

Asteria and Neurodiversity in Role-Playing Games: Inclusion or Tokenism? Examining Community Conflicts Over Autism Representation

Abstract: The introduction of Asteria, an explicitly autistic character in *Dungeons & Dragons*, has ignited widespread discussions about representation, authenticity, and corporate motivations in tabletop role-playing games. This study examines the polarized reception of Asteria within online gaming communities, analyzing debates over whether her inclusion fosters meaningful representation or constitutes tokenism and virtue signaling. Using Natural Language Processing techniques, sentiment analysis, and thematic classification, this research explores how players perceive autistic representation in fantasy settings and whether Asteria's explicit labeling enhances or constrains creative freedom.

The findings reveal a spectrum of reactions, from strong support for representation to concerns over commercial exploitation and the risk of reducing autism to a narrative device. Moreover, the study considers broader implications for the depiction of alterity in speculative fiction, particularly in worlds where magic and supernatural elements may problematize or reshape understanding of neurodiversity. By situating Asteria within ongoing debates about inclusivity in gaming culture, this research contributes to discussions on the evolving role of representation in interactive storytelling. The study ultimately highlights the complexities of integrating neurodiversity into fantasy narratives while balancing corporate, community, and creative interests.

Keywords: neurodiversity, representation, role-playing games, inclusion, tokenism, *Dungeons & Dragons*, virtue signalling, autism

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Dungeons & Dragons*

Dungeons & Dragons (*D&D*) is a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) that has shaped the fantasy genre and gaming culture since its initial release in 1974. Designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *D&D* is characterized by its improvisational storytelling, cooperative gameplay, and flexible role-playing mechanics, allowing players to create unique characters and embark on narrative-driven adventures within a fantasy setting. Unlike traditional board games, *D&D* is played with an open-ended structure where a Dungeon Master (DM) orchestrates the game world, guiding players through quests, interactions, and challenges using dice rolls to determine success or failure. The game is set in various high-fantasy universes, most notably the *Forgotten Realms*, a setting filled with intricate lore, deities, and legendary figures that players can interact with or embody.

Since its inception, *D&D* has undergone multiple revisions, each refining its mechanics, expanding its lore, and adapting to evolving gaming cultures. The first edition (*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons AD&D* 1977-1989) formalized the ruleset, introducing distinct character classes, alignments, and combat mechanics. The second edition (1989-2000) expanded on narrative depth,

world-building, and campaign settings such as Ravenloft and Planescape. The third (2000) and 3.5 editions (2003) marked a shift towards a more flexible and tactical system, emphasizing character customization and balanced gameplay mechanics. The fourth edition (2008) introduced a more structured combat system, heavily influenced by video game design, but faced criticism for reducing the fluidity of role-playing. The current fifth edition (*D&D 5e*, released in 2014) sought to return to the game's storytelling roots, simplifying mechanics while maintaining strategic depth. It has become the most commercially successful edition to date, embraced by both veteran players and newcomers, partly due to its accessibility, the rise of actual play, web series and movies, and the expansion of diverse character options.

Within the framework of *D&D 5e*, Wizards of the Coast has progressively expanded character diversity, both in terms of narrative inclusivity and mechanical representation. The release of the latest sourcebook, *The Book of Many Things* (Wizards of the Coast 2023), introduced Asteria, a character who is explicitly identified as autistic. Created by Makenzie De Armas, a game designer who is herself autistic, Asteria represents one of the first officially neuroatypical characters in *D&D*'s history. Asteria's inclusion marks a significant step in Wizards of the Coast's ongoing efforts toward greater representation of autistic people within its game worlds. Unlike previous characters who may have exhibited traits associated with neurodiversity or autism but were never officially labeled as such, Asteria's characterization explicitly integrates autism as a recognized and intentional element of her identity. This move reflects broader trends in (autism) media representation (Dean and Nordahl-Hansen 2021; Jones et al. 2023; Mittmann et al. 2023), where autistic characters are increasingly given narrative depth beyond stereotypes.

The introduction of an explicitly autistic character has sparked widespread discussions among *D&D* communities, gaming forums, and broader social media platforms. Within *D&D*-focused spaces, reactions range from enthusiastic support, particularly from players who appreciate the representation, to skepticism or criticism, with some arguing that autism and neurodiversity were always an implicit part of role-playing freedom and did not require official validation (see quotes in section 3.3 of this article).

1.2 Authentic representation vs. creative freedom in fictional characters

One of the central debates surrounding Asteria's inclusion concerns the balance between accuracy in representation and artistic freedom. While some argue that explicit identification of neurodiversity in characters enhances visibility and fosters understanding, others contend that such realism can impose restrictive expectations on character development (see Rebecchi and Vial 2025 for an overview of discussions on psychiatric, mental health, and neurodivergence representations). Shaw (2015) describes this dilemma as the *tyranny of realism*, wherein excessive demands for authenticity in media may curtail the creative possibilities of storytelling. In his study of *Assassin's Creed III*, he demonstrates how audiences' expectations for historical accuracy influence and sometimes limit the diversity of perspectives presented within a game world. At the same time, representation is not solely about fidelity to reality. Noury (2023) explores how artistic expression extends beyond strict realism, enabling layered and interpretative narratives that capture the complexity of identities without confining them to rigid frameworks. Simond (2023) similarly advocates for a broader understanding of representation in video games, emphasizing that portrayals should not be bound by medical definitions or therapeutic purposes but instead engage with imaginative and metaphorical storytelling. Beach (2001) supports this view, arguing that successful representation involves a careful balance between analytical precision and emotional resonance, allowing audiences to connect with characters on multiple levels.

In role-playing games like *D&D*, the fluidity of character creation allows players to shape identities in ways that reflect their own experiences. This aligns with Hugaas's (2024) discussion of *bleed*, a phenomenon where elements of a player's real-life identity and emotions influence their character, and vice versa. Montola (2012) explains that this dynamic interplay enables role-playing to serve as a tool for self-exploration. In such a case, making explicit labels like Asteria's autism is both valuable and, for some, unnecessary. The question remains whether direct representation enhances inclusivity or if it risks simplifying the diverse ways in which players engage with neurodiversity in gaming spaces. (See Bowman 2024 for a discussion on how analog role-playing game narratives can foster active, mythical, and ironic imagination, enabling players to reshape their narrative identity into more empowering structures of belief and life plans).

1.3 Tokenism, virtue signaling, and corporate intentions

Critics of Asteria's introduction frequently argue that her inclusion is more a marketing tactic than a sincere attempt at representation. It is also interesting to note that several years ago, *D&D* was accused of racism and Satanism (Ferguson 2022; Waldron 2005). Trammell (2018) examines how media can sometimes use diversity initiatives to reinforce stereotypes rather than dismantle them, particularly when representation appears to be driven by corporate image concerns rather than genuine storytelling needs. Leonard (2006) emphasizes that representation in games must be understood within its broader sociocultural context; when inclusivity efforts seem performative or commercially motivated, they may be met with skepticism or resistance from audiences. Garcia (2017) further underlines the importance of studying representations and their sociocultural effects beyond the game world.

Tabletop role-playing games, despite their reputation for fostering creativity, can thus unintentionally reinforce dominant power structures. In the case of Asteria, some players feel that autism has always been implicitly present in *D&D*'s character-building freedom, making an explicitly labeled autistic character seem more like a public relations move than a necessary addition. When approached thoughtfully, a character like Asteria has the potential to add meaningful depth to *D&D*'s world without feeling like a corporate checkbox. Schiappa (2008) critiques the overemphasis on "representational correctness," advocating instead for an understanding of media representations based on their broader cultural and social impact. The key challenge remains ensuring that diversity efforts are woven into worldbuilding and storytelling rather than being presented as isolated gestures of inclusivity. Furthermore, some scholars also argued that making diversity visible could lead to either a kind of surveillance or even more regulation (Halberstam 2018; Fischer 2019).

1.4 Objectives of the article

This work seeks to explore the reception of Asteria on social media, analyzing discussions within *D&D* communities and broader gaming audiences. Specifically, it examines how people feel with the character's representation, whether the inclusion is perceived as positive or negative, and how discussions about autism and role-playing intersect with contemporary debates on inclusion in gaming. By analyzing user-generated comments on Facebook groups and pages, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how autism representation in tabletop role-playing games is received, debated, and contested in digital spaces.

2. METHODS

This article employs a Natural Language Processing (NLP) approach combined with sentiment analysis and topic modeling to analyze user-generated content discussing the representation of autism in *Asteria*. The dataset consists of comments extracted from Facebook groups dedicated to *Dungeons & Dragons* and video game news pages such as Polygon, where users reacted to the portrayal of an explicitly autistic character. The methodological framework includes six key stages: data collection and preparation, data cleaning, exploratory data analysis, sentiment analysis, thematic classification, and visualization. This work was conducted using Python (version 3.9), and key NLP and machine learning libraries included pandas (version 1.3.3), scikit-learn (version 0.24.2), TextBlob (version 0.15.3), and Gensim (version 4.1.2). All analyses were performed in a Jupyter Notebook environment to facilitate iterative processing and visualization.

The dataset comprises 648 user comments extracted from (the only) four publications found about *Asteria* on the biggest *D&D* Facebook groups. All the publications only share in a fairly neutral way a link or information about the creation of the character of *Asteria*. It's also important to note that all of the threads were about announcing the character's creation and were made before the book's actual release. Therefore, the reactions analyzed in this article only relate to the fact that there is a new autistic character, not the actual description of the character. Comments were collected manually and formatted into a structured CSV file. Each entry includes the Facebook post ID (ranging from FB01 to FB04), a unique comment identifier, a parent comment ID to track reply structures, the number of reactions, and the comment's textual content. To ensure ethical compliance, all comments were anonymized, removing any user-identifying information. As this study analyses publicly available social media content, usernames have been withheld throughout to protect participant privacy, in line with established internet research ethics practice (Franzke et al. 2020).

The dataset was imported into Python using pandas, where it underwent preprocessing before analysis.

To ensure textual uniformity and remove noise, a preprocessing pipeline was implemented using NLTK (Natural Language Toolkit, version 3.6.5), spaCy (version 3.1.3), and regex (re module, version 2.2.1). The first step involved eliminating missing values by filtering out empty or irrelevant comments. Standardization was then applied by converting all text to lowercase to maintain consistency across the dataset. The next step removed stopwords, defined as function words such as "the," "and," and "is," which do not contribute to the semantic meaning of a sentence. This was performed using NLTK's predefined English stopword list. To further refine the dataset, punctuation, emojis, and URLs were stripped from the text using regular expressions. Finally, lemmatization was applied using spaCy's `en_core_web_sm` model, which performs morphological analysis to unify word variations (e.g., "running" to "run"). These cleaning processes ensured that the dataset was optimized for further NLP-based analysis, free of irrelevant textual noise, and prepared for tokenization.

Before conducting sentiment and thematic analysis, an initial exploratory data analysis (EDA) was performed to assess the dataset's structure. Several key descriptive statistics were computed, including the total number of comments per post, the ratio of replies to main comments, and the distribution of reactions. The average length of comments, measured in character count, was also examined to determine whether longer comments contained more nuanced discussions. A word frequency analysis was conducted using TF-IDF (Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency) to identify the most dominant terms in the dataset. A word cloud visualization, generated using the WordCloud library (version 1.8.1), provided a visual representation (see Figure 1) of the most frequently occurring words, revealing dominant discussion themes before topic modeling was

conducted.

To assess the polarity of user discussions, sentiment analysis was performed using TextBlob (version 0.15.3), a rule-based lexicon approach that assigns a polarity score ranging from -1 (negative) to +1 (positive), with 0 representing neutral sentiment (see Figure 2). Several optimizations were applied to enhance sentiment classification. First, negation handling was implemented to ensure that phrases such as “not good” were correctly classified as negative, addressing one of TextBlob’s common limitations. Also, a customized lexicon of gaming and *D&D*-specific sentiment terms was incorporated to improve accuracy, ensuring that words specific to role-playing games were correctly interpreted in context. A histogram was generated to visualize the distribution of sentiment scores across all comments, revealing the proportion of positive, neutral, and negative reactions. To explore potential disparities in sentiment across different discussions, a comparative sentiment analysis was conducted between the four Facebook threads, showing whether specific threads triggered a higher concentration of negative responses (see Figure 3).

To identify the main themes present in user discussions, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was applied for unsupervised topic modeling using Gensim (version 4.1.2). LDA is a probabilistic generative model that assumes each document — in this case, each comment — contains a mixture of topics, with words probabilistically associated with different themes. To optimize the LDA model, the text corpus was first vectorized using TF-IDF, incorporating bigram and trigram detection to capture multi-word phrases relevant to the discussions. The optimal number of topics, denoted as k , was determined empirically through perplexity score minimization and coherence score maximization, computed via Gensim’s CoherenceModel function. A grid search was conducted to fine-tune LDA hyperparameters, specifically alpha (document-topic density) and eta (topic-word density), ensuring better topic separation. Upon convergence, the LDA model identified five dominant themes, which were manually reviewed and categorized into discussions on (1) support for representation and inclusion, (2) historical precedents of autistic characters in *D&D*, (3) criticism of tokenism and virtue signaling, (4) freedom in role-playing and character creation, and (5) the medical perception of autism within the game world.

To present the findings in a clear and interpretable manner, multiple visualization techniques were employed using Matplotlib (version 3.4.3) and Seaborn (version 0.11.2). Bar charts were created to illustrate the proportion of positive, neutral, and negative comments per post, highlighting differences in audience reception. Histograms displaying sentiment score distributions provided a more detailed understanding of the polarity variations across comments. Heatmaps were generated to visually map thematic categories against sentiment polarity, revealing which topics triggered stronger reactions (see Figure 4).

3. RESULTS

The results are organized into four subsections: exploratory data analysis, sentiment analysis, thematic classification, and comparative analysis of post-specific engagement trends.

3.1 Exploratory data analysis

A preliminary exploration of the dataset revealed key structural characteristics of the discussion. Among the 648 collected comments, 370 (57.1%) were original comments, while 278 (42.9%) were replies. The distribution of comments across the four analyzed threads was highly uneven, with FB04 accounting for 81,17% of the total dataset, followed by FB01 (9,56%), FB02 (5,86%), and FB03 (3,39%). The average length of comments was 143.1 characters, with significant variation between short (the shortest is two characters), reactionary statements and longer, argument-driven

The sentiment analysis provided insights into the polarity of user-generated content. The overall distribution of sentiment scores revealed that 44.4% of comments were classified as positive, 27.5% as neutral, and 28.1% as negative. The sentiment polarity histogram demonstrated a distribution with a stronger positive tendency, while a notable proportion of negative and neutral comments still contributed to a diverse range of perspectives. While discussions showed some level of polarization, the overall sentiment skewed more positively than initially expected (Figure 2).

A closer examination of sentiment trends across individual threads showed notable discrepancies (Figure 3). FB02 exhibited the highest concentration of negative sentiment, with 42.1% of its comments classified as negative, followed by FB01 (32.8%) and FB04 (27.3%), while FB03 had the lowest proportion of negative sentiment (23.7%). Conversely, FB02 also had the highest proportion of positive sentiment (52.6%), indicating that discussions in this post were highly polarized. FB01 and FB04 both showed a strong presence of positive sentiment (46.9% and 44.4%, respectively), while FB03 had a more balanced distribution, with a significant proportion of neutral sentiment (39.5%). This suggests that discussions in FB03 were less polarized, with a mix of factual statements, clarifications, and more moderate engagement regarding Asteria's characterization within the *D&D* universe.

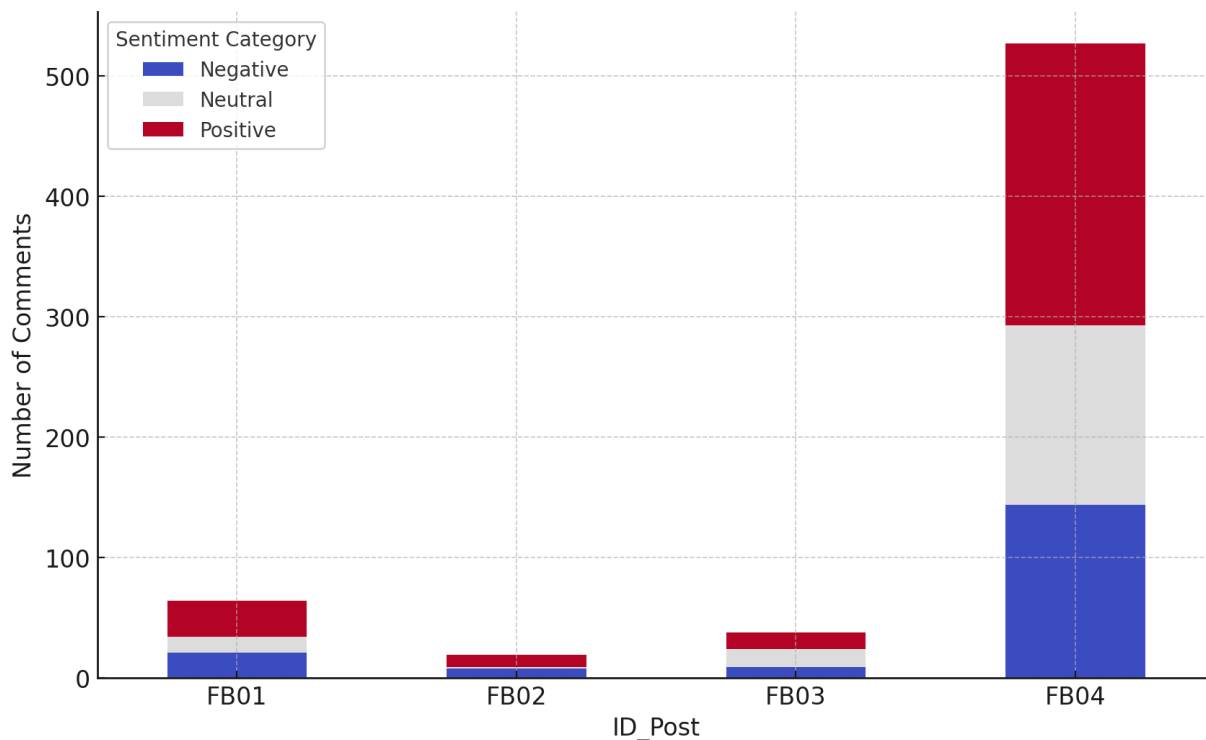


Figure 3. Sentiment category by Facebook post

Further qualitative inspection of negative comments revealed common concerns, particularly centered around the perception that explicit representation of autism was unnecessary or motivated by wrong reasons rather than authentic character development. Some examples follow:

Dnd and forced diversity yuck (Anonymous commenter, FB03, 2023)

They profit on everyone else! Your turn! Honestly it's gross but what do you expect from Hasbro ? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Is this a joke? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Probably thousands of autistic players over the years and I doubt any of them ever said “I wish there was an autistic character so that I feel represented”. It’s not a big deal, but this is more about WOTC needing some good press than anything about inclusion (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

DND is satire at this point. So glad I stopped playing (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

oh for christ sakes, Anything past 3rd edition TSR is pointless this new stuff just absolutely sucks (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

In contrast, positive sentiment comments frequently emphasized the importance of explicit representation and its impact on autistic players. For instance:

the good news is this character was designed by an autistic designer to represent her interactions (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Finally, a character D&D fans can relate to (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

There are ppl here, who are on the spectrum, who like this. To me, that’s a win (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

good. Representation matters (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

official representation means a lot more! (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Just what the realms needed. Some canon autism (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

These contrasting perspectives highlight a clear ideological divide in how different segments of the audience perceive the inclusion of an explicitly autistic character in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

3.3 Thematic classification of comments

The first dominant theme was Support for Representation and Inclusion, with discussions emphasizing the importance of acknowledging autistic characters explicitly. Comments in this category often expressed appreciation for Asteria’s characterization as a meaningful step toward inclusion in *D&D*. For example:

I really think it depends on the person’s point of view who is looking at it. I know a lot of people who are also on the spectrum who would be very happy to be represented. As for myself, I do see it as unnecessary given how vast the world of DnD is and the fact that, by nature, the game allows you to be whoever you want. I don’t necessarily think that it’s harmful or tokenizing to have a character be canonically on the spectrum themselves. It really depends on how said character is portrayed. If done respectfully, I think that it has the opportunity to make a lot of people very happy and to portray autism in a better light. But it is a delicate matter, considering how broad the spectrum itself is (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Thankfully it sounds less like it was done specifically for virtue clout, and more like it was a natural consequence of the writer putting some of her own experience into her characters (as one always does). The article headline does come off pretty gross though (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Question for the ones saying “virtual signaling much!” This is D&D, you do realize it’s completely up to the player how neurodivergent their PC is right? Some people like to have a little bit of themselves in their character and that’s fine (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

this one was written by an actually autistic person, for once (Anonymous commenter, FB01, 2023)

I read this and am so excited! #ActuallyAutistic (Anonymous commenter, FB01, 2023)

The second theme involved Historical Precedents of Autistic Characters, with many users referencing existing characters such as Minsc and Volo, arguing that autistic traits have long existed within the game without requiring explicit labeling. For instance:

Finally, representation for 90% of players of the hobby (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Volo is definitely on the spectrum lmao (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Is Prince Baerovus Obarskyr of Cormyr a joke to you!? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

I would argue that most D&D characters are on the spectrum. Every Paladin ever, for example. Edit: I just read she’s a Paladin. (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

so a wizard? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

That’s not true people been calling my characters that for years (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

You can’t convince me The Gutbuster Brigade wasn’t all on the Spectrum (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

The third theme centered around Criticisms of Tokenism and Virtue Signaling, reflecting the concerns of users who believed that Asteria’s characterization was more about corporate image than meaningful storytelling. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2015), *tokenism* refers to:

something a person or organization does that seems to support or help a group of people who are treated unfairly in society, such as giving a member of that group an important or public position, but which is not meant to make changes that would help that group of people in a lasting way. (Cambridge Dictionary 2015)

and *virtue signaling* refers to:

an attempt to show other people that you are a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media. (Cambridge Dictionary 2020)

D&D players thus applied these concepts — originally from the corporate world — to the new *D&D* book:

A Virtual Signal brighter than the Sun (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

this kinda already feels like Tokenism (Anonymous commenter, FB02, 2023)

strange, for some people it only counts if it was announced in before a figure would be/have a special condition. Kinda prove the virtue signalling issue (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Talk about virtue signaling!!! (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

I'm autistic. Stop pity making characters with health conditions just for inclusion. It's DND. Literally every conceivable character is playable. I've played a disabled deaf/mute wizard who couldn't cast spells needing speech (wouldn't recommend it). This is just virtue signalling for extra sales and positive reviews. Like JK Rowling coming out years later that Dumbledore was Gay. Or that bloke in a dress representing bud light (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

As an autist I hate this kind of performative virtue signaling to mark a box on some diversity checklist (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

So virtuous (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Virtue signal much? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

The fourth theme focused on Freedom in Role-playing and Character Creation, with players asserting that they have always been able to create neuroatypical characters without requiring an official label:

Isn't DnD like the whole point is that anyone can make anything canon? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Pretty sure all of us who play DnD are on the spectrum somewhere lol (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Canonically ? My character is not canon ?? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Every DND party is autistic, why dafug a normal person would go bang a dragon? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

I mean, aren't all D&D players autistic? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

The fifth theme explored the Medical Perception of Autism within the Fantasy Setting, with some users questioning whether Asteria's autism would be treated as a condition that could be "cured" through magical means. This discussion raised concerns about how disability and neurodiversity are conceptualized within the *Dungeons & Dragons*. For example:

They have vaccines in D&D? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

They have vaccines in Forgotten Realms? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Here I thought magic cures everything? Including autism? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

so what happens the first time someone casts Restoration or Heal ? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Do they have modern metal [sic] health related diagnosis in D&D? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

3.4 Comparative analysis of post-specific engagement trends

The final component of the analysis involved a comparative examination of sentiment and thematic trends across the four Facebook threads (Figure 4). FB04 emerged as the most polarized discussion, with the highest number of both positive and negative comments. This suggests that FB04 functioned as the primary locus for debate, potentially due to the framing of the post or the visibility of the discussion within the broader *D&D* community.

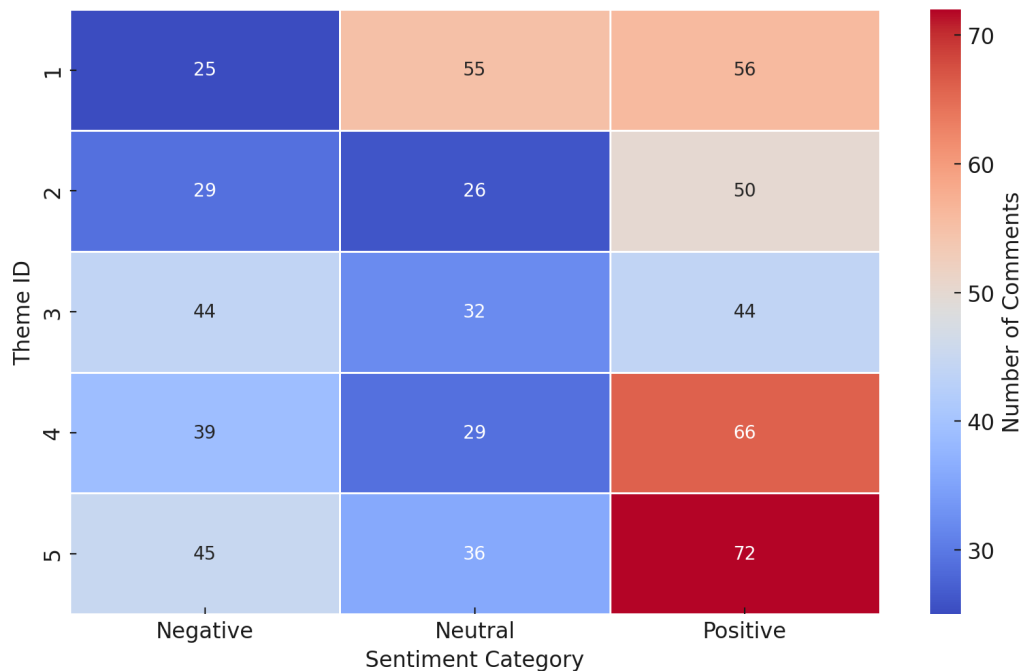


Figure 4. Correlation between themes: 1. Support for Representation and Inclusion; 2. Historical Precedents of Autistic Characters; 3. Criticisms of Tokenism and Virtue Signaling; 4. Freedom in Role-playing and Character Creation; 5. Medical Perception of Autism within the Fantasy Setting; and sentiment categories.

Furthermore, a comparison of engagement metrics indicated that negative comments received 18% more reactions on average than positive comments, suggesting that critiques of Asteria's representation were more likely to provoke further discussion and engagement. Moreover, threads that presented Asteria's inclusion as a simple fact rather than as an ideological debate tended to attract less polarized discussions. FB03, for example, framed the announcement in a neutral manner and received a significantly lower proportion of negative sentiment compared to FB04. This may suggest that the context and framing of the initial post plays a crucial role in shaping audience reception and engagement patterns. Finally, an analysis of sentiment polarity across these themes indicated logically that themes related to inclusion and representation had significantly higher positive sentiment scores, while themes discussing tokenism and the medicalization of autism were more likely to elicit negative sentiment.

4. DISCUSSION

The introduction of Asteria as an explicitly autistic character in *D&D* raises critical questions not only about representation but also about the intentions behind such inclusivity efforts and the broader implications for worldbuilding in fantasy settings. While some players welcome this inclusion as a meaningful step toward broader neuroatypical representation, others critique it as tokenism or virtue signaling rather than a genuine attempt to foster inclusivity. These debates highlight broader tensions within media and gaming communities concerning the balance between authentic representation and creative storytelling, the role of corporate strategies in shaping diversity initiatives, and more specifically the way autism and neurodiversity are conceptualized — as a disability or a difference — within speculative fiction worlds.

The portrayal of autism in fantasy settings like *D&D* raises questions about whether neurodiversity is framed as a fundamental aspect of identity (see Davies et al. 2024 for a systematic review of autistic identity, and Rebecchi 2025a for a discussion about debates between social autism and neurobiological autism) or as a condition to be altered or “cured” (see Barnes & McCabe 2011; Baron-Cohen 2009; Bölte 2014 for discussions about curing autism). Some players have expressed concern that, within a world where magic can heal physical ailments, autism might be treated as something fixable rather than an intrinsic part of a character's being. This reflects a broader issue in fantasy worlds, where disabilities and neurodiversity are sometimes depicted in ways that reinforce problematic medicalized perspectives (see for example Nordahl-Hansen et al. 2018 for a discussion on how films and television series tend to portray autistic characters in a stereotypical fashion).

Mainstream games often focus on topics like mental health, mental illness, madness, violence, and psychiatry, reinforcing the idea that autism and neurodiversity is something to be fixed or feared (Anderson 2020; Buday et al. 2022; Dunlap 2018). A study by Ferrari et al. (2019) reviewed 100 games and found out that 97% of them portrayed mental “illness” in a negative and misleading way, often associating it with violence, fear, and madness. However, Cassese et al. (2023) notes that counternarratives can challenge dominant perspectives and create new worlds and points of view. Asteria's presence in *D&D* has the potential to challenge conventional tropes about neurodiversity, provided that her autism is treated as an inherent aspect of her character rather than as a disability and a trait subject to magical alteration or brain damage. This broadens into more anthropological discussions about questions of cognitive alterity and otherness (see Sevinç 2010; Staszak 2020; Van Pelt 2000 for discussions about the outlines and definitions of these concepts), rather than what is normal vs. abnormal or healthy vs. pathological (Foucault 2013; Frances 2013; Szasz 1973). Indeed, there is growing academic discussion about moving beyond

autism spectrum disorder as the sole explanatory label for autism and shifting toward concepts rooted in evolutionary, cognitive psychology, and biology (see Rebecchi 2025b for a synthesis of these discussions).

5. CONCLUSION

The introduction of Asteria as an explicitly autistic character in *Dungeons & Dragons* serves as a microcosm of larger debates on representation, authenticity, and corporate motivations in media. While her inclusion marks a step toward greater visibility for neurotypical players, it also raises fundamental questions about the nature of representation in role-playing games: should inclusivity be explicitly defined, or should it remain open-ended, allowing players to craft their own interpretations?

This study has highlighted the polarized reception of Asteria, demonstrating how representation in tabletop games is deeply entwined with broader cultural and commercial dynamics. On one hand, Asteria offers a meaningful counter-narrative to the historical erasure of autism in mainstream fantasy. On the other, concerns about tokenism and corporate virtue signaling reflect a growing skepticism toward the commodification of diversity in gaming industries.

Looking ahead, future research could explore how autism and neurodiversity are represented beyond character creation, examining game mechanics, narrative structures, and player agency in shaping inclusive worlds. Moreover, comparative analyses with other forms of media, such as movies, video games or literature, could provide a deeper understanding of how autism and neurodiversity are conceptualized and received across different storytelling mediums. Ultimately, Asteria's portrayal invites a broader discussion about the evolving role of fantasy as both an escape and a space for self-representation. Rather than offering a final answer, her presence in *Dungeons & Dragons* underscores the ongoing tension between structured inclusivity and the boundless creative freedom that defines role-playing games, especially in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

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