THESIS

"AUTISM-TO-AUTISM CONVERSATION": EXPLORING RECOGNITION AND (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF AUTISTIC IDENTITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

“AUTISM-TO-AUTISM CONVERSATION”: EXPLORING RECOGNITION AND (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF AUTISTIC IDENTITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Since the earliest conceptions and models of autism were created, U.S. American society has consistently looked upon autistic people with shame, hostility, and misinformed assumptions of what being autistic means to autistic individuals. In higher education environments, these stigmatizing and misleading narratives of autistic lives often lead to inequitable access to social and academic opportunities, detrimental impacts upon autistic students’ wellbeing, and the overall failure of academic institutions to reform their perceptions of what autistic students are capable of accomplishing. Understanding how autistic students themselves construct and voice their identities and lived experiences in higher education is critically needed. This thesis centers autistic university students’ accounts of how they experience autistic identity to explore the ways autistic identity is enacted and consequently (re)constructed in interactions between autistic peers. The findings illustrate autistic students’ profound and nuanced understandings of how their autistic identities manifest in their self-perceptions, their behaviors, their relationships with autistic peers, and their experiences of autistic community. These narratives generate powerful resistance against stigmatizing discourses around autistic communication and offer valuable considerations for how higher education institutions can facilitate social and systemic justice for their autistic students.

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Happy Anniversary, my love. Thank you for absolutely everything.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There's a sort of inside joke in some autistic communities about "peer-reviewed diagnosis," which is when you don't know that you're autistic until a bunch of other autistic people collectively clock you as one of them. No wonder you get along so well with these people who are supposedly difficult to communicate with; you communicate just like they do—taking turns infodumping, stimming at your favorite parts, starting echolalia chains out of funny phrases and intonations. How could you not see something so obvious?

It's probably because that's not the narrative of autistic communication that you grew up with. Your knowledge of autism was limited to a rigid clinical model that taught you that your older brother's parroting of dialogue from movies and YouTube was inappropriate and meaningless, and his difficulty regulating his emotional responses to unpleasant sensory inputs was a personal failing indicative of chronic immaturity. That same model would interpret your own meticulously plotted and lore-ridden pretend-play sessions as abnormal and maladaptive—never mind how much pride you took in your mastery of daydreaming, even long after you learned to keep quiet about it around those who would weaponize their intolerance for whimsy against you. You learned through trial by fire that even the most casual social interactions are balancing acts, that no one wants to entertain your monologues of unbridled joy and excitement around every new favorite show or video game, that you get a certain amount of space that you're allowed to take up and you have to earn that space by deducing the secret rules of acting like a normal person and never breaking them where other people could notice. The people who watched you grow up now fondly recall that you were a good kid, a bright kid—maybe a little awkward and oversensitive sometimes, but anyone with such an exceptional gift for the written *word as yours would be a little eccentric. You have no reason to believe you're autistic, but you know deep down that there's something that you and everyone else missed that might explain why any unfamiliar social cues or situations feel like tests designed to make you prove that you are a human being.*

The only people you don't feel so anxious and exhausted around are the people who, according to what you thought you knew about autism, aren't supposed to be this easy to spend time with. It only clicks when one of them off-handedly hints that the identity that makes them different—their distinctly autistic ways of knowing who they are and finding each other in the world—is also what makes you belong with them.

You belong *with them, and suddenly you feel like you are meeting yourself for the first time.*

The above account illustrates my first encounter with autistic identity. Until this point, I had never seriously entertained the possibility that I might be autistic because I had little understanding of what being autistic actually meant to autistic people. Then, upon being told by one of my autistic friends that I was likely also autistic, I finally realized that the reason I felt so much more comfortable talking with my autistic friends was because we had many of the same default communication habits. I soon ran the gauntlet of autism self-evaluation surveys, and my friend's intuition was corroborated by a resounding consensus that I am, in fact, autistic.

This incongruence between dominant narratives of autistic life and the ways of being that are articulated in autistic communities is far from breaking news. Angulo-Jiménez and DeThorne's (2019) study of YouTube videos created by self-identified autistic individuals finds many stark differences between the traditional medical model of autism and the neurodiversity paradigm narrated by the videos' authors. Consistent across each of the themes explored is the opposing orientations of the medical and neurodiversity models of autism. The medical model uses language and assumptions that posit autism as antithetical to a "normal" or "desirable" life, favoring approaches that place neurotypical doctors and scholars as the experts on autism and aim to suppress, prevent, or even cure the symptoms of autism (Angulo-Jiménez & DeThorne, 2019, p. 577). Conversely, the neurodiversity paradigm positions autistic people as the experts on their own lives and conditions, recontextualizing and redefining autism as a multifaceted and inalienable part of one's life and self—a part that is rendered abnormal or undesirable by societal privileging of neurotypical norms (Angulo-Jiménez & DeThorne, 2019). These conflicting ways of knowing and understanding autism as a whole can create confusion, stress, and doubt for autistic people trying to locate and develop a sense of selfhood and/or community in regards to their autism.

These feelings of anxiety and insecurity drive many autistic people to try to suppress certain traits and behaviors that could be associated with autism. Commonly known as "masking," these strategies include forcing oneself to make eye contact, developing "scripts" for the normative language and nonverbal expressions in certain social situations, suppressing stimming behaviors, and other acts performed to conceal one's autisticness. Autistic people are often exposed to stigma and discrimination against autism from an early age and continue to encounter it throughout their lives, be it in education (Cohen et al., 2022), healthcare (Nicolaidis et al., 2015), professional settings (Gonzales, 2022; Praslova, 2021), and even in casual interactions with strangers (Cook et al., 2021). Stigmas against autism commonly include but are by no means limited to assumptions of intellectual deficits and/or poor language skills, distrust of academic and/or professional efficacy, aversion to stimming behaviors and unusual vocal intonations, and anticipation of disruptive or destructive behaviors (Cleary et al., 2023). As a result of exposure to these narratives, autistic people often employ masking to shield themselves from anti-autistic stigma and discrimination.

Masking asks the neurotypical person to pay no attention to the autism behind the curtain, but the autistic person reaps few benefits from the neurotypical person's blissful ignorance. In fact, masking has decidedly proven to be so harmful to an autistic person’s mental and emotional health that prolonged masking can lead to psychological trauma, depression, and even suicidal tendencies (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Cassidy et al., 2018; Cleary et al., 2023). Because masking cannot be perpetually sustained without increasingly harmful consequences, some autistic people look for spaces where they are able to express themselves authentically and eventually build the confidence to embrace their autisticness in other social situations—in other words, to unmask (Kemp, 2024). This process, however, raises an entirely new series of considerations around how autistic people decide to unmask and what outcomes the process of unmasking can bring to an autistic person’s life.

Given that access to "safe" individuals and spaces is a vital part of the unmasking process (Kemp, 2024), it is highly unlikely that one will accomplish such a complex endeavor completely on one's own. Indeed, recent literature on autistic community has increasingly shown that forming social connections with other autistic people is highly influential in an autistic person's self-esteem. In an interview study with 12 autistic adults, Crompton et al. (2020a) report that the study participants felt that social interactions with autistic friends and family members were not only easier and more comfortable than interactions with neurotypical people, but also that the sense of belonging that arose from interactions with other autistic people directly contributed to the participants' happiness in those interactions as well as their overall well-being and resilience against common mental and social struggles. One participant went so far as to say that forming relationships with other autistic individuals felt so profoundly different from their relationships with neurotypical people that they were struck with the thought that "this is how neurotypical people must feel all the time" (Crompton et al., 2020a, p. 1444). Another study by Crompton et al. (2023) explores the impacts of autistic peer support programs in public schools on the experiences of autistic students. The interview participants described feeling more confident in embracing their autistic behaviors, more accepted among like-minded peers, and more capable of succeeding and advocating for their needs in social and academic settings alike. These emotional and social outcomes are all but diametrically opposed to those of prolonged masking as explicated above (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Cassidy et al., 2018; Cleary et al., 2023).

Also apparent in the results of these studies is that the "deficits" in communication skills that autistic people are presumed to possess are not intrinsic to autism itself. There is a clear connection between the degree of mutual understanding of autistic communication behaviors and the emotional and social outcomes of any given social interaction involving at least one autistic person. Autistic sociologist Damian E.M. Milton (2012) refers to this connection as the double empathy problem and describes it as follows:

> . . . the ‘double empathy problem’ refers to a breach in the ‘natural attitude’ . . . that occurs between people of different dispositional outlooks and personal conceptual understandings when attempts are made to communicate meaning. In a sense it is a 'double problem' as both people experience it, and so it is not a singular problem located in any one person. Rather, it is based in the social interaction between two differently disposed social actors, the disjuncture being more severe for the non-autistic disposition

> as it is experienced as unusual, while for the ‘autistic person’ it is a common experience . . . (p. 884)

The double empathy problem as explained by Milton (2012) reframes the communication challenges that autistic people encounter in interactions with neurotypical people as products of both parties’ misunderstandings of one another’s words and behaviors, as opposed to assuming a one-sided failure of the autistic person to communicate competently. This explanation holds neurotypical people accountable for their reluctance to adapt to autistic communication needs in the same way that autistic people are demanded to adapt to neurotypical communication norms. Simultaneously, this model liberates autistic people from the notion that they are simply poor communicators by nature, thus facilitating conversations around productive interactions and relationships between autistic individuals whose communication styles and experiences align with one another (Crompton et al., 2020a; Crompton et al., 2023; Belek, 2022). The social behaviors that autistic people feel compelled to suppress in interactions with neurotypical people are the same behaviors that lead to immediate emotional benefits and long-lasting relational bonds when expressed in interactions with other autistic people.

Underlying the decisions, processes, and theoretical models related to masking and unmasking is the question of what it means to any given autistic individual to be autistic. Before one can even begin to answer this question, though, one must first “become” autistic. I use the word “become” not in the sense that autism can be voluntarily created or destroyed—a wildly untrue assumption that reflects harmful notions that autism should be masked or somehow cured (Baron-Cohen, 2009). Rather, I mean that in order for a person to embrace autistic being, they must first conceive of themselves as an autistic person and maintain a positive understanding of “autistic” as an identity label.

In other words, autistic being is directly tied to autistic identity. Rooted in theoretical frameworks of social identity (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), autistic identity as a concept refers simultaneously to a person's understanding of themselves as an autistic individual and to their perceptions and performances of likeness and belonging with other autistic people. As demonstrated by the roles of masking and stereotypes in delayed autism diagnoses (Lai et al., 2020; Lawson, 2020; Kalb et al., 2022; Guerrero & Sobotka, 2022), a person can think and behave in ways that are characteristic of autism without personally associating their thoughts and behaviors with autism or likening themselves to other autistic people. However, an individual must associate their thoughts and behaviors with autism before they can even begin to integrate autism into their self-concept. If that association is situated primarily in stigma and impairment, then it makes sense that a person would feel compelled to hide or even reject identification with autisticness. On the other hand, if that association is situated in acceptance and strengths, then a person would be much more likely to value autisticness as a part of who they are and how they live.

None of these associations, be they positive, negative, or somewhere in between, can be fostered or reinforced in isolation from the world around oneself. These associations are learned through exposure to verbal, visual, and material messages about what it means to be autistic across a variety of contexts (Cohen et al., 2022; Nicolaidis et al., 2015; Gonzales, 2022; Praslova, 2021; Cook et al., 2021). Therefore, one must receive supportive and encouraging messages about autistic identity in order to understand autistic identity as something that is safe and beneficial to adopt and enact. It should not come as a surprise that autistic people are more likely to receive this acceptance and support from other autistic people than from non-autistic people (Crompton et al., 2020a; Crompton et al., 2023; Belek, 2022). For this to happen, though, autistic individuals need to not only form a personal understanding of what constitutes autistic identity, but also be able to recognize similar identities in other individuals and communicate their shared identity in an accepting and supportive manner.

Opportunities to locate and connect with other autistic people are limited in environments that are unwelcoming to autistic people by design. Higher education institutions are particularly in need of intentional shifts in how autistic students are recognized on campus and in the classroom. Autistic students have long struggled to thrive in college and university settings—not for lack of trying, but for lack of understanding and support from others (Anderson et al., 2018). Without systems in place to make classroom instruction and coursework more compatible with autistic students' needs, these students may struggle to keep up with their workload, meet traditional standards of success at their institutions, or even complete their degree programs (Bolourian et al., 2018; Cage et al., 2020). Additionally, the absence of peer connection and mentoring events, organizations, and programs for autistic students leaves many of these students feeling out of place on their campuses and unable to advocate for themselves (Anderson et al., 2018; Bolourian et al., 2018; Cage et al., 2020). However, many autistic people share certain strengths that make them uniquely suited for certain elements of higher education, such as keen memory, attention to detail, strong dedication to subjects of high interest or priority, analytical thinking, impartial listening skills, and "remarkable powers of observation" (Van Hees et al., 2015, p. 1681). When accommodations and community spaces are provided to offset the challenges of navigating higher education as an autistic person, autistic students are far more likely to consistently perform well in their studies and have a more positive college or university experience overall (Davis et al., 2021; Sarett, 2017).

Breaking the cycle of exclusion of autistic students in higher education demands more awareness and acknowledgement of autistic people at colleges and universities, as well as greater efforts to create spaces where autistic students can connect with one another to foster a sense of community and belonging. Accomplishing either of the above goals first requires a body of knowledge that not only establishes that autistic students do not inherently exist in isolation from each other, but also provides robust and nuanced evidence that autistic students are aware of the qualities that would bind them together as a community given the opportunity and are capable of generating strong discourses about autistic identification. Thus, scholars must engage directly with autistic students at colleges and universities to explicate what these students truly want and need from their institutions in the pursuit of an accessible and supportive education.

In pursuit of such knowledge, this thesis study looks closely at the discursive narrations of interaction-level processes of shared identity reported and discussed by autistic university students, ultimately seeking to answer the questions of how students recognize one another as autistic and what these connections contribute to a student's experiences of autistic identity. The manuscript begins with a review of the development of theoretical and applied literature around autistic communication and identity. An overview of Hecht's (1993) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) provides context for the trajectory of autistic identity research literature, which in turn builds to the research questions which will guide the proposed study. I then describe my methodological process, including the method of data collection, grounding theoretical framework, and data analysis approach, interspersed with adaptations to particular design elements of the interview protocol with attention to autistic individuals' unique communication needs and preferences. Next, I explore my findings from thematic analysis of the interview data, organized by each of the four frames of identity explicated in CTI (1993). At its core, this study is meant to locate the autistic student voices that are often silenced or forgotten in mainstream discourses of autism in higher education, bring these voices to the forefront of the conversation around autistic student identity, and demonstrate what higher education institutions can learn from autistic students' stories of who they are. To initiate this process, I offer a guide to the relevant nomenclature around autism and neurological disability.

Nomenclature and Appellations

This thesis employs a variety of terminology derived from contemporary discourses around autism. This terminology encompasses a variety of clinical and cultural labels and phrases, each with distinct definitions and impacts both within and beyond autistic communities. To assist readers unfamiliar with these topics and to assuage the risk of misinterpretation, context for several of these terms is summarized below.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (n.d.) defines autism as "a neurological and developmental disorder" that is characterized primarily by deficits in communication skills and performances of restricted or repetitive interests and behaviors. This definition is grounded in clinical psychiatric research and is currently the most commonly accepted understanding of autism. However, some have criticized this definition for its negative connotations and implication that autism must be treated or cured (Dwyer et al., 2022). Critics of this model instead define autism using the neurodiversity paradigm, which posits that in the same way that there is no "normal" or "right" gender, ethnicity, or culture, it is also false to assume the existence of a "normal" and "right" type of brain and mind (Walker, 2014). Framed as a form of neurodivergence, autism becomes less of a "disorder" that must be corrected and more of an alternative way of being that should be accepted and accommodated.

Varying perspectives on the clinical model of autism have contributed to differing preferences for person-first language versus identity-first language as identifiers. Person-first language places the human subject before the label of autism in its phrasing (Brown, 2011). Examples include “a person with autism” and “someone who has autism,” both of which place emphasis on the subject as an individual over autism as a condition. Identity-first language swaps the arrangement of these elements, instead using the label as a descriptor that precedes and frames the subject (Brown, 2011). “Autistic person/people” and “the autistic community” are common manifestations of identity-first language. These appellations claim autism as an unalienable aspect of one’s life and selfhood, rejecting the notion that autism can or should be fixed or overcome (Brown, 2011). While a use and preference for identity-first language will appear throughout this paper, person-first language will be used when contextually necessary and/or to reflect the language used in the literature under review.

Another distinction to be made is that of diagnostic status—that is, the type of diagnosis that an autistic person has acquired. “Formal diagnosis” refers to people who have undergone a psychiatric evaluation for autism and received a diagnosis through standardized clinical practices. While a formal diagnosis is one of the more tangible and societally legitimized tools for being recognized by others as autistic, clinical validation is by no means a prerequisite for personal autistic identification. Many barriers exist in the way of obtaining a formal diagnosis of autism, including the high financial burden of the process (Galliver et al., 2017), biases against intersecting marginalized gender, racial, and ethnic identities (Kalb et al., 2022; Guerrero & Sobotka, 2022), and evaluation frameworks that are targeted towards children and thus prevent many adults from being diagnosed later in life (McDonald, 2020). As a result, “self-diagnosis” has become an increasingly common and respected form of identification within autistic communities.

To illustrate the validity of self-diagnosis, Sturm et al. (2024) compare psychometric self-evaluation survey results between formally diagnosed and self-diagnosed adults. The median survey scores were almost exactly the same between formally diagnosed and self-diagnosed participants, and as the authors explain, "[t]here were no . . . items that demonstrated bias between these groups and there were very few significant differences in item endorsement" (Sturm et al., 2024, p. 2342). These findings show that people who self-identify as autistic do so based on the same experiences and characteristics that a formal diagnosis of autism would attend to. Thus, when distinctions between formally diagnosed and self-diagnosed autistic people are made in this paper, readers should not assume that they are distinguished based on assumptions of validity. Rather, these distinctions will occur only to accurately reflect the language of referenced literature or to explain certain aspects of the following study.

Finally, I would like to explain the difference between "neurotypical" and "non-autistic" in the context of this paper. "Neurotypical" refers to people whose neurocognitive functions are recognized as "normal" according to dominant social and clinical standards (Walker, 2014). As explained above, the concept of neurodiversity exists to represent and empower those whose neurocognitive functions differ from neurotypical norms. While autism most definitely falls under the umbrella of neurodiversity, it is only one of many distinct conditions and disabilities that neurodiversity recognizes (e.g., attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), clinical depression, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, etc.). Therefore, the phrase "non-autistic" is used here to refer to people who, while not autistic, may (but do not necessarily) identify with neurodiversity for any number of other reasons.

This distinction is significant because non-autistic neurodivergent people may encounter similar but not identical challenges and opportunities to those that autistic people tend to experience. For instance, while individuals with ADHD face many of the same social challenges as autistic individuals, people with ADHD tend to struggle with these dynamics due to impulsivity and impaired executive function, whereas autistic people have difficulty with reflexively adapting their thinking and behavior to different social contexts (Antshel & Russo, 2019). Thus, while “non-autistic” *may* refer to neurotypical people, it also includes people who are neurodivergent but not specifically autistic. With the above context established, I will proceed with a review of the evolution of research literature into autistic communication and identity.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will begin with a review of traditional academic and cultural understandings of autistic communication, followed by a review of recent literature that challenges these traditional narratives. I then explore the extant literature concerning social identity as it relates to autism and autistic communication, particularly in the framework of Hecht's (1993) Communication Theory of Identity. The literature review concludes by pointing to the remaining questions unanswered in the already limited existing literature, which will inform the research questions at the center of the proposed study.

The literature contained in the following sub-headings was located through a systematic process to follow the trajectory of extant research into the subject matters surrounding my proposed study. This process reveals the foundational theories and concepts that inform what types of research are conducted, how scholars have approached such research, what knowledge has been produced, and what research questions have yet to be asked and answered (Tracy, 2020). Drawing from previously collected literature regarding traditional understandings of autism and recent advances in autistic communication scholarship, I utilized common phrases from these publications as my initial search terms, including “autistic communication,” “autism stigma,” “autistic perspectives,” “autistic identity,” and various derivations and extensions of these terms as needed for more specific topics.

These literature searches were conducted across several different engines and databases, including the Primo Search database through Morgan Library, Academic Search Ultimate, Communication and Mass Media Complete, Google Scholar, and general Google searches. The sources I included from these searches were not strictly limited to the discipline of communication studies, as autism research in sociology, developmental studies, psychology, and other related disciplines often contains valuable perspectives and inquiries that are currently not present in communication studies literature. Using the initial round of literature as a starting point, I gathered the remaining sources by exploring the citations within these publications that pointed to foundational theoretical literature, exemplary studies of relevant autistic communication topics and research trends, and other sources that were commonly cited across multiple different publications. Between the previous section on nomenclature and the following subheadings, 64 journal articles, books, book chapters, and popular sources have been utilized in the development of this literature review.

In practicing self-reflexivity in relation to my own experience and the conversant research literature, I disclose my status as a self-diagnosed autistic person and my former role as an organizer of the Graduate Student Neurodiversity Affinity Group at Colorado State University (2024-2025). I acknowledge that my positionality interplays with the findings from the literature described.. At the same time, my positionality is grounded in seven years of subjection, witness, and resistance to neurological ableism in higher education. I assert that my own experiences are in and of themselves evidence of an exigency for more critical communication scholarship as it relates to neurological disability.

Traditional Understandings of Autistic Communication

As expressed in the nomenclature section above, traditional understandings of autism are grounded in generalizations of autism as being synonymous with poor communication competence. Cupach and Spitzberg (1983) define communication competence as the ability to navigate interpersonal interactions both effectively and appropriately. In this context, effective and appropriate communication "fulfills personal goals or communicative functions without violating contextual rules of appropriate conduct" (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1983, p. 365). Scholarly explorations of what this definition entails in practice have explicated an array of particular social traits by which communication competence can be measured. Many of these traits are outlined in Rubin and Martin’s (1994) Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale (ICCS), a quantitative research tool that measures communication competence in 10 areas: self-disclosure, the ability to “open up” (Rubin & Martin, 1994, p. 34) one’s personality to others; empathy, the ability to identify with another’s emotions and respond “from the other's position instead of referencing one's own experiences” (p. 34); social relaxation, meaning comfort and lack of apprehension in everyday interactions; assertiveness, which entails “standing up for one's rights without denying the rights of the other” (p. 35); interaction management, which encompasses skills such as “negotiating topics to be discussed, taking turns, beginning and ending conversations, and developing conversational topics” (p. 36); altercentrism, referring to one’s attentiveness and ability to perceive and adapt to what others are saying and thinking; expressiveness, the communication of one’s thoughts and feelings through both verbal and nonverbal expressions; supportiveness, which “confirms the other[‘s feelings]” (p. 36) and conveys equality and accountability; immediacy, entailing verbal nonverbal expressions of approachability, closeness, and warmth; and environmental control, the ability to “achieve predetermined goals and satisfy needs,” “solve problems in a cooperative atmosphere,” and “gain compliance from others” (p. 37). These proposed loci of communication competence paint a picture of mutual emotional and physical openness, consciousness of others’ implied feelings and needs, and equal exchange of conversational space at regular intervals. At the same time, this model identifies specific criteria for success in each measure, which in turn constitutes implicit conditions for failure.

This framework of communication competence becomes problematic for populations whose default communication tendencies do not align with dominant societal norms of effectiveness and appropriateness, as is the case for autistic people. Take, for instance, the first category of the official diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5):*

> Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):
>
> 1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
> 2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
> 3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers. (p. 50)

Consistent throughout this medical model of autism are words such as "deficits," "abnormal," "failure," and language of "lack" or "absence" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 50). The *DSM-5* also distinguishes common areas in which autistic people "fail" to communicate competently, such as equal conversational reciprocity, understanding of nonverbal signals like facial expressions and body language, consistent engagement in social interactions, adapting behaviors for different contexts, and expressing interest in making friends. These areas of alleged failure reflect many of the aforementioned standards of communication competence, particularly in the areas of self-disclosure, empathy, interaction management, altercentrism, and expressiveness. What is not overtly expressed in this medical model is that all of these "deficits" and "failures" are measured subjectively against neurotypical understandings of reciprocity, nonverbal signals, behavioral adaptation, and engagement with peers. Using neurotypical standards to evaluate the communicative effectiveness and appropriateness of a population that is by definition not neurotypical will inevitably create a poor reflection of that population's communication competence; on paper, the logic behind this process should seem quite flawed. However, because the DSM-5 was produced by the United States' leading body of experts in matters of psychiatry, this definition is largely accepted as an accurate and well-informed reflection of autistic personalities and social capacities.

Because these understandings of autism are the most legitimized, common discourses around autism perpetuate notions of autism as a tragic source of family turmoil, medical mystery, and general social undesirability (Bie & Tang, 2015; Holton et al., 2014). These notions may result from an over-reliance on reports from non-autistic family members, caregivers, doctors, and non-profit organizations to construct an observational narrative of autistic life (Holton et al., 2014; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021). Such narratives often result in understandings of autistic people as isolated, destructive, lacking in social capacities, and otherwise troubled and/or troubling to those around them (Bie & Tang, 2015; Gaeke-Franz, 2022; Holton et al., 2014). These narratives are then perpetuated into forms of purported advocacy designed on behalf of autistic people rather than by autistic people themselves. A particularly notable example is the organization Autism Speaks, whose Board of Directors had only two autistic people on the 28-person team as of April of 2024 (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2024). Autistic communities have repeatedly denounced Autism Speaks for its history of likening autism to a disease and advocating for a cure (Saunders, 2018). These pathologizing and catastrophizing rhetorics around autism have created a discursive environment in which autistic narratives of self-representation are dismissed as "little more than an index of their communicative and intuitive deficits" (Saunders, 2018, p. 4). In the words of Yergeau (2017), an autistic rhetorician, "Anything I claim here is held suspect on the basis of my very being . . . because I lack a theory of my mind and the minds of others, anything I say is inherently unreliable, idiosyncratic, and special" (p. 31). In this framing, because autistic communication is already functionally wrong, any arguments that an autistic person attempts to make on behalf of themselves or other autistic people are inherently faulty and cannot be taken seriously.

These broader cultural assumptions about autism frequently bleed into autistic communication scholarship. For instance, a 2021 study of conversational skills learning in autistic adolescents opens by describing natural autistic communication tendencies as "overly verbose," "one-sided," and "failure… to show interest in and sensitivity to their conversation partners" (Bambara et al., p. 4846). This negative positioning immediately cancels any consideration for the strengths of autistic communication or the societal and cultural restrictions that place autistic communication at a disadvantage. Gerlach-Houck and DeThorne (2023) discuss the expectations that speech and language therapists press upon autistic clients to understand neurotypical social norms and the process of “code switching” (p. 157) in order to achieve acceptance and success in neurotypical society. The authors express support for code switching as a tool for autistic people to perform well in high-stakes social situations. However, as Roberts (2024) articulates in response, teaching autistic people to “mask” or “camouflage” (p. 219) their autism by learning and mirroring neurotypical behavioral norms—and thus suppressing any outward expression of autism—should not be understood as a solution for an autistic person’s lack of belonging. This message not only perpetuates the attitude that autistic people are at fault for the discrimination they face, but also implicitly reinforces and prioritizes neurotypical privilege in social situations (Roberts, 2024). These trends reflect an overall lack of faith in autistic people as narrators of their own lives and experiences, which ultimately perpetuates the incomplete and ableist discourses around autism that pervade modern society.

Shifts in Autistic Communication Research

In response to the above trends, there is a growing push towards research into autistic communication that engages autistic perspectives. For example, Cummins et al. (2020) interviewed 18 autistic adults about their understandings of their own communication needs and preferences, as well as how difficulties in navigating neurotypical communication—the keyword being "neurotypical," as emphasized by the authors—impacted their health and behaviors. The participants articulated their individual strengths, weaknesses, and preferences regarding communication modalities, demonstrating a strong awareness of their communication skills in a variety of contexts. On that note, the participants also asserted that some of their communication "weaknesses" were more the result of societal barriers and lack of support than they were the result of simply being autistic. Participants felt much more capable and comfortable socializing with people whose communication preferences were similar to their own. Contrarily, when the participants had to try to adapt to neurotypical norms in order to navigate a social situation, they felt embarrassed, vulnerable, and as if they were being "tolerated" (p. 684) rather than truly welcomed. The latter type of interaction caused many participants to withdraw from social engagements or avoid them entirely, leading to feelings of isolation, negative self-concept, and compounded social anxiety—none of which suggest having been on the receiving end of effective and appropriate communication.

In addition, Howard and Sedgewick (2021) evaluated quantitative ratings of communication modalities and qualitative written responses to open-ended survey questions from 245 autistic adults to examine not just the participants' communication preferences in different situations, but also how factors such as current age, age of diagnosis, camouflaging, and anxiety influenced the participants' preferences. Importantly, Howard and Sedgewick (2021) disclose that they approached the project "as non-autistic autism researchers who prioritise community involvement" (p. 2267) and collaborated with an autistic consultant to ensure the accessibility of the study and the accuracy of the authors' findings. The "performance demand" (p. 2272) of camouflaging one's autism was described as highly taxing and detrimental to the participants' overall well-being, while interactions with other autistic people allowed participants to communicate more "effectively and honestly" according to "[their] own social rules" (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021, p. 2272). These findings challenge the narrative that autistic people fail to meet some universal set of standards for competent communication; rather, effectiveness and appropriateness are subjectively defined concepts that happen to differ between neurotypical and autistic communication styles. This, too, is already familiar knowledge to scholars who have found that many autistic people are successful communicators with conversation partners, including non-autistic individuals, who are able to understand and respond to their autistic behaviors (Crompton et al., 2020b; Keates, 2022). Put simply, it is a factually invalid assumption that autistic communication is inherently incompetent, as neurotypical communication is just as easily rendered ineffective and inappropriate when neurotypical individuals are unprepared or unwilling to entertain alternative ways of communicating.

The assumption that autistic people are unreliable narrators of their own experiences becomes even less credible when one considers the contributions of autism scholars who are themselves autistic. Among the most influential of such scholarship is Milton's (2012) sociological theory of the double empathy problem (DEP). Milton (2012) challenges the notion that autism is the sole cause of communication obstacles between autistic and neurotypical individuals; rather, the DEP frames these obstacles as the result of mutual disjunctions between what a neurotypical person assumes to be the "natural attitude" (p. 884) of social conduct, and an autistic person's perceived deviance from these norms as a result of their unique perceptions of their own and others' social behaviors. By illustrating effective communication between autistic and neurotypical people as dependent on both parties' ability to understand and respond to one another's differing social behaviors, Milton confronts neurotypical audiences with the subjectivity of their social realities, as well as their complicity in stigma around autistic communication. Since its conception, the DEP has been employed in journal articles, public programs, and seminars aimed towards teaching neurotypical people how to meet autistic people where they are, or at the very least in the middle, instead of leaving the entirety of the burden of social adaptation on the shoulders of autistic people (Keates, 2022; Milton et al., 2022; Ekdahl, 2023; Milton et al., 2023).

Potential for Growth

Despite these efforts to foster a more mindful approach to autism research, most scholarship around autism and autistic communication continues to hold itself back from its full potential. For instance, autism research tends to dramatically overrepresent autistic children and adolescents. Jang et al. (2014) found that out of 2,857 autism studies published across 20 years, only 605 studies—roughly 21% of the total sample—included any participants at or over the age of 20. These trends have led to a significant gap in knowledge about the communication preferences and needs of autistic adults (Shattuck, 2012; Zisk & Dalton, 2019). These gaps subsequently foster numerous barriers for autistic people attempting to navigate adult society, particularly in contexts of healthcare and access to alternative communication technology (Nicolaidis et al., 2015; Zisk & Dalton, 2019). Similarly, White and male-identifying individuals often dominate the demographic makeup of autism studies regardless of age (Linkous et al., 2024). This contributes to the racial and gendered biases in clinical processes of diagnosing autism (Kalb et al., 2022; Guerrero & Sobotka, 2022) as well as to stereotypical portrayals of autistic people as almost exclusively White and male-identifying (Heilker, 2012).

At the root of these and other problematic phenomena in autism studies is a pervasive and frustrating irony: the majority of extant academic knowledge about autism has been and continues to be produced by non-autistic people (Milton, 2014; Benham & Kizer, 2016). As explained earlier, effectiveness and appropriateness, the two primary markers of communication competence according to Cupach and Spitzberg (1983), are two of the standards by which autistic people are most frequently disadvantaged in discussions of autistic communication. Returning again to the lingering scholarly assumption that autistic communication is ineffective and inappropriate by default, the resulting conclusion is that autistic people cannot be trusted to make coherent or meaningful contributions to scholarship. These misconceptions have contributed to a phenomenon wherein autistic voices are routinely excluded from the production of autism knowledge (Milton & Bracher, 2013). As a result, many of the problems in autism scholarship that have been illustrated thus far will likely remain largely unaddressed as long as autism scholarship is dominated by non-autistic positionalities.

There is another angle of communication competence that implicates the role of masking in the dearth of autistic positionalities outside of sampling pools. "Masking" is a colloquial term that refers to the process of suppressing behaviors that may be associated with autism (Miller et al., 2021). The purpose of masking is to conceal the behaviors that would mark oneself as autistic to avoid the stigma that comes with being visibly autistic in a neurotypical society (Cage et al., 2022). This process largely entails learning to mimic normative nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, creating "social scripts" (Cage et al., 2022, p. 247) for certain types of conversations, and suppressing noticeably autistic behaviors such as stimming, talking about special interests, non-normative speech and language patterns, and other markers of non-belonging with the neurotypical crowd (Cook et al., 2021). In doing this, the autistic person can create a more normative and thus socially acceptable impression among neurotypical peers. So long as an autistic person can maintain the mask of neurotypicality, they can at least partially shield themselves from the social and systemic rejection that comes with being legibly autistic.

The concealment of behavioral markers of autism demonstrates an autistic person's keen perception and analysis of other individuals' behaviors and that person's ability to strategically adapt their own conduct. Spitzberg (1983) examines effectiveness and appropriateness in three frames: 1. knowledge and understanding of the effective and appropriate communication behaviors in different contexts, 2. ability to perform those behaviors skillfully and strategically, and 3. the social impression that results from the interplay between one's level of knowledge and one's level of skill. Within these dynamics, Spitzberg explains, "a person can be skilled but not competent, competent but not skilled, effective but not competent, or competent but not effective" (1983, p. 323). To learn what one must do to not only avoid being detected as autistic, but also to specifically pass as neurotypical, requires knowledge of neurotypical communicative norms and skills in performing them, even if one does not fully understand the reasoning behind those norms. In other words, masking is demonstrative of an autistic person's communication competence. The cost, however, is that many autistic positionalities are assumed to be neurotypical, which consequently reinforces wider cultural assumptions that neurotypicality is the default state and neurodivergent people are outliers.

Thus, while it is true that autistic people are systemically and socially prevented from studying autistic communication, it may also be that the scholars who openly disclose their autistic positionality constitute only a small portion of the amount of autistic people in researcher roles, and that other autistic scholars who have accessed academia by strategically masking their autism continue to do so out of self-preservation. Such an experience is narrated by Pryal (2024), an autistic law professor and rhetorician who also has bipolar disorder and anxiety disorder. Pryal describes an experience at a conference presentation about stigma against mental illness related to gun violence in which she and her fellow panelists were asked by an audience member if any of them identified as disabled. Pryal, who had never publicly disclosed her disability status at the time, felt compelled to answer truthfully to the audience member's "test" (2024, p. 72) of Pryal's positionality. However, as a contingent faculty member and lifelong victim of stigma against her disabilities, Pryal was "terrified and furious" (p. 71) at being coerced into outing herself as neurologically disabled at the risk of losing her reputation or even her job. Experiences like Pryal's only further incriminate the discriminatory and exclusionary consequences of treating neurotypical standards of effectiveness and appropriateness as natural law. These practices not only shut down the potential for dialogue and collaborative reflection between non-autistic researchers and autistic participants, but also shut out autistic scholars and community partners whose perspectives would provide valuable innovations to study designs and interpretations.

Emergence of Autistic Social Identity

There is, thankfully, a slowly growing body of literature that seeks to counteract some of these counterproductive trends. One area of scholarship that has demonstrated particularly effortful engagement with autistic communities is the study of social identity as it relates to autism. Social identity as it is understood today has evolved from early sociological work examining the dynamics between self-concept and society (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). These works theorize that a person constructs a concept of who they are based on their interpretations of others' attitudes towards them. Goffman (1959) adds performance of identity to this framework, showing that just as others' attitudes towards a person influence that person's self-concept, the ways in which that person—the "actor"—portrays themselves to others—the "audience"—create the basis upon which others will form an impression of that person's "character" (p. 35). These grounding notions of identity as a socially situated process inform following advancements in interpersonal and intergroup communication scholarship, including and especially Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT).

Tajfel (1974) defines social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 69). In other words, when a person recognizes shared traits between themselves and others through social interactions, they may identify themselves as part of a collective based on those shared traits. Having identified oneself as a member of a group that is distinct from the rest of society, one may start to integrate the beliefs and behaviors of that group into one's self-concept and conduct (Tajfel, 1974). Tajfel's definition of collective social identity is carried over to the development of Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory illustrates how social identity is driven not just by in-group identification, but also through intergroup encounters. When multiple groups with differing social identities inevitably encounter each other, members of each group are compelled to evaluate the collective character and societal status of their group in comparison to the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These intergroup dynamics further inform how members of a group understand and enact their collective identity, which in turn can motivate an individual to feel more positively or negatively about the aspects of their own identity that are associated with the group overall.

Historically, following the aforementioned cultural and academic trend of framing autistic communication in terms of lack or failure, scholarly discourses around autistic identity have often assumed from the jump that autistic people inherently have a "disrupted" (Arnaud, 2022) self-concept. If one is operating on the philosophy that identity is socially constructed, but also maintains the belief that autistic people inherently have reduced social capacities, then there is a third implicit assumption that autistic people have a less coherent or substantial sense of identity than neurotypical people. As recent developments in autistic identity research have demonstrated, this could not be further from the truth (Cohen et al., 2022; Crompton et al., 2020a; Underhill et al., 2024). Crucial to understanding how autistic identity manifests, however, is to first understand how identity is constituted through individual thoughts and performances and their interplay with broader in-group and out-group relationships. Before I illustrate the trajectory of autistic social identity scholarship, I will explore Hecht's (1993) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as a helpful tool for framing the uniquely nuanced themes of selfhood and belonging that appear in discussions of autistic identity.

Communication Theory of Identity

The foundations of Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) are derived from previously described concepts of social construction of self-concept, performance and recognition of shared traits, and adoption of certain beliefs and behaviors in accordance with group solidarity (or lack thereof) from Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and identity theory (Goffman, 1959). Whereas these theories are largely rooted in the contexts of in-group, intergroup, and societal roles and norms, CTI zooms in on the individual social interactions through which identity is constructed and communicated. The theory contends that "a person's sense of self is part of his or her social behavior and the sense of self emerges and is defined and redefined in social interaction" (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p. 138). In other words, social behaviors themselves are just as integral to a person's sense of identity as the roles and beliefs associated with those behaviors, and individuals may define a shared identity through performances and interpretations of shared behaviors.

CTI assumes that social identity develops through four "frames" of identity (Hecht, 1993, p. 79): personal, enacted, relational, and communal. The personal frame points to the individual's self-concept, self-cognitions, self-esteem, and "spiritual sense of being" (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p. 140). This frame may apply to how a person perceives themselves under the influence of particular social situations, but it can also refer to how a person understands themselves more broadly across all situations. The enacted layer of identity highlights the behaviors through which one translates their internalized identity into social messages and behaviors; as Hecht and Lu (2014) explain, “communication not only causes and is caused by identity, but is identity itself” (p. 225). The relational frame contains three aspects: one, identity emerges through interactions with other people, which inform a person’s knowledge of the traits and categorizations that others ascribe to them; two, identity may be defined in terms of one’s position in different types of relationships, such as marriages, friendships, or colleagues; and three, relationships themselves can become a form of unified identity between two or more people (Hecht, 1993; Hecht & Choi, 2012). Finally, the communal frame refers to identity at the level of larger groups and cultures, integrating into one’s sense of self the characteristics, experiences, and codes of conduct that are shared and replicated between members of the group at large (Hecht, 1993; Hecht & Choi, 2012).

These four frames of identity are not strictly conceptualized as separate from one another; rather, Hecht (1993) specifically emphasizes the dialectical “interpenetration” (p. 80) that inevitably occurs between multiple frames of identity. For instance, Hecht et al. (1993) examine how members of the African American community (communal frame) define themselves as African American (personal frame), as well as the tensions between how they perform African American identity (enacted frame) when interacting with other African American people as opposed to with European Americans (relational frame). CTI research has also generated questions around “identity gaps” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268), or contradictions between two or more of any of the four frames of identity outlined in CTI. A great deal of this research has occurred in the context of health communication, centering the negative outcomes of stress, depression, and unsuccessful communication with peers, family members, and healthcare professionals (Hecht & Choi, 2012; Hecht & Lu, 2014; Jung & Hecht, 2008; Jung et al., 2007).

On the other hand, identity gaps may also motivate positive behavioral changes when health intervention messages “evoke incongruent identities and provide solutions or approaches that will reduce the inconsistency” (Hecht & Choi, 2012). One example is that of school-based drug prevention messages directed at adolescents who personally identify as adolescents and believe that drug use is a communal norm among their peers (Tobler et al., 2000). Messages that change the “normative belief” (Hecht & Choi, 2012) show these adolescents that fewer of their peers use drugs than those who abstain and that other adolescents generally disapprove of drug use, thereby encouraging adolescents to avoid drug use in order to maintain belonging with their peers (Tobler et al., 2000). These findings point to the heavy role of enactment in both the solidification of one’s personal sense of identity and in the maintenance of that identity in interpersonal relationships and community connections.

CTI studies that lead with the enacted frame often center tensions between concealment and disclosure of closeted identities. Hecht and Faulkner (2000) use interviews with Jewish Americans to explore how members of this population decide when to disclose or conceal their Jewish American identity. The acts of disclosure and concealment are in and of themselves enactments of identity, but the study also reveals that there are direct and indirect behaviors and traits that are uniquely recognizable to other Jewish Americans as indicative of their shared identity, including accents, names, discussion of Jewish traditions, and use of Yiddish or Hebrew (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000). The implicit disclosure of personal Jewish American identity through these enactments allows Jewish American individuals to connect with one another relationally and communally without fully disclosing their identities to out-group individuals. Faulkner and Hecht (2011) also examine how people who identify as both Jewish and LGBTQ understand and enact their intersecting identities. They find that disagreements between partners about when and how to disclose Jewish and/or LGBTQ identity (if at all) can cause relational challenges, and that each individual's comfort level regarding expression or concealment of their identities depended heavily on contextual influences from Jewish communities, LGBTQ communities, and distinctly Jewish *and* LGBTQ communities (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). These studies point to the strategic nature of constructing and maintaining identity, the role of in-group connections in orienting and solidifying identity, and the tensions that can result when alignments in one or two frames of identity do not guarantee alignments in the other frames of identity.

Communicating Autistic Identity

With the framing concepts of CTI in mind, I now explore how approaches to autistic communication research have evolved through the study of autistic identity. As some researchers work to change the basis of knowledge upon which autistic identity is understood, input from autistic adults at varying stages of the research process has become a point of focus. Collecting data from an adult demographic generates insights into the experiences of people who have had more time to grapple with the notion of autistic identity, and have done so in realms of life experience that children and adolescents have not encountered. For example, McDonald (2020) surveys over 1,000 autistic adults through an online survey to study the relationship between formal diagnosis versus self-diagnosis of autism and trends of demographic characteristics, stigma experiences, self-concept, and quality of life. Comparisons of data from formally diagnosed participants and self-diagnosed participants showed that the trends were largely the same between both groups, with the exception of demographic data; self-diagnosed participants were more likely to be older, woman-identifying, and employed, while less likely to be students or to prefer using the term "autism."

Relatedly, Bury et al. (2023) investigate how perceptions of stigma, which may threaten how strongly or openly one wishes to associate themselves with a stigmatized group, influence an autistic person's preferences for identity-first language (i.e., "autistic person") versus person-first language (i.e., "person with autism"). The study uses survey results from 198 people over the age of 18 with a formal diagnosis of autism, finding that older participants were often diagnosed more recently and felt more positively towards identity-first language than younger participants. Bury et al. (2023) suggest that those diagnosed later in life may have been exposed to more positive messaging about autism due to the increase in autism advocacy in recent years, and thus feel more comfortable with identity-first language despite having a weaker sense of autistic identity. Like Howard and Sedgewick (2021), Bury et al. (2023) consulted two autistic academics about the study's approach and design. The inclusion of autistic perspectives in the production of the study rather than only in the sample adds a layer of empowerment and accountability that is sorely lacking in most other autistic communication literature.

Some scholars are also making greater efforts to explore more specific angles of autistic identity. Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2020) examine the relationship between autistic identity, camouflaging, and disclosure. The survey, which was also reviewed by two autistic consultants, found conflicting relationships between strength of autistic identity and the amount of camouflaging behaviors. While stronger autistic identity was generally linked to less camouflaging and more disclosure, the data also showed a link between strong autistic identity and *more* camouflaging and *less* disclosure. These findings suggest that the effects of autistic identity on camouflaging and disclosure are dependent on situation-specific factors not accounted for in the study, such as perceived risk of stigma, age of diagnosis, other layers of marginalization, or environmental implications (i.e., communication in the workplace). While camouflaging and disclosure both constitute enacted forms of identity, camouflaging may be taken as indicative of a gap between enacted identity and personal, relational, and/or communal identity, whereas disclosure represents a stronger connection between enactment of autistic identity and its companion frames.

Looking more specifically at the particular variables of autistic identity that may contribute to such trends, Davies et al. (2024) perform a review of 3,617 quantitative studies of autism identity, compiling a table that synthesizes some of the major "aspects of Autistic identity" (p. 877) and the literature from which those themes were derived. The list of themes is an extensive but non-exhaustive accounting of both positive and negative aspects. Positive aspects include but are not limited to acceptance of one's autism (Cage et al., 2018; Lamash & Meyer, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020), centrality of autistic identity (Cooper et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2023; Ferenc et al., 2023; Maitland et al., 2021), life enrichment and other benefits gained from being autistic (Lamash and Meyer, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020), and identification with autistic community and culture (Cage et al., 2022; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2020; Cresswell & Cage, 2019). Negative aspects include internalized stigma (Botha and Frost, 2020; Bury et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023), feelings of helplessness or domination of one's life by autism (Nguyen et al., 2020; Lamash & Meyer, 2022), exclusion and rejection (Corden et al., 2021; Lamash & Meyer, 2022), and dissociation from other autistic people (Perry et al., 2022). The existence of these studies and their common variables demonstrate the complex web of personal, enacted, relational, and communal autistic identities that shape autistic life and being.

Some of these studies have also investigated autistic identity in particular adult settings. For instance, Lamash and Meyer (2022) explore formally diagnosed autistic adults' perceptions of their work-related self-efficacy, recording overall lower confidence in career planning, job acquisition, and workplace social skills regardless of how positively or negatively one felt about their autism diagnosis. Other authors have begun to home in on autistic identity in academia and education. Cohen et al. (2022) and Underhill et al. (2024) both ask how autism stigma in schools can shape students' autistic identity. Cohen (2022) focuses on elementary and secondary school environments, conducting interviews with ten autistic participants between the ages of 15 and 35 years old about their interactions with peers and teachers. Participants reported that they were often treated poorly by teachers and peers after disclosing their autism, and that the severity of the stigma they faced was sometimes compounded by intersecting marginalized identities. However, the participants found ways to empower themselves by making active choices around to whom they self-disclosed and when, identifying and embracing their unique strengths as autistic people, and combating stigma and misconceptions around autism by asserting their own understandings and experiences. These individuals made strategic choices around the enactment of their personal, relational, and communal identities in order to challenge negative stereotypes and stigma, thus reorienting their autistic identities into a more positive light.

Underhill et al. (2024) takes similar questions and methods to the university setting, interviewing ten undergraduate students about how they navigated autism stigma at their institution. Participants largely sought to avoid stigma by concealing their autistic traits, and some engaged in social comparisons against students who they perceived as more noticeably autistic in an effort to make themselves less of a target. Rather than place the responsibility upon their neurotypical peers to change their perceptions, these students believed that the stigma was justified and that it was the burden of autistic students to change their behavior accordingly. In this case, participants did all they could to dissociate their enacted, relational, and communal identities from their personal autistic identity, suggesting that the prevalence of autism stigma in higher education environments can drastically impact an autistic student’s ability to form a positive and multifaceted sense of autistic identity.

Finally, centering the in-group dynamics of autistic identity, some studies have aimed to answer the question of to what extent social engagement with other autistic people influences an autistic person’s self-concept. Crompton et al. (2020a) interview 12 autistic adults about their feelings towards themselves and their autism during and after interacting with neurotypical people compared to interactions with other autistic people. The participants report experiencing profound feelings of belonging, solidarity, and comfort in presenting one’s “authentic, autistic self” (p. 1445) when interacting with other autistic people, as opposed to the pervasive anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion they experienced when trying to navigate neurotypical social norms. These findings suggest a highly influential and positive connection between access to relational and communal autistic identities and the strength of one’s personal and enacted autistic identities.

This suggestion has similarly appeared in research of autistic identity in public education settings. Crompton et al. (2023) interview 13 autistic young adults between 18 and 30 years old about their past experiences of autistic peer support programs in mainstream public schooling. The participants felt that finding and befriending autistic peers helped them to feel more included and welcomed in social situations and empowered them to contribute to the coordination and impact of the peer support programs in their schools. Participants also found comfort in the flexibility of social engagement and the types of support they received from their peers. While challenges related to autism stigma remained constant, participants also noted the potential for peer support programs to foster understanding and acceptance of autism in schools. Programs that fostered relationships and community between students directly led to those students feeling more positively about themselves and their autistic social behaviors and needs, reinforcing the connections between different frames of identity found in Crompton et al. (2020a).

In a study that illustrates the consequences of a lack of autistic peer connections, Macleod et al. (2013) interview six university students about their perceptions, knowledge, and personal identification with autism or Asperger syndrome. Some participants did report learning more about their autism through contact with other autistic people and their stories. However, as a whole, the participants' experiences with autistic community and solidarity were limited, and many felt a dissonance between their personal understanding of autistic identity and the neurotypically situated knowledge of autism and Asperger syndrome that was available to them. Juxtaposed with the findings of the previous two studies, these outcomes further highlight the critical role of in-group connections in the development and solidification of a self-determined autistic identity.

The research trends described above indicate a growing movement towards an understanding of autistic identity that is rooted in more nuanced engagement with genuine autistic perspectives. What researchers thus far have still not purposefully investigated is which specific elements of social interactions between autistic people contribute to the development of an autistic identity. By "specific elements," I am referring to particular verbal and behavioral patterns that autistic people may recognize in themselves and/or others as indicative of autism—in other words, the diverse enacted forms of autistic identity that simultaneously feed into and result from personal, relational, and communal autistic identity. While the literature discussed above demonstrates ongoing discourses regarding the relationships between autistic peer interactions and enacted autistic identity more generally, these discourses have thus far done little to explore the specific social behaviors enacted in these interactions that contribute to other frames of autistic identity. Previous studies that highlight the enacted frame have shown that performances of identity have unique meanings, functions, and possible tensions between individuals who share the identity in question (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000; Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). Bringing similar inquiries into the context of autistic identity would illuminate the strategic complexity of autistic social behaviors that are often dismissed under the language of ‘deficits’ and ‘failures’ to communicate competently.

A study of enacted autistic identity would also expand and enhance current scholarly understandings of *why* autistic peer relationships and communities are essential to supporting autistic individuals’ self-image and self-esteem. This is particularly needed in the context of higher education, where autistic students’ willingness and ability to connect with other autistic students on their campuses has been shown to massively impact how these individuals understand what it means for anyone to be autistic, let alone themselves (Macleod et al., 2013; Underhill et al., 2024). There is already evidence to show that psychological and academic outcomes for autistic students improve massively when systems are put in place to support their strengths and foster connections with other autistic students (Van Hees et al., 2015; Davis et al., 2021; Sarett, 2017). Higher education institutions who are seeking similar ways to create more accessible social spaces and resources for autistic students would be better equipped to do so with autistic-informed knowledge on what meaningful autistic social connections entail, especially relating to aspects of autistic interactions that may clash with the structures and functions of more normative student social spaces.

Bringing together these concerns of elevating autistic agency and enhancing autistic social support in higher education, this study aims to use autistic university students’ reflections on their experiences of autistic peer interactions to understand the ways autistic identity is enacted, constructed, and continuously *re*constructed in interactions between autistic university students. Having now synthesized the development of the literature that reveals the exigency of this work, I posit the following two research questions as the defining lines of inquiry before outlining my study's methodology:

RQ1: What are the specific communication behaviors that autistic university students associate with autistic identity?

RQ2: How do autistic university students make sense of autistic identity in their reporting of autistic peer interactions?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This chapter explicates how my study addresses the gap in knowledge of autistic identity regarding which specific behaviors contribute to the development of autistic identity. I first provide my reasoning for a qualitative approach, then outline an interview-based data collection process. I then explain the ways my interview protocol extends and evolves traditional interview-based studies and why a change to offer multiple interview options is of vital ethical importance for this particular study. Finally, I outline my process of data analysis using an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach in line with the methodologies of previous critical autism research.

While there is a growing basis of quantitative knowledge about autistic identity demonstrated in the earlier Literature Review chapter, the general predictors of autistic experiences provided by this literature are limited in their explorations of heterogeneity across individual autistic lives. A shift towards qualitative approaches is necessary to capture more personal and nuanced reports from autistic individuals as well as research methods that can help respond to the research questions of this study. While an observational study would have allowed me to analyze enacted forms of autistic identity in action, the preceding literature review articulates the negative consequences of relying too heavily on observational studies in autism research (Holton et al., 2014; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021) and the significance of centering the voiced perspectives of autistic individuals in discussions of what it means to be autistic (Bury et al., 2023; Howard and Sedgewick, 2021). As such, my Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved (July 15, 2025) data collection method consisted of qualitative interviews with autistic university students. Interviews allow participants to narrate their experiences, actions, feelings, and rationales in their own words, providing more detailed information about a topic that can strengthen or complicate the broader conclusions of quantitative research (Tracy, 2020). In addition, interviews can provide insight into participants' preferred language around their identities and issues, as well as reveal new information that is not widely known or accessible outside of specific environments and communities (Tracy, 2020). My study grew beyond already researched broad predictors of common autistic experiences and sought out the valuable lessons to be learned from the unique stories and expressions of autistic individuals.

Because autistic university students are a largely underrecognized population in university settings, my procedures for recruitment first utilized snowball sampling. Snowball sampling begins by identifying a small number of individuals who meet the criteria for the population being studied, then asking those individuals to suggest other candidates for participation (Tracy, 2020). This sampling method utilizes the existing social networks between members of a specific population to reach other members of that population, making it an especially useful method for studies related to marginalized groups who may otherwise be harder to locate (Noy, 2008). As an autistic person who completed all four years of my bachelor's degree at Colorado State University and has spent a total of seven years at this institution upon the completion of my master's degree, I have formed an abundance of relationships with other autistic students across many different colleges and majors on my university campus. Additionally, I have worked alongside other autistic graduate students to establish a student organization called the Graduate Student Neurodivergent Affinity Group, which aims to be a space for connection, support, and awareness-raising for neurodivergent and neurologically disabled students across all graduate programs. These personal and professional relations provided me with potential access to a vast network of autistic students at Colorado State

University (CSU) from which I aimed to recruit interview participants across different years of education, majors, ages, and other intersecting identities such as gender and race.

While working within personal campus networks does carry some risk of researcher bias, I sought to mitigate this risk by starting my sampling process by reaching out to a handful of individuals whose wider social networks were unlikely to heavily overlap with mine and each other's. For instance, one initial candidate was an undergraduate student in a liberal arts discipline who arrived at a self-diagnosis of autism in adulthood, while another candidate was a PhD student in a STEM field who was formally diagnosed in childhood. This approach both increased the variety of individual, social, and academic experiences represented in the study sample and helped to reach students beyond my immediate sphere of relationships, thus reducing the influence of prior history with study participants upon the findings.

The snowball sampling process was later supplemented using multiple routes of opportunistic sampling, including posting recruitment flyers in public areas and partnering with CSU organizations to disseminate information about the study. Opportunistic sampling methods such as these have historically been useful when more direct communication with the study population is difficult, time-consuming, or expensive (Tracy, 2020). These methods are also helpful when the perceived trustworthiness of the research personnel and procedures is a significant concern, as approaching potential participants "where they are" (Langer et al., 2021, p. 1107) can assuage these worries. The launch of this study overlapped with the second half of the Spring 2025 semester, a period during which many students were highly preoccupied with coursework. This timeline also ran through the summer, meaning that eligible study participants who had more time and energy to devote to an interview were still not easy to reach through on-campus networks and communications. Finally, as previously explained, autistic university students are often vulnerable to discrimination outside of their own trusted networks and may feel reassured if the study information is received from familiar people and spaces. Thus, beginning in the summer of 2025 and continuing through the fall, I sought permission from applicable administrators to post flyers detailing general information about the study in areas of campus which were still somewhat active and in off-campus venues which were frequented by students who were still in town. I also reached out to the administrators of the CSU Student Disability Center, the CSU Psychological Services Center, and the Student Disability Club to seek approval to disseminate information about the study through relevant organizational email lists and/or social media. These recruiting methods were more likely to reach members of the study population who could not be successfully reached or recruited through my existing campus networks.

Participants were recruited based on three essential criteria. First, participants must have self-avowed as being autistic or as having autism. However, this criterion explicitly welcomed both formally diagnosed and self-diagnosed individuals. This carried Sturm et al.'s (2024) evidence for the equal reliability of formal and self-diagnosis of autism into practical application and made participation more accessible to those who were unable and/or chose not to obtain a formal diagnosis (Galliver et al., 2017; Kalb et al., 2022; Guerrero & Sobotka, 2022; McDonald, 2020). Secondly, participants must have been at least 18 years old, as this study was aimed at autistic adults only to center an underrepresented demographic in autism research (Jang et al., 2014). Third, participants must have been current or former CSU students, including alumni. The scope was limited to this institution for three reasons. First, many land grant institutions like CSU hold a commitment towards local community contributions (Colorado State University, n.d.). As a graduate student at CSU, I have aimed to use my thesis to contribute to my institution’s efforts toward improving access and equity for neurodivergent and neurologically disabled populations. Additionally, as a member of the neurodivergent and neurologically disabled community at CSU, I was personally invested in creating a study that gave back to the people whose profound solidarity and support have shaped my individual and academic journey over the past several years. Finally, on a purely practical level, containing the geographic scope of my sample pool to my own university was better suited to the program’s timeline of a thesis process and research project of viable scope.

While recommended sample sizes for qualitative research vary widely depending on methods, scope, and the topic of the study (Creswell, 2007), Morse’s (2000) recommendation to use at least 6 to 10 participants for an interview-based phenomenological study with a narrow scope and clear, specific subject matter aligned well with the constraints of my project. Thus, I proposed an IRB of a maximum of 20 participants and work within this recruitment parameter. This range afforded room to continue collecting data toward thematic saturation (Tracy, 2020), while still establishing parameters in the amount of data collected to a manageable level.

Once a CSU IRB protocol was approved, to more efficiently spread the word about my study while also securing the confidentiality of each participant’s identity and interview data, I disseminated a flyer briefly summarizing the purpose and participant criteria of the study and instructing interested parties to email me directly for more information. This flyer was sent to the initial candidates as described above with instructions to distribute the flyer to others who might have qualified for the study, along with a disclaimer that in adherence to human subject research confidentiality, interested parties would need to contact me directly according to the information on the flyer in order to be considered for participation. This flyer was later posted in a hard copy format in various campus and public areas and used in approved partnerships with CSU organizations to advertise the study during the summer. I did not confirm or deny any contacts or decisions regarding participation to any individuals outside of each connection. Contacts who expressed interest in being interviewed received a response email providing a much more thorough explanation of the study in accordance with IRB guidelines for informed consent, including my identity and affiliations as a researcher, the interview procedures in which the individual was being asked to participate, and how the interview data would be utilized in future stages of the project. Contacts who then confirmed that they were willing and able to participate in the study were sent a Qualtrics survey to collect their name, contact information, demographic information, diagnostic status, and a pseudonym of their choice. This information was compiled into a spreadsheet for use in interview planning, transcription, and data analysis. All documents containing confidential participant information were password-locked, accessible only to myself and my committee, and destroyed after data analysis had concluded.

As for data collection, interviews were made available in multiple formats, and each participant was allowed to choose the format of their preference. Autistic individuals' communication preferences vary from person to person; any given individual's attitudes towards verbal, written, face-to-face, mediated, or augmented and alternative communication (AAC) technologies (i.e., text-to-speech software, signed languages, etc.) are unique and change between situational contexts (Cummins et al., 2020; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021; Zisk & Dalton, 2019). While this knowledge of differing communication needs within autistic communities is clearly established in the prior literature review, it is often not accounted for in studies that employ interviews with autistic participants.

Because the thesis aimed to produce autism knowledge that highlighted the agency of autistic voices at all stages of the project, it was vital to recognize the unique communication needs of each individual by giving participants more control over and within their interview process. Thus, participants were allowed to choose between a semi-structured face-to-face interview, a semi-structured virtual interview conducted over Teams, Zoom, or a similar platform, or a more structured written email interview with as much similarity as possible in the interview questions between each option. Accommodating each participant's communication preferences allowed participants to more comfortably and thoroughly articulate their experiences in their preferred medium, thus producing interview data that more accurately represented the participants' lived experiences (Heath et al., 2018; MacLeod et al., 2017).

Face-to-face interviews and virtual interviews lasted no more than 60 minutes, including room for optional two-minute breaks at the participant's discretion. With each participant's verbal consent, face-to-face interviews were recorded (audio only) using a digital recording device and virtual interviews were recorded using applicable software resources. Audio recordings were used to transcribe each interview into a password-protected Word document and destroyed upon completion of the transcription. Participants who chose to complete the interview in a written format were sent a password-protected Word document containing the interview instructions and questions via email. Written interview participants would be asked to return their written responses via email within 72 hours of receiving the interview prompts. This allowed participants to take advantage of the affordances of an asynchronous interview (i.e., answering at one's own pace, reflecting upon and revising answers for accuracy, reduced sense of pressure or intrusiveness) while still ensuring that data was obtained within a timely manner (Fritz & Vandermause, 2018). Written responses were transferred to a separate password-protected Word document for analysis with their original copies destroyed thereafter.

Prior to commencing each interview, I asked each participant to affirm their informed consent to their participation in the study. For face-to-face and virtual interviews, I read a list of items related to the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, the use of audio recording, and the processing and protection of all data, including de-identification of interview content and secure management of confidential information. Written interview participants were provided the same checklist in a digital format with the recording question removed and asked to type "Y" next to each item to affirm their informed consent. All compiled transcripts and written responses were kept on secure flash drives and password-protected documents accessible only to myself and my committee.

For my interview protocol and eventual conclusions from the interview data, Hecht's (1993) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as discussed earlier served as a valuable grounding theoretical framework. CTI emphasizes the construction and enactment of identity at the level of individual social interactions and relationships as well as in broader communities (Hecht, 1993). This study focused on collecting interview data that could define and explain the behaviors that constitute and communicate autistic identity, and less so on the general roles and societal positions of autistic identity as a whole. Therefore, CTI was a useful framework for narrowing down the broader lines of inquiry in its parent theories, leading to more specific discourses about what interview participants described as communicative practices and processes of autistic identity.

The generated list of interview questions explored how participants described their sense of autistic identity as an individual (personal frame), the language and actions they use to communicate that identity to other autistic people (enacted frame), how those behaviors lead to connection and understanding between themselves and another autistic student they are interacting with (relational frame), and how a sense of community arises from recurring performances and understandings of autistic identity across interactions with different autistic students (communal frame). Because the study sought participants' narratives about language and behavior associated with autistic identity, enacted identity was emphasized in the interview protocol. To ensure that the phrasing and progression of my interview protocol were appropriate for the target population of this study, I practiced both the face-to-face and written protocols with two qualifying individuals (who were subsequently excluded from the sample pool of the study proper) and amended the protocols as necessary based on the results and feedback from these practice interviews. The final versions of the interview protocols utilized in this study are provided in Appendix A.

After interviews were conducted and transcribed, I processed the resulting interview data using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is grounded in phenomenology, which urges a scholarly focus on the lived experiences of individuals and the suspension of judgment from the researcher (Tracy, 2020). As a qualitative paradigm, phenomenology orients researchers towards self-reflexivity around their own subjectivity and assumptions, exploration of participants' personal experiences through detailed narrative accounts, and collaboration with participants throughout the collection and analysis of data to ensure ethical integrity (Tracy, 2020). First articulated in 2009 by Smith et al., IPA builds upon the interpretive nature of phenomenological studies from both the participant and the researcher perspective, approaching data analysis with the mindset that "the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith & Osborn, 2015). As a part of this sense-making process, IPA asks the researcher to examine each individual case with equal rigor before drawing more general conclusions from the data as a whole (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015). In the context of my study, this meant devoting equal attention to each interview as its own unique account and identifying the threads of autistic identity within each individual piece, then comparing and contrasting the themes from each interview to locate where each participant's experiences overlap and diverge.

I chose this method of analysis because of its repeated usage in other critical qualitative studies of autism (Howard et al., 2019; Macleod, 2019). Multiple reviews of IPA-based autism research have found that IPA is highly successful at elevating the capacity and agency of autistic individuals to articulate and reflect upon their own experiences. MacLeod (2019) synthesizes three major strengths from thirteen IPA studies of autism: attention to and disruption of power relations between researchers and participants; empowerment of autistic narratives and simultaneous challenging of dominant neurotypical narratives of autism; and the potential to develop new frameworks for including autistic individuals in stages of the project other than data collection. Similarly, Howard et al. (2019) evaluate ten studies of autism that utilize IPA, finding that the emphasize on researcher self-reflexivity resulted in better researcher-participant rapport, adaptations to traditional interview methods to accommodate diverse autistic communication preferences, pilot interviews to verify the compatibility of interview protocols with participants' communication needs, and several other outcomes that made each study a more positive and productive experience for researchers and participants alike.

Following the lead of many of these studies, I built my data analysis procedures around those outlined by Smith et al. (2009) and adapted them as needed to recognize and accommodate the needs of autistic university students. These procedures included analyzing each transcript using a line-by-line read, descriptive comments in the left-hand margin, and emergent themes in the right-hand margin; identifying the common themes between interviews; building a list of master themes and sub-themes; creating a narrative account of thematic findings using participants' quotes as examples; and linking themes back to existing research while acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015). To exemplify a part of these procedures, the master list of themes and sub-themes produced in this study is provided under Figure 1 on the following page. The analysis and conclusions were later represented in the written thesis using relevant quotations from interviewees, with the terminology and phrasing used by participants to describe their experiences preserved throughout the discussion. This ensured that the cultural discourses implicated within these symbolic terms and their meanings as communicated by the participants were mitigates by my reflexivity as the researcher (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2012; Scollo, 2011).

In summary, this study utilized qualitative semi-structured interviews in face-to-face, written, and virtual formats to invite autistic CSU students to discuss how they understand and perform autistic identity. Using CTI's personal, enacted, relational, and communal frames of identity as a guiding framework, participants were asked to reflect upon and narrate their experiences and constructions of autistic identity in a higher education setting. The interview data was coded and analyzed using the procedures of IPA, ensuring that the participants' voices were placed at the forefront of the findings represented in the written project. The results of these procedures are explicated in the following Analysis chapter.

Figure 1

Master List of Themes and Sub-themes

Personal Identity	Autism as context for holistic self	
	Childhood narratives	
	Valences of personal identity and diagnostic status	
Enacted Identity	Bodily and Affective Identity	Aversion to eye contact
		Flat affect
	Linguistic and Conversational Identity	Direct/formal language
		Aversion to small talk
	Cognitive and Emotional Identity	Masking
		Special interests
		Thinking styles

Fig. 1 (continued)

Relational Identity	Hard signals	Stimming
		Aversion to eye contact
		Infodumping
		Explicit disclosure
	Soft signals	Ease of communication
		Diminished compulsion to mask
		Quiet proximity
Communal Identity	Lack thereof	
	Awareness of autistic student body	
	Inhibiting social and environmental factors	
	Tensions between autistic and campus identities	
	Considerations for autistic-inclusive spaces	
	Efficacy of existing community-facilitating groups	

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

The Analysis explores the thematic outcomes from the interview data collected and produced in this study. I first provide clarity and transparency regarding the total sample size of my study, the quantities of interview data, and the organization of my findings throughout this chapter. I then proceed with a thorough exploration of the themes that surfaced across the interviews, using direct quotes and details from different participants' interviews to exemplify and elaborate upon the common discourses of autistic identity among these Colorado State University (CSU) students.

A total of eight interviews were conducted throughout this study, including five undergraduate students and three graduate students of varying diagnostic and demographic identities. All three available interview formats were employed at least once, culminating in four face-to-face interviews, three written interviews, and one virtual interview. The compiled results of the participant demographic survey are shown under Table 1 on the following page.

Face-to-face interviews lasted between 21 minutes and 58 minutes, producing a combined total of 64 pages of transcripts after formatting and proofreading. Excluding the written prompts, written interview responses ranged from 529 words to 1,121 words, providing 8 total pages of interview data. The single virtual interview filled the allotted 60 minutes and produced 17 pages of transcribed data. Each participant is quoted multiple times throughout the written analysis below, though not every participant is equally represented in every subsection of the analysis due to natural variations in the subject matters that appeared in each interview.

The thematic findings from my analysis are presented within the four frames of identity in Hecht's (1993) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). This arrangement reflects an

Table 1

Participant Demographic Survey Results

Name	Academic Position	Age	Diagnostic Status	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Interview Format
Emmitt*	Senior	24	Formally diagnosed	Trans/Transgender, Trans Man/Masculine	White	Face-to-face interview
Jordan*	Senior	21	Formally diagnosed	Prefer not to disclose	White	Written email interview
Biggs*	Junior	22	Formally diagnosed	Cisgender Man	White	Face-to-face interview
Aiden*	Former student (Graduated 2025)	27	Self-diagnosed	Cisgender Man	White	Face-to-face interview
Hollis*	Master's student	21	Formally diagnosed	Cisgender Man	White	Written email interview
Lana*	Master's student	25	Self-diagnosed (reported having informally discussed autism diagnosis with a mental health provider)	Woman	White	Face-to-face interview
Phineus*	Senior	22	Self-diagnosed	Trans/Transgender, Trans Man/Masculine	White	Written email interview
Sam*	Senior	46	Formally diagnosed (reported having previously been self-diagnosed until receiving formal evaluation well into adulthood)	Man	White	Virtual interview (Teams)

accurate and intentional representation of how I have organized and synthesized the responses to my two guiding research questions:

RQ1: What are the specific communication behaviors that autistic university students associate with autistic identity?

RQ2: How do autistic university students make sense of autistic identity in their reporting of autistic peer interactions?

RQ1 aims to articulate the specific signals of autistic student identity as narrated by participants. These include (but are not limited to) verbal and nonverbal behaviors, uses of language, cognitive patterns, and interaction-level events or outcomes that participants relate with autism and autistic identity. RQ2, on the other hand, aims to explore how participants make sense of autistic identity as a more holistic social variable. These sensemaking discourses may relate to positioning oneself within an individualized construct of autistic identity, considering the unique qualities of one's relationships with other autistic people, defining one's perceived scope and qualities of an autistic student community, and other sensemaking processes that consider autistic identity on a broader, more conceptual scale. By using CTI's four frames of identity to organize the findings from my data, I more effectively delineate between what is pertinent to RQ1—accounts of autistic communication behaviors—and to RQ2—retrospective sensemaking of autistic identity. In turn, this delineation better prepares me to respond to RQ1 and RQ2 in the Discussion chapter, in which I address each research question separately through synthesis of the applicable themes in the present Analysis section. With the quantity of my data and the organization of my findings now outlined, I begin the presentation of my findings with the personal frame of autistic identity.

Personal Identity

Interviews always began with explorations of the personal frame of autistic identity. CTI (Hecht, 1993) defines personal identity in terms of an individual's self-concept, self-cognitions, self-esteem, and "spiritual sense of being" (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p. 140). These aspects of identity shone through in participants' discussions of autism as an inseparable element of an autistic person's selfhood. These discussions were further developed through the use of narratives from childhood and recontextualized through participants' implied valences of their personal autistic identities.

The first prompt in the interview protocol asked participants to describe how being autistic shaped their identity on an individual level. While the phrasing of the prompt ("Tell me about how you understand autism as a part of your individual identity") implicitly frames autistic experiences as components within a person's whole sense of self, most of the eight participants' responses to the prompt inverted that framing; in reality, it was the whole of the self that many participants situated within their autistic experiences. Phineus, a senior undergraduate student, wrote an apt summary of this widely shared sentiment:

> Anything that happens: touching, seeing, reading, thinking, hearing, etc. goes through this sort of autism filter and certain things will stick out to me and others will not. (Phineus)

Sharing and expanding on Phineus' ideas, several participants talked or wrote in detail about why so much of their self-concept could be situated in autistic identity. For instance, Hollis, a second-year master's student, and Aiden, a former master's student, used phrases like "inextricable" (Hollis) and "how I'm wired" (Aiden) to emphasize that the development of their identity as a whole was inseparable from their autistic experiences:

> I have also come to understand autism as an inextricable part of who I am because I think differently than others I have met. (Hollis)
>
> . . . having that kind of understanding of myself and a little more how I'm wired, in hindsight, has helped me a lot to be like, "Oh, okay, so I'm not just the freak." . . . It's simply the way that, you know, the neurons fire. (Aiden)

As demonstrated in these two quotes, participants attached great significance and personal value to their autistic minds. Autisticness is a powerful grounding force in these students' ways of knowing themselves, holding some degree of influence upon most if not all dimensions of an individual's life. This attitude resonated throughout the participants' responses to the rest of the interview prompts, becoming particularly pertinent again during discussions of enacted and relational identities.

Stories from childhood were also sometimes used to further explain the relationships between autism and personal identity development. Jordan, a senior undergraduate student who was formally diagnosed at a young age, wrote about how their individual sense of autistic identity had been established through systems of developmental intervention and support:

> I have had much more supportive family and school experiences than the majority of other autistic people I know. I did have a rather hellish middle school experience where I was given a completely useless "life skills" class just because I was a special ed student, and one teacher gave me a chair with a seatbelt to force me to stop walking around the class. But otherwise, getting IEP accommodations was never a struggle for me, I didn't really need special education, I passed all of my classes (albeit with very high stress as a

> consequence), and I always had at least some teachers who would accept the way I thought and behaved. Phrases like “twice exceptional” and “high functioning” were never as offensive to me as they were to some other autistics, and I saw the benefits of classifying [autism] both as a neutral difference and a disability. (Jordan)

Jordan’s childhood narrative explores how their current concept of personal autistic identity has been shaped by the social, clinical, and academic frameworks of autism that they were already engaged in long before coming to CSU. Meanwhile, Aiden, who arrived at self-diagnosis around a year before his interview, recounted specific events from his childhood that he could retrospectively reinterpret through the lens of autism:

> It was probably when I was, like, eleven years old. We were camping, we were in the tent, and it wasn’t even raining hard. It was, like, a drizzle. And I lost my shit. I lost my shit. And my mom, God bless her, was like, “Am I—Look at me. Am I worried? Am I scared? Then you don’t need to be scared.” And that’s a really good way of kind of grounding someone, but . . . there’s still this disconnect of, like, “I know everything is fine. I know it’s raining and I’m not gonna die. But what the fuck is going on?” . . . I got so mad when stuff would go wrong. These, like, reactions I would not understand at the time, in hindsight, I’m like, “Oh, that tracks.” [laughter] That was a little meltdown. And, you know, we are figuring it out 15 years later. (Aiden)

Aiden, who was not engaged with the same language and systems around autism during his childhood as Jordan was during theirs, used childhood narrative to illustrate how some of his past social and emotional experiences can now be understood as uniquely autistic experiences. Side-by-side, these narratives point to similarities in the processes by which formally diagnosed and self-diagnosed autistic students come to understand themselves as autistic, while also indicating where the specific contexts and contents of those processes may differ.

More notable differences arose in participants' valences of personal autistic identity. Take, for instance, the following excerpts from two face-to-face interviews. Biggs, a junior undergraduate student who obtained a formal diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder as a toddler, opened his description of his personal autistic identity as follows:

> Well, for starters, it's just—just something I grew up with and honestly is just something that I had to—I guess kind of, like, understand about myself. Not only, like—how my—how I perceive stuff, but also, like, that—the world around me, and how I could adapt to everything around me as well . . . I think it's just, like, a part of me that I—just feels, like, individualized to me, to kind of stand out within a crowd, I guess. (Biggs)

Throughout this excerpt, Biggs' wording remains fairly neutral and does not paint his personal identity in a pointedly positive or negative light. This outcome is starkly contrasted by Lana, a second-year master's student who self-diagnosed as autistic in the summer of 2024:

> [Self-diagnosis] has made me more, like, comfortable embracing things that like—interests that I had that I previously was like, "Oh, that's weird and cringe and I probably should not like that." But now I'm like, "No, it's okay that I have these interests, and it's fine, and I can enjoy them because they bring me joy." So that's been really nice. (Lana)

Lana's understanding of her personal identity is much more overtly positive than Biggs'. This pattern continued across other participants' interviews, often correlating with differences in self-reported diagnostic status. Participants who reported a formal diagnosis in early childhood, such as Biggs, tended to show more neutral attitudes towards personal autistic identity. On the other hand, participants who reported self-diagnosis and/or formal diagnosis in adulthood, such as Lana, tended to demonstrate a markedly more positive attitude towards personal autistic identity.

Between uses of childhood narratives and valences of personal autistic identity, the role of diagnostic status as a significant factor in autistic identity development surfaced in the interviews for this study. Deeper considerations of how diagnostic status contextualizes the development of autistic identity will be elaborated upon in the Discussion chapter, focusing on connections to identity-first language and potential applications for future research. Bearing in mind the importance of autisticness and personal autistic identity as context for autistic identity as a whole, I now shift towards analyzing the many themes of enacted identity that arose throughout this study.

Enacted Identity

After participants explained their perspectives on personal autistic identity, conversations shifted towards the enacted frame of identity. The enacted frame encompasses the ways one translates their internalized identity into social behaviors and messages, illuminating how communication itself is just as much an aspect of identity as it is a product of identity (Hecht, 1993; Hecht & Lu, 2014). While there was consensus among participants that autism is a factor in most if not all aspects of an autistic person's identity, there were also a multitude of specific behavioral traits that participants most heavily associated with being autistic. These traits constituted a diverse array of bodily and affective behaviors, linguistic and conversational behaviors, and cognitive and emotional behaviors. Each of these three categories of enacted identity are explicated below, beginning with bodily and affective identity.

Bodily and Affective Identity

Bodily and affective enactments of identity included physical and sensory experiences and expressions that participants related to being autistic. Among these bodily and affective enactments, a frequent topic of discussion was eye contact and the preference for a lack thereof. In four of the eight interviews, participants mentioned on at least one occasion that they strongly disliked sustained eye contact with other people and would avoid it as much as possible, often even with close friends and family members. Emmitt, a senior undergraduate student, voiced an especially poignant perspective on this issue in his face-to-face interview:

> I definitely don't give eye contact. I hate doing that. But I also acknowledge that neurotypicals do like eye contact and feel a disconnect when I'm not looking at them. But I'm like, "Too bad." [laughter] (Emmitt)

While clearly aware of how dominant social norms position his avoidance of eye contact as abnormal and inappropriate, Emmitt vocally validated his aversion and resisted social pressure to suppress this aspect of his autistic identity. Conversely, Lana expressed a higher level of insecurity about her aversion to eye contact:

> I am not super great at making eye contact. I'm pretty bad at it. I try to be better at it, especially when I notice people trying to see what I'm looking at, when in fact, I'm just kind of dissociating and not really looking at anything and just thinking. (Lana)

Like Emmitt, Lana was aware of the normatively perceived abnormality of her avoidance of eye contact. Unlike Emmitt, Lana reported making more frequent and conscious efforts to "be better" about holding eye contact during conversations so as not to have her intentions misinterpreted. Among other participants, both Emmitt and Lana owned an aversion to eye contact as an enacted element of their autistic identities. Their perspectives diverged, however, in how they navigated this enactment during interactions where sustained eye contact is a dominant expectation. This pattern of connections between enactment and masking continued into discussions of other forms of enacted autistic identity, including and especially flat affect.

Similarly to eye contact, four participants noted that they embodied some degree of "flat affect," or the tendency of some autistic people to use fewer and/or less pronounced facial expressions and vocal modulation during social interactions (Weiss et al., 2019; Brown, 2025). Again, Emmitt and Lana discussed this at the most length and tied their experiences to issues of masking and unmasking. Lana attested to defaulting towards a flat affect in most social interactions, often resulting in unsolicited questions from others about her wellbeing:

> I'm trying not to be, like, super self-regulatory about my facial expressions because I know that is, like, part of masking. But also, I don't like when children come up to me and are like, "Are you okay? You look really sad." I'm just—[laughter] My face is neutral! I'm not doing anything! (Lana)

Though Lana felt that her natural flat affect could draw unwanted attention in social settings, she also afforded herself more acceptance of this aspect of her autistic identity than she did regarding her aversion to eye contact. This time, it was Emmitt who felt more compelled to consciously manage his facial affect during most social interactions:

> I feel like when I'm unmasked, I'll either be on two opposite ends of the spectrum where I'm, like, very expressive with facial expressions, or I'm, like, dead-panned face and don't have very much expression. And I don't really have that middle—authentically, anyway. But when I'm masking, I kind of have this middle, and I'm like, "Ohh, yes. I am showing interest with my face." (Emmitt)

Emmitt's reported experience demonstrates the great conscious effort he devotes to modulating his facial expressions during interactions with non-autistic individuals. Hollis shared even more intense awareness of how his flat affect may be misconstrued as unfriendly or disinterested when interacting with people who are unfamiliar with his communication style:

> I also speak with a very flat cadence, especially with strangers, when communication is more anxiety-producing for me . . . I often find myself speaking with a rising intonation and deliberately trying to smile and raise my eyebrows to avoid being seen as rude or standoffish. (Hollis)

As the above excerpts demonstrate, though participants often reported similar patterns of bodily and affective identity enactment, each participant felt different levels of obligation towards altering these behaviors to align with dominant social norms. Later, the subsection on cognitive and emotional enactments of identity will explore how these internal navigations of visible communication differences serve as performances of autistic identity in and of themselves. Equally important in contextualizing these cognitive and emotional reflections, though, is to discuss the linguistic and conversational enactments that surfaced in the participants' stories.

Linguistic and Conversational Identity

Other reported enactments of autistic identity focused on linguistic and conversational behaviors that participants associated with their autistic identities. Regarding language itself, some participants described their autistic language patterns as being more formal, direct, and verbose than those of their non-autistic peers. This pronouncement was especially salient in Hollis, Jordan, and Sam's interviews, wherein they expressed a strong association between their stylistic uses of language and their autistic identities. Hollis described his autistic language patterns as follows:

> Without thinking, I tend to use a larger-than-average vocabulary in my speech (e.g., "aloft" instead of "in the sky"). (Hollis)

The "larger-than-average" vocabulary that Hollis reported was evident throughout his written interview, which was full of vivid sensory language and emotionally evocative accounts of Hollis' autistic identity construction throughout his time at CSU. Though similar linguistic and narrative styles were by no means absent from other participants' interviews, they were uniquely prevalent and powerful in Hollis' responses, representing his experiences and perspectives with great clarity and specificity.

Jordan and Sam described their linguistic and conversational styles more broadly, each briefly commenting on how these enactments of their autistic identities can pose challenges when communicating in neuronormative spaces. As Jordan explained in their written interview:

> I'm at my best when I feel comfortable being completely direct, and when I am not being direct, I'm thinking through my words very carefully to avoid both offending and misleading, which is often difficult. (Jordan)

Jordan associated "completely direct" communication with a sense of comfort and confidence, which they felt was compromised in situations where their straightforwardness would be perceived as offensive. Sam, a senior undergraduate student, echoed the language of "direct" communication in his virtual interview:

> I have a tendency to be direct, and I guess the term is I wear my emotions on my sleeves. So what I'm actually saying is usually what I'm processing in my head, with rare exceptions. This is often not taken well. Like, I guess an apt description would be

> unfiltered, or I should manipulate more often, or I should be misleading. And that's a very difficult concept for me to accept. (Sam)

Like Jordan, Sam reported that he prefers to say precisely what he is thinking and that others often disapprove of his “unfiltered” communication style. Sam also expressed a strong aversion to adjusting his language to be *less* direct, as doing so would feel dishonest. These three perspectives on linguistic and conversational enactments convey a desire for clarity and authenticity that underlies autistic students’ communication styles.

Related to discourses of clear and authentic conversation, four participants touched upon their dislike and/or avoidance of small talk as a prevalent enactment of their autistic identity, with Jordan’s interview most emphatically exploring the matter. Jordan reported often feeling confused and frustrated by redundant rituals of small talk:

> Though I’m not entirely against small talk, I tend to resent it if it goes on for a long time, and becomes a form of “stalling for time,” and I still don’t understand some social rituals, such as the expectation to only ever say “fine” to “how are you?” or “please” after every request. (Jordan)

Jordan’s perspective on these social rituals returns to a desire for clarity and honesty, particularly in their framing of the common greeting question, “How are you?” Though the open-ended phrasing of the question implies that multiple types of answers are welcome, Jordan’s statement describes an “expectation” in the context of small talk to “only ever” respond to this question by saying that one is “fine.” The perceived normative response to this greeting question is much more rigid than an autistic person like Jordan might glean from the question itself, potentially leading to discrepancies in understanding on either side of the interaction.

The social ritual of small talk was the most prevalent of several conversational norms that participants described as requiring conscious effort and preparation to perform successfully. Hollis reported going so far as to "rehearse topics in advance of talking with someone" to more easily navigate routine social situations, such as talking with professors or classmates while waiting for a class to begin. Aiden utilized the metaphor of "conversational baseball" to contextualize these modes of extensive strategizing around social interactions:

> I mean, a lot of times, it is literally like, I'm just here. I'm simply existing in this space, not taking up any of it. I'm—There'll be four people talking. I'm just standing there. And it feels super, super uncomfortable sometimes because there is this social pressure of, like, 'Oh, you're in this conversation. Converse now.' . . . When you're at the plate, someone's throwing a pitch at you and you have to wait for your pitch. You have to, like—You have to wait for the pitch that you know you're going to be able to hit. And that's kind of what it feels like. It's conversational baseball. (Aiden)

Aiden's metaphor evokes the image of an individual quietly analyzing their circumstances, awaiting an opportunity to fill space in a conversation by correctly anticipating, identifying, and responding to normative social cues. To use the context of Aiden's baseball metaphor, autistic students often feel that they must *earn* their spot in a conversational "team" by learning and following the unspoken "rules" of the "game." This pattern of hypervigilance and micromanagement of one's own social conduct leads into the third realm of enacted autistic identity that came to light through this study: cognitive and emotional enactments of identity.

Cognitive and Emotional Identity

An unexpected outcome of discussions surrounding enacted identity was the participants' subversion of what enacted identity is typically assumed to encompass. While enactments of identity are generally conceptualized as visible behaviors (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000; Wagner et al., 2016; Paxman, 2021), these interviews also explored internal thoughts and feelings as active performances of identity. As opposed to the more broadly philosophical reflections on personal identity, participants pointed to the cognitive and emotional processes within masking, executive dysfunction, special interests and hyperfixations, and ways of interpreting information as distinctly enacted elements of their autistic identities.

A popular topic of discussion during conversations about enacted identity was autistic masking, and particularly the invisible thought processes involved in masking. All eight participants demonstrated an awareness of what autistic masking tends to entail, and five participants went into more detail about how and why they mask certain behaviors that they associate with being autistic. For instance, Emmitt reported making efforts to disguise his tendency to fidget as less socially "abnormal" behavior:

> I would say that I'm much more still [when masking]. Um, and if I'm fidgeting, I kind of make sure it's discrete and that it's not something that would be perceived as, like, an abnormal behavior . . . I think it's those little things, where it's just like, "Don't move too much." (Emmitt)

In the context of autistic behavior, fidgeting, stimming, and self-stimulating behavior all generally describe repetitive movements, speech, and other behaviors that facilitate sensory and emotional regulation and expression (Kapp et al., 2019). Some common forms of stimming include rocking, hand-flapping, finger-tapping, spinning, jumping, and parroting words and phrases absorbed from other sources—a pattern of behavior also known as echolalia (National Autistic Society, n.d.). Stimming is by no means exclusive to autistic people or even to neurodivergent people broadly; most people, regardless of neurotype, engage in stimming behaviors to some extent (Barrett et al., 2015). However, autistic people are known to stim especially frequently and intensely, resulting in a strong association between stimming and autism (Barrett et al., 2015). Emmitt's reported self-direction to hide his fidgeting (e.g., instructing himself not to move "too much") demonstrates an awareness of how stimming may mark him as autistic and of a social demand to suppress this aspect of his autistic identity.

Other participants discussed identifying and mirroring other students' language and behaviors in social settings in order to avoid being perceived as autistic. As Phineus stated:

> I observe patterns and try to remember how others acted and if it was perceived as "socially normal" or "okay." I'm not always sure when is the best place to jump in, and go nonverbal a lot. (Phineus)

Phineus' reported tendency to "go nonverbal" reflects a phenomenon increasingly referred to as a "verbal shutdown" in response to non-speaking autistic individuals' criticisms of the former term (Hsieh, 2023; Farkas, 2025). Whereas non-speaking autistic people *consistently* employ and rely on alternative communication methods in place of speech, verbal shutdowns occur when an otherwise speaking autistic person *temporarily* loses part or all of their speech production faculties as an involuntary response to overwhelming cognitive, emotional, and/or sensory distress (Farkas, 2025). Though Phineus, like other participants, reported engaging in masking to decrease the likelihood of negative communication outcomes, Phineus' voiced connection between masking and verbal shutdowns echoes the psychological and social detriments of masking that have been noted in many previous studies (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Cassidy et al., 2018; Cleary et al., 2023).

Phineus was not the only participant who reported negative impacts to their health and relationships as a result of masking. Lana, whose interview was conducted shortly after the Fall

2025 midterms season, expressed that her tendency to mask in the classroom as a graduate teaching assistant can actively worsen the quality of her interactions when the social behaviors she is mirroring reflect and reinforce other students' stress and fatigue:

> Oh, I mimic. I mimic really bad. [laughter] I've noticed it when I'm teaching. And it's kind of a problem because I will mimic the energy of my students that they're giving me, and then now we're all, like, really tired and sad. And I'm like, "I'm sorry, I'm trying." [laughter] "I need to get you guys up and hyped." But I can't because I mimic people's behavior and their terminology and their pattern of speech . . . And I feel like some people think it seems—makes me seem ingenuine, is something I've gathered also from others." (Lana)

These participants' stories of masking strategies and their consequences illustrate the paradoxical nature of masking as both an enactment and an eraser of autistic identity. To be able to mask one's autistic behaviors, one must be simultaneously aware of the behaviors they are performing that would mark them as not neurotypical *and* of the more normative counterparts to those behaviors that one must then attempt to emulate. An autistic person who knowingly adapts their behaviors to align with normative social expectations is acting upon their awareness of their autistic identity, yet those enactments simultaneously serve to conceal that identity from onlookers' perceptions. When masking itself becomes the default expectation placed upon autistic people in neuronormative spaces—for instance, autistic students in higher education—autistic identity becomes flattened and suppressed on a larger scale. The result is an environment that lacks open representation of autistic identity and discourages autistic individuals from fostering their own representation. As the communal frame of autistic identity will later illuminate, this scenario for the eight participants of this thesis aligns dreadfully closely with the current state of collective autistic identity at CSU.

On a much more positive note, another point of enacted autistic identity that arose in some interviews was engagement in special interests. “Special interest” is a colloquial term used by many autistic people to refer to subjects towards which they experience prolonged, intense intellectual and emotional attachments (National Autistic Society, n.d.). A special interest is markedly different from a typical hobby or interest, often remaining a constant and significant aspect of an autistic person’s day-to-day routine for many years if not for their entire life. Biggs and Hollis in particular were eager to discuss manifestations of special interests in their autistic identities. Biggs shared the following about two of his special interests:

> As a psych major, I definitely am really passionate and exciting about learning about psychology, and—and that being just one of my, like, several, several special interests . . . I’m a big sports guy, too . . . I mean, since I was eleven. I just like obsessing, learning about, like, individual players, team and player stats, and X, Y, and Z. (Biggs)

Biggs framed his special interest in psychology as a source of intellectual inspiration and motivation, allowing him to enact this aspect of his autistic identity through his academic pursuits. His concurrent special interest in sports served a more recreational purpose, bridging his autistic identity with intricate knowledge of some of humanity’s most widely renowned social and organizational phenomena. Hollis, too, shared some of the social applications of one of his special interests:

> I have a strong aptitude for learning foreign languages, having taught myself fluent Norwegian as a teenager and gone from knowing virtually no Spanish to attaining B1

> proficiency in three months, as well as being complimented by international students for my pronunciation of phrases in their languages. (Hollis)

Hollis' past enactments of his special interest in foreign languages had equipped him with multilingual communication competencies, enabling him to better converse with international students whose native languages aligned with Hollis' acquired languages. For these students, engaging in special interests was both psychologically and socially productive, channeling cognitive enactments of autistic identity into pronounced academic and conversational skills.

On a final note of enacted identity, four participants vocalized particular ways of thinking and interpreting information as performances of autistic identity. However, these defined ways of thinking varied from person to person. For instance, Aiden attested to having a highly "analytical" style of thinking and attributed his dislike of small talk to his perceived lack of meaning within such exchanges. Lana and Hollis, on the other hand, described their thought patterns as "abstract" (Lana) or "systems thinking" (Hollis), both expressing that these cognitive styles helped them to consider problems and concepts from multiple perspectives. Sam explained that he vastly prefers application-based projects and tests over rote memorization, as he best comprehends new information by treating it as a "cogwheel" in a machine and pondering its potential applications in different contexts. These participants' metacognitive reflections harken back to prior qualitative studies of lived autistic experiences, which have repeatedly asserted the significance of heterogeneity between autistic individuals as a feature of autistic identity more broadly (MacLeod et al., 2013; Nicolaidis et al., 2015).

The abundance of different types of enactments reported in the interviews illustrates the greatly multifaceted nature of these students' autistic identities. Indeed, more variances and nuances of autistic identity among these students and their peers began to show throughout discussions of relational identity. These relational variances are explored further in the following subsection, highlighting the ways in which shared identity is constructed and reconstructed between autistic peers.

Relational Identity

Following discussions of enacted identity, the relational frame of identity was introduced into the interviews. The relational frame encapsulates how certain traits and categorizations of identity come to light through interactions with other people, as well as the ways one's position in different types of relationships and even relationships themselves can take on identity-related meanings (Hecht, 1993; Hecht & Choi, 2012). When participants spoke on relational autistic identity, they tended to frame it within various instances of relating with other autistic students in general before referring to the contexts of specific relationships. The most commonly articulated means of autistic relating was the recognition of shared enactments. Participants provided numerous examples of how these patterns of shared enactments might appear during social interactions, consequently signaling to participants the possibility of shared autistic identity—or, in relationships where shared autistic identity is a known fact, reinforcing participants' existing knowledge of that shared identity.

Importantly, many participants also professed that their most profound experiences of relational autistic identity between themselves and other CSU students often did not center these overt performances. Rather, these participants asserted that some of the strongest signs of shared autistic identity are less concrete in nature, reflecting on how more liminal perceptions of mutual comfort and implicit understanding could reveal either during an interaction or in retrospect that one may likely be interacting with a fellow autistic person. These manifestations of relational autistic identity—recognition of shared enactments, or “hard signals,” and broader feelings of understanding, or “soft signals”—are explored below.

Hard Signals

As illustrated in the preceding section on enacted identity, participants discussed a plethora of bodily/affective, linguistic/conversational, and cognitive/emotional behaviors as enactments of their autistic identities. Following these threads into the relational layer of identity, participants frequently connected relational identification to noticing other students performing similar behaviors to those that the participants associated with their own autistic identities.

Fidgeting and stimming were widely discussed indicators of possible shared identity, appearing in this context across six of the eight interviews. Specific examples of recognizable stims were provided by Emmitt, who remarked on his autistic friend’s habit of flapping their hands when excited, and Sam, who noted having seen other students utilize fidget toys during classes to help them focus. Phineus listed several examples, framing them as patterns of behavior that he recognizes both in others and in himself:

> I tend to look for behaviors I do . . . fidgeting, swaying or stimming, walking on tip toes, having “trex” [sic] arms. (Phineus)

Though lacking a more formal term, “T-Rex arms” or “dinosaur arms” are a real behavioral phenomenon recognized within autistic communities and in prior autism research (Orzel, 2024). This behavior presents as an autistic person carrying their hands loosely in front of their chest or stomach with their arms bent at around a 90-degree angle, usually as a means of self-regulation and comfort akin to other forms of stimming (de Goede, 2024). Phineus and other participants’ knowledge of different forms of stimming and some of their common monikers indicate that these students are generally well-informed about their own and other autistic students' modes of sensory and emotional regulation and expression.

Three participants referenced lack of eye contact and other facial or bodily cues as signs of shared identity. More specifically, participants did not interpret a peer's avoidance of eye contact during face-to-face interactions as a sign of disinterest or disingenuity. In fact, a lack of eye contact from peers was generally a non-issue for participants who commented on it. For instance, Phineus only briefly mentioned noticing other students "avoiding eye contact" just before listing the fidgeting and stimming behaviors he shares with his autistic peers, and he did not elaborate on his valence of these shared aversions to eye contact. Similarly, Hollis listed a new friend's persistent aversion to eye contact as one of several signals of possible shared autistic identity. However, Hollis did not appear to derive any meaningful implications from this peer's aversion to eye contact in regard to the quality of their relationship:

> I recently made a friend whom I also suspect to be autistic. She religiously avoids eye contact, even after we have grown comfortable with one another and speaks in monotone. She is quiet and shy, and has a dry sense of humor. She has chosen a major that can help her fulfill her lifelong dream of being in a profession where she can help others, which I believe reflects a sense of empathy. All of these traits indicate to me that she may also be autistic. (Hollis)

As shown in the above excerpt, Hollis did not perceive his friend's avoidance of eye contact as a drawback in their friendship, nor did he attach to it any distinctly favorable meaning. Instead, Hollis regarded this behavior with the same nonjudgmental familiarity as he afforded his friend's flat vocal affect, her quiet and shy nature, and her dry humor. The only signal of this person's possible autistic identity that Hollis described with a distinct tone of praise was the reflection of this person’s powerful sense of empathy through her choice of major and career goals. The impacts of the communicative receptiveness and understanding that Hollis demonstrated around his friend’s behaviors will return with greater clarity alongside other “soft signals” of shared identity.

Aiden’s interview elucidated how openly naming and discussing shared autistic performances, such as an aversion to eye contact, can facilitate collaborative sensemaking between autistic peers. Aiden (referred to as “AP” in the transcript excerpt below, with myself notated as “RK”) noted aloud during his interview that he had been looking at a sticker on a wall for nearly the entire conversation. This was not, as neuronormative social customs would assume, because Aiden was disinterested, but because he could better concentrate on the interview prompts and articulate his responses more thoroughly when looking elsewhere in the room:

> AP: The big one that I did not even start to clock until the last six months to a year is eye contact. Because as you’re sitting here talking to me, I’ve been looking over there the whole time.
>
> RK: Oh, yeah.
>
> AP: I’ve been looking at that sticker on the wall because prolonged eye contact is just like… Ugh.
>
> RK: Yeah. It’s easier to focus on what you want to say—
>
> AP: Exactly.
>
> RK: —if you are looking somewhere else.
>
> AP: Yeah. You don’t have to worry about what’s happening right now. Um, that’s a big one.

An important note of context for my interjection in the above excerpt is the timing of Aiden's remark on his lack of eye contact during the interview. Immediately before this exchange, I had given Aiden the third interview prompt, asking him to explain the language and behaviors he had seen other students performing that signaled to him the possibility of shared autistic identity. When Aiden began talking about recognizing other students' aversions to eye contact and noted that he had been avoiding eye contact throughout our conversation, it brought to my attention that I, too, had been looking slightly off to the side while asking Aiden the third interview question. Recognizing why I had been looking aside until I had finished asking my question—because it was easier to concentrate on communicating the transition from one interview prompt to the next—I offered my perspective aloud, curious to see if the reasoning behind the behavior was also shared. Indeed, Aiden agreed with my suggestion, capturing an instance of relational identity sensemaking between the two of us as the interview progressed.

Another reported hard signal of shared identity was infodumping. "Infodumping" is a colloquial term for the tendency of many autistic and otherwise neurodivergent individuals to talk at length about topics of strong interest, often without having been directly prompted to do so (Whelan, 2020). Three participants recounted how they had recognized that a peer was likely autistic and/or otherwise neurodivergent based on the person's tendency to talk about their special interests at any perceived opportunity. Jordan described a pattern of such encounters with a friend of theirs:

> One of my friends on campus made it fairly obvious that he was not neurotypical when he began info-dumping about *Ace Attorney* fanfiction, showing his enthusiasm for the most humorous and absurd aspects of it, and would often make observations about it unprompted. (Jordan)

Similarly, Hollis provided a specific example from a recent interaction with his best friend:

> When we text, [my best friend] will often shift the topic to anarchism, often texting large paragraphs, sometimes with extended direct quotes from various thinkers. Earlier today, I sent him a picture of elk in my hometown, to which he responded, "Whoa, that's sick," immediately followed by, "Whoever sets out on the high road and takes a wrong turn does not go where he intends to go, but where the road leads him. Read that Maletesta quote recently and liked it." (Hollis)

Finally, Aiden recalled the niche expertise of a particular student whom he had taught as a graduate teaching assistant:

> [I had] one student who was just incredibly, like, socially—I can't think of the opposite of inept. Like, very dynamic, very fun. Um, he talked a LOT about sharks, and he knew a LOT about sharks . . . I loved this student, but he talked a lot about sharks. [laughter] I'm like, that's not necessarily a, you know, kind of neurotypical behavior, or a thing to know a lot about. [laughter] (Aiden)

These participants' encounters with infodumping demonstrate a divergence from dominant communication norms regarding conversational reciprocity. In the past, researchers who approach autistic social behaviors through the lens of communication deficits have often been concerned with "taking equivalent turns" (Bambara et al., 2021, p. 4846) during conversations as an area of communication competence that tends to "elude" (p. 4846) autistic people. Chan (2021) and Bambara et al.'s (2021) studies of behavioral interventions mediated by non-autistic caregivers and peers both endorse the practice of training autistic individuals who infodump to speak more "appropriately" (Chan, 2021, p. 214) about their special interests, framing infodumping as an autistic individual's "failure . . . to show interest in and sensitivity to their conversation partners" (Bambara et al., 2021, p. 4846). These studies, of course, are concentrated on interactions between autistic and non-autistic individuals and primarily direct the burden of "improving communication" (Bambara et al., 2021, p. 4847) towards the autistic individual.

If one instead looks to autistic individuals' voiced perspectives on infodumping, it quickly becomes clear that infodumping should by no means be equated to disinterest in one's conversation partner. In reality, many autistic people describe infodumping as a love language (Whelan, 2020; Bennie, 2025) and associate this manner of thoroughly expressing their interests with an underlying desire for social connection with another person. Autistic peers may regularly exchange infodumps with each other as a means of relational bonding, implicitly conveying mutual trust in each party's attention to and appreciation for one another's interests (Jung, 2024; Heyworth, 2025). Whereas neuronormative standards of conversational reciprocity position infodumping as problematic and off-putting, autistic peers—the participants of this study included—recognize infodumping as a natural and valued form of autistic relating.

Two participants, Biggs and Jordan, reported having explicitly told others and/or been told by others about their shared identity. Biggs described his experiences as follows:

> I have, like, three or four autistic friends that are on and off campus through, like, clubs or whatever. It's just like—You just kind of know, and we also kind of, like, tell each other, "I'm on the spectrum." (Biggs)

Biggs' statement implies that his circle of peers has generally approached explicit disclosures of shared autistic identity with comfort and ease. On the other hand, Jordan's approach to explicit identity disclosure was somewhat more cautious:

> . . . I notice the ease by which we get along, and our communication styles work together, until one of us asks if the other is autistic. (Jordan)

Whereas Biggs framed his peers' disclosures of autistic identity as more freely shared, Jordan reported that they only explicitly confirm shared autistic identity with a peer when one of them *asks* the other to disclose their identity. This contrast suggests differing ways of navigating the risk of stigmatization when openly disclosing one's autistic identity. At the same time, Biggs and Jordan's reported approaches to explicit identity disclosure share an important condition: these disclosures are joined and/or preceded by subtle developments of a sense of mutual belonging. Many participants emphatically narrated their experiences with these quieter, less concrete indicators of shared identity, explicated below as soft signals of relational autistic identity.

Soft Signals

This study illuminated that recognizing another student as an *autistic* student often cannot be attributed solely to specific visible behaviors. Six participants reported that there is an ambient sense of connection and compatibility that may arise during interactions with other autistic people, regardless of whether or not one consciously recognizes the more tangible signals described above. Using phrases like "Spidey sense" (Biggs), "vibes" (Aiden), "the Force" (Sam), and various other analogies, these participants conveyed high regard for more abstract processes of autistic relating.

When asked to elaborate on these soft signals, participants reported that the ease with which they could communicate with another individual was a strong indicator of shared autistic identity. As Jordan summarized:

> With neurotypical people there is always some emotional distance, and I have to do more mental work to interpret what they're saying; when I'm not making that effort, I can be fairly sure that the person I'm talking to is not neurotypical. (Jordan)

Whereas conversing with neurotypical individuals was associated with confusion and discomfort, Jordan felt that a person with whom they could communicate without such arduous effort was likely a fellow autistic person. Sam shared this sentiment, attributing this ease of communication to autistic peers' receptiveness to one another's social behaviors:

> I recognize when somebody's being open with me . . . when I talk with autistic people, it's strange because we tend to get more and more excited. And the commonalities that we identify with is often social challenges or perception challenges that finally, somebody else understands . . . It's that social, that emotional connection that this person is being excited, honest, and forthcoming. (Sam)

Sam's account points to autistic students' shared understandings of autistic affects, conversation styles, and ways of processing information. In turn, this shared communicative receptiveness was linked with diminished compulsions to mask or compensate for one's social differences. Lana described such experiences as follows:

> Is it weird to say if I just, like, click socially with them? . . . I don't have to do that backpedaling. I don't have to, like, backtrack. I don't have to be more conscious of my facial expressions. Or I don't feel weird or compelled to make eye contact with them, even if I don't feel super comfortable about it. If I notice them sort of, like, doing the same thing, then I'm like, "Oh." (Lana)

Earlier in her interview, Lana shared that she has grown accustomed to the feeling of needing to "backpedal" and explain herself more than once in order to be understood during conversations with neurotypical people. When explaining how she recognizes other students as potentially fellow autistic students, it was the conspicuous absence of this pressure to "backtrack" that Lana said would inspire her to look more consciously for signs of shared identity. Lana brings articulations of this ambient communicative ease full circle, illustrating how understanding these soft signals of shared autistic identity can facilitate recognition of the hard signals described in the previous subsection.

Some of these participants described uniquely autistic interpersonal experiences they had encountered as a result of reduced stress around communication in the presence of other autistic individuals. For instance, Aiden and Emmitt both reported engaging in non-conversational social proximity with autistic peers. As Aiden explained:

> I've actively tried really hard to be okay with this silence. Like, me and my coworker, we're very—we are extremely similar flavors of autistic. We'll be at work, and it'll be slow, and we'll just be standing there. And we'll stand there in silence, in just—not really comfortable, but not uncomfortable silence, because neither of us feel the need to fill the silence with anything. (Aiden)

Aiden's account frames these instances of quiet proximity as a valuable form of social connection between autistic individuals. Emmitt further elaborates on the relational significance of quiet proximity:

> . . . you can, like, be in the room and doing two completely different things, and you don't really have to be talking to each other, either. But you're like, "I'm still having fun and feel engaged and connected to you." (Emmitt)

Emmitt's description hints at themes of relational appreciation and trust similar to those associated with autistic infodumping. Whereas infodumping was framed as a more active and visible means of autistic relating, Aiden and Emmitt depicted their experiences of quiet proximity as more passive reflections of shared social needs and preferences. These low-demand social engagements served their own important purposes in these participants' narrated autistic peer interactions, emphasizing again that an autistic individual's capacity to create and nurture rich relationships is not fundamentally impeded simply by nature of deviating from dominant communication expectations.

These students' accounts of hard and soft signals of relational autistic identity sustain the robust discourses of autistic identity construction and sensemaking that this Analysis chapter has explored thus far. One might expect similar levels of multiplicity in the participants' reflections on communal autistic identity at CSU. However, as the next and final section of the Analysis will elucidate, a dramatic tonal shift occurred when interviews broached the communal frame of autistic identity.

Communal Identity

Out of all of the perspectives on autistic identity construction that surfaced in the interviews, one particular realm of experience was voiced at least once by all eight participants. This unanimous perspective fell under the communal frame of identity, which relates to the large-scale group affiliations and cultures constructed through experiences of shared identity (Hecht, 1993; Hecht & Choi, 2012). When asked to describe their understandings of the wider autistic community at CSU, however, these students' unambiguous consensus was that there is virtually no such thing. In a stark contrast to their vividly detailed stories of personal, enacted, and relational identities, not a single participant could concretely describe a communal autistic student identity at CSU.

While a communal autistic identity across CSU's student body might evidently be better described as a lack thereof, participants did not attribute this plight to a lack of *potential* for autistic students to create community. Emmitt, for instance, described the presence of "bubbles" of community among autistic peers he had met throughout his time at CSU:

> . . . it's just, like, these little—it feels like bubbles. And it doesn't feel like there is—at least for me, because I haven't really explored it, where there's, like, a direct community. I feel like we're all kind of sparsed out . . . but there is a lot of, like, tremendous support and community within those bubbles. (Emmitt)

In the absence of access to a more holistic communal identity, Emmitt's ties to these "bubbles" of fellow autistic students had helped him develop a sense of group identity and solidarity on a smaller scale. Jordan expressed a similar perspective, reporting having met many small groups of autistic students and yet never perceiving them as communally connected:

> The fact that I have met different sets of autistic students in many different places suggests to me that, despite famous individuals like Temple Grandin, there is no organized autistic community at CSU. Insofar as it exists, it exists because autistic people tend to share similar interests and get along more easily, so their friendship networks favor being autistic. (Jordan)

Jordan's account suggests that the formation of small group identities among autistic peers is a rather frequent phenomenon. Despite this, Jordan also shared Emmitt's perspective that these groups appear to have no "organized" connections to one another. Though Jordan and Emmitt's responses hint towards an abundance of autistic individuals among CSU's student body, autistic students themselves generally do not *feel* the presence of so many other students who share their autistic experiences, thus limiting their ability to connect with one another in larger numbers.

Jordan also calls attention to the presence of renowned animal scientist and autistic advocate Temple Grandin among CSU's Agricultural Sciences faculty ("Temple Grandin," n.d.). This pointed mention of a well-known autistic scholar at CSU resonates with two other participants' assertions that the cognitive strengths of many autistic individuals should, in theory, be well-suited to the intellectual demands of higher education. Hollis made the following argument:

> . . . based on the number of students and professors I've met who display suites of autistic traits (I can think of two professors and at least one student beyond those mentioned above), I feel that we autists may be statistically overrepresented in academia due to many of us having intense, often niche interests, and academia's valuation of topical knowledge, research skills, an analytical ability over bedside manner and personability. (Hollis)

Like previous scholars who have argued the strengths that autistic people often bring to higher education settings (Van Hees et al., 2015), Hollis defended the scholarly value of his autistic peers' devotions to their special interests and aptitudes for synthesizing large quantities of information. Aiden expanded on how these traits can also influence interpersonal and relational outcomes in an academic environment:

> I know in higher ed—in a master's cohort, in a PhD cohort, in a grad school, in whatever—people are going to think like me . . . And it's like, "Oh, these are my people. These are the people I vibe with who think similarly to the way I do." We can talk about—I can go to a professor and talk about the movie *Sinners* for, like, 30 minutes, and

> have an in-depth conversation about it and what it is saying, when I cannot do that at my job at a restaurant. (Aiden)

The interaction described in this excerpt reflects Aiden and his professor's similar ways of engaging with their interests and the compatibility of their communication styles in an academic context. Together, Hollis and Aiden's stories echo other scholars' suggestions that autism and other forms of neurodivergence are likely far more common among university students and faculty than many would think (Pryal, 2024). Yet still, despite their broad awareness that plenty of autistic people are indeed present at CSU, the participants of this study all reported feeling limited if any affiliation with a larger autistic student community.

The disparity between the strong potential for autistic students to come together as a community and the ongoing paucity of such collectivity indicates that there are deeper prohibitive factors at play. Indeed, four participants reported that overwhelming combinations of academic, social, and environmental stressors were perhaps the greatest bane of autistic community development. In Emmitt's words:

> . . . I find it hard to connect, especially because most of us are probably socially drained as fuck [laughter] from our classes . . . We're already drained from all of, like, the social and sensory and executive skills that are required to be in the classroom, and whatever expectations lie within that. (Emmitt)

Other participants' stories showed the accuracy of Emmitt's assessment that autistic students often feel too "socially drained" to seek out and maintain a wider community. Lana painted an especially vivid picture of how repeating cycles of social and cognitive overload have depleted her mental and physical reserves:

> I have no space to, like, decompress. I have to go from, like, forcing myself to focus for prospectus writing, and then focus on doing more readings, and then focus on preparing for classes and grading, and then I'm in class and I'm having conversations. And I'm actively, like, out there, I'm teaching . . . And I'm like, "I don't have the time to get burnt out right now." (Lana)

Drained social motivation resulting from academic and environmental stressors was not the only reported source of communal autistic identity disruption. Two participants, Biggs and Hollis, demonstrated tensions between their connections to a communal *campus* identity and their vision of a communal *autistic* identity. Biggs drew the following comparison between himself and other autistic students he had met at CSU:

> I'm definitely more passionate than other [autistic] students when it comes to, like, my degree, or when it comes to, like, school spirit . . . I feel like getting involved with, like, the spirit of my favorite teams, that's also playing into a part of, like, my special interest as well. (Biggs)

Biggs felt that he was more invested than most of his autistic peers in CSU's campus culture at large, with his special interest drawing him towards the sports-related dimensions of the CSU Rams community in ways that his autistic peers generally did not share. Hollis, too, perceived autistic identity and campus identity as conflicting; however, Hollis' feelings around CSU's campus culture were completely opposite to Biggs':

> I've met a number of students I would not assume to be autistic who seem to deliberately downplay or conceal their academic interests and intelligence in informal settings . . . Given that students ascribe great importance to drinking, partying, and one-night-stands, I

> wonder whether those of us autistic students who are able to mask do so in order to fit in with campus culture. (Hollis)

Hollis' understanding of the CSU Rams community was rooted in wildly different experiences, which he regarded with overt disgust in contrast to Biggs' open admiration. While Biggs sought a way to bridge his autistic identity with his identity as a CSU Ram, Hollis framed these two worlds as wholly incompatible with one another without the interposition of masking. Opposing communal identity tensions such as these may also contribute to the division of autistic students and groups from one another, with some seeking out more active involvement with wider campus culture while others persistently avoid it.

As these students' narratives clearly convey, the interconnectedness of the autistic student body at CSU is currently extremely limited. Even so, when asked what would enable and incentivize them to participate in a more established autistic student community, several participants had plenty of ideas to contribute. For instance, Emmitt emphasized the importance of creating spaces that could welcome and accommodate a variety of social and sensory needs and preferences. As Emmitt noted:

> . . . we try to take into consideration, like, sensory and social issues of whatever activity we're doing and what spaces we might be going into . . . because we all have, like, very different and diverse needs, that can also make it conflicting because there's some people who might need a lot of stimulus, and then there's others who are like, "I need it to be quiet to not get dysregulated." (Emmitt)

Similarly, Lana recommended that organized efforts to form autistic community should attend to multiple types of group engagements to accommodate different individuals' interests and routines:

> What I would like to see is maybe more, like, extracurricular activities . . . An arts and crafts activity, or something I can do with my hands. A walk, a nature walk. Or, like, a game night, or video games. Or just having a space on campus, or off campus. I don't know. Space somewhere for the neurodivergent community that has, like, active activities, and I can, like, take a break, I guess. (Lana)

Emmitt and Lana's contributions demonstrate their mindfulness towards the heterogeneity of autistic individuals' identities and needs. Relatedly, three participants touched upon how intersecting identities can impact an autistic person's needs and experiences in a communal context. Biggs gestured towards the importance of inviting and including autistic women in communal identity discourses, acknowledging that autistic women are often late-diagnosed, misdiagnosed, or never diagnosed at all due to the overrepresentation of autistic boys and men in autism research (Linkous et al., 2024). Phineus commented on meeting many autistic students through the same academic majors and spaces, describing a particularly consistent association between autistic CSU students and STEM fields such as biology. Lastly, Jordan and Phineus both attested to having met many autistic people through queer/LGBTQ+ groups and spaces on the CSU campus, with Phineus referring more specifically to widespread acceptance of and/or affiliation with gender non-conforming identities among autistic students. These students' discussions of heterogeneity and intersectionality reflect a shared cognizance of diagnostic status, academic interests and strengths, concurrent marginalized identities, and a variety of other person-to-person differences as important context for communal autistic identity construction in higher education.

Finally, it is important to consider the relevance of community-facilitating resources for disabled and neurodivergent CSU students that have come into being over the last few years, such as the Student Disability Club or the Graduate Student Neurodiversity Affinity Group (GSNAG). Four of the eight participants reported being aware of these groups, but only Biggs was actively involved with the Student Disability Club, and Hollis was likewise the only participant who regularly engaged with GSNAG. Aiden and Lana both reported having at least heard of GSNAG but went on to explain that several of the barriers described above have made it nearly impossible for them to engage with the group in a meaningful capacity. In conversation with one another, these students' experiences signify a need to greatly expand the overall visibility and accessibility of the Student Disability Club, GSNAG, and other community-building resources for disabled and neurodivergent students in order for these groups to achieve their goals.

Over the course of the eight interviews conducted in this study, participants produced a diverse array of narratives of personal, enacted, relational, and communal manifestations of autistic identity among CSU students. The first three frames show a vast and colorful array of experiences and encounters with autistic identity, while the communal frame uniquely and concerningly demonstrates quite the opposite. The following Discussion chapter will examine how these findings interpenetrate one another in the context of my two guiding research questions. The responses to these questions not only offer valuable contributions to the extant body of scholarship on autistic social identity but also produce several critical implications for the lives and needs of autistic students at CSU.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Earlier in the Literature Review and Methods chapters, I illustrated the scholarly and societal exigency of studying autistic social identity among higher education students with an approach that uncompromisingly centers autistic voices. The purpose and design of my study were grounded primarily in three contexts: the persistence of language and models that presume holistic deficits in communication competence among autistic people (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Saunders, 2018), the growing body of scholarship that, while performing much better in honoring autistic individuals' perspectives, is still disproportionately authored by non-autistic researchers (Milton, 2014; Benham & Kizer, 2016), and my own positionality as an autistic Communication Studies student and scholar at Colorado State University (CSU). Through in-depth interviews with eight other autistic students at our shared institution, this study has documented a robust range of narratives regarding the construction, performance, and retrospective sensemaking of autistic identity among CSU's autistic student body. As promised in the previous chapter, this Discussion revisits my two guiding research questions and elucidates informed responses based on the thematic findings from the interviews. Alongside these responses to the research questions, I explore some of the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the results of this study. This chapter concludes with an overview of this project's strengths, its limitations, and future directions for scholarship related to autistic identity in higher education. Without further ado, I now reintroduce and respond to my first research question:

RQ1: What are the specific communication behaviors that autistic university students associate with autistic identity?

Discourses of specific communication behaviors associated with autistic identity largely tied into the framework of CTI's enacted identity, with participants explicating in great detail how they communicate autistic identity to others and to themselves. The layer of relational identity, however, added even more depth to these discourses of autistic identity performance by illustrating how the recognition of shared autistic communication behaviors can foster peer connections through the emergence of shared identity. Examined together, the enacted and relational layers of autistic identity articulated in this study produce innovative narratives of autistic identity construction and reconstruction, resisting misconceived notions that autistic people are intrinsically less capable of social identification.

The behaviors that participants described as distinctly autistic behaviors were many, encompassing a wide range of bodily/affective, linguistic/conversational, and cognitive/emotional enactments. Bodily and affective enactments included stimming, avoiding eye contact, and tending towards neutral facial and body language. Linguistic and conversational enactments included using more formal and/or direct language, infodumping during conversations, and avoiding small talk. Cognitive and emotional enactments included feeling pressured to mask, engaging in special interests and hyperfixations, and experiencing non-normative patterns of thought and reasoning. Participants situated many of the above behaviors both in their own reported enactments of autistic identity and in the relational context of shared autistic identity, providing specific examples of interactions with other autistic students that revolved around shared behaviors like stimming, infodumping, and certain preferences around eye contact and body language.

By itself, this vocalized interpenetration of enacted and relational identities indicates that within each participant's sphere of autistic peers resides common knowledge around autistic communication behaviors. Perhaps of even greater importance, though, is that these knowledge systems were frequently represented using the same language across multiple interviews. Even while stating in no uncertain terms that their environmental circumstances actively limit their ability to connect with other autistic students, participants still consistently used phrases like "fidgeting," "stimming," "special interest," "flat affect," "masking," and other recurring labels to refer to the same kinds of behaviors in vastly different contexts.

The presence of shared knowledge and language across several unconnected networks of autistic students carries significant implications for autistic identity construction. Firstly, many autistic students have other means of access to a common autistic culture that exists beyond the university setting. Between the emergence of autistic voices in disability rights advocacy (Walker & Raymaker, 2021), the slow reduction of barriers to formal diagnostic evaluations (Qin et al., 2024), and the growing number of autistic individuals using online platforms to share their lived experiences as a form of education (Angulo-Jiménez & DeThorne, 2019), there are several avenues by which autistic students may absorb autistic cultural knowledge and language independently of interactions with other autistic students. Contrary to theoretical implications and common assumptions of autistic individuals' diminished capacity for identity communication (Bambara et al., 2021; Arnaud, 2022), once an autistic student becomes connected to autistic cultural knowledge, they can and often do use that culture to construct an identity that centers how they communicate with themselves, other people, and the world around them.

On the note of distinctly autistic identity systems, the boundaries of what participants understood as enactments of identity stretched beyond conventional understandings of what constitutes enactment in previous uses of Communication Theory of Identity (CTI; Hecht, 1993). In previous CTI work, discussions of enacted identity almost exclusively relate to outwardly expressed and perceived performances of an identity (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000; Wagner et al., 2016; Paxman, 2021). In this study, such outward enactments encompassed physically embodied enactments like avoiding eye contact, flat affect, and stimming, as well as language- and conversation-oriented enactments like formal and direct speech or writing, avoiding small talk, and infodumping. Uniquely from other CTI studies, though, this project provides an alternative interpretation of enactment, as participants repeatedly spun largely internal and invisible experiences as instances of enacted identity as opposed to aspects of personal identity.

In hindsight, a strong relationship between cognitive and emotional experiences and enacted identity makes sense in the context of autistic identity specifically. In the most technical sense of the word, autism refers to certain neurodevelopmental traits that do not align with the expected trajectory of human development, which then result in the cognitive and behavioral differences and impairments that may mark a person as autistic. With this association between behavior and the brain being so fundamental to broader understandings of autism, it is no wonder that autistic individuals would include *intrapersonal* experiences—hyperfixations, thinking styles, and thought processes behind masking, among others—alongside more outward expressions when asked to describe how they actively perform autistic identity.

The above findings reinforce previous scholars' findings about autistic individuals' awareness of their own communication styles and how effective their communication behaviors are depending on situational context (Cummins et al., 2020; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021).

Uniquely, though, this study dug deeper than asking *whether* and *to what extent* autistic students are aware of these concepts, particularly in regard to their senses of identity as autistic people. Instead, this study began with an unwavering assumption that the participants would be fully capable of metacommunication surrounding social identity, inviting them to describe in detail what autistic identity truly *means* to them and *how* autistic identity is constructed, expressed, and reconstructed through multiple interconnected layers of communication. This assumption of competence proved to be well-founded, as the participants succeeded with flying colors at the reflective tasks that were set before them.

On a more practical level, the fact that autistic university students at CSU possess shared language around the communication of autistic identity begs a pertinent question: if these systems of shared knowledge and language about autistic identities are so readily accessible, then how do higher education institutions remain so ill-equipped to nurture autistic students' success and wellbeing (Cage et al., 2020)? If autistic cultural discourses are so abundantly available that autistic students from wildly different academic and diagnostic backgrounds use similar if not identical language to story their experiences, why do those stories still reflect an environment where these students rarely feel genuinely understood and accepted? To fully develop the answers to these questions, I must first expand upon what this study illuminates about other layers of autistic identity in a higher education context. I thus proceed to respond to my second research question:

> *RQ2: How do autistic university students make sense of autistic identity in their reporting of autistic peer interactions?*

The sense-making journey that occurred throughout the interviews was primarily grounded in the personal, relational, and communal layers of identity. Beginning with the personal frame, the participants of this study vividly described how autistic experiences serve not only as components of their whole self-concept, but also as a grounding framework for their perceptions of themselves, other people, and the systems of the world around them. Some participants also provided narratives from their childhoods to explain how previous patterns of certain social and academic experiences contributed to their present-day personal autistic identities. Rather than considering autism as a finite aspect of their holistic identities, these students generally framed autisticness as a more overarching influence in many if not all areas of their lives, personalities, and ways of communicating.

These narratives of autistic selfhood reflect much of the reasoning behind the growing movement within autistic communities to reclaim identity-first language. Proponents of identity-first language assert that autism cannot be separated from the context of a person's identity because autism *is* crucial context for a person's identity (Brown, 2011). In the same vein, as this study illustrates, an autistic university student is not merely a university student who is failing to be neurotypical. Rather, autistic students are engaged in distinctly autistic ways of knowing, learning, and being, none of which can be removed from their social and academic development.

Some participants' discussions of personal identity hinted towards a connection between diagnostic status and certain personal identity outcomes, including understandings of childhood experiences and present valences of personal autistic identity. Participants who were formally diagnosed early in life gestured towards past interactions with social, clinical, and academic systems of developmental intervention and support, and they generally did not frame their personal concept of autistic identity within overtly positive or negative language. Compared to these students, participants who were self-diagnosed or formally diagnosed in adulthood described specific childhood events during which they felt and behaved in ways that they now relate to being autistic, and they demonstrated a more markedly positive stance on their personal autistic identity.

This contrast parallels the outcomes of studies aiming to represent and affirm the experiences of self-diagnosed and late-diagnosed autistic individuals. In McDonald's (2020) comparative analysis of formally diagnosed and self-diagnosed autistic individuals' experiences, the self-diagnosed survey participants demonstrated a greater focus on the positive attributes of autism than that of the formally diagnosed participants. Additionally, Leedham et al. (2019) and Friedman et al. (2024) respectively interviewed late-diagnosed and self-diagnosed autistic adults about how their diagnostic journeys had changed their perceptions of themselves. These studies both found that self-diagnosis and late diagnosis both frequently result in increased self-esteem and feelings of liberation from shame.

The ongoing trend of self-acceptance narratives among specifically self-diagnosed and late-diagnosed autistic individuals indicates that the means and the timeline of an autism diagnosis are both potentially powerful variables in the development of autistic identity. A multitude of factors likely contribute to the impact of diagnostic status on autistic identity, including but certainly not limited to tensions between clinical and cultural understandings of autism, differences in available supports throughout one's life, and the perceived 'validity' of one's claim to autistic identity. These are only a few of the complex contextual dimensions of autism diagnosis and unpacking them with their deserved diligence is simply not feasible within the confines of this project. As a result, some possible avenues for exploring diagnostic status as its own niche of autistic social identity will be explored alongside other considerations for future directions. At present, I shall turn my attention to the relational themes and implications of this study.

In addition to constructions of personal autistic identity, this study explored some of the unique relational dynamics and outcomes that may occur in autistic peer relationships. Discourse around "soft signals" of shared autistic identity was heavily present across the interviews, depicting more passive relational patterns such as a distinct ease of communication and understanding during conversations, reduced self-consciousness around visible autistic behaviors and non-normative forms of social connection, and intentional demonstrations of empathy towards differing social and sensory needs. Participants attached great importance and appreciation to these soft signals, portraying a sense of implicit acceptance and trust that catalyzes and anchors autistic peer relationships.

The participants' stories of relational autistic identity formation reflect the significance of Milton's (2012) double empathy problem (DEP) in understanding autistic communication cultures. The DEP model argues that communication dysfunctions between autistic and neurotypical people cannot be exclusively attributed to an autistic person's perceived communicative incompetence. Rather, these dysfunctions result from both parties' differing and conflicting interpretations of one another's social behaviors, thus tasking neurotypical people with an equal obligation to learn and adapt to an autistic person's social expectations and needs. Though the primary purpose of the DEP is to explain challenges in communication between autistic and neurotypical individuals through a social lens as opposed to a pathological one (Milton, 2012), it also serves to reinforce the conclusions of scholarship that highlights positive communication outcomes between multiple autistic people, this project included.

Indeed, my study is not the first to find that when autistic individuals are able to connect with one another, the ambient undercurrent of understanding, ease, and comfort empowers these individuals to unmask in one another's presence, leading to successful and mutually beneficial relationships built on a foundation of autistic authenticity (Crompton et al., 2020a; Crompton et al., 2023; Belek, 2022). What this project does contribute that others have not is a deeper understanding of how these relationships feed into other dimensions of autistic identity. As illustrated through RQ1, autistic peer relationships can allow autistic individuals to embrace their own and others' enactments of autistic identity, redefining these performances as useful and effective in ways that may not be afforded in relationships with non-autistic people. Additionally, as the following elucidations on communal autistic identity at CSU will demonstrate, there are a number of serious implications within the stark juxtaposition between the participants' experiences of relational identity and those of communal identity.

In a bleak contrast to the personal, enacted, and relational layers of identity, the participants of this study portrayed the communal autistic identity at CSU as only sparingly conceived. Citing underlying barriers such as cognitive overload, masking-relating fatigue, and tensions between autistic identity and perceived traits of the broader "CSU Rams" culture, participants painted a picture of a campus environment that inhibits the formation of a wider, stronger community of autistic CSU students. Some participants were aware of community-oriented student groups like the Student Disability Club or the Graduate Student Neurodiversity Affinity Group (GSNAG), but only two participants, Biggs and Hollis, were actively engaged with either of these resources. Other interviewees who knew about the groups attested that academic and environmental barriers prevented them from participating, and the rest did not indicate having knowledge that these groups exist at all.

These perspectives align with several prior studies examining broader themes of social identity among autistic university students. Such studies have routinely captured intense feelings of isolation and alienation from one's classmates and peers (MacLeod et al., 2013; Cage et al., 2020), as well as poor mental health outcomes and internalized stigma (Van Hees et al., 2015; Underhill et al., 2024). Interestingly, however, this project was also able to capture students' suggestions for how a stronger communal identity could be fostered. Participants emphasized the need for spaces and activities that cater to different types of autistic people, pointing to the prevalence of diverse communication needs and boundaries, sensory preferences, and intersecting identities within any given group of autistic individuals. Even with limited opportunities to engage with more than a handful of their autistic peers, these students conveyed informed, nuanced, and empathetic insights into what they would want and expect from their peers in a hypothetical communal space.

As I have explicated throughout this chapter, autistic university students at CSU are highly cognizant of how being autistic shapes their modes of interfacing with their peers, their academics, and other aspects of university life. These students share similar personal philosophies around autistic identity that posit autism as fundamental context for the vast majority of their lived experiences. They often engage with the same systems of knowledge and language around how they enact their autistic identities. They place significant relational and emotional weight on the quiet freedom to unmask that arises in interactions with other autistic people. They have specific ideas of where and how they would like to connect with more of their fellow autistic students, and they can envision the impacts that an interconnected autistic student community could produce for themselves and their peers. Despite all of this, the one and only unanimous perspective across all eight participants was that such a community is effectively nonexistent at CSU. I must ask, then, once again: how does such a monumental disparity between one layer of identity and the others occur in this context?

Between these students' keen awareness of their own and others' autistic identities, their drive to come together over their shared identities, and the presence of student-led social organizations like the Student Disability Club and GSNAG, the fact that there remains almost no common narrative of communal autistic identity among these CSU students reinforces on a larger scale what individual autistic students already understand: the neuronormative structures and environments of higher education systemically devalue, dismiss, and stigmatize autistic students' needs and perspectives. When visible autisticness is positioned as ontologically shameful behavior, autistic students are disincentivized from sharing their ideas and experiences or expressing their autisticness where they might be perceived by non-autistic observers. As a result, the personal, enacted, and relational layers of autistic identity are all concealed as a means of protection and survival, rendering the formation of communal identity and solidarity a nigh impossible task.

Improving conditions for autistic students at CSU means facilitating structural and environmental changes that foster widespread community-building connections for autistic students. Though research has shown that well-executed disability accommodation systems improve academic and health-related outcomes for autistic university students (Van Hees et al., 2015), an inclusive higher education environment should not only attempt to compensate for the challenges that autistic students inevitably face in neuronormative spaces. Instead, such an environment should prioritize educating non-autistic faculty, staff, and students on autistic communication and learning styles, as well as empowering autistic students to utilize the academic and social strengths that they uniquely possess because they are autistic. These processes must center the cultural language and expertise of autistic students and professionals to ensure that the experiences, needs, and goals of autistic students are thoroughly and accurately represented.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This project began with aspirations to design a study that would be accessible to its intended participants and engage with previously unfulfilled angles of discussion around autistic identity. Of all my methodological decisions, utilizing multiple interview formats to accommodate a range of communication needs was among the strongest. Eligible students who would have been unwilling or unable to participate in a face-to-face interview were able to contribute their perspectives in writing or over a virtual call, and the participants who chose either of these options provided incredibly valuable insights that would have otherwise been lost. In particular, the written and virtual interview participants spearheaded conversations of direct and formal language patterns that they associate with their autistic identities, demonstrating how facilitating multiple modes of interviews can empower autistic individuals with differing communication preferences to tell their stories thoroughly and authentically.

A second strength of this study was my own positionality as an autistic student at CSU. I entered this project with an understanding of autistic identity and culture that was developed both through scholarship and over years of lived experience. These combined perspectives enabled me to consider the scholarly possibilities that non-autistic researchers have historically overlooked—for instance, using the layered framework of CTI (Hecht, 1993) to elucidate narratives of autistic identity performance in tandem with sensemaking. Additionally, my positionality helped me to highlight the implications of the particular language that participants used in their narratives of autistic identity construction and communication. During and after data collection, it came naturally to me to explore the participants' shared terminology and knowledge because I, too, employ similar terminology and knowledge to navigate my own autistic identity. Outcomes such as these are evidence of the need to place autistic scholars at the forefront of autism research, for even the most informed non-autistic researcher cannot replicate firsthand autistic expertise.

This study also inevitably experienced certain limitations. Most glaringly, I encountered a number of obstacles during data collection that greatly extended the duration of the project and narrowed its scope more than I had intended. The launch of my recruitment protocol in March of 2025 coincided with the midterm season of the Spring 2025 semester, during which many eligible students were likely too busy and/or fatigued to respond to the study. I attempted to rectify this by re-disseminating my recruiting materials in April after the midterm season had ended, managing to connect with the first three participants over the next few weeks. Unfortunately, my second wave of announcements was shortly followed by national news of Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s plans to amass the medical data of U.S. Americans with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder in an effort to "uncover the root causes of autism and other chronic diseases" (HHS Press Office, 2025). Kennedy's argument that autism is a "preventable disease" (Seitz, 2025) revitalized historical discourses promoting the idea of a cure for autism, agitating fears of unwanted detection and persecution in autistic communities across the nation (Leveille, 2025). It is not surprising, then, that responses to my recruiting materials came to a complete halt by mid-May, remaining stagnant throughout the summer and only resuming at the start of the Fall 2025 semester after I revised and expanded my recruiting methods.

Additionally, in August of 2025, I took on a new job as a peer advocate and mentor for individuals in my local community with intellectual and developmental disabilities. While the part-time structure of the position allowed me ample time overall to finish data collection and write the remainder of the thesis, the combined load of my work obligations and my own disability-related care needs inevitably impacted the rate at which I could progress through the project. Aiming to finish and defend my thesis within the spring semester of 2026, I made the decision to close data collection after the eighth interview in January so that I could shift my full focus towards the remainder of the project. After closing data collection, I took measures to mitigate some of the time constraints that were preventing me from writing, including adjusting my work schedule to earlier hours so that I could make more productive use of my afternoons and evenings and regularly attending writing retreats hosted by the CSU Writes program.

Though a minimum range of six to ten participants aligns with Morse's (2000) recommendations for an interview-based phenomenological study such as mine, a sample size of eight participants is still on the low end of what I had originally hoped to achieve with my study population. A larger sample size would have likely enhanced the overall demographic diversity of the participant cohort and permitted me to expand upon thematic nuances that I presently do not have the data to fully develop. For instance, a wider range of ages and racial or ethnic identities across the participant pool could have illuminated more complex narratives of how various intersecting identities may be marginalized in unique ways among autistic students. Higher rates of recruitment would have also likely produced a larger volume of written and virtual interviews, allowing me to explore in more detail the strengths and limitations of each interview format applied in this study. If I were to perform these study procedures again, I would begin recruiting participants at a more widely accessible time in the semester, and I would design my recruitment materials to be more detailed about exactly where and how the data collected for the study would be utilized and protected. Likewise, other scholars interested in researching autistic identity at higher education institutions should account for the demands of the academic calendar and the systemic threats that the target population may be experiencing at the time of recruiting.

On a related note, this study's findings offer compelling opportunities for future research. The concept of intrapersonally enacted identity is most definitely worth further and wider study. A natural next step would be to further explore how cognitive and emotional enactments like hyperfixations, special interests, autistic thinking styles, and mental calculations around masking all inform an autistic person's sense of identity in ways that are unique from other forms of identity enactment. Another readily available path would be to investigate how enacted identity might be interpreted as intrapersonal performance among otherwise neurodivergent populations. Autism is only one of numerous forms of neurodivergence, and those who ascribe to other and/or multiple neurodivergent identities would likely have a great deal to say about their own cognitive and emotional enactments of identity. Understanding how neurodivergent identities may be enacted within oneself in conjunction with outward expressions of identity would help to further empower narratives of autistic people as richly developed human beings whose thoughts, language, and behaviors all have valuable purpose and meaning.

Returning to my discussions of diagnostic status in response to RQ2, a deeper understanding of the relationships between diagnostic status and other aspects of autistic identity would be helpful in a variety of practical contexts. The formally diagnosed and self-diagnosed participants of my study were overall aligned in their perspectives, supporting past literature on the legitimacy and validity of self-diagnosis (Sturm et al., 2024). However, there was also a notable contrast in the implied valences of personal identity between formally diagnosed participants, who tended to approach their personal autistic identity with a fairly neutral outlook, and self-diagnosed or late-diagnosed participants, who framed their personal autistic identities in a more distinctly positive light. This indicates that an autistic person's diagnostic status—or, as it may be better described in light of these findings, a person's diagnostic *story*—can still have notable impacts on other elements and layers of their autistic identity. Further research into diagnostic status/story as a factor in autistic identity would be useful for educators, care providers, and support coordinators who want to better understand and work with autistic students whose experiences may challenge normative assumptions of what an autistic person looks or acts like.

Having now responded to the research questions that guided the course of this study, I conclude this Discussion chapter with an overview of the essential takeaways. Firstly, autistic students at CSU are highly knowledgeable about the enacted behaviors that represent their autistic identities and how these behaviors inform their identification and relationships with autistic peers. The shared language and knowledge demonstrated across the participants of this study implies the presence of common cultural connections, though the lack of pronounced communal identity also indicates that these autistic cultural touchpoints are typically not tied to the university setting. Additionally, autistic students at CSU who were a part of this thesis study generally understand autism as grounding context for their self-concepts, with tonal differences between interviews suggesting a connection between a person's diagnostic status and their valence of their personal autistic identity. Furthermore, participants' reported engagements with soft signals of shared autistic identity reaffirm the likely effectiveness of autistic individuals' communication behaviors during autistic peer interactions. Despite the above findings, the students in this study pronounced a dearth of communal autistic identity to be found on CSU's campus, implicating an institutional lack of consideration for autistic students' identities and needs as opposed to a lack of awareness or desire for connection among autistic students themselves.

Moving forward, higher education institutions like CSU must attend to and account for autistic students' lived experiences when seeking to support the inclusion and wellbeing of autistic students on their campuses. Scholars should also consider how centering autistic positionalities in autistic communication research enhances the designs, outcomes, and contributions of such scholarship. By acting upon these directives, higher education institutions can generate more complete understandings of how autistic students navigate their social and academic environments and eventually facilitate versions of those environments that are more equitable and empowering for our developing autistic professionals and scholars.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Autistic people have long been deprived of equitable opportunities to represent their own lived experiences and identities, leading to flattened and often misinformed understandings of how autistic people think, behave, and communicate (Holton et al., 2014; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021). Higher education settings especially have a problematic history of enforcing neuronormative frameworks of communicative and intellectual competence upon neurodivergent people, leaving little room for autistic students to express their authentic selves in the social and academic spaces of their campuses (Anderson et al., 2018; Bolourian et al., 2018; Cage et al., 2020). Autistic communication research is growing and improving in its representations of autistic identity in academic contexts, though it generally regards autistic identity as a broad, intangible concept that anchors other questions about the psychological and social outcomes of connecting with autistic identity and peers (Cohen et al., 2022; Crompton et al., 2023). This scholarship is extremely important and innovative, but it still lacks depth regarding what specific behaviors and experiences constitute and shape a person's autistic identity. In response, this thesis has addressed the paucity of autistic students' perspectives on the construction and reconstruction of autistic identity in higher education, using qualitative interview protocols grounded in Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht, 1993) to explore how autistic students at Colorado State University (CSU) conceptualize autistic identity in personal, enacted, relational, and communal dimensions.

The autistic students in this study defined their autistic behaviors in terms of bodily and affective enactments (e.g., aversion to eye contact, flat affect), linguistic and conversational enactments (use of direct/formal language, aversion to small talk), and cognitive and emotional enactments (strategic masking, special interests, autistic thinking styles). These findings offer new considerations for how identity can be enacted through intrapersonal processes as well as through visible actions and language. Additionally, students reported recognizing many of these behaviors in other students and that these shared enactments, or “hard signals,” served relational purposes in their interactions with autistic peers. In conveying these associations, students demonstrated shared systems of language and knowledge around the behaviors they associated with autistic identity, with different participants frequently employing the same labels and descriptors in reference to similar behaviors. This alignment suggests that autistic students have access to common autistic cultural reference points even in the absence of an autistic community on campus, raising questions around where autistic university students tend to locate autistic culture and how autistic cultural knowledge could be better utilized and represented in higher education settings.

Discourses of sensemaking around autistic identity explored autism as informative context for most or all of one’s self-concept, reflecting the reasoning behind the growing adoption of identity-first language (e.g., “autistic person”) within autistic communities as opposed to person-first language (e.g., “person with autism”) (Brown, 2011). Participants’ descriptions of their personal autistic identities suggested a connection between diagnostic status/story and valence of one’s autistic identity. Those who reported having been formally diagnosed during childhood generally did not assign positive or negative judgments to their personal autistic identities, while those who were self-diagnosed or formally diagnosed only after reaching adulthood spoke about their identities using distinctly positive language. These variances in autistic identity development may result from conflicting cultural and clinical discourses around autism diagnosis that inform what kinds of supports an autistic person may have access to throughout their life and how ‘valid’ one’s claim to autistic identity is perceived to be.

Sensemaking narratives also illustrate how relational autistic identity can arise through less concrete signals of autistic peers’ shared identity. Participants shared that they often recognized when they were likely interacting with another autistic student through an implicit sense of acceptance, understanding, and empathy towards each party’s autistic social behaviors and needs. These reported “soft signals” of shared autistic identity also had the potential to recontextualize participants’ enacted performances of autistic identity, restoring meaning and value to many misunderstood and stigmatized aspects of autistic communication.

Despite these incredibly robust discussions of how autistic identity is constructed and reconstructed both individually and collaboratively between peers, participants unanimously reported feeling little to no connection to a wider autistic community at CSU. These students cited a variety of academic and environmental barriers that prevented them from seeking out larger numbers of fellow autistic students or participating in existing student groups such as the Student Disability Club or the Graduate Student Neurodiversity Affinity Group. Still, participants provided several suggestions for how to design community-building spaces and activities that could cater to autistic students’ diverse needs and identities. When placed alongside these students’ nuanced awareness of personal, enacted, and relational autistic identities, the scarcity of communal autistic identity at CSU reflects the inevitable outcome of institutional systems that privilege neuronormativity and obstruct autistic students’ expressions of their experiences.

The outcomes of this study provide strong evidence in support of autistic university students’ communication competencies, rejecting the widespread notion that autistic people are incompetent communicators by nature (Saunders, 2018; Yergeau, 2017). The participants of this study were more than capable of thoroughly articulating their experiences of autistic identity construction and performance, and those experiences reflected a strong cognizance of environmental social norms that discouraged these students from more openly embracing their autistic ways of thinking and communicating. In light of these findings, I join my study participants and other openly autistic communication scholars in calling upon higher education institutions like CSU to take accountability for the inclusion and wellbeing of autistic students. Support for autistic students cannot stop at providing accommodations through services such as the Student Disability Center; we must sincerely listen to autistic students and scholars about what it means to be autistic in academic spaces, and we must learn to adapt and respond to the communication styles of autistic people in our classrooms, course designs, and campus life at large. Through the facilitation of spaces and structures that account for diverse social, cognitive, and sensory needs, higher education institutions can foster a more holistically inclusive and empowering experience for their autistic learners and scholars.

An important truth to understand before concluding this work is that changing the systems of higher education to better serve autistic students will not completely resolve every challenge that an autistic university student faces. The goal, again, is not to try to make autistic students less autistic, but to create an environment where these students do not have to suppress their autisticness in order to thrive. For instance, designing sensory-inclusive classrooms could not guarantee that an autistic or otherwise neurodivergent student would never feel over/understimulated in those spaces, but they *would* help to normalize sensory processing differences and potentially inspire collaborative conversations about neurodiverse sensory needs (Rappaport, 2024). In my own academic journey, being encouraged to employ my autistic voice in my work has never negated the frustration of trying to communicate in a linear narrative what manifests in my head as three-dimensional diagrams of information; it *has,* however, helped me to communicate more openly with instructors, classmates, coworkers, and even my own Public Speaking students about how I approach certain tasks or situations and what might be happening in my mind and body when I appear to be struggling. An inclusive higher education environment should nurture the strengths that come with autistic students' cognitive and social differences, extend empathy and compassion towards the challenges that autistic students will encounter regardless, and above all, enable autistic students to come together as peers and express themselves without fear or shame.

That is, after all, how I found my own autistic identity. I would never have found my way into this work without the wisdom and compassion of my autistic peers, and I feel that we have spent long enough merely imagining what could be possible if every autistic student was afforded that same gift. It is decidedly time to start turning those visions into our reality.

There's a sort of inside joke in some autistic communities about "peer-reviewed diagnosis," which is when you don't know that you're autistic until a bunch of other autistic people collectively clock you as one of them. They see themselves in you, and they might tell you as much once you pass a certain threshold of relational trust (and sometimes, in cases like mine, a limit to how many times your friends can listen to you obliviously vent about autism-related problems before they decide that it's time to intervene). No wonder you've always felt uniquely seen and understood in their company, and no wonder they appreciate your *company in a way that doesn't feel contingent on your adherence to social customs that have never come naturally to you. You* belong *with these people, and when they give you the gift of language that can* *articulate* why, *you are liberated into a whole new understanding of yourself and the world around you.*

It's been three years since that fateful post-midterms game night, where one conversation led to another and suddenly seven different friends who all happened to be autistic were urging me to take the online RAADS-R survey at my earliest convenience. Since then, I've spent a great deal of time pondering and researching the differences between autism as a neurological entity and what it actually means to be autistic. I've come to think of it this way: autism begins in the brain and extends into the world, whereas autistic identity happens the other way around. Autism is something that you're born with, but you aren't born knowing *that you're autistic or what that really means beyond the label. Autistic identity is something that you acquire in one way or another, and once it's in your grasp, you develop and redefine it over and over again for the rest of your life. Autism in and of itself kind of just happens, and neither you nor the people around you really get a choice in the matter—which, I cannot emphasize enough, is* not *automatically a tragedy. It's only tragic if your environment makes it tragic, and* that's *the part that you can choose what to do with; will you see yourself as a tragedy, too, or will you look at your autisticness and see all of its magnificently messy potential? Will you accept the models and the messages that portray autism as a curse, or will you dare to believe that your self-determined autistic being is a cause worth fighting for?*

Twenty-five years ago, I was born with autism. Twenty-two years later, I finally became autistic. Today, my only regret is that I did not come to know my autisticness sooner. Had I realized how much joy it could bring someone like me to be autistic on purpose, I would have started fighting for it ages ago.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

The interview prompts used in the face-to-face interviews and the virtual interviews were phrased as follows:

1. Tell me about how you understand autism as a part of your individual identity.
2. During most social interactions, what kinds of language and behaviors do you perform that you associate with your autistic identity?
3. When you interact with another CSU student, what language and behaviors signal to you (explicitly or implicitly) that that student is or may be autistic?
4. How do you believe your identity as an autistic CSU student aligns with or differs from other autistic CSU students' identities?
5. How does interacting with other autistic students at CSU shape your understanding of the autistic student community at Colorado State University?
6. Is there anything else about communicating autistic identity with other autistic university students that you would like to discuss?

The interview prompts used in the written interviews were phrased as follows:

1. Tell me about how you understand autism as a part of your individual identity.
2. During social interactions, what kinds of language and behaviors do you perform that you associate with your autistic identity?
3. When you interact with another CSU student, what language and behaviors signal to you (explicitly or implicitly) that that student is or may be autistic? If comfortable, please

describe a particular experience in another student's language or behaviors signaled to you that that student may have been autistic.

4. How do you believe your identity as an autistic CSU student aligns with or differs from other autistic CSU students' identities? If comfortable, please describe a particular experience in which your own identity as an autistic CSU student seemed to align with or differ from that of another autistic CSU student.
5. How does interacting with other autistic students affect your understanding of the autistic student community at Colorado State University?
6. Is there anything else about communicating autistic identity with other autistic university students that you would like to discuss?