

# Chapter 7

## “Tell Me Something You Didn’t Know Was Neurodivergence–Related Until Recently. I’ll Start”: TikTok as a Public Sphere for Destigmatizing Neurodivergence

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### ABSTRACT

*The neurodivergence (ND) movement has sought to reframe societal perceptions of neurologically based conditions, like autism, from viewing ND as problematic conditions that need to be eradicated to seeing ND as beneficial forms of mental diversity. The chapter seeks to understand how self-identified ND creators on TikTok communicate about ND through the lens of critical discourse analysis. Through the qualitative analysis of 376 videos across 10 creators’ profiles and 1,880 comments findings of this chapter seek to better understand how social media platforms may contribute to the (de)stigmatization and empowerment of ND through the facilitation of the public sphere. Findings suggest that creators play an important role as ambassadors for ND building awareness, engaging in advocacy, and empowering the concept of ND. Further, creators’ profiles meet the criteria necessary for facilitating a public sphere. From these findings, recommendations for ND-inclusive public relations practices and strategies are proposed.*

### INTRODUCTION

Mental disorders and mental health remain heavily stigmatized in today’s society, although reports of mental distress, illness, and disorders have increased as a result of a traumatic global pandemic (Cullen et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020). Recently, however, the neurodivergence (ND) movement, also known as

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the neurodiversity<sup>1</sup> movement, has sought to destigmatize conversations surrounding mental disorders, mental health, and cognitive diversity by empowering neurodivergence through public discourse (Kapp, 2019; Shmulsky et al., 2021). The ND movement specifically has sought to reframe societal perceptions of neurologically based conditions (e.g., Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD], learning disabilities, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder [OCD], etc.) from the current conceptualization of ND as problematic conditions that need to be eradicated to seeing ND as beneficial forms of cognitive diversity. Within this movement, a new wave of ND creators on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have begun creating ND related content, providing users with new communities for seeking mental health information and support.

An important way communication scholars and public relations practitioners can seek to destigmatize and advocate for mental disorder equity is through public discourse. Previous research has argued that public relations scholars and practitioners have the unique ability and role to create invaluable spaces for this discourse to occur and ultimately contribute to a “healthy” public sphere (Sommerfeldt, 2013; Williams & Sommerfeldt, 2021). In this public sphere, people can engage in conversations related to social activism to freely discuss and identify societal problems in an effort to change them. Moreover, with the rise in social media, the modality and access to this public sphere has changed, allowing more people to engage in debate and knowledge production than ever before.

Since social media has changed how public discourse operates in the public sphere, it is important to understand how social media “influencers” (i.e., “those who exert influence over their community of followers, combining distinctive self-branding, self-presentation skills, and a business approach, all of which are necessary to build social capital that can be turned into economic capital” [Navarro et al., 2020, p. 2]) may help or hinder the (de)stigmatization of ND issues. Thus, the present chapter seeks to understand how self-identified neurodivergent creators (termed SINDCs) on the platform TikTok communicate about ND. TikTok was chosen as the site for analysis. Unlike legacy platforms (i.e., Instagram, Facebook), TikTok’s core identity of “fun” emphasizes authenticity and humor over heavily curated, aesthetically beautiful content (Barta & Andalibi, 2020). Research has suggested that the norms and values of TikTok allow users to engage in and normalize expressions of both positive and negative emotions and experiences (Barta & Andalibi, 2020), e.g., ND and the challenges associated with ND. Ten influencers’ profiles (see Table 1) were chosen for analysis using the TikTok search function. Profiles were evaluated to confirm that the main topic of creators profile was focused on their self-identified ND (e.g., Autism, ADHD). Ten percent of each creators’ videos (376 total videos) were watched and analyzed through critical discourse analysis (CDA), along with the top five comments on each video (1,880 total comments) (Fairclough, 2013; Zienkowski, 2018).

The findings of this chapter seek to better understand how social media platforms can contribute to the (de)stigmatization and empowerment of the ND. Findings from this analysis suggest that SINDCs play an important role as ambassadors for ND by building awareness, engaging in advocacy, and empowering the concept of ND. Further, SINDCs’ profiles meet the three criteria necessary for facilitating a public sphere, i.e., they provide invaluable access to unlimited information, equal and protected participation, and freedom from institutional influence. The results of these findings suggest that SINDCs may act as public relations practitioners providing the space to engage in important discourse related to ND and building purposeful relationships with other users in an effort to empower ND. From these larger implications, this chapter closes with recommendations for ND inclusive public relations practices and strategies from a newfound understanding of how SINDCs facilitate a public sphere of inquiry and build a sense of community among users.

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