The Autistic Human-container and its Contents
A Multi-lingual Critical Discourse Analysis of Autism Info Materials

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Abstract

This thesis examines written autism info materials from web searches and autism expert recommendations across Germany, Sweden, and the US. Making use of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, the different materials were analyzed with the help of code schemes by marking down conceptual metaphors and other ideological words. The most common metaphors, and alternatives, with their implications for the view on autism, as well as the influence of the Neurodiversity Movement pushing for a paradigm shift on autism, were analyzed. The main findings include the capitalist ideology causing autism to be seen as deficits to be cured through the conceptualization of autists as dysfunctional machines in need of fixing which is made possible through turning autism into a concrete object situated in a human container. This allows the assumption that it is possible to remove ‘the autism’ from its container without altering it. However, especially in expert-recommended sources, the neurodiversity paradigm which aims to shift away from a pathological perspective is finding more foothold which challenges the classical medical paradigm dominating autism discourses.

Keywords: Autism, Autism Representation, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis
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1. Introduction

Different kinds of media are platforms for discourses about various topics and therefore spaces in which the meaning of these topics gets discussed and negotiated. In media, dominant discourses and paradigms can be observed, as well as struggles over the dominating, hegemonic, discourses. This has been the case, in recent years especially, with competing autism discourses where the conceptualization of autism as a number of developmental deficits to be cured like the medical paradigm suggests, has been challenged. Activists and researchers propose the use of the ‘neurodiversity’ paradigm instead (Broderick and Ne’eman 2008, 467–471; Walker and Raymond 2021, 6). The concept of neurodiversity argues that natural variations of the brain and different developmental paths exist. Among those variations are ‘neurotypical’ people, people who develop typically, and ‘neurodivergent’ people whose development is seen as atypical (compared to the standard: neurotypical people) (Pellicano and den Houting 2022, 386). Rather than seeing autism, among other developmental disabilities, as a deficit, the neurodiversity paradigm proposes that developmental differences are natural and normal and that neurodivergent people should therefore be just as accepted as people of different ethnicities, religions, etc. The neurodiversity paradigm therefore proposes that neurodivergent people are different but equal (Ne’eman n.d., cited in Broderick and Ne’eman 2008, 471).

A number of scientific articles have been published that discuss the use of the neurodiversity paradigm within autism research and education (Jaarsma and Welin 2012, 24–29; Pellicano and den Houting 2022). Studies have shown that operating within the medical paradigm has led to bad mental health and self-perception in autistic people and their relatives (Pellicano and den Houting 2022, 384). The neurodiversity paradigm, on the other hand, is associated with better mental health of the autistic people and their families which has added to the increased push for the use of the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano and den Houting 2022, 387). The push for the use of the neurodiversity paradigm is also known as the Neurodiversity Movement (Kapp 2020, 2). Besides advocating for the use of the neurodiversity paradigm, activists of the Neurodiversity Movement are also advocating for more (equal) rights for neurodivergent people (Kapp 2020, 2).

The increased push for a paradigm shift on autism, as well as the opposition to such a shift is one of the incentives of this thesis, in which I examine if an influence of the Neurodiversity Movement can be seen in information material on autism that can be found online, as well as resources that are being recommended by psychologists and psychiatrists that are qualified to diagnose autism. This study’s interest lies in figuring out how autism is presented to (caregivers of) newly diagnosed chil-
dren or adults. Additionally, this thesis seeks to find if there are any differences between autism information web search results and information that experts recommend considering that the push for a paradigm shift has started in online spaces and gained its momentum there (Parsloe 2015).

To this date, most research on autism rhetoric and conceptualizations of autism has been done in English and the USA specifically, based on the search results of such studies. Furthermore, Europe is considered to be ‘behind’ in autism studies (Keenan et al. 2014). Therefore, I will explore the issue from a more European standpoint by examining autism resources from Germany and Sweden, as well as comparing them to each other and to material from the United States.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this thesis is to critically examine discourse construction of autism through analyzing the rhetoric of printed and web-published autism resources. A part of the thesis is to examine the underlying paradigm and ideologies of the examined materials and to determine possible consequences on the reader’s conceptualization of autism. While it builds on previous research done of the effects of different conceptualizations in autistic individuals and their loved ones, the thesis also aims to bring new insights by comparing autism resources from three different countries: Germany, Sweden, and the USA.

1.2 Research Questions

• Which conceptual metaphors are used to talk about autism and which paradigm do they correspond to?

• Which similarities and differences between the materials and countries can be found?

• What implications do these representations have on the view on autism across sources and countries?

• To which extent is the Neurodiversity Movement visible in the examined information material?
2. Background

Autism is listed as ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ (ASD), a neurodevelopmental disorder, in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (Pellicano and den Houting 2022, 382).

“In both manuals, Autism Spectrum Disorder is described as a series of ‘persistent deficits’ demonstrated by autistic children, young people and adults, involving deficits in social communication and interaction, and restricted, repetitive and inflexible patterns of behavior, interests or activities” (Pellicano and den Houting 2022, 382).

According to Evans (2013, 24), the modern understanding of autism, as it is found in both diagnostic manuals, builds on the “post-1960s conception of autism”, which characterizes autism as a neuro-cognitive (developmental) disorder. The focus is on “absence or impairment of social interaction’, ‘absence or impairment of development of verbal or non-verbal language’, or ‘repetitive, stereotyped activities of any kind’” (L. Wing and Gould, 1979, cited in Evans 2013, 22). In 1985, researchers Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith built on this theory by proposing that “autistic children lacked a ‘theory of mind’” (Evans 2013, 24). This view focused on autism mainly being an “impairment in verbal and non-verbal communication” (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith, 1985, cited in Evans 2013, 24).

The USA are seen as forerunners in autism research and interventions whereas European countries are seen as lagging behind, especially in regards to autism interventions (Keenan et al. 2014). However, when it comes to each country’s social expenditures, then Germany placed the highest whereas the United States placed the lowest among the three examined countries (OECD 2023). This statistic measures the amount (in %) of the countries’ GDP spent on social welfare in 2022. According to Esping-Andersen (1990) each of the countries is representative of three different types of welfare regimes operating with a capitalist ideology. Esping-Andersen (1990, 26–27) names the USA as the ‘archetypal example’ of the so called ‘liberal welfare state’ in which services associated with welfare, such as social insurance and benefits are ‘modest’ and almost solely intended for those with a low income, whereas the ‘conservative welfare states’ (for which Germany is considered to be archetypic) are more inclusive of different ‘societal classes’ and their incomes than liberal welfare states, however, the welfare state is structured in a way that upholds traditional family values which is expressed by “family benefits [that] encourage motherhood” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 27) while services such as day care are underdeveloped to encourage stay-at-home wives and other family raising the children. Sweden, on the other hand, is considered to be the archetype of the ‘social
democratic welfare state’ which focuses on equality between social classes where everyone has access to the same services, as well as the services covering more than just ‘the bare minimum’.

According to Keenan et al. (2014) autism interventions, especially ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) which aims to change the behavior of autistic people to be ‘desirable’ rather than ‘deviant’ are lagging behind in Europe. ABA is widely in use in the United States and Canada as ‘interventions’ or ‘treatment’ for autists. In Sweden and Germany, however, ABA is not in use (Keenan et al. 2014). Instead, “due to a court decision in 2009, ASD is classified as a static, ‘lifelong’ condition that does not respond to intervention” (Keenan et al. 2014, 172) in Germany which also means that ABA or other behavioral therapies are not officially recognized and therefore not financially supported by the state. In Sweden, after a child has been diagnosed, they are assigned to a ‘multi-professional habilitation team’ that among other things applies behavioral interventions but not ABA specifically (Keenan et al. 2014).

The acceptance and embracing of autism like the neurodiversity paradigm proposes, includes the politicization of autism by framing it within the social model of disability which removes the attention on disabilities as ‘individual problems’ and rather focuses on how the way that society is structured disables certain groups of people (Kapp 2020, 7). In the course of the Neurodiversity Movement, the Internet has played a vital role in building an autistic community that started self-advocating, online especially, and with that gained a greater visibility beyond the autistic community (Parsloe 2015).

One debated topic on autism communication is the use of person-first (‘person with autism’, ‘having autism’) and identity-first language (‘autistic person’, ‘being autistic’). Research shows that the majority of autistic people prefer the use of identity-first language over person first language because they deem it to be less offensive than person-first language (Bury et al. 2020). Additionally, Gernsbacher (2017, cited in Lewin and Akhtar 2021) found that person-first language may increase stigma. For these reasons, I have chosen to use identity-first language throughout this thesis as well.
3. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

Here, I introduce Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Discourse Theory as the theoretical framework I used to answer the research questions of this thesis.

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

According to discourse theory, the world is constituted through discursive practices, meaning that the world is understood by discussing what it is and what it is not. This means that ‘truth’ is constantly negotiated through discourse while there is no such thing as an objective truth (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2000, 15–17). In other words, to be able to understand a phenomenon, we must be able to describe, explain, as well as discuss it. The purpose of critical discourse analysis is to study the way that underlying ideologies in discourse uphold power structures in the social world and aims to change discursive practices in a way that power relations are made more equal between groups (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2000, 69). This makes CDA a good fit for this thesis, considering the discursive struggles between the medical and neurodiversity paradigm that explain autism differently and therefore influence how the majority of the society thinks about autism and what should be done about it (e.g. finding a cure or accepting autistic people and increasing accessibility). The medical paradigm therefore employs ‘medical discourse’ whereas the neurodiversity paradigm works with the ‘neurodiversity discourse’.

Ideology, according to Althusser (1971, cited in Kang 2018) is a system of ideas, beliefs, and representations that forms the foundation of human understanding. Usually in a culture and historic context, there is one dominant idea, that forms the basis of human understanding and determines the way that society is structured. However, Althusser (1976, cited in Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2000, 22–23) argued that this structure hides the true relations between human beings by applying an imaginary system (based on such things as gender, ethnicity, religion, class etc.) which then determines relations between people that would differ if another ideology dominated. For example, if disability is seen as an individual ‘problem’ rather than a societal one, then it is on the individual to ‘solve’ the problem (e.g. by using a wheelchair for better mobility) and not the society (making spaces more accessible so that disabled people won’t have to struggle as much).

Ideology is tied to norms which define what is desirable and what is undesirable which is intertwined with the concept of ‘normalcy’. In the context of autism, the concept of ‘the normal child’ is of importance since autistic children (and later adults) are defined as deviating from the norm in their behavior and abilities (Waltz 2020, 15–17). As mentioned by Winther Jørgensen and Phillips
(2000, 87), the analysis of metaphors can be used in a Critical Discourse Analysis to examine underlying ideologies in the construction and framing of phenomena in discourse.

### 3.2 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

According to Lakoff and Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), human thinking and understanding works a lot with conceptual metaphors that make the understanding of more complex phenomena possible by relating them to simpler phenomena (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 11–12). This simplification means that only the similar aspects can be explained by the simpler phenomena. The aspects that do not match, on the other hand, get hidden and sometimes completely forgotten about (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 206, 208). The risk with metaphors is therefore that thinking about one phenomenon (target domain) with the terms of another phenomenon (source domain) can become so naturalized that other ways of conceptualization, other metaphors, become unimaginable (Deignan 2005, 30–31). The dominant conceptual metaphor(s) used to describe a phenomenon therefore make up the frame of the human understanding. Everything in accordance with the dominant metaphors is seen as natural and legitimate whereas other ways of thinking of that phenomenon seem either unacceptable or simply unimaginable.

Certain metaphors are said to be ‘embodied’, meaning that they are “based on our most basic physical experiences and are inevitable in making sense of the world around us” (Kövecses 2008, 177) and therefore the same for everyone whereas other metaphors are specific to cultures and languages. It is therefore no guarantee that everyone will interpret a metaphor in the same way, though the cultural background of a person can invite to certain interpretations.

According to Deignan (2005, 14–15), conceptual metaphors are seldom found in texts but they can be identified by linguistic metaphors. An example is the conceptual metaphor THE HUMAN IS A MACHINE whereas linguistic evidence for it would be, in the context of autism, the categorization of ‘high-functioning’ and ‘low-functioning’. The word ‘function’ is borrowed from the machine (source) domain and applied to the target domain: the human being. By identifying linguistic metaphors one can therefore uncover the underlying conceptualization and identify the implications the metaphor has on the understanding of the target domain. It can for example be said, that if aspects of a human being are looked at like a machine, the focus of the humanity is diminished while the functioning, the possibility to accomplish given tasks in an effective manner, is emphasized. In the context of critical discourse theory, it could then be determined how and if phrasings such as the ‘functionality’ of human beings is used to legitimize the discrimination of people with a different or
lower level of ‘functionality’ than the norm (Danforth and Naraian 2007, 286–289; Lima and Belk 2023, 7).

In the case of autism, common conceptualizations ever since autism was first given its name have been based on pathology, the common medical approach, that examines ‘deficits’ and aims to heal them (Evans 2013, 4; Waltz 2020, 17). This approach requires “a stable norm” (Waltz 2020, 17) based on which any deviations can be categorized as ‘deficits’. The neurodiversity paradigm, which is used to challenge the medical paradigm, focuses not only on ‘deficits’ and weaknesses in autistic people but also on their strengths (Bury et al. 2022). However, they are represented as differences, rather than weaknesses or strengths. Despite the advocacy of the Neurodiversity Movement and studies on the effects on the mental well-being of autistic individuals and their loved ones suggesting that the neurodiversity paradigm should find more use, most information provided by professionals focuses on deficits (Bury et al. 2022; Pellicano and den Houting 2022). This suggests that professionals have difficulties thinking about autism outside the realm of the pathological conceptualization which can likely be attributed to their profession being aimed at curing deficits in individuals deviating from the norm. The conceptualizations, the metaphors, used in everyday discourse, as well as the history of autism add to solidifying the medical paradigm as the norm and truth.

Previous studies using CMT have shown the relevance of examining metaphors, such as Thibodeau and Boroditsky’s (2011) study on how metaphors influence reasoning. With the help of made-up news articles, the authors framed the issue of an increased crime rate in a city with the help of two different metaphors: CRIME IS A VIRUS and CRIME IS A BEAST. Thibodeau and Boroditsky later gave half of their test persons the articles with the virus metaphor and the other half the article with the beast metaphor. After reading, the students were asked what they think the city should do to decrease violent crime numbers and to underline which parts of the article were most influential in their decision-making. Significantly more students reading the CRIME IS A BEAST article suggested the use of force (increase of police officers and help of the military) than those reading the CRIME IS A VIRUS article (74% versus 56%) whereas 25% of the CRIME IS A BEAST readers and 40% of the CRIME IS A VIRUS readers suggested social reform. Only 3% of the readers identified the metaphors as influential in their decision making, whereas the others mainly emphasized the statistics as having been the most influential. This shows how influential and well-hidden metaphors can be when it comes to presenting problems and its proposed solutions. This is also applicable and relevant to the framing of autism.
4. Previous studies

In this section, I present and summarize previous research on the conceptualizations and representations of autism across different kinds of media, as well as the implications and consequences of these portrayals.

4.1 Metaphoric Conceptualizations of Autism

Most previous studies on the conceptualizations of autism have divided them either into the medical or the neurodiversity paradigm (Broderick and Ne’eman 2008; Coopman 2003, cited in Parsloe 2015, 338). Both paradigms categorize autism as a disability, however the word disability is defined differently by either paradigm (Kapp 2020, 7). The medical model focuses on each disabled person’s ‘deficits’ individually, meaning that disability is a ‘problem’ of the individual (Pellicano and den Houting 2022). The neurodiversity paradigm, on the other hand, sees disability as a ‘societal problem’ in accordance with the ‘social model of disability’. The social model of disability claims that disability isn’t an individual problem but rather a problem of the way that society is designed disables certain groups of people (Kapp 2020, 7). This model tends to differentiate between ‘impairments’ and ‘disability’, where impairments are the individual ‘deficits’ that the medical model describes as disability, such as the need of mobility aids to be able to move on one’s own, whereas the ‘disability’ us a product of the way that society is structured, both in a physical and non-physical way, like limited accessibility for wheelchair users in public and most private buildings which is also a product of elevators, ramps, bigger spaces, etc. not being the ‘standard’ (Kapp 2020, 7). Applying this model of disability to autism means that autistic people are disabled by the way that society is structured in instances such as schools or workplaces that often correspond to an overwhelming environment for autists which can be caused by noise, the amount of people being present, the way that social interactions are ‘supposed to’ happen, etc. (Buckle 2020).

Studies on conceptual metaphors in autism communication show that there are metaphors that cannot simply be categorized as either belonging to the medical paradigm or the neurodiversity paradigm. The prime example of that is AUTISM IS A SPECTRUM (Thomas and Boellstorff 2017). Broderick and Roscigno (2021, 78) summarize the findings of dominant metaphors about autism in different materials, such as educational materials and popular culture, as constructing “autism as enemy, abductor, epidemic contagion, alien, or otherwise dangerous and ‘other’”.

Another relevant work is Susan Sontag’s (2013) research on how illnesses are framed metaphorically, since the medical model mainly operates within the medical paradigm and therefore also ap-
plies to autism. According to Sontag (2013, 64–65), the dominant metaphors in talking about diseases are military metaphors that are also used to describe medical treatments with the help of military terms, e.g. the aim of cancer treatment being the termination and killing of the cancer.

Sontag (2013) describes how the words ‘alien’ and ‘mutant’ are re-occurring in discourse about viruses especially. According to her, these ‘alien cells’ or ‘alien viruses’ that are “stronger than normal cells” (Sontag 2013, 68) are said to invade the body and take over. The alien terminology was also observed by Broderick and Ne’eman (2008, 463–465) in autism discourse as well as its consequences of autistic people being perceived as belonging outside the ‘geographic landscape of normalcy’.

In his study on the conceptual framing of emotional behavioral disorder, Danforth (2007) found that unwanted conduct tends to be framed as an illness. This can also be applied to autism based on Evan’s (2013) and Waltz’s (2020) research on the history of autism, where they found that the establishment of normalcy was based on desired (behavioral) traits and all deviations, which are mostly based on behaviors in regards to autism, are seen as something in need of being ‘fixed’ or ‘cured’.

Danforth and his colleague Naraian (2007) published a study on machine metaphors in autism research in which they found that, since autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder and the biggest focus therefore is on the workings of the brain, the machine metaphor dominates in talking about autism and autism interventions. According to them, common phrasings include ‘input’ and ‘output’. Especially the focus on ‘desired outputs’ and how they can be achieved and controlled. With ‘desirable output’ Danforth and Naraian (2007) found, that this metaphor mainly refers to desirable behaviors.

**4.2 Autism Communication and Media Representations**

Bury et al. (2022) conducted a study on the source of autism knowledge and its effects on autistic adults in the accuracy of their knowledge of autism, as well as their self-perception. They found that the knowledge on autism that autistic people obtained from conventional sources, such as parents and professionals, “was associated with more internalised stigma” (Bury et al. 2022, 1), focused less on the strengths and more of the ‘deficits’. Autistic individuals that gained most of their autism knowledge from sources such as autistic bloggers and social media were associated with less internalized stigma, were more likely to embrace an ‘autistic identity’, and a greater focus on strengths and special abilities.
This is relevant to this thesis since Bury et al. differentiated between conventional sources of autism knowledge (such as parents, professionals, books, and journals) and online sources.

Other studies that focused on different kinds of media representation of autism found that most media content such as movies and newspaper articles portray autism in a negative light which adds to stereotyping and stigmatization of autistic people (Mittmann et al. 2023; Lewin and Akhtar 2021; Hamilton 2019; Pesonen et al. 2021). They report a focus on ‘deficits’ in the presentation of autistic people by comparisons to ‘normal’ people and highlighting negative differences. However, Lewin and Akhtar (2021) report on an increase of more positive (focus on strengths) and less stigmatizing portrayal in newspaper articles published in the Washington Post between 2007 and 2016. Pesonen et al. (2021) reported similar findings in their study on the portrayal of autism in Finnish newspapers.

Hamilton applied Critical Discourse analysis in her 2019 study and found that autism being represented as a disability as opposed to ‘normalcy’ is ableist in nature and sustains the oppression of ‘the disabled’ that do not fit into the idea of what ‘normal’ is. She argues that contemporary media is being used as a tool to either use disability to play on the fears of non-disabled people (becoming disabled) or to evoke sympathy and use that to raise money. This view corresponds with Broderick and Roscigno’s (2021) view on the ‘Autism Industrial Complex’ who argue that language and images are strategically being used to capitalize on autism by evoking fear about autism and offering ‘interventions’, as well as researching cures. Hamilton (2019) also argues that this is made possible through the strategic presentation of disabled people as an inferior group of society.
5. Method and Material

In this section, I introduce the material and explain why the material was chosen and how I analyzed it.

5.1 Material

I have chosen to analyze written resources found through independent web search, and recommendation from autism experts, such as psychologists and psychiatrists that are specialized in autism. This means that there are independent web search results and expert recommendations for the United States, Germany, and Sweden. The three countries are interesting and relevant to compare to each other since each of them represents another archetype of a capitalist welfare state according to Esping-Andersen (1990).

5.1.1 Web Resources

The material for the web search consists of the first three results for the chosen keywords. However, I have chosen to exclude Wikipedia articles from the first three search results because of Wikipedia articles’ tendency to include long paragraphs about the history etc. which I deem to be outside the scope of this thesis.

I used the search engine Google for all web searches, however the language and region settings varied so that the most relevant web pages would come up for the three respective countries. This means that I set the region for the results to the United States and the language to English for the US sources, whereas I changed the region to Germany and the language to German when I entered the German key words, and for the Swedish key words, I set the region to Sweden and the language to Swedish.

I chose the key words presented in Table 1 (hereafter) based on what seemed to be logical for people to search for if they wish to receive more information on autism. Especially when keeping in mind that the people looking for more information on autism because they themselves have been diagnosed, are undergoing a diagnosis, or have a loved one who has been diagnosed/is in the process of being diagnosed.
Table 1: Web Search Keywords

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Swedish</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Autismus</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism child</td>
<td>Autismus Kind</td>
<td>Autism barn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism diagnosis</td>
<td>Autismus Diagnose</td>
<td>Autism diagnos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism diagnosis child</td>
<td>Autismus Diagnose Kind</td>
<td>Autism diagnos barn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism information</td>
<td>Autismus Information</td>
<td>Autism information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism information child</td>
<td>Autismus Information Kind</td>
<td>Autism information barn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for all of the countries included the websites of governmental (health) agencies, private clinics, and private organizations. The shared aim of the private organizations is to inform about autism and collect money for research on treatments and ‘cures’ for autism.

I made the decision to analyze the first three results of the search engine results pages (SERPs) based on research by Google Organic CTR History (2018, cited in Ziakis et al. 2021, 4) showing that a website has to appear “on the first page of SERPs in order to receive a sufficient amount of organic visitors”. The reasons for the order of appearance of websites is based on the relevance of the websites in relation to the entered keywords. According to Killoran (2013, 51), relevance is determined by a website’s “authenticity, topicality, and quality, [and] especially popularity” (Killoran 2013, 51). This entails, among other factors, that the websites that are clicked on most often in relation to the entered key words have a higher popularity which makes them appear higher up than less popular websites. In the context of this thesis, the first three results of each search are deemed to be relevant since they will likely attract the most visitors that in turn learn about autism from these websites.

Moreover, I only analyzed the content of the original pages I clicked on, even if they linked to other pages and info materials. Exceptions are pages that only consisted of links to PDF-files, in which cases I chose to examine the first three files presented on the website. I additionally chose to only examine written texts (no pictures or graphics). The exclusions were made based on the time limitations for this thesis.

If a website showed up within the first three results of the SERP for a multiple key words (for example the same website that was in the top three results for “Autism” also appeared in the top three results of “Autism child”), I chose not to analyze the fourth, fifth, etc. result.

In sum, I have analyzed 33 different websites and PDF files (see Appendix 1).
**5.1.2 Resources from Psychologists and Psychiatrists**

I have reached out to 50 different psychologists and psychiatrists located in Germany, Sweden, and the United States who are licensed to work with autistic children, teenagers, and adults. I have informed them of the aim of this thesis, evaluating autism resources that are provided to those who have newly been diagnosed with autism and/or their caregivers. I have received 5 answers from Sweden, 3 answers from Germany, and 2 answers from the United States.

In the emails I sent, I informed the experts about the motivation behind my request for autism materials that they recommend to newly diagnosed autists and their caregivers stemming from writing a bachelor’s thesis in which I examine the materials with a focus on rhetoric. Since I informed the experts that I plan on examining the materials in a student thesis, instead of pretending as if I was asking for myself/my child/a friend, could mean that the material recommendations sent to me differ from what they would normally give out to patients. However, since I requested the materials they would normally recommend to their patients and caregivers, without mentioning the Neurodiversity Movement or discursive struggles, I think that it is safe to believe that the expert’s recommendations did not differ from what they would recommend to their patients. Save for the fact that I have been told in some cases that they usually prefer to give specialized recommendations depending which autistic traits are expressed by the patient and whether or not they also have an intellectual disability. In these cases I asked for the recommendations of materials they found to be the best applicable to most of their patients.

I have chosen to only examine materials that were recommended by at least two different professionals which especially limited the recommendations of experts from the US.

Because of my choice to examine only written texts, I have excluded recommendations such as film clips and podcasts. The materials left were websites and books. Among those are governmental health agencies and private organizations with differing aims. These aims range from autism acceptance and understanding to the aim of ‘curing’ autism. The books include a children’s book explaining what it is like to be autistic, self-help books for adults that are supposed to help autistic adults manage their life, and books with self-biographical traits.

For books, I chose to analyze about 40 pages per book due to a lack of time to analyze the books in their entirety.

I have analyzed 5 books and 8 additional websites recommended by experts (see Appendix 1). Some expert-recommended websites were already included in the web search results (9 duplicates). In total, I have analyzed 5 books and 41 websites.
5.2 Method

Here I explain the methods I employed based on which I analyzed my material and reached the results that my analysis builds upon.

5.2.1 Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP)

To identify the conceptual metaphors in the sources, I used the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) which was formulated by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and gives clear instructions on how to identify words as metaphoric. According to MIP, every single word is examined for metaphoricity by determining the words’ meaning in their context. If the word usually means or refers to something different than it does in its examined context, it means that the word is of metaphoric nature. To determine how a word is non-metaphorically used, meaning the word’s ‘basic meaning’, the Pragglejaz Group (2007) suggests using a dictionary.

However, there are different ways to approach the metaphoricity of words. While a word is used as a metaphor, as soon as the basic meaning does not match its contextual meaning, there are cases such as the word ‘progress’ where a traditionally metaphoric meaning of the word has become so conventionalized, that it is almost solely used in its metaphoric meaning (Semino 2008, 14–15). It has been shown that the ‘basic meaning’ might differ across dictionaries depending on whether the etymological meaning is seen as basic or the way the word is most commonly used (Semino 2008, 15). For this reason, I have decided to use the meaning which is first listed of the website Dictionary.com (based on Random House Unabridged Dictionary) for English, the Duden online dictionary for German, and SAOB (Svenska Akademiens ordbok) online for determining the metaphoricity of Swedish words.

Since most conceptual metaphors rarely occur by the concept itself but rather in linguistic metaphors, all metaphors in the examined material have been identified and categorized by the underlying concept (Deignan 2005, 14–15).

I have created a coding scheme in which I listed the source, the linguistic metaphor, the source and target domain, and the conceptual mapping for each metaphor I found. Based on the scheme, I identified common conceptual mappings, which allowed me to see how common and therefore dominant the conceptual mapping was. As a result, the analysis has some quantitative traits despite this not being the main incentive of this thesis.
5.2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Theory (CDA) is a conflation of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and theories on society, power, and influence which means that CDA combines studies on language, the use of language, and theories on society and power relations (Berglez 2021, 243). This makes CDA a useful tool to examine texts that circulate in different kinds of media, as well as the impact they might have on the consumers of the texts by critically examining the language used, the underlying ideologies and power structures. With the help of CDA, this thesis’ remaining research questions were answered, such as the implications of the metaphors used. Additionally, I marked down the use of the words ‘normal’, ‘common’, or ‘typical’ in my code schemes, as well as whom the texts seemed to be addressed to and who was represented as the out-group (‘us’ versus ‘them’).

When using CDA it is not enough, according to Fairclough (1992, cited in Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2000, 72), to just examine texts without taking societal cultural processes and structures into consideration. Fairclough (1995) makes use of a three-dimensional analytical framework since, according to him, “[e]ach discursive element has three dimensions: it is a spoken or written language text, it is an instance of discursive practice involving the production and interpretation of text, and it is a social practice.” (Fairclough 1995, 133, original emphasis). The spoken or written text is to be analyzed and then critically assessed taking the discursive practices into consideration, like what kind of text it was and what kind of hegemony there is with these kinds of texts. For my materials, this means that I have to take into consideration that texts published by health agencies and clinics are likely to default to discursive elements typical for the medical paradigm since they operate in the medical paradigm themselves. While the employment of CDA consists of a multitude of ‘analytical tools’ that examine more than just written texts (Berglez 2019), I have chosen to only employ the tools used to focus on linguistics in accordance with the examined material consisting of written texts only. This has been a necessary limitation due to the given time frame for the production of this thesis.

5.3 Method Discussion

Since MIP in its traditional form requires every single word to be examined for potential metaphoricity, it takes up a considerable amount of time which I unfortunately do not have. Instead, I focused on identifying metaphors at the level of meaning so that no bigger metaphoric complexes are missed. I also paid special attention to verbs based on Cameron’s (2003, 88–89) findings on the majority of metaphorically used words in education discourse being verbs. This bears the risk that some metaphors will be missed. However, as Semino (2008, 12) also points out about MIP, examin-
ing every single word as its own lexical unit can cause problems since metaphorical expressions often occur in a complex and thus consist of more than just one word. Looking at every word separately therefore bears the risk of ‘missing the bigger picture’. Not looking at every word as its own separate lexical unit therefore decreases the risk of that happening.

When applying CDA, it is important for the analyst to be aware of their own personal background with its cultural and social background and since that constitutes the preconceptions the analyst might have on the topic they choose to analyze and interpret (Hartman 2004, 191–192). In my case, I do have an autistic friend who rejects the notion of ‘curing autism’ and embraces, as well as occasionally advocates for the neurodiversity paradigm. Because of sympathizing with my friend, I was biased towards preferring the neurodiversity paradigm at the start of this study. However, since I systematically (in accordance with the recognized MIP) identified metaphors, other people reading the same texts should be able to identify the same metaphors I did which answers for this thesis’ reliability (Hartman 2004, 146–147). When it comes to the interpretation of the results, mainly the way that metaphors conceptualize autism and aspects surrounding it, I have built on previous research regarding conceptual metaphors and explained my reasoning which supports the validity of this thesis (Hartman 2004, 146, 191–192).
6. Analysis and Results

I have divided the analysis and presentation of the results in different parts. First, I list the conceptual metaphors I found with the help of the conceptual mappings, as well as examples of linguistic metaphors to demonstrate the conceptual mappings. I also point out differences and similarities between sources and countries. Additionally, I present some of the implications these metaphors might have, though I discuss them more extensively in the second part of the analysis which employs more of the Critical Discourse Analysis. In the third and last part of the analysis, I discuss the visibility of the Neurodiversity Movement with the help of the presence of the neurodiversity paradigm in the examined materials.

6.1 Conceptual Metaphors

I have decided to group the metaphors that help to conceptualize autism by their source domains (topics). The order of occurrence corresponds to the prevalence of the metaphors based on the number of materials the metaphors occurred in, not the total amount of metaphors in all texts.

6.1.1 Reification, Container and Other Spacial Metaphors

When it comes to the metaphoric construction of autism, most texts used person first language (‘person with autism/ASD’, ‘having autism/ASD’) which is a reification of autism. A reification describes the making of something abstract, like autism, into a “material or concrete thing” (Merriam-Webster 1994, cited in Olwig 2013, 251). Therefore, one can either have/possess autism or not have/possess autism. Some texts use phrasings which place autism (physically as an object) inside a person. Examples include sentences such as “[c]ertain medicines taken during pregnancy may also lead to ASD in the child” (Mount Sinai 2023, own emphasis), “[i]n others, symptoms may not show up” (CDC 2022c, own emphasis), or “diagnostic assessments [can] be inadequate in recognizing autism in adults” (AANE 2023 n.d.c, own emphasis). In instances where autism is placed inside a human being, there are two conceptual metaphors at work: THE HUMAN IS A CONTAINER and AUTISM IS AN OBJECT. Seeing autism as a concrete and material thing that only some have and the majority does not have, puts the focus on how to remove that concrete object from the autistic person. This is especially the case since the ideological desired state of human beings is to not be autistic. The reification of autism and conceptualizing the human as a container further entails that autism is nothing but an object that is situated in the container. Not only does it suggest that this object can be removed, it also entails that removing contents from the human container, such as
autism, does not alter the container. This perspective is the main focus of the criticism that the people who prefer identity first-language express. They claim that saying ‘person with autism’ suggests that autism should be removable from a person without altering their identity (Sinclair 1999, cited in Lewin and Akhtar 2021). ‘Removing autism’, they say, cannot be possible without drastically altering an autistic person’s identity because autistic brains process information differently. The information the brain receives is responsible for the thoughts and actions of that person. If that information is different, the person in their being and actions is therefore inherently different as well (Lewin and Akhtar 2021).

Despite some texts exclusively using identity-first language and embracing the neurodiversity paradigm, certain phrasings still established autism as an object instead of an identity. Examples include: “traits that have nothing to do with autism but look similarly” (Mueller 2023, own emphasis) or “[t]his is a book for you, who has experience with autism” (Törnvall 2023, 8, own emphasis). This shows just how common reifications are in language and the human conceptualization and how impossible it seems to avoid them despite the rejection of the reification of autism.

Some phrasings showcase autism as a hidden object that needs to be ‘detected’ or ‘found’ through tests and observations but that it is not ‘immediately visible’ from birth or can be ‘detected’ before birth through certain medical tests. Rather, autism first gets noticed through ‘deviating’ behavior and development later in life. In one source the phrasing even says that autism can ‘hide’ behind some ‘disturbances’ [but that it can also be another ‘disorder’] (Neurologen und Psychiater im Netz n.d.a).

Abilities and skills are also conceptualized as objects, as well as areas or spaces. In relation to autism, it is often talked about a lack of skills and abilities and sometimes even a ‘loss’ of them. Examples include “[l]osing any language or social skills” (Mount Sinai 2023, own emphasis), “[i]n the area of communication” (Autismus Deutschland e.V. n.d.a), or even “[r]egression or loss of already acquired abilities” (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023a, 8, own emphasis), where abilities are objects of value which makes their loss or never ‘acquiring’ this ability at all even more of a bad thing that ‘just losing an object’ that might not have a value ascribed to it. Metaphorically, the skill and ability ‘objects’ are situated ‘in’ the human container.

‘Disorders’ or specific ‘disturbances’ are also conceptualized as objects. Since autism looks different ‘in’ different people, ‘disturbances’ typically associated with autism can be present or not. In German sources, multiple different disabilities can also ‘stack up in’ a person (‘Mehrfachbehinderung’, literally ‘multiplied disability’).
Other phrasings that establish the human being as a container which is filled with objects include ‘behaviors in people’, where behaviors are objects that fill (parts of) the human container. Another instance of behavior being conceptualized an object is the phrasing of interventions aiming at “reduc[ing] behaviors that interfere with daily functioning” (NIMH 2023, own emphasis). Here, behavior is an object, that if it is ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ is [too] big so that it ‘interferes’ with ‘daily functioning’ and therefore needs to be ‘reduced’ (in size) to take up less space in the human container so that it does not interfere with other objects (abilities and skills) ‘in there’.

Besides container metaphors, other spacial metaphors are used to conceptualize certain aspects of autism. Examples of such linguistic expressions such as ‘areas of development’, ‘areas of skills’, ‘a broad range of conditions’, and ‘narrow interests’. A reoccurring theme with these spacial metaphors is the conceptualization of autism as a ‘lack of space’. This expressed with phrasings such as ‘narrow interests’, ‘narrow’ or ‘restrictive’ behaviors, as well as mentions of ‘getting stuck’ in routines (Mount Sinai 2023).

A consequence of conceptualizations with the help of spacial metaphors is that many ‘areas in life’ are conceptualized to be diminished by autism, like the ‘restriction’ the social life of autistic people or even that behaviors, such as imitation, are ‘restricted’ (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023b; Autismus Deutschland e.V. n.d.a). Another example of the autistic human container, the autistic brain especially, having a lack of space is the expression of ‘sensory overload’ which means that sensory impressions become ‘too much’ for an autist to handle which can lead to so called ‘meltdowns’ or ‘outbursts’ (Sörgård 2018; Törnvall 2023). An interesting alternative metaphor suggested by Törnvall (2023, 27–28) is a lack of ‘filters’ that limit the amount of information, such as sensory impressions, ‘entering’ the brain. Rather than autistic people lacking space for the processing of the same amount of information that neurotypicals process, autistic people lack the filters that neurotypical people possess. She therefore suggests that autists have to process more information than non-autistic people which is the cause of ‘sensory overload’. According to Törnvall (2023), autists therefore do not lack space but ‘filters’ and suggests that neurotypicals would face the same difficulties with sensory overload that autists do if they had to try processing the same amount of information.

Another use of spacial metaphors is to set autistic apart from non-autistic people. This can also been seen by using ‘they’ and ‘them’ in some instances, rather than using expressions such as ‘autistic people’ or ‘people with ASD/autism’. According to Semino (2004, 95) spacial, or container metaphors, are often used to establish an ‘in-group’ and an ‘out-group’. This can also be seen in Broderick and Ne’eman’s (2008, 463–465) observation that autistic people were being conceptual-
ized as belonging outside the ‘geographic landscape of normalcy’. An example that demonstrates the establishment of autists as an out-group and sometimes even alien include “[autists] finding a sensible/useful place in our community” (Autismus Stuttgart e.V. n.d.b, own emphasis), where autistic people are established as being ‘outside’ the [neurotypical] community and therefore needing to be integrated into a spot that makes autists useful.

In some sources, autists are described as ‘living in their own world’, and not ‘participating in’ conversations, play, etc. which also physically distances autistic people from others (mainly non-autistic people). Related to this are examples of spacial metaphors and container metaphors working together are phrasings like autistic people being ‘closed off’ towards others and their surroundings. Especially in the context of play being shared, as well as conversations, that autistic people are described to have no interest or difficulties ‘in’ participating and sharing. In a guide for autists in workplaces, it is mentioned that it is necessary for autistic people to have time to ‘withdraw’ themselves literally and figuratively (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023b, 11).

Also related to containers and other physical constructs are metaphors that construct autists as ‘lacking surface’. This conceptualization occurs in German and Swedish, where autists hold ‘one-sided’ conversations, as well as developing ‘one-sided’ skills, abilities, and interests in contrast to neurotypical people that have ‘multiple-sided’ skills, abilities, and interests.

The conceptualization of autism as a spectrum (of traits or disorders) is also a spacial metaphor. Sometimes it is claimed that autism ‘is’ a spectrum that encompasses a ‘broad range’ of (dis)abilities, other times an autistic person is (placed) somewhere ‘on the autistic spectrum’.

In summary, the reification of autism and other attributes such as skills and abilities work together with container and other spacial metaphors to distinguish ‘the autism’ from the person and to conceptualize the effect autism has on a person by ‘diminishing their space’. Spacial metaphors are also employed to physically place autistic people outside of the norm by describing autistic behaviors as ‘disturbances’, ‘abnormal’, and ‘atypical’, as well as phrasings that suggest that autistic people don’t participate ‘in’ social activities that others, non-autistic peers, do. This also creates physical distance between autists and neurotypicals.

6.1.2 War/Military/Disaster Metaphors

A part of an autism diagnosis are so called ‘screenings’, which are observations of children suspected of being autistic in specific environments and situations executed by autism experts. The word ‘screening’ is metaphorical since it, in its original meaning, stands for protection. Therefore
the metaphorical mapping of OBSERVING IS PROTECTING occurs. This ‘protection’ is a protection from autism which is often framed as a threat through phrasings such as being at a ‘high risk for autism’, ‘risk factors’, and an atypically behaving child putting its parents in an “acute emergency situation” (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023a), as well as autistic people being ‘victims’ (of autism).

Other military metaphors find their expression through the words ‘fight’ and ‘struggle’, for example “autists often fighting to understand” (Zander n.d.) and autists “struggling with [their] autism” (Törnvall 2023, 38).

Other phrasings frame autism and being autistic as a threat or a problem, usually indicated through the words ‘risk’, though the word ‘threat’ and ‘threatened/threatening’ does occur as well. These ‘threats’ can be autism itself, as well as other disabilities, but also ‘the threat of unemployment’ due to being autistic (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023b). The word problem occurs often across all sources, though it is important to acknowledge that the word problem is not nearly as strong as threats and disasters. Autism is also officially (medically) categorized as a ‘disorder’ or ‘disturbance’ which, according to the three dictionaries are ‘interruptions’ of ‘normalcy’, ‘routine’, or even ‘peace’.

Somewhat related to the war and military domain is the crime domain. Words that relate to the crime domain are ‘surveillance’, ‘suspicious/suspicions’, and even the word ‘prisoner’ which often occurs together with ‘isolation/isolated’. ‘Tools’ for autism screenings are for example called “surveillance tools” (CDC 2022b) and specific behaviors might lead to “suspicions of autism” (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023a, 8) by family members and doctors. When it comes to autists being ‘prisoners’, the word mainly refers to autists ‘being held prisoner’ in their own mind, not knowing how to ‘escape’ and being/feeling ‘isolated’ (Preißmann 2023, 13; Sharpe 2019, cited in Törnvall 2021, 17). This metaphor works together with the container metaphor where autists are being imprisoned by their own selves, their ‘containers’, as well as feeling isolated from others, mainly neurotypicals, due to differences in experiencing, thinking, and behaving.

One lone but interesting military metaphor was expressed by Liman (2017, 15–16) in writing that she had become “good at camouflaging [her] autistic struggles without knowing about them” which led to a late diagnosis because her autistic traits ‘remained hidden’. Other sources and phrasings describing the same phenomenon instead use the words ‘mask’, ‘masking’, ‘façade’, ‘acting’, and ‘performing’, which are not as drastic as the word ‘camouflage’ with its military associations.

To sum up this section, if framing autism as a problem is counted into the domain of war/military and disaster metaphors, then this source domain is the third most occurring one (behind reifications
and spacial metaphors). However, since problems are not as drastic as typical war/military and disaster metaphors (such as the linguistic metaphors ‘threat’, ‘risk’, ‘fight’, and ‘struggle’) this grouping of metaphors might be a point of discussion. Yet, even without the metaphors with whom autism is conceptualized as a problem, metaphors from the war/military domain occur often because of the so called ‘screenings’ that children undergo so that their behavior may be observed, as well as mentions of ‘risks’ and ‘risk’ factors, metaphors from this source domain are still common across texts. However, they are noticeably absent from texts that embrace the neurodiversity paradigm and make use of language stemming from neurodiversity discourses.

6.1.3 Journey Metaphors

Other occurring metaphors are journey metaphors that are often applied to development which is expressed through phrasings such as a child ‘meeting developmental milestones’ or even ‘the right developmental track’ which suggests that there is a right and wrong ‘way’ in the ‘developmental journey’. Another element is often added to development being a journey: time, where development is a timed journey and if ‘developmental milestones’ are not met within a certain ‘normal’ or typical time span, then ‘developmental delays’ are present. Another more neutral word than normal to describe the often different development of autistic people is that autism “change[s] the most common ways people develop” (CDC 2022c). The DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY metaphor is especially present in US sources whereas it occurs less often in German and Swedish texts. However, in all resources, time, ‘delays’ especially, occur very often. In some instances they explicitly occur with journey metaphors which then leads to the conceptual mapping of DEVELOPMENT IS A TIMED JOURNEY. Examples of linguistic metaphors are “delayed language development” (Sörngård 2018, 30) or “[the reaching of] milestones in the motor development possibly being delayed” (Preißmann 2023, 20), as well as a child “[having] delays” (Autism Society 2023), and “[developing] language slowly” (Mount Sinai 2023). Development is therefore not only a journey, but a journey that should be absolved/milestones of that journey that should be reached in a certain amount of time. According to Autismus Deutschland e.V. (2023a, 6) developmental milestones often are not reached “on a straight path” by autistic children which implies that the ‘developmental journey’ is not absolved in a timely manner. Similar are phrasings such as a child being on the “right development track” (CDC 2022a) also imply the time element of the ‘developmental’ journey, as well as suggesting, as mentioned, that there is a ‘right’ way to develop but also a or multiple wrong ways. This assigns even more negative value to the development of an autistic child on top of the negatively associated ‘delays’, than just the time element occurring on its own.
Certain actions, such as learning, communicating, behaving, etc. are also conceptualized with the help of journey metaphors. Autistic people are said to behave, learn, communicate, etc. in different ways, or these ‘ways’ can even “range from highly skilled to severely challenged” (Autism Speaks 2023c, own emphasis). In this case the journey metaphor is being mixed with spacial metaphors.

Another journey conceptualization is that of the autism diagnosis. This is expressed through phrasings such as experts helping parents ‘navigate the diagnostic process’, as well as an emphasis on an autism diagnosis taking time as opposed to having one appointment which results in either being diagnosed or not being diagnosed and that being final.

Conversation is yet another instance of the journey metaphor being used, especially when ‘the way’ that autistic people communicate deviates from the ‘typical way’ of communication which is supposed to go “back and forth” (NIMH 2023) rather than being a monologue.

Playing into the journey source domain is the word ‘hindrance’ which occurs in sentences such as “[H]aving autism can be a hindrance” (Magnusson Österberg 2023) or that changing work conditions and environments possibly being a hindrance to autistic people (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023b) or even the word ‘disability’ in German itself (‘Behinderung’) derives from the word ‘hindrance’ (‘Hindernis’). Autism therefore is a ‘hindrance on the path of a typical development’ and therefore leads to different ‘longer’ or ‘wrong’ paths having to be taken.

Finding a job is also conceptualized with the help of journey metaphors in the German guide about autists in workplaces (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023b). The guide mentions ‘job/career paths’, ‘standard ways [of getting a job]’ which often are difficult or impossible for autistic people to ‘follow’, or autistic people not knowing “with which step to start [performing a task]” (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023b, 21). The brochure therefore recommends the use of a ‘guide’ specialized in guiding autistic people to get started with the journey of finding a job, as well as starting it. The guide in question tends to be a neurotypical person, which suggests that autists need help navigating and that neurotypical people know better than autistic people. This emphasizes that neurotypicals are considered to be ‘normal’ and ‘the standard’ while autists deviate from that norm and therefore are the ones in need of help to ‘become as normal as possible’.

6.1.4 Illness Metaphors

The illness source domain could often be found across sources. Part of which can be attributed to the fact that the word ‘diagnosis’ was included in one of the key word searches, which already frames autism within the medical paradigm. However, I have chosen to include the search word be-
cause during the first search, the word ‘diagnosis’ occurred in all texts and the diagnosis process, as well as diagnosis criteria are of interest to those wanting to learn more about autism because they might suspect being autistic or knowing someone who is autistic.

‘Diagnosis’ occurred almost across all texts to talk about ‘discovering autism’ and autistic traits were often called ‘symptoms’, though some sources talked about ‘signs’ instead which is an alternative to the medically/illness associated word ‘symptom’. Even sources which seemed to favor the neurodiversity paradigm of autism being a neurological variation, rather than a disability, employed the word ‘diagnosis’ when talking about someone discovering that they/someone they know are autistic. Diagnosis, in these cases, stands for ‘discovery’ and the only way for someone to be officially recognized as being autistic is through a formal medical diagnosis which shows how essential and deeply ingrained certain elements of the medical paradigm are in western cultures.

In some cases, the word ‘illness’ was explicitly named when talking about autism, though this was only the case in German texts. Examples include “[s]tudies show that autists have a higher risk of developing additional illnesses/disabilities that can lead to enhancing autism-specific symptoms” (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023a), “How does the doctor recognize if a child is sick with autism spectrum disorder?” (LWL-Klinik Paderborn n.d.), or even “[affected youth] suffer from the consequences of their symptoms” (LWL-Klinik Paderborn n.d.).

6.1.5 Machine Metaphors

Machine metaphors, especially by the likes of words such as ‘functioning’ and ‘input’, are also present in the analyzed texts. These machine metaphors conceptualize the human being and its mind as a machine, sometimes a specific machine such as a computer. Lots of sources talk about early interventions and treatments to ‘improve daily functioning’ (or other kinds of ‘functioning’) which suggests that autistic human machines need fixing to function ‘adequately’. Another source even suggests that treatment is necessary in order for an autistic person to ‘function’ at all (Mount Sinai 2023).

In a German source an occurring machine metaphor talks about ‘subconscious behavioral mechanisms’ that autistic people are unable to ‘access’ in social situations (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023b, 10). Related to this, a machine metaphor used in Swedish sources is the conceptualization of autism as a lack of automatization. This is expressed through sentences such as “for most others [socializing/decoding social clues] happens automatically with the help of social intuition” (Zander n.d.) or “[w]hat others do automatically, autists do manually [the reading and translating of body language]” (Törnvall 2023, 20–21).
In Swedish, the disability (‘funktionsnedsättning’) literally means ‘function reduction’ which encourages the association of disabled people with impaired machines.

### 6.1.6 Weight Metaphors

In German, the word ‘difficulty’ (‘Schwierigkeit’) derives from the word ‘heaviness’ (‘Schwere’). Therefore, when talking about skills, abilities, and situations that autistic people find difficult, the words ‘heavy’ or ‘heaviness’ occur. At times, the word ‘burden’ is also mentioned to talk about autism being a burden to neurotypical people that witness ‘deviating’ autistic behavior, as well as autism interventions that aim to change the ‘deviating’ behaviors of autistic people ‘taking [a part of the] load/burden off’ the autistic person’s family (LWL-Klinik Paderborn n.d.).

### 6.1.7 Other Metaphors

Another reoccurring metaphor are metaphors describing autistic people as lacking something, having ‘deficits’ when it comes to skills, abilities, interests, among other things. Autism is therefore not just conceptualized as a ‘lack of space’ as mentioned above, but is seen as a ‘lack’ in general, an incompleteness. ‘Interventions’ such as behavioral therapy but also tools to help with communications, are supposed to lessen that ‘lack’ and at times even compensate for it.

Other metaphors are SEEING IS UNDERSTANDING and WORDS ARE CONTAINERS where words are filled with meaning, the meaning(s) thus being objects in the container, that are visible to some (neurotypicals) and invisible to others (autists) (Törnvall 2023). For autists the word is not necessarily a container but an object whereas for neurotypicals, the word is the container that is filled with more objects (meanings) than just the container itself. However, the autist is unable to see (understand) these ‘hidden’ objects (because of a different view [understanding]).

Autism also gets personified in a lot of sources even if it is not as common as autism being reified. The personifications are mainly expressed by autism being turned into an agent, such as autism ‘expressing itself’ or ‘showing signs’. Despite personifications not being unusual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 42), the consequences of personifications, especially in the case of autism, can also lead to autism being seen as its own separate entity. Moreover, it allows for metaphors and descriptions such as the person being held prisoner in its own mind [by autism] (Sharpe 2019, cited in Törnvall 2021, 17).

As shortly mentioned in the section of war/military and disaster metaphors, in texts written by autistic people, there are drama metaphors such as mentions of masking, performing, acting, and even having erected a façade in order to hide one’s autistic traits and struggles to pass as a neurotypical
person. In other sources this behavior is referred to as ‘compensatory strategies’ and presented as desirable behavior whereas autists share their experiences of these activities to be bad for their mental well-being (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023b, Liman 2017, 15–16, Törnvall 2021, 14).

6.1.8 Other Observations

A noticeable difference between German sources compared to US and Swedish sources is that the word ‘normal’ and therefore autistic people being ‘abnormal’ is much more common in German texts than in Swedish and US texts. In texts from these two countries, words such as typicality/atypicality and also common/uncommon are used to describe behaviors and traits associated with neurotypical and autistic people respectively. The words (a)typical and (un)common are more neutral and less ideological in nature than ‘normal’. Additionally, German texts commonly ascribe value to traits and abilities, such as having a ‘good’ language repertoire, meaning to have a big vocabulary and being able to express oneself in a varied manner. Another example is the phrasing of some autistic people being “well talented” [having ‘good’ talent] (Neurologen und Psychiater im Netz n.d.b). Therefore, autism is at times framed as being a threat that can diminish the value of skills and abilities and with that even the human (machine) itself.

Most texts, no matter which country they are from or whether they were found through the web search or recommended by experts, talk about autistic people as the out-group. This differentiating is often done with spacial metaphors such as being ‘outside the norm’, autistic people ‘withdrawing’ into themselves and therefore not reaching neurotypical people or not participating ‘in’ play, conversations, or socializing in general. However, even the use of the words ‘they’ and ‘them’ marks autistic people as being different and therefore not being a part of ‘us’, meaning neurotypical people. The exception to that are some of the literature recommended by experts that are written by autistic people, Törnvall especially. There, autists are the in-group, ‘us’ and ‘we’, to explain differences to neurotypical people. This shows that most text productions are done or overseen by neurotypical people that therefore get to decide whom the out-group consists of.

Another interesting observation, which goes against Pellicano and den Houting’s (2022) findings, is that more of the expert recommended sources contained the neurodiversity paradigm and had a bigger focus on strengths than online sources. Though it needs to be acknowledged, that the online sources Pellicano and den Houting mentioned in their studies refer to social media and autistic blogs rather than the first three web results that mainly are hosted by governmental health agencies and medical institutions.
Additionally, in Swedish and US sources, there were texts that solely employed the neurodiversity paradigm whereas in German sources, the neurodivergent paradigm only co-occurred together with the medical paradigm. Meaning that at times differences were mentioned in a more neutral way but there were still mentions of deficits in the same text.

The examined German sources focus, compared to the materials from the other countries, over-proportionally on jobs and autists in workplaces, as well as focusing on how make use of autistic people in workplaces as to ‘contribute to society in a useful way’. This focus on autistic people being ‘useful’ and ‘contributing to society’ which can be achieved through employment might explain the bigger focus on deficits and the lack of the neurodiversity paradigm occurring on its own since most workplaces and working conditions are created to ‘fit’ neurotypicals, not autists. Consequently, autists struggle with conditions that do not suit them which then leads to autistic people potentially not being able to work which in turn leads to viewing autistic people as being ‘at risk’ of not ‘meaningfully contributing to society’ and ‘being a burden’. Therefore the negative portrayal of autism is more ‘naturalized’ and ‘dramatized’ than in those countries and materials that do not focus as much on autists in workplaces. The existence of autistic people possibly being unable to work in a culture where labor is the cornerstone of its ideology threatens the capitalist ideology. This therefore leads to an increased negative portrayal of autism so that the focus is on changing the people rather than questioning the system. As Broderick and Roscigno (2021) and Hamilton (2019) observed in their studies, language is being weaponized to legitimize the treatment of autistic people as being inferior and in need of ‘interventions’.

6.2 Implications of the Autism Representations for the View on Autism

Based on the examined materials, autism is still mainly understood and talked about in terms of the medical paradigm. Additionally, most materials seem to be aimed at neurotypical caregivers of autistic people based on the firm establishment of autists as an out-group, as well as a great focus on deficits. However, many of the expert-recommended materials are aimed at autistic people to learn more about themselves, rather than for caregivers. Noticeable, however, is the low amount of materials aimed at children or autistic people that also have an intellectual disability and therefore require more simple language. One web search result from Germany and one web search result had information about autism in simple language whereas none of the expert-recommended ones did (with the exception of materials aimed at children). Some materials just assumed that if an autistic person were reading them, they’d be classified as ‘high-functioning’, such as guides for autistic
people to manage everyday life, whereas others explicitly said that the material is for and about ‘high-functioning’ autists (e.g. Törnvall 2021).

With the framing of autism mainly taking place in the medical paradigm, the focus is on differences between autistic and neurotypical people which disfavors autists. Central points of the materials tend to be the ‘deficits’ and how to ‘fix’ or ‘lessen’ these perceived deficits. In the occasion of autistic differences being represented as strengths rather than ‘deficits’, the focus is on the ‘usefulness’ of these strengths career-wise, meaning that the strengths can be exploited to be turned into capital. Only in children’s sources, it was mentioned that being autistic is likely to mean that one might be more prone to being honest or loyal which are positive human qualities. The rest of the times, the focus was mainly on so-called autistic ‘special interests’ which are strong interests autists have in certain fields and topics and therefore often become experts on. This is said to be able to lead to advantages in the vocational world since autists are likely to possess more knowledge on their subject of interest than neurotypical people due to the ‘deeper going’ nature of autistic special interests.

This, as well as conceptualizing humans as machines by focusing on the ‘functionality’ of human beings, are products of capitalism and industrialization where the focus is on converting labor into capital and the production and use of ‘standardized adults’ that “[can] be slotted into industrial processes” (Waltz 2020, 18) without further complications such as needing to adapt the individual to their new workplace and vice-versa. Waltz (2020) argues that the want for adults as ‘standardized components’ led to the ‘normal child’ being constructed as a production goal that should be reached through parenting and school. For a child to turn into the desired product, the ‘normal’ child, they had to learn certain skills in a certain way and time, deviations were constructed as deficits that need to be corrected. This ideology can be seen in the employed metaphors, such as the reification of skills and abilities, making them into objects one can (should) possess, the journey metaphors of development and working life where there is a ‘right’ way, a ‘straight’ way, and other ‘wrong’ and ‘long’ ways, as well as ‘hindrances’ that make traveling the desired path difficult or impossible. It can also be seen in the machine metaphor which categorizes people by their ‘functionality’, such as ‘high-functioning’ (despite one’s disability) or ‘low-functioning’ (because of one’s disability). The functionality of a person in this case means their ability to transform labor into capital in accordance with the capitalistic ideology and system. The machine metaphor also leads to the dehumanization of human beings and allows for ascribing value to a person based on their ‘functionality’ (Lima and Belk 2023). It therefore legitimizes trying to ‘reform’, ‘fix’, or ‘reprogram’ ‘dysfunctional machines’ (such as autists) because a machine needs to function properly in order to be of value for production processes (labor). Even if a machine functions differently, the upkeep might be too ex-
pensive (such as creating and up-keeping work or school environments that are ‘autism friendly’), especially if there are other machines that all work the same way and still ‘get the job done’. This is also why it is legitimized and even desired to ‘fix’ or ‘reprogram’ the differently functioning or ‘dysfunctional’ machines so that they easily fit into production processes “like a standardized component” (Waltz 2020, 18).

This is where interventions such as ‘behavior therapy’ come in that also employ medical approaches since autistic behaviors are seen as something pathological. Broderick and Roscigno (2021, 78) argue that the common metaphoric conceptualizations of autism as an illness, as alien, an enemy or “otherwise dangerous and ‘other’” lead to such interventions being seen as “the only sensible response for autistic people”. The narrative of autistic people being machines with an undesired different functionality or lower functionality needing to be fixed in order to ‘function properly’ also fit with their argument. They also argue that, if ‘autism interventions’ are seen as “the only sensible response for autistic people” (Broderick and Roscigno 2021, 78), ableist hopes and fears are exploited for money since these interventions are costly. The claims of most sources, that early interventions are needed for autistic children, and in some cases even needed so that a child might be able to ‘function at all’, fit this narrative.

Another metaphor that helps with interventions that are supposed to lessen one’s ‘degree of being autistic’ (meaning appearing to be less autistic due to changed behaviors that deviate less from those of neurotypical people) is the reification of autism. Only if autism is conceptualized as a concrete thing that can be present or absent in someone but is its own entity, separate from the person, can there be a focus on removing ‘the autism’. If autism (being autistic) is accepted as its own (and natural) neurotype instead, this would not be possible since the ‘autisticness’ is not something that can be separated or singled out from a person.

Interesting is also the exclusion of the so-called ‘low-functioning’ autists, however not surprising considering the capitalist ideology. Considering the perceived ‘low’ functionality of some autists, they are not of value to the labor market and likely not expected to ‘get better’ (meaning to get skilled at hiding autistic traits so that they can pass as neurotypicals). It might therefore appear fruitless to try and ‘reprogram’ a ‘barely functioning machine’, which is why a ‘cure’/’complete removal of the autism’ is still needed so that the human may reach an ‘adequate functionality’, according to those operating in capitalist ideologies.
6.3 Visibility of the Neurodiversity Movement

Determining the visibility of the Neurodiversity Movement can be a challenge considering that few texts explicitly name the Neurodiversity Movement or the neurodiversity paradigm. However, considering that the Neurodiversity Movement pushes for autism to be seen as a neurological difference and the description of differences in behavior, interests, etc. being more neutrally worded (as differences rather than deficits), as well as preferring identity first-language, then I believe that materials containing these elements have been influenced by the Neurodiversity Movement.

I found 14 out of 46 sources to at least partially embrace the perspective of autism as a neurological difference rather than a just an illness and a few more materials that seemed to focus on the conceptualization of autism within the medical paradigm that also make use of identity-first language. One of the materials, a German online brochure (Autismus Deutschland e.V. 2023a) even acknowledged some autists preferring identity first-language and explained that they therefore chose to make use of ‘mixed language’ meaning to use both, person first and identity first-language.

The fact that those materials containing the neurodiversity paradigm were almost solely recommended by experts gives reason to believe that they are aware of (some of) the perspectives and goals that the Neurodiversity Movement is pushing for. Especially considering that the experts whom I asked for material recommendation are medical experts that typically work within the medical paradigm due to the nature of their profession. This suggests that the Neurodiversity Movement with its suggestions for discursive changes has been spreading and found more influence in the circles of medical experts. However, the most common perception of autism still remains within the medical paradigm which is especially clear considering that only one of the web search results (Mueller 2023) contained parts of the neurodiversity perspective. The dominance of the medical paradigm can be determined through the web search results since the reason for them being a part of the first three results is also due to traffic, meaning lots of people clicking on the articles which makes them (appear) more relevant. This shows that, from a discursive perspective, the conceptualization of autism within the medical paradigm is hegemonic even if it appears that its hegemony is being challenged more and more, at least within expert circles.
7. Discussion

The aim of the thesis is to examine the influence of the Neurodiversity Movement on autism information materials, as well as critically studying the discursive construction of autism. The results show that autism is still largely conceptualized within the medical paradigm with a focus on deficits even though the neurodiversity paradigm seems to begin challenging the hegemony of the medical paradigm.

The first question of this thesis is concerned with determining the conceptual metaphors used to construct the understanding of autism. The next two questions discuss the implications of the metaphors used and compare the different materials between the country of origin and whether they were the results of a web search or recommended by experts. The main findings include that the metaphoric conceptualizations of autism are mainly focused on conceptualizing autism and skills and abilities as objects to show the ‘deficits’ caused by autism, as well as separating autism from the person (the human-container) so that the focus can be on removing or ‘reducing’ autism. Especially considering that autism, according to the common conceptualizations, is/causes a lack of space in the person and also causes autistic people to be alien at worst and an out-group at best and therefore focuses on negatives. This view on autism and autistic people is legitimized through capitalist ideologies that aim to transfer labor into capital which requires human beings to be as close to a ‘standardized product’ as possible. Autistic people deviate from this standardized norm which is regarded as a pathology. According to Danforth (2007), this is common when it comes to emotional and behavioral differences in people and therefore allows for autism to be regarded as a disease. This in turn legitimizes autism ‘interventions’ and the search for a cure. Which, again, is only made possible through the reification of autism and with that the idea that autism can be separated from the person, a notion which the neurodiversity paradigm rejects.

Noticeable is the lack of materials for autistic people with an intellectual disability. This is also legitimized by the capitalist ideology which aims to transform labor into capital. Those who are unable to work under capitalist conditions (meaning that they do not represent the ideal standardized human product) therefore are assigned less value which is also legitimized due to the dehumanization by the conceptualization of humans as machines. Those machines that are believed to be ‘fixable’ or ‘reprogrammable’ therefore ‘deserve’ greater attention and resources to be devoted to them.

This thesis’ last question is concerned with the visibility of the Neurodiversity Movement. The analysis has shown that the neurodiversity paradigm is more widespread in the expert recommended materials while there is almost no sign of it in the web search results. Since framing autism within
the neurodiversity paradigm is one of the aims of the Neurodiversity Movement, this means that the Neurodiversity Movement is visible in the examined materials, however, mostly solely in expert-recommended ones. I found this to be a bit surprising, considering that the majority of the Neurodiversity Movement is taking place online (Parsloe 2015). However, it is important to remember that the most employed paradigm and its discourses, and therefore the most popular one (as measured by Google’s Search Engine Optimization) remains the medical paradigm. It therefore is not as surprising that language corresponding to the neurodiversity paradigm did not occur in almost any of the top three search results.

Despite the neurodiversity paradigm occurring rather often in the expert-recommended materials, it will remain to be seen how much of a foothold the neurodiversity paradigm is going to get. Especially when considering that the medical paradigm fits the capitalist logic and ideology dominating in the western world better than the neurodiversity paradigm and its use of the social model of disability. Accepting and embracing the neurodiversity paradigm would mean having to give up on the idea of a standardized human product which is beneficial for production processes and work places. This happening in a culture determined by capitalist logic and ideology seems unlikely.

When it comes to the limitations of this thesis, the validity is varied when it comes to expert materials because of a varying amount of expert responses. Since I chose to examine sources that were recommended by at least two experts and received only two responses from US experts, it was more unlikely for materials to be recommended by 100% (2/2) of the experts as compared to German experts (67%, 2/3) or Swedish experts (20% 2/5). Unfortunately, the time frame in which this thesis is set did not allow for me to reach out to more experts and wait for a response. Another limitation, especially when it comes to materials for and about autists with an intellectual disability is that I have been told by almost all Swedish experts that they usually recommend materials specifically for every person they work with which means that they likely would have materials for those with an intellectual disability too. However, I asked for those materials that they are likely to recommend to most of the autists they work with and they happened to mainly be intended for autistic adults without an intellectual disability.

Another limitation of this thesis is the fact that I only examined written texts. I have also received recommendations of podcasts or video clips, and some materials contained pictures and info graphs that I have chosen not to include in my analysis due to a lack of time. However, it would be relevant to look into more than just written texts to examine the conceptualization of autism and the influence of the Neurodiversity Movement. This leaves room for future multi-modal research perhaps
with a bigger focus on expert recommended info materials, as well as a bigger focus on materials for children and autistic individuals with an intellectual disability. Another interesting research topic could be the determination and comparison of the metaphors used within medical and the neurodiversity discourses. The metaphoric construction of autism in other cultures, especially those not dominated by capitalist ideology would be another research topic of interest and relevance when it comes to the discursive construction and representation of autism.
8. References


Appendix 1: List of Materials

The used material is listed here by country and is divided into the results of the web searches and the experts’ recommendations. Duplicates, meaning that materials were included in the web search results and the experts’ recommendations are shown in brackets under the experts’ sections since the web search was conducted first.

US Sources: Web Results


Nemours Children’s Health. (2019.) *Autism Spectrum Disorder*  

**US Sources: Expert Recommendations**

Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE). (n.d.a). *Adult Life*.  


Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE). (n.d.c). *Diagnosis*.  


Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE). (n.d.e). *What is autism?*.  

**German Sources: Web Results**

Autismus Deutschland e.V. (2023a). *Elternratgeber Autismus-Spektrum*. [Online brochure]  

[https://www.autismus.de/fileadmin/WAS_IST_AUTISMUS/Broschueren/Broschuere_Teilhabe_am_Arbeitsleben_Sta](https://www.autismus.de/fileadmin/WAS_IST_AUTISMUS/Broschueren/Broschuere_Teilhabe_am_Arbeitsleben_Sta)nd12Juni23_v2.pdf (Accessed 2023-12-06).

Autismus Deutschland e.V. (n.d.a) *Was ist Autismus?*.  
[https://www.autismus.de/was-ist-autismus.html](https://www.autismus.de/was-ist-autismus.html) (Accessed 2023-12-05).

Autismus Deutschland e.V. (n.d.b) *Was ist Autismus?*. [Online brochure] Autismus Deutschland e.V.  
German Sources: Expert Recommendations

(Autismus Deutschland e.V. (2023a). Elternratgeber Autismus-Spektrum. [Online brochure]
Autismus Deutschland e.V.)

(Autismus Deutschland e.V. (2023b). Leitfaden: Teilhabe am Arbeitsleben für Menschen mit Autismus. [Online brochure]
https://www.autismus.de/fileadmin/WAS_IST_AUTISMUS/Broschueren/Broschuere_Teilhabe_am_Arbeitsleben_Stand12Juni23_v2.pdf (Accessed 2023-12-06).)

(Autismus Deutschland e.V. (n.d.a) Was ist Autismus?. https://www.autismus.de/was-ist-autismus.html (Accessed 2023-12-05).)

(Autismus Deutschland e.V. (n.d.b) Was ist Autismus?. [Online brochure] Autismus Deutschland e.V.
https://www.autismus.de/fileadmin/WAS_IST_AUTISMUS/Broschueren/Was_ist_Autismus_Infoblatt_A4_2018.pdf (Accessed 2023-12-06).)

(Autismus Deutschland e.V. (n.d.c) Was its Autismus? [Online brochure] Autismus Deutschland e.V.
https://www.autismus.de/fileadmin/WAS_IST_AUTISMUS/Themenspezifische_Flyer/Was_ist_Autismus_-einfach_zu_lesen.pdf (Accessed 2023-12-10).)


**Swedish Sources: Web Results**


**Swedish Sources: Expert Recommendations**


(Accessed 2023-12-11).)