivergence is understood as a cognitive and sensory variation that influences how individuals process information, interact with their environments, and engage in learning and social participation. However, these definitions, terms, and concepts should be seen as dynamic, shifting with new insights and evolving understandings. This recognition is essential when developing educational frameworks that are responsive to the needs of neurodivergent individuals in the post-pandemic digital age.

Project Aim & Inquiry Question

The purpose of this project is to identify, critique, and synthesize factors of the emergence of neurodivergent identities in context with social media behaviors and practices. The result will include development, critique, and analysis of a critical curricular framework and sample curriculum materials designed using neurodivergent-friendly learning strategies explored in the integrative project. Specifically, the curriculum focuses on adapting strategies borrowed from social media engagement. This includes multimodal samples, which embody some of the strategies by using media to engage with some of the concepts that are written about in narrative form to support understanding. The inquiry questions for exploration are: How can culturally

responsive design, neurodivergent visibility, and digital media intersect to create a curriculum that is both identity-affirming and participatory? How can these elements be integrated to foster a learning environment that is inclusive, empathetic, and empowering for neurodivergent students?

Glossary: A Note about Language

The glossary serves as a dynamic resource rather than a static dictionary of definitions. Given the evolving nature of language and the influence of discourse on meaning-making, this glossary embraces the idea that definitions shift with new research, cultural understanding, and technological developments. It provides foundational knowledge while incorporating hyperlinks, multimedia resources, and academic sources to allow readers to engage with terms in a more interactive and meaningful way. Building upon Gee's (2015) concept of [Discourse \(big "D" and little "d"\)](#), language plays an active role in shaping meaning and identity. In the context of neurodivergence, terms evolve alongside cultural and scientific understandings. By treating the glossary as an interactive repository, this project acknowledges the fluidity of language and the importance of community-driven definitions. Therefore, the definitions here serve as a guide for discussion in this paper, but it should be noted that ideas and understandings linked to terms and concepts could differ in the future, as they differ now from notions and conceptions of the past. This glossary should be used to contextualize and understand this paper, but do not present terms as permanent definitions – instead more of a best current understanding.

Engage with the interactive glossary below:

[GLOSSARY](#)

Background and Context

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in the visibility of neurodivergent identities, as social isolation and the shift to digital platforms created new opportunities for

self-expression and community building. During this period, there was a significant rise in official diagnoses of neurodivergent conditions, such as autism and ADHD (Grosvenor et al., 2024). Social media platforms, particularly those that emphasize multimodal storytelling—such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube—became essential spaces for neurodivergent individuals to share their experiences, find validation, and build communities (Clark, 2021; Bury, 2020). These platforms allowed for the dissemination of knowledge in ways that resonated with neurodivergent modes of communication, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning (Kim, Seitz, & Shams, 2008). This shift not only increased awareness of neurodivergence but also affirmed the identities of individuals who had historically been marginalized or misunderstood. This Integrative Project examines the convergence of factors that have contributed to the increased visibility of neurodivergent identities in the post-pandemic digital era and explores the implications for life and learning.

The project is structured in two parts: first, a research and analysis section that investigates the rise of neurodivergent visibility through digital media, and second, a culturally responsive curricular framework designed for first-year post-secondary students. This framework incorporates strategies derived from the research and is informed by successful media engagement practices popular within neurodivergent communities. This project seeks to address several key questions: How can culturally responsive design, neurodivergent visibility, and digital media intersect to create a curriculum that is both identity-affirming and participatory? How can these elements be integrated to foster a learning environment that is inclusive, empathetic, and empowering for neurodivergent students?

Overview of Theoretical Frameworks

To answer these questions, the project draws on frameworks from Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2017), Intersectionality (hooks, 1994), and Participatory Culture (boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2009), which emphasize the importance of centering students' cultural and personal identities in the learning process.

Critical Pedagogy

Paolo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy provides a foundational lens for this project, emphasizing the need for education to be a liberatory practice that challenges oppressive systems and empowers marginalized voices (Freire, 2017). In the context of neurodivergence, this means creating educational spaces where neurodivergent individuals are not only seen but also heard, and where their unique ways of experiencing the world are valued rather than pathologized. bell hooks' work on intersectionality further enriches this perspective, highlighting how overlapping identities—such as race, gender, and neurodivergence—shape individuals' experiences and access to resources (hooks, 1994). For example, Black Americans are disproportionately underdiagnosed with neurodivergent conditions, leading to significant disparities in support and outcomes (Begeer et al., 2009). This project seeks to address these disparities by integrating intersectional approaches that recognize and affirm the diverse identities of neurodivergent individuals.

Participatory Culture: Digital Literacy Technology Applications

The post-pandemic economy has seen a shift toward more flexible and remote work options, which have opened up new opportunities for neurodivergent individuals. Careers in fields such as digital content creation, software development, graphic design, and data analysis have become increasingly accessible, as these roles often allow for remote work and flexible

schedules (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Additionally, the rise of the gig economy and freelance work has provided neurodivergent individuals with opportunities to leverage their unique skills and interests in ways that traditional employment structures often do not accommodate (Gandini, 2016). For example, many neurodivergent individuals excel in roles that require attention to detail, pattern recognition, and creative problem-solving—skills that are highly valued in tech and creative industries (Baron-Cohen et al., 2011). However, navigating these career paths requires more than just technical skills; it also requires an understanding of how to effectively engage in digital spaces and build professional networks. This project emphasizes the importance of teaching neurodivergent students how to critically engage with digital platforms, understand algorithmic biases, and leverage social media for professional growth. By incorporating these skills into the curriculum, students will be better equipped to navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic digital economy.

Social media has played a crucial role in shaping neurodivergent interpersonal relationships, providing a space for individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences and challenges. Platforms like Reddit, Discord, and Facebook have become hubs for neurodivergent communities, where individuals can discuss topics ranging from sensory sensitivities to relationship dynamics (Sweet et al., 2020). These online spaces offer a sense of belonging and validation that is often lacking in offline interactions, particularly for individuals who may struggle with traditional social norms and expectations (Mazurek et al., 2013). However, the role of algorithms in shaping these relationships cannot be overlooked. Social media algorithms often prioritize content that generates high engagement, which can lead to the amplification of certain narratives while marginalizing others (Noble, 2018). For neurodivergent

individuals, this can result in the reinforcement of stereotypes or the exclusion of diverse perspectives.

This project explores how algorithms impact collective schema and interpersonal relationships, and it emphasizes the importance of teaching students how to critically analyze and navigate these digital spaces. By understanding how algorithms work, students can become more informed consumers and creators of digital content, ensuring that their voices are heard and their experiences are accurately represented. The success of neurodivergent communities on social media platforms highlights the potential for incorporating these strategies into formal educational delivery. For example, the use of short-form video content, such as TikTok videos or Instagram Reels, can be an effective way to engage neurodivergent students who may struggle with traditional lecture-based formats (Clark, 2021). Similarly, the use of sensory-rich media, such as ASMR or binaural beats, can create a more inclusive learning environment that caters to the diverse sensory needs of neurodivergent students (Barratt & Davis, 2015; Beauchamp & Jastrzembski, 2020). This project proposes a curriculum that integrates these media strategies into formal education, providing students with opportunities to engage with content in ways that align with their sensory preferences and cognitive strengths. Additionally, the curriculum emphasizes the importance of teaching students how to critically engage with digital media, including understanding algorithmic biases, evaluating the credibility of online sources, and creating content that is both authentic and impactful.

The rise of participatory culture in digital spaces has transformed how neurodivergent individuals engage with media and each other. Henry Jenkins defines participatory culture as a space where individuals actively create and share content, blurring the lines between producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2009). For neurodivergent communities, platforms like TikTok and

YouTube have become vital spaces for multimodal storytelling, where individuals can share their experiences through videos, music, and other sensory-rich formats (Ito et al., 2013; boyd, 2014). These formats align with the sensory nature of neurodivergent learning, which often favors visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modes of engagement (Kim, Seitz, & Shams, 2008). For example, the use of ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) and binaural beats in digital content has gained popularity among neurodivergent individuals for their calming and focus-enhancing effects (Barratt & Davis, 2015; Beauchamp & Jastrzembski, 2020). These sensory experiences, often overlooked in traditional educational settings, are explored in this project as unconventional yet powerful tools for learning and self-expression.

Hip Hop Based Education

Neurodivergent communities have demonstrated a strong preference for multimodal storytelling as a medium that aligns with their sensory and cognitive experiences (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). This preference is particularly evident in the ways that neurodivergent individuals engage with digital media, using platforms like TikTok to share personal narratives, advocate for social change, and challenge stereotypes (Clark, 2021). Drawing on Hip-Hop-Based Education (HHBE) frameworks (Love, 2014; 2019), this project bridges the gap between culturally responsive pedagogy and the evolving landscape of digital media engagement.

Hip-Hop culture, with its emphasis on storytelling, rhythm, and improvisation, resonates strongly with the creative skills often exhibited by individuals with ADHD (White & Shah, 2016). HHBE provides a model for integrating these skills into educational practices, offering neurodivergent students opportunities to express themselves through music, poetry, and digital media. This approach not only affirms neurodivergent identities but also challenges traditional educational paradigms that often marginalize non-normative ways of thinking and learning. Additionally,

research has shown that individuals with ADHD often exhibit creative skills that are celebrated within Hip-Hop culture, such as improvisation, storytelling, and rhythmic expression (White & Shah, 2016). These findings suggest that integrating HHBE principles into educational design can provide a powerful framework for engaging neurodivergent students. The concept of neurodivergence as an identity-affirming framework also offers a broader lens for understanding intersectionality in education. Historically marginalized communities, such as Black Americans, have faced significant disparities in the diagnosis and support of neurodivergent conditions (Begeer et al., 2009). This project responds to these disparities by integrating principles from HHBE and culturally sustaining pedagogies, which aim to create inclusive educational environments that honor students' diverse identities and experiences. The "Exploring Identity" curriculum proposed in this project is designed to provide first-year post-secondary students with an experiential learning opportunity that emphasizes positionality, self-representation, and collective action. Through this curriculum, students will explore their identities within digital economies, engage in collaborative projects, and develop creative and social outlets that affirm their neurodivergent identities. The curriculum is structured around four key components: examining positionality within systems, self-representation in digital spaces, learning through shared experiences, and resolving conflicts constructively. By incorporating sensory-rich media formats like ASMR and binaural sound, the curriculum also addresses the unique learning needs of neurodivergent students, offering them new ways to engage with content and express themselves.

Pandemic Journey of Self Discovery: A Catalyst for Neurodivergent Visibility

View the media below:
[PANDEMIC NEWSREELS](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic served as an unprecedented disruption to global education, social structures, and identity formation. As schools, workplaces, and social spaces shut down, the internet became the primary site for connection, learning, and self-exploration. While these shifts were initially perceived as temporary adjustments to an emergency situation, they have had long-lasting implications, particularly in shaping how individuals engage with information, construct their identities, and build community. This transformation was particularly significant for neurodivergent individuals.

The structure of traditional schooling, often rigid and standardized, had long been a source of struggle for many neurodivergent learners. The sudden shift to remote learning exposed both the failures and potential alternatives to conventional education. Some students thrived in asynchronous and self-paced digital environments, which allowed them to engage with material in ways that aligned with their cognitive strengths. Others faced heightened barriers due to a lack of accommodations, technological access, or institutional understanding of their needs (Pellicano & Stears, 2020). Beyond formal education, digital platforms became primary spaces for socialization and self-discovery. Many neurodivergent individuals turned to social media to explore aspects of their identity that they had never fully examined in traditional settings. This period of introspection, amplified by the widespread dissemination of neurodivergent-created content online, led to an increase in self-diagnosis, late-in-life diagnoses, and community formation around neurodivergence (Walker, 2021). A key factor in this transformation was the forced unmasking that many neurodivergent individuals experienced. Masking—the conscious or unconscious suppression of neurodivergent traits to conform to societal expectations—has long been a coping mechanism used by autistic and ADHD individuals to navigate social and professional environments (Hull et al., 2017). However, the pandemic disrupted daily social

structures, allowing many neurodivergent individuals to temporarily step away from the performative expectations of neurotypical norms. With fewer in-person interactions, many reported reduced burnout and mental exhaustion, as they no longer had to exert constant effort to camouflage their traits (Pearson et al., 2020). Yet, for others, the abrupt shift to isolation intensified internal struggles, as the routines and social scripts they had long relied upon disappeared.

The rapid changes in social activity during the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed many individuals to reevaluate their own conceptions of identity, community, and learning. Habits of daily life drastically changed during the lockdown and isolation period, and many systems and structures never fully returned to their previous state. Some of the new methods and accommodations introduced during lockdowns—such as remote work, digital learning, and asynchronous communication—proved to be more accessible for neurodivergent individuals, leading to advocacy for their continued availability post-pandemic. Increased reliance on technology to facilitate connection also strengthened the role of social media as a critical space for neurodivergent self-expression and solidarity, providing avenues for both self-diagnosed and formally diagnosed individuals to find resources and community (Spencer, 2024).

The pandemic, a rare shared global experience, serves as a marker for social change in how people learn, socialize, communicate, and build connections. One of the most significant outcomes of this collective experience is the worldwide surge in neurodivergent diagnoses for both adults and children (Grosvenor et al., 2024). The lifting of external societal pressures during lockdown revealed the extent to which masking had contributed to burnout and misdiagnosis among neurodivergent individuals, leading many to seek formal assessments and medical intervention. Consequently, the demand for ADHD medications increased so rapidly that it

resulted in a national stimulant medication shortage that persisted even after lockdowns ended (Gimbach et al., 2023). This phenomenon underscores how deeply structural and systemic barriers have historically obscured neurodivergent identities, leaving many individuals without the recognition, accommodations, or support they needed. By disrupting traditional social and educational structures, the pandemic exposed long-standing inequities in neurodivergent accessibility and forced conversations about the sustainability of masking as a survival strategy. It also paved the way for a more expansive and intersectional understanding of neurodivergence, where self-advocacy, digital community-building, and accessibility remain central to post-pandemic conversations about education, work, and identity.

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Paradigm Shift in Schema and Learning

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[Zeitgeist Video](#)

Schema refers to cognitive structures that individuals use to organize, interpret, and make sense of information based on prior experiences and social constructs (Bartlett, 1932; Piaget, 1952). These frameworks shape how people perceive, process, and respond to the world, influencing everything from learning and memory to social interactions and identity formation. Schema development is an ongoing and dynamic process, constantly evolving through new experiences, cultural influences, and technological shifts. The concept of schema was first introduced by Bartlett (1932), who explored how individuals recall and reconstruct past events based on their existing knowledge frameworks. Later, Piaget (1952) expanded on this idea, emphasizing the role of schema in cognitive development, particularly in how children assimilate and accommodate new information. These foundational theories highlight that schema is not

static—it continuously adapts to incorporate new learning, shaping how individuals navigate their environments.

The global lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the routines and structures that many neurodivergent individuals rely on to navigate [neurotypical](#) society. For undiagnosed neurodivergent individuals, these routines often served as essential coping mechanisms, allowing them to function effectively in environments not designed with their needs in mind. The sudden loss of these structures highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by neurodivergent communities, particularly those without formal diagnoses or support systems (Pellicano & Stears, 2020). Their lives were so drastically altered by the pandemic that it caused a collective trigger of symptoms that then led to self-exploration and discoveries about neurodivergence. The surge in presence and popularity of neurodivergent social media pages, apps, and specialized educational technologies reflects the growing integration of neurodivergent culture into the broader cultural zeitgeist. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram have become spaces where neurodivergent individuals share their experiences through multimodal storytelling, while educational technologies increasingly cater to neurodivergent learning styles (Clark, 2021; Davidson & Slegers, 2019). This shift not only highlights the expanding visibility of neurodivergent identities but also underscores the demand for tools and spaces that affirm and support neurodivergent ways of being. Also, the way both neurotypical and neurodivergent people are engaging socially and learning from each other in these spaces has contributed to the general schema of the individual. A large and growing number of people today report getting their news and information through social media sources (Pew Research Center, 2020). When people are no longer building their schema from the same set of information through traditional purveyors (the mainstream news, formal school), but instead through their interactions on social

media, the content present on those digital platforms may become the de facto [schema](#) of knowledge. With all of these changes in human interaction and behaviors as the result of a global event, some of them permanent, systems and structures may also need to change with it. If the way people engage in the world is now different – increasingly digital and multimodal in nature, then the curricular impacts and needs for society at large due to this shift should also be examined to ask if traditional educational practices are meeting the needs of today's learners.

If human behavior and cognition have shifted as a result of the pandemic, it follows that educational paradigms must also shift to reflect these new realities. The disruption caused by COVID-19 illuminated long-standing inequities and inefficiencies in traditional schooling while simultaneously providing opportunities to reimagine learning through multimodal engagement, participatory knowledge-sharing, and digital community-building. This research identifies three key areas where shifts in learning demand new curricular considerations; The Rise of Neurodivergent Identities in Digital Spaces, Social Media as an Educational Ecosystem, and Borrowing from Digital Engagement Strategies for Curriculum Design.

The Rise of Neurodivergent Identities in Digital Spaces

The internet has facilitated an explosion of discourse around neurodivergence, moving it beyond clinical and academic spaces into everyday conversations on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. This has led to community-driven definitions of neurodivergence that challenge traditional deficit-based models and emphasize identity, self-advocacy, and systemic change. Many individuals who may have struggled to access diagnosis or accommodations through traditional systems have found language, validation, and support through online neurodivergent communities.

View the media below:

Curated Selection of Neurodivergent Media Creators

Social media acts as an informal educational ecosystem. Unlike formal education, which often relies on static, linear models of learning, social media platforms operate through dynamic, interactive, and multimodal storytelling. Engagement on social media is [interest](#)-driven, with users curating their own learning experiences rather than adhering to rigid curricula. This is often done through the utilization of [algorithms](#). The algorithmic personalization of content, while not without ethical concerns to be further discussed following, provides a model for adaptive learning that could be leveraged in educational design for neurodivergent students. Curriculum might borrow digital engagement strategies for curriculum design. Social media excels at capturing and sustaining engagement, a challenge that many educators face in traditional classrooms. Strategies such as short-form video content, [gamification](#), multimodal storytelling, and community discourse align well with neurodivergent learning needs and could serve as a foundation for reimagining curricular frameworks.

The goal of this research is not merely to critique existing educational structures but to synthesize emerging learning behaviors and social media engagement strategies into a functional curricular framework that meets the evolving needs of neurodivergent learners. By understanding these shifts and integrating neurodivergent-centered pedagogical approaches, educators, designers, and institutions can move toward a more inclusive, participatory, and effective learning environment—one that embraces, rather than resists, the changing landscape of education in the post-pandemic world.

Click below to view the media:

The Conscious Lee – Social Media selection for educator George Lee Jr.
Call Me Shivy – Social Media selection for educator Alfred “Shivy” Brooks II

The Neurodivergent Lens, Social Media, and Technology

In today’s digitally connected world, schema formation extends beyond direct experiences to include virtual interactions, digital content, and algorithmically curated information. Social media, search engines, and [artificial intelligence](#) (AI) systems now play a crucial role in shaping cognitive frameworks, determining which information individuals encounter and how they interpret it (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). These digital influences can reinforce existing schema or challenge them by exposing users to new perspectives and ways of thinking. For example, social media platforms create personalized digital ecosystems that affect self-perception, community identity, and worldview (Bury, 2020). Algorithms tailor content based on engagement history, subtly shaping users’ schema around knowledge acquisition, political beliefs, and social norms (Noble, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). While this can enhance learning and connection, it can also contribute to cognitive biases, reinforcing preexisting perspectives rather than fostering critical engagement with diverse ideas. Schema influences how individuals process new information, making it a critical concept in education, communication, and identity development. In learning environments, educators use schema theory to design instructional strategies that build on students' prior knowledge, making complex ideas more accessible (Bartlett, 1932; Piaget, 1952). Similarly, in social interactions, people rely on preexisting schemas to interpret behaviors, emotions, and societal expectations. As digital technologies continue to shape cognitive frameworks, it is essential to recognize the fluid and evolving nature of schema. Understanding how social media, AI, and participatory digital culture influence schema formation allows for a more nuanced discussion on the role of technology in shaping human cognition, identity, and social belonging.

Artificial Intelligence and Algorithmic Influence on Schema

AI-powered [algorithms](#) play a pivotal role in shaping schema by determining which content is presented to users, reinforcing certain patterns of engagement while minimizing others (Noble, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). These algorithms are designed to maximize user retention, predict preferences, and refine recommendations based on past behavior (Gillespie, 2014). For neurodivergent individuals seeking community and validation, these systems often provide pathways to discovering affinity spaces, connecting with like-minded individuals, and encountering neurodivergent-affirming discourse (Davidson & Orsini, 2013). One of the key benefits of algorithmic curation is its ability to surface highly relevant content that might otherwise remain inaccessible in traditional social settings (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). For neurodivergent users, who may struggle with in-person networking due to sensory sensitivities, communication differences, or social anxiety, AI-driven social media platforms offer an alternative means of connection. Content recommendations often lead users toward communities discussing neurodivergence, self-advocacy, coping strategies, and shared experiences, reinforcing a positive and self-affirming schema of identity (Mazurek, 2013). However, this reliance on AI-generated schema formation is not without risks. Algorithms are inherently shaped by engagement-driven biases that prioritize high-engagement content over nuance (Gillespie, 2018). This can lead to overrepresentation of certain narratives—such as romanticized, hyper-visible portrayals of neurodivergence—while silencing or misrepresenting less palatable realities, such as systemic barriers to employment or healthcare (Noble, 2018).

For neurodivergent individuals, social media algorithms serve as a means of curating a digital environment that aligns with their cognitive preferences and processing styles (Davidson & Orsini, 2013). Unlike traditional social spaces, where neurodivergent traits may be stigmatized

or pathologized, social media allows for the curation of self-affirming digital ecosystems, shaping an individual's schema around identity, acceptance, and belonging (Bury, 2020). The role of participatory culture in shaping these schemas is particularly evident in neurodivergent-affirming communities on platforms like Reddit, TikTok, and Twitter. The continuous feedback loop of content creation, sharing, and discussion allows users to refine their understanding of neurodivergence beyond clinical definitions, emphasizing lived experience, self-advocacy, and collective identity formation (Jenkins, 2009; Literat, 2021). This participatory process not only informs personal schema but also contributes to shifting societal narratives around neurodivergence.

The relationship between algorithmic curation and neurodivergent identity formation is inherently reciprocal. As individuals engage with content that resonates with their experiences, their schema evolves—influencing how they conceptualize neurodivergence, social interaction, and personal identity (Bury, 2020). In turn, the algorithms adjust, reinforcing patterns of engagement that further shape self-perception and community belonging (Gillespie, 2014). However, this reliance on AI-driven schema formation raises ethical concerns. Algorithms lack the nuance of human experience, meaning that overreliance on digital schema-building can lead to self-reinforcing echo chambers, misinformation, or unhealthy identity essentialism (Bucher, 2018; Noble, 2018). For neurodivergent individuals navigating identity discovery online, it is crucial to approach these digital narratives critically, balancing algorithmic affirmation with diverse sources of insight and lived experience (Davidson & Orsini, 2013).

Formal vs Informal Learning

Current shared learning experiences often diverge significantly from formal systems of education. If the majority of schema—our mental frameworks for understanding the world—are

increasingly derived from informal sources like social media, formal education systems must adapt to remain relevant (Jenkins, 2020). The primary purpose of formal education is to shape values, foster critical thinking, and prepare individuals to be engaged members of society. However, to achieve these goals, formal institutions must integrate the more dynamic and engaging strategies of informal learning practices. Traditional education operates within a formal structure, characterized by rigid curricula, standardized assessments, and hierarchical models of knowledge dissemination. While this approach provides consistency and accountability, it often fails to accommodate the diverse learning needs of neurodivergent individuals (Livingstone, 2018). Informal learning, by contrast, occurs organically within digital spaces, peer networks, and social interactions. It is inherently flexible, self-paced, and multimodal, making it particularly well-suited to neurodivergent learners who may struggle with the constraints of traditional educational environments.

Neurodivergent learners often thrive in informal learning environments due to the autonomy and adaptability these spaces provide. Social media platforms, open-source education initiatives, and affinity groups enable learners to construct knowledge in ways that align with their cognitive preferences and interests. For example, platforms like YouTube, Reddit, and TikTok allow users to explore topics at their own pace, engage with content in multiple formats (e.g., videos, memes, infographics), and connect with communities that share their passions. This aligns with the principles of connected learning (Ito et al., 2013), which emphasizes the importance of interest-driven, peer-supported, and openly networked education. To better support neurodivergent learners, formal and informal learning approaches must be integrated. This hybrid model would combine the structure and rigor of formal education with the flexibility and engagement of informal learning. For instance, schools could incorporate project-based learning,

digital storytelling, and collaborative online platforms into their curricula, allowing students to explore topics in ways that resonate with their individual strengths and interests (Potter, 2018).

Formal vs Informal Schema

The implications of deriving schema from informal sources, such as social media, as opposed to formal sources, such as schools, libraries, and textbooks, are profound. Schema developed through informal learning is often shaped by algorithms, peer influence, and viral trends rather than curated, evidence-based knowledge (Livingstone, 2018). While this can lead to a more personalized and engaging learning experience, it also carries risks, such as exposure to misinformation, reinforcement of biases, and fragmented understanding of complex topics. For example, social media platforms prioritize content that generates engagement, often at the expense of accuracy or depth. This can result in schema that is heavily influenced by emotionally charged or sensationalized information, rather than balanced, well-researched perspectives (Potter, 2018). In contrast, formal sources of knowledge are typically vetted for accuracy and designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of a subject. However, they can also be perceived as less engaging or relevant to students' lived experiences.

For neurodivergent individuals, the distinction between formal and informal schema is particularly significant. Informal learning environments often allow neurodivergent learners to engage with content in ways that align with their cognitive strengths, such as pattern recognition, hyperfocus, or visual thinking (Ito et al., 2013). However, the lack of structure and oversight in these environments can also make it difficult to discern credible information from misinformation. Formal education, while more structured, often fails to accommodate the unique ways neurodivergent individuals process and retain information (Jenkins, 2020). To address these challenges, educators must find ways to bridge the gap between formal and informal schema.

This could involve teaching students to critically evaluate informal sources, integrating digital literacy into formal curricula, and creating hybrid learning environments that leverage the strengths of both approaches (Potter, 2018). By doing so, we can ensure that all learners—neurodivergent and neurotypical alike—develop robust, accurate, and adaptable schema that prepare them to navigate an increasingly complex information landscape.

Technology, Social Media, and Interconnected Systems as Conduits of Knowledge

Social media platforms curate personalized learning pathways through algorithm-driven content delivery, enhancing access to affinity spaces, expert discourse, and multimodal storytelling (Ito et al., 2013). These algorithms analyze user behavior—such as likes, shares, and search history—to tailor content that aligns with individual interests and learning preferences. For neurodivergent learners, this personalized approach can be particularly beneficial, as it allows for self-paced exploration and engagement with content that resonates with their cognitive strengths, such as visual or interactive media (Livingstone, 2018). Affinity spaces, or online communities centered around shared interests, further support this by providing opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and collaboration, fostering a sense of belonging and intellectual growth (Gee, 2005). However, the reliance on algorithm-driven content delivery also raises significant concerns. Algorithmic bias, for instance, can reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse perspectives, creating echo chambers that hinder critical thinking and shared understanding (Pariser, 2011). Content suppression, where certain topics or voices are disproportionately filtered or deprioritized, further exacerbates this issue, often marginalizing underrepresented or minority viewpoints (Noble, 2018).

The commodification of knowledge—where information is treated as a marketable product rather than a public good—poses ethical challenges. Platforms prioritize profit-driven

engagement metrics over educational value, often amplifying sensational or emotionally charged content at the expense of accuracy and depth (Dixon-Román, 2020). These challenges highlight the dual role of technology in education: while it offers unprecedented opportunities for personalized and inclusive learning, it also introduces risks that must be carefully managed. Addressing these concerns requires a multifaceted approach, including algorithmic transparency, digital literacy education, and ethical frameworks to ensure that technology serves as a tool for equitable knowledge dissemination rather than a source of division or exploitation (Benjamin, 2019).

View the media below

[*Selection of my original neurodivergent social media content - Tequila Mockingbird*](#)

Post-pandemic Identities

The plethora of multimodal material that contributes to overall schema in the modern world necessitates the skills to process, analyze, and contextualize this knowledge within one's own experience and the experiences of others. Catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals and systems are in the midst of personal transformations of deeper and more nuanced understanding, both internal and external. As learners navigate growth and development, questions of identity, important decisions about adulthood, and development of special interests arise. Individuals start to understand their positionality within their contexts and as they relate to others. Metacognition and self-reflection during this transformational period is crucial for the development of our identities. The curricular framework for first year college students provides tools to help learners of all ages understand who they are, how others perceive them, who they would like to be and what impact they would like to have on the world. Being able to clearly define oneself with an understanding of the interplay of layers of intersectional identities in various contexts leads to deepened comprehension of how one presents to and is perceived by

others, and situates oneself within the contexts of space and place are important steps to setting the foundations of how one interacts with the world as one transitions into the greater autonomy and accountability of adulthood.

At the core of this inquiry lies the dynamic interplay between Freirean critical pedagogy and Jenkins' participatory culture—a dialectic that reframes education as both a liberatory practice and a collaborative meaning-making process. Freire's (2017) insistence on education as a site of resistance against oppressive systems aligns with Jenkins' (2009) vision of digital spaces as arenas for collective knowledge production, where neurodivergent learners transcend passive consumption to become co-creators of discourse. This synthesis challenges hierarchical models of schooling by centering student agency: where Freire dismantles the 'banking system' of education, Jenkins provides the tools for its replacement—multimodal storytelling, algorithmic affinity spaces, and remix as pedagogical acts. For neurodivergent communities, this fusion is particularly potent; it validates lived experience as expertise while leveraging digital platforms' inherent flexibility to accommodate diverse cognitive styles. By anchoring the study in this framework, we interrogate not only how neurodivergent individuals learn, but how their participation in digital cultures redefines learning itself.

Critical Consciousness of Intersectional Identity

View the media below:
[Intersectionality video](#)

Critical consciousness and intersecting notions of identity underpin context and perceptions of the self, others, and the systems therewithin. Therefore, qualities, beliefs and traits associated with individuals or communities of people. This is tied to the idea that we are a collection of our roles and experiences. Our varied identities result in unique, fluid combinations of discrimination and privilege. Neurodivergence is an emergent layer of identity for individuals,

groups, and systems. Awareness of one's own identities and cultural relevance underscores the ability to understand the multifaceted identities of others, and within systems. This concept exemplifies itself in practice, when individuals consider how their intersecting identities show up in their work and relationships. Critical analysis of outcomes from metacognitive reflection on one's performances of and interactions with identity in virtual spaces should drive curricular design.

While participatory culture and pluriversality largely deal with methods of instruction and learning, critical pedagogy focuses on content that directly addresses power imbalances in societies. It pushes students to actively engage in intellectual, physical, and spiritual activism necessary to fix these imbalances. Scholars of critical pedagogy decry the use of “banking” education (Freire, 2017), wherein teachers are merely information givers tasked with feeding the dominant narratives or necessary information to students, who are tasked with memorizing as much as they can to demonstrate narrow competencies. Instead, critical pedagogy necessitates the co-creation of learning objectives with teachers, students, and communities, based around educational goals that are context-specific and important to those that participate in education (Freire, 2017).

Context-specific learning goals must speak to intersectional issues by accounting for the multiple identities we hold at individual and collective levels, to understand how systems of power and oppression affect us differently based on these individual portions and combined identities (hooks, 2010). These curricular strategies prompt learners to critically reflect on the different aspects of identity that define them, and situate these aspects within larger systems of relational power. Students will come to understand how their identities and real-world experiences (Walker & Soltis, 2009) relate to systems of power, and work together with

classmates from different backgrounds to leverage these real world experiences, knowledge of intersectional identities and power relationships and participatory methods to collaboratively build more positive spaces with and for each other. In this way, the process of learning is the goal itself, and students build skills for continued knowledge acquisition and learning (hooks), setting a foundation for their ability to continually grow and take on new information as they move through their lives.

Interrogation of Knowledge

The ways in which individuals acquire and validate knowledge have fundamentally shifted in the digital age. The traditional gatekeepers of knowledge—educational institutions, libraries, and academic publishing—are now competing with user-generated content, social networks, and participatory learning spaces. This shift is particularly significant for neurodivergent learners, who often engage in nonlinear, interest-driven knowledge acquisition that diverges from standardized curricular models.

Neurodivergent individuals frequently interrogate knowledge by seeking out alternative sources, challenging dominant narratives, and utilizing experiential learning methods. Platforms such as Reddit, Discord, and TikTok serve as informal learning hubs where users critically engage with information through discussions, lived experiences, and participatory discourse (Spencer, 2024). This aligns with Gee's (2015) concept of Discourse, which distinguishes between little "d" discourse (language in use) and big "D" Discourse (socially constructed systems of meaning-making). Neurodivergent individuals navigate epistemological hierarchies, validating knowledge through community consensus rather than institutional approval. It also explores the implications of misinformation and disinformation in digital spaces, particularly in relation to neurodivergent identity and advocacy.

Modern schema generally embodies more information sourced from social media than any other format. (Pew Research Center, 2020) Inconsistent schema for different cross sections of individuals may be rooted in algorithmic design of social media platforms. This has the potential for unrecognized or unintended bias that should be considered. Unstandardized schema results in varying perceptions of truth and reality, which in turn may lead to conflict between individuals and groups.

Participatory Culture

Participatory Multimodal Engagement

Taking part in collaborative activities with shared goals, and the ways or dimensions of making oneself known to and interacting with others for a shared purpose. Social media serves as a platform for users to generate and share multimodal expressions of their experiences with others and participate in synchronous and asynchronous discourse with others. This established pattern of social behavior and engagement is applicable to formal systems of learning. Expressing information in multimodal formats that include less traditional methodologies for activating neural networks such as using sound, music, moving images, pictures, and written text are effective for deepening understanding the processing of knowledge for both neurodivergent and neurotypical learners. Adulthood, including relationships, work, and quality of life satisfaction offer new challenges and opportunities as a result of collective self-discovery and technological advancements which was an outcome of virtual participation during the pandemic lockdown.

View the media below:

[Jenkins](#)

The world is an increasingly globalized place, where “widespread cultural consciousness” is driving further interdependence and the creation of a more deeply embedded

world society in which we all participate (Meyer, 2007, p.263). Within this global context, individuals and communities must develop a critical consciousness of their identities and presentation to others, and others' reactions and presentations to them. Critical consciousness must follow cultural consciousness to build a harmonious shared world, and one of the first steps on the path towards critical consciousness is participation and cultural exchange based on an understanding of our intersectional identities and interactive presentations of self within the systems we inhabit. Participatory culture theorists posit that participatory cultures have low barriers of entry for artistic and civic engagement, build connections between creators, and that these opportunities create benefits such as “opportunities for peer-to-peer learning...diversification of cultural expression... and a more empowered conception of citizenship” (Jenkins, 2009, p.xii). This peer-created shared culture challenges normative narratives around history, culture, and individuals' places within and abilities to affect systems. This curriculum draws on participatory culture to recognize and celebrate differences, while giving credence to the factors of our intersecting identities that cause conflict or misunderstanding between individuals and within groups. It seeks to understand how media portrayals may serve to exacerbate or ameliorate conflict, acknowledging that “when students use technology positively, they create a cohesive academic environment...in which everyone feels valued.” (Henshon, 2021, p.7).

Telling our stories and finding the shared spaces where these stories can exist with those of others is key to developing participatory culture. Social media is an important vector for both of these activities, as it hosts both autohistoria (Diaz Beltran, 2018) - the demonstration of self through stories that situate ourselves within our pluriversal realities - and helps us find interstices (Anzaldua, 1987) - the places between borders where we can find ourselves together with others

of similar and different identities and persuasions. Social media can itself be both a format of autohistoria and an interstice, and it can also help us find each others' autohistorias, and create interstices based on these understandings. This curriculum recognizes that intersectional social awareness begins with a deep understanding of self followed by the application of self to others and the systems in which we operate, so it combines the activity of auto-historia with the goal of finding and inhabiting interstices using participatory methods such as multimodal storytelling and communities on social media that are activated within intersectional cultural and critical consciousness.

Spreadable Media

Click below to view the media:

[Henry Jenkins - Spreadable Media](#)

Jenkins' (2009) concept of spreadable media refers to the participatory nature of content dissemination, emphasizing the role of users in shaping how information circulates across digital platforms. Unlike traditional media, where information flows from a centralized authority, spreadable media allows for audience-driven redistribution, remixing, and adaptation. In neurodivergent communities, spreadable media plays a pivotal role in knowledge-sharing and advocacy. Online platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube enable neurodivergent individuals to share lived experiences, coping strategies, and educational content in a way that is accessible, engaging, and multimodal. These platforms cater to diverse communication styles, incorporating text, audio, and video elements that align with universal design for learning ([UDL](#)) principles (CAST, 2018). Moreover, neurodivergent creators leverage spreadable media to challenge misinformation, amplify marginalized voices, and build affinity spaces where users can engage in peer-to-peer learning.

Despite its benefits, algorithmic curation and [platform paternalism](#) pose challenges for neurodivergent content creators. While certain posts gain viral traction due to their relatability, others may be [shadowbanned](#) or deprioritized due to nonconventional communication styles. This section explores how spreadable media democratizes knowledge production while also reinforcing existing power structures through algorithmic suppression and digital gatekeeping. These ideas are further drawn out later in this study.

This selection of theories was selected because of their inherent connection with neurodivergent learning. Neurodivergence has entered into the layering of intersectional identity. Not only how neurodivergence interplays with structures and systems, but also now the self awareness and knowing how neurodivergent identities, which has often been gathered from neurodivergent social media communities and engagement. Knowing about oneself and finding community in these social media spaces, this knowledge can be utilized and leveraged to design frameworks for learning, teaching, and community building. Social media serves as a dynamic and multimodal space where individuals, including neurodivergent users, engage in self-expression, learning, and community-building. Unlike traditional communication environments, social media platforms offer a range of textual, auditory, and visual modalities that allow users to craft content that aligns with their cognitive and sensory preferences. For many neurodivergent individuals, this multimodal affordance supports self-advocacy and identity formation, enabling them to curate digital personas that reflect their unique experiences and perspectives (boyd, 2014). However, the ability to express oneself on social media is often shaped by algorithmic visibility and platform biases. Algorithms prioritize content based on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and watch time, which can amplify or suppress neurodivergent voices depending on how well their content aligns with dominant engagement

patterns. Studies have shown that neurodivergent content creators face challenges with shadowbanning, where their posts receive limited visibility due to atypical communication styles or content themes that deviate from mainstream trends (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019). This raises ethical questions about who controls the digital narrative and how platform design influences knowledge dissemination and self-representation.

The concept of representational identities, how individuals present themselves and interact with others on social media, can be understood through bell hooks' theory of intersectionality. hooks (1989) emphasizes that identity is not singular but multifaceted, shaped by the interplay of race, gender, class, ability, and other social categories. On social media, users construct and negotiate these intersecting identities, often navigating complex power dynamics. For neurodivergent individuals, this process can be both empowering and fraught with challenges. While social media provides a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, it also exposes them to misinterpretation, stereotyping, and erasure. As hooks (1989) argues, visibility alone does not equate to equity; meaningful representation requires an understanding of the contexts in which identities are constructed and interpreted.

The interpretation of content on social media is deeply influenced by context, yet the context in which content is created is often lost or distorted when consumed by others. As boyd (2014) notes, "Content is always produced and interpreted in a context, but the context in which it is created might not be the context in which it is consumed" (p. 52). This disconnect can lead to misinterpretation, where assumptions about the creator's intent or situation overshadow the actual meaning of the content. For neurodivergent individuals, whose communication styles may differ from neurotypical norms, this risk is particularly pronounced. Misinterpretation can breed intolerance or reinforce stereotypes, further marginalizing neurodivergent voices. At the same

time, social media has the potential to foster understanding and connection when users approach content with contextual integrity. Helen Nissenbaum's concept of "contextual integrity," as cited by boyd (2014), emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which information is situated to derive accurate meaning. Without this, visibility can lead to harm rather than support. For example, while social media makes visible the struggles and triumphs of neurodivergent individuals, it also exposes them to scrutiny and judgment. As boyd (2014) observes, "We consistently use technology to search for and examine the presence of people who interest us, but we rarely use these same features to seek out those who are at risk and could use our help" (p. 54). This highlights the ethical responsibility of platforms and users alike to prioritize empathy and context in their engagement with content.

The growing presence and popularity of neurodivergent content creators on platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram reflect a shift toward greater visibility and representation. These creators use social media to share their lived experiences, advocate for neurodiversity, and build supportive communities. Their content often challenges stereotypes and provides educational resources, fostering a more inclusive understanding of neurodivergence. However, as Jenkins (2009) argues, participatory culture—while empowering—is not without its challenges. Neurodivergent creators must navigate algorithmic gatekeeping, digital inequities, and the commodification of their narratives. The future of human connection on social media depends on how platforms and users address these challenges. By prioritizing contextual integrity, ethical design, and inclusive practices, social media can become a space where neurodivergent individuals and other marginalized groups thrive. This requires not only technological innovation but also a cultural shift toward valuing diverse voices and fostering meaningful connections.

The transformation of learning paradigms, particularly for neurodivergent individuals, necessitates an examination of curricular frameworks that not only acknowledge but actively support diverse cognitive processing styles. Traditional education systems have long prioritized verbal and textual instruction, often neglecting multimodal engagement, participatory learning, and student agency. As neurodivergent discourse increasingly enters educational spaces, there is a critical need to evaluate existing curricular models and identify strategies that align with the strengths, challenges, and digital behaviors of neurodivergent learners. Core Competencies and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the role of informal and digital learning spaces are explored here.

Fluidity in Roles of the “Teacher” and “Learner”

In redefining the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners within this curriculum within contemporary context, it is imperative to challenge the traditional notion of education, where teachers impart knowledge through one-way lectures. As this curriculum is heavily based on participatory culture and critical pedagogy centered in multimodal neurodivergent affirming strategies, the essence of the curriculum lies in sharing and engaging in conversations between teachers and students as well as peer-to-peer. Consequently, teachers transition from being the 'sage on the stage' to becoming curators of lived experiences, guides, and resources for students, sparking intellectual intuition by posing real problems of human relations with the world (Walker & Soltis, 2009). Teachers no longer merely provide answers; instead, they serve as presenters or moderators of real problems, fostering a collaborative and co-investigative process where a safe and open space is created for genuine dialogue between students and teachers. These underpin the emphasis on Critical Consciousness for the purpose of building a more just society, which is the ultimate goal for all of us, therefore “[l]earning would

then serve to educate students for the practice of freedom rather than maintenance of existing structures of domination.” (hooks, 46). Drawing on Jenkins et al.'s (2009) definition of Participatory Culture, the educational environment is characterized by low barriers to artistic expression, strong support for creating and sharing, informal mentorship, belief in the significance of contributions, and a sense of social connection among members. This aligns with the view that interactivity is a property of technology, while participation is a property of culture. Moreover, Soep's (2016) perspective on participatory culture in schools emphasizes the importance of situating learning as a form of participation within communities of practice.

Both teachers and learners are acknowledged as contributors within connected contexts that are production-centered, creation-centered and networked toward a shared purpose. The interconnected nature of learning across platforms, settings, and domains of interest is highlighted as we incorporate various learning experiences in our curriculum. The frameworks of neurodiverse, culturally responsive critical pedagogy, transmedia making, and the release of imagination guide the integration of participatory culture into the curriculum.

Social Emotional Learning Standards

The potential strength of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) based standards, in this case the CASEL competencies are recommended, is that it can build off what students have already learned about harmonious interactions and acceptance of others. This helps them to start incorporating critical reflections on pluriversality, power imbalances, and the systems that affect our communities. Strategies that center neurodivergent modalities of method and delivery are adaptable and scalable in context. They are designed to capitalize on the pandemic-inspired journey of self-discovery many experienced to build self-awareness, followed by exploring

avenues for external expression and collaboratively exploring systems and mechanisms that produce inequality through interactions with classmates and external communities has the potential to create further understanding and strong life-skills for students in their immediate environments, and setting students up as agents of productive discourse and social change in their communities and wider societies.

What is explicit and what is null?

Social media platforms have become de facto learning environments, shaping users' worldviews and schema through algorithmic exposure and participatory engagement. The content users consume is explicitly shaped by platform design, determining what information is prioritized, how narratives evolve, and whose perspectives are amplified. However, null curriculum—what is omitted from formal education—also plays a critical role in shaping cognitive schema. Traditional schooling often neglects media literacy, [algorithmic bias](#), and participatory engagement, leaving students unprepared to critically analyze digital information. This section explores how social media functions as an alternative curriculum, fostering skills such as multimodal literacy, peer learning, and digital self-advocacy, while also reinforcing misinformation cycles and knowledge silos.

Epistemological and Ontological Consciousness

Some of the major factors of society that have shifted show a clear delineation in the advent of the internet and subsequent growth in technology. This impacts identities and behaviors, how communities form, how people learn, and who/what people are learning from. People want to participate in their community, they want to be engaged. We see this in social media engagement and communities. This identity is representational. We now have intersectional representative identities interacting with each other via multimodal methods using

systems of technology popular on the market. This space is a de facto learning community. People learn through the shared experiences of others, and social media has become an active and engaging locale for this learning to take place.

The role of media in the fabric of identities, who people are and how people relate to each other, is more pervasive than ever. Students need to have a chance to explore the reality of living in a pluralistic environment and their social and media participation therein. Critical Pedagogy encompasses critical consciousness and moving away from banking education practices (Freire, 2017) while incorporating intersectionality into pedagogy and activities. Students then leverage these understandings to identify and understand overlapping systems of oppression and empowerment (hooks, 2010) and situate their identities within these systems, while engaging in problem-solving based on real lived experiences (Walker & Soltis, 2009) that may converge or diverge with overarching narratives. This means from whom, what, and where people learn has shifted from classrooms and libraries to digital spaces on the internet. One thing, however, has not changed. People still need and seek out social spaces for connecting and learning (including digital communities) as evidenced by niche communities, including neurodivergent communities, emergence and popularity in digital spaces.

Post-Pandemic Adulthood: Life & Learning

The rise of digital learning environments, particularly informal social media-based education, has transformed where, how, and from whom people learn. Unlike traditional curriculum, which is linear, hierarchical, and controlled by institutions, digital learning spaces—especially those cultivated by neurodivergent communities—operate through crowdsourced knowledge production. Instead of knowledge being “delivered” by an authoritative teacher, individuals engage in peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing, with lived

experience treated as expertise (Jenkins et al., 2015). Through multimodal learning, information is conveyed visually, aurally, textually, and kinesthetically, allowing learners to engage through their preferred processing modes (Kim et al., 2008). In adaptive learning models, content discovery is algorithmically driven based on prior interactions, mirroring the benefits of self-paced, personalized learning (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019).

In contextualizing thinking about neurodivergent strategies aligned to the conceptual framework, it is logical, much like the process of UDL, to think about the neurodivergent individual in adulthood. Next, is a look ahead to the future of the learner as we interrogate the landscape of neurodivergence in post-pandemic adulthood. Here, areas of career exploration (creativity and work), and relationships (friendship, toxic social media relationships, and [intimacy](#)) are explored. This is analyzed by framing the inquiry in terms of equity, highlighting the challenges of access, ethics, and representation for neurodivergent learners. The intentional selection of these factors, skills, and knowledge seeks to find praxis for neurodivergent and neurotypical learners to collaboratively negotiate information sharing and education between the self and others within systems and structures through a critical lens. The intention of casting such a wide net on age ranges for these strategies is that the neurodivergent individual does not cease to be neurodivergent upon the completion of their K-12 schooling. Neurodivergent children grow up to become neurodivergent adults, adults who will benefit in the long term from having experience with the strategies outlined here, as well as an exploration of new and nontraditional opportunities for neurodivergent adults that may address some of the reports of quality of life dissatisfaction among later in life diagnosed neurodivergent adults. In the study by Smith et. al. (2024) who identified as neurodivergent consistently reported higher levels of mental health symptoms at intake compared to their neurotypical counterparts. As neurodivergent children

transition into adulthood, they encounter new challenges and opportunities in education, work, and social relationships. Post-pandemic workforce trends have highlighted the need for flexible, remote, and interest-based career pathways, many of which align with neurodivergent strengths. However, barriers such as workplace discrimination, accessibility gaps, and [stigma](#) persist, necessitating advocacy for inclusive policies and work environments.

Click below to view the media:

[boyd](#)

[boyd – quotes and questions](#)

Creativity and the Senses

Click below to view the media:

[Synesthesia](#)

Heightened sensory perception is a notable characteristic among neurodivergent individuals, often influencing creativity and cognitive processing. Sensory sensitivities, enhanced pattern recognition, and cross-modal perception contribute to creative thought by enabling unique ways of interpreting and engaging with the world (Ward, 2013). One particularly significant sensory phenomenon linked to neurodivergence and creativity is synesthesia, a condition in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway involuntarily triggers experiences in another (Cytowic, 2002). One of the lesser studied phenomena of the senses is called synesthesia. Synesthesia is commonly reported among individuals with autism, ADHD, and other forms of neurodivergence, suggesting a potential neurological overlap between these cognitive profiles (Neufeld et al., 2013). Research indicates that synesthetes often demonstrate higher levels of creativity, problem-solving, and artistic innovation, as their brains process sensory information in a more interconnected manner (Rothen & Meier, 2013). For example, an individual with grapheme-color synesthesia may associate specific colors with letters or numbers, while another with chromesthesia might perceive sounds as bursts of color. These

cross-sensory associations can enhance creative output, allowing neurodivergent individuals to engage in multimodal storytelling, music composition, visual arts, and other creative disciplines in ways that differ from neurotypical patterns of cognition (Ward, 2013). The creative advantages associated with synesthesia align with the broader cognitive strengths of neurodivergent individuals, including nonlinear thinking, heightened perception, and deep focus on niche interests (Simner & Hubbard, 2013). Many artists, writers, and musicians with synesthetic experiences attribute their creativity to their unique perceptual blending, which enables them to create multidimensional and immersive artistic works. In educational and professional spaces, understanding the link between synesthesia, neurodivergence, and creativity is crucial for developing inclusive learning environments that foster diverse cognitive styles. Encouraging multisensory learning, flexible creative expression, and participatory storytelling can help neurodivergent individuals leverage their heightened sensory perception as a creative asset (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001).

Creativity and Neurodivergence in the Digital Economy

Neurodivergent individuals often find fulfillment in creative and flexible work models, such as content creation, freelancing, and remote work. These non-traditional career paths allow them to leverage their unique cognitive strengths and thrive in environments that accommodate their needs. Platforms like Patreon and YouTube have become vital spaces for neurodivergent individuals to monetize their creativity and build sustainable careers outside conventional employment structures (Ito & Lange, 2013). The rise of these platforms reflects a broader shift toward digital economies that value creativity, innovation, and individuality. Research has consistently shown that neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with ADHD or autism, often exhibit enhanced divergent thinking—a key component of creativity—due to their unique

cognitive processing styles (White & Shah, 2016). Divergent thinking enables individuals to generate multiple solutions to a problem, think outside the box, and approach challenges from unconventional angles. This cognitive flexibility is further supported by the atypical neural connectivity observed in neurodivergent individuals, which facilitates novel problem-solving approaches and contributes to their heightened creative potential (Baron-Cohen et al., 2011). Social media platforms amplify these creative strengths by providing spaces for neurodivergent individuals to experiment with self-expression, share their work, and receive immediate feedback from peers (Literat, 2014). As Ito et al. (2010) note, “The advent of this socially based, digital milieu means they can connect with large numbers of dispersed others and test wider reaction to their work” (p. 243). The participatory nature of social media fosters creative identity development, allowing users to explore and refine their unique voices. For many neurodivergent individuals, this process is deeply validating, as it enables them to connect with communities that celebrate their perspectives and provide a sense of belonging (Davidson & Slegers, 2019).

Social media also facilitates collaborative creativity, enabling neurodivergent individuals to share and remix ideas across diverse communities (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit allow users to engage in peer-to-peer learning and co-creation, transcending geographical and social barriers to connect with like-minded individuals (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). This collaborative environment not only enhances creative output but also fosters a sense of solidarity and mutual support among neurodivergent creators. For example, neurodivergent content creators often use social media to share coping strategies, advocate for neurodiversity, and challenge stereotypes. Their work not only contributes to public discourse but also empowers others within the neurodivergent community. As Zhu et al. (2023) note, “Cognitive use of social media has a positive indirect relationship with creativity through

increased creative self-efficacy” (p. 1). This underscores the transformative potential of social media as a tool for creative expression and empowerment.

Despite these opportunities, digital labor is not without its challenges. Neurodivergent creators often face barriers such as shadowbanning, algorithmic suppression, and fluctuating income models, which can undermine their ability to sustain long-term careers (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019). Shadowbanning, in particular, disproportionately affects neurodivergent individuals whose content may deviate from mainstream trends or communication norms. The commodification of creativity on social media raises ethical concerns about exploitation and the unequal distribution of resources. The post-pandemic era has further highlighted these challenges, as the rapid adoption of new technologies and remote work models has intensified competition and algorithmic pressures. While these changes have expanded opportunities for neurodivergent individuals to participate in digital economies, they have also exacerbated existing inequities. Addressing these issues requires a commitment to ethical platform design, transparent algorithms, and policies that support the financial and creative autonomy of neurodivergent creators. The growing presence of neurodivergent creators on social media reflects a broader cultural shift toward valuing diverse perspectives and creative contributions. As digital economies continue to evolve, it is essential to recognize and address the unique challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals while celebrating their innovative potential. By fostering inclusive and equitable online spaces, we can ensure that neurodivergent creators not only survive but thrive in the digital age.

Neurodivergence and Digital Labor

The concept of “work” has undergone a significant transformation in the digital age, particularly for young people who are redefining productivity, career pathways, and economic

participation through social media. For neurodivergent individuals, these shifts offer both opportunities and challenges, as they navigate a rapidly evolving landscape that blends creativity, technology, and entrepreneurship. Today's young people view work not as a rigid, standardized activity but as a dynamic and flexible process that integrates creativity, social interaction, and economic gain. As Ito et al. (2010) observe, "New media engagement operates as a site of training and preparatory work as well as how it becomes a vehicle for new forms of volunteerism, nonmarket labor, and new media ventures" (p. 296). Social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have created new career pathways, enabling young people to monetize their creativity, build personal brands, and generate income through freelance content creation, affiliate marketing, and sponsored posts (Abidin, 2016; Gandini, 2016). These platforms empower individuals to exercise agency in defining the terms of their work, moving away from traditional employment structures and toward self-directed, flexible careers (Duffy et al., 2017).

For neurodivergent individuals, this destandardization of work is particularly transformative. Social media provides a space to showcase their talents, build communities, and generate income in ways that traditional workplaces often fail to accommodate (Strang et al., 2020). The flexibility of virtual and multimodal work environments—such as reduced sensory stimuli, customizable schedules, and opportunities to leverage unique strengths—can be especially beneficial for neurodivergent individuals (Mazurek et al., 2019). As Ito et al. (2010) highlight, "Practices of everyday, personal media production—the creation and sharing of personal photos, videos, and online profiles—are central to how young people transition to practices that they self-identify as 'media production'" (p. 245). This transition often involves engaging with creative communities and collaborations, which are critical for skill development

and audience building. Though there are many opportunities, neurodivergent individuals often face significant barriers in traditional workplaces. Sensory overload, rigid communication norms, and a lack of accommodations can make conventional employment environments inaccessible or unsustainable (Lorenz et al., 2016). These challenges highlight the need for inclusive practices, such as flexible schedules, sensory-friendly environments, and clear communication strategies, to support neurodivergent workers (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2021). Social media and the gig economy offer an alternative to these barriers, allowing neurodivergent individuals to design careers that align with their needs and preferences. As Sala et al. (2020) note, “The destandardization of work through social media creates opportunities for neurodivergent individuals to thrive, as they can design careers that accommodate their unique needs and preferences” (p. 4140).

This shift not only empowers neurodivergent individuals but also challenges traditional notions of productivity and workplace norms. The rise of virtual and multimodal work environments has been shaped in part by the contributions of neurodivergent individuals, whose unique perspectives and problem-solving approaches drive innovation in digital spaces. For example, neurodivergent content creators often bring fresh ideas and creative solutions to their work, challenging conventional norms and expanding the possibilities of what work can look like. At the same time, the destandardization of work has created a more inclusive landscape, where neurodivergent individuals can thrive by leveraging their strengths and finding communities that value their contributions. The gig economy and social media-based work are not without challenges. Neurodivergent individuals may face issues such as inconsistent income, algorithmic suppression, and the pressure to constantly produce content (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019). Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to ethical platform design, equitable

access to resources, and policies that support the financial and creative autonomy of neurodivergent creators. As social media continues to reshape the world of work, it is essential to recognize and address the unique needs of neurodivergent individuals. By fostering inclusive and equitable online spaces, we can ensure that neurodivergent creators not only survive but thrive in the digital economy. This requires a cultural shift toward valuing diverse perspectives, redefining productivity, and creating opportunities for meaningful participation in the workforce.

Content Creator

Social media content creation has emerged as a viable career path for individuals seeking autonomy, creativity, and flexible work environments. Content creators engage in various forms of digital production, including video creation, blogging, podcasting, and visual media, often leveraging social media platforms to build audiences and monetize their work. This career pathway has transformed hobbies into lucrative professions, challenging traditional notions of work and productivity (Marwick, 2015, p. 139). The democratization of content creation has played a crucial role in expanding career opportunities. Social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram provide individuals with tools for self-promotion, audience building, and monetization, allowing creators to turn their personal brands into sustainable businesses (Abidin, 2016, p. 87). Revenue streams for digital media creators include advertising, sponsorships, merchandise sales, and crowdfunding, though success often depends on audience engagement and adaptability to platform algorithms (Duffy, 2017, p. 10).

For neurodivergent individuals, content creation presents an opportunity to showcase talents, build communities, and generate income in ways that traditional workplaces often fail to accommodate (Strang et al., 2020, p. 412). Many neurodivergent creators use social media to share personal experiences, advocate for disability rights, and educate audiences about

neurodiversity, fostering a sense of belonging and validation (Davidson & Slegers, 2019, p. 110). This alternative employment model is particularly appealing as it allows individuals to work at their own pace, structure their environment to accommodate sensory needs, and engage with audiences in ways that feel comfortable. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift toward digital careers, increasing the popularity and viability of social media-based work. Lockdowns and remote work drove people to spend more time online, leading to a surge in digital content consumption and content creator opportunities. During this period, many individuals—including neurodivergent professionals who struggled with traditional employment structures—discovered content creation as a sustainable alternative (Strang et al., 2020, p. 412).

Click below to engage with the media:

[*Tips to be a Successful Content Creator in 2025*](#)

Divergent Lifestyles and Vice: Lived Experience on Social Media

Non-traditional careers: sex-work

View the media below:

[*The Sunny Collection*](#)

Neurodivergent adults often feel unable to function in social situations and work or getting burnt out from masking their neurodivergence so hard to actually get it done. This can lead neurodivergent adults, like myself, to more unconventional lifestyles. As a neurodivergent adult, I've often found myself unable to function effectively in traditional social or workplace settings. The relentless effort of masking my neurodivergent traits to conform to neurotypical expectations has led to burnout and a search for alternative ways to navigate life. This struggle has drawn me—and many others like me—toward what I call the “vice category”: industries and lifestyles that are often stigmatized or considered taboo, or in terms of social media, routine violators of community guidelines, such as sex work, cannabis use, and tattooing. These areas, which frequently violate mainstream social norms and community guidelines on digital

platforms, have become spaces where neurodivergent individuals like myself find both community and economic opportunity. Throughout my participation in online communities under the pseudonym Tequila Mockingbird, I've noticed that my social media algorithms consistently connect me with other neurodivergent individuals who share my special interests (define: neurodivergent special interests). One of the observations I have made engaging in online communities as Tequila Mockingbird for nearly the last four years is that these communities often overlap with those engaged in sex work, cannabis culture, and tattooing. What these areas share is their divergence from mainstream societal norms, making them particularly appealing to neurodivergent individuals who may feel alienated from traditional career paths and social structures. As Foucault (1977) describes in his concept of the panopticon, power structures rely on surveillance and control to maintain authority, and these alternative spaces offer a form of resistance to that control.

In the context of this discussion, sex work is defined as the exchange of sexual services, performances, or content for financial compensation, often facilitated through digital platforms. This includes but is not limited to activities such as content creation, producing and selling sexually explicit photos, videos, or live streams on platforms like OnlyFans, ManyVids, or Patreon; camming, engaging in live, interactive sexual performances via webcam on sites such as Chaturbate or MyFreeCams; escort services, providing in-person companionship or sexual services, often arranged through online platforms or personal networks; phone sex or sexting, offering erotic conversations or text-based interactions for payment; and custom content: creating personalized sexual content tailored to the specific requests of clients. Sex work in this discussion is framed as a form of entrepreneurship, where individuals act as independent contractors managing their own businesses. This includes branding, marketing, client

communication, and financial management. In this discussion, sex work is also examined through the lens of power dynamics, particularly how digital platforms have shifted control from traditional, male-dominated industries to individual creators, challenging societal norms and disrupting traditional hierarchies. This shift has sparked both empowerment and backlash, reflecting broader cultural tensions around autonomy, labor, and morality. Neurodivergence into adulthood can lead to struggle and exhaustion function in neurotypical confines. The digitalization of sex work, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has allowed for greater autonomy and flexibility, making it an appealing option for neurodivergent individuals who may struggle with the rigid structures of traditional employment. However, sex work remains highly stigmatized and is often subject to moral and legal scrutiny. Despite this, it is recognized here as a legitimate and skilled profession that requires creativity, business acumen, and emotional labor. For neurodivergent individuals, sex work can provide a unique opportunity to leverage their strengths—such as creativity, adaptability, and the ability to work independently—while navigating a world that often marginalizes them.

The irony of sex work, often referred to as “the oldest profession,” is that it has paradoxically become a pioneer in the digital revolution, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic forced many industries to adapt to remote work, and sex work was no exception. Platforms like OnlyFans experienced a seismic surge in popularity, providing sex workers with new avenues to generate income from home (Lippmann et al., 2022). This shift was particularly significant for me and other neurodivergent individuals, who often struggle with the sensory and social demands of traditional workplaces. The autonomy and flexibility offered by digital sex work allowed many of us to thrive in ways that conventional employment did not. Sex-workers I have met in my journey as Tequila Mockingbird have shared so graciously with

me about the inner workings of their career. The women I spoke with truly entrepreneurs. They run online businesses, produce content, collaborate with others, schedule and manage virtual and in person events, build a brand, and so much more. It's underrated how much work goes into being a successful online sex-worker. The pandemic illuminated the function of these sex driven digital social platforms.

This shift also highlighted the pervasive stigma surrounding sex work. Despite being the primary consumers of adult content, cisgender heterosexual men often lead the backlash against sex workers, particularly those who achieve financial success through platforms like OnlyFans. This paradox underscores the power dynamics at play: while sex workers gain agency over their labor and income, they are simultaneously shamed for their success, reflecting broader societal discomfort with women's economic independence (Duffy & Hund, 2019). The pandemic revealed that sex work is not only a viable career path but also a form of entrepreneurship, requiring skills in content creation, branding, and digital marketing—skills that many neurodivergent individuals, myself included, excel at when given the opportunity. It's underrated how much work goes into being a successful online sex-worker. The pandemic illuminated the function of these sex driven digital social platforms. Traditionally, avenues for distribution of adult content were facilitated by a larger production entity – often run by men, as is most industry and business of today. Sites such as OnlyFans, although they take a hefty percentage for themselves, provide agency for the creator over their interactions with fans and dissemination of content. Additionally, the seismic boom of popularity during the pandemic generated a lot of wealth for some creators (Lippmann et al., 2022). Because the perceived value of the sex-worker themselves is low in mainstream society, the narrative of critique is that they are undeserving of

riches for their labor, many often saying that sexworkers get rich off doing nothing, which is contradictory to the reality.

Tattooing

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[Full Interview with Neurodivergent Tattoo Artist - Daz Leone](#)

[Selected Shorts from Interview with Daz Leone](#)

Tattooing, another area often associated with alternative lifestyles, has also become a significant creative outlet for me and other neurodivergent individuals. The tactile and artistic nature of tattooing aligns with my sensory preferences and creative strengths, providing a structured yet flexible environment that allows for both autonomy and self-expression. For many neurodivergent individuals, traditional workplaces can be stifling due to rigid schedules, sensory overload, and social expectations (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). In contrast, tattooing offers a career path that prioritizes creative autonomy, self-direction, and the ability to cultivate a client base that respects individual working styles. Beyond personal artistic fulfillment, tattooing is a profession that allows neurodivergent individuals to develop technical skills, build independent businesses, and create meaningful connections with clients. Research suggests that careers centered around artistry and craftsmanship can be particularly beneficial for neurodivergent individuals, as they provide hands-on engagement and opportunities to work in controlled environments (Silberman, 2015). The repetitive motion of tattooing can have a calming, stimming-like effect for individuals who experience sensory-seeking behaviors, further reinforcing its appeal within neurodivergent communities (Davidson & Slegers, 2019).

The rise of social media has also played a pivotal role in transforming tattooing into a viable and highly visible career for neurodivergent artists. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow tattoo artists to showcase their work, build personal brands, and connect with clients in

ways that were not possible before the digital age (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). These online spaces provide an alternative to traditional networking methods, which may be difficult for neurodivergent individuals who struggle with in-person social interactions. The ability to curate and control digital presence has empowered many neurodivergent tattoo artists to gain recognition, expand their clientele, and find a sense of belonging within broader creative and alternative lifestyle communities. Tattooing is deeply embedded in alternative subcultures that value individualism, self-expression, and defiance of conventional norms. This aligns with the experiences of many neurodivergent individuals, who often feel alienated by mainstream societal expectations and find community in spaces that embrace divergence from the norm (McKay, 2021). In this way, tattooing is not only an art form and career path but also a cultural practice that allows neurodivergent individuals to forge meaningful identities outside of rigid societal structures.

Despite the myriad contemporary challenges, I've seen neurodivergent individuals continue to find ways to thrive in these alternative industries. The persistence of online communities centered around sex work, cannabis, and tattooing demonstrates the resilience and creativity of neurodivergent individuals in the face of systemic barriers. These industries, though stigmatized, offer valuable opportunities for self-expression, economic independence, and community-building. As a neurodivergent individual, I am at my best when I can express myself creatively, free from the rigid confines of traditional workplaces. The sensory and expressive nature of these industries aligns with my strengths, making them not only viable career paths but also spaces of empowerment and belonging. Having gathered all of this experiential knowledge of the social experience in these online communities, especially from those who use social media to support their career in one of the vice industries, it is important to see these as valid career

pathways – especially for neurodivergent adults. These are popular, financially viable, skills based trades that, although taboo and deviate from mainstream ideas of traditional upstanding citizenry, are absolutely worthy of consideration nonetheless. Neurodivergent people are at their best when they are able to express themselves creatively, without the rigid confines of the traditional workplace. We are also often very sensory in our reception and expression in the world, and I have found that neurodivergent adults cathect to many fields commonly found in what I affectionately call the “Vice Category”.

More Divergent Lifestyle Communities on Social Media

Cannabis use is another area where I’ve found both community and relief. Research has shown that neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with ADHD or autism, are more likely to use cannabis as a form of self-medication to manage symptoms such as anxiety, sensory overload, and executive dysfunction (Silva Junior et al., 2022). However, the legal and social stigma surrounding cannabis use creates barriers for neurodivergent individuals like me who rely on it as a form of self-medication to manage symptoms such as anxiety, sensory overload, and executive dysfunction (Silva Junior et al., 2022) for therapeutic purposes. On social media platforms, content related to cannabis is often heavily regulated, with users facing penalties such as shadowbanning or account suspension for violating community guidelines. For example, Instagram’s vague policies on “promoting unregulated goods” disproportionately affect cannabis users, forcing us to navigate opaque and inconsistent enforcement mechanisms (Petre et al., 2019). Cannabis use is still not federally legal, and many online platforms do not allow the promotion or use of cannabis products of any kind and in doing so, the user may receive a consequence for violating the community guidelines. For example, on TikTok, you cannot be seen visibly inhaling or exhaling smoke in a livestream, while on Instagram you are able to do

so, but if your posted content promotes cannabis in any way, their accounts are penalized.

Earlier, I discussed shadowbanning, and many content creators in the vice category experience this kind of algorithmic ostracization. Another example on Instagram is when you have had too many violations of the community guidelines, Instagram will tell you “Your account cannot be shown to non-followers”, meaning that their algorithm won’t show my content to anyone who doesn’t follow me. Or even worse, user accounts are deleted without warning for repeat “violations”.

Click below to engage with the media:

[*Strong Link Between Autism and Cannabis Use*](#)
[*Cannabis and Neurodivergence resources - Project Chronic, NAP \(Network of Applied Pharmacology\)*](#)
[*Creativity - Personal Reflection*](#)

Post-pandemic Digital Relationships: the good, the bad, and the ugly

Neurodivergence is a huge factor in our relationships both as adults and as children. These relationships can be difficult for neurodivergent individuals because of inherent differences in both expressive and receptive communication styles. (Rosqvist et. al., 2020). Consideration of the importance of relationships for a healthy and productive life is crucial when taking both a neurodivergent and neurotypical centered approach. By recognizing these differences in communication and allowing all learners to create, receive, and engage with the material in collaboration as practice for important skills they will need to navigate adulthood. Many neurodivergent adults report feelings of loneliness, isolation, and being misunderstood by their peers and colleagues – not to mention family. (Umagami, 2023). Often, those individuals are left to feel that they have done something wrong to not make friends, and there’s also the factor of Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria that plays a role. Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is a condition commonly associated with ADHD and neurodivergence, characterized by intense emotional responses to perceived rejection or criticism.

In digital spaces, RSD can be exacerbated by social media interactions, where engagement metrics, online discourse, and digital conflict can trigger heightened emotional responses. This section examines strategies for navigating digital relationships with emotional regulation and self-advocacy. Through metacognition on how social behaviors interplay with others and within structures and systems, individuals can begin to modify and mitigate behavior patterns that do not serve them, and help to recognize common challenges in relationships for many neurodivergent adults, who never got the chance to reflect on this as children or younger adults. Awareness of this can inform the design of formal curriculum to support students' growth in these areas. "The term rejection sensitivity dysphoria has been helpful in terms of framing. . . and has also helped me visualize the particular issue, and naming something helps you feel like you're in power and control of it" (Ginapp et. al., p. 12). This correlates to the ways in which the newly diagnosed neurodivergent has often perceived the journey of self-discovery as empowering. This indicates that overall awareness of neurodivergences and how they present is a beneficial experience for the individual.

Friendship

Neurodivergent individuals often experience friendships through unique social communication styles, which may differ from neurotypical expectations due to differences in sensory processing, executive function, and social interpretation (boyd, 2016). In traditional social environments, unspoken social rules, rapid conversational exchanges, and physical socialization can create barriers for neurodivergent individuals who may experience social exhaustion, sensory overload, or difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008). However, the asynchronous and structured nature of digital

interactions provides an alternative space where neurodivergent individuals can curate their engagement, manage social energy, and develop deep relationships.

Social media platforms facilitate affinity-based friendships, allowing neurodivergent individuals to connect with like-minded peers through shared interests, gaming communities, and creative collaborations. These digital spaces reflect participatory culture, where individuals engage in collaborative meaning-making, knowledge-sharing, and identity formation (Jenkins, 2009). Digital friendships are not simply substitutes for in-person relationships but primary sites of social development, shaping how individuals navigate both peer and professional relationships in adulthood (boyd, 2016). This aligns with research emphasizing that digital socialization provides an essential framework for understanding identity, intimacy, and peer dynamics (Pahl, 2000, as cited in boyd, 2016). boyd (2016) argues, social media plays a critical role in shaping adolescent and adult friendships, providing an essential space for social negotiation, identity formation, and emotional support. She notes that "given the prominence of social media in both contemporary teen and adult life, learning how to manage the unique affordances of networked sociality can help teens navigate future collegiate and professional spheres where mediated interactions are assumed" (boyd, 2016, p. 114). This suggests that social media literacy is an essential skill for developing and maintaining relationships across educational, personal, and professional contexts.

For neurodivergent individuals, online friendships are particularly valuable because they remove or reduce the physical and social barriers that may be present in in-person interactions (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008, p. 855). The ability to engage in asynchronous communication allows individuals to process social interactions at their own pace,

reducing the pressures of real-time engagement and increasing the sustainability of social connections (boyd, 2016, p. 91). Platforms such as Discord, Reddit, TikTok, and specialized neurodivergent affinity groups provide dedicated spaces where individuals can discuss experiences, exchange coping strategies, and find community validation.

Moreover, friendship structures in digital spaces are often more fluid, allowing for ongoing connections that do not require immediate, continuous engagement. As boyd (2007) explains, "by providing tools for mediated interactions, social media allow teens to extend their interactions beyond physical boundaries. Conversations and interactions that begin in person do not end when friends are separated" (p. 80). This blurring of physical and digital friendships is particularly significant for neurodivergent individuals, who may struggle with traditional forms of socialization but thrive in structured, interest-driven digital spaces. However, while digital friendships offer flexibility, accessibility, and inclusion, they are also subject to social pressures, status negotiations, and potential relational conflicts. As boyd (2007) notes, "teens have flocked to social media because they represent an arena to play out these means of status negotiations even when they are away from the schoolyard" (p. 84). This suggests that the same social hierarchies that exist in physical spaces may be replicated in digital environments, sometimes leading to exclusion, miscommunication, or relational strain.

Toxic Relationships

Despite the benefits of digital friendships, social media also magnifies existing societal tensions, leading to toxic interactions, miscommunication, and online conflict. The phenomenon of context collapse, as discussed by boyd (2024) and Brandtzaeg & Lüders (2018), describes how varied audiences merge into the same digital space, often leading to misunderstandings and

negative interactions. This can be particularly detrimental for neurodivergent individuals, who may struggle with the nuances of shifting social expectations, digital etiquette, and audience perception. Context collapse occurs when a piece of information intended for a specific audience reaches unintended viewers, leading to misinterpretation and negative responses (Brandtzaeg & Lüdgers, 2018, p. 2). For example, a neurodivergent content creator discussing sensory processing difficulties in a niche online community may suddenly face public scrutiny or backlash if their post gains broader visibility beyond its intended audience. Similarly, neurodivergent communication styles—such as directness, literal thinking, or atypical expressions of humor—may be misread by neurotypical audiences, resulting in social exclusion, cyberbullying, or digital harassment.

boyd (2024) emphasizes that "the internet mirrors and magnifies the good, bad, and ugly. This includes bullying and harassment, but it also includes racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, and anti-trans attitudes." This suggests that online interactions are not inherently equitable or safe spaces, particularly for marginalized individuals, including neurodivergent users. Digital platforms, while facilitating connection, also reproduce broader systemic inequalities, shaping who is heard, who is amplified, and who is silenced. Moreover, the algorithmic structures of social media platforms often reward controversy, conflict, and high engagement, unintentionally amplifying toxic behaviors. Misinformation, misrepresentation, and digital dogpiling can escalate tensions, making it difficult for neurodivergent individuals to navigate relational complexities online. As boyd (2007) explains, "by facing decisions about how to circumscribe their Friends lists, teens are forced to consider their relationships, the dynamics of their peer group, and the ways in which their decisions may affect others" (p. 100). This suggests that managing digital relationships requires significant social navigation skills, which

may be particularly challenging for those who struggle with implicit social rules or digital communication norms. Despite these challenges, neurodivergent individuals continue to find creative ways to build and sustain meaningful digital friendships. Strategies such as curating safe online spaces, engaging in affinity-based communities, and leveraging content moderation tools help mitigate the risks of toxic interactions while maximizing the benefits of digital connection. Educational frameworks and digital literacy programs must integrate social media navigation skills to help neurodivergent individuals build online relationships while protecting themselves from algorithmic biases, context collapse, and digital harm.

View the media and project below:

[*"Feed the Algorithm": Toxic Culture on Social Media*](#)
[*Social Media Issue Project*](#)

Intimacy

Intimacy is a deeply personal experience, shaped by communication styles, sensory preferences, and societal norms. For neurodivergent individuals, traditional models of intimacy may not always align with their needs, leading to the development of alternative relationship structures and social interactions that emphasize direct communication, sensory accommodations, and digital engagement (Pascoe, 2013). Social media provides an important space where neurodivergent individuals can explore intimacy on their own terms, allowing them to navigate romantic and platonic relationships in ways that prioritize comfort, trust, and self-expression (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). As Wong and Mingus (2021) discuss in their work on disability intimacy, neurodivergent individuals may engage in intimacy through nontraditional modes, such as text-based emotional exchanges, parallel play, or creative collaboration. These forms of intimacy are often more accessible than traditional face-to-face interactions, as they allow individuals to control sensory input, manage their social energy, and communicate at a

pace that suits their needs (Uhls et al., 2017). This aligns with Pascoe's (2011) argument that social media has fundamentally reshaped intimacy norms, offering new ways to build and sustain relationships in the digital age.

The ability to engage in asynchronous communication through social media helps neurodivergent individuals develop and maintain meaningful connections while avoiding the stressors of in-person interactions. As Pascoe (2011) explains, "using social media, contemporary teens continue to craft and reshape dating and romance norms and rituals that are now deeply tied to the development of new media literacies" (p. 114). This shift is particularly beneficial for neurodivergent individuals, who may experience difficulties with real-time socialization or struggle with the unspoken social rules of traditional dating and friendship structures (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). The participatory nature of social media allows for the formation of intimate online communities where individuals can connect with like-minded peers, explore their identities, and receive emotional support without the pressures of physical social spaces (boyd, 2016). As Mazurek (2013) notes, "like the adolescents described by Pascoe (2011), neurodivergent adults often use social media to create private spheres for intimacy, where they can engage in romantic and platonic relationships without the sensory and social demands of in-person interactions" (p. 1702). These private spheres provide a safe and structured space where individuals can cultivate intimacy in a way that aligns with their cognitive and emotional needs.

In addition to fostering romantic and platonic intimacy, social media plays a significant role in sexual identity development and exploration. Online platforms provide a space where individuals can explore, express, and discuss their sexual identities in ways that may not be possible in offline environments (Van Oosten et al., 2017). For neurodivergent individuals, social

media offers a controlled and low-pressure setting where they can engage in self-discovery, self-advocacy, and community building around sexuality (Strang et al., 2020). Research has shown that neurodivergent individuals are more likely to embrace nontraditional sexual identities, such as asexuality, polyamory, and queer identities, reflecting a broader acceptance of diverse forms of intimacy (Dewinter et al., 2017). As Shuttleworth and Mona (2016) argue, "neurodivergent individuals challenge traditional notions of sexuality, offering new perspectives on intimacy, desire, and relationships that can enrich our understanding of human sexuality" (p. 47). This is particularly evident in online communities, where individuals share personal experiences, exchange information, and challenge societal expectations surrounding relationships and sexual norms.

Heightened sensory experiences, which are common among neurodivergent individuals, can play a significant role in shaping sexual expression and intimate relationships. Byers et al. (2013) note that "the heightened sensory experiences common among neurodivergent individuals can enhance their sexual expression, allowing them to experience intimacy in deeply personal and meaningful ways" (p. 222). This suggests that neurodivergent perspectives on intimacy may offer unique insights into how individuals experience pleasure, connection, and emotional closeness. However, while digital spaces offer opportunities for sexual exploration and community support, they also present challenges related to safety, boundary-setting, and consent. Neurodivergent individuals may be at increased risk of exploitation and misunderstanding, particularly if they struggle with interpreting social cues, asserting boundaries, or recognizing predatory behavior (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014). Therefore, tailored education and resources are essential for helping neurodivergent individuals navigate sexual health, relationship dynamics, and online safety (Hannah & Stagg, 2016).

One of the most significant aspects of neurodivergent intimacy is the emphasis on direct, honest, and unfiltered communication. Neurodivergent individuals often prioritize clear and explicit communication in relationships, which can lead to more equitable and fulfilling partnerships (Sala et al., 2020). Unlike neurotypical social norms, which often rely on implicit social cues, nonverbal communication, and emotional guessing, neurodivergent communication is often straightforward, logical, and focused on mutual understanding (Hénault, 2006). Social media has further normalized and reinforced these communication styles, providing text-based, structured, and customizable modes of interaction that align with neurodivergent preferences (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). The ability to craft messages, edit responses, and engage at one's own pace reduces the pressure of real-time socialization, allowing individuals to maintain meaningful connections without experiencing sensory overload or social fatigue. Neurodivergent individuals often challenge traditional relationship structures, embracing platonic intimacy, parallel play, and creative collaboration as valid and fulfilling forms of connection (Pascoe, 2011). These alternative models of intimacy highlight the diverse ways in which individuals can experience love, trust, and companionship, moving beyond the rigid definitions often imposed by mainstream relationship norms (Shuttleworth & Mona, 2016). Neurodivergent experiences of intimacy often diverge from neurotypical norms, encompassing sensory sensitivities, direct communication preferences, and alternative relationship structures (Pascoe, 2013). Alice Wong and Mia Mingus (2021) discuss the concept of disability intimacy, emphasizing that neurodivergent individuals may engage in intimacy through nontraditional modes, such as text-based emotional sharing, parallel play, or creative collaboration. The digital landscape provides alternative pathways to intimacy, where neurodivergent individuals can build trust and emotional connections without the constraints of traditional social norms. This aligns with

broader discussions of formation, where self-expression is fluid, adaptable, and shaped by participatory learning environments.

[Love on the Brain](#)

[Alice Wong and Mia Mingus: On Disability Intimacy](#)

I. Curriculum for Cultural Responsiveness & Identity Affirmation

Hip-Hop-Based Education as a Transformative, Identity Affirming Framework

Click below to view the media:

[Hip-Hop Based Education - Dr. Bettina Love and Serius Jones](#)

The post-pandemic digital landscape has fundamentally altered how individuals interact, learn, and construct knowledge. For neurodivergent learners, these shifts are particularly transformative, offering opportunities for self-determined learning, multimodal engagement, and participatory knowledge-sharing that traditional educational models often fail to provide. In this evolving paradigm, Hip-Hop-Based Education (HHBE) emerges as a culturally sustaining and pedagogically flexible framework, aligning with the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009), and connected learning (boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2013). By embedding music, storytelling, and digital media into education, HHBE provides a critical literacy framework that meets students where they are—both culturally and cognitively.

The post-pandemic era has necessitated a shift toward digital tools, social media platforms, and participatory knowledge-making, calling for educational models that prioritize multimodal engagement and student agency. Henry Jenkins (2009) emphasizes that participatory culture encourages learners to not only consume media but also create, remix, and interact with it—a process that mirrors the foundational principles of HHBE. Dr. Bettina Love (2014) similarly argues that hip-hop serves as a site of identity formation and meaning-making, where young people develop critical consciousness by engaging with their social realities through art, storytelling, and digital expression. She states, “For urban youth, hip-hop is where they find their

voice to participate and challenge injustice within our democratic society” (p. 54). This emphasis on critical literacy and multimodal engagement makes HHBE particularly relevant in digital learning spaces, where knowledge is increasingly constructed through remixing, collaboration, and interactive storytelling. HHBE’s alignment with digital affinity spaces and neurodivergent online communities further underscores its potential as a transformative educational model. As Love (2015) notes, HHBE is not merely about using hip-hop to engage students; it is about leveraging hip-hop’s epistemological roots—its ability to challenge dominant narratives, provide counter-storytelling, and foster critical resistance—as a pedagogical tool. Love argues that HHBE “has resulted in many positive educational outcomes, ranging from teaching academic skills to teaching critical reflection at secondary levels” (p. 109). These outcomes are particularly significant in a post-pandemic world, where digital engagement has become a necessity rather than an alternative.

The urgency of HHBE is underscored by the structural violence embedded in traditional schooling systems, particularly for Black and Brown students. Love (2016) introduces the concept of spirit murdering, defining it as “the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism” (p. 3). This institutionalized harm is exacerbated by deficit-based curricula, exclusionary disciplinary policies, and a lack of culturally relevant pedagogy—factors that disproportionately impact neurodivergent and marginalized students. Freire (1970) reminds us that education should be a practice of liberation, where students develop the tools to critique and resist oppressive systems. HHBE provides a radical alternative to the banking model of education, emphasizing active creation, disruption, and self-determination over passive absorption. Through digital storytelling, participatory media, and hip-hop pedagogy, students engage in knowledge production that

affirms their experiences rather than erases them. The incorporation of lyrical analysis, beat-making, and digital media production into curricular design fosters self-directed learning and social critique, making education more inclusive, affirming, and intellectually rigorous. For neurodivergent learners, the intersection of hip-hop, digital storytelling, and participatory knowledge-making offers a cognitively accessible and socially engaging model of education. Many neurodivergent individuals are drawn to hip-hop's patterned linguistic structures, layered storytelling, and rhythmic complexity, making it an intuitive and engaging pedagogical tool.

Hip-Hop and Social Media: A Space for Neurodivergent Knowledge-Making

The collaborative and remixable nature of hip-hop culture aligns with the ways neurodivergent individuals often process and construct knowledge—through deep-dive research, nonlinear exploration, and interactive engagement. This is particularly evident in social media discourse, where hip-hop serves as a site of cultural production and digital activism. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter have become spaces where hip-hop analysis, remix culture, and counter-storytelling thrive, allowing for interactive and multimodal knowledge-making (boyd, 2014). Love (2016) asserts that hip-hop pedagogy fosters “humanizing, critical, and creative pedagogical (re)interventions” that empower students to reclaim their narratives and resist systemic erasure (p. 12). In a digital learning context, this means that students can leverage social media platforms, video essays, and collaborative music production as part of their educational process—practices that are particularly beneficial for neurodivergent thinkers who thrive in dynamic, self-paced, and multimodal environments. By integrating digital multimodal engagement strategies, HHBE provides a culturally responsive, neurodivergent-affirming curricular framework that challenges traditional deficit-based models of education. This approach:

- I. Expands knowledge-making by allowing students to create, remix, and distribute their own narratives through hip-hop storytelling and digital media production.
- II. Centers student agency by validating the cultural knowledge and lived experiences of marginalized learners.
- III. Supports neurodivergent cognition by embracing multimodal expression, rhythmic patterning, and nonlinear engagement with content.
- IV. Connects learning to social justice by using hip-hop's history of resistance to foster critical consciousness and systemic critique.

As traditional education continues to struggle with engagement, accessibility, and cultural relevance, HHBE provides a viable, dynamic, and socially conscious alternative—one that meets the evolving needs of learners in an increasingly digital and multimodal world.

Multimodal Storytelling for Discourse: Designing Content for Delivery

Multimodal storytelling is a cognitively and emotionally rich learning tool that fosters deeper engagement by activating multiple sensory pathways, allowing learners to make connections beyond a singular modality. This aligns with UDL principles (CAST, 2018), ensuring multiple means of engagement, representation, and action. Through visual, auditory, and textual elements, multimodal storytelling not only enhances comprehension but also bridges the gap between classroom learning and real-world cultural practices. In contemporary digital spaces, multimodal storytelling is a dominant form of communication, particularly on social media platforms through the use of reels, TikTok videos, and short-form storytelling. These interactive, participatory narratives (Jenkins, 2009) allow consumers to engage with cultural content in dynamic and personally relevant ways. By integrating multimodal storytelling into

academic discourse, students learn to critically analyze media, develop digital literacy, and enhance their ability to construct meaning from complex cultural texts.

Hip-Hop Based Education Sample Lessons and Activities

One recent, high-profile example of multimodal storytelling's social and cultural impact was the 2025 Super Bowl Halftime Show, headlined by Kendrick Lamar. As an artist whose work is deeply rooted in narrative-driven social critique, Lamar's performance was not only a musical showcase but also a cultural commentary. According to Billboard (2025), Lamar's performance is now the most-watched Super Bowl Halftime Show in history, drawing 133.5 million viewers—surpassing the viewership of the game itself. This highlights the widespread engagement with multimodal storytelling on a national and global scale, making it an ideal entry point for critical media analysis in education.

Lamar's ability to blend personal narrative with broader socio-political themes has long been recognized as a hallmark of his storytelling. In his review of DAMN., Matthew Trammell (2017) highlights that Lamar's storytelling is his most powerful artistic tool, enabling him to “articulate, in human terms, the intimate specifics of daily self-defense from [his] surroundings.” His halftime performance followed this same pattern, using symbolism, visual aesthetics, and lyrical composition to craft a layered message accessible to both casual viewers and those attuned to deeper cultural critiques. Kendrick Lamar himself reinforced this intent when interviewed about his Super Bowl performance, stating: “Storytelling. I’ve always been very open about storytelling through all my catalog and my history of music. And I’ve always had a passion about bringing that on whatever stage I’m on” (Billboard, 2025). His emphasis on storytelling as the foundation of his artistry reinforces the importance of analyzing his work not

simply as entertainment, but as a form of discourse that shapes public consciousness and dialogue.

Incorporating culturally relevant multimodal texts such as Lamar’s performance into curriculum aligns with Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2018) by validating students’ lived experiences and prior knowledge. The CASEL competencies support this approach by emphasizing self-awareness, critical thinking, and social responsibility—all of which are developed when students critically engage with contemporary cultural texts. The adaptability of multimodal storytelling makes it accessible across a wide range of learners. While Lamar’s subject matter may be complex, his performance at the Super Bowl—a mainstream, nationally televised event—demonstrates its accessibility to audiences of all ages. Providing students with a structured analytical approach to something they are already exposed to through digital culture creates meaningful learning opportunities, rather than dismissing culturally relevant content as “inappropriate” for school settings. This approach mirrors Freire’s (1970) concept of critical consciousness, wherein students are empowered to question, interpret, and critique dominant narratives rather than passively consume them. Moreover, by integrating participatory culture theory (Jenkins, 2009), students engage in media remixing, social analysis, and digital literacy, reinforcing critical thinking and multimodal expression.

Click below to engage with the media:

[Kendrick Lamar Interview Prior to Super Bowl Performance](#)

[Kendrick Lamar Super Bowl Halftime Show](#)

[Breakdown of Symbolism in Kendrick Lamar Halftime Show](#)

- [The Root](#)

- [BlackySpeaks Breakdown](#)

Integrating HHBE into Multimodal Curriculum Design

Multimodal storytelling, as demonstrated in these lessons, transcend age groups and academic levels. The ubiquitous nature of incorporating the arts outside of the formal school

setting demonstrates the flexibility of culturally responsive multimodal frameworks. The same principle applies to analyzing Lamar’s halftime performance—while older students can explore its socio-political critique, younger students can engage in visual and lyrical analysis that aligns with their cognitive development. If an artist who has won a Pulitzer Prize for Music (2018), five Grammy Awards (2025), and headlined the most-watched concert in America in the same week is worthy of national cultural recognition, then his work is also worthy of critical engagement in the classroom. Ignoring widely consumed cultural texts in educational settings only limits students’ ability to construct meaning from the media they encounter daily. By integrating multimodal storytelling into curriculum design, educators create a bridge between academic learning and lived experience, fostering critical consciousness, digital literacy, and culturally responsive engagement. Below are stand alone activities designed for first year college students that align with the frameworks discussed in this integrative project.

- [*Hook Activity: Childish Gambino*](#)
- [*Interrogating Hip-Hop Vocabulary – A Conversation*](#)
- [*HHBE CCLS Aligned Media Project*](#)

Exploring Identity: The Self and Others

This curriculum seeks to equip late term high school students with the skills and tools necessary for them to contribute to positive peace (Galtung, 2001) in their immediate environments, and open pathways for them to continue this peace work as they engage with wider spheres of influence. The curriculum is set up as an iterative growth process where students identify themselves, learn how they and their peers project or share their identities, and then bring these understandings together to situate their identities within larger systems, and identify how they can use these understandings to become participatory members of their environments.

The culminating goal of the curriculum is for students to build an identity portfolio that discovers and maps their individual identities with those of their peers, and situates these identities within larger systems to pinpoint factors of conflict, and strategies for addressing these. This portfolio will demonstrate students' understanding of the intersectional aspects of identities, use of empathy in communicating and representing ourselves and each other, and the skills they have developed to productively and peacefully negotiate conflict within these systems. Formative and summative assessments are focused on conceptual understanding, synthesis, and sharing, and students are encouraged to share using formats and approaches that are meaningful and useful to them throughout the units. Activities and assessments build on each other, presenting digestible disparate pieces of information, encouraging students to think about how what they have already learned interacts with new concepts they learn at each stage. Throughout the curriculum, students' activities and assessments will evolve from demonstrating and assessing understandings of personal awareness to social awareness, and students will be required to understand and leverage participatory culture practices in their activities, particularly as they interact with social media and outward expression, and then collaborate with their classmates to identify systems in conflict and associated peacebuilding activities. By the end of the curriculum, students will demonstrate how they situate their understandings of self within social and pluriversal structures.

By the end of Unit 1, students will work with teachers to create SMART goals for the year and then will relate their assignments and final portfolio to these goals. Students are expected to demonstrate emerging mastery of many of these concepts throughout the curriculum and demonstrate how these will contribute to lifelong goals of self- and social-discovery and peacebuilding. Understanding our identities and finding common ground to build empowering

communities is a lifelong activity, so this curriculum serves as the foundation, not the finish line, for students.

The core concepts developed within the curriculum are as follows:

- **Identity**, including perceptions of the self and others
 - Qualities, beliefs and traits associated with individuals or communities of people
- **Participation & Expression**
 - Taking part in collaborative activities with shared goals, and the ways or dimensions of making oneself known to and interacting with others
- **Intersectionality**
 - The idea that our varied identities result in unique combinations of discrimination and privilege.
- **Systems**
 - Groups of interlinking factors that come together to create a whole, that is defined by its environment and boundaries.
- **Conflict & Conflict Resolution**
 - A struggle or clash of interests between people, groups, systems or other demarcations. Conflict resolution is the act of negotiation between conflicting parties to bring an acceptable end to a conflict.

As students acquire these understandings through the content and activities of the curriculum, they will build skills that will help them activate these understandings. These skills include methods of self-discovery, expression and communication, critical thinking, empathic and active listening, and participatory approaches to conflict identification and resolution. Core understandings and associated skills are clearly identified throughout the curriculum, with further definition and description of specific skills being targeted through the contained activities.

Students will be assessed throughout the curriculum, to ensure they understand core concepts and are able to actively use these concepts in their explorations of self and their communities. Assessments are done throughout the entire curriculum using a single rubric. The

overarching rubric contains 10 different domain criteria. No single assignment is meant to encompass all at once, but by the end of the course, students will have a comprehensive portfolio of work demonstrating proficiency in all areas of the larger rubric. For each item in the portfolio, as well as a series of self reflections, a student is formally and informally assessed on specific rubric domains. These are introduced at the outset of the activity, as well as provided in student friendly language.

Many of the assessments within the portfolio are artifacts, which combined will make up the final portfolio for their full curriculum summative assessment. At the end of the curriculum, students will present their portfolio of artifacts, which will demonstrate how they have explored understandings of their own identities, developed skills in sharing these identities publicly, and then worked together to leverage their personal identities to build personal and group stories situated within the systems and conflicts they experience in their lives. This format allows for authentic assessment of what students have learned, and invites them to continue to participate in the activity of self- and community-exploration.

The content and process of this curriculum are inextricably linked. As much as students will need to develop core understandings (content), what's more important is the process of synthesizing previously gained understandings with new ones, and leveraging these understandings to direct specific actions related to self- and social-awareness, critical consciousness, participatory culture, and peacebuilding. The curriculum material, therefore, is presented thematically rather than chronologically, and students are expected to incorporate previous understandings as they undertake new assessments and build their portfolio. When structured this way, a more generalized skeleton of focused skills and goals (critical thinking, lifelong learning through a sensory process, and applied peacebuilding) can be used as a

foundation for which to overlay the more specific units and content. Assessments should not only be demonstrations of mastery of skills but also as a meta-cognition of the learning process throughout. Discourse should be constant throughout units, allowing students to digest new material and examine their changing relationship with their process and product. Check in's and self-assessments should be frequent in the creation of curricular materials for this vision, and students should be able to explicitly understand and share how their perceptions of self, others, and systems change throughout the curriculum. A student's understanding of self, for example, should be much different in the assessment at the end of Unit 1 than it is in the assessment at the end of Unit 3. The summative assessment is a comprehensive learning portfolio, providing students with an opportunity for reflective self-exploration and interactions with their peers, community, and larger contexts. This curated collection of artifacts, reflections, and insights serves as a tangible representation of the student's growth with regards to self and social awareness, and application of curriculum principles.

These curriculum tools and activities are culturally responsive in form and content, and assesses students on identity development, knowledge of self, cultural knowledge, and confrontations with internalized and externalized conflicts. Students are empowered to choose the form and format of the artifacts, reflections, and insights they include in their portfolio, so that they determine the best way for them to communicate their learnings with their classmates, teacher, family, and community, and to make sure that they are assessed on what they have learned, and not their skill in a particular type of assessment or productive format. This format also allows students to engage with the types of conflicts and oppressive systems they are implicated in or experience in a way that is sensible to them, and that they feel is productive.

This curriculum embraces the power of authentic assessments, which are those that reflect “real life” tasks that are both meaningful and relevant to students; they are student-centered, activity-based, and product oriented (Valle, 2019). Students are tasked with engaging in real world (including virtual) concepts and skills that will transfer far beyond the classroom. They are provided with tools and resources to navigate the complexities of interpersonal relationships and systemic factors of identity to better understand the role they play in their own lives and the power they have in participating/inspiring others to engage. Students will work together to address an audience of their peers and (virtual) communities at large in this unit and their assessments. This curriculum and assessments are designed to bring purpose, meaning, and criticality to abstract and challenging scenarios that exist in the world today. Each assessment has an opportunity to be personalized, with scaffolded supports and extension activities available to students who may need them.

Participatory Culture underpins both formative and summative assessments in Exploring Identity: The Self and Others. While the curriculum acknowledges that context for learning can exist anywhere, it also recognizes the constraints imposed by structures and systems. Students, therefore, play a crucial role not only in their personal learning but in challenging and reshaping these structures through participatory engagement, evaluating themselves before and after learning. Since identity exploration is a profound personal journey, a portfolio assessment is the most suitable assessment for this curriculum because it puts students at the center of the process where they can select work they feel represents them. They are highly individualized and can be customized to the needs and ability levels of any student (Valle, 2019). Portfolios should be seen not only as a collection of student work but also as an opportunity for students to reflect upon and discuss the progress of their efforts, orally and/or in writing. Various forms of assessments

are incorporated from which students are able to choose from based on their multiple intelligences and learning styles. In many ways, multiple intelligence is linked to authentic assessment, as students have input into what they would like to produce, and in terms of abilities, have the opportunity to "play to their strengths" (Valle, 2019). Once students and teachers gain more insights on their individual learning profiles, students can be provided with a variety of ways that can be used to assess learning, for example, creating posters (visual/spatial), self-evaluate and monitor performance (intrapersonal), do a group/individual presentation (interpersonal & linguistic), work real-life logic problems (math); write and perform a dramatization (body/kinesthetic). Students can also decide how they want to present their work to peers, family, and other teachers.

As a result of applying this curricular vision, learners and educators will begin to adopt a pedagogy of pluralism, participation, empathy, critical consciousness, and conflict resolution both formally as explicit practice in curriculum and informally, in their behaviors and practices. They will begin to understand how educators are working within the guidelines presented to them to utilize a framework for thinking that can be applied anywhere. Through criticality and participatory and collaborative use of engagement, the informal lesson here is that these skills are valuable in all aspects of learning and participating in our world. By observing teachers grappling with these ideas and applying them to their own criteria, students will see how viewing social situations through an intersectional lens can be productive in all areas of life and work.

Curriculum materials below:

- [Curriculum Overview](#)
- [Content Organizer: a guide for teachers](#)
- [Unit Overview](#)
- [Rubrics](#)
- [Learning Experiences Bank](#)
- Assessment [Rationale](#) and [Portfolio](#)

- [Sample Lessons](#)

VI. Critical Analysis

Embedding these neurodivergent-centered strategies into curriculum may address deficits related to those areas in work life and relationships for neurodivergent adults and equip them with the coping and regulatory skills necessary for adulthood. Throughout this learning process, the participant is invited to metacognate on their own experiences to reflect on the questions ‘How do I interact with systems and people to present myself to the world, and understand the intersectional factors of how others are presenting themselves to me?’ and think about how those systems influence identities, including neurodivergent identities, and vice versa. This includes exploring factors of neurodivergent identity and the self and how tools of self-expression such as multimodal storytelling might be used to connect with others meaningfully and productively in society, and finally how to negotiate social aspects for productive participation.

Self advocacy

Self-advocacy is fundamental to neurodivergent empowerment, allowing individuals to articulate their needs, challenge misconceptions, and demand systemic change in environments that often fail to accommodate them (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). Social media platforms have become a crucial tool for neurodivergent individuals to amplify their voices, offering a space to educate others, combat stigma, and foster inclusive discourse (Strang et al., 2020). Through these digital spaces, neurodivergent self-advocacy movements engage in collective organizing, influencing policies in education, employment, and healthcare (Sala et al., 2020). The participatory nature of social media allows neurodivergent individuals to connect with like-minded peers, share lived experiences, and collectively advocate for structural changes (Mazurek et al., 2019). In many cases, self-advocacy within digital communities has driven

meaningful institutional shifts, such as increased accessibility accommodations in academic settings and workplace inclusion initiatives (Sala et al., 2020). By publicly sharing their experiences and engaging in discourse on platforms like TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube, neurodivergent individuals can debunk myths, normalize neurodivergent traits, and counteract harmful stereotypes (Davidson & Slegers, 2019).

As Freire's (2017) concept of critical pedagogy highlights, empowerment occurs through participatory engagement, which social media uniquely facilitates for neurodivergent communities. Through multimodal forms of communication—including text, video, memes, and infographics—neurodivergent individuals can advocate in ways that align with their cognitive strengths (Strang et al., 2020). This flexibility in communication supports greater self-awareness, confidence, and advocacy skills, helping individuals articulate their needs both in digital spaces and in broader institutional contexts (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). Beyond individual empowerment, self-advocacy in digital spaces plays a key role in reshaping societal systems and policies. Neurodivergent activists and content creators use social media to demand systemic reforms, including stronger accessibility policies, workplace accommodations, and neurodivergent-inclusive educational models (Sala et al., 2020). This aligns with broader movements that challenge ableist norms, calling for neurodiversity to be recognized as an identity rather than a disorder (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). One key aspect of this advocacy is combating the systemic exclusion of neurodivergent individuals in education and employment. Online movements have successfully raised awareness about discriminatory hiring practices, lack of workplace accommodations, and inflexible academic models (Sala et al., 2020). Social media platforms provide a direct line to policymakers, institutions, and employers, allowing neurodivergent voices to be heard in decision-making processes. Digital campaigns advocating

for universal design, alternative communication methods, and sensory-friendly work environments have gained traction, leading to concrete policy changes in both private and public sectors (Mazurek et al., 2019).

Neurodivergent activists use social media to hold institutions accountable, creating public discourse around ableism, discrimination, and exclusionary practices. Viral campaigns like #AutisticWhileBlack and #ADHDinWomen highlight intersectional experiences of neurodivergence, exposing racial, gender, and class-based disparities in diagnosis, treatment, and representation (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). By leveraging platform visibility, neurodivergent communities have successfully pressured corporations, universities, and government agencies to implement neurodiversity-focused policies and practices (Sala et al., 2020). Neurodivergent activism through social media reflects Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, which describes how digital platforms enable users to collaborate, share knowledge, and create cultural change (Jenkins et al., 2009). This participatory model shifts the focus from individual expression to collective action, reinforcing the idea that community-driven advocacy can challenge oppressive systems and promote inclusivity (Jenkins et al., 2009). As Jenkins et al. (2009) state, "Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement, where collective intelligence and shared knowledge become tools for advocacy and social change" (p. 5). This is evident in the ways neurodivergent individuals use social media to educate, mobilize, and influence public discourse. By creating viral threads, educational videos, and collaborative campaigns, they redefine public narratives about neurodivergence, pushing back against deficit-based models of disability (Davidson & Slegers, 2019).

Platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube have facilitated neurodivergent-led discussions on topics such as late diagnosis, masking, burnout, and sensory regulation, enabling individuals to find solidarity and validation through shared experiences (Strang et al., 2020). This digital landscape serves as a counterbalance to traditional institutions that have historically marginalized neurodivergent voices, allowing individuals to craft their own narratives and challenge dominant societal perceptions (Sala et al., 2020). In addition, the multimodal affordances of social media enhance neurodivergent accessibility in advocacy spaces, ensuring that individuals can engage in ways that align with their cognitive and sensory needs. Infographics, video captions, and alternative text options allow for greater inclusivity, making advocacy more accessible for those with diverse communication styles (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). By embracing participatory culture, neurodivergent individuals are not only advocating for policy changes but also reshaping social attitudes toward neurodiversity, creating more inclusive and representative narratives in digital and offline spaces (Sala et al., 2020).

Pathology and Stigma

The rise in neurodivergent diagnoses spurred the popularity of engagement on social media and establishment of the phenomenon of neurodivergent culture. This visibility has illuminated some of the inadequacies of traditional schooling. Formal education, as it once existed, may no longer meet the needs of our learners, especially the growing number of identified and unidentified neurodivergent learners. Many students who are diagnosed with some variant of neurodivergence are labeled and categorized for the purpose of special education, which may include stigma and [pathology](#) of that categorization, while many are also still undiagnosed but need accommodation to access the current general education curriculum. Often, it's really their presentation in response to 'the school' and 'the classroom' creating an

environment for them that does not inspire learning or meet their neurological, physical, social, or cognitive needs. While there are many issues of equity at play when it comes to institutional education and practices, this project addresses some of those needs as they currently exist and examines possible ameliorations or exacerbations of those issues as related to the neurodivergence and technology in teaching, learning and community building, such as the community and pride found in online neurodivergent social media spaces.

Historically, neurodivergence has been positioned within medicalized and pathologized discourses, framing differences in cognition as barriers to success rather than alternative ways of thinking and learning (Walker, 2021). This research builds on neurodiversity-affirming frameworks by challenging deficit-oriented models and proposing an asset-based approach that repositions neurodivergence as a cognitive and creative strength in learning environments. Instead of asking “How can neurodivergent learners adapt to traditional schooling?” This research shifts the question to: “How can curriculum adapt to honor the cognitive diversity of learners?” Neurodivergent individuals have already developed organic, self-directed learning strategies within digital spaces, demonstrating that interest-driven, participatory, and multimodal engagement are highly effective learning mechanisms. This study identifies ways to integrate these insights into formal curricula, ensuring that education is not only accessible but also engaging and empowering.

Click below to engage with the media:

[*Do I Have Adult ADHD?*](#)

[*Do I Have Adult Autism?*](#)

Positive Expression: The “Headcanon” Phenomenon

In online communities, particularly on platforms like Reddit, fans frequently engage in "headcanon" discussions, attributing neurodivergent traits to fictional characters. This practice

involves fans interpreting characters as exhibiting behaviors or characteristics associated with conditions such as autism or ADHD, even if these traits are not explicitly stated in the source material (Murray, 2020; Walker, 2021). Such interpretations allow fans to see themselves reflected in media, fostering a sense of inclusion and representation (Davidson & Orsini, 2013). Threads in subreddits such as r/Neurodiversity, r/AutisticPride, and r/FanTheories frequently discuss these headcanons, debating the accuracy and potential impact of attributing neurodivergence to fictional characters (Reddit, 2024).

However, this phenomenon has sparked debate within fan studies. Some scholars argue that while these interpretations can be empowering, they may also lead to the pathologization of characters, reducing complex personalities to a set of diagnostic criteria (Mills, 2022). This reductionist view can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes about neurodivergence, as characters are pigeonholed into specific behaviors that align with societal misconceptions (Rivers & Walker, 2020). Moreover, the act of diagnosing fictional characters can blur the line between appreciating diverse representations and imposing medical labels where they may not be appropriate (Rosqvist, Chown, & Stenning, 2020). This practice raises questions about the ethics of attributing medical conditions to characters without canonical evidence, potentially influencing public perceptions of neurodivergent individuals (Giles, 2021). Reddit discussions highlight this tension, with users debating whether such interpretations are a form of advocacy or an oversimplification of neurodivergent experiences (Reddit, 2024). Despite these concerns, the communal aspect of sharing headcanons contributes to a supportive environment where fans can explore and discuss neurodivergence openly. These discussions often lead to a deeper understanding of neurodivergent experiences, challenging traditional narratives and promoting inclusivity in media interpretations (Yergeau, 2018; Ortega, 2021). In summary, while attributing

neurodivergent traits to fictional characters can enhance representation and foster community among fans, it is essential to approach such interpretations thoughtfully. Balancing the desire for representation with the need to avoid reductive or pathologizing portrayals is crucial in promoting a nuanced understanding of neurodivergence in media (Kapp, 2020).

Click below to view the media:

[In the Comments](#)

[r/autism - Reddit Thread: Who are your favorite Autistic headcanons?](#)

Engagement with Systems

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered global systems, accelerating the transition to remote work, virtual education, and digital communication. Many of the temporary adaptations made during the pandemic have since become permanent shifts, reshaping how people learn, work, and socialize (Pew Research Center, 2020). Institutions and businesses adopted new digital technologies at an unprecedented pace, integrating remote collaboration tools, online learning platforms, and digital commerce into their long-term operational models. One of the most significant changes was the normalization of remote work, which demonstrated high productivity levels, reduced operational costs, and improved employee satisfaction (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Research shows that many organizations experienced increased efficiency during the pandemic, leading them to adopt permanent remote or hybrid work structures (Choudhury et al., 2021). Employees have also reported higher job satisfaction and work-life balance, leading to improved retention rates (Kniffin et al., 2021). This trend underscores the sustainability of remote work as an alternative to traditional in-office employment across industries (Barrero et al., 2021).

Beyond the workforce, the education system experienced a dramatic shift. With the temporary closure of schools and universities, online education became the primary mode of learning for millions of students worldwide. Virtual learning platforms expanded rapidly, with

institutions investing in digital tools, interactive learning models, and hybrid course offerings (Pew Research Center, 2020). While the demand for online education spiked in 2020, research suggests that it has yet to reach its peak, as students and educators continue to embrace flexible and accessible learning options (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). The widespread adoption of digital learning and remote work has also led to substantial cost savings for organizations. Companies have cut expenses related to office space, utilities, and commuting subsidies, further incentivizing long-term remote work policies (Gajendran & Harrison, 2021). Similarly, universities and training programs have recognized the financial benefits of delivering coursework online, reducing costs associated with physical infrastructure and administrative expenses (Barrero et al., 2021).

Social media emerged as a dominant space for social interaction and professional networking. With in-person gatherings limited, people turned to platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, and Discord to maintain relationships, build communities, and even develop careers (Choudhury et al., 2021). The use of content creation, livestreaming, and online forums expanded significantly, demonstrating the evolving role of social media in both personal and professional spheres (Kniffin et al., 2021). As the digital landscape continues to expand, these pandemic-driven changes have solidified remote and digital-first models as permanent features of modern society. The convergence of online work, education, and social networking has created a more interconnected and flexible world, one that continues to reshape traditional notions of labor, learning, and community engagement (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020).

Technological Advancements

The introduction of Artificial Intelligence, algorithmic coding for predicting human behavior, and the platforms that use them to network individuals are influential technologies for

human interaction, learning, and thinking. In essence, there are very few sectors of modern life in the United States and beyond that are not supported by these technologies – if not driven by them completely. While technology may be replacing activities once performed by people at a rapid rate, one critical element of society is still necessary: people seek out and form community groups. Whether it takes place virtually or face-to-face, human beings still crave social interactions, and lifelong learning often takes place in these spaces. Understanding the implications of how these algorithms are utilized, and what kind of influence they have over the general public may support teaching, learning, and community building with intentionality and criticality.

Social Media as an Untapped Learning Model

Education has historically viewed social media with skepticism, often labeling it as a distraction or a source of misinformation (Selwyn, 2021). However, this research contends that social media platforms hold untapped potential as models for innovative learning design—particularly for neurodivergent individuals who often face barriers in traditional, rigid educational systems. By examining the unique affordances of social media, educators can uncover strategies to create more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments.

Social media platforms excel at adaptive content personalization, using algorithms to tailor content based on user behavior, preferences, and engagement patterns (Boyd, 2014). Unlike traditional education, which relies on fixed curricula and uniform pacing, social media dynamically adjusts to individual needs, ensuring that users encounter content that resonates with their interests and learning styles. This approach aligns with the principles of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes tailoring teaching methods to meet diverse learner needs (Tomlinson, 2014). For neurodivergent students, who often require personalized approaches to

thrive, this model of adaptive learning can significantly enhance engagement and comprehension. Social media leverages multimodal storytelling, combining visual, auditory, and interactive elements to create immersive and engaging content. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok use videos, animations, and soundtracks to convey information in ways that are both accessible and compelling. Neuroscientific research supports the effectiveness of multisensory learning, demonstrating that engaging multiple senses enhances memory retention and comprehension (Shams & Seitz, 2008). For neurodivergent learners, who may process information more effectively through visual or kinesthetic modalities than through traditional text-based instruction, this multimodal approach can provide alternative pathways to understanding (Quak et al., 2015).

Social media fosters participatory and peer-led learning, where knowledge is co-constructed through interactions, discussions, and collaborative content creation (Jenkins et al., 2009). Platforms like Reddit and Discord enable users to engage in real-time discourse, ask questions, and share insights, creating a dynamic and interactive learning environment. This model contrasts with the top-down, teacher-centered approach of traditional education, which often marginalizes neurodivergent learners who may struggle with passive, lecture-based instruction (Davidson & Slegers, 2019). By embracing participatory learning, educators can empower students to take ownership of their learning and engage with content in ways that feel meaningful and relevant. Social media also thrives on interest-driven engagement, where users actively seek out content that aligns with their passions and curiosities (Ito et al., 2013). This approach contrasts with the one-size-fits-all model of traditional education, which often fails to capture the diverse interests of students. For neurodivergent learners, who may have intense and specific areas of interest, this model of learning can be particularly motivating and affirming. By

integrating interest-driven strategies into curriculum design, educators can create learning experiences that are not only more engaging but also more aligned with students' intrinsic motivations. Rather than dismissing social media as a threat to learning, this research explores how its engagement strategies can inform curriculum design, making education more interactive, interest-driven, and neurodivergent-affirming. By leveraging the affordances of social media such as adaptive personalization, multimodal storytelling, participatory learning, and interest-driven engagement, educators can create learning environments that honor the diverse ways in which students process and interact with information.

Significance

Contributions to the Field: A Unique Triangulation

This inquiry makes a distinct contribution to the field by integrating three interconnected but previously unlinked areas: neurodivergence, social media as inspiration for schema and multimodal engagement strategies, and preparation for adulthood, careers, and relationships. While prior research has examined these factors independently or in partial overlap, this study is the first to interweave all three, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding how neurodivergent individuals navigate digital and educational spaces. It is important to acknowledge that the choice to focus primarily on the benefits of implementing learning strategies rather than solely on mitigating harm is not an oversight of the risks involved. Rather, it is a deliberate effort to shift the conversation toward hope and opportunity. The risks and negative impacts of social media and digital engagement for neurodivergent individuals are already widely discussed in academic and public discourse. Instead of reiterating these concerns, this inquiry builds upon existing research and recommendations, exploring how intentional, strength-based strategies can prepare neurodivergent youth to navigate challenges effectively and develop the skills necessary for adulthood. Awareness of potential harm is crucial, but so too is

ensuring that neurodivergent individuals are equipped to face these challenges with resilience, agency, and informed decision-making.

By identifying successful engagement patterns used within neurodivergent digital communities, this study provides insights into how participatory culture and multimodal storytelling can inform curricular design. The findings contribute to educational discourse by challenging traditional, neurotypical-centered learning models and advocating for inclusive, adaptive, and socially relevant frameworks. This research addresses broader implications of algorithmic bias and attention economies, highlighting the systemic barriers neurodivergent individuals face in digital spaces. The study underscores the urgent need for education systems to integrate critical digital literacy, self-advocacy training, and alternative assessment models, fostering lifelong learning and agency for neurodivergent individuals. Ultimately, these findings expand the conversation around learning in the digital age, positioning neurodivergent perspectives as essential to innovation in education and knowledge dissemination.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the intersection of neurodivergence, social media, and education, it is not without limitations. One primary constraint is the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms and social media algorithms. The technologies and engagement strategies discussed in this paper may shift significantly in the coming years, necessitating continuous updates and adaptability. Future research should consider ongoing evaluations of digital learning environments to ensure their relevance and effectiveness for neurodivergent learners (Akgun & Greenhow, 2022).

Another limitation is the lack of long-term empirical studies on neurodivergent social media behaviors in educational contexts. While qualitative observations and existing research inform this study, there remains a gap in large-scale, longitudinal data that examines the direct

impact of multimodal digital strategies on neurodivergent learning outcomes. Future studies should implement quantitative research methodologies to track learner engagement, retention, and success over time (Bombaerts et al., 2024).

Equity in access remains a critical issue. While social media and digital learning offer new opportunities for neurodivergent individuals, barriers such as technological accessibility, digital literacy gaps, and socioeconomic disparities limit participation. More research is needed to bridge these gaps and ensure inclusive implementation of the proposed strategies. For example, students from lower-income backgrounds may lack access to high-speed internet or digital devices, preventing them from fully engaging with online learning platforms (Einhorn, 2020). Addressing these barriers requires not only technological solutions but also systemic changes in educational policy and funding to ensure that all students have equal access to digital resources. This study operates within Western digital landscapes and frameworks. While many of its insights may be applicable globally, cross-cultural studies are necessary to understand neurodivergent learning in different technological and educational contexts. Cultural variations in neurodivergent engagement, as well as localized digital literacy programs, should be explored to enhance accessibility and inclusivity on a global scale (Baekgaard, 2023).

Additional Reflection on Barriers to Implementation

One of the primary challenges in implementing a neurodivergent-centered curriculum inspired by social media engagement strategies is institutional resistance to non-traditional learning models. Although participatory, multimodal, and digitally integrated learning environments align with contemporary engagement trends, many educational institutions remain entrenched in standardized testing models, rigid curricular structures, and teacher-centered pedagogies (Freire, 2017). Transitioning to a model that prioritizes learner agency, multimodal

storytelling, and social media engagement necessitates a significant pedagogical and infrastructural transformation. Such a shift may encounter resistance from administrators, policymakers, and educators who are accustomed to traditional frameworks and may perceive these changes as disruptive or untested. Equity concerns related to access to technology further complicate the implementation process. While many students regularly engage with digital platforms, disparities in access to reliable internet, assistive technologies, and devices capable of supporting multimodal learning experiences persist. Warschauer (2011) highlights that while digital learning spaces hold the potential to democratize education, they risk exacerbating existing inequities if accessibility is not prioritized. This underscores the necessity of integrating digital inclusion strategies into policy planning and securing adequate funding to ensure equitable access for all learners. Another significant barrier is the presence of algorithmic bias and the proliferation of misinformation in digital spaces. As Noble (2018) argues, algorithmic curation often reinforces existing biases, prioritizes engagement over accuracy, and amplifies dominant narratives while marginalizing underrepresented voices. To address this, embedding a critical media literacy component within the curriculum is essential. Such a component would empower students to critically evaluate digital content, discern credible sources, and navigate the complexities of algorithmic influences on information consumption.

To address these barriers, this study proposes the following strategies:

- I. Institutional Advocacy and Professional Development: Providing educators with training and resources to support the transition to neurodivergent-affirming, multimodal instructional methods. This includes fostering a culture of innovation and flexibility within educational institutions.

- II. Digital Equity Initiatives: Securing funding and resources to ensure equitable access to technology, including reliable internet, assistive tools, and devices. This must be accompanied by training for educators and students to maximize the potential of these resources.
- III. Media Literacy Integration: Embedding critical media literacy components into the curriculum to equip students with the skills necessary to critically assess digital content, recognize algorithmic biases, and engage responsibly in digital spaces.

By addressing these barriers through targeted strategies, educational institutions can create more inclusive, equitable, and engaging learning environments that align with the needs of neurodivergent learners and the realities of the digital age.

Further Research

Some recommended areas for further research are in longitudinal studies on neurodivergent digital learning – Investigating the long-term effects of multimodal storytelling, participatory learning, and algorithm-driven knowledge acquisition for neurodivergent individuals. Another area is in algorithmic transparency and digital inclusion – Examining how platform design influences neurodivergent visibility, self-advocacy, and knowledge-sharing. A third area is in the cultural variations in neurodivergent engagement – Analyzing how neurodivergent digital communities function in non-Western contexts and how localized digital literacy programs can enhance accessibility. And a final suggested area for further research is in AI and neurodivergent learning – Assessing the role of artificial intelligence in supporting personalized learning experiences for neurodivergent students.

Policy implications for educational institutions – Developing institutional guidelines for integrating social media-based engagement strategies into curricula, ensuring that neurodivergent learners receive structured and meaningful support. These areas of inquiry will extend the findings of this study, ensuring that neurodivergent-centered pedagogies remain adaptive, inclusive, and relevant in an evolving digital landscape. The findings from this research suggest critical shifts in how neurodivergence is conceptualized, how social media is integrated into learning, and how multimodal approaches can enhance education. Future research should build on these contributions by examining the role of participatory culture in knowledge production for neurodivergent learners, developing curriculum pilots that integrate social media engagement strategies into formal learning spaces, exploring the ethical implications of algorithmic bias and its impact on neurodivergent content visibility. This study challenges the boundaries between formal and informal education, arguing that social media and participatory culture are not distractions from learning—but rather powerful sites of knowledge production that should be harnessed in educational frameworks.

VII. Conclusion: A Hopeful Trajectory

The research presented in this study highlights the systemic barriers neurodivergent individuals face in digital spaces, education, and broader social structures. However, these challenges also present opportunities for transformation. By integrating multimodal storytelling, culturally responsive design, and participatory learning frameworks, educators, policymakers, and content creators can shape more inclusive and accessible learning environments. The findings suggest that embracing digital affordances, rather than resisting them, can empower neurodivergent learners to thrive in ways traditional education has often failed to support.

Historical Context: The Legacy of Oppressive Education

Click below to view the media:

What was the original purpose of school as an institution?

To fully appreciate the transformative potential of this work, it is important to acknowledge the historical roots of oppressive educational systems. In 1913, Frederick T. Gates, a key figure in the General Education Board, articulated a vision of education that sought to mold individuals into docile, compliant workers rather than critical thinkers or agents of change. He wrote: "In our dream, we have limitless resources, and the people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hand... We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning... The task we set before ourselves is very simple... to train these people as we find them to a perfectly ideal life just where they are..." (Gates, 1913, p. 6). This quote starkly contrasts with the vision of education I propose in this study. Gates' words reflect a system designed to maintain the status quo, prioritizing conformity over creativity and compliance over critical thinking. My work seeks to dismantle this legacy, advocating instead for an educational framework that empowers learners to question, create, and thrive on their own terms. By centering joy, empathy, and resistance, we can move beyond the oppressive structures of the past and build a future where education is a tool for liberation, not control.

Reframing Neurodivergence as a Strength

Historically, educational systems have viewed neurodivergence through a deficit-based lens, positioning neurodivergent learners as needing intervention rather than recognizing the value they bring to learning communities. This paper challenges that framing, advocating instead for a strength-based approach that centers neurodivergent cognition as an asset. The multimodal, participatory, and interest-driven learning methods naturally embedded in social media and digital communities offer models for reimagining formal education. Rather than forcing compliance with rigid, standardized systems, an inclusive educational framework should reflect

the way people—particularly neurodivergent individuals—actually engage with knowledge in an increasingly digital and globalized world. By drawing from the affordances of digital engagement, such as adaptive learning technologies, algorithm-driven personalization, and social-driven participatory culture, educational institutions can create spaces where neurodivergent students are not only accommodated but actively supported in ways that align with their strengths.

The Role of Digital Spaces in Identity, Learning, and Community

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst, accelerating the integration of digital technologies into daily life and revealing both new opportunities for connection and new barriers to accessibility. For many neurodivergent individuals, social media became a critical space for identity formation, self-education, and community-building. Through digital platforms, individuals were able to:

- Access knowledge outside of traditional academic gatekeeping.
- Engage in multimodal discourse that aligns with their cognitive strengths.
- Find validation and social belonging among communities with shared experiences.

Despite concerns about misinformation and algorithmic bias, social media serves as a vital learning ecosystem, particularly for those historically underserved by formal education. This research calls for a more intentional integration of digital and social media engagement into curriculum design, recognizing that these platforms are not merely entertainment venues but key sites of informal and self-directed learning.

Reimagining Education: Toward an Adaptive, Inclusive Model

The implications of this study extend beyond theoretical discourse; they offer tangible pathways for educational reform. A neurodivergent-centered approach to education could:

- Expand definitions of valid learning modalities to include visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and interactive approaches.
- Challenge the dominance of text-based instruction, ensuring that learners who process knowledge differently are not excluded.
- Foster educational environments where participation, creativity, and student agency are prioritized over passive knowledge consumption.

Traditional education structures, designed for industrial-era learning models, are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of modern learners. As digital ecosystems redefine knowledge production and dissemination, education must follow suit by becoming more dynamic, participatory, and responsive to the ways people naturally engage with information today. The post-pandemic digital era presents an opportunity to rethink education as an inclusive, evolving, and multimodal practice that does not merely accommodate neurodivergence but actively integrates it into the foundation of teaching and learning.

A Call for Empathy and Joy in Education and Society

As we navigate the future of AI and digital integration, empathy and joy must remain central to our educational and societal frameworks. The art of hip-hop, born out of resistance and resilience, offers a powerful model for how we can approach education—not as a rigid system of control, but as a space for creativity, connection, and empowerment. By prioritizing empathy, we can ensure that technological advancements serve to unite rather than divide, fostering a society where all individuals, regardless of neurotype, can thrive.

My Journey Through This Research

As I reflect on this journey, I am struck by the profound interconnectedness of neurodivergence, technology, and empathy. This research has been more than an academic

endeavor; it has been a deeply personal exploration of how we, as a society, can create spaces that honor and celebrate cognitive diversity. My own experiences as a neurodivergent individual have shaped this work, driving me to challenge the status quo and envision a future where education is not just accessible but truly inclusive. I've often felt caught between two worlds: the rigid structures of traditional education and the dynamic, fluid possibilities of digital spaces. Social media, for all its flaws, has been a lifeline for me—a place where I could find community, express myself authentically, and learn in ways that felt natural and empowering. This duality—of struggle and hope—has fueled my passion for reimagining education as a space where neurodivergent individuals can thrive, not just survive. The rise of AI and its potential to personalize learning excites me, but it also terrifies me. I see the promise of adaptive technologies that can meet learners where they are, but I also fear the algorithmic silos that could further isolate us from one another. This tension has led me to a central question: How can we harness the power of technology to foster connection rather than division? The answer, I believe, lies in empathy. If we can teach and model empathy—both in our interactions with AI and with each other—we can create a world where differences are not just tolerated but celebrated.

The deadline for this project coinciding with the current political climate has weighed heavy on my heart. The current administration, most notably, Elon Musk, has made some of the most broad sweeping changes I have ever seen in the early days of a new administration. I have long been skeptical of the ability to reform a system predicated on Elon Musk's vision of dismantling systemic barriers resonates with me, but his apparent dismissal of empathy leaves me uneasy. I agree that many of our institutions are broken and in need of radical change, but I believe that the foundation of any new system must be compassion. Joy, as I've come to see it, is not just a fleeting emotion but a form of resistance—a way of asserting our humanity in the face

of dehumanizing systems. Dr. Bettina Love (2019) reminds us that joy is a radical act of resistance, particularly for marginalized communities. In her work, she emphasizes that joy is not merely the absence of oppression but the presence of liberation—a concept that resonates deeply with my vision for education. Similarly, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020) argues that joy and criticality must be central to curriculum design, as they empower students to see themselves as agents of change in their own lives and communities. Hip-hop, with its roots in joy and resilience, has been a guiding light for me in this work, reminding me that creativity and connection are powerful tools for transformation.

This research has been a labor of love, a testament to the belief that education can be a force for liberation. It is my hope that this work inspires others to rethink what education can be—not just for neurodivergent individuals, but for all learners. By embracing multimodal storytelling, participatory culture, and adaptive technologies, we can create learning environments that honor the diverse ways people think, learn, and connect. Education is not a static institution; it is a living, evolving practice that must adapt to reflect the realities of learners' lives. As this study has demonstrated, social media, participatory culture, and multimodal learning provide powerful tools for neurodivergent engagement. However, to harness these affordances effectively, educators and policymakers must move beyond risk-mitigation approaches and instead embrace the transformative potential of digital spaces. Rather than treating neurodivergence as an obstacle, this research reframes it as a source of educational innovation. Through intentional integration of participatory culture, multimodal storytelling, and adaptive learning strategies, we can construct an educational system that does not merely prepare students to function within existing structures, but equips them with the tools to shape and redefine those structures entirely.

This is not just a shift in pedagogy—it is a shift in the very foundation of what we define as education. And it is a shift I am proud to champion.

View the media below:

[Graduation](#)

[Wishing Well](#)

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