

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

**The Rhetoric of Self-Harm**

Addressing the Communicative Framework of Nonsuicidal Self-Injury &  
Translating its Purpose through the Rhetoric of Compassion

By

Jordan Secher, B.A.



Thesis prepared for and submitted in fulfillment for the degree of  
*Bachelors in English and Honors*

May 2019

To all of those who hurt themselves and who feel voiceless out of shame for doing so as well as  
to those who yearn to understand the language of self-harm.



**TRIGGER WARNING**

This in-depth rhetorical analysis and observational research study is founded on the practice of nonsuicidal self-injury and specifically cutting. The paper will use images from three different Tumblr accounts of people who are to this day still cutting themselves. The images are graphic, and there is explicit and detailed language that some audiences may find triggering. I will be including direct images of the words they post as well as images of their bodies that they have cut. My hope is to do right by those who injure themselves.

## ABSTRACT

Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a perplexing and uncanny concept in which people engage in the practice of purposefully harming themselves without fatal intent. Though there are many actions classified as NSSI, this research addresses only cutting. The research for this project was attained via following and tracking three separate Tumblr accounts of women between the ages of 17-24 who currently cut themselves. The point of this study is to rhetorically analyze the posts and personal images of people who cut. Their accounts are completely anonymous and they are referred to as the “authors”; as they are the authors of their words and wounds. The research analyzes the Tumblr accounts as any other rhetorical analysis would be conducted—breaking down the authors’ work to explain and understand how logos, ethos, and pathos work together to communicate something more than the surface meaning of the words. Cutting is unique in its contradictory language and existence. Few actions allow one to simultaneously be the harmer and the harmed in the same moment. The analysis uses the DSM-5 as a framework to understand the psychological pain behind the author’s choice of diction and visuals but is not limited to what the DSM-5 proposes are reasons behind NSSI. A concise yet apt definition of rhetoric is, “the study of misunderstandings and their remedies.” The goal of this analysis is simply to meet the meaning behind the words and the images on Tumblr as well as what the cutters possibly communicating without concretely saying it.

*Keywords:* NSSI (nonsuicidal self-injury), cutting, Tumblr, rhetoric, rhetoric of compassion, tekmerion, palimpsest, Real Wounds, Blood in the Sink, Hide and Seek.

**FOREWORD**

By

**Brenda Cannon MS, NCC, LPC**

Jordan's perspective on the communication surrounding self-harm is beautifully written. This thesis shows her compassion and understanding of those who struggle with self-harm. In a world in which there is so much pain and secrecy surrounding self-harm, her writing is much needed. As we continue to work toward a better understanding of how to support those who struggle in this area, we need writers and helpers to continue leaning into this discussion. Jordan is both of these...she's an author, and she's a helper. She has written this piece in a way that can and will support change. I am honored to know Jordan...to have read her work, listened to her perspective, and to have learned from her. I am a better human and helper because of her.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>DEDICATION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>TRIGGER WARNING.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>FOREWORD.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>LIST OF IMAGES.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION: Research Questions.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1 EVERYTHING OK? .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Defining Research Role.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Defining Rhetoric .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>MEDICAL: Introducing DSM Definitions of NSSI and Cutting.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Methods .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>SOCIAL: Taboos &amp; Deviant Behavior.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Logic of Self-Harm .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Empathy &amp; Logic.....</b>	<b>25</b>

**PRACTICAL: Tumblr as a Platform of Discourse..... 27**

**II RHETORIC OF COMPASSION..... 28**

**PART I: Real Wounds..... 32**

**PART II: Blood in the Sink..... 39**

**1. Diction of Blood in the Sink..... 41**

**2. Therapeutic Conversation..... 42**

**3. #i speak..... 46**

**PART III: Hide & Seek ..... 47**

**CONCLUSION: Persuading a Relentless Pursuit..... 52**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 54**

**LIST OF FIGURES**

**Figure Page**

**1. Figure of Visual Framework of the Paper..... 11**

**2. Figure Identifying Tumblr in the Practical Realm of Cutting..... 11**

**3. Figure of the Criteria for Tumblr Accounts. .... 21**

**4. Table Identifying the Three Tumblr Authors. .... 21**

**5. Figure of the Relationship between the three concepts that make up the Framework of the Rhetoric of Compassion. .... 30**

**6. Figure Clarifying the Relationship between Real Wounds, Blood in the Sink and Hide& Seek ..... 31**



LIST OF IMAGES

Image Page

1. Screenshot of Tumblr Page: “Everything Okay?” ..... 12

2. Barelystanding’s Re-Post: “pretend, pretend, pretend” ..... 26

3. Tumblr Screenshot: “Keep Fighting” ..... 28

4. Brokenobstacle Screenshot: Cut legs, Introducing *Real Wounds* ..... 32

5. Graydecay Screenshot: Car Photo, Feb. 21,2019, *Real Wounds* ..... 36

6. Graydecay Screenshot: Car Photo, March 14, 2019, *Real Wounds* ..... 36

7. Graydecay Screenshot: Relapse Post, *Real Wounds*..... 36

8. Graydecay Full Screenshot of Relapse and Cut Arms, *Real Wounds* ..... 37

9. Graydecay Screenshot: “Today’s Mess”, *Blood in the Sink*..... 39

10. Graydecay Screenshot; “Relief”, *Blood in the Sink* .....40

11. Graydecay Screenshot: Too Deep, *Blood in the Sink* ..... 40

12. Graydecay Screenshot: Cut arms, “Oops”, *Diction of Blood in the Sink* ..... 41

13. Graydecay Screenshot: Cut legs, “#whoops”, *Diction of Blood in the Sink* .....41

14. Graydecay Screenshot: “lmao” post, *Diction of Blood in the Sink* .....41

15. Graydecay Screenshot: “Maybe I’m Proud. Am I fucked up? *Blood in the Sink*..... 43

16. Graydecay Screenshot: Responses to Image 15, *Therapeutic Conversation* ..... 43

17. Graydecay Screenshot: Uplifting Repost, *Therapeutic Conversation*..... 44

18. Graydecay Screenshot: Uplifting Repost Responses. *Therapeutic Conversation*..... 44

19. Graydecay Screenshot: List of Posts, *#i speak* ..... 46

20. Brokenobstacles: “fake smile”, *Hide & Seek*..... 47

21. Barelystanding: Cut Wrist, *Hide & Seek*..... 49

## INTRODUCTION

### Research Questions

The purpose of identifying a framework that aids to better understand cutting from a rhetorical lens, comes from a desire to engage in a topic that is difficult to talk about. Many people want to understand why people self-harm, but few have the means to enter a real where the author's themselves work to persuade and discuss their true reason. Tumblr allows the authors to fully disclose their deviant thoughts and behaviors without fearing condemnation or hurting their loved ones. My hopes in entering this research as an observer and analytic was to discover and create a type of translation that bridges the gap between the authors on Tumblr and the academic and social realms that yearn to understand the language of cutting.

My research questions developed and changed over time. My first set of questions were structured to study and uncover the intention of all three Tumblr accounts separately. My questions then developed to focus more on the academic practice of rhetorical studies themselves and if there are elements missing or overlooked that could deepen the ability to closely read and comprehend different texts and especially taboo texts such as self-mutilation. Rather than rhetorically analyzing all three Tumblr accounts separately, I investigated how the three of them worked to create a new kind of persuasion within the practical realm of cutting.

When I first began this research on self-harm I focused on performing a rhetorical analysis on three active Tumblr accounts of those who cut themselves. I purposed this rhetorical analysis format to better understand the people who engage in the practice of cutting. The questions I desired to address and hope to answer include:

1. Why are the authors putting this out in the world in the first place?
2. What do the authors get out of sharing it?
3. What does the audience get out of their exposure to it?
4. What are the authors saying by showing their cuts?

The longer I subjected myself to the authors' works the more I desperately wanted to understand their purpose and their pain. Once I began writing my analysis I became frustrated and confused by the contradictory theme surrounding self-harm and even more so when I realized that the kind of analytical structure I was using in attempt to understand restricted me. I felt limited by a definition of logos and the typical employments of ethos. I began to question if there is another element or device that would aid understanding of an author's rhetoric. My questions shifted and though my purpose to better understand those who engage in self-harm remains, my means to understand them shifted to create a framework that is unique to the rhetoricians who cut.

1. Is there a unique framework to understand the persuasion of self-harm?
2. How can self-harm be logically persuaded to those outside the Tumblr audience?
3. How can people better understand people who self-harm through rhetoric?
4. In what way are the rhetoricians persuading their audience?
  - i. Persuade them to engage in compassion
  - ii. Persuade them to seek after them

Figure 1 gives a simple visual as to how this paper will reach the specific realm and pinpointed text that I will be analyzing where cutting exists practically as a form of communication. Cutting is a medical, mental and social concern; however, this paper focuses solely on the practice of cutting as a means of new persuasion and communication.

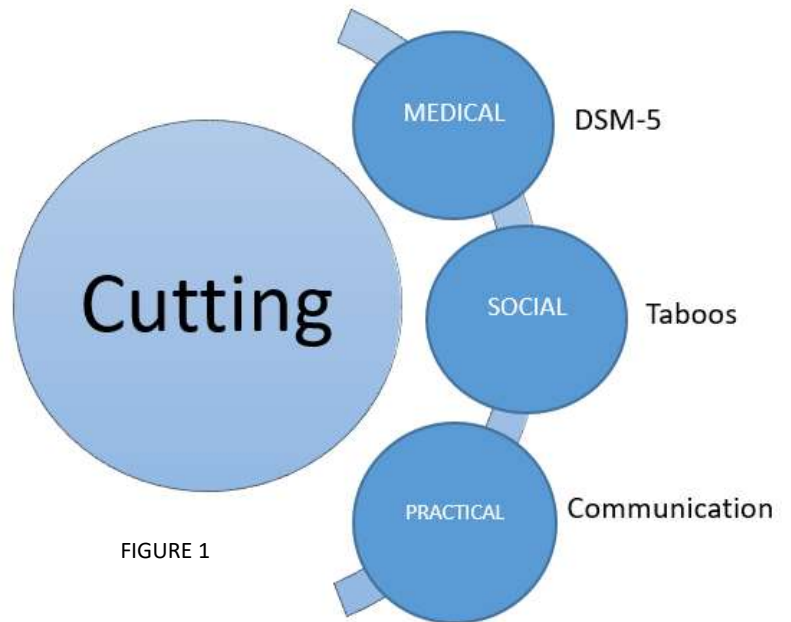


FIGURE 1

The entirety of this paper is purposed around the concept of NSSI in the form of “cutting”. The DSM-5 addresses the “medical” and mental importance and conversation regarding the nature of

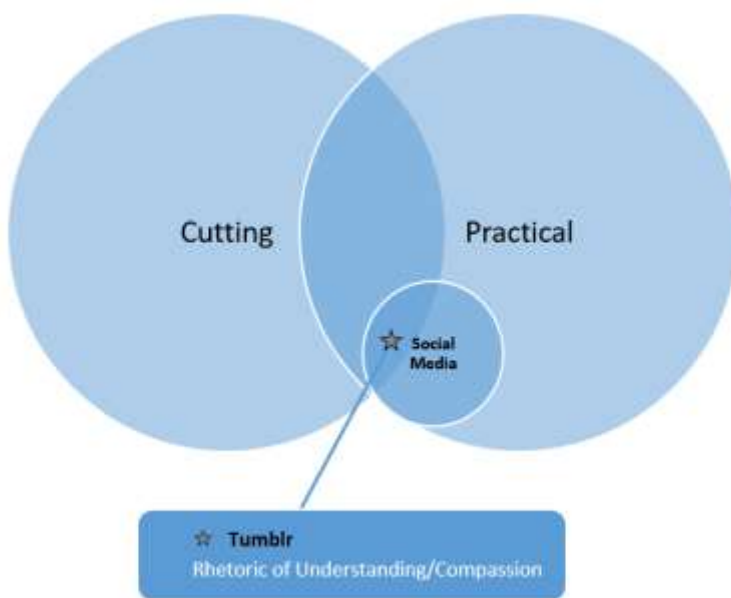


FIGURE 2

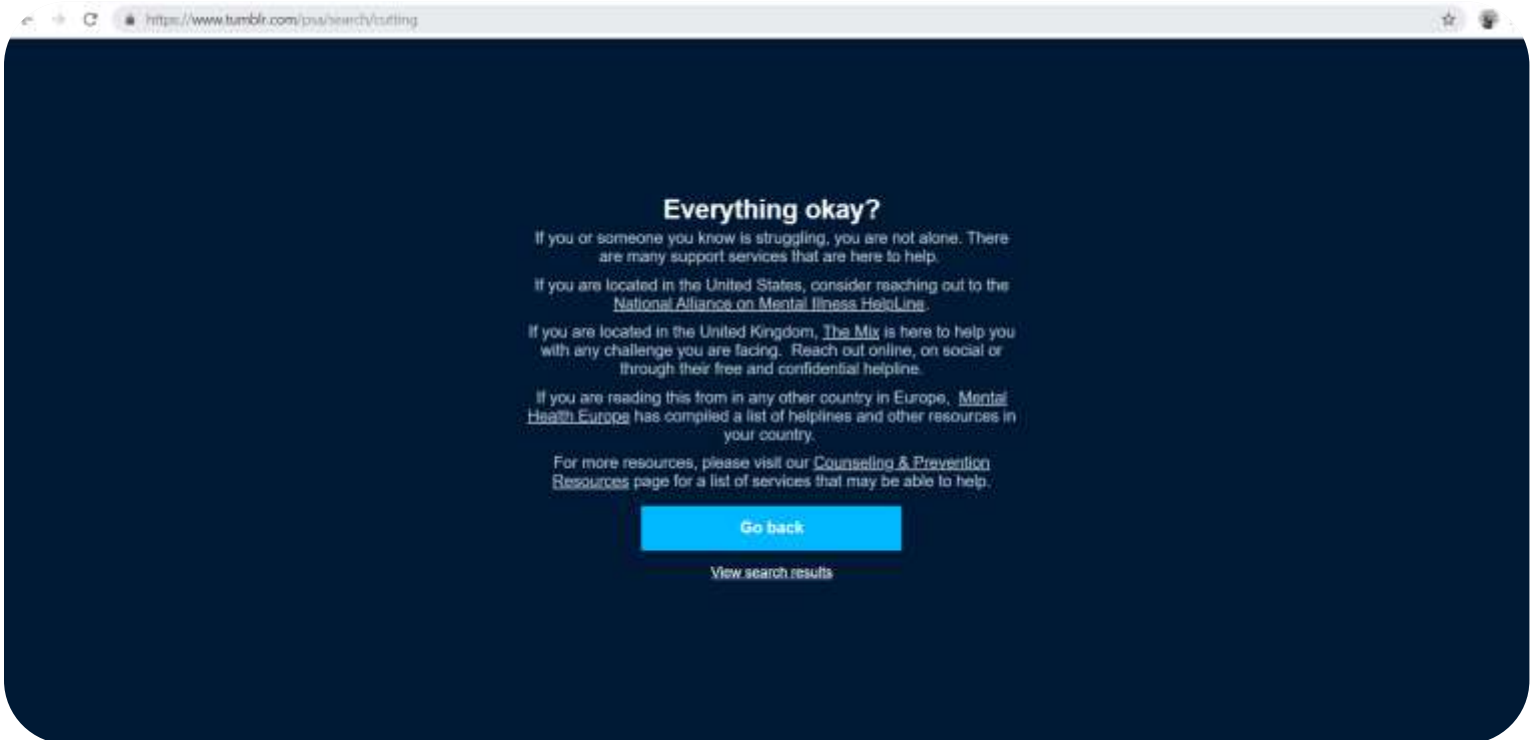
self-harm. There are harmful “social” taboos regarding the topic that tend to drive those who cut themselves into shame and secrecy. Society also applauds socially acceptable forms of self-harm which convolute the

concept. However important these two realms of discourse are in terms of cutting; this paper addresses the “practical” realm of cutting. It is within the overlap of cutting and practicality that we find communication and persuasion at work.

The overlap between “cutting” and the “practical” form of cutting inhabits “social media”. Social media platforms are specifically a practical form of communication and it is within the overlap of social media communication and posts on cutting that “Tumblr” resides. The cutting conversations I have been studying are all on Tumblr which functions as the platform of the text that this paper analyzes. What I have found is a theorized answer to my second question, which is a rhetoric that can help people better understand those who self-harm out of respect. The language I found being used on the Tumblr accounts is not a rhetoric calling for discipline or change but one that asks the audience to engage with the Tumblr account handler compassionately. The self-harming Tumblr account users I followed use persuasive language that lures the audience to seek out the self-harmer in attempt to understand them and in a way that gives the self-harmer value.

## CHAPTER I

### EVERYTHING OKAY?



Rhetoric functions as a tool that is critical to building the framework of comprehension and communication. The way that people communicate takes on many forms. Think about the clothes you choose to wear, the conversations you have with your family members versus those you have with your boss, or even the subtle faces you make displaying appreciation or disgust. The ability to motivate perceptions as well as offer understanding requires rhetorical appeals within any form of discourse. In this paper I will explore the rhetoric of self-harm expressed on the Tumblr social media platform. There are so many important elements to address and explore within the topic of communication over social media and self-harm however the purpose of this paper is to start a conversation about how and why those who self-harm chooses to share their words and their wounds in the way that they do. I want to clarify that I am not writing this to explain or propose some definite answer as to why people might engage in cutting. I believe that there are reasons behind why people choose to injure themselves, and I am in no way trying to diminish the psychological and medical research that attempts to diagnose and understand the action. The DSM-5 has, in fact, been the backbone of this research and articulates a medical understanding of cutting. However, my purpose is not to unearth why or tell anyone who does or does not cut themselves why they do it. I am attempting to understand through a lens of written and visual language. I have rhetorically analyzed short stories, advertisements, clothing and political speeches and now I want to hear what an author's self-inflicted wounds are saying.

I chose to purpose this paper around the rhetorical analysis of how those who cut choose to represent their cuts and themselves on the Tumblr platform. We want to understand their purpose in why they hurt themselves so maybe we should start with what they are trying to communicate. It is difficult if not impossible to find a definite answer as to why some engage in non-suicidal self-injury, especially because people's motives, perspectives, and lives vary.

However, the one definite thing is that they are cutting themselves. I won't even venture to say hurting themselves because some of the population who cut themselves would disagree that it is hurtful. However, we cannot deny their blood that they draw and the scars that are too stubborn to fade. So, with that single definite I decided I wanted to meet some of those who self-harm where they chose who to represent themselves rather than how I decide to define them. I will use rhetoric to break down what they do and post on Tumblr as a scope to understand their words and images in relation to what the DSM-5 has to say about non-suicidal self-injury.

I desire to understand how the author means in conjunction with what they do write. The method in writing or presenting or speaking is not only reliant on the words themselves. Though I personally am a strong believer that words contain power, they are simply letters—symbols strung together that are empty until we assign them meaning. Rhetoric is synonymous with meaning. Meaning comes from use and from context not the words themselves. So, studying the use of words and how the authors choose to employ words and images when and where is what truly helps us to uncover meaning.

### **RESEARCHER ROLE**

I've defined my role throughout this study as an "observer" with the intent to bridge gaps between what the authors are posting and what they are meaning. My role is not to uncover a definitive means to stop self-injury or explain what possible traumatic situations or physiological disorders may drive one to cut themselves. There are powerful and important resources available that do investigate such topics on self-harm that educate people on the validity and severity of the action. I believe it is fair to say that I hate the action of self-harm. Knowing that there are humans driven to the point of inflicting pain on themselves breaks my heart and drives me to fight with and for them to defeat such a personal attack. That all being said I am not here to take



their voice or fight their battles. Though this topic is difficult to discuss from a purely observational and articulative position it is not meaningless. Throughout my five and a half months of simply following people who self-harm on Tumblr I learned how important it is to be an observer and a listener. Though at times I experienced heart ache and difficulty understanding the posts it was in my silent observations that I became even more passionate about defending the importance and power in the action of understanding. Rhetoric is an active art of effectively communicating to shift perceptions, actions and ways of thinking. It is used in even the most mundane discourse and provides a framework of understanding.

As important as the effective use of rhetoric is, the receiving and understanding of the text is easily just as if not more important. Though the momentary rhetorician is in control of how they present their point and themselves, the audience is ultimately in control of determining just how successful the speaker/author is in their presentation. Though the audience is a necessary element in discourse perhaps in a standard rhetorical analysis it is too simple to determine a successful rhetorician based on the perception of audience. Based on my personal experience as the audience to these three Tumblr account authors I felt that if I settled on not understanding their words, images and wounds I was discrediting the authors completely. I was their audience, and if I said that I didn't understand and that meant that they were failures at communicating that meant I determined not only their success in attempts to be understood but I negated their means to expose such a vulnerable rhetoric all together. That doesn't inherently define them as a poor rhetorician, that makes me a nearsighted analytic.

As rhetoricians we cannot discredit the authors based on an audience's level of understanding. Yes, the persuasion of the audience to move or see things differently is indicative of a powerful narrator. Yes, audiences differ, and Athenians might not think like Spartans. Your

next-door neighbor might not think like you. But if a Spartan doesn't understand an Athenian's speech, does that negate the severity, validity, and power within their presentation. If you don't understand your next-door neighbor's scars on her arms does that make her decision to cut herself completely irrelevant? A good rhetorician recognizes when the author changes people's minds and actions. A great rhetorician doesn't expect to understand but works to find a way to. "Critical studies scholars might expose the included and excluded parties in messages, thereby creating awareness of hidden power within a social system. Their identification of rhetorical struggles within a symbolic experience might result in the empowerment of an excluded people and a power shift within the social system."

### DEFINING RHETORIC

I know that providing a simple definition of a word or concept may seem elementary but defining rhetoric is far from it. Rhetoric has been defined and redefined and simplified and complicated since the notion was named as it is. The three definitions below are only a few of the endless attempts to define rhetoric. I believe, that though different, the three definitions come close to the heart behind rhetoric:

- 1. Aristotle writes that, "Rhetoric is the art (techne) of finding out the available means of persuasion."**
- 2. George Campbell states that, "[Rhetoric] is that art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its end. The four ends of discourse are to enlighten the understanding, please the imagination, move the passion, and influence the will."**
- 3. I also appreciate I.A Richards's short definition, "Rhetoric is the study of misunderstandings and their remedies."**

There are three different rhetorical appeals that I will explore in this analysis including ethos, pathos and logos. *Ethos* is a form of persuasive argument that establishes the author's credibility. The more reliable that the author is then the more valid their voice is to their audience. *Pathos* is

another form of persuasive argument that appeals to the audience's emotion and communicates to the hearts of the readers. Some examples of an emotional appeal could include either finding some relatable ground between the author and audience or gaining sympathy, encouragement, excitement from the audience and above all else igniting a passion that persuades their action.

*Logos* appeals to the logic of an argument or simple discourse.

### **BACKGROUND ON NSSI & CUTTING**

The type of self-harm this paper is focusing on is classified as non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). There are many forms of non-suicidal self-injury, but I specifically focus on cutting. The DSM-5 defines NSSI as, "the deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned, includes behaviors such as cutting, burning, biting and scratching skin." Starting in the 1980's Pattison and Kahan's research argued that NSSI should be categorized and classified as a separate syndrome from other disorders and be added to the fourth version of the DSM as non-suicidal self-injury disorder (NSSID).

"In the diagnostic nomenclature (in the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) NSSI has been limited to a symptom of borderline personality disorder (BPD), described as suicidal behavior, gestures, threats or self-mutilating behavior. Arguments have been put forward that NSSI should be a separate syndrome."

Pattison and Kahan argued that self-injurers have an inability to resist the impulse to injure oneself, increased sense of tension prior to the act, and experience release/relief after the act as essential features. In 2005 Muehlenkam also proposed that self-injurious behavior should be a separate clinical syndrome, emphasizing the absence of conscious suicidal intent, the inability to

resist NSSI impulses, the negative affective/cognitive state prior to and the relief after NSSI, as well as the preoccupation with and repetitiveness of the behavior.”

The DSM-5 begins to say that NSSI needs to be studied alone and not limited to BPD or only seen as a product of other mental illnesses. The medical realm claims that there is a need to better understand the behavior,

“NSSI is associated with clinical and functional impairment; the classification of NSSI solely as a symptom of BPD is inconsistent with recent evidence; NSSI needs to be separated from suicide attempts; studying NSSI purely within a BPD context or as a manifestation of suicidality will hamper research and treatment of NSSI; a standardized definition of clinically significant NSSI would facilitate comparisons of findings from different studies and improve communication and clarity in clinical care.”

The functions most often endorsed by those who met NSSI criteria were 1. Affect regulation 2. Self-punishment and 3. Dissociative disorders. The DSM-5 does recognize the overlap between NSSI and suicide. However, if an intent is assumed and not attempted to be understood, we lose the purpose of the cutting all together. The DSM-5 recognizes that,

“Ignoring intent in describing self-injury can lead to an overestimation of the prevalence of suicide attempts and prevent correct identification of specific risk factors for the respective behaviors”.

There is a danger in the social taboos of either assuming that those who cut themselves are suicidal or are dramatically seeking attention. Some self-harmers and even the people I have been following on Tumblr do think about killing themselves, but they have not done so, yet they continue to cut themselves. If the audience ignores real intent or assumes intent, then we might

as well ignore the wounds altogether. “Improved communication, more precise definition and clearer implications for prognosis and treatment are thus advocated, allowing NSSI to be highlighted and treated outside the BPD context.”

The self-harmers use cutting as a practical form of communication: written, verbal, and visual. If people are left without the written or without the verbal and are left with only the visual and interpret the harmer’s intention incorrectly – do we declare the self-harmer as a failed communicator? It is their fault that the audience didn’t understand their purpose? Maybe as an audience we need to be more gracious when we see wounds and not assume it means this person wants to die or has split personalities or is a dramatic hormonal teenager. It is crucial to enter their language – talk back and have a conversation. Yes, the audience is subject to the author. However, the author displays their wounds in a specific way for a reason. Perhaps that reason is simply to be heard, rather than put on display for assumption and judgment.

## METHODS

The process followed in beginning my research required me to start by collecting secondary data and research on nonsuicidal self-injury. I started with the medical and mental realm and went directly to the DSM-5 where I gained most of my understanding of the medical language surrounding cutting practices. I then looked further into the social taboos and socially accepted forms of self-harm. After collecting secondary data I then began primary research by creating a Tumblr account. I created an account name, “jojustanobody” and posted a few photos from off my laptop. I had set requirements of the accounts I chose to follow to keep a narrow scope and that I had based off the American Psychological Association’s statistics regarding self-harm. Though the exact number is uncertain due to the hidden nature and various methods of self-harm the A.P.A states that, “Females are more likely to engage in self-cutting, she says,

while males are more prone to deliberately bruising themselves, hurting themselves while taking a substance, or having others hurt them.” An especially at-risk demographic are women of a minority sexual status, “bisexual females are especially vulnerable: About 47 percent of bisexual females (as measured by their ratings on the Kinsey scale on sexual orientation) self-injure, finds the 2011 eight-college review.”



I then searched key words and phrases on Tumblr to find accounts to follow that fit my specified population. I searched, “cutting,” “slit wrists,” “self-harm,” and “trigger warning”. It was when I searched these that I got the buffer page asking, “Everything okay?” The buffer page between me and my search results told me I wasn’t alone and provided websites that support those struggling. Beneath the provided resources I was given the option to “go back” to the home page or to “view results” anyways. After viewing my results, I finally found the three Tumblr accounts that I followed for this research. They all three have account-names, biographies, and some have a blog-name.

Account Name	Blog Name	Bio
Brokenobstacles	Neverland	“If you wanna talk just do it”
Barelystanding	N/A	“a lil’ mix of everything. 23, FL. torn between living & dying”
Graydecay	The fuckening	GAD. MDD.OCD.ADD.trichotillomania Potential AVPD,BPD,DPD 21/ trans masc nonbinary lesbian This is a side blog Giant tw for self harm shit

FIGURE 4

The account users are completely anonymous. I only know them by the account-names that they gave themselves. Throughout the paper I will refer to the users as “authors.” They have in fact written their posts on the computer and inscribe the wounds on their skin and have chosen to present themselves the ways they desire to represent themselves. After identifying these three authors, I followed their accounts and received daily posts from them on my personal feed. I downloaded the Tumblr app on my phone and would check Tumblr either on my laptop or phone multiple times a day. After purely observing the authors’ posts for a while I went back and started to screenshot certain images and posts from my laptop that seemed to present themes or a persuasive element to them. It wasn’t until halfway through collecting these images as primary research that I started to shift my research questions and found a way to better purpose the screenshots.

## **SOCIAL TABOOS**

In, *the Demedicalization of Self-Injury From Psychopathology to Sociological Deviance*, Patricia and Peter Adler write, “The behavior (self-mutilation) is generally carried out secretly, as wounds may be superficial and easily self-treated (Gardner and Chowdry 1985). The majority of self-injurers are functional and thus remain hidden within society.” Society has constructed a structure that has deemed certain behaviors as acceptable and others as deviant. There is a level of discomfort when talking about self-harm, and that is one of the reasons we must talk about it more. Those who injure themselves live in secrecy and remain hidden within society so that they can continue to exist as a perceived functional part of it rather than a deviant flaw in their culture’s cloth. Punk culture has drawn previously defined deviant behaviors out of the depths and turned them into socially acceptable forms of self harm. Tattoos and piercings are

socially sanctioned. Many people purpose their tattoos to have meaning; they work to communicate personal values or style and can also be markers that allow people to self-identify with others. In the Adler's chapter on *Earlier and Later Rationales* they gained understanding as to how,

“Novice self-injurers were likely to regard their behavior through the lens of conventional society. Alice reflected that she used to think of her cutting as weird: I guess just the way that I thought about it was at first, I was glad that I was able to do it because it made me feel better. That I wished that I had a different way of making myself feel better, because unfortunately it created so much drama and emotionally awkward situations with other people. If they happened to notice what I was doing, which over time more and more people were noticing, and so it was creating problems in my life.”

It is important to become familiar with the rhetoric of self-harm to fight social taboos that surround the practice. Many people react out of annoyance or disgust, some out of pity and others out of horror and love. Even when reacting out of a place of love, the taboos that surround the practice hinder people to truly understand the practitioner and ultimately love them well.

### **LOGIC OF SELF HARM**

Though the focus of this paper rhetorically analyzes the author's Tumblr accounts I first want to address the problem of dismissing logic based on a non-self-harmers perception of the illogical. By this I mean that it is difficult for one to accept an act that they do not define as rational even though it is the reality of another. The three self-harmer's purposed audience is whoever follows their Tumblr account – however the reality of their pain and self-destructive penmanship exists outside of the social media realm. These authors walk around town, their



college campuses and neighborhoods with the same wounds on their arms and thoughts in their minds that they advertise on Tumblr. Anyone outside of their intended Tumblr audience who suddenly becomes subject to their work but is not logically convinced by the purpose of their cuts may completely blind themselves from the reality of the author's pain.

Engaging in empathy overcomes one's ability to dismiss the self-harming action as illogical or fictional irrational. The authors engage their audiences in the logical purpose of self-injury if the audience chooses to accept the fact that the author is reliable, and cutting is something that they do. The purposed audience that the Tumblr authors are addressing are only others who are on the social media platform themselves and especially those who choose to follow them. For the purpose of this paper I want to briefly address how empathy aids understanding things we do not find logical. I do not assume that all those reading this personally engage in self-harm and explaining a logical standpoint behind an almost innately illogical act proves to be a difficult barrier to cross.

Someone coming from a place with no understanding of self-harm will most-likely find the practice completely un-relatable. This barrier hinders one's ability to see the logic in why someone may cut. This barrier is almost comparable to when we watch fictional shows such as Harry Potter. Before I go on—I am *not* saying that the action or thought processes behind inflicting injury on one's self is in anyway fictional. It is real. It matters. It needs to be talked about. The similarity I am drawing from fiction and self-harm is in the audience rather than the action or representation itself. To the audience watching Harry Potter, they cannot relate to casting spells and playing quidditch. However, as the audience, we are subject to the truth that the fictional world cast on a screen in front of us. So, we either question the reliability and reality of the entire movie or we engage in some sort of suspension of disbelief, accepting that for this

movie; magic, wizards and witches are all real. By suspending our disbelief, we can understand the urgency or seriousness of the cinematic moment. In a way we damage our ability to understand a character, a moment, or a meaning by utilizing reality and logic rather than momentarily suspending our disbelief. We can empathize with the characters; Harry and his friends are experiencing genuine danger or excitement but in reality, we know that Daniel Radcliffe and other actors and actresses are professionally pretending to be experiencing danger or excitement. By suspending what makes logical sense to us we are then able to understand, sympathize, and even empathize with something or someone that we cannot relate to through a personal lens that we define as logical.

### **EMPATHY & LOGIC**

As a rhetorical analysis I will address three rhetorical appeals, ethos, logos, and pathos. Logos is a difficult because the act of purposefully wounding one's self is completely counter intuitive from a logical standpoint. Theorist Suzanne Keen describes empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect that can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition or by reading" (Keen 208). To experience empathy is to experience what another is expected to feel. I believe that the feeling of empathy is temporary, and the mirrored feelings for another cannot endure like one's personal feelings can. Empathy is momentary and must evolve. She explains that, "empathy is thought to be a precursor to its semantic close relative sympathy" (Keen 208). Witnessing the rhetorical analysis or a self-harmer's cuts from an outside perspective may cause immediate reactions like, "why would someone do that to themselves?", "doesn't it hurt?", "I don't understand". Reactions like these are in no way wrong, but if one is reluctant to engage empathetically they blind themselves from the harmer's logic.

I address all of this concerning logos now so that when I explain how ethos and pathos are used in the Rhetoric of Compassion, a viewer outside of the Tumblr audience can understand that cutting is inherently a logical reaction. If you are not a follower of the three accounts I mention in this work, then you are not the author's intended audience. However, I still want to point out that NSSI is very real and though not everyone may not be the author's specified audience through their Tumblr posts – anyone is subject to becoming their audience if the self-harmers wounds are exposed. To support the legitimacy behind the author's use of logos I want to mention the necessity of engaging in empathy to legitimize the logic behind their posts and visuals. Secondly, there is an unfortunately high chance that there is someone in your life who has or still does cut themselves and if you are coming from an outside perspective the logic may seem to be obsolete. However, if we can set aside what we classify as illogical and enter a realm, such as Tumblr, where the rhetoric used is in fact logical then we can read their use of logos as accurate and even successful depending on their intent.

### **PRACTCAL: TUBMLR AS A PLATFORM**

Quickly made medical diagnoses, social taboos and immediate assumptions about self-harm has made those who cut fearful of what the world will think of them based on their scarred skin. Cutting is classified as deviant behavior – an

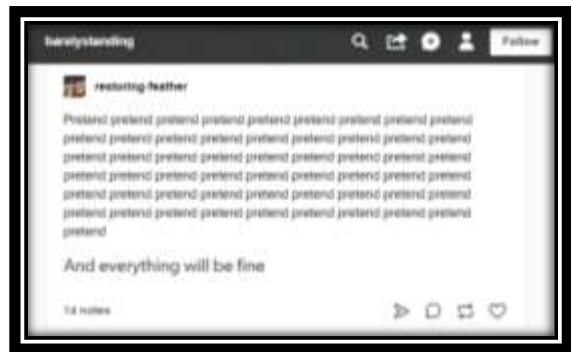


IMAGE 2

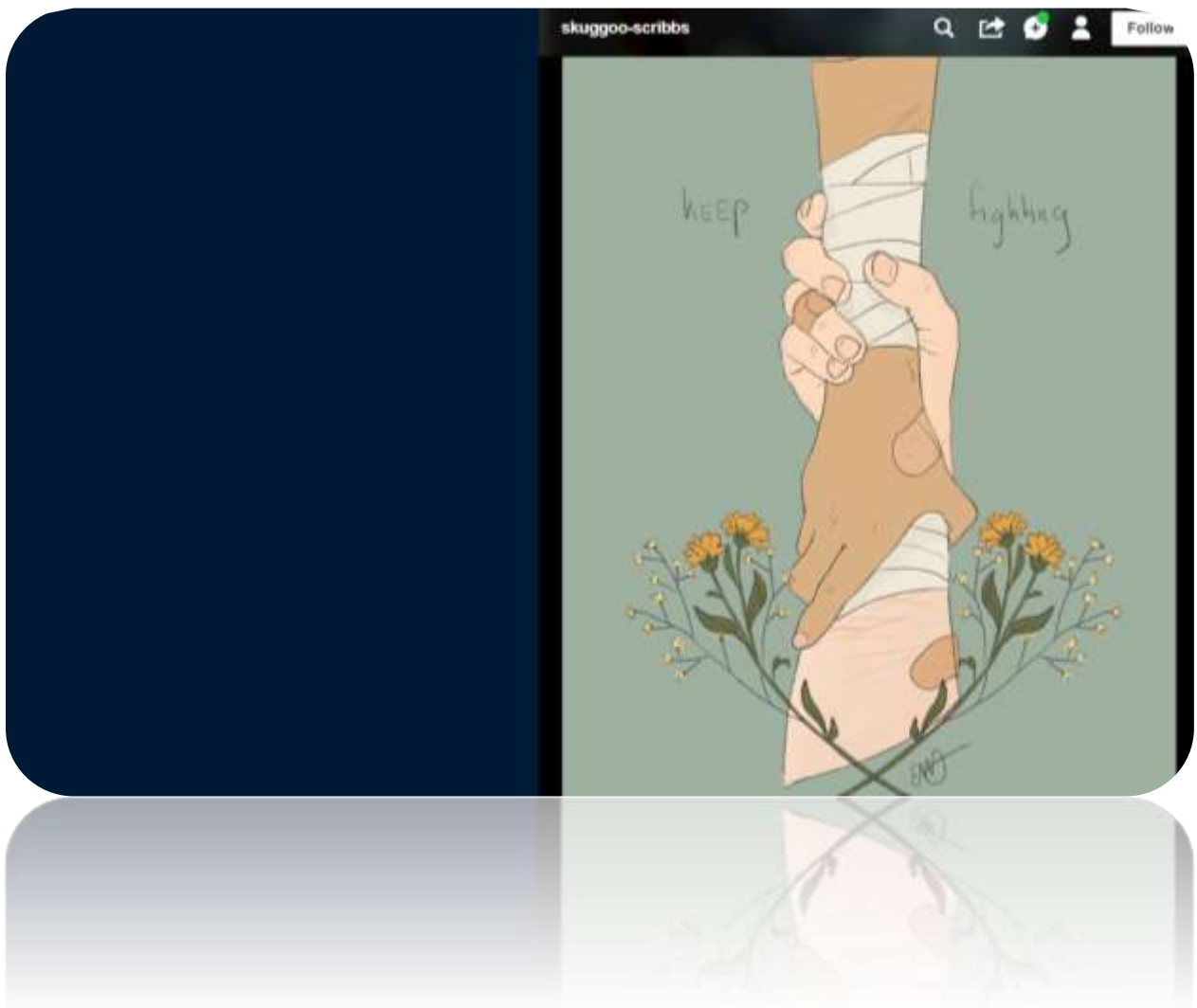
action that is outside of the acceptable norm of a society. This classification may drive authors to feel isolated from those who can and don't extend empathy as well as separated from extending their own empathy to another person who also deals with NSSI. For example, the author Barelystanding explains her rational belief that she needs to keep

“pretending” (image 2) and hiding her cuts and her feelings in order to survive offline without being subject advice and deprived of understanding. But, if she hides her deviant markings who will offer compassion and how could she offer her own understanding to others without “outing” herself? Without Tumblr, Barelystanding lives isolated from receiving or extending compassion – separated by the chasm created by societal taboos. Tumblr functions as a safe place where different account users can fully disclose their deviant thoughts and photographs with less fear of being silenced and with hopes of finding community amongst other Tumblr users who cut themselves as well.

There is no doubt that the social media platform functions as a therapeutic realm for people to confess, explain, vent, share and encourage one another. The rhetoric within NSSI is powerfully persuasive – sometimes for worst. My fear in observing these accounts has been to watch the number of re-blogs or likes that some of the images and posts get. I dread a community that spirals together and triggers one another. However, the persuasive rhetoric of cutting that exists in Tumblr that proves dangerous also proves compelling to engage people into the Rhetoric of Compassion.

## CHAPTER II

### The Rhetoric of Compassion



During my time following the three Tumblr accounts I was able to be a part of their audience. In observing the authors as an active member of this subculture I experienced an unexpected persuasion. I became emotionally involved with these authors and would find myself checking their posts multiple times a day even aside from purposed time to analyzing the posts for the purposes of this study. I found myself wanting to know them more and feeling heartbroken in their moments of brokenness as well. I decided to call this type of persuasion the “rhetoric of compassion.” All three of these authors successfully persuade emotion that motivates their audience to gain understanding of their author. The author seeks to be sought by their audience. They persuade their audience to engage in genuine compassion and empathy. They evoke a desire within their audience to become better at understanding. They in a way encourage their audience to be critical listeners and close readers of situations that are less overt than other forms of persuasion. This rhetoric of compassion works to persuade their audience to seek to understand the author, their language and actions and encourages the readers to come to their own conclusion that the self-harmers experience real pain that isn’t to be cast aside.

The historical etymology of the word compassion derives from the Latin word *compassionem* (nominative *compassio*) with the translated meaning of “sympathy”, which is a product of the past participle stem of *compati*. (com-) meaning “with or together” (+ pati), meaning “to suffer”. The derivation of the modern-day word, “compassion” is a literal sharing of affliction or suffering with another. I will name and talk about three different ways that the authors employ this rhetoric of compassion.

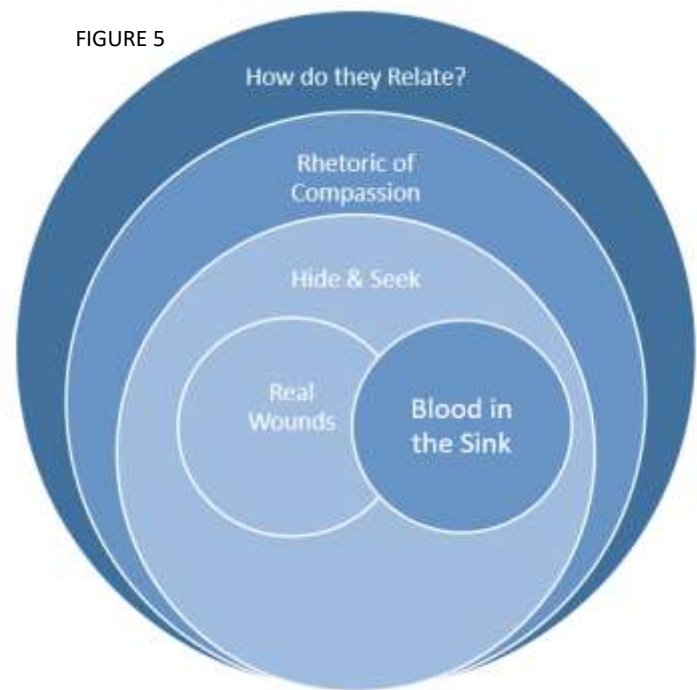
The first concept is called *Real Wounds*. This initiates the reader into their audience by introducing them to the manifested pain that proves their internal pain and inherent value. The

second concept is called *Blood in the Sink*. This notion within the rhetoric of compassion communicates to the audience what cutting too deep means. The third concept is called *Hide and Seek*, which addresses the perpetual anonymity that encompasses the language and display of cutting. The authors have created a kind of persuasion that doesn't tell the audience to do anything. Rather than working to force their audience to come to a specific conclusion, the authors persuade their audiences by inviting them into the parts of them they themselves are trying to understand. The Hide and Seek concept asks the audience to be a part of the search of the author's importance.

The relationship among the three concepts are that they all exist within the Rhetoric of compassion. *Real Wounds* and *Blood in the Sink* share the same definitive trait as elements of cutting aftermath. The documented stages of wounds and blood function as proof, they are both outcomes of purposeful cuts that are visible and ask to be seen. They are both consequential outcomes of cutting that visually expose the direct harm the author brings to herself.

The two main elements that *Real Wounds* and *Hide & Seek* share are that they are both anonymous and both on purpose. The real wounds are purposefully inflicted while simultaneously the inflicted wounds are purposefully hidden, which requires someone to purposefully seek them out. Similarly, the commonalities between *Blood in the Sink* and *Hide &*

FIGURE 5



*Seek* also come down to the anonymous nature of the act and display as well the fact that they are both done on purpose. Even if the author cut too deep, they still purposefully cut themselves and even more importantly, purposefully photographed the blood and wounds and/or purposefully reach out for support and community.

*Real Wounds* and *Blood in the Sink* coincide with the nature of the *Hide and Seek* concept in that by their anonymous and purposeful definition they lend themselves to the reader as tools



FIGURE 6

to seek out the author.

What is simultaneously anonymous and on purpose? Breadcrumbs. Hints. Clues – enthymemes created by the authors that guide the reader from drawing their own conclusion to drawing the next. The *Real Wounds* and *Blood in the Sink* aid to answer my first research question: *Is there a unique framework to*

*understand the persuasion of self-harm?* The two concepts are explicit enthymemes that engage the reader as a part of seeking the author. The scars, cuts and blood existence prove consequence of something more. The audience has no idea who left the marks and is only left with the images of the gruesome act itself, photos of unclaimed mutilated flesh and a created account name. The author leaves their audience with the mystery of who they are following in the first place which evokes the rhetoric of compassion in that though the audience doesn't know who they are following they can still desire to understand them—and that is what gives the authors value.



## PART I

### Real Wounds



IMAGE 4

Tumblr allows for the authors to fully disclose their wounds. The main points of the *Real Wounds* concept are that it first proves the author's credibility and builds their ethos by proving both a level of pain and reality to the audience. The *Real Wounds* work to remind the audience that the author is serious. Their pain is not solely internal but manifested externally, and it persuades attention to the severity and genuine suffering the author communicates in her words. For the authors to feel that they have any right to post their thoughts and feelings about cutting themselves, they first must prove that they truly hurt inwardly by posting pictures of their sliced skin. The images of the wounds seem to speak in a much rawer way than when there are re-posts of gifs or words alone. Unfortunately, as an observer, the photographs of the author's arms or

legs or sides was what reminded me the most that these are real people and real wounds. The audience can often see some little part of this anonymous person's life when they photograph their cuts. In the image above, Brokenobstacles, the author of Neverland, posted a photo of her skin. The audience can see that there are scars; marks that have healed but not faded alongside the result of a much more recent act where the blood droplets are just starting to pool out. Not only does the reader find themselves exposed to the documented act but also to pieces of Neverland's life. When the author takes a photo of themselves they risk any sort of exposure or hint as to who they really are. This risk comes with their background or pieces of the photo that remind the audience that this could very easily be their next-door neighbor, sister, or partner. For example, we can see some of Neverland's clothes. It looks like she is wearing a robe or shorts that are black and appear to have a fuzzy texture with pink stars patterning the material. In the upper right-hand corner, we see her weapon with which she chose to harm herself. There isn't much, but there is enough in that photo to be reminded that despite her name, the author of Neverland is real, and her photographed blood proves that.

There is an evident pattern in using cutting as a practical form of communication not only to persuade the audience to engage compassionately but also brings the audience into their search for self-understanding. This can be articulated as a form of attention seeking which is one of the many social taboos surrounding the self-harm topic. These authors are choosing to display their self-inflicted wounds and disclose deep and dark thoughts on the Tumblr platform. I am not arguing that cutting and communicating through cutting on the social media platform is not attention seeking. In fact, I believe that is a huge component in the rhetoric of compassion. The authors desire to be sought after and for anyone to seek anything they must believe whatever it is they are looking for is valuable. The *Real Wounds* piece in this process of persuasion works to

establish the authors' value. The author builds their credibility and works to instill an ethos that is considered trustworthy, raw, and real by their viewers. However, they create their own barrier to fully disclose their credibility by existing in the rhetoric of compassion. This type of rhetoric works to persuade the audience to seek after the author as a way of giving them value, so the author cannot and does not fully disclose their full identity. The barrier this creates is one of distrust. How can the audience truly believe that the author is someone who cuts herself when there are no images of the mutilated body on the known author? There is not a single photo I could find in my research between these three authors where they had images of their faces and their wounds. One could speculate it is all fake, that they used images from google, that they used make up to look like they were injuring themselves – that it is all just for the attention. These speculations that are used define self-harm as “attention seeking” as a way to cast the severity and validity of the practice are what perpetuate the taboo nature surrounding the dialogue about the practice and is what forces the practitioners into a shameful shell. Suddenly, they feel that their only outlet to talk about their actions and feelings is through a social media platform where they claim anonymity to protect themselves from society's “attention-seeker” label.

Being the persuasive rhetoricians that these authors are, all three of them realize that in claiming this namelessness they risk the power of their ethos. To cope with the threat of losing audience based on their weak credibility the authors attempt to prove their wounds as tekmerion through images of their skin that function as palimpsest. Tekmerion is a conclusion made that is beyond refutation. The conclusion is no longer in the realm of likelihood or an argument made by probability but is undeniable. There are very few cases of tekmerion, but it is powerful as an absolute state. If the authors on Tumblr could achieve absolute proof that they bleed because

they cut, and the blood is real because the blades are real, and the wounds are real because they use the blades to draw the blood then their ethos is recovered despite their chosen anonymity. This way they protect themselves from taboo societal labels and shameful dismissals while still proving that they are in fact cutting their own skin for a reason that the audience would then yearn to better understand.

The tekmerion of their purposefully drawn blood from their bodies is almost impossible to prove on social media. It can almost always be argued counterfeit. In attempt to address and refute this argument the authors use their skin as a palimpsest to record past and present markings from their own harm. A palimpsest is defined as, “a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain”. It is something (in this case flesh) that is reused or altered yet still bears visible traces of its earlier form. In the image from the author of the blog Neverland, the audience not only sees the immediate wounds that are freshly cut and bleeding. They also are exposed to the skin where the original cuts have worn away and healed with time. The newest cuts are written over the past wounds yet traces of the previous self-mutilating actions remain. Their skin becomes historic material. In the bottom right corner of Neverland’s post the audience bears witness to at least three scars that are thicker than the rest. Her body keeps track of the cuts that were deeper. The fact that their skin acts as a palimpsest recording past wounds, present cuts and healing to make room for future injuries provides a possibility to prove that their blood drawn is an indisputable conclusion from cutting it themselves which proves them a credible author.

One more example of how this works comes from another author, Graydecay whose blog is called *the fuckening*, who is the most frequent poster out of the three accounts I followed.

Graydecay would post “updates” on her arms and legs and would date them and take photos in similar environments. The dated photos enhance the validity of the skin as palimpsest. The audience then watches her cuts turn to scabs and scabs turn to scars over the course of the dated photographs.



IMAGE 5

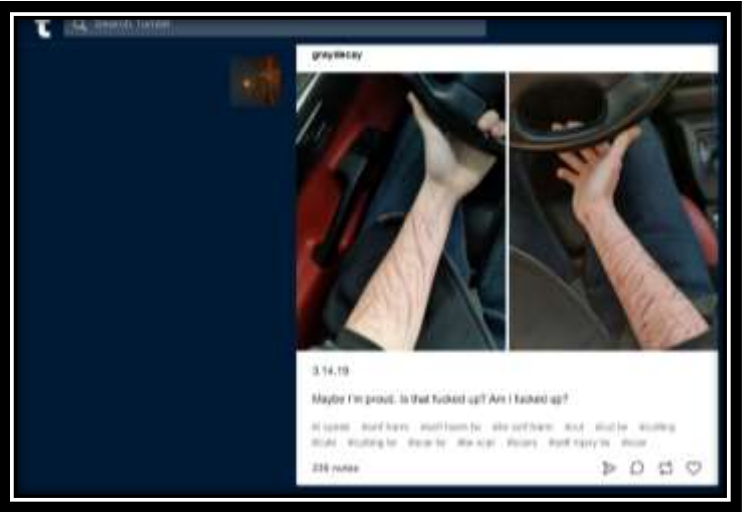


IMAGE 6

Graydecay dated the photograph on the left as taken on February 21, 2019 and photograph on the right records that the image was taken on March 14, 2019. Both images are of her in her car with the steering wheel. Graydecay would either take her photos in her car or in a bathroom like the image below. By taking the images in similar spaces every time, posting dates and most importantly providing photographic evidence of fresh cuts turning into scars, she makes it difficult to argue falsehood which makes the claim of tekmerion that much more attainable if not certain.

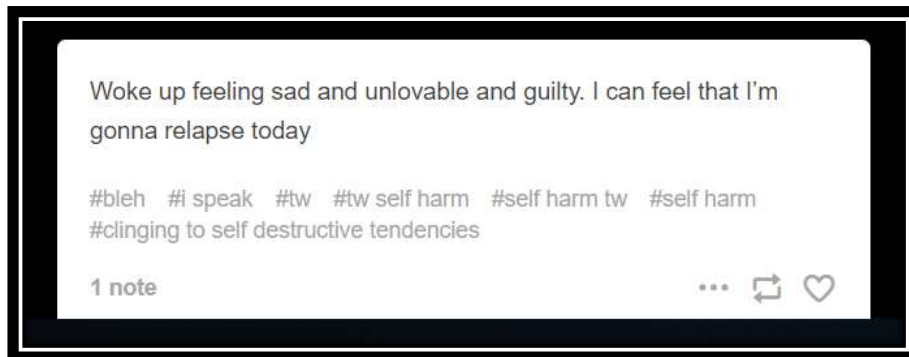


IMAGE 7

Image 7 exemplifies how the photographed wounds give the words so much more weight and authenticity. The post at the bottom of the screenshot precluded photographs of her arms. The words alone imply the author's foreshadowed cutting but are merely words that plant the idea of a bloody relapse, hinting at intent but not backed by proof of action. Image 8 is a screenshot of both the previous post claiming a possible relapse followed by an updated post that proves the intent through visuals. The words beneath suddenly hold more weight paired with the bloodied arms. Her cuts proved her intent and her audience is now captivated by her trustworthiness to follow through on her words.

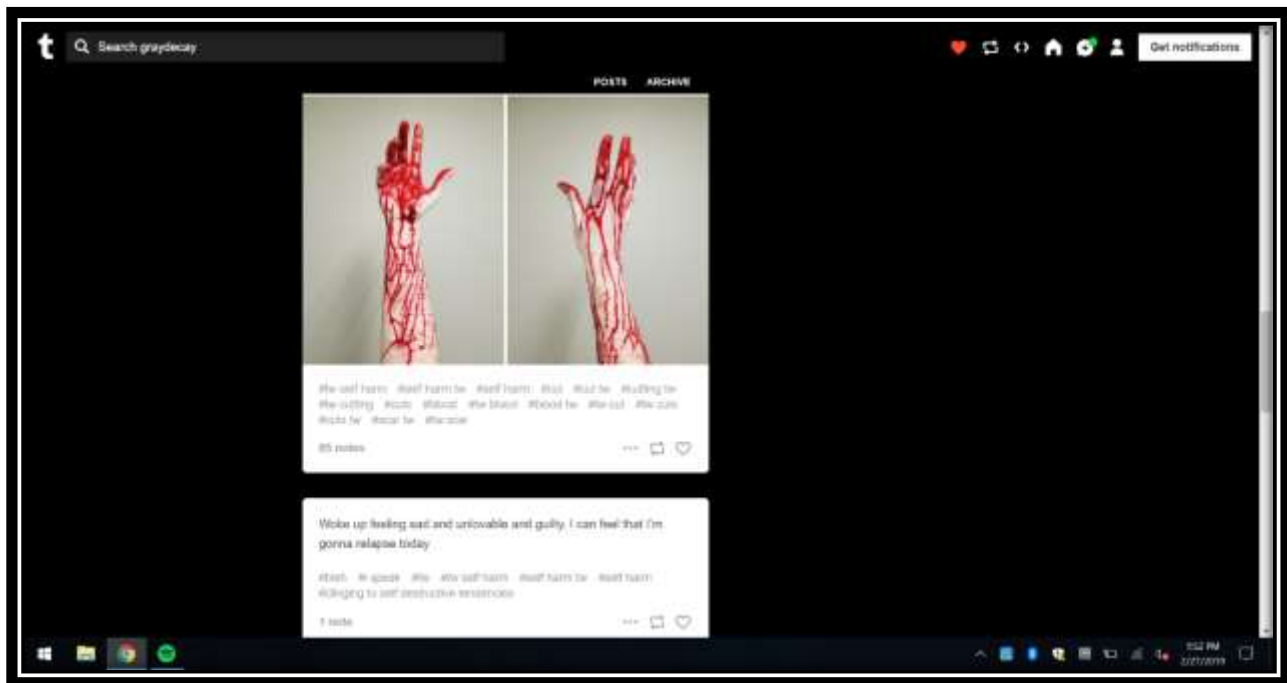


IMAGE 8

Both Neverland and Graydecay work to prove their credibility and work to gain respect as authors, and more importantly as people. Since the taboo conversations surrounding cutting in society push shame and secrecy onto these authors they have masterfully worked to persuade their audiences of their credibility despite their complete facelessness. The visual posts revealing the authors' cuts signify their past and present pain as undeniable through the faded and bleeding

inscriptions on the palimpsest that is their skin. They also keep record of their intent and pain on both the Tumblr platform and their flesh that represents them as honest and trustworthy. And it is not even until the audience sees the aftermath of the authors' documented cuts that their words hold more value. Now that the audience has seen the scars, scabs and slices – now that they have seen the real wounds they can find it worth their time to further engage in the conversation and subject themselves to the rhetoric of compassion.

## PART II

### Blood in the Sink

The concept of *Blood in the Sink* within the Rhetoric of Compassion is mainly to employ pathos and pull at the hearts of the audience by (1.) Exploiting how horrific the aftermath of cutting too deep is (2.) Combining diction and visuals as a mode to exhibit fear, ask for help and (3.) Engage with the therapeutic framework that the Tumblr platform provides. Graydecay, on her blog, *the fuckening* is the most active Tumblr account user out of the three authors. She also examples herself to be the most active cutter through her frequently updated posts. In her posts that document immediate self-cutting she exemplifies shocking images. There is a lot of blood that has splattered, dripped and pooled on her arms and on the toilet, sink and floor. This imagery alone is a huge part of the *Blood in the Sink* element in the Rhetoric of Compassion.

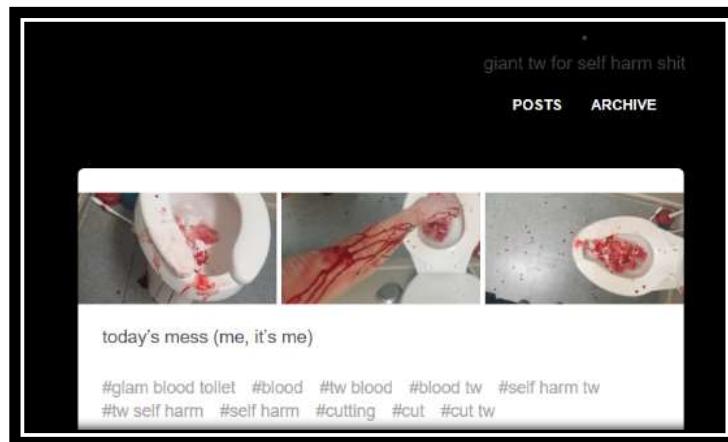


IMAGE 9

The two screenshots below exemplify what cutting “too deep” might look like as well as where the title “Blood in the Sink” originated. Graydecay captioned image 10, “Relief”. The image is of an unsettling amount of blood that appears to have gushed into the sink as an immediate consequence of cutting herself. Call it what you will: awe, horror, fascination, heart-wrenching, nausea, but these images appeal to the audience’s pathos immediately and aggressively. While



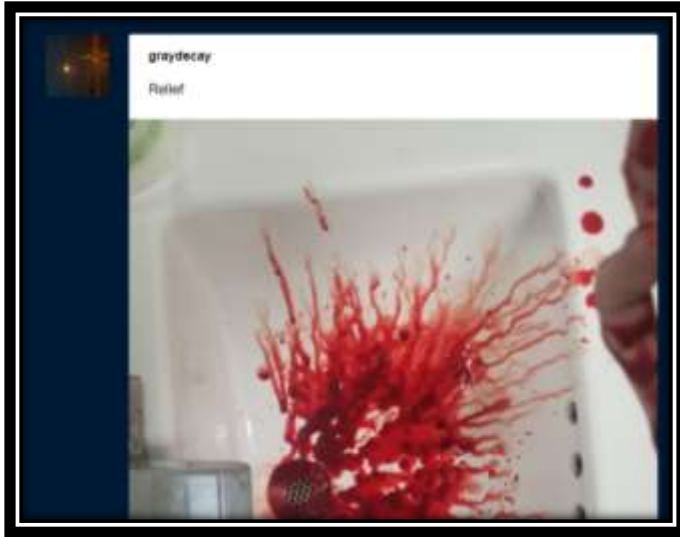


IMAGE 10

working as an observer on Tumblr I was overwhelmed by a flood of emotions when scrolling through my feed and suddenly was hit with these images. They knocked me over mentally and affected me physically. I experienced visceral reactions to images such as these. I inadvertently pulled my head away when I

unexpectedly came across them for the first time and then had to consciously create breaks from looking at them when purposefully looking at them.

These images are powerful because they exist in a space between the understood and the unfathomable. By this I mean that the audience knows and understands that this is too deep, it is dangerous, and it is perceived to feel painful. However, the unfathomable part is why Graydecay would hurt herself so badly, why does she feel “relief”? The imagery of *Blood in the Sink* is arguable the most blatant element of how cutting functions in the Rhetoric of Compassion on Tumblr.



IMAGE 11

It is immediate and graphic and exposes a disconcerting level of severity, pride, and plea for help all at once.

***DICTION OF BLOOD IN THE SINK***

The second major piece of the *Blood in the Sink* is how the authors' diction implies apathy, disgust, and fear to the audience and appeals to their pathos through the extreme level of disregard for their own body. There are endless examples of this but images 12, 13 and 14 will work as an example of many instances where this is true.



IMAGE 12



IMAGE 13



IMAGE 14

The similar word choice of, “oops”, “whoops”, “#i suck”, “lmaooooooo yikes” and so on are the apathetic words that are uncanny when paired with such graphic images. The “whoops” comments imply this accidental action that led the author to go too far and hurt herself more than she intended. The “I suck” language perpetuates the idea of failure and self-disgust with the outcome of the cutting or with herself. The “lmao yikes” comment exemplifies many others like it that almost make a joke out of the severity of the cuts. The audience is fully aware that there is nothing comical about the documented moments. The “lmao” is used almost as a term of dismissal but doesn’t function as such when paired with photos of self-mutiliation. Rather it functions as an appeal to pathos because the audience would either already empathize with this moment if they too practice self-harm or they would be persuaded to do act oppositely of dismissing the moment and come together as a support system. This self-hatred manifested in apathetic, repulsed, and fearful diction appeals to the pathos of the audience, which persuades

them to encourage and seek after the author as a way to prove that they have value. They are persuaded to engage with the author and attempt to understand them. In this act of being actively sought after it is possible that the author may see themselves as valuable and use the audience's yearning to understand the language of self-harm to convince themselves that their bodies should not be carelessly mutilated.

### ***THERAPUTIC CONVERSATION***

#### ***Confessional & Empowering Attitude***

Another important component of the *Blood in the Sink* concept is that it does appeal to the audience's pathos as an affective call for help or for community. The images that shown they have gone too far are so bold that they are undermined by their own word choice. Though the undermining works more to create a sense of compassion within the audience, the authors choose to present themselves in a self-effacing way. The other side of Blood in the Sink is when they do acknowledge and fully disclose the severity of their thoughts and actions themselves and work to communicate that to their audience. This act of acknowledgment either takes form as a confession or as empowerment. The *confessional attitude* is when the author discloses information that society would deem abnormal or wrong. Often times the audience's response to the author's confessional attitude is supportive of her actions, empathizing to a point of encouragement. The *empowering attitude* are in fact moments where the author uses Tumblr to uplift others *out* of their actions rather than *in* them. Within either the confessional or empowering attitude, there is a conversation that provides a sense of community and disproves feelings of isolation.

In the earlier images where Graydecay photographs her scars and healing cuts in her car she writes, “Maybe I’m proud. Is that fucked up? Am I fucked up?” The responses that followed acted as a sense of community that accepted her photo, and though they didn’t answer her question they supported her feelings.

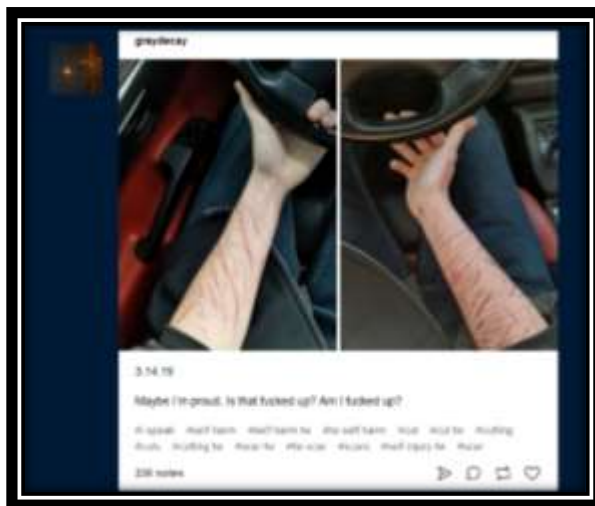


IMAGE 15



IMAGE 16

Depressed-emo-pup commented that, “they are so pretty.” Vacilavola re-blogged the photo and commented saying, “para invierno tendré mis brazos así,” claiming that in the winter she will have arms that look like Graydecay’s. In saying this she both validates Graydecay’s disclosed feelings of pride and exemplifies how Tumblr works as a framework of confession amongst strangers who have cutting in common. Graydecay’s post wasn’t an explicit cry for help or nearly as heart-stopping as her prior images but she did confess to feeling proud about her scars. Her pride comes from an act that society condemns and pushes to change or stop altogether. Her deviant confession was not questioned, and no one told her, “Yes, you’re fucked up”. No one tried to convince her that what she was doing was wrong and needs to stop immediately. The Tumblr community simply allowed Graydecay to exist in her confession and she was told that her scars were beautiful not disturbing.

One of Graydecay’s re-posts exemplifies the empowering attitude within *Blood in the Sink*. The post elicited dozens of responses, all of which echoed one another. The mixture of responses was either empathetic, affirming or used as an outlet to comment confessionally and thankfully.



IMAGE 17



IMAGE 18

The initial post (image 17) addresses the author’s audience by saying “in case you needed to hear this today”, followed by six sentences of encouragement starting with the idea that, “it will get better” and continue with language that addresses the reader personally as, “you”. The statements label them beautiful, radiant, not behind, growing, and young and encourage the audience to accept and love themselves where they are at and congratulate where they have been. The final sentence addresses the reader’s future and talks about the change to start again and ability to change. This diction differs from the confessional attitude in that it does address healing, change and growth rather than disclosing what is known to be taboo information.

The audience’s responses are where the therapeutic nature of *Blood in the Sink* becomes active. The screenshot (image 18) shows four of the many comments that characterize a therapeutic conversation in different forms. The first and longest comment expresses an empathetic response through their obvious level of personal understanding as well as confession

of their own need to read the encouraging post. The response involves understanding, personal confession, and appreciation for the post. The following comments are short and simply emoticons, however the act of engaging at all in the conversation adds to the therapeutic nature of the empowering attitude. The single heart suggests a level of compassion and the following response of the heart and flexed arm suggests compassion as well as affirmation that those who are struggling are strong. The final comment that reads, “I really needed this, thank you” followed by the heart emoji also taps into the therapeutic conversation by responding in the first place, confessing that they felt that they did need to read the encouragement, and expressing gratitude for Graydecay’s willingness to employ an empowering attitude.

*Blood in the Sink* functions in different ways that elicit various therapeutic responses. The process it takes to cut one’s own flesh, then choose to document this unseen part of themselves; the grotesque nature of open wounds and blood is enough to provoke an audience’s attention. Yet, there is no conversation in attention alone. The authors create a therapeutic conversation through their blood in the sink and their confessional and empowering words on the web page. Simply because they remain anonymous in life doesn’t mean that their actions are without purpose; in fact, it is the partnership between anonymity and intentionality that persuades their audience to follow their cuts and their thoughts and ultimately define the authors as someone with value – someone worth the conversation.

*#I SPEAK*

There is a specific hashtag that Graydecay uses in most of her posts regarding cutting. The hashtag is “#i speak” (image 19). I believe that Tumblr has become a realm where those who self-harm can freely show and explain their cuts and thoughts as a way to discuss their actions without fear of their audience reaction out of rejection, disgust, or complete shock. The communication that exists within cutting is worth listening to before shutting down.

It is understandably daunting to see or talk to someone who purposefully hurts themselves, and many people react intensely and fearfully because they want to help and protect. Though this comes from a loving place it enforces the social taboos and deviant behavior that cause those who self-harm to shut down. Graydecay’s frequent hashtag suggests a



IMAGE 19

freedom in speaking without interruption, no matter how loving that interruption may be it takes the author’s voice away. On Tumblr Graydecay can say, “I know you wish I could just stop wanting to kill myself, to hurt myself, to tear myself apart. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry”. Though the sentiment is heart-wrenching and frightening to read, she uses Tumblr as a platform to release these thoughts without shutting down. Her hashtag “#i speak”, declares ownership over her thoughts and her words and decision to post them.

### PART III

#### HIDE & SEEK

The act of cutting is confusing and contradictory in its simultaneity; NSSI is one of the few actions where the exact same person in the exact same moment is both the inflictor and receiver of physical harm. The contradictory theme deepens with the anonymous element that pervades the population of self-harmers. Many people will choose to cut themselves, permanently marking their skin and though they have revealing scars on their bodies they actively work to hide it (image 20).

Their family may know who they are, their hobbies, pet peeves, and habits yet may be kept from the knowledge of their cuts.

The Tumblr platform takes namelessness

even further in that the authors' identity remains

anonymous, yet they expose their wounds. The Tumblr audience knows this deep, dark and deviant side of someone they wouldn't be able to identify if they ran into them. The defining characteristic of the *Hide & Seek* concept is anonymity. Typically, people seek after anything of value. Rarely would one actively search for something unimportant. The authors have intentionally hidden their wounds from the world and their identities from their Tumblr audience. The authors' chosen names, language, and explicit visuals work to persuade the audience to seek what they are hiding. Though the audience may never know the author's true name, they can choose to attempt compassion for the anonymous author, and if persuaded by the rhetoric of compassion to seek understanding of the author, they inherently deem the author as valuable.

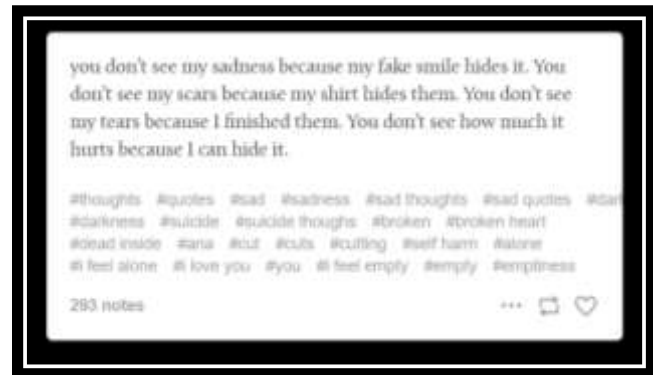


IMAGE 20



Barelystanding is the Tumblr account name of one of the authors I followed. Her biography is “a lil mix of everything. 23, FL. Torn between living and dying.” At first glance the audience simply sees her name and her profile image—both leave her real identity anonymous. Currently her profile picture is of a small dog and her name is the title of her Tumblr account, “Barelystanding”. This initial exposure to this authors’ page invites the audience’s imagination to search for more of the author’s identity. Another unique element of the Tumblr account authors’ text and images is that it is so vulnerable it is not that they are trying to hide the fact that they cut but rather start to articulate and disclose the fact that they do. Barelystanding defines herself as depressed, an alcoholic, and a cutter. These things are what give her credibility to post what she posts. Rather than these attributes be discrediting they are actually appealing to her audience and they choose to follow her. Once they choose to subject themselves to what she has to say they then are the judges and subjects of her imagery and technological discourse. Her followers see her self-description, moments of her day and thoughts as her testimony and suddenly she is credible. Suddenly she is recognized as someone who deserves to feel the pain she feels. Not as in she deserves the punishment but in that she deserves it as fair and valid. Barelystanding wants to feel acknowledged for deserving the feelings she possesses that activate her pain and her cutting.

As Barelystanding has developed her identity and presented her chosen ethos to her followers, she has gained their trust as someone who has felt real and deep pain and is willing to share. By disclosing personal information and admitting to actions that society deems as deviant behavior she offers a personality that is transparent and vulnerable. This kind of vulnerability is attractive, refreshing and defines Barelystanding as honest despite societal rejection and

condemnation of such actions. It is this transparent level of honesty that give her the credibility and that keeps her audience engaged and scrolling.

Perhaps the credibility is less for her followers and more for her. The posts seem to give her credibility as a cutter but perhaps the purpose in doing this is not for her followers, but so that she could shape her pain for herself. When I say shape the pain, I don't mean she is asking for attention by making her life seem worse than it is. Though it may seem purposed as only an outward "display" of her pain, it is a release for herself.



IMAGE 21

These authors create their ethos in reverse to how it is typically analyzed and understood. Ethos is the art of persuading one's audience of their expertise or character so that the audience trusts what the author has to say. A lot of times this is found in credentials or in an accomplished title such as "Dr." or "Olympic Gold Medalist" and so on. These titles imply that the author is well educated in a field and dedicated or hardworking. In advertisements we see brands like Coca-Cola who have established ethos simply by producing a lasting and classic product that has invited consumers to "open happiness" for decades. We hear applaud-able titles and assume comfort in believing that whatever follows their introduction is reliable. So, what about when you hear the title, "Barelystanding" whose first disclosed credentials are that they are "stuck between living and dying"?

These authors are in complete control of how they present themselves to their audiences. They can choose any name for themselves, so why something so fragile and vague? To barely do anything implies an immense amount of difficulty to achieve the task of, in this case—standing.

If the author is hardly capable of standing what makes the audience believe that she has any kind of ability or experience to do anything more than stand? The ethos here is not to convince her audience that she is Barelystanding because she is incapable of standing but rather she has been weighed down by so much it takes all her effort to stand. Barelystanding seems feeble and breakable but it is in fact proof of strength and experience not a definition of weakness. She had the opportunity to name herself anything. She could disclose her birth name but rather than defining herself by her given name she chose to define herself by an action. An action disguised as a futile act yet is truly an act of persistence and that refuses defeat. This is the underlying message within Barelystanding's appeal to ethos. Something is crushing her, whether it is her mind, her past, her circumstances or something else, she is weighed down and she is fighting to stand. The name honestly depicts her feelings and though she is barely standing she is still capable of naming herself and actively writing her own story and that gives her credibility and even more so—it gives her power. In a way her chosen title is actually an active movement declaring her fight to claim triumph.

Though different titles and completely different people, Brokenobstacles and Graydecay also appeal to their audiences through the anonymous contradiction within their own names. Rather than start with the name that is credible, the audience is given a name that calls for further investigation. By choosing to label themselves something other than their given names the authors ask the audience to seek after them. Brokenobstacles is similar to Barelystanding in that the two words together, “broken” and “obstacles” hold weak connotations and at first seems to be describing someone who is shattered and hopeless. I believe that is the point of the name – to persuade emotion and empathy out of the readers for the author but, I don't think it ends there. Obstacles are not impossibilities but rather complications or hindrances. This author's chosen

name is not stating defeat but rather acknowledging obstacles. Though stumped by obstacles she is not defeated by them. She is living amongst them. She is in fact named Brokenobstacles, so perhaps she is identifying herself as the obstacle. She is in fact the same person that wounds her body and a victim fighting the assailant epitomizes an obstacle. Perhaps the definition of broken is not referring to her victimized self but to the self that attacks.

The concept of Hide & Seek has two obvious parts and the concept altogether encompasses the Real Wounds and Blood in the Sink in its purposefulness and anonymousness. Hiding both cuts and identity is purposefully done and the real wounds and blood in the sink are outcomes of purposefully cutting. All three realms work within the boundaries of secrecy alongside the purposeful hiding and hurting to create the framework of the Rhetoric of Compassion. The authors invite the audience to seek after them, to attempt to understand them and listen to them without condemnation. They employ a persuasion that asks for empathy and invites the audience to search and understand rather than forcing them to.

## CONCLUSION

### Persuading a Relentless Pursuit

In my time following these three authors I have found myself subject to their powerful rhetoric of compassion that they have communicated through their wounds and their words. I still find myself checking Tumblr to see how they are doing and how they are communicating with others. I worry about them, I long for them to know their worth, and my heart breaks when they describe their brokenness and rejoices when they declare daily victories. I have found myself completely persuaded to attempt to understand them.

Within the framework of the Rhetoric of Compassion, the outcomes of their purposed self-injury draw their audience in by asking them to be generous with their empathy in order to understand the logic that exists within their practical communication. Their *Real Wounds* prove their credibility to their followers even in the state of namelessness in order to escape the social taboos of attention-seeker. If these people are seeking attention by drawing their own blood, then maybe society should give it to them rather than dismiss it with annoyance or label it “a phase”. The Rhetoric of Compassion is carefully structured to remain anonymous, yet purposeful and credible just so that they can *ask* their audience for attention and cannot be negatively labeled as attention seekers. They had to create a rhetorical framework that convinced their audience that they are a subject worth being sought after rather than the subject demanding to be heard. The Rhetoric of Compassion persuades the Tumblr audience to be a part of seeking the authors’ importance.

“Seeking” is not synonymous with “finding”. To seek is to relentlessly search for something. The authors cloak themselves anonymously and hide their cuts from the offline world and their identities from the Tumblr world as a way to start their persuasion. As much as the

author's rhetoric of compassion persuades their audience to deem them as valuable, the audiences' motivation to seek them out proves to the authors that they have worth. Even if their audience never finds their identity, their powerful persuasion has instilled a means to converse about cutting, move the passion in the audience to relentlessly hunt for the inherent value that these authors have, and influence the will to understand the language of self-harm.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Who self-injures?**American Psychology Association. (2015, August). Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2015/07-08/who-self-injures>

**Adler, P. A., & Adler, P.** (2005). Self-Injurers as Loners: The Social Organization of Solitary Deviance. *Deviant Behavior*, 26(4), 345-378. doi:10.1080/016396290931696

**Adler, P. A., & Adler, P.** (2007). The Demedicalization of Self-Injury. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36(5), 537-570. doi:10.1177/0891241607301968

**American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV).** (n.d.). *SpringerReference*. doi:10.1007/springerreference\_179660

**Aristotle, & Kennedy, G. A.** (2007). *On rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press.

B. (Ed.). (n.d.). A History of Rhetoric: George Campbell. Retrieved from <http://www2.bakersfieldcollege.edu/jgiertz/B5 Chapter One.htm>

Barelystanding. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://barelystanding.tumblr.com/>

**Brown, S.** (1992). I. A. Richards' New Rhetoric: Multiplicity, Instrument, and Metaphor. *Rhetoric Review*, 10(2), 218-231. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/465482>

**Glenn, C. R., & Klonsky, E. D.** (2013). Nonsuicidal Self-Injury Disorder: An Empirical Investigation in Adolescent Psychiatric Patients. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 42(4), 496-507. doi:10.1080/15374416.2013.794699

**Kahan, J., & Pattison, E. M.** (1984). Proposal for a Distinctive Diagnosis: The Deliberate Self-Harm Syndrome (DSH). *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 14(1), 17-35.

doi:10.1111/j.1943-278x.1984.tb00334.x

**Muehlenkamp, J. J.** (2005). Self-Injurious Behavior as a Separate Clinical Syndrome. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 75(2), 324-333. doi:10.1037/0002-9432.75.2.324

•Neverland•. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://brokenobstacles.tumblr.com/>

**Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan.** *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 3rd ed., John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2017, pp. 1284-189

**Zetterqvist M.** (2015). The DSM-5 diagnosis of nonsuicidal self-injury disorder: a review of the empirical literature. *Child and adolescent psychiatry and mental health*, 9, 31.

doi:10.1186/s13034-015-0062-7

**Zetterqvist, M., Lundh, L., Dahlström, Ö, & Svedin, C. G.** (2013). Prevalence and Function of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) in a Community Sample of Adolescents, Using Suggested DSM-5 Criteria for a Potential NSSI Disorder. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 41(5),

759-773. doi:10.1007/s10802-013-9712-5