

Advertising to the Spectrum: Exploring Ethical Implications in Neurodivergent Consumer Markets

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Abstract

This study compares the effects of high-pressure sales messages on Autistic and non-autistic consumers, guided by Critical Disability Theory (CDT) and a social model of disability. It argues that society has an ethical obligation to consider the potential disparate impact of advertising practices on neurodivergent consumers. An online survey of 162 participants found that Autistic individuals (n = 83) reported higher levels of anxiety and stress than non-autistic participants (n = 79) when exposed to high-pressure sales messages (defined here by overstated claims, urgency, scarcity, fear, and an emphasis on uncommon results) despite showing similar ad-clicking behavior. Autistic participants were also less likely to recognize the sales content as advertising. Although exploratory in nature, this study suggests a need for further research into the unintended consequences of high-pressure advertising on vulnerable populations. It contributes to the understanding of ethical advertising by highlighting consumer vulnerabilities within current societal structures and potential gaps in advertising ethics, advancing discussions on marketplace equity and communication.

Plain Language Abstract

This study compares the effects of high-pressure sales messages on Autistic and non-autistic consumers. High pressure sales messages are those that make overstated claims; create a false sense of urgency, scarcity, or fear; or emphasize uncommon results. When the reactions of 83 Autistic individuals were compared with 79 non-autistic individuals, the Autistic individuals were less likely to recognize the sales messages as advertising, and they were more likely to feel anxious and stressed. However, there was no significant difference between the groups in their willingness to click on the ads. This article suggests current advertising practices have the potential to impact Autistic consumers differently, and ethical advertisers ought to think about the effects their messages have on different types of brains. Further research is necessary to confirm these findings.

Advertising is one of the most pervasive and influential forms of social communication in modern life, shaping not only consumer behavior but broader cultural expectations. As its prevalence and complexity grow in our increasingly digital world, deeper consideration of advertising's broader societal role becomes necessary. In response to consumer demand for more accessible and inclusive communication, initiatives within the advertising industry have emphasized ethical practices, as seen in movements toward legal compliance, brand responsibility strategies, and advocacy efforts (Center for Ethical Marketing, 2024; Disability Belongs, 2023; Gracenote, 2024). Yet amid these developments, one critical area remains largely overlooked: the integration of neurodiversity perspectives, particularly the centering of Autistic

experiences, within advertising discourse and public communication research.

Understanding advertising's pervasive role requires examining not just its content, but the scale and persistence with which it reaches consumers. While widely circulated claims suggest that individuals encounter anywhere from 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements daily, these figures often lack clear methodological support. More rigorous analyses place the figure much lower: Media Dynamics (2014) estimated approximately 360 meaningful exposures per day, while more recent calculations based on digital ad impressions suggest around 300–400 daily exposures from banner ads alone (Rawat, 2023). Digital advancements, particularly personalized targeting, have fundamentally altered consumer-advertiser interactions,

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creating an environment where individuals navigate a constant stream of highly tailored and persistent messaging (Lee & Cho, 2019). According to Bell et al. (2022), ad exposure is likely to continue increasing, a trend further intensified by behavioral targeting strategies (Aguirre, et al., 2016; Laux et al., 2021).

There is limited research on how these evolved practices impact neurodivergent consumer audiences, particularly regarding social communication differences. Accessibility research in media tends to focus on areas like race, ethnicity, gender, and accommodations for physical disabilities, such as screen readers, speech input, and browser extensions. However, the social nature of advertising must not be forgotten. Studies have shown that fostering parasocial relationships (PSR)—a technique where consumers form one-sided relationships with media figures—enhances consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Du et al., 2023), one example of how advertising increasingly operates as a mediated form of social connection that blurs boundaries between communication, persuasion, and relationship-building (Wibowo et al., 2021). This shift not only reflects but intensifies the trend described by Leiss et al. (2005), who argue that advertising functions as a core site of social communication, shaping meaning through selective use of cultural codes and emotional associations. In doing so, advertising constructs and reinforces dominant norms about communication itself—norms that may distort or obscure more direct, reciprocal forms of connection. For individuals with communication differences, such as Autistic consumers, navigating these constructed norms may not simply be more difficult; it may expose fundamental mismatches between dominant advertising communication patterns and diverse ways of understanding. This evolution reflects a broader transformation in the role of communication itself—one that, as Leiss et al. (2005) argue, systematically shapes and distorts meaning within the marketplace.

Advertising's role in structuring distorted communication has significant ethical implications. As Leiss et al. (2005) emphasize, distortion is not incidental but a structural feature of advertising, systematically obscuring essential aspects of production, consumption, and human need. For individuals with communication differences, such as Autistic consumers, navigating these distortions may not simply be more difficult; it may intensify vulnerabilities that are already shaped by broader patterns of marginalization. As advertising increasingly functions as a primary mode of social communication, the potential disparate impact of high-pressure techniques—defined here as relying on overstated claims, urgency, scarcity, fear, and uncommon results—must be critically examined. These concerns are particularly significant given the lack of transparency and public oversight, as noted by Milano et al. (2021) and (Laux, J. et al., 2021).

While advertising is regulated through both government oversight and industry self-regulation, gaps in oversight remain. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) enforces laws against false advertising and unfair trade

practices (Federal Trade Commission, 2021). The National Advertising Division of the Better Business Bureau (BBB) addresses complaints about ads targeting *recognized vulnerable* populations (BBB National Programs, 2023). The Association of National Advertisers promotes its Ethics Code of Marketing Best Practices (Center for Ethical Marketing, 2024). However, advertisers must also recognize a broader understanding of communication and disability and its connection to situational consumer vulnerability, defined as the disadvantages consumers face when engaging in transactions (Anderson et al., 2013; Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2020; Stenlund & Jensen, 2022).

Disadvantages such as stigmatization or discrimination based on personal or social characteristics, along with limited alternatives or a lack of expertise in important areas like finance, education, or healthcare, can make people more vulnerable to predatory or discriminatory practices (Anderson et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2005). Autistic consumers, who routinely face such stigmatization and discrimination, may experience situational vulnerability in the marketplace (Botha et al., 2020). This potential vulnerability highlights the importance of recognizing Autistic individuals' experiences within consumer contexts and aligns with broader calls for consideration in advertising (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2020; Stenlund & Jensen, 2022).

The theoretical foundation of this research is Critical Disability Theory (CDT), which advocates equity for the disability community and provides a framework for understanding the relationship between impairment, disability, and society (Hosking, 2008). Goodley (2013) argues that a key task of CDT is to explore how *conditions of dominance* intersect in ways that “promote values” and “justify forms of oppression,” actively engaging with intersectional analysis to consider the convergence and divergence of multiple marginalizations (p. 637). Equity, as defined by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), emphasizes the need to recognize groups historically denied equal treatment or access, often marginalized in mainstream narratives. Young (1990) argues that equity may sometimes require *special treatment* for these groups. In this context, advertisers bear the responsibility of integrating evolving equity considerations into their practices.

While some researchers posit that Autistic individuals may be more susceptible to deception and exploitation (Jankowski & Pfeifer, 2021; Williams et al., 2018, & Woodcock et al., 2019), existing evidence remains inconclusive. Other studies suggest that Autistic individuals may be less influenced by manipulative messaging (Farmer et al., 2017). This ongoing debate underscores the need for exploration and understanding of Autistic experiences in the context of consumer behavior and advertising, including the need for Autistic representation in the production of understanding (Botha, 2021).

The primary objective of this article is to advance advertising ethics in the context of Autistic consumers' experiences. Specifically, it seeks to address messages that may not treat consumers equitably based on the audi-

ence's *nature* (Institute for Advertising Ethics, 2022). This research advocates for advertisers to intentionally apply ethical practices characterized by "respect for others, an awareness of justice, and sensitivity to the application of rules of conduct" (Institute for Advertising Ethics, 2022, para. 1) in consideration of advertising and marginalized communities, such as the Autistic community (Botha, 2020). This article explores the relevant literature on high-pressure advertising practices and their potential disparate impact on Autistic individuals through the lens of Critical Disability Theory (CDT). A survey is used to compare the perceptions and reactions of Autistic and non-autistic individuals to simulated high-pressure advertising messages.

Literature Review

This study draws on critical theory but also incorporates social science techniques to examine possible disparate impacts of high pressure advertising on the Autistic community. This section reviews literature related to disability, advertising, and the reasons Autistic and non-autistic consumers may react differently to high pressure sales messages.

Representing Autism

Autistic individuals are part of a broader neurodivergent community, and this research advocates for a value-neutral approach rather than a medicalized model of autism (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013). The medical community depends on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*' (DSM-5) description of autism, which emphasizes, in part, differences in social interaction and focused interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2021). Recent data suggest that approximately 1.5% of the population in developed countries is diagnosed autistic, with many cases never recognized or diagnosed due to various barriers to formal diagnosis (Baxter et al., 2015; Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015), limitations of diagnostic tools (Volkmar & Reichow, 2013), or lack of interest in seeking diagnosis.

Seeking to most accurately represent the Autistic community requires emphasizing the individuality of its members, while distinguishing between the medical definition of autism and the lived experiences of Autistic individuals. This understanding is crucial for an accurate portrayal in both academic research and society overall. Cuthbert and Insel (2013) have argued that medical understandings of conditions like autism are affected by the limited nature of the DSM-5, which they contend does not incorporate advances in genetics, neuroscience, or cognitive science. Hens (2021) observed, "What a child psychiatrist means when they talk about autism can be something different from what a cognitive scientist means. It may be something different again from what it means for the autistic person" (p. xi). Consideration of the relationship between the tool and what is being tested is pertinent here. Does the diagnostic tool mea-

sure autism, or is autism defined as the outcome of the test (Hens, 2021, p. 54)?

On the one hand, there is a growing self-advocacy within the Autistic community that continues to shape discourse around disability rhetoric and the conceptual understanding of autism. On the other hand, there remain researchers and medical providers with a singular focus on finding a *cure* for autism (i.e., the limited medical definition of it), which may disregard the value and perspectives of Autistic individuals. For instance, Cooper et al.'s (2024) study, which advocates for "ideal, permanent" treatments through gene editing, frames autism as a *disease* to be eradicated, rather than as a form of human diversity (p. 16). This tension reflects what Hacking (1995) described as the *looping effects* of humankind: classifications like "Autistic" are not static labels but interact with how individuals are perceived, treated, and understood, thereby influencing both self-identity and societal expectations over time. As the Autistic community increasingly participates in reshaping the narrative, the social meaning of autism continues to evolve, highlighting the importance of centering Autistic voices in research and public discourse.

It can be challenging for researchers to fully represent the Autistic community, particularly in areas of intersectionality such as race, gender, cognitive diversity, co-occurring conditions (Dickson et al., 2021), and age (Fusar-Poli et al., 2020; Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015). We recognize that our own study has limitations in this area. We also acknowledge that we have drawn upon research from scholars whose perspectives on autism differ from the perspective taken here. Autistic individuals frequently report that their experiences are minimized or misinterpreted, a situation exacerbated by a historical lack of Autistic representation in research (Kasambira Fannin, 2017; Lebenhagen, 2019) and concerns about how they are treated during the knowledge creation process (Botha, 2021). As Milton (2012) highlights, "Autism is not just an invisible disability to many in terms of a behavioural definition; the autistic voice is made invisible within the current culture of how knowledge produced about autistic people often excludes empowered autistic advocates from such processes" (p. 4).

Although progress is being made toward more accurate representation, significant gaps remain, particularly in the inclusion of non-speaking persons, those with intellectual disabilities, racial minorities, gender-diverse individuals, those of lower socioeconomic status, and other intersections of marginalization. The use of CDT as a lens for this research is important because, "the intersectional character of disability" is one of the reasons we might, "conceptualize the contemporary state of the field as *critical* disability studies" (Goodley, 2013, p. 632). Systemic underrepresentation cautions against generalizing the experiences of the entire Autistic population and underscores the importance of sharing research that recognizes the diversity within the Autistic community and the inherent limitations of research (Cascio et al., 2021; Kasambira Fannin, 2017). When participants are re-

cruited via survey services, there is an increased risk of sampling bias and lack of generalizability to the Autism population as a whole (Rødgaard et al., 2022).

Language and the Social Model of Disability

Psychiatry has constructed its objects of concern, “psychiatric symptoms and disorders,” as problems located within individuals, in their psychological dynamics and, increasingly, in their neurobiology. This warrants ongoing efforts to identify biological bases of psychopathology and corresponding treatments. However, there are many reasons to believe that mental health problems, broadly conceived, also arise from interactional processes with the social environment. Mind, brain, and culture are mutually co-constructed across multiple timescales, reflecting the reality that human biology is inherently social, and the brain functions as an organ of culture (Kirmayer, L. J., Worthman, C. M., & Kitayama, S. (2020).

Disability rhetoric has its own history and significant implications for those within the community (Linton, 1998). Language choices often reflect different conceptions of disability in research. Hosking (2008) defines disability as “a complex interrelationship between impairment, an individual’s response to that impairment, and the social environment,” (p. 13). We intend to neutrally identify a subset of the population. However, we recognize that “any label describing something society considers a negative attribute often acquires a negative social connotation” (Hosking, 2008, p. 13). For example, the term *special needs*, frequently used in advertising guides to describe vulnerable populations, often carries connotations that reinforce stigma or marginalization, failing to capture the full spectrum experiences and needs within the disability community (Gernsbacher et al., 2016).

The medical model of disability frames people’s impairment as the reason for their inability to fully participate in society (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Research shows that employing the medical model in autism studies predicts a higher likelihood of “ableist cues” compared to using social or neutral embodiment narratives (Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 1). In contrast, the social model of disability emphasizes that the challenges associated with disability are exacerbated by the mismatch between individuals and their environment, particularly when accommodations for variation are lacking (Andrews, 2017). While this article cannot fully explore the evolution, proposed changes (Woods, 2017), and critiques of certain applications of the social model, this framework serves as the foundation for this research.

Neurodiversity theory (Botha et al., 2024) posits that all neurodivergent individuals—including Autistic people, ADHDers, dyslexic individuals, and those with dyspraxia—are valued members of society, with neurodivergence existing independently of cognitive ability, intelligence, or aptitude (Dunne, 2024). The neurodiversity movement has played a prominent role in challenging the traditional views of autism as a deficit or disease (Kapp, 2020). Consequently, *Autistic* will be capitalized to

denote a cultural group, much like *Deaf* is used, while *autism* will be lowercase to represent the neurological pattern itself (HarperCollins Publishers, 2022; Price, 2022).

The National Centre on Disability and Journalism (2021) emphasizes the need to use terminology preferred by the person or group being addressed. While there are various ways to refer to Autistic people, some terms may further stigmatize or marginalize the group (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020). Research shows that Autistic individuals are *reclaiming* the language surrounding autism as part of the de-stigmatization process, redefining its connotative meanings (Botha et al., 2020). These efforts have been shown to increase feelings of empowerment and reduce stigmatization (Galinsky et al., 2013). This paper uses identity-first language (*Autistic person*) as it aligns with the perspective that autism is an integral, non-negative aspect of identity, reflecting the natural spectrum of human cognitive diversity. Identity-first language acknowledges an individual’s neurodivergence as inherently intertwined with their identity, supporting a broader understanding of neurodiversity (Botha et al., 2020; Taboas et al., 2022). Research indicates identity-first language is preferred by many in the Autistic community (Dwyer et al., 2022). However, individual preferences for language are diverse and should be respected.

Critical Disability Theory

As Goodley (2013) explained, “The word *critical* denotes a sense of self-appraisal; reassessing where we have come from, where we are at, and where we might be going” (p. 632). Hosking (2008) has argued that the objective of Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is “to support the transformation of society so that disabled people in all their diversity are equal participants and fully integrated into their communities” (p.17). Integration includes the ability to fully participate in the economic marketplace, where advertising plays a prominent role (Bagwell, 2007, pp. 1701–1844). In her book, *What Can a Body Do? How We Meet the Built World*, Sara Hendren (2020) states, “Ability and disability may be in part about the physical state of the body, but they are also produced by the relative flexibility or rigidity of the built world” (p. 14). She further observes, “[D]isability reveals just how unfinished the world really is” (p. 30).

Hosking (2008) emphasizes that many social challenges disabled people face result from inadequate responses of the social environment. Through the lens of CDT, lack of intention for more equitable practices within the marketplace is part of this *inadequate response*. CDT challenges the very way the status quo is defined and, “maintains space for critical reason to achieve a more participatory and egalitarian society” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 175). Using this lens invites important questions, such as, “how to conceptualize diversity among disabled people to restructure cultural meanings, social processes, and politics” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 175). As Hacking (1995) explains in his theory of looping effects, classifications of human kinds—such

as disabled or Autistic—are not static but interact with social perceptions and behaviors, continually reshaping both individual experiences and societal norms.

Since the mental health of Autistic individuals is closely linked to the extent of which they feel accepted by society as Autistic (Cage et al., 2018), creating systems that support equality and inclusion is vital. Early critical disability scholars argue that the disability movement's struggle was more about ramps, while critical disability's work centers on society's exclusion of atypicality and, "who is eligible for participation in civic life" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 17). The application of CDT advocates for societal transformation and the eradication of social exclusion across all domains of public life, including the persuasive practices embedded in contemporary advertising.

Traditional psychiatric models have often reinforced deficit-based views of neurodivergent individuals, framing differences like Autism through the language of disorder and impairment. However, Morioka et al. (2019) advocate a critical shift away from disease-based paradigms, arguing that many so-called vulnerabilities arise not from intrinsic pathology but from developmental diversity interacting with unsupportive environments. Kirmayer (2024) similarly challenges individualistic models, emphasizing that human cognition, emotion, and identity are shaped within dynamic cultural-ecosocial systems. From this perspective, the pressures created by conventional advertising environments—designed with narrow cognitive and emotional expectations—represent structural barriers, not individual shortcomings. Ethical advertising practices must move beyond accommodation models to actively reconstruct persuasive environments in ways that affirm and include diverse modes of perception, meaning-making, and interaction.

Ethical Advertising

Building on Critical Disability Theory's call to transform exclusionary systems, ethical advertising must be reimagined not simply as rule-following but as an active commitment to reshaping communication environments to support cognitive and social diversity. The evolution of advertising reflects the dynamic nature of ethical progress, demonstrating that advertising practices continue to evolve in response to societal changes (Leiss et al., 2005). Ethical advertising is more than legal compliance; it demands consideration of how messaging influences and interacts with diverse audiences. Advertisers may not intentionally create inequitable systems, but the historical lack of ethics-based training often results in practices based on inconsistent definitions of ethical professional behavior (Richardson-Greenfield & La Ferle, 2021). Advertisers commonly view ethical practice through a legal lens, focusing on compliance over social responsibility, leading to advertising that can inadvertently exploit or marginalize vulnerable groups in avoidable ways.

For ethical advertising to be meaningful, it must move beyond simply avoiding deceptive practices. It should in-

tionally practice equity and understanding in its development of messaging that does not perpetuate harm but instead contributes to a marketplace accessible for all consumers, particularly marginalized groups.

Ethics and Power

Ethics in advertising, defined as a set of prescriptive rules, principles, and values that guide conduct (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005), must be understood within the context of the inherent power dynamic between advertisers and consumers. Given Brenkert's (1998) argument that advertisers not only create products but shape consumer desires and behaviors, recognizing unethical uses of power, such as manipulation, invasion of privacy, and withholding information (Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998), is essential. These concerns are not merely theoretical; the FTC codifies them by defining deceptive advertising as any act or omission that misleads reasonable consumers, regardless of intent or outcome and continues to rely on this standard through its consumer protection mandate under Section 5 of the FTC Act (Federal Trade Commission, 2021).

However, deception is only part of the ethical landscape. Bakir et al. (2018) argue that organized persuasive communication (OPC) encompasses a broader range of tactics, including incentivization and coercion, operating within physical, socio-political, and economic systems where power is unequally distributed. Their framework highlights how advertising is embedded within larger structures that may subtly or overtly pressure consumers, not merely mislead them. Brenkert (1998) points out that it is this intersection of consumer vulnerability and advertising tactics that places certain groups at greater risk.

While some service providers may argue that protections for vulnerable groups are patronizing (Wolburg, 2005), acknowledging the broader dimensions of power within persuasive communication, as Bakir et al. (2018) suggest, strengthens the case for safeguarding consumers from undue influence. Although various groups experience such vulnerabilities, this research focuses specifically on the experiences of Autistic consumers.

Ethical Evolution in Advertising

Advertising has evolved over time, adapting to shifting cultural norms and ethical considerations, continually responding to social change (Leiss et al., 2005). Once-acceptable advertising messages, such as Volkswagen's campaigns implying that women are unsafe drivers or Sugar Information Inc.'s assertion that sugar promotes health (Shelton, 2021), would no longer align with today's ethical standards. As societal values evolve, so too must advertising's ethical standards, particularly regarding intentional consideration of *vulnerable* consumers (Hosking, 2008).

Advertisers are not passive observers of cultural change, they function as cultural intermediaries, whose professional success depends on their sensitivity to cul-

tural shifts across media, fashion, and social life (Leiss et al., 2005). Recognizing and adapting to the needs of diverse consumer communities, including Autistic individuals, is therefore not a radical request, but an extension of advertising's ongoing role in responding to cultural evolution.

Recent examples such as Apple's 2024 "Crush" ad, retracted after criticism that it symbolized technology destroying human creativity (Franck, 2024); Gucci's 2019 "blackface jumper" and H&M's 2018 "Coolest Monkey in the Jungle" hoodie, both condemned for promoting casual racism (Blanchard, 2019); and Pepsi's 2017 commercial, accused of trivializing the Black Lives Matter movement (Victor, 2017), illustrate the standards to which advertisers are now held. Less prominent examples—such as deceptive *ghost store* ads posing as local businesses on Instagram (McLeod, 2025), the University of Phoenix's false claims of employment partnerships (University of Phoenix, n.d.), Juice Plus's use of fake testimonials and unsubstantiated health claims across multiple countries (Federal Trade Commission, 2020) or DERMAdoctor's exaggerated body-shrinking product claims (Federal Trade Commission, 2014) show that ethically questionable advertising is not exclusive to large companies but is found across the advertising landscape.

A dual evolution is taking place—one of public ethical progress and awareness, and another of advancements in advertising techniques. Technologies like machine learning and behavioral targeting now refine strategies to influence consumer behavior, often without consumers' awareness. For example, psychographic targeting—tailoring ads to a consumer's emotional state—can exploit temporary vulnerabilities without the consumer's full awareness (Matz & Netzer, 2017). As advertising technologies evolve to influence consumers more subtly and powerfully, advertisers face an urgent ethical obligation to reconsider not just how they persuade, but how their strategies deepen systemic disparities among diverse consumers.

Responsibility of Advertisers

Meeting this ethical obligation requires advertisers to move beyond surface-level compliance and critically engage with the diverse ways consumers experience communication itself. The Institute for Advertising Ethics (IAE) advocates for ethical decision-making among advertisers, particularly in scenarios where there isn't a clear *right* choice (Institute for Advertising Ethics, 2022). The possible effects of advertising on Autistic consumers offer a good example. Research highlights the challenges faced by Autistic individuals, who often encounter mismatches between their neurological functioning and environmental demands, stemming from cultural contexts predominantly tailored to non-autistic individuals (Legault et al., 2019). This can contribute to feelings of isolation, discrimination, and victimization, as Autistic individuals face societal expectations for neurotypical behavior (Botha et al., 2020). Recognizing Autistic individuals as part of a vulnerable community, subjected to societal norms that

do not accommodate their neurotype, highlights the responsibility of advertisers to engage ethically with this group.

Marginalized communities often face stressful circumstances due to societal marginalization and limited coping resources (Meyer, 2003). This heightened stress is linked to significant disparities in mental health, well-being, and physical health outcomes (Botha, 2020). Within the Autistic community, the prevalence of anxiety is notably high, often due to navigating environments that are structured around non-autistic norms and expectations (Riedelbauch et al., 2024). Given the IAE's emphasis on prioritizing consumer health, and Critical Disability Theory's advocacy for integrating disability perspectives into societal frameworks (Hosking, 2008), advertisers should conscientiously evaluate the impact of their practices on marginalized communities like the Autistic population.

According to the FTC (2021), advertisers must not only refrain from intentional deception but also from messaging that is *likely* to mislead people. With the emergence of new research and updates to our understanding of autism, advertisers now face an ethical imperative to consider the likelihood that their messages may be interpreted differently by different neurotypes.

Williams et al. (2018) argued that Autistic individuals might be "particularly vulnerable to manipulation" (p. 1), as demonstrated by their difficulty in making what the researchers referred to as *correct* inferences about deceit even when cues were available. This study examined both truth-related cues, such as gaze, smiling, posture shifts, response latencies, and speech fluency (Zuckerman et al., 1981), and lie-related cues, including nervous behavior, incoherent answers, and gaze aversion (Global Deception Research Team, 2006). However, the researchers themselves caution that these findings are not representative of all Autistic individuals (Williams et al., 2018). Research also suggests that Autistic individuals may rely more heavily on contextual cues and adhere strictly to learned social rules, potentially altering their responses to high-pressure advertising (Jankowski & Pfeifer, 2021). High-pressure advertising often employs tactics like overstated claims, false urgency, scarcity, and fear, which can lead to responses such as Fear of Missing Out (FoMo) and have been associated with increased anxiety, stress, fatigue, as well as physical symptoms like decreased sleep (Hayley et al., 2022; Milyavskaya et al., 2018). Given the heightened prevalence of anxiety within the Autistic community (Riedelbauch et al., 2024), these findings suggest the need to explore whether high-pressure tactics might disproportionately impact Autistic consumers. Following Morioka et al. (2019), such vulnerabilities are better understood as arising from the interaction between individual diversity and an inadequately accommodating environment. While anxiety serves as a pertinent example, this research aims to capture a broader understanding of how high-pressure tactics, particularly those shaped by neurotypical norms, might uniquely affect Autistic consumers.

Certain service practices have the potential to be exclusionary (Fisk et al., 2018). These include marketplace discrimination (Crockett et al., 2003, p. 1), failure to recognize the needs of disadvantaged (Klein & Andreasen, 1975) and/or vulnerable (Baker et al., 2005) consumers, and the imposition of service captivity (Rayburn, 2015, p. 806). *Service captivity* refers to a consumer's perception that they have no alternative service providers (Rayburn, 2015, p. 806), a concept closely tied to high-pressure advertising tactics. For instance, by inducing a false sense of urgency, scarcity, or emotional manipulation, advertisers may create the illusion of limited consumer choice. Although exclusionary practices may not always be overtly unethical, for the purposes of this study, *unethical* and *exclusionary* will be treated as synonymous. Additional tactics commonly used in high pressure advertising, such as inducing a false sense of urgency or scarcity, or employing emotional manipulation, may also be deemed unethical within the scope of this research.

Society requires structural changes to better accommodate the diversity of disabilities. Advertisers, like other service providers, must meet this challenge by embracing inclusive practices that ensure fair access and equitable treatment (Fisk et al., 2018). Insights into how Autistic individuals respond to social pressures and contextual cues should inform a broader commitment to service inclusion, not just for Autistic consumers but for other marginalized groups as well. In doing so, advertisers can help support the marketplace as a system that enhances well-being and provides fair access.

Ultimately, ethical advertising toward Autistic consumers requires not only refraining from exclusionary practices but also critically reassessing how communication norms are constructed and whose ways of understanding are privileged in the marketplace, a recognition that intersects with broader critiques of capitalism and neurodiversity (e.g., Chapman, 2023). However, this study focuses specifically on the differential experiences of Autistic consumers in advertising environments.

The Autistic Consumer

For Autistic consumers, the marketplace often presents communication and structural challenges rooted in environments built around non-autistic norms. The marketplace is not just an economic arena; it also functions as a social environment where individuals interact, communicate, and navigate societal norms. For Autistic consumers, these environments, often designed with neurotypical norms in mind, can present unique challenges. Many Autistic adults have only recently received diagnoses and recognition due to earlier assumptions that autism was a childhood-specific neurotype. In 2013, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) introduced its understanding of autism as a spectrum, eliminating subtypes and writing that "symptoms" may not manifest in some adults until "social communication demands exceed limited capacities" (American Psychiatric Association, 2021, p. 50). This shift led to the identification of a "lost generation" of undiagnosed

Autistic adults previously overlooked under older diagnostic criteria (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015). As awareness grows, so does the recognition of the need for autism-inclusive environments, including in the marketplace—a social space that has long been structured around neurotypical consumers.

The narratives Autistic people often share about living in a neurotypical society include experiences of discrimination, victimization, and carrying an excess stress burden (Laursen, E.K. & Yazdgerdi, S., 2012; Botha, 2020). Researchers are calling for the "creation of supportive, accepting, and autism-friendly social and physical environments" (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015, p. 1013), which would include the marketplace as a significant social environment. Recognizing the marketplace as part of these broader social structures reinforces the need for inclusive advertising strategies that consider the unique needs of Autistic consumers.

Scholars must give more attention to the way Autistic individuals engage with the marketplace and the responsibilities of advertisers in this context. While some research suggests that Autistic consumers may face challenges in interpreting certain advertising messages (Nuñez-Gomez et al., 2020), other studies highlight potential advantages. For example, Farmer et al. (2017) found that Autistic individuals are less susceptible to the influence of decoy options when evaluating and selecting products. Similarly, Overskeid (2016) suggests that Autistic adults may possess heightened problem-solving abilities and critical thinking skills, which could be beneficial in navigating consumer decisions. Whether these differences are considered challenges or benefits, it is probable that Autistic consumers engage with advertising differently (Nuñez-Gomez et al., 2020), warranting further exploration into how this consumer behavior can be supported within the marketplace. The notion of cultural affordances, as described by Kirmayer (2024), challenges the assumption that all consumers interpret persuasive messages similarly; instead, advertising environments privilege certain ways of making meaning while marginalizing others.

Contextual Factors in Advertising Perceptions

Advertising perceptions do not emerge in a vacuum. They are shaped by consumers' lived experiences of communication, social expectations, and the ways persuasive messages are culturally framed. There is a lack of research into the effects of advertising on Autistic consumers, so at this stage we do not propose to definitively explain why disparate impacts may exist, only to explore whether they do or not. At the same time, theories of information processing may offer insight into why such disparities could occur. Autistic consumers often navigate differences in social communication, decision-making processes, and may rely more heavily on learned *social rules*, which could contribute to variations in how they perceive advertising (Jankowski & Pfeifer, 2021, p. 3514). This section introduces two concepts that may intersect to shape advertising perceptions among Autistic

individuals: the Double Empathy Problem and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM).

Double Empathy Problem

Advertising, at its core, is a form of social communication (Leiss et al., 2005). This type of communication relies on shared social cues and assumed norms to effectively convey messages. However, Autistic individuals often experience social interactions in ways that differ from non-autistic individuals, leading to a potential breakdown in mutual understanding. Milton (2012) defines the double empathy problem as a disjuncture in reciprocity between individuals with differing dispositional outlooks, which becomes more pronounced when people from contrasting social or neurological backgrounds attempt to communicate.

Traditionally, these breakdowns in communication have been attributed solely to Autistic individuals, as they have historically been portrayed as having a social communication *deficit*. The double empathy problem, however, reframes this issue by recognizing that misunderstandings occur on both sides—not simply because Autistic people struggle to empathize with non-autistic individuals, but because non-autistic individuals also have difficulty understanding and empathizing with Autistic people. As Milton (2012) argues, these breaches in communication are not solely rooted in the individual but are shaped by the social interaction between two differently disposed actors, each with their own perceptual and communicative frameworks.

Since advertising is predominantly created by and for non-autistic individuals, the communication gap between Autistic and non-autistic perspectives could result in Autistic audiences perceiving advertisements in ways that differ from how non-autistic audiences interpret them. It is an oversimplification to attribute this to a lack of empathy or understanding on the part of Autistic individuals rather than a reflection of the differing social realities and communicative worlds experienced by Autistic and non-autistic people alike.

Persuasion Knowledge

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), developed by Friestad and Wright (1994), offers a framework for understanding how individuals recognize, interpret, and respond to persuasive attempts in advertising. PKM proposes that consumers develop a personal knowledge base about persuasion over time, which they use to evaluate advertising messages critically. This knowledge base, shaped by prior experiences and individual cognitive processing, enables consumers to detect manipulative intent and adjust their responses accordingly. PKM suggests that an individual's level of persuasion knowledge influences not only their ability to recognize advertising messages but also their emotional and cognitive reactions to them.

When examining PKM in the context of Autistic consumers, cognitive processing differences (Jankowski &

Pfeifer, 2021), the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), and the marketplace's structure as a predominantly non-autistic environment (Legault et al., 2019) become relevant. Research suggests that Autistic individuals may interpret persuasive messages differently due to their experiences within non-autistic social contexts, a perspective supported by both PKM and the double empathy problem (Legault et al., 2019; Milton, 2012). However, rather than positioning this as a cognitive deficit, the double empathy problem highlights that miscommunication is a two-way issue, shaped by the asymmetrical design of social and commercial environments themselves.

PKM traditionally assumes that consumers build persuasion knowledge through experience, but this framework often overlooks how structural barriers shape access to that experience. Advertising communication is not a neutral transmission of information but a systematically distorted system that selectively encodes and obscures meaning (Leiss et al., 2005). Thus, the knowledge consumers build, even when accessible, is itself situated within environments shaped by selective and often misleading representations. For Autistic consumers, exclusion from dominant social environments compounds the challenges already present within an inherently distorted communication system.

This distinction is particularly critical when considering high-pressure advertising tactics, which rely on urgency, scarcity, or fear to evoke immediate responses. As Bakir et al. (2018) argue, organized persuasive communication often extends beyond deception to include coercion and incentivization, especially within socio-economic contexts that normalize urgent or fear-based messaging as standard persuasive practice. Non-autistic consumers may more readily interpret these tactics as manipulative, activating persuasion knowledge as a defense. However, Autistic consumers, historically excluded from dominant frameworks of persuasion knowledge, may be at heightened risk of either over-trusting or misinterpreting these messages, reinforcing inequities in consumer protection.

These dynamics underscore the need for systemic changes in advertising ethics, rather than placing the burden on Autistic consumers to develop neurotypical persuasion defenses. As PKM suggests, understanding persuasion requires attention to varied consumer responses, and the double empathy problem reframes this as an issue of systemic exclusion rather than individual cognitive failure. A critical disability perspective demands that advertisers recognize these inequities and assess advertising strategies in a way that accounts for diverse cognitive and social backgrounds, ensuring that persuasive tactics do not disproportionately impact marginalized neurodivergent consumers. These considerations raise important questions about how high-pressure advertising tactics, rooted in dominant communication norms, might differentially impact Autistic and non-autistic consumers, a question this study seeks to explore.

Research Question

Advertising functions as a form of social communication, yet communication between Autistic and non-autistic individuals often involves barriers to shared meaning (Milton, 2012; Botha & Frost, 2020). This creates an opportunity for advertisers to take informed actions toward fostering an ethical marketplace for diverse consumers. Critical Disability Theory (CDT) argues for the adaptation of advertising to accommodate disability diversity, promoting equitable engagement opportunities for all consumers.

While advertising codes of ethics discourage lying, manipulation, and exploitation, research has not yet fully examined how advertising messages—typically crafted with non-autistic norms in mind—might impact Autistic consumers. With digital advancements, the advertising landscape continues to shift, changing the way advertisers and consumers communicate (Bell et al., 2022; Lee & Cho, 2019). Nuñez-Gomez et al. (2020) observe: “One of the greatest challenges our society currently faces is developing activities that respect the diverse needs of different people, particularly when it comes to communication and more specifically, advertising” (p. 10). This research begins to address this gap, exploring whether high-pressure advertising tactics may have a disparate impact on Autistic consumers.

As advertising operates as a form of social communication that often reflects dominant norms, it is critical to explore whether these tactics affect Autistic and non-autistic individuals differently, particularly if Autistic consumers may be at a disadvantage. Critical Disability Theory (CDT) underscores the need to create inclusive environments for the disability community, beginning by identifying and addressing structures that may disadvantage specific groups.

This research seeks to answer the following question: *Do the perceptions and reactions of Autistic consumers differ from those of non-autistic consumers when exposed to high-pressure advertising?*

Methods

To investigate any differences in how Autistic and non-autistic consumers perceive high-pressure digital advertising, this study employed an online survey. Participants were recruited via the Connect platform, facilitated by CloudResearch. This section outlines the composition of the study's sample, the procedures followed during the study, and the measures used to assess perceptions of advertising.

Sample

Initially, a total of 250 U.S. adults participated in the survey. However, 88 participants were excluded due to failing an attention check, leaving a final sample size of 162 participants. Of these, 51.2% ($n = 83$) identified as Autistic, while 48.8% ($n = 79$) did not. Sex distribution within the sample was relatively balanced, with slightly

more female respondents (51.9%, $n = 84$) than male respondents (48.1%, $n = 78$). Age-wise, the largest segment of participants fell within the 25-34 age range (44.4%, $n = 72$), followed by those aged 35-44 (26.5%, $n = 43$), 18-24 (14.2%, $n = 23$), and 45-54 (10.5%, $n = 17$). Regarding economic status, over half of the participants reported an annual household income between \$30,000 and \$80,000 (51.9%, $n = 84$), with 29% ($n = 47$) reporting income below this range and 19.1% ($n = 31$) above. Educational attainment was evenly distributed, with 50.6% ($n = 82$) of participants having completed at least a college degree, while the remainder (49.4%, $n = 80$) had not. Employment status revealed that 61.7% ($n = 100$) of participants were employed full-time, and 16.7% ($n = 27$) were part-time employees. The survey did not collect data on race, ethnicity, or gender expression.

Chi-square tests were conducted to look for associations between any of the demographic variables and autism. There were no significant associations between an autism diagnosis and sex, age, income, education, or employment status.

Procedures

Participants opted into the study via the Connect platform, which categorized individuals as Autistic or non-autistic prior to participation, and they were informed they would receive \$3 upon completion. Participants were redirected to a Qualtrics-hosted survey to review the research information and consent page. Following this step, participants answered a series of demographic questions.

Participants were then shown a simulated advertising experience, which utilized high-pressure tactics based on real-world marketing materials. There were 16 slides promoting a fictional financial coaching service called the WealthFlow Blueprint. Participants scrolled through the 16 slides to view statements such as, “You will say goodbye to the fear of bills...” (exaggerated promise, fear appeal), and “Apply within the next 24 hours to unlock an exclusive webinar,” (false sense of urgency). There were also exaggerated testimonials that make statements such as, “I went from scraping by to saving \$1,000 each month” (see appendix for sample slides and full description of each slide).

Three attention checks were incorporated throughout the simulation to gauge participant engagement and enhance the validity of their responses. A chi-squared test showed no association between failing the attention checks and being Autistic. After viewing the messaging, participants answered a series of questions related to their perceptions and reactions to the content.

Measures

The survey started by collecting demographic information from participants, including biological sex, employment status, age, and annual household income. Following the sales messages, participants were given three attention checks (e.g. “Does this service offer a money

Table 1. Chen et al. (2020) Advertising Perception Questionnaire

Variable	Measurements
Advertising Recognition	1. Did you find any form of advertising in the content?
Understanding of persuasive and selling intent	1. The aim of the content I just viewed is to influence your opinion. 2. The aim of the content I just viewed is to make people like certain products/services. 3. The aim of the content I just viewed is to sell certain products/services. 4. ^a The aim of the content I just viewed is to give information about the products/services.
Credibility	1. I find this advertisement trustworthy. 2. I find this advertisement reliable. 3. I find this advertising convincing.
Entertainment	1. The content is fun to engage with. 2. The content helps me pass time.
Irritation	1. I find this advertising implausible. 2. I find this advertising annoying. 3. I find this advertising interfering.
Relevance	1. The content is relevant to my interests. 2. The content is relevant to my needs.
Intention to Click	1. I would absolutely click the button to learn more about purchasing the product/service in the near future. 2. I would like to click the ad to learn more about purchasing the product/service in the near future. 3. I would recommend the product/service to others in the near future.

^aExcluded from data analysis due to low reliability ($\alpha = 0.44$).

back guarantee?"). Measures adapted from Chen et al. (2020) were used to assess seven variables: advertising recognition ("Did you find any form of advertising in the content?"), understanding of persuasive and selling intent ("The aim of the content I just viewed is to influence your opinion."), credibility ("I find this advertisement trustworthy."), entertainment ("The content is fun to engage with."), irritation ("I find this advertising implausible."), relevance ("The content is relevant to my interests."), and intention to click ("I would recommend the product/service to others in the near future.") (see [Table 1](#)). Additionally, to understand other potential effects of high-pressure sales tactics, such as anxiety or urgency, participants' reactions to the content were gauged with items like, "This content made me feel anxious." (see [Table 2](#)).

All multi-item scales were checked for reliability. The scale for understanding persuasive intent was not reliable according to Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.44$); this scale was excluded from the analysis. All other scales adapted from Chen et al. (2020) were reliable (see [Table 2](#)).

Results

This study was looking for possible differences in the perception of and reaction to high-pressure advertising between Autistic and non-autistic participants. From the analysis, three key findings emerged.

Recognition of Advertising

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to assess the relationship between autism diagnosis and the recognition of content as advertising. The results indicated a statistically significant association, with Autistic participants less likely to recognize content as advertising compared to non-autistic participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = 5.12, p = .023$ (see [Table 3](#)). Specifically, out of 162 participants, 30 reported they did not see any advertising content or were unsure. Of those 30, 21 were in the Autistic group and only nine were in the non-autistic group.

Anxiety and Stress Responses

To measure differences between Autistic and non-autistic participants, a series of t-tests were conducted comparing the perceptions and reactions of both groups to the advertising messages. The groups did not differ significantly on the four perception variables from Chen et al. (2020). Significant differences were found in two of the six reaction measures. On the item "This content made me feel anxious," Autistic participants reported significantly higher scores ($M = 2.43, SD = 1.38$) compared to their non-autistic counterparts ($M = 2.03, SD = 1.23$), $t(159.30) = 1.99, p = .048$. Similarly, for the item "This content made me feel stressed," Autistic participants ($M = 2.46, SD = 1.43$) also reported higher scores than non-autistic participants ($M = 1.97, SD = 1.25$), $t(158.96) = 2.30, p = .023$.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alpha for Survey Items (N = 162)

Survey Items	M (SD)		α
	Autistic (n = 83)	Non-autistic (n = 79)	
Credibility scale	2.32 (1.20)	2.27 (1.22)	.95
Entertainment scale	2.52 (1.10)	2.75 (1.21)	.78
Irritation scale	3.47 (1.05)	3.37 (1.23)	.85
Relevance scale	2.97 (1.30)	2.76 (1.32)	.91
Intention scale	2.12 (1.21)	2.12 (1.32)	.95
This content made me feel...			
...afraid of missing out.	2.18 (1.29)	2.22 (1.43)	
...anxious.	2.43 (1.38)	2.03 (1.23)	
...stressed.	2.46 (1.43)	1.97 (1.25)	
...a sense of urgency.	2.65 (1.49)	2.39 (1.44)	
...excited.	2.33 (1.30)	2.35 (1.31)	
...empowered	2.41 (1.34)	2.44 (1.46)	

Table 3. Frequencies and Chi-Square Results for Advertising Recognition (N = 162)

Autism Diagnosis (Yes/No)	Yes (recognized the content as advertising)		No/Don't Know	
	n	%	n	%
Yes (Autistic)	62	74.4%	21	25.3%
No (non-autistic)	70	88.6%	9	5.6%

$\chi^2(1) = 5.12, p = .023.$

Behavioral Intentions

A t-test comparing the intention to click on the ad, revealed no significant differences between Autistic and non-autistic participants.

Discussion

While this study cannot prove that Autistic consumers face a disproportionate impact (such as increased anxiety or stress) from high-pressure advertising tactics, the initial findings align with existing theories on social and communication differences, such as Milton's (2012) double empathy problem. High-pressure advertising strategies are designed to evoke immediate responses, which, when compounded by the double empathy problem, may pose a unique challenge for Autistic consumers. These tactics, especially when presented through advertising likely crafted within non-autistic communication frameworks, may lead Autistic consumers to experience distinct responses to emotionally charged elements such as urgency or scarcity.

These findings, though not encompassing the experiences of all Autistic consumers, suggest that the marketplace—as a social environment where advertising functions as a form of social communication (Leiss et al., 2005)—can pose unique challenges. Following Kirmayer's

(2024) view that socially constructed environments shape cognition and well-being, advertisers bear a systemic responsibility to recognize how their messaging structures impact diverse neurocognitive ways of navigating the world. As Leiss et al. (2005) argue, advertising itself is part of a communication system that systematically shapes and distorts meaning, often obscuring essential realities about production, consumption, and human needs. For consumers with communication differences, such distortions may amplify the barriers already created by dominant social norms. Autistic adults are often subjected to social stigmatization and minority stressors (Botha et al., 2020). This misalignment, as Legault et al. (2019) observe, often stems from environments structured predominantly around non-autistic norms, suggesting how communication gaps and unintended impacts may emerge when advertising strategies do not fully consider diverse cognitive and social backgrounds.

This research examines these initial insights to advocate for advertising approaches that appreciate cognitive diversity and acknowledge the different ways consumers engage with persuasive messages. By grounding these findings in Critical Disability Theory, the study not only underscores the importance of consumer equity but also prompts advertisers to consider structural adjustments that better serve diverse cognitive and social needs.

In addition to informing advertising practices, expanding research in this area has broader implications for advocacy and clinical work with Autistic individuals. Public forms of social communication, such as advertising, significantly shape societal narratives, influencing both how Autistic people are perceived and how they experience everyday environments. Framing advertising as a social force rather than a neutral marketplace practice highlights the need for advocacy professionals and clinicians to engage reflexively with the systems that contribute to marginalization. By contextualizing these findings within social communication practices, this study contributes to a growing body of work that emphasizes systemic change as a core component of supporting Autistic well-being.

Persuasion

In the consumer marketplace, individuals uniquely interpret and react to information and persuasion attempts. The Persuasion Knowledge Model suggests that when people activate their persuasion knowledge, they become more skeptical and critical of persuasive messages, leading them to adjust their cognitive and emotional responses. This activation aids in recognizing the persuasive intent of messages, evaluating the persuader's motives, and ultimately deciding how to respond to the persuasion, often with increased resistance or scrutiny. However, persuasion knowledge is not simply an individual cognitive trait, but a socially constructed competency that is reinforced within dominant consumer environments. If, therefore, an Autistic person is less likely to recognize a message as an advertisement, their persuasion knowledge may not be activated as frequently, potentially making them more susceptible to high-pressure advertising. Although this study found no significant difference in the likelihood of Autistic or non-autistic participants' intent to click on the simulated ads, real-world advertising operates within a broader system of repetition, and social influence that could magnify disparities in how consumers engage with high-pressure messages. Consequently, online advertising may create a consumer landscape that unintentionally privileges the cognitive and social experiences of the dominant social group, raising ethical concerns.

For Autistic consumers, this presents a structural challenge. Given the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012) and the neurotypical bias in advertising communication, Autistic individuals may be excluded from the implicit social learning processes that cultivate persuasion knowledge. As a result, rather than merely assuming that an Autistic person is less likely to activate persuasion knowledge due to an inherent cognitive difference, it may be that the consumer marketplace systematically privileges neurotypical social and cognitive experiences—including the ability to readily detect and resist high-pressure persuasion tactics. This aligns with Critical Disability Theory (CDT), which critiques the way systems are designed to reinforce dominant norms while marginalizing those who process information differently.

If future research corroborates these results, it could help substantiate the systemic impact of high-pressure advertising on neurodivergent consumers. This finding would extend beyond Autistic consumers to reveal broader disparities in how persuasion knowledge is developed and applied across diverse consumer groups, reinforcing the need for advertising strategies that acknowledge and accommodate cognitive diversity rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all persuasion model. Such recognition is central to Critical Disability Theory (CDT), which calls for systemic changes in communication design to promote consumer equity and challenge the structural biases embedded in current advertising practices.

Vulnerability

In this study, the mean responses for both groups on anxiety and stress were below the midpoint on the Likert scale, but the reported stress and anxiety were significantly higher for the Autistic group. If similar high-pressure sales experiences in a real-world setting created stronger effects, this could be interpreted as an indicator of service systems failing to accommodate the unique needs of Autistic consumers, necessitating a reevaluation and redesigning of these systems to enhance wellbeing and equity. If future research finds support for these findings, it could mean that advertisers need to consider the potentially harmful effects of certain types of persuasion on certain groups of consumers.

A holistic understanding of vulnerability considers not only physical, cognitive, and social factors but also financial vulnerability, aging populations, sexual minorities, and other contexts affecting marginalized groups (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2020). The use of high-pressure persuasive techniques without consideration or understanding of their varied effects on diverse audiences poses the risk of unethical practices that could result in inequity for specific consumer groups. The call for a reevaluation of advertising practices emerges as a critical step towards cultivating a more equitable consumer landscape. Advertising is embedded within a broader system of distorted communication highlights the need for systemic change, not just individual responsibility, in cultivating equity for marginalized consumers (Leiss et al., 2005).

Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations begin with its generalizability, as the sample cannot represent the entire Autistic population. Participants were recruited based on their medical diagnosis, which does not account for self-identified Autistic individuals or those without access to diagnostic resources or interest in pursuing diagnosis. Research has shown that biases in stereotypical autism research affect diagnostic processes, and research manuals often fail to capture the "complexity and variation" of Autistic individuals (Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 16). As a result, due to the small sample size, challenges in obtaining diagnoses, dis-

interest in diagnosis, and the general underrepresentation of Autistic diversity in research (D'Mello, et al., 2022), the findings should be interpreted as exploratory.

There are also limitations from an intersectional standpoint. As reported earlier, this study found no associations between autism and sex, age, income, education, or employment status. However, this study did not collect data on race, ethnicity, or gender expression. These are important variables if researchers are going to fully explore the intersectionality of participants, and this study cannot do so.

The simulated advertising environment also presents limitations. Simulated sales messages often evoke weaker responses than real-world advertisements, potentially affecting participants' engagement levels. Since persuasion knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by exposure to dominant consumer norms rather than purely individual cognitive traits, the artificial setting may not fully reflect the real-world disparities in how Autistic and non-autistic consumers encounter and process high-pressure advertising. Communication within advertising is already systematically distorted, meaning that real-world exposures may amplify these disparities in ways that a controlled simulation cannot fully capture (Leiss et al., 2005). Given that the consumer marketplace structurally privileges neurotypical persuasion knowledge, a simulated setting may reduce the extent to which these systemic inequities manifest. Future studies could explore more immersive simulations to assess whether real-world high-pressure sales environments evoke stronger and more varied responses among Autistic consumers. These studies should also examine how marketplace structures contribute to disparate consumer experiences, rather than framing differences solely through individual cognition. Participant safeguards should remain in place to avoid undue distress.

This study's reliance on self-reported measures may have also introduced limitations. Self-report methods are susceptible to biases, which could influence the results. To build on these findings, future research could employ mixed methods approaches that incorporate qualitative data, such as interviews or focus groups, to gain nuanced insights into the lived experiences of Autistic consumers in high-pressure sales contexts. Such qualitative methods would be valuable in capturing the specific ways Autistic individuals interpret, respond to, and cope with high-pressure tactics in real-world settings.

Potential gaps were identified in how Autistic and non-autistic participants move from recognizing content as advertising to forming reactions, such as feelings of stress or anxiety. Recognition of advertising influences the way consumers process persuasive intent, which in turn affects their responses. However, without a reliable measure of how participants interpret and understand persuasive intent, we are missing a key step in assessing how recognition translates to specific emotional or behavioral reactions. Developing a validated measure of persuasive intent interpretation in future research would help complete this link, allowing a more comprehensive

understanding of the pathway from recognition to reaction in diverse consumer populations.

Most importantly, future research must prioritize the intentional inclusion of Autistic researchers and participants, ensuring that diverse perspectives shape both the study design and interpretation of results.

Conclusion

Guided by Critical Disability Theory (CDT) principles, this research emphasizes the need to establish an economic marketplace that facilitates equitable access and participation for all its members. It acknowledges that certain groups, such as Autistic individuals, remain vulnerable within current societal structures. This study explored the hypothesis that Autistic consumers may respond differently to high-pressure sales tactics, such as those using a false sense of urgency, scarcity, fear, and an emphasis on uncommon results. Survey findings revealed that Autistic participants were less likely to recognize the sales content as advertising and reported higher levels of anxiety and stress than their non-autistic counterparts, though they did not demonstrate a higher likelihood of clicking on ads.

Further research is warranted to validate these findings and comprehensively investigate the nuanced mechanisms behind them, including potential implications related to persuasion knowledge and the double empathy problem. As this line of inquiry progresses, it holds the potential to reshape our understanding of ethical advertising within the framework of neurodiversity. By discussing the experiences of Autistic consumers, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on equity in the marketplace and the responsible use of communication. Rather than treating advertising as a neutral exchange of information, this research, building on Leiss et al.'s (2005) critique of structural communication distortions, emphasizes the need to rethink how communication norms themselves are constructed—and to prioritize cognitive equity as a foundational principle in marketplace practices.

Positionality Statements

Chelsea Verrette

Recognizing positionality is key to understanding how identity shapes research. As a white, Autistic woman with a background in Strategic Communication, and a PhD student in Curriculum Studies, my perspective influences this study. I was driven by observed disparities in how high-pressure advertising affects diverse consumers. This work seeks to advance equity in the marketplace and highlight the potential harms of exclusionary communication. The study includes both Autistic and non-autistic participants, and I've made intentional efforts to represent their voices with care. My identity may influence interpretation, particularly in centering Autistic experiences within the analysis.

Joshua Bentley

As a neurotypical white male with a doctorate in strategic communication, I take an etic (i.e., outsider) position on this research, and I bring to it a post-positivist bias. I have been trained to see social science as a process of testing and trying to disprove hypotheses. My role as the second author on this study was to support Chelsea's research. That role included questioning certain assumptions that guided this research, as well as helping with study design, data analysis, and interpretation of the findings. However, my role was not to impose my own research paradigm on Chelsea's work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

These authors report no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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Ethics Statement

The research was reviewed and approved by the IRB at Texas Christian University (Study #2024-95).



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Appendices

Appendix A

Sample Slide Images with Alt Text Descriptions

This appendix presents three representative slide images from the 16-slide stimulus set used in the study, each accompanied by alternative text. These samples illustrate the visual design and content style of the materials shown to participants. Several misspellings were intentionally included to simulate authentic user-generated reviews.

Slide 1



Description:

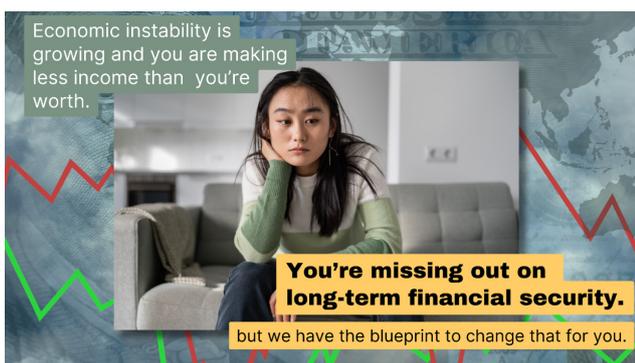
(Image of a key on top of a pile of money; two images of people with money)

Text: UNLOCK YOUR FINANCIAL FREEDOM

The WealthFlow Blueprint—Applications Open Now!

CLICK HERE TO LEARN THE SECRETS TO FINANCIAL SUCCESS

Slide 4



Description

(Image of woman sitting on a sofa looking discouraged.)

Text: Economic instability is growing and you are making less income than you're worth.

You're missing out on long-term financial security, but we have the blueprint to change that for you.

Slide 13



Description

(Image of a smartphone with an order confirmation message)

Text: LIMITED TIME OFFER

Don't miss your chance!

The normal investment is \$999, but we are offering you life-changing access for just \$499 because we believe in your success!

The first 20 approved applicants will receive a private coaching session with exclusive wealth secrets you won't find anywhere else!

Appendix B

Alt Text Descriptions of Non-Pictured Slides

This appendix includes alternative text descriptions for the 13 slides from the original 16-slide stimulus set that are not visually represented in Appendix A. These descriptions capture the content and structure of the remaining slides. As with the visual samples, intentional misspellings were included to reflect real-world user review patterns

Slide 2

(Text over a background of twenty-dollar bills)

Text: If I offered to teach you the secret to build wealth twice as fast, would you take me up on it?

Slide 3

(Text over a background of twenty-dollar bills)

Text: The WealthFlow Blueprint will end your money struggles and teach you to live a life of financial freedom.

You will say goodbye to the fear of bills, the stress of living paycheck to paycheck, and the anxiety of an uncertain financial future.

Slide 5

(Images of user reviews with five stars)

Text: Listen to what our community is saying...

Lee: I just paid off ALL my student loans and am now DEBT FREE! Being part of this program changed my life! No questions! (mind blown emoji)

Taylor: From when I started til now my salary increases by \$14,876.24 annually and I am still in shock! All of this

is because the coaches taught me how to use this course perfectly!

Slide 6

(Image of a woman smiling and pumping her fist while holding her computer)

Text: SPECIAL OFFER

Join the WealthFlow Blueprint for financial mastery

Slide 7

(Image of a woman reaching into her wallet)

Text: The WealthFlow Blueprint is more than a course, it will increase your wealth by \$10K per year (at the least!) Applications to join are open! (and due THIS WEEK!)

Slide 8

(Images of user reviews with five stars)

Text: Join the community experiencing results like these...

Parker: Now I have three different businesses growing and making me \$\$\$!

Avery: From never traveling to 3 fully covered trips per year from the money I've made during my time in WealthFlow. I am an explorer now! Can't wait to keep going.

Slide 9

(Text over a background of twenty-dollar bills)

Text: WHAT THE WEALTHFLOW BLUEPRINT WILL DO FOR YOU

Grow your wealth like never before

Build your savings faster

Pay off debt quicker

Invest more every time

Slide 10

(Image of a woman's hands holding a tablet. Text is on tablet's screen.)

Text: The WealthFlow Blueprint

If you're financially ambitious and committed to making change in your life, you're ready to be part of this unprecedented built-for-you program!

We'd love to see your application before the end of the week!

Spaces are filling up as you read!

Slide 11

(Images of user reviews with five stars)

Text: People just like you are transforming their future!

Cameron: I was pretty skeptical about the WealthFlow Blueprint at first. I mean, I was pretty deep in debt, like \$6,000 deep, and I just couldn't see the end of it. But here I am, four months later, and I've actually cleared all that debt. Crazy, right?

Drew: I started putting away cash - I've got \$3k saved up already. I never used to save, like ever. Now, I'm also investing \$500 a month, which still blows my mind. I learned all these steps in the program, and they actually worked.

Slide 12

(Text over green and tan background)

Text: The WealthFlow Blueprint offers groundbreaking and transformative resources, including...

Custom made Wealth Building Toolkit that shows you proven ways to increase your income

Unlimited support from financial coaches

Exclusive access to resources you won't find anywhere else

...and so much more!

Slide 14

(Image of a customer review and a gold seal)

Text: ONE MORE BONUS!

Apply within the next 24 hours to unlock an exclusive webinar—Secret Investment Strategies for 2024—to gain access to how to rapidly grow your investments.

100% Money Back Guarantee

We're so confident in the transformative power of our program that we offer a 30-day money-back guarantee. If you're not satisfied with your progress, we'll refund your payment in full.

Parker: Totally changed my investment game with the WealthFlow Blueprint. I was clueless, but now I've invested \$2,000 and I'm up by 15% already, and that's just in a few months! They break it down so it's super simple. Seriously, best move I've made.

Slide 15

(Images of user reviews with five stars)

Text: The WealthFlow Blueprint is changing lives—yours is next!

James: I always thought these programs were a bit of a joke. But the financial coaches and resources are the real deal. It's completely changed the way I handle my money—feels like it's changed my whole life.

Aaron: I went from scraping by to saving an extra \$1,000 each month. Plus, I've kicked off an investment portfolio with a \$1,000 initial investment. The guides broke everything down so simply, and getting advice from the coaches. (smile emoji)

Slide 16

(Text on a solid tan background)

Text: YOUR WEALTH IS WAITING FOR YOU!

The WealthFlow Blueprint—Start your financial transformation now!

Apply here to access your wealth.

(Small text) DISCLAIMER: Information is for educational purposes only. Testimonial results of increased savings, amount of debt paid off, increased income, or investment returns stated or implied are self reported results. These results are not typical. They demonstrate what the dedicated members have done and should not be considered average. These are examples of what is possible when you commit and take consistent action. The WealthFlow Blueprint LLC makes no guarantee of any financial gain from the use of its products.