Algorithmic Exclusion and Neurodivergent Users: How Platform Design Shapes Belonging and Mental Health Online

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Citation: Ofori-Mensah, K. (2026). Algorithmic exclusion and neurodivergent users: How platform design shapes belonging and mental health online [Unpublished manuscript]. University of Roehampton.

Abstract

Social media platforms have become central to social participation, identity formation, and community belonging in contemporary society. However, the algorithmic systems that underpin recommendation engines, content moderation tools, and engagement optimisation functions are predominantly designed around neurotypical patterns of behaviour, attention, and social interaction. This paper offers a critical conceptual review of the emerging literature on algorithmic exclusion as it relates to neurodivergent users, with particular emphasis on autistic adults and individuals with ADHD in the United Kingdom. Drawing on critical algorithm studies, the neurodiversity paradigm, person–environment fit theory, and the social model of disability, this work develops the Neurodivergent Algorithmic Misfit (NAM) framework. NAM conceptualises the structural incompatibility between platform design logics and neurodivergent cognitive profiles as a primary driver of digital exclusion, mental health harm, and diminished sense of belonging for this population. Four dimensions of algorithmic exclusion are identified and analysed: attentional exploitation, social ambiguity amplification, identity suppression, and community fragmentation. The paper concludes by advocating for neurodiversity-inclusive platform design principles grounded in co-production with autistic and neurodivergent communities, and outlines implications for platform governance, digital inclusion policy, and future empirical research.

Key Words: algorithmic exclusion, neurodiversity, autism, ADHD, platform design, digital belonging, mental health, social media, critical algorithm studies, digital inclusion, UK

1. Introduction

Social media platforms now serve as essential infrastructure for social connection, community participation, professional networking, health information, and identity expression for millions in the United Kingdom (Khan et al., 2025; McMillan, 2025). The 2024 Ofcom Online Nation report indicates that UK adults spend an average of three hours and 22 minutes per day on social media, with particularly high usage among young adults aged 18 to 34 (Ofcom, 2024). For neurodivergent individuals, who constitute an estimated 15–20% of the UK adult population (ACAS, 2023), these platforms are especially significant. They provide spaces for the formation of communities based on shared neurological experience, opportunities for identity exploration with reduced social pressure, and partial suspension of stigma associated with neurodivergence in offline contexts (Neurodiversity and Online Communities, 2021; Meads, 2022; Alper et al., 2025).

These platforms are governed by algorithmic systems including recommendation engines, content moderation classifiers, engagement scoring functions, and advertising targeting tools whose design logic is typically optimised for neurotypical patterns of social interaction, attention, and behaviour (Barros Pena et al., 2023; Baillargeon et al., 2024; Choi, 2025). This design asymmetry constitutes a form of structural exclusion, not as intentional discrimination, but as an emergent consequence of developing systems on a scale without meaningful inclusion of neurodivergent

perspectives in the design process (Moura, 2023; Tilmes, 2022; Walkowiak, 2023; Parks, 2025). This phenomenon, termed algorithmic exclusion, is perpetuated by ranking and recommendation processes that systematically disadvantage minority users (Espin Noboa et al., 2021; Fabbri et al., 2021; Stoica et al., 2018; Metzler and García, 2023; Zajko, 2022). The Neurodivergent Algorithmic Misfit (NAM) framework is introduced to make these mechanisms analytically accessible and to inform the development of more inclusive, neurodiversity-aware sociotechnical systems (Kelan, 2023; Khan et al., 2025).

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 establishes the conceptual foundations by reviewing critical studies on algorithms, the neurodiversity paradigm, person–environment fit theory, and the social model of disability. Section 3 develops the NAM framework by identifying four dimensions of algorithmic exclusion. Section 4 discusses implications for platform governance, mental health, and digital belonging. Section 5 concludes with directions for future research and a call for neurodiversity-inclusive platform co-design.

1.1 Research Questions

This conceptual review is guided by the following questions:

How does the existing literature characterise the relationship between social media platform design and the experiences of neurodivergent users?

Through what specific mechanisms do algorithmic systems produce exclusionary outcomes for autistic and ADHD users?

What conceptual framework best captures the structural nature of this exclusion?

What design and governance principles might redress neurodivergent algorithmic exclusion?

2. Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Critical Algorithm Studies

Critical algorithm studies is an interdisciplinary field emerging at the intersection of science and technology studies, media studies, and computational social science that examines the social, political, and ethical dimensions of algorithmic systems (Gillespie, 2014; Pasquale, 2015; Noble, 2018). A central insight of this literature is that algorithms are not neutral technical instruments: they encode the values, assumptions, and blind spots of their designers, and reproduce and amplify existing social inequalities at scale (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018).

Substantial work in this tradition has documented algorithmic discrimination on the basis of race (Noble, 2018), gender (Eubanks, 2018), class (Pasquale, 2015), and political identity (Pariser, 2011). What has received far less attention is the relationship between algorithmic design and neurodivergence. This gap is significant: if algorithms encode neurotypical assumptions about attention, sociality, and communication, then neurodivergent users are structurally positioned as algorithmically illegible users whose behaviour does not fit the patterns the system is trained to recognise and serve.

2.2 The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm, developed from Singer's (1998) foundational concept and subsequently elaborated by Armstrong (2010) and Walker (2014), reconceptualises neurological differences, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and related conditions, as natural human variation rather than pathological deficit. This paradigm shift carries profound implications for how we analyse digital environments: rather than asking how neurodivergent individuals can adapt to platform norms, it asks how platforms must change to accommodate the full range of human neurocognitive diversity (Walker, 2014).

In the context of algorithm studies, the

neurodiversity paradigm reframes algorithmic exclusion not because of neurodivergent users' "abnormal" behaviour, but as a consequence of algorithmic systems designed around a narrow neurotypical norm (Singer, 1998). The problem is not the user; it is the system (Armstrong, 2010).

2.3 Person–Environment Fit Theory

Person–environment fit (PE fit) theory proposes that well-being and functioning are products not of individual characteristics alone, nor of environmental characteristics alone, but of the match or mismatch between the two (Edwards and Cooper, 1990; Edwards, 2008). When there is a good fit between an individual's needs, abilities, and values and the demands and supplies of their environment, well-being is supported; when there is a misfit, stress, disengagement, and harm result (Edwards, 2008). PE fit theory has been productively applied to workplace contexts to understand why neurodivergent employees often experience significant distress in neurotypically designed workplaces, not because of their neurodivergence per se but because of the mismatch between environmental demands and neurodivergent cognitive profiles (Austin and Pisano, 2017). Extending PE fit theory to the digital environment, social media platforms can be understood as environments whose design characteristics, rapid information flow, implicit social norms, and engagement-maximising stimulation create systematic misfit for significant proportions of neurodivergent users (Page et al., 2022).

2.4 Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability distinguishes between impairment, the physical or cognitive characteristic, and disability, the socially produced disadvantage that results from environments, systems, and attitudes that fail to accommodate impairment (Oliver, 1990). Applied to digital environments, the social model positions algorithmic exclusion as a form of digitally produced disability: the disadvantage experienced by neurodivergent users of social media platforms is not a consequence of their neurodivergence itself, but of platforms designed without their inclusion in mind (Koteyko et al., 2022). This framing has important political and practical implications. It places responsibility for change on platform designers and policymakers, not on neurodivergent users, connects digital inclusion to the broader disability rights framework and the legal obligations of the UK Equality Act 2010, and grounds the conceptual framework developed here in a well-established tradition of emancipatory disability scholarship (Oliver, 1990).

3. The Neurodivergent Algorithmic Misfit Framework

Drawing on these conceptual foundations and emerging empirical literature on neurodivergent social media use (Page et al., 2022; Koteyko et al., 2022), the Neurodivergent Algorithmic Misfit (NAM) framework identifies four dimensions through which algorithmic systems produce exclusionary outcomes for neurodivergent users.

Dimension 1: Attentional Exploitation

Recommendation and engagement algorithms are designed to maximise time on the platform. Mechanisms such as infinite scroll, autoplay video, variable-reward notification systems, and algorithmically timed content delivery exploit dopaminergic reward circuitry and can contribute to social media addiction (Burhan and Moradzadeh, 2020; Veissière and Stendel, 2018). For users with ADHD, whose attention and reward processing differ, the consequences may be particularly severe: studies report elevated problematic technology or Internet use among individuals with ADHD traits (Andreassen et al., 2016; Tateno et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2015; Uzun et al., 2016). This reflects not ADHD alone but ADHD in an environment optimised to exploit attentional vulnerabilities, creating structural misfit between platform design and neurodivergent

attentional profiles (Panova and Carbonell, 2018; Weinstein and Lejoyeux, 2020).

Dimension 2: Social Ambiguity Amplification

Social media involves complex, implicit, and shifting social norms. For autistic users, whose social information processing often relies on more explicit and systematic strategies, such contexts can be especially challenging (Milton, 2012; Bons et al., 2013; Schwenck et al., 2012; Bird and Cook, 2013). The "double empathy problem" conceptualises misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people as bidirectional, arising from divergent cognitive styles rather than a one-sided deficit (Milton, 2012). Algorithmic curation intensifies ambiguity by surfacing content from diverse social worlds without shared norms, while moderation systems tuned to dominant communication styles can misinterpret or penalise autistic modes of expression, increasing exclusion (Page et al., 2022; Gongane et al., 2022).

Dimension 3: Identity Suppression

Content moderation systems, automated classifiers, human review, and user reporting encode assumptions about appropriate communication and acceptable identity expression (Myers West, 2018; Gongane et al., 2022). Empirical work shows that creators with marginalised identities or stigmatised content genres experience uneven governance, including removals, shadowbans, and biased algorithmic visibility that disadvantage non-normative cultural expressions (Duffy and Meisner, 2022). For neurodivergent creators, such dynamics can disproportionately flag direct, literal, or unconventional communication, suppressing self-representation and reducing the visibility of autistic culture and community practices (Koteyko et al., 2022; Page et al., 2022).

Dimension 4: Community Fragmentation

Social media are algorithmically segmented into distinct communities and content niches. For neurodivergent people, algorithms can indeed surface highly specific autistic or ADHD communities that provide psychosocial support and opportunities for identity work (Page et al., 2022; Koteyko et al., 2022). Yet segmentation can also isolate these communities from broader publics and concentrate them in high-engagement zones subject to intensified monetisation and targeting, while interest-based categorisation (e.g. "autism") flattens internal diversity and can reproduce hierarchies of visibility (Duffy and Meisner, 2022; Myers West, 2018). NAM conceptualises this as community fragmentation: algorithms that both enable and constrain neurodivergent collectivity, shaping inclusion, representation, and exposure to harm.

The four dimensions of the NAM framework converge to produce measurable consequences for mental health. A growing body of research links social media use with depression, anxiety, and loneliness in the general population, particularly when use is excessive or problematic (Twenge et al., 2018; Huang, 2020; Koh et al., 2024; Lopes et al., 2022; O'Day and Heimberg, 2021; Thygesen et al., 2022). For neurodivergent users, these associations may be mediated by the specific mechanisms identified in this paper: attentional exploitation that disrupts self-regulation, social ambiguity amplification that intensifies anxiety and confusion, identity suppression that reduces a sense of belonging, and community fragmentation that limits the protective benefits of online community participation (Walkowiak, 2023; Park and Humphry, 2019; Chemnad and Othman, 2024; Vindigni, 2025; Xu et al., 2025).

Understanding these mechanisms matters for clinical and public health practice. General population guidance about social media use and mental health ("use it less", "take breaks", "curate your feed") may be inadequate or actively unhelpful for neurodivergent users whose relationship with platforms is structured by specific algorithmic misfit rather than generic overuse (Twenge, 2020; Twenge, 2020; Huang, 2020). Neurodiversity-specific digital mental health guidance, developed in

partnership with autistic and ADHD communities, is urgently needed (Walkowiak, 2023; Xu et al., 2025).

4.2 Platform Governance Implications

The NAM framework positions algorithmic exclusion of neurodivergent users as a governance failure rather than merely a design oversight (Park and Humphry, 2019; Chemnad and Othman, 2024; Vindigni, 2025). UK regulatory frameworks, including the Online Safety Act 2023 and the digital accessibility duties that flow from equality and accessibility legislation, provide a legal basis for requiring platforms to address discriminatory algorithmic outcomes (Chemnad and Othman, 2024; Vindigni, 2025). However, existing frameworks have not explicitly addressed neurodivergence as a protected characteristic requiring specific consideration in algorithmic design (Walkowiak, 2023; Xu et al., 2025). This paper calls for neurodivergent representation in platform algorithmic audits, neurodiversity inclusive design standards for recommendation and moderation, and equality impact assessments for algorithmic decisions with explicit consideration of neurodivergent users (Walkowiak, 2023; Park and Humphry, 2019; Chemnad and Othman, 2024; Vindigni, 2025).

4.3 Towards Neurodiversity Inclusive Platform Design

The principle of co-production, developing systems with rather than for the communities they affect, is well established in inclusive and participatory disability research (Nind, 2012; Nind, 2014) and is increasingly echoed in accessibility and AI design frameworks that emphasise co design with disabled users (Chemnad and Othman, 2024; Vindigni, 2025). Applying this principle to platform algorithm design would require meaningful, sustained involvement of autistic and other neurodivergent individuals in the development, testing, and evaluation of algorithmic systems (Walkowiak, 2023; Xu et al., 2025). This is not primarily a technical limitation but a question of values and governance: whether platforms are willing to invest in design processes that centre neurodivergent experience rather than treating neurodivergent users as marginal edge cases to be accommodated post hoc (Nind, 2014; Park and Humphry, 2019; Chemnad and Othman, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This paper has developed the Neurodivergent Algorithmic Misfit (NAM) framework as a conceptual tool to understand how social media platform design produces structural exclusion of neurodivergent users through four intersecting mechanisms: attentional exploitation, social ambiguity amplification, identity suppression, and community fragmentation. The framework is grounded in critical algorithm studies, the neurodiversity paradigm, person–environment fit theory, and the social model of disability, and draws on an emerging empirical literature on the experiences of autistic and ADHD users with social media.

The implications are significant. Algorithmic exclusion of neurodivergent users is not an accidental side effect of neutral technical design: it is a structural consequence of designing systems at scale for a neurotypical majority without meaningful inclusion of neurodivergent perspectives. Addressing it requires not merely technical adjustment but a fundamental rethinking of whose experiences, needs, and ways of being in the world are centred in the design of our shared digital infrastructure.

Future empirical research should test the NAM framework through mixed-methods studies with neurodivergent adults, examining the specific relationships between algorithmic design features, neurodivergent experience, and mental health and belonging outcomes. Participatory and co-productive research designs developed with, not merely about, autistic and neurodivergent communities are essential to this endeavour.

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