



Abstract

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Title ‘If you’re seeing this...’: The constitutive rhetoric of autism diagnosis content on TikTok

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Keywords constitutive rhetoric, autism, TikTok, genre, rhetorical identification

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This article examines the rhetorical dynamics of autism diagnostic content from the #*AcutallyAutistic* community TikTok, focusing on how users perform credibility and construct knowledge claims in that community.

Drawing upon a rhetorical analysis of 45 videos, the study explores genre, appeals to epistemic authority, and the discourse of autism visibility. It finds that creators predominantly rely upon narrative and mimetic forms, privileging personal experience over scientific citation. I argue that such content does not aim to supplant scientific discourse about autism but instead fulfills distinct rhetorical goals, such as the affirmation of identity and the cultivation of community. By framing autism diagnosis as a site of positive freedom and authenticity, TikTok creators in that space engage in a mode of constitutive rhetoric that reflects broader generational shifts in epistemology, identity politics, and media engagement.

Going back to arguments linking autism with vaccines in the 1990s (which were quickly debunked), autism has stood out as a particularly politicized area of scientific research and healthcare. At the time of writing, the United States Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—a persistent champion of the vaccine-autism link theory—has initiated a project which will attempt to discover the environmental “exposures” that account for the increase in autism diagnoses in recent years in the U.S. and elsewhere (Wendling, 2025). Autism diagnoses among children in the U.S. rose from 6.7 cases per 1000 in the year 2000 to 23.1 cases per 1000 in 2020 (Grosvenor et al., 2024), with similar numbers being reported in the United Kingdom and Europe (Russell et al., 2022). In-



deed, Kennedy's HHS has adopted the language of an "autism epidemic" in its own publications (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). While Kennedy takes this increase seriously, he underplays the role of growing autism awareness in the diagnosis increase. Others have called into question the validity of the diagnoses themselves (Rødgaard et al., 2019; Gillberg, 2021; Fombonne, 2023). Still others, such as former British prime minister Tony Blair, lament the uptick in self-diagnosis for mental health conditions since the COVID-19 crisis, worrying that the increase of young people seeking diagnoses puts undue strain on national health care systems (McLoughlin, 2025).

Blair has been criticized for his dismissive tone, for instance, in claiming that many young people are confusing life's "ups and downs" for a "condition" (McLoughlin, 2025). Nevertheless, the negative attention his remarks received points to a real generational divide in attitudes and language practices around mental health and neuropsychiatric conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Barker, 2024; Benitez-Marquez et al., 2022). Blair points to the COVID-19 pandemic as the inflection point for the shift in attitudes towards mental health. And although, in the case of autism, diagnoses had already been increasing for decades, it is clear that the pandemic and its attendant effects on work and socialization accelerated the change (Bagdadi et al., 2023; McCashin & Murphy, 2023). Another factor in the shift in attitudes is in how and where information about mental health and neuropsychiatric conditions is communicated. Social media played an even larger role as sources of socialization and information (and misinformation) during the pandemic than the already substantial role they played prior to it. The popularity of TikTok in particular exploded among young people during that time (Feldkamp, 2021) and has since become the dominant site for what Alper et al. (2023) term "platformed diagnosis," where online knowledge communities negotiate and/or perform self-diagnostic criteria for neuropsychiatric conditions (p. 3).

Alper et al. argue that the effects of platformed diagnosis go beyond their consequences for the spread and quality of information about conditions like autism; platformed diagnosis is also implicated in the disruption or enrichment of personal narratives that form the basis for social identity, processes known as *biographical disruption* and *biographical illumination* (Bury, 1982; Tan, 2018; Alper et al., 2023). There, a newly diagnosed individual (whether officially or self-administrated) may either experience alienation and a loss of meaning or else the very opposite: an affirmation that the alienation they already experience has a definite cause and that it is not due to their own personal or moral failures. In Tan's work with autistic adults, she finds that the tendency in newly diagnosed individuals is towards biographical illumination or enrichment of personal meaning. What's more, an autism diagnosis may also be an invitation to find community with other autistic people.

Alper et al. furthermore find that biographical illumination, a salutary experience often accompanying an autism diagnosis, incentivizes platformed diagnosis. This is particularly true on TikTok, where it is not just the social networking structure that connects people but also the platform's recommendation algorithm, the latter





exposing users to new accounts and content with startling efficiency. TikTok's recommendation algorithm feeds content to the user based upon both active and passive engagement (Roderick, 2024). In other words, a user's feed (*For You Page* or *FYP*) will adapt its content not only when a user has saved, liked, shared or commented upon a video with a particular type of content, but also when they have watched more than a few seconds of that video before scrolling to the next one on their feed. A user may begin receiving more and more autism diagnosis content on their FYP without being aware that their viewing activity has prompted such content, leading users, in some cases, to believe that the algorithm itself is diagnosing them (Alper et al., 2023; Foster & Ellis, 2024). Thus, generational, cultural and historical factors are combining with the architecture of the platform to make autism self-diagnosis an almost self-perpetuating phenomenon.

Taken together, these observations point to the need for a different interpretive frame—one that treats diagnostic knowledge claims on social media like TikTok not as proto-scientific statements but as rhetorical actions whose force lies in how they circulate, invite identification, and make autism visible to their audiences. The small study anchoring this article proceeds from that premise: drawing upon a selection of videos from the *#ActuallyAutistic* community on TikTok, I analyze the genres through which creators make platformed diagnosis claims, the kinds of epistemic authority they perform, and the discourse of visibility that structures their narratives. My argument is that the knowledge claims embedded in these videos should not be understood to operate within the pragmatics of scientific knowledge. Instead, they participate in a mode of *constitutive rhetoric* (White, 1985) aimed at helping their audience name their own experiences and traverse their own social spaces freely as autistic people. Ultimately, I contend that the rhetorical power of this content lies in how it cultivates a sense of *positive freedom* (Berlin, 1969): the freedom to act as an undivided self whose legitimacy is affirmed through shared narratives and collective identification.

Description of the study

As with any other health-related content, misinformation in autism self-diagnosis content on social media is widespread (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023) and its dangers are obvious. On the other hand, platformed diagnosis presents a number of opportunities for the autistic community. The increasing visibility of experiences of autism can be both validating to the autistic person and edifying for those in the autistic person's life. Moreover, as Wang & Ringland (2023) argue, first-person accounts of autistic experiences are a valuable supplement to clinical observation in professional practice with autistic people. Rather than adjudicating on the validity or accuracy of knowledge claims about autism diagnosis criteria on TikTok, the small study that anchors the arguments in this article focusses on the rhetorical means by which such claims are made, as well as the apparent rhetorical purposes motivating the production and circulation of autism diagnosis content on the app. My main research questions are:





— Roderick: 'If you're seeing this...' —

1. How is credibility performed in claims about autism diagnosis criteria on TikTok?
2. What is the rhetorical function of those diagnostic claims for their user communities?

Although the present study focusses on claims about autism diagnosis criteria in particular, my hope is that the study and discussion that follows may also prove useful for the rhetorical study of how other sorts of knowledge claims are performed on multimodal social media apps like TikTok.

The videos comprising the data pool for this study were drawn from the *#ActuallyAutistic* hashtag on TikTok. *#ActuallyAutistic* serves as a nexus point for autism diagnosis content across several social media platforms, including X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok (Osario, 2020; Lupton & Southerton, 2024). Here, “diagnostic content” need not refer to any official diagnostic criteria listed in state or professional diagnostic manuals. It instead refers to any content that makes a knowledge claim about autism traits by discussing, displaying or performing those traits. In addition to selecting from *#ActuallyAutistic*, there were two constraints on the selection of videos for the gross data set: 1) the content of the videos needed to either make explicit claims about autistic criteria or dramatize autistic traits; 2) videos whose content pertained to the diagnosis of children (e.g., a parent discussing their child) were excluded. Using those two constraints ($N = 150$) videos from the top of the feed¹ were selected, saved and assigned a number. Finally, a random number generator was used to make a selection of 30% ($n = 45$) of the videos to study from the gross data set. The data was analyzed deductively, using descriptive rather than line-by-line coding. However, the taxonomy of biographical topics (see: *Interior authority*) was produced inductively. Of the criteria the videos were studied for, three superordinate categories will be discussed in this article:

1. Genre
2. Claims to epistemic authority
 - a. Exterior authority
 - b. Interior authority (i.e., personal experience)
3. Discourse on autism visibility

An obvious task of the study was to seek out and taxonomize the sources of epistemic authority for diagnostic claims about autism (criterion 2); however, as Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) argue, “Genres are the intellectual scaffolds on which community-based knowledge is constructed” (p. 501). Therefore, the conventional forms (criterion 1) on which knowledge claims are performed are just as important

1 One of the limitations of doing research on TikTok is the order in which videos are displayed. Even in searching from a particular hashtag or user, videos are displayed in an order determined by the recommendation algorithm for the individual user. So, while the researcher tries to remove bias from the data collection, the data, in some sense, has its own bias towards the researcher.





as the content of those claims when it comes to making sense of how legitimacy and authority are constructed and sustained within a knowledge community. Finally, the decision to include a criterion about the discourse of autism visibility (criterion 3) speaks to one of the core assumptions of this knowledge community, which is that autism is a relatively invisible disability, both to oneself and to others. As I will argue later on, the ability to negotiate one's own visibility as an autistic person is seen as a source of agency within the community.

Fuller descriptions of those criteria along with results from the study will be presented in the following three sections. What follows from there is a discussion on how to characterize the discourse of the videos in the study as well as an argument about which mode of rhetoric should form the basis on which we interpret the goals of such content.

Empirical analysis

Genre

Modern rhetoric approaches genres as “typified rhetorical actions” (Miller, 1984, p. 159), and therefore modern rhetorical genre theory is resolutely anti-typological in its approach. In other words, genres are not studied as manifestations of primary formal divisions between rhetorical modes. Furthermore, as Schryer (1993) observes, genres are always only “stabilized-for-now” (p. 200). The relative stability of a genre depends upon several factors, including the genre's function for an institution (think of the stability of liturgical and juridical genres), the regularity of the type of rhetorical situation to which the genre responds, as well as how and where the genre is mediated. The latter obviously plays an outsized role in the relative stability of genres on social media, where the number of connections between interlocutors and frequency of communicative acts accelerate the development, use, and disuse of genres. Indeed, the barrier separating relatively short-lived social media memes from social media genres is quite permeable, with the former often evolving into the latter (Roderick, 2021).

The meme-genre permeability seen in TikTok in particular is partially explained in Zulli & Zulli's (2022) argument that app's affordances, such as the recommendation algorithm, the ability to stitch one video on to another, and reusable sound (music or audio clips), mean that it is a primarily *imitative* medium. Zulli & Zulli construct a tripartite taxonomy of imitative behavior on TikTok: “*physical imitation—copying* dance moves—*reactive imitation—capitalizing and expanding* on someone else's video—and *narrative imitation—describing* the same types of experiences” (p. 1881, emphasis mine). This taxonomy of imitative behavior, I argue, is a good start towards a meta-generic taxonomy, but a further division of modes needs to be introduced: *diegesis* and *mimesis* (Roderick, 2024). These terms follow upon Plato's (1979) division of narrative types. In the diegetic mode, the speaker “avoids concealment,” meaning that they speak as themselves, leave little to interpret from context, and mediate the temporal distance between what is being re-





— Roderick: 'If you're seeing this...' —

counted and the listening audience (393c). In other words, a diegetic narrative is a relatively straight forward, monologic presentation. In the mimetic mode, the narrative is dramatized so that what is being recounted is made immediate to the audience, as if it is unfolding right in front of them. The narrator can achieve this by concealing themselves in characters; or else, as Saltz (2001) points out, mimetic dramatization can be achieved through multimodal affordances, such as music or lighting, that *imitate* the mood of the scene, thus leaving contextual content for the audience to experience directly. Of course, all communicative acts—from polite conversations to political speeches to poems—are imitative on some level in that they are embedded in repeating registers and genres, but in the mimetic narrative mode, imitation is internal to the logic of the communicative act.

Of Zulli & Zulli's three imitative types on TikTok, *reactive* and *narrative* videos can be either diegetic or mimetic. The two well-known genres qualifying as reactive imitation are *stitch* and *duet* videos. Stitch videos typically feature a snippet from another video, where the creator of the stitch video presents the snippet as either a prompt for or an appendix to their own argument. There, the creator directly addresses the snippet, either explaining it, expanding upon it, or arguing against it. For example, one stitched post begins with an excerpt of another post in which the presenter talks about how she manages panic attacks by telling herself she is not going crazy; the video then cuts to the author of the stitched post who argues, from her own experience, that such verbal techniques are not helpful. This is an example of a relatively diegetic communication, which is typical of stitch videos. In duet videos, the creator takes another video to run concurrently (either side-by-side or in the background) with their own video. Typically, the duet video creator limits themselves to reactive gestures, such as exaggerated facial expressions and body language that telegraph emotional responses. In one duet, for example, the underlay video features someone presenting as a clinician describing a single, definitive test to diagnose autism; the video's creator can be seen on a side-by-side window shaking his head, pinching his brow, and occasionally wincing—indicating incredulity towards the idea that autism could ever be reducible to a set of obvious signs (GenericArtDad, 2023). A duet video may further feature an audio overlay (music, sound effect, or a trending sound) that also telegraphs a particular emotion. Duet videos are therefore mimetic, relative to the diegetic quality of stitch videos. There are also reactive videos that don't qualify as either stitches or duets. Some videos merely feature a creator telegraphing a reaction to a line of text or to an audio clip. Other reactive genres include *challenge* videos, where the video uses an audio clip that prompts the subject of the video to take a certain action, for instance, putting a finger down each time the subject can identify with an autistic trait named in the audio clip. These too are more mimetic in nature.

Narrative videos can also be divided along diegetic and mimetic modes. Perhaps the most common type of TikTok video is the unscripted monologue. The formal boundaries of this genre are looser than those of other genres on the app, but there are some identifiable conventions, including a range of 'hooks' at the beginning of the video to get the viewer to stop scrolling, such as 'If you're seeing this...' 'Here's





what you need to know about...,' or 'Here's what you've been missing about...' (Ch, 2025). Moreover, in this genre, even explicit knowledge claims that reference external sources are often couched in a narrative of how the creator came across that knowledge to deliver it to the audience, as well as what that new knowledge meant to them personally.² The unscripted monologue is therefore describable as being relatively diegetic.

One of the other most prevalent narrative genres is the POV (point-of-view) genre, which is thoroughly mimetic. It is one of those genres on TikTok that began its life as a lip-syncing meme (Roderick, 2021). What evolved was a genre in which the subject of the video dramatizes a situation in which the audience on the other side of the camera is imagined as an interlocutor. To give an example, a POV video in this study displays the text "pov: you're autistic and you take things too literally" (Candor, 2024). The creator/subject is a man arriving at his friend's house for a party. An off-camera interlocutor playing the friend admonishes him for arriving precisely at nine o'clock, which produces visible confusion in the subject, who was told that the party begins at nine, thus dramatizing the claim that struggling to read the subtext of things like party invitations is an autistic trait. Importantly, what is dramatized is a situation that's characterized (often explicitly in text) as recurring in the creator's everyday life. Indeed, the genre has evolved so that the conceit of the off-camera interlocutor is no longer necessary to be labeled as a POV video, so long as it dramatizes a recurring situation. As I will argue later on, one of the main functions of autism diagnosis content is rhetorical identification, and the dramatization of recurring situations can therefore be seen as a strategic means of achieving identification because it implies that there are enduring (and thus, real) divisions between autistic and non-autistic behaviors and worldviews.

	Diegetic	Mimetic
<i>Physical genres</i>	--	Dance trend
<i>Reactive genres</i>	Stitch	Duet Text/Audio reaction Challenge
<i>Narrative genres</i>	Monologue POV	

Table 1: Observed genre divisions

Claims to epistemic authority

Following Zagzebski's (2012) distinction between *expertise* and *epistemic authority*, I define the latter as emanating from a particular relationship between authority

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- 2 To be clear, these sorts of couched narratives about how the creator came across certain knowledge are very different from the citational practices of scientific discourse, where there is no special relationship between the source cited and the one citing it—what matters is the source itself.



and public, rather than as a set of objective qualifications attributed to the expert. As a particular relationship of trust, epistemic authority should also be seen as an ongoing rhetorical process. A rhetorical approach to epistemic authority means that one must account not only for *which* sources are being referenced to support a knowledge claim but also for *how* the knowledge claim is being communicated. Accordingly, Aristotle (2021) creates two fundamental classes of persuasive appeals: the *pisteis atechnoi*, or inartistic appeals such as laws, expert testimony and demonstrable facts that the speaker levies from exterior sources; and the *pisteis entechnoi*, or artistic appeals that the speaker shapes and performs themselves (*ethos, logos, and pathos*). So, to simply draw upon a published scientific study (*atechnos*) to support one's argument does not in itself constitute a logical appeal (*entechnos: logos*). An artistic logical appeal instead depends upon how well the evidence—framed within the speaker's premises and conclusions—appeals to the audience's intuitions. Similarly, a dispassionate list of the speaker's credentials and achievements does not in itself constitute an effective appeal to *ethos*; instead, the audience must be able to identify the speaker's experiences with the argument and/or to identify with the speaker themselves (Burke, 1969). A rhetorical study of appeals to epistemic authority, in other words, is more interested in the framing and performance of such appeals than it is in their scientific validity. Thus, in my study of appeals to epistemic authority in autism diagnosis videos, I paid attention both to the kinds of sources creators were drawing upon to make their claims about autism traits and to how (where relevant) knowledge from experience was framed. The primary division was between videos in which creators drew upon sources outside of their personal experience to make their claims (Exterior) and those in which creators drew upon personal experience (Interior).

Exterior sources included references to state or professional organization guidelines (e.g., *Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders* or *DSM*), published academic research, observations from therapeutic practice, other autism diagnosis TikTok videos, and claims from unspecified but non-experiential sources.³ As for knowledge claims that drew upon personal experience (Interior), I was interested in which kinds of situations or topics the creators reported as the bases for their being able to generalize autism traits from their own experiences. For instance, a creator might describe an insight about an autism trait in the context of a story about being unable to interpret the subtext of their boss's instructions for them at work. We can say the main topic that frames such a knowledge claim would be *employment*. Another example might be a POV video where the creator interacts with an off-camera interlocutor who implies that the creator's behavior is too feminine for them to be truly autistic. There the topic framing the knowledge claim can be classified as *gender*. Such observations would also provide some insight into the aspects of autistic experience that members of the *#ActuallyAutistic* community value as definitional or important. For this, I drew upon Lindqvist's (2016) biographical topics (*person-*

3 Again, none of these external sources were vetted, including whether or not those creators who presented themselves as clinicians were certified practitioners in their fields.



topiker), revising Lindqvist's classifications to match the range of common biographical topics I had identified in preliminary research. These included gender, friends and romance, physical appearance, employment, age, family, interactions with healthcare, reputation, and school.

In the study, I found that 24.4% ($n = 11$) appealed only to exterior authority; 55.6% ($n = 25$) appealed only to interior authority, and 20% ($n = 9$) appealed to both exterior and interior authority. Of the videos that appealed to exterior authority ($c 44.4\%$), only 25% referred either to state/professional guidelines or published academic research, which is just slightly more than those which referred to other TikTok videos (20%). The most common exterior source, on the other hand, therapeutic experience (as clinicians) at 40%. Of the videos that appealed to interior authority ($c 75.6\%$), the most frequent biographical topics were gender, friends/romance and physical appearance (see Table 2).

Biographical topic (n = 34)	%
Gender	27.3
Friends/Romance	24.2
Physical appearance	18.2
Age	9.1
Employment	9.1
School	3.0
Reputation	3.0
Family	3.0
Healthcare interactions	3.0

Table 2: Biographical topics

Discourse on autism visibility

We have already discussed some of the reasons why autism diagnosis content has become so widespread on TikTok and other social media platforms, including historical circumstances, the desire for biographical illumination, and media architecture. But another major reason why autism diagnosis communities are springing up is, of course, the nature of autistic experience itself. Autism and other neuropsychiatric conditions like ADHD, are often invisible—invisible to others and, in many cases, to one's own self. ASD can also be difficult to diagnose because it's usually accompanied by any number of comorbidities, including ADHD, obsessive compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and depression (Gillberg, 2021). There is also a wide range of needs relating to education, employment, and everyday life that can vary widely from individual to individual. Unsurprisingly, the visibility of autism is also a source of political and discursive contestation. Secretary Kennedy's claim that autism has reached 'epidemic' levels appears to be largely





— Roderick: 'If you're seeing this...' —

based upon his own observation that when he was younger, he personally did not *see* people with “full-blown autism” as he does today (Korecki, 2025, para. 14). At best, ‘full-blown autism’ is a woefully inept diagnostic category and at worst, outright derogatory. But among clinicians as well as communities of autistic people, ways of talking about visibility pertain not just to diagnostic classification but also to ways of performing identity. Activists in autistic communities already eschew the language of *high-* and *low-functioning* in favor of the language of *needs* (Landqvist, 2024). This seems to be supported in my study, where there were only two mentions of ‘functioning,’ both of which were found in videos where the creators presented themselves as clinicians drawing upon professional practice.

More frequently, the terms of visibility (present in 17 videos) were ‘masking’ and ‘unmasking.’ *Masking* refers to the involuntary or deliberate practice of suppressing stereotypically autistic behaviors (stimming, etc.) in order to avoid unwanted and/or negative attention in social, educational, and professional spaces (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Miller et al., 2021; Belek, 2023). In the videos studied, the issue of masking is commonly addressed through dramatization (e.g., as a POV video). In one video, for example, the creator overlays audio of “my inner monologue” during a mundane work interaction in which the inner monologue is giving step-by-step instructions for how to act normally (Foley, 2024). Masking is described by autistic people as being self-alienating (Pearson & Rose, 2021), and above all, exhausting (Miller et al., 2021). The act of *unmasking*, or allowing oneself to display visible signs of autism, can be both a source of personal relief and a rhetorical action with the purpose of normalizing autism in public spaces.

The discourse of masking showed up in my study in two different ways. The first was as a way of performing signs of autism in two POV videos that used *employment* as their biographical topic. The point of those videos was to create a negative identification of autism signs by displaying behaviors, such as lack of eye contact, that were just barely suppressed. The majority of videos that used the discourse of masking, however, were those that used *gender* and *physical appearance* as biographical topics, the two topics often being implicitly or explicitly tied one another. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that a whopping 77.8% percent of the videos in the net data set featured female-presenting creators. Whether or not they used the language of masking explicitly, many of the knowledge claims about autism traits in the videos were accompanied by arguments about the invisibility of autism in women and/or trans people. And indeed, there are real gender disparities in autism diagnosis, with boys/men being more frequently diagnosed and diagnosed at earlier ages than girls/women (McQuaid et al., 2024). Furthermore, McQuaid et al. (2021) find that autistic women are more likely than autistic men to report using “camouflaging” or masking behaviors (553). We might, therefore, add perceptions of gender disparity in autism diagnosis and visibility to the list of factors motivating the growth of platformed diagnosis communities on social media platforms like TikTok.





Theoretical discussion

The pragmatics of platformed diagnosis

As I stated in the description of my study, my goal was not to adjudicate on the validity or accuracy of any claims made about autism diagnostic criteria. There is surely a function for that kind of work, given the wide circulation of platformed diagnosis content and the recommendation algorithms' predilections for attention-grabbing content over information quality. Correcting bad information on social media is, of course, a Sisyphean task, especially when the algorithm is working against you. It's possible, however, that we are also making a kind of category mistake when we treat these knowledge claims about autism signs as scientific statements to be evaluated accordingly. It is therefore worth looking into how these videos look from the perspective of the pragmatics of knowledge. Here, Lyotard's (1984) division between the pragmatics of scientific discourse and the pragmatics of narrative discourse is useful. Lyotard associates those two types of discourse with 1) *savoir* [knowing-that], or scientific knowledge, 2) and the "three-fold competence" of narrative knowledge: "'know-how,' 'knowing how to speak,' and 'knowing how to hear' [*savoir-faire, savoir-dire, savoir-entendre*]" (p. 21). He gives several requirements for scientific utterances, including:

1. "A statement's [denotative] truth value is the criterion determining its acceptability;"
2. "the competence required concerns the post of sender alone;"
3. "[a] statement of science gains no validity from the fact of being reported;"
4. "[t]he current sender of a scientific statement [...] only proposes a new statement on the subject if it differs from the previous ones" (pp. 25-26).

The first requirement means that the utterance is evaluated only for its internal consistency and its correspondence to a state of affairs in the world. Acceptance or rejection of the utterance depends on its content alone. In the second requirement, the dialogic nature of knowledge is suppressed so that the receiver makes no contribution to the knowledge reported. The third and fourth requirements mean that the utterance is no more or less true because of who makes the claim or how widely and frequently the knowledge is reported.

Narrative discourse, on the other hand:

1. Contributes to the creation and maintenance of social norms and implicit beliefs (*doxai*) as well as making statements about states of affairs in the world, with denotive statements mixing freely with deontic statements;
2. "finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them;" (22)
3. makes use of "repetitive forms" such as proverbs, maxims, and *topoi* "that are like little splinters of potential narratives," and require competence





— Roderick: 'If you're seeing this...' —

from receivers as well as from the sender (22).

In addition to exchanging information, the goals of narrative knowledge utterances are to create and enrich social bonds and to fortify meaning-making practices. They make use of the dialectics of knowledge creation, inviting the receiver to contribute through their own competence with rhetorical tools and norms within a given community.

Again, one of the prominent video types observed in my study were duet videos or audio/text reactions, where creators merely gesture affirmation or refutation of what is being said in the underlay video, without adding and denotative statements of their own. The repetition and/or endorsement of what is being said in the attached video or text is enough to fulfill its pragmatic function as a narrative utterance. Further-more the majority of mimetic videos seen in the study were POVs, where the receiver is expected to have the competence to recognize themselves as an albeit silent interlocutor or character in the narrative, a cosigner on the knowledge being shared. Lyotard further argues that “the right to occupy the post of sender” in narrative knowledge depends upon “having been positioned as the diegetic reference in other narrative events” (21). As I found in my study, even the simple, monologic reporting of autism traits using exterior sources were frequently couched in a narrative chain, with the creator recounting how they came across such knowledge.

The constitutive rhetoric of #ActuallyAutistic

It is partially a function of the recommendation algorithm that so many of the videos in the #*ActuallyAutistic* TikTok community can be more readily identified with the discourse of narrative knowledge than with that of scientific knowledge. As Abidin & Kaye (2021) find, an implicit demand upon TikTok creators is to “please the algorithm,” which means making content that incorporates trending audio memes (music or dialog clips), images/gestures, hashtags, and/or challenges (p. 60). As we saw in Lyotard’s pragmatics of knowledge descriptions, legitimacy in narrative knowledge, unlike in scientific knowledge, is augmented by iteration/repetition: both iteration of the message and repetition of rhetorical forms through which the message is expressed. Again, such practices demand competence from the receiver to interpret the message in the context of those repetitions.

On the one hand, it’s impossible to disentangle the values and desires of a community from the medium upon which the community operates; yet there may be other, cultural motivations for why knowledge in the #*ActuallyAutistic* community takes the form it takes. Again, many of the videos in the study dwelt upon autism and visibility in one way or another. One apparent motive for autism diagnosis content is to make visible (to give a name to) behaviors and traits that might have been invisible to the autistic person themselves, but which have made them stick out to others (unwanted visibility) throughout their lives. Another theme, expressed through the language of *masking*, is talking about identifying autism through the behaviors and traits that autistic people suppress and make invisible in public. And





then there are those videos that discuss or dramatize autism traits in the context of autism's invisibility among girls and women (including trans women). Thus, knowledge claims about identifiable autism traits are often inextricably tied to other rhetorical motives, such as negotiating autism in/visibility as well as cultivating social identification and self-categorization (Turner et al., 1999).

In modern rhetorical studies, cultivating social identification is part of a strategy known as *constitutive rhetoric* (White, 1985; Charland, 1987; Putman & Cole, 2020). It comes out of Burke's (1969) insight that rhetoric itself is made necessary by division, and, consequently, that identification precedes persuasion. "Rhetoric," Burke proclaims, "is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall" (p. 23). This is particularly true in mass media environments, where audiences are not already bound together by local identifications. Charland characterizes constitutive rhetoric as a narrative process whose "ideological effects" work in three stages (p. 138). Those three stages are succinctly summarized in Putman & Cole as the: "(1) constitution of a collective subject; (2) positioning of a transhistorical subject; and (3) the illusion of freedom" (p. 210).

As for the first effect, there are, of course, built-in affordances on social media apps like TikTok for drawing disparate individuals together, such as mutual followings and organizing through hashtags. But a sense of collective subjectivity can also be achieved through negative identification, particularly among communities that perceive themselves as marginalized. One tactic of negative identification is to reverse subjectivity marking, so that the unmarked, 'normal' subjectivity becomes marked. This can be seen, for instance, in the widespread adoption of *cis*-variant terms, first among trans activists and then elsewhere (Cava, 2016). The tactic is also widespread in the discourse of autism, where terms like *allistic* and *neurotypical* mark out non-autistic identities. Indeed, two videos in my study (a monologue and a POV) discussed or dramatized autism traits by humorously contrasting neurotypical and autistic behaviors.

As a collective subject is marked out, it needs to be reified by aligning itself with some timeless essence, which is the positioning of a transhistorical subject. In rhetorics of nationalism, such as the case of Québécois nationalism in Charland's study, the positioning of a transhistorical subject can be achieved by naturalizing religious, linguistic and/or ethnic affiliations (e.g., 'blood-and-soil' rhetoric). Observations of the #ActuallyAutistic community show that transhistorical subjectivity is achieved through the medicalization of autism. As a means of anchoring a collective subject, medicalization is fraught with some tension. There is some resistance to medicalization discourse among autism activists for whom it represents a reduction of autistic individuals to a set of symptoms. There is also fierce resistance to the kind of medicalization forwarded by people like Secretary Kennedy, where autism—an effect of recent environmental toxins—is positioned as an expressly *historical* phenomenon that can be eliminated. Nevertheless, in the videos from this study, diagnosis (whether self- or official) was regarded as either a positive experience or a desired outcome, which further supports the observations about biographical illumination in Tan and Alper et al.



The lure of positive freedom

Charland's third ideological effect—'the illusion of freedom'—draws upon Althusser's (1971) concept of *interpellation*, where being subjected to an ideology becomes indistinguishable from actively reproducing it. The moment the subject understands their ideological actions to spring from their own free will is the moment of true subjugation. But there is another, perhaps more value-neutral way to think about the third effect of constitutive rhetoric. Here, I draw upon Berlin's (1969) "Two Concepts of Liberty," where he makes a distinction between *negative freedom* and *positive freedom*. I argue that Charland's third ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric can be redefined as an appeal to positive freedom.

In that essay, Berlin argues that "conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes as self [...]" (p. 25). The first conception of self is an "empirical" one in which one sees oneself as a unified and distinct body (p. 21). Berlin defines the conception of freedom that derives from the empirical self in deliberately spatial terms, where freedom is an "area" between selves "within which a man can act unobstructed by others" (p. 16). This is *negative freedom*. Politically, negative freedom manifests in different forms of libertarianism, where the highest duty of a political unit like the state is to prevent "the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act" (p. 16). Brake (2006) argues that in addition to its association with the libertarian notion of freedom, negative freedom can also be coupled with existentialist ideas of liberty, where the chief virtue is to continually flee from categorical essences—labels that others would use to pin us down with or, worse yet, that we ourselves would use as relief from the burden of making free choices with our lives.

Positive freedom, on the other hand, derives from the Hegelian notion of a split self: Even if we feel ourselves to be totally free from the coercion of others, we can still be dominated by our own desire for recognition, the desire to reify the empirical self. The problems come when we look only to the choices we have made (individual achievements) as evidence that there is a self that is freely choosing. In addition to that tautology, Berlin finds an obvious contradiction in negative freedom, where 'liberty' itself becomes an ideal with which people collectively identify themselves. It becomes part of a "super-personal entity," giving evidence of a self that persists beyond the whims of our free, individual choices (Berlin, p. 25). And here, we should identify the idea of a 'super-personal entity' with Charland's notion of the *transhistorical subject*. Burke (1969) shares this insight when he talks about the primacy of rhetorical identification, arguing that divisions between people are mirrored in "neurotic" divisions inside of the individual (p. 23). Positive identification with a 'super-personal entity,' whether that be an ideal, a social unit or—as in most cases—both, sustains an individual's sense of self-persistence and also enables the social unit to exercise the freedom of "*acting-together*," otherwise defined as "*consubstantiality*" (Burke, 1969, p. 21). To have a positively identified substance is to have the option of fidelity to that substance—a virtue we call *authenticity*.

I would argue that in practical terms, positive freedom can mean a license to move through social, educational or professional spaces as an undivided self. This



could mean someone from a marginalized ethnic, class or geographical background choosing not to codeswitch; it could be a gay person coming out of the closet; or, in the constitutive rhetoric of platformed diagnosis communities, it means *unmasking*. The positive freedom to be one's undivided, authentic self is made possible by the belief that there are others who share that same idea of authenticity, a belief which is inherently a rhetorical achievement. Thus, Charland's third ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric should first be seen as a *selection* of a type of freedom, regardless of whether or not that freedom is ultimately illusory and/or pernicious.

Conclusion

Drawing on the results of my small study of autism diagnosis content on TikTok, I have argued that the knowledge claims there do not function rhetorically to replace scientific knowledge claims about autism or autistic traits, even if that is the occasional effect they have on their audience. The relative scarcity of references to scientific literature in the videos is not so much a sign of poor-quality information as it is a signal for an altogether different set of rhetorical goals. I observed that the generic forms as well as some of the rhetorical topics in the videos align such content more with the pragmatics of narrative knowledge than with those of scientific knowledge. The rhetorical goals of the videos therefore have less to do with arguments about the natural referents for autism and more to do with creating social bonds and shared referents for autistic experience. In other words, instead of functioning as forensic rhetoric (i.e., the testimony of experts), videos in the study are functioning as constitutive rhetoric, where the invitation to audiences is to positive freedom.

In describing the distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom, I referenced Brake's argument that the freedom envisioned in existentialist thinking is a sort of negative freedom. Brake's argument about negative freedom actually comes in her excellent essay about Bob Dylan and his history of wearing different masks—both metaphorically and, sometimes, literally. The myth of Dylan is that of a protean rambler, deftly escaping the labels that fans and critics would try to pin him down with. The earnest folk singer. The onery protopunk. The warbling country balladeer, and so on. Although the chameleonic Dylan struck a mold for pop stars that endures some sixty years on, that style of negative freedom fits his own generation's zeitgeist best, a generation that so defined itself in opposition to the civic and religious institutions that had long been ready sources of identification for its progenitors. It strikes me that millennials and Gen Z'ers, unmoored as they are by late capitalist malaise and accelerating technological change, have opted for positive freedom. In fact, the prospect of positive freedom is probably the only shared value proposition offered by their deeply polarized politics, from the manosphere to the politics of intersectionality. Such ideological trends do not emerge and persist without mediation and rhetorical form, and so we should con-



tinue to develop ways of studying how constitutive rhetoric materializes and evolves in an ever-changing media landscape. As the boundaries between personal narrative, political identity, and scientific discourse continue to blur online, it is imperative that rhetorical scholars remain attentive to how these hybrid forms of knowledge shape not only public understanding but also the lived realities of marginalized communities.

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