

University of Dayton

The Rhetoric of Autism on Social Media  
Language Analysis and Implications

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## **Introduction**

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder marked by differences in communication, restricted interests and repetitive behaviors (CDC). In the United States, about 1 in 36 children are diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, and those born male are four times more likely to be affected than those born female (CDC). Millions of dollars are spent yearly to fund autism research projects in the United States. In 2023 alone, the NIH contributed 306 million dollars to autism research and this number is expected to increase in the following years (*RePORT*).

In the age of the neurodiversity and autistic self-advocacy movements, discourse about autism is rapidly increasing, especially on social media (Leadbitter et al.). Therefore, it is essential to explore social media posts related to autism, specifically how autism intersects with gender, to discover how the rhetoric being spread impacts autistic people and public perceptions of autism spectrum disorder. While public discourse has widened to include more diverse presentations of autism, there is still a large segment of autistic people who do not feel embraced by the apparently affirming neurodiversity community. I argue that because autism is a rhetorical phenomenon, gender based autism labels and intersecting identities are highly impacted by the rhetoric surrounding ASD which influences the fluid public perception of autism further highlighting difficulties faced by some autistic people.

### *Autism as a rhetorical phenomenon*

To explain how autism is rhetorical, it is first necessary to define rhetoric. An influential scholar in the field of digital rhetoric defines rhetoric, “as the means to move the audience into a state of action (often articulated specifically as social action, although it can certainly be used to prompt individual action)” (Eyman 22). This is a contemporary view of rhetoric which is intentionally inclusive of diverse elements of communication and is relevant to modern forms of media.

With that definition in mind, autism is rhetorical because there is a significant amount of discourse about autism, particularly on social media, encouraging people to take action, despite the largely unclear foundation of which the claims are made (Heilker; Heilker and Yergeau). Naturally, popular discourse changes over time as society’s perception of autism morphs. In an article published to *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Paul Heilker affirms the rhetorical nature of autism stating that, “The arguments wielded in this conflict are often verbal, of course, but they are increasingly visual in nature as well, and they come at us from professional, popular, and amateur authors through a wide variety of media...” (Heilker). Similarly, in “Autism and Rhetoric”, Yergeau and Heilker assert that beyond acting as rhetorical, autism is a rhetoric, “we

contend that autism itself is a rhetoric, that autism is a way of being in the world through language, through invention, structure and style” (Heilker and Yergeau 487).

For example, what is the first symbol that comes to mind when you think of autism? Perhaps, you thought of a blue puzzle piece. The puzzle piece historically was and continues to be one of the most popular autism symbols worldwide. In 2005, national organization, Autism Speaks adopted the puzzle piece for their logo opting for a baby blue color to symbolize that autism is both a “male” disorder with an emphasis on childhood. This event popularized the symbol in the United States, though the puzzle piece was initially designed as a symbol for autism in the United Kingdom in 1963 and was not introduced in the United States until the 1990s. The puzzle piece symbolizes the “mystery” of autism and can be perceived to mean that autistic people are just a piece of the larger puzzle of humanity and should be accepted. The puzzle piece can also be perceived more negatively. Some see it as representative that autistic people “are missing a piece” or that autistic individuals should be responsible for fitting in the puzzle that society created (Gernsbacher et al.). In this case, the blue puzzle piece would be an example of visual rhetoric as it conveys a hidden meaning that is typically outside of our immediate awareness.

It is also important to explore the impact of the narrative on the perception of autism spectrum disorder. Duffy and Dorner argue that autism is a narrative condition, meaning that “diagnoses of autism are essentially storytelling in character, narratives that seek to explain contrasts between the normal and abnormal” (Duffy and Dorner 201). The distinction between what is normal and what is not is crucial in a normative society which heavily enforces the norm and values those who can identify with it (Dolmage). In her book, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks*, Jordynn Jack emphasizes the role of gendered characters in shaping the rhetorical narrative of autism stating that, “rhetors create, describe, and perform stock characters: typified roles that allow individuals to gain authority, to understand autism as a condition, and to intervene in debates about autism” (Jack 2).

### *Impact of gender on autism- gender based labels*

Autism and gender are heavily intertwined. In popular culture, characters portrayed as autistic are typically heterosexual, white, and male with an extraordinary talent, usually in math or science. While people assigned male at birth are about four times more likely to be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, the limited representation of other autistic characters in the media continues to shape the narrative of autism and public perception of ASD. As Kristin Bumiller put it, “gender identity matters in one’s experience as autistic” (Bumiller 974). Autistic people who identify as non-binary or gender diverse, are often excluded from autism discourse altogether. This

exclusion is harmful as evidence suggests that autistic people have a higher rate of gender variance than their neurotypical counterparts, especially autistic people assigned female at birth (Cooper et al.). In the following paragraphs, I discuss important ASD theories that are closely related to gender and will briefly examine the impact of each.

The first theory is an older autism theory proposed by clinical psychologist, Simon Baron-Cohen, known for his extensive research on autism, particularly relating to theory of mind and his “extreme male brain theory” of autism. The theory suggests that traits of autism are the result of an individual possessing an extreme manifestation of the male brain (Baron-Cohen). This theory has been a point of controversy and recent studies have criticized it stating, “Given that the brain and body determine behavior, the description of male-typical behavior as being the product of a male brain is true but trivial in a male and conceptually problematic in a female. In neither case, does equating behavior with brain have explanatory power” (Ridley 26). Autism is rhetorical and because of that, the narrative is heavily influenced by theories like the extreme male brain.

Another, novel and less widely discussed gender-based theory of autism is the female phenotype theory (FPT). Unlike the extreme male brain theory of autism, the female phenotype theory does not link gender to the ultimate cause of autism. Instead, suggests that gender should be considered as a factor when examining ASD in a person, in part because the diagnostic criteria were formulated based on male autistic behaviors (Hull et al.). According to a study conducted by Belcher et al, “Female Phenotype Theory (FPT) suggests that autistic women often present with less obvious social impairments than autistic men” (Belcher et al. 1). The emergence of this idea is important as autistic women are typically diagnosed later and have a higher rate of being misdiagnosed than their male counterparts. This could be in part due to a phenomenon known as masking, or autistic masking. Masking is simply hiding one’s autistic traits to fit in or to appear neurotypical. Many people who mask find the practice exhausting and uncomfortable after a while (Radulski). This theory of autism is a central topic of discourse on social media. Statements like “female autism” and “autism in women ” are often used to discuss the theory on social media outlets. Autistic women are underrepresented and the emergence of this theory helps to broaden the narrative to allow for more women to be identified as autistic, though the language is still exclusionary towards non-binary autistic people.

### *Neuroqueer Community: gender nonconformity and autism*

As I mentioned earlier, there is preliminary evidence to suggest that gender nonconformity is more common in the autistic population than the neurotypical

population (Cooper et al.). Gender diverse people are often excluded from autism discourse, the very discourse that shapes public perception of autism which further contributes to a misrepresentation of autistic and gender nonconforming individuals. A study conducted by Hiller et al., created a focus group of autistic adults to examine the intersection between gender diversity and autism. They found a few emerging themes, one analyzed the effect of being both gender diverse and autistic. Researchers discovered that participants who held a dual identity, didn't feel fully accepted in the neurodiversity or LGBTQ+ community which contributed to feelings of isolation (Hillier et al.). The emerging concept, neuroqueer, is important as it plays a role in filling that social gap.

The idea of neuroqueer was formulated by scholars Remi Yergeau, Nick Walker and Athena Lynn Micheals-Dillion (Attias; Walker). Dr. Walker states on her blog that, "A neuroqueer individual is any individual whose identity, selfhood, gender performance, and/or neurocognitive style have in some way been shaped by their engagement in practices of neuroqueering...you're neuroqueer if you're neuroqueer" (Walker). In other words, neuroqueer is something that transcends beyond the typical interpretation of an identity and is applicable to anyone who feels represented by the concept. It is virtually impossible to articulate a definitive definition of the concept as neuroqueer is fluid and continues to evolve.

## **Analysis**

### *Background*

To conduct a rhetorical analysis, I selected posts with content related to the concepts of neuroqueer and the female phenotype theory of autism. I used the search terms "female autism" and "autism in women" to find posts that are generally connected to the presentation of autism in people assigned female at birth or who identify as female. For posts relating to the concept of neuroqueer, I utilized the search terms "neuroqueer" and "queer autism." Both of the concepts push back against the typical narrative of autism which puts them in a unique position.

### *"Female Autism"*

"Female autism" is a popular topic across various social media outlets so there were multiple posts to pick from. I decided to analyze one post that agreed with gender based ASD labels, specifically "female autism" and another post that shared concerns about the terminology.

The first post I analyzed was a TikTok video. The video is 39 seconds long and was posted on April 28, 2023. This is a relatively popular post, it has over 140 thousand

likes and more than 800 comments. The creator of this video is a feminine presenting, white, autistic woman named Morgan Foley (@morgaanfoley).

Morgan is speaking about autism in women for the duration of the video, there is no background noise or music and the creator's position remains constant throughout the video. The camera is positioned to show above Morgan's shoulders. In the upper left hand corner of the screen, there is text that states "Autism in girls" in a bright pink color, about halfway through the video, when Morgan begins talking about her own traits of autism, more text in a smaller font and subtler shade of pink, appears saying, "This is my experience as a high masking low support needs autistic". Against the neutral background, the pink color stands out. This color choice makes a statement and is a form of visual rhetoric. Pink is often attributed to femininity, which was historically not representative of autism. The creator explicitly emphasizes this by saying, "Let's talk about autism in girls and why only girls. Well because autism was only studied in boys and at first it was thought that girls couldn't even have autism". This affirms the strategic color choice to oppose the narrative of autism as a male disorder, as traditionally symbolized by the color light blue.

The video has a caption that reads, "This is an autistic trait that is common in girls that I have. Both agnosia and autistic masking. #austimstraits #autisminwomen #autismingirls #autisticmasking #autismfyp". The use of hashtags are essential in digital spaces and some consider hashtags a rhetorical sub-genre. Daer et al., elaborate on the rhetorical nature of metacommunicative tagging and provide the framework to identify the rhetorical role of a hashtag as either: emphasizing, critiquing, identifying, iterating or rallying. In this case, all of the hashtags are emphasizing as they are representative of what Morgan spoke about in the video. The tags #autisminwomen, #autismingirls, and #autisticmasking are also identifying because Morgan used first person pronouns throughout the video and attributed the trait and autism to her own identity (Daer et al.).

The video's content is relatively straightforward. Morgan begins by providing background information on autism's connection to women. She then moves on to talk about a trait that she has and believes is connected to her autism and more generally, autism in women. She describes the trait as, "manually forcing facial expressions" elaborating by asserting that, "a lot of autistic people don't naturally make facial expressions, we're very monotone". The use of "we" is important to note as it is indicative of Morgan's desired audience, other autistic people assigned female at birth or those who are exploring their identity. She then connects the trait to the experience of masking in which she states, "girls specifically are pretty good at masking and covering up their autistic traits." Duffy and Dorner emphasize that autism is a narrative condition and perception of autism is often shaped by individuals sharing their experience with the

difference, either directly or indirectly (Duffy and Dörner). This video is an example of that and reveals a narrative of autism based on someone's experience with autism, though this narrative is different from the typical autism story.


I selected some user posted comments to examine the role of the rhetoric on the public perception of the content. It is important to note that comments are restricted to 150 characters so user engagement is somewhat limited. The first comment I selected was posted by the creator of the video, Morgan Foley. The comment says, "I am a late diagnosed autistic, female. A lot of my autistic traits were overlooked as a child so I want to talk about them here". This comment recaps what she spoke about in the video and explicitly indicates the purpose of the post. Re-emphasizing what she spoke about in the comments also successfully acts as a guide for user discourse. This comment gives users a prompt to follow when commenting on the video, rather than just posting a general comment. Guiding the comments in this way allows the digital space to remain open and fluid. Morgan utilized tools of digital rhetoric which allowed for this type of engagement between users living distances apart (Eyman). Adding a comment to re-cap the video also makes the content accessible to people with different abilities and allows viewers to interact with the content at their own pace. This is an example of Universal Design, something that the social model of disability heavily supports. Most of the replies to this comment were people sharing their personal experiences and thanking Morgan for shining light on their life as a part of the underrepresented group.

While most of the comments were in agreement with the perspective shared in the video, some were not. @johnsalvetti3 felt invalidated by the video, "This topic is difficult for me because I am a man who wasn't diagnosed until 32 and I think I have a lot of the so called "female" autistic traits". Other commenters shared similar experiences and felt that their gender identity didn't match with the "type" of autism they had, the narrative intentionally excluded them from fitting in. Another group of commenters identified as autistic but felt that their experiences were not valid because they did not possess the trait that the creator highlighted. This led one commenter to question their diagnosis, "I was diagnosed with level one autism when I was little but I don't think I've ever masked at all. Is it possible I was misdiagnosed?" (@mafumafufangirl). This comment displays how powerful one video can be on an individual's perception of their own neurotype.

The analysis of this post revealed how profoundly rhetorical autism is. Morgan shared her experience with autism which is different from the typical representation of autism but still valid. Morgan did not share any specific data or statistics yet many still felt extremely validated or not by the content. This one video about autism holds immense power, so much so that it led some to question their own diagnosis or even identify as autistic because of the trait discussed. I believe that this exposes the

possible danger to the rhetorical space surrounding autism, especially on social media, where young people are likely to come across the content. I also recognize how positive this content can be. Many people who do not fit into the typical autism mold went under the radar for decades. This video is encouraging individual action, and creating a space that allows individuals to feel accepted. Content like this video helps to broaden the rhetoric surrounding autism which directly affects how the disorder is assessed and treated.

The second post that I analyzed was posted on Facebook by @Neurodivergent Rebel (they/them) on August 28, 2020. The post is a screenshot of a tweet that the same creator (@Neurorebel on Twitter) posted on August 27, 2020. The post received over 300 comments and over 1,400 likes. The caption of the Facebook post has the exact same text as the screenshot, with the exception of added hashtags to the Facebook post.

The screenshot of the tweet displays white text on a black background and includes the creators account information and general post information. The caption states, “I really dislike all this “male and female” autism talk. It completely ignores nonbinary and gender nonconforming people (who are a VERY large percentage of the autistic community). #ActuallyAutistic #nonbinary #gender #genderfluid #autistic #autisticadult #neurodiversity #lgbtq ”. As I said, the only difference between the screenshot and the caption is the addition of four additional hashtags, the original screenshot only included “#ActuallyAutistic”, “#nonbinary”, “#gender”, “#genderfluid”. The added hashtags are fairly broad, which allows the post to appear relevant to more users and reach a larger audience. The hashtags act as emphasizing since the creator did not reveal anything about their own identity in the short post, though a further search on the creator’s page revealed that they identify as non-binary and autistic (Daer et al.). Adding the caption with the same text present in the screenshot also is an element of Universal Design as the caption is easier for users to refer to when formulating a response and is also more accessible to those using adaptive technology.

The act of posting the same thing on multiple social media outlets serves a couple of different purposes. First, it allows the content to reach a wider audience across both platforms. Second, it encourages different types of user engagement. On Twitter, comments are typically restricted to 280 characters which does not give users much space to share their thoughts. Facebook allows comments to be up to 8,000 characters, leaving ample room for one to formulate a well-articulated response. Neurodivergent Rebel did reply to many user comments, this displays to some extent, their interest in engaging in further conversation with users which could have driven them to post the content on Facebook.



There are a couple of structural elements that stuck out to me. The first thing that I noticed was the use of quotation marks around male and female. In this case, the quotation marks are not indicating a direct quote but instead are separating those words from the speaker and adding criticism to the gender based concepts that the words identify. After the speaker's main point, parentheses were used to provide supporting evidence. Within these parentheses, the word "very" is capitalized which pulls the reader's attention to the word. Emphasizing "very" makes it seem like an issue that is affecting a large number of people which would encourage the audience to take action.

The comments in this post are mixed. Some users strongly agreed with Neurodivergent Rebel's point, while many others were ambivalent or in support of gender based ASD labels. Heather Stone (@Heather Stone) commented, "I agree but I also try to be opened minded in my thinking surrounding this topic. I think this is a very complex issue that needs addressed. And if discussing it as a male/female difference can at the very least get evaluators, clinicians, and others thinking in the right direction (that there are potential differences in how different groups or individuals present) then maybe it's a good (and necessary) first step. One day, one diagnosis, at a time...". This comment underlines the rhetorical nature of autism by displaying how important changing discourse is in closing the diagnostic gap. Johnna Joseph had a similar perspective, "I hear and understand the intent of this post, but discussion of "female autism" has opened doors for a lot of people who would otherwise have been missed, my family included. I've seen this point made often without any suggestions for how else we should be approaching the diagnostic gap or dismantling male stereotypes". This comment also points out the changing narrative of autism is necessary to broaden the public's perception of ASD and break away from the character's that have represented autism for so long. All because autism diagnoses are rhetorical in nature. They emphasized the need for tangible steps to actually encourage further action to be taken without undermining the progress that has already been made.

Other commenters were not as respectful, @Shane Robinson said, ""WhO aRe A vErY IArGe PeRcEnTaGe Of ThE cOmMuNiTy" 0.2 isn't a large percentage but you know what is? 41%". The commenter created a question out of the main point made in the post, they also put the text randomly in upper and lower case which is a strategy used to intentionally invalidate the content. They also provided some numbers but do not clarify what the numbers are referring to which could potentially confuse readers. Neurodivergent Rebel did not provide any statistics in their original post which weakened their argument and opened the space up for further criticism. Other users who may be reading the comments to the post might find the numbers Shane provided more appealing and may be inclined to disregard the original argument. @Shane Robinson may have felt compelled to reply in dissent because the narrative of autism that they had known was not represented through this post but they did not provide any

rationale for their comment. They may also feel that their own identity would be somehow threatened if changes were to be made.

This post is directly related to the rhetoric of autism. Social media was used as a vessel to spread the information in a concise manner. The first post I analyzed mostly focused on promoting individual action, this post though, encourages more widespread social action. The creator addresses terms that are used to describe autism which are inherently rhetorical. Addressing autism as a binary, male or female, issue can greatly impact the narrative. The same narrative that shapes the way that autism is diagnosed, treated and perceived. On the other side of the coin, the “label” of female autism has helped decrease a diagnostic gap and provide the framework for those with different ASD presentations to be diagnosed. I believe that this post identifies some major downfalls to the slowly changing perception of autism because even if some people benefit, others are hurt in return.

### *Neuroqueer*

“Queer autism” or more broadly, “neuroqueer” are popular topics leading to discussion on social media. There are fewer posts relating to these terms but the posts that exist were generally put out by individuals who were sharing general information about the concepts or sharing their own personal experiences. I picked one post that focused on providing education about “neuroqueer” and another post that shares the individual's experience while also educating the public on the role of their dual identities.

I first analyzed a TikTok video. The video is 34 seconds long and was posted on June 18, 2023 by Jenna (@jenna.frieds). The video has over 1000 comments and more than 45 thousand likes. Jenna identifies as queer and autistic.

Jenna remains seated through the entire video, and the camera is positioned to show above their waist. Captions appear in white text over Jenna's head for the duration of the video. The background is simple and void of noise. Jenna is wearing headphones, a rainbow crop top, jeans, and rainbow earrings. Their outfit choice could be an outward symbol of their identity. Some autistic people prefer to wear headphones to reduce sensory discomfort and many autistic characters are often portrayed with headphones, making them somewhat symbolic of ASD. The rainbow has been a long standing symbol of the LGBTQ+ movement and may be used as a way to represent one's identity. This outfit choice may have been a coincidence, but it could have been a rhetorical strategy to draw people in to watch the video.

The caption of the video says, “happy pride month! here's a quick overview of the connection between autism and being LGBTQIA+ #lgbt #lgbtqia #queertiktok #autism #autismawareness #actuallyautistic”. The caption almost explicitly reveals and

addresses the intended audience. While pride month is a celebratory time for all, the statement, “happy pride month!” is more meaningful to those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and this expresses that the creator intends to reach an audience who can relate to that identity. Jenna briefly outlines what the video will be about but fails to provide further information in the caption, forcing people to watch the video if they are interested in learning more. This allows Jenna to control how the content is interpreted by audience members. The lack of a summary in the caption or comments may be exclusionary to those that prefer to recap the information at their own pace. This may discourage certain individuals from engaging with others in the comments, limiting a diverse conversation. The hashtags are all emphasizing, as they relate to what Jenna discusses. Additionally, #lgbtq, #lgbtqia, #autism, and #actuallyautistic are identifying because Jenna is autistic and part of the LGBTQIA+ community (Daer et al.). Being part of the autistic and queer community also gives the speaker more credibility in the eyes of viewers based on the topic that they are discussing.

The video’s content mainly focuses on the relationship between having autism and being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community or being gender diverse. Jenna begins the video by stating, “Autistic people are more likely to be LGBTQIA+”, they then ask “but why is this?”. This immediately draws the viewer in and makes them want to find out more. Jenna quickly answers this question saying, “our Autistic and Queer identities interact and intersect”. The use of “our ” is inclusive to the audience and reveals that Jenna is a part of both communities. Jenna then provides rationale for the connection for the rest of the video, using “we” when discussing the points. For example, they state “we often don’t understand social norms”. Jenna also adds an important disclaimer at the end of the video, “and I want it to be clear that just because there is a correlation it does not mean that autism causes someone to be LGBTQIA+”. This line at the end was not necessary to defend their argument but was a helpful statement to clear up possible misconceptions. Showing to some extent that they understand how powerful the rhetoric surrounding autism is.

This is a TikTok post so the comments are limited to 150 characters each which can severely impact the type of discourse that takes place. The comments under this video fall into three broad categories. The first category are offensive comments. A large proportion of the comments were intentionally offensive. @ballongballe said, “Then there is me. I say no thanks. you do your stuff and I stay faaaaaar away from it”. Similarly, @\_herohero0 stated, “My brain can’t process”. These unfriendly comments may be the result of people’s discomfort when faced with a changing view of autism or simply just hatred directed towards an identity Jenna discusses. The second category includes comments in support of Jenna’s video. @funnynerd2021 said, “considering this it’s really frustrating that a lot of neurotypical lgbt+ people treat us like we’re a problem”. Other commenters falling into this category left simple messages or a couple of emojis.

The last category are comments that point out something about Jenna's outfit. Multiple people complimented their earrings and crocheted top, even asking where things were purchased from. This reveals that the outfit had an important role as it was able to successfully elicit engagement.

Rhetoric is not explicitly stated in this video but as a post on the subject of autism, it is rhetorical. Jenna uses inclusive language and presents a direct argument about the connection between autism and membership of the LGBTQIA+ community. The argument is rhetorical because they do not provide any "scientific" evidence to support their claim, instead opting for examples related to their personal experience. Again, autism exists within narratives which means that people see Jenna's post and may be inclined to make broader assumptions about people with autism. Social media is being used as a way to spread this narrative of autism and this can have mixed results. Broadening the narrative to include people with different manifestations of autism is incredibly important but at the same time, people watching just one video may get the wrong idea and this could be harmful to the autistic community. This risk is universal to social media, any post can be misinterpreted as representative of an entire community. This is especially harmful if an individual posts on social media with malicious intent to discredit or even eradicate those communities.

The second post on neuroqueer that I analyzed was posted on Instagram on April 2, 2024 by @justsaysk (she/they). The post has over 13 thousand likes and over a hundred comments. The caption states, "Autism 🍌 Transness 🍌 POWER #neuroqueer #neurospicy #actuallyautistic #trans #nonbinary #genderisasocialconstruct". In this case, the first five hashtags are both identifying and emphasizing as they reiterate what the post discusses and relate to the creator's identity. The last hashtag would be classified as critiquing because SK is making a judgment about something related to the post's content (Daer et al.).

This post is composed of 10 different slides. The first slide, the cover, displays a photo of SK. In the image, she is wearing a skirt and her chest is showing, with flowers drawn over scars from a top surgery. She also has a buzzcut. To the right of SK, there are screenshots of three negative comments telling the creator not to receive a gender affirmation surgery. One of those comments says, "Did you know? Autistic people are more likely to have LGBTQ syndrome? Keep this in mind before making the switch". Under the comments, there is text which says, "Pointing out the overlap of my queerness and autism isn't the insult you think it is". Using the word "you" uncovers the intended audience, people who are confused about SK's identity or disapprove of it. This is different from other posts I've analyzed, as the purpose is to spread awareness and even change the mindset of those who disagree with the creator.

The middle eight slides of the post contain only text. SK uses first person pronouns throughout and continues to directly refer to the audience by using “you”. For example, slide 7 reads, “It scares you that I am defiant and curious and resilient and free because it means that you could be, too”. The tone and content is similar throughout the slides. SK describes how meaningful her dual identities are to her and directs thought provoking statements towards those who disagree. The statements are very direct and in a couple of places, SK explicitly addresses her audience. This rhetoric may feel inflammatory to certain neurotypical users who disagree with her argument, though I do not believe this was the creators intention. The text on the body slides is purple and some words are emphasized by being a different color. There is a lot to read so emphasizing important points in different colors allows SK to ensure readers are absorbing the most important pieces of information. The last slide contains a circular photo of SK with a background of pride flags and information on how to receive further information from the creator.

The comments are extremely important in this analysis because SK directly addressed a group of people and their perception of the content is evident in the comments. It appears that SK’s typical audience are other people who identify as neuroqueer, autistic or LGBTQIA+ and many of those individuals left positive comments. @hotchpotchperformance said, “wow this is so well put! Just the best response to pure ignorance”. Others were not as respectful. @nads0094 used the space to share their own opinions on the LGBTQIA+ community as they exclaimed, “I WAS SO IN LOVE WITH RAINBOW, BUT LGBT MAKES ME HATES THEM”. The all caps suggest that this person was frustrated and wanted to emphasize their disdain towards the rainbow, even though the post did not mention that once. This exemplifies how meaningful symbols can be. I found other similar comments sharing hateful remarks towards the LGBTQIA+ community with seemingly no connection to the post. For many, the comment section was used as a free space to leave hurtful thoughts. @ryanfunnell1 said, “This is terrible stop promoting this mental illness”. In fact, it seemed like some commenters were worried about SK’s autistic identity as they could not fathom that someone with autism could also be LGBTQIA+. Comments like this are not surprising, autism is rhetorical and until recently, autistic people were viewed as lacking rhetorical capacity (Yergeau). The offensive comments display how difficult the intersectionality between autism and LGBTIA+ can be. This could be a clue that many still view autism through a narrow lens and have a hard time accepting the different ways that autism can manifest. This directly emphasizes how powerful pre-existing rhetoric on autism is and how difficult changing that narrative can be.

This analysis supported the view that autism is rhetorical in nature. People were uncomfortable with SK’s representation of autism and left offensive comments in return. This is evidence that people understand the rhetoric of autism in their daily lives and

futures. Otherwise, people would not be so combative about one person sharing their understanding of autism. This content can invoke both social and individual action because she addresses a group of individuals who can choose to change their mindset while also keeping the information broad enough to apply to a large audience. SK did not explicitly connect autism to rhetoric but they were able to share their own experience and contribute to expanding the perception of autism. This reveals the importance of concepts like “neuroqueer” which provides language to aid in broadening the narrative to include all autistic people. This post also displays the important role of social media, without that outlet, SK would not be able to reach her intended audience.

## **Discussion**

Autism’s position as rhetorical has already been established and until recently autism was viewed through a narrow lens. Now, in part due to the increased prevalence of autistic creators on social media, the public perception of autism is slowly expanding to include more diverse perspectives. The present analysis explored two newer topics to autism discourse, the concept of “female autism” and the intersection of autism and gender identity, which may be expressed by the identity of “neuroqueer”.

Recall, autism spectrum disorder is more frequently diagnosed in people assigned male at birth. Belcher et al., explained the female phenotype theory of autism and revealed that autistic people assigned female at birth are often diagnosed later than their male counterparts and have a higher probability of being misdiagnosed (Belcher et al.). The analysis revealed the importance of rhetoric on the perception of “female autism” and the critical role that the label plays in the everyday lives of autistic people. The first post was successful in invoking individual action which can be confirmed by the comments of individuals sharing their experiences. The post connects the idea of “female autism” to a trait, which shifts the presentation into something measurable and concrete. The rhetoric of female autism was heavily utilized because the creator only discussed one trait and more definitively than not, connected the experience of autism in women to that particular trait. The second post opposed the gendered rhetoric, attempting to invoke social action to change the ways that people discuss presentations of autism. The creator made a compelling argument but many commenters found the label necessary to close the diagnostic gap and argued that getting rid of the labels would harm a large proportion of autistic people. Gendered rhetoric surrounding autism is relatively new yet it seems that many people feel strongly about the labels.

There is evidence to suggest that autistic people are more likely to be gender diverse (Cooper et al.). This rhetoric is popular on social media and many autistic creators are reaching out to share their experience and educate others on the

intersection. My analysis of posts relating to this concept discovered that pre-existing conceptions of autism are harmful in the expression of individuals who are autistic and LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse. As mentioned previously, autism exists in narratives and is rhetorical, this makes it hard to change the way that autism is viewed by the public. The first post was more educational, even though the narrator was sharing their experiences. Rhetoric was not explicitly mentioned, but any post about autism is rhetorical. My analysis revealed that people struggled with the concept that autistic people can have a dual identity. This is important to take into account since autism is heavily influenced by society meaning that individual creators may continue to share their stories but societal perception of that intersection may remain unaccepting. This highlights the importance of the defined concept, “neuroqueer”. Our society so heavily relies on narratives and rhetoric so creating a new way to define that intersection may, in time, increase acceptance and reduce barriers faced by those who are both autistic and LGBTQIA+. The second post worked differently to reveal how influential rhetoric is on public perception of autism. The creator was direct throughout the slides and intended to invoke a change in attitude of an audience who disagreed with the intersection of being autistic and LGBTQIA+. The creator argued that being autistic actually allowed them to fully accept and discover themselves as being LGBTQIA+. The creator shared thoughts that were specific to their identity yet people in the comments were still apprehensive about the connection, leading many to make offensive remarks. This is interesting because people are directly invalidating one’s first hand experiences, highlighting the powerful role that the narratives defining autism have on the public’s perception of the difference.

The public is mostly supportive of female autism but there is more tension surrounding neuroqueer. I expected this as female autism is relevant to a larger segment of the population and is not a completely new idea. While a majority of the content on social media regarding female autism aims to spread awareness on broader presentations of ASD, autism has been identified in women for almost as long as the disorder has been defined. This allows individuals to be more comfortable expanding their view of autism. Neuroqueer is a specific concept that applies to a smaller proportion of the population. Most people have never heard of neuroqueer, nor have they thought deeply of the connection between being LGBTQIA+ and autistic. This novelty makes it harder for people to accept the idea and to expand their narrative of autism. This could explain why people were combative in the comments on those posts. For some, the discomfort could be due to general hostility towards the LGBTQIA+ community which would in turn, harm those who are neuroqueer or who identify as autistic and LGBTQIA+.

As mentioned earlier, rates of autism diagnoses are rapidly increasing in the United States and throughout the world. Along with the increase in diagnosis, the

narrative of autism is expanding to include those who display their autistic traits in diverse ways. Therefore, it is important to explore and understand the rhetoric surrounding autism, especially on social media as it has become a vital source of information for many in the autism community. This study focused on important current trends surrounding autism on social media though there are countless other analyses that should take place. Future research could examine rhetoric on social media relating to the increased rate of autism diagnoses, particularly in those with lower support needs. It would be interesting to explore the perception of self diagnosis within the autism community, including perspectives shared by those with higher support needs who often are excluded from discourse surrounding autism on social media.



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