

Research Study Overview: Understanding the use of the term “weaponized autism” in an alt-right social media platform

- The gap:
 - To date, there has been no systematic study of how the term “weaponized autism” is used in Gab and other websites associated with online hate.
 - Prior to this study, our understanding of what is meant by this term has only been informed by a few media mentions and blogs.
 - This term has also begun to be picked up by mainstream media, but there is little understanding of the term’s meaning, or its origins.
- Study objective:
 - To better understand how the term “weaponized autism” is used on Gab, a website associated with online hate, and how it reflects, affects and produces perceptions of autism in this online forum.
 - To understand how this term may affect autistic people when they are engaged in these discussions on Gab.
- Methodology:
 - The research team analyzed 711 posts on the website Gab from 2018-2019, filtering for variations on the term “weaponized autism”.
 - They analyzed the data using an approach called discourse analysis. This is a form of qualitative analysis that looks at how a topic is discussed and what this tells us about how the discussion informs the understanding of the topic in wider society.
- Key findings:
 - The term “weaponized autism” was mainly used by Gab users who were not autistic.
 - As for defining this term, Gab users are, according to the study’s authors, ‘applying a stereotype of autism, which is largely of their own making, but has roots in medical and media representations of autism. Building of this Gab autism archetype, “weaponized autism” is the harnessing of hyper-focus and talents of “autistic” people, to advance the interests of the alt-right.’
- Conclusion:
 - Key findings highlight that:
 - the term “weaponized autism” is used in ways that are demeaning to autistic people as well as in ways that glorify stereotypical features of autism.
 - since autistic people experience social rejection in larger society, the special identity and perceived important role of becoming a ‘weaponized autist’ can make engaging with Gab and similar spaces an appealing option.
 - It’s important not only to teach autistic individuals about Internet safety, but we also need to continue to foster a sense of community and belonging for them outside of

- **Uniqueness of study:**

- Very little research has been done to date on how autistic people have been being targeted or talked about by people who create online hate speech content
- This ground-breaking study comprises an international multi-disciplinary team: autism experts, healthcare practitioners including psychiatrists, autistic people, and a counter-extremism/ disengagement expert
- Study is co-created with autistic people and the research team has taken great care to approach this work in a way that is respectful and considers the complexity of this issue.

Researchers:

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 - John Elder Robison, College of William & Mary, U.S.
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 - Barbara Perry, Ontario Tech University, Canada
 - Jenny Nguyen, formerly at Holland Bloorview
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Download the study [here](#).

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