



Effect of Autism Portrayal in Television and Film Media on Viewers With Autism

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Abstract

Purpose Representation of people with autism in television and film media is increasing. However, inaccurate or stereotypical representations can be potentially harmful to the world's view of people with autism. This has been widely explored in previous literature. However, less attention has been given to analysing how people with autism perceive these representations and the effect that these representations have on people with autism themselves. The current study therefore explored the perceptions of people with autism on representations of autism in television and film media and the effects that these representations have on them.

Methods Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 10 participants with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) on this topic. Thematic analysis was then carried out.

Results Thematic analysis identified three key themes: 'neurotypical actors in autistic roles leads to feelings of discomfort'; 'autism representation is well-meaning, but lazy'; and 'harmful effect of the autistic savant'.

Conclusion Overall, rather than empowering and including people with autism, the representations of autism in television and film media that they encountered were often found to be distressing. These findings have clear implications for how autism representation in television and film media could be improved.

Keywords Autism spectrum disorder · ASD · Neurodiversity · Media · Film · Television

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition involving a variety of difficulties with social, emotional, and communicative behaviours, and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In society, media plays a big role in shaping beliefs towards life events and concepts (Baroutsis et al., 2023), and with regards to the reporting and featuring of people with disabilities it often appears ill informed, offensive, and discriminatory (Ellis & Goggin, 2017). Within the media autism has been increasingly represented in film and television shows, which has helped improve awareness of autism. However, it has done little to change associated stigma within society (Broderick, 2010; Holton, 2013). Murray (2008) suggested that films and television shows portraying autism often lack a personal

viewpoint and play on public concern rather than seeking to extend public knowledge.

Media portrayals have a significant effect on the lives of individuals with autism, as observing characters on screen influences the perceptions of many individuals towards those characters and the groups they represent (Nordahl-Hansen et al. 2018a). According to research, inaccurate media representations of autism can result in increased discrimination, stigma, and marginalisation among people with autism (Turnock et al., 2022). Individuals with autism may internalise negative portrayals and stereotypes depicted in the media, resulting in an unfavourable view of themselves and their capabilities, which can negatively affect their self-esteem and self-acceptance (Cage et al., 2018). In addition, these depictions can influence societal views and opinions about autism, which can impact individuals with autism when it comes to access to schools, jobs, and social possibilities (Brede et al., 2017; Black et al., 2020).

Autism is a broad and complex spectrum, and individuals with autism can exhibit a range of abilities and traits. Representing characters with autism in a stereotypical fashion

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may reinforce incorrect assumptions and limit comprehension of the broad spectrum of skills, obstacles, and traits within the autism community (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to handle media portrayals of autism with sensitivity and acknowledge that they may not reflect the complete diversity of the autistic community (Cage et al., 2019). Issues with autism representation in the media will be discussed, followed by the importance of positive representation in the media. The lack of research into how representations of autism in television and film media affect individuals with autism themselves will then be highlighted. Finally, the current studies aim to help address this by interviewing individuals with autism on how autism is represented within television and film media and the effect that this has on them will be outlined.

Media portrayals of autism have been criticised for frequently focusing on stereotypes (Ressa, 2021). An example being the television show *Atypical* (Robia et al., 2017–2021) which focuses on the story of Sam Gardner, a high school student with autism. Concerns have been raised that *Atypical* depicts autism in a stereotyped and simplistic manner, consequently reinforcing stereotypes (Nordahl-Hansen 2017; Lee and Deng 2020; Jones et al. 2023b). Furthermore, by focusing only on the stereotypical representation of one main character with autism, the series fails to accurately depict the variety of experiences, and obstacles within the autism community (Kurchak 2021b) or to recognise the well documented heterogeneity of the autistic population. However, it should be noted that public opinions on *Atypical* are varied, with some appreciating the show's efforts to raise autism awareness.

An additional character that has prompted controversy is Sheldon Cooper in the television show *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre & Prady, 2007). They consistently display characteristics that are often associated with autism, such as social clumsiness, trouble with understanding sarcasm, dedication to schedules, and an intense concentration on specific interests. Again, it has been claimed that the character reinforces stereotypes and inaccurately depicts the spectrum of autism's diversity (Den Houting et al., 2021). However, despite this, certain viewers welcome the portrayal of a character with autism-like characteristics because it helps spread visibility and promotes awareness of neurodiversity (Sharifi, 2020). And it is important to keep in mind that Sheldon's autism status was never explicitly acknowledged on the show (Gill, 2022).

Further supporting stereotypical representations of autism in media are findings from a study in which fictional film and television characters with autism were assessed against Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.) indicators for ASD. There was an evident pattern that the majority of characters experienced close to

all characteristics specified in the diagnostic manual, a finding that is in stark contrast to the clinical picture observed in real life (Nordahl-Hansen et al. 2018b). These portrayals therefore seem to reflect “extreme levels” of autism related indicators, which is not representative of a large majority of people with autism in real life.

A stereotype of autism that is frequently represented in the media and therefore deserves highlighting is that of the ‘autistic savant’, in which individuals with autism are frequently portrayed as having exceptional talents in disciplines such as mathematics, science, or art. While true that some individuals with autism may flourish in certain areas because of their particular strengths and intense focus, not all individuals with autism have these exceptional skills. Savantism is observed in fewer than one-third of individuals with autism (Howlin et al., 2009), which is why focussing on portrayals of the ‘autistic savant’ can reinforce inaccurate stereotypes (Anjay et al., 2011).

A focus on the ‘autistic savant’ is found in one of the earliest portrayals of a character with autism in the film *Rain Man* (Levinson, 1988), which since its release in 1988 has become a subject of critical debate. The film, directed by Barry Levinson and featuring Dustin Hoffman as an ‘autistic savant’, has drawn favourable reviews as well as negative ones for its portrayal of autism (Conn & Bhugra, 2012). While *Rain Man* has been praised for casting light on autism and spreading awareness concerning the disorder, it has also been criticised due to its constrained and stereotypical depiction of the savant archetype of those with autism (Hannam, 2014). Another criticism is that, while it can be acknowledged that some characteristics of autism may be challenging for families, Raymond is initially portrayed in *Rain Man* as a hardship or a problem to be addressed, reinforcing damaging assumptions about people with autism being a burden to society and their families, rather than recognising their innate worth and value (Skudra, 2021).

In addition, representations of autism in media have been criticised for employing neurotypical actors to portray autistic characters. Many claim that it disregards accomplished actors with autism and promotes the exclusion of people with autism from on-screen roles (Thomson, 2021). A recent example comes from the film *Music* by Sia Furler (2021) in which a neurotypical actress portrays the non-verbal autistic character ‘Music’, who serves as the focal point of the film. The film faced significant backlash regarding its portrayal of autism and the absence of inclusion and dialogue with people who have real-life experiences of autism (Bastow, 2021). According to critics, the film promoted detrimental autism stereotypes and encouraged ableist attitudes (O'Neill, 2021). The decision to hire a neurotypical actress as an autistic character elicited an exceptionally strong backlash, because it was perceived as a missed chance to

offer representation and real examples for people on the autistic spectrum (Kurchak, 2021a). Critics and individuals of the autism community underlined the importance of genuine representation which acknowledges the spectrum's diversity and avoids damaging stereotypes (Bastow, 2021).

Failure to include people with autism in 'behind the scenes' roles of television shows and films about autism has also been criticised. For example, the television show *Atypical* (Robia et al., 2017–2021) was criticised for not including enough people with autism in its creation, both on screen and behind the scenes (Brady & Cardin, 2021). Critics claimed that by omitting autistic voices, the show lost a chance to create an increasingly complex and accurate portrayal (O'Keeffe, 2017). Including people with autism in the creation of portrayals of autism has been suggested as a way to combat inaccurate portrayals (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). However, it should be noted that due to the criticism *Atypical* did subsequently include actors with autism in seasons 2 and 3.

Despite the issues with how autism is represented that have been covered above, increased representation is still a valuable goal, as positive portrayals of autism in television and film can have important and profound effects (Hopkins, 2019). Positive depictions aid in educating the general population about autism, its traits, and its difficulties (Prochnow, 2014), and aid the normalisation of autism as a natural component of human variation, which promotes acceptance and inclusion (Nordahl-Hansen, 2018b). When the distinct perspectives and challenges faced by people with autism are depicted properly, well-executed representations may further inspire empathy in audiences (Jones et al. 2023a).

In recent years as awareness of autism has increased, so too has representation of autism in television and film. However, as can be seen from the literature discussed above this has been done with varying degrees of accuracy and often feeds into stereotypes about autism. Research into autism representation in the media often focusses on how representations of people with autism relate back to existing stereotypes and the effect that representations have on a neurotypical audience's views of people with autism and their understanding of the condition. However, Orm et al. (2023) did survey adults with autism about their recommendations for improving portrayals of autism in television shows and films. The most important factors were rated as appointing autistic writers, having an autistic consultant, and representing greater diversity in autistic characters. Additionally, Jones (2024) asked academics with autism to write a reflection on fictional/entertainment portrayals of autism, identifying the best and worst portrayals in film, television, and literature. The respondents identified a need for more diverse, accurate and positive portrayals of autistic characters, including the presentation of autistic characters

as holistic people, rather than story arcs. Stereotyped portrayals were highlighted as negative aspects, as was the presentation of autism as a problem to be solved, and the lack of actors with autism playing autistic characters. Despite these studies there is still a paucity of research that directly elicits and analyses the views of people with autism on representations of autism in television and film media.

Additionally, an important question that is still not well explored is how representations of autism in television and film media affect individuals with autism themselves. How are they affected by the sometimes inaccurate and stereotypical representations of autism that they see? Previous research has identified positives and negatives in television and film media from the point of view of people with autism (e.g. Jones, 2024). What the current study aims to do is to further explore how the representations that they are viewing are affecting them. In other words, going beyond what they do and don't want to see or like and don't like, into what the effect of these representations is on the viewer with autism that is leading to them expressing these opinions.

This is a significant avenue for research to focus on as it is important that not only are autistic voices heard when it comes to how people with autism are represented in the media, but that it is understood how current representations make them feel. In that way a greater understanding can be gained of why certain aspects are being highlighted as positive or problematic and following on from this, a greater understanding of what is driving acceptance vs. rejection of representations of autism in television and film media by the autistic community. The aim of the current study is therefore to both help address the paucity of research that directly elicits and analyses the views of people with autism on representations of autism in television and film media by exploring their views on this topic through interview and to expand on current understanding by exploring the effect that these representations have on them.

Method

Design

A qualitative approach was taken in the current study to enable the gathering of rich, descriptive data (Howitt, 2019). This approach works well for exploring in-depth the views of individuals with autism on representations of autism in television and film media and the affect these representations have on them. Additionally, a relativist and constructionist approach is taken, acknowledging that people with autism's understanding of autism portrayal in television and film media and how it affects them is inherently relative to the individual and constructed based on individual

experience. This was achieved through the interview process by the interviewer approaching the interviews as an opportunity for the participants to share their subjective experience, rather than looking for the participants to meet preconceived ideas or give ‘correct’ answers. However, it is important to note that while people’s experience of autism portrayal in television and film media may be subjective, this does not prevent the identification of key themes that represent shared experience.

The current study used semi-structured interviews as they are versatile and flexible (Kallio et al., 2016), allowing the interviewer to ask the interview questions in whatever order best suited the flow of the interview and to rephrase questions to aid conversational flow. And when interviewing individuals with autism, it needs to be acknowledged that each person is different and requires a creative and flexible approach otherwise the discourse can become restrictive rather than insightful (Harrington et al., 2014). Interviews took place remotely through MS teams on a one-to-one basis.

Participants

Participants were required to be between the ages of 18–34 years, have a diagnosis of ASD and have watched television and film which depicted characters with autism. The age range was chosen as people between the ages of 18–34 years consume the most online videos with regards to Netflix, YouTube and other streaming platforms which means they have the most access to wider content containing autistic representation (Statista, 2022). The exclusion criteria were anyone who hadn’t watched any pieces of media with autistic representation and had no diagnosis of ASD. Ten participants who all met these criteria took part in the study (Mean age = 23 years, $SD = 3.8$, 6 female, 4 male). The sample size is in line with recommendations for qualitative research using interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were recruited via a study advertisement being sent through the mailing list of individuals registered with the disability support services at a large university in the West Midlands region of the United Kingdom. The disability support team sent out the study advertisement with contact details for the researchers.

Materials

An interview schedule consisting of fifteen questions was used alongside prompts (see appendix). These have been formed around existing research into autistic representation in the media (e.g. Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022). Each interview lasted around thirty minutes. Examples of the questions are:

1. What TV shows have you seen that had autistic representation?
2. Did you perceive anything negative?
3. Did you perceive anything positive?

Procedure

Participants took part in the study at a time of their choosing, and the interviews were carried out online for the participants convenience. The interviews were carried out using MS Teams and the participants were able to choose whether they wanted to have their cameras on or not. Due to the discomfort that people with autism can experience in social interactions, which taking part in an interview is, this option was given to minimise any potential discomfort to ensure that participants were able to feel as comfortable as possible during the interview process, which would support more open dialogue with the interviewer. During the interview participants were initially welcomed to the interview, then asked the questions on the interview schedule, and finally thanked for their time at the end of the interview.

Analytic Strategy

Thematic analysis (TA) was used as it offers a flexible approach to identifying themes within people with autism’s experience of autism representations in television and film media (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was taken to allow the data itself, rather than existing preconceptions to inform the themes. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases for conducting a thematic analysis were followed. First of all, the interview transcripts were read and re-read to familiarise the researcher with the data. Then initial codes were generated. These codes were then formed into initial themes. These themes were then reviewed, followed by naming and defining the themes. In accordance with suggested quality guidelines (Willig, 2008) the second author reviewed the data interpretation and final thematic structure. Any issues highlighted during review were discussed to reach consensus.

Results of Thematic Analysis

Analysis identified three key themes relating to individuals with autism’s views on how autism is represented within television and film media and the affect this has on them: neurotypical actors in autistic roles leads to feelings of discomfort; autism representation is well meaning, but lazy; and the harmful effect of the autistic savant. Please note that the participant names used are pseudonyms.

Neurotypical Actors in Autistic Roles Leads to Feelings of Discomfort

The majority of participants highlighted that when viewing media where the role of an individual with autism was being played by a neurotypical actor, this led to feelings of discomfort.

The first quote discussed here is from Sarah (female, age 28):

Being autistic should be considered when playing an autistic role, I think it is almost offensive. I think for example showing stimming or something like that, something which us autistics get mocked for all the time and then have someone else, a neurotypical person, do it and then no one bats an eye and it's very unfair.

Sarah clearly feels that it is important that actors with autism should be given the opportunity to play autistic roles. Even suggesting that it is offensive when a person with autism isn't cast, demonstrating the strength of her views. Taking offence involves experiencing emotional discomfort as a result of what you are witnessing. Her example of 'stimming' suggests that seeing a neurotypical individual imitate behaviour associated with autism, especially behaviour that an individual with autism may be stigmatised for may lead to discomfort in a viewer with autism. This may also suggest a feeling of discomfort towards witnessing a neurotypical actor being able to 'switch off' the behaviour when they finish acting, when in reality for someone with autism it is something that they cannot simply stop, as noted by Brady and Cardin (2021).

Another participant Jess (female, age 24) expresses similar views:

It does upset me as I do performance arts and love acting, and three of my friends also do the same as me and are autistic themselves. I don't think there's a shortage of actors, and I think it's just offensive, especially when it comes to the physical aspects of autism. Like I understand stimming, and I might not have the same stim if I was playing an autistic character, but I'd understand what it's like to not be able to control it. Sometimes I feel like they add the most extreme one in due to stereotypes. Does that make sense?

Jess indicates that she does not feel that the use of neurotypical actors in autistic roles is a result of a lack of actors with autism, going so far as to suggest that it is offensive to cast neurotypical actors when an actor with autism could fill the role. She may also view the casting of neurotypical

actors as minimising opportunities for her and her friends who are actors with autism. Jess also highlights the example of stimming, suggesting that viewing the portrayal of this behaviour by a neurotypical actor is particularly discomforting. Partly because the actor would have no idea what it was like to live with this behaviour. And because it feeds into stereotypes. This may lead to discomfort which is not just due to the depiction of the behaviour by a neurotypical actor, but due to the choice of the writers to include it (e.g. Thomson, 2021).

Chris (male, age 19) also states:

Again, I don't like it. I can't really describe specifically why, but something about it makes me extremely uncomfortable. Especially when it's not accurate or pushing a common stereotype. I think if it wasn't the same stereotype reformatted like it is most of the time, then maybe I wouldn't feel uncomfortable.

Chris also indicates how uncomfortable viewing neurotypical actors in autistic roles make him feel, going so far as to use the word "extremely". His quote suggests that this may be more of a problem when the portrayals are inaccurate or appear to push a single stereotype of autism. This suggests that moving away from stereotypical representation would increase his comfort with viewing representations of autism, as a viewer with autism.

However, the discomfort caused by neurotypical actors playing autistic roles was not universal. Max (male, age 21) shared a different opinion to the other participants:

It doesn't bother me too much, but I understand why people wouldn't like it. It just doesn't make me feel upset if I see someone who is neurotypical playing an autistic character. But a badly written character who is autistic does unsettle me, but I don't think that's down to the actor rather the poor research when writing.

Max can clearly see why neurotypical actors playing autistic roles would cause discomfort in others, but for him it is rather viewing a poor portrayal of autism that causes him discomfort. He places the blame for these poor portrayals on a lack of research into autism when writing, a sentiment echoed in Thomson (2021). However, the use of neurotypical actors in autistic roles may represent a missed opportunity to include people with knowledge and understanding of autism which they could bring to inform the portrayal of autism.

Overall, this theme suggests that the casting of neurotypical actors in autistic roles may potentially cause a large amount of discomfort in viewers with autism and may even be viewed as offensive. This discomfort is related to views

that a neurotypical actor would not understand what it is like to live with the behaviours and characteristics of autism that they are attempting to display. They may even be considered to be almost mimicking people with autism. This is particularly problematic when it is associated with stereotypical representations of autism. Additionally, the casting of neurotypical actors is viewed as a missed opportunity for inclusion of actors with autism in media that is about them. It may be that the inclusion of actors with autism and the lifetime experience of living with autism that they would bring to the role could inform the portrayal of autistic characters and go some way to mitigating stereotypical representations. This may lead to more accurate, fleshed out characters that portray different aspects of autism. This could make them less discomforting to watch for viewers with autism, as suggested by Singer (2017).

Autism Representation is Well-Meaning, but Lazy

When discussing autism representation all ten participants mentioned the television show *Atypical* and some mentioned shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Good Doctor*. Participants expressed differing opinions about shows they mentioned, but there was an overall theme of believing that the writers appeared to have good intentions but somehow it all felt lazy and even disingenuous.

When Harriet (female, age 21) shared her opinion on the television shows *Atypical*, *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Good Doctor* she expressed that:

I didn't relate to *Atypical*, but I don't think it was extremely bad. The *Big Bang Theory* is a bit more complicated because no one actually says that Sheldon is, but it's quite clear that he is. But if they did ever announce that he was, the writers would then receive backlash because the other characters spend the whole show making fun of him for things out of his control. *The Good Doctor* made me so angry because I refuse to believe they ever consulted a single autistic person when they were creating it and it was the whole idea of autistic people being insensitive while also being these extreme geniuses. But I'm not sure whether this is down to an American thing, or the way Hollywood like to make autism out to be like.

Harriet highlights difficulty relating to the portrayal of characters with autism in a number of television shows. This seems to be largely due to the shows relying on stereotypical representations of autism and using autism related behaviours and characteristics as things to be made fun of. Harriet seems to feel that the reason for this reliance on stereotypes may be a result of a lack of consultation with people who

have autism in the creation of shows representing people with autism. And instead, potentially relying on a prevailing view of what autism is within the media, rather than actively researching it. As stated, when referring to *The Good Doctor* these aspects of autistic representation are actually anger inducing for Harriet. This suggests that any intention of trying to offer representation to people with autism may be jaded by inaccurate representation and playing to stereotypes, potentially leaving the viewer with autism angry, rather than affirmed.

Kylie (female, age 19) describes her feelings towards the show *Atypical*:

I didn't mind *Atypical*. There were some parts that I could relate to, but it was very much another show about a white autistic male that seems to be the default for anyone trying to write about autism. I know they added different autistic characters, but he was the main focus for the show, and even though they tried, something about it just didn't feel right.

Kylie concludes that the show is somewhat relatable but that there was still an undertone of unease while she was watching it. The comments about the show being 'another' show about a white autistic male, suggest that Kylie as a viewer with autism wants to see a broader and therefore more diverse representation of people with autism on screen. The repetitive focus on white autistic males may be viewed as stereotypical and the inclusion of representation of people with autism to therefore be tokenistic. Seeing the same stereotypes repeatedly reformatted into a different character may stop the viewer from seeing it as good representation, which is a common factor in media that depicts autism (Nordahl-Hansen et al. 2018a).

Jane (female, age 30) highlighted representation on reality TV shows when talking about a reality TV show called *Love on the Spectrum*:

...However, I sort of got the idea that it was more for neurotypical people somehow. It didn't like show much on advice on how to help those with autism to understand and navigate relationships. I feel like it was more for entertainment purposes. Sort of like the *Undateables* which covered people with a variety of disabilities dating, and I remember that specifically one of the men on there with autism was turned into a meme. Like I can see the fun side to things, but when it's already difficult for us to maintain relationships, I don't feel like such shows should be being made simply for entertainment purposes.

Jane concluded that rather than being used as a means of supporting viewers with autism with relationships reality television shows like *Love on the Spectrum*, which feature people with autism, are instead created as entertainment for neurotypical people. Clearly a show that takes an area that people with autism have difficulty with and turns it into perceived entertainment for neurotypical people feels to Jane like a missed opportunity for advice and support. Such shows can even lead to participants on the shows being the target of ridicule. This would clearly be quite discomforting to people also from the autism community. This suggests that even if the inclusion of people with autism in these kinds of shows was well-meaning, how they were formatted may represent a missed opportunity to offer support to the autism community.

Danny (female, age 25) described a similar feeling of disingenuousness when talking about her experience of representation of autism in the media:

I think I like an element of being seen, but also a lot of the negative things in the media about autism, they somehow come across like they are trying to be kind and thoughtful, yet it somehow reinforces stereotypes or comes across as misinformed at the same time. I'm not sure if that makes sense.

Danny highlights that while representation of autism makes her feel seen, which is viewed as positive, the positivity of increased representation in the media may be somewhat attenuated by the often-negative content. Positive intentions may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes due to a lack of knowledge of autism. Consistently seeing negative and stereotypical information on autism can be detrimental to those with autism (Jones et al. 2023a).

To summarise, while the inclusion of representation of autism in television and film media may be well intentioned, how it is implemented may come across to the autistic viewer as somewhat lazy, and perhaps even disingenuous. This is because of a perceived tendency to involve a reliance on stereotypical representations, rather than attempting to offer an accurate representation. It can be viewed as often swaying towards focussing on more negative aspects of autism, even going so far as to poke fun at individuals. And can potentially promote the ridicule of people with autism. Perceived stereotypical or negative representations can potentially create unease and even anger in the viewer with autism. And rather than feeling supported by inclusion in media viewers with autism may at times feel that such inclusion is for the entertainment of neurotypicals, and that opportunities for accurate representation and support are potentially being missed.

Harmful Effect of the Autistic Savant

The 'autistic savant' is a popular stereotype in television and film media. It is the idea that those with autism are extremely intelligent and gifted. This theme describes how the continuous representation of the autistic savant in media creates the perception that all people with autism are gifted and the negative affect that this can have on them through heightened expectation of intelligence by others that can be difficult for the individual to live up to.

Chris (male, age 19) shared his experiences in school in relation to the portrayal of Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*:

Also, he's (Sheldon) portrayed as a genius, and I always remember kids at school would constantly ask me things about maths and I had no idea why they would say that until I came across more media portraying autism.

Here Chris describes how even from other children at school there was an expectation that as a person with autism he would fit the stereotype of being very intelligent and good at maths. He links this to how *The Big Bang Theory* has created a whole character around the savant trope, showing that he feels that it is representations like the one in *The Big Bang Theory* that are perpetuating this stereotype and creating this expectation in others. His experience of encountering this expectation and initial confusion around why this expectation was being placed on him demonstrates the effect that these stereotypical representations can have on the lived experience of people with autism.

When discussing *The Good Doctor* Jess (female, age 24) shares her opinion on the savant trope that is contained within the show:

And there's the TV show *The Good Doctor*, I really don't like that one. It's the whole idea of him being extremely intelligent and seeing equations in front of him. It just pushes that idea that we are all these geniuses, and I have to say I'm not it's like calling myself stupid which I know I'm not, but I feel like it lowers people's opinions of me.

Jess highlights how portrayals such as in *The Good Doctor* set the expectation in others that everyone with autism is a genius which sets an unrealistically high standard for people with autism. When they are not able to live up to this high standard it can leave the individual feeling that they are less in the eyes of others.

In summary, while savantism does exist within autism, its frequent portrayal within television and films may have supported a stereotype that all people on the autistic

spectrum are essentially geniuses. This can create an unrealistic expectation in others which can leave the individual with autism feeling potentially confused as to why this is expected of them and negatively about themselves when they are unable to meet this expectation. This is potentially harmful to people with autism's view of themselves and their place in the world.

Discussion

The current study aimed to directly elicit and analyse the views of people with autism on representations of autism in television and film media and to explore the effect that these representations have on them. Through interviews with people with ASD and subsequent thematic analysis three key themes were identified: neurotypical actors in autistic roles leads to feelings of discomfort; autism representation is well meaning, but lazy; and the harmful effect of the autistic savant.

The current study's findings that viewing neurotypical actors playing autistic characters was perceived negatively by the viewers with autism and as a missed opportunity for greater autistic representation furthers the idea that more consideration should be given to casting actors with autism in roles that portray autism. This is consistent with the suggestions of many critics of autism media (e.g. Bastow, 2021; O'Keeffe, 2017; Thomson, 2021) and supports the endorsement of casting actors with autism by autistic survey respondents in previous research by Orm et al. (2023). The current study's findings further expand on these ideas, by suggesting that a clear underlying reason for viewers with autism's rejection of neurotypical actors playing autistic characters may be that viewing this can cause significant discomfort in viewers with autism. Some may even view these representations as offensive. Mimicking autism related behaviours, such as stimming by these non-autistic actors was seen to be particularly discomforting to the viewers with autism, which supports suggestions that seeing this on screen can be perceived as harmful and a mockery of those with autism (e.g. Draaisma, 2009; Brady & Cardin, 2021).

The current study's finding that viewers with autism felt that the depictions of autistic characters in television shows and films tended to be somewhat lazy, relying on stereotypical representations supports the claims of critics that media portrayals of autism are often stereotypical (e.g. Nordahl-Hansen, 2017; Lee & Deng, 2020; Ressa, 2021). Stereotypical representations may feed into the potential association between how autism is represented in the media and stigma (e.g. Broderick, 2010; Holton, 2013). The current study also highlights that in addition to the lasting societal impact that inaccurate information and poor portrayals of autism

can have (Brede et al., 2017; Black et al., 2020) these stereotypical or negative representations can potentially create unease or even anger in viewers with autism. Therefore, the rejection of stereotypical representations of autism by viewers with autism may be motivated not only by a desire to see accurate representations, but also by the discomfort that inaccurate representations provoke within them. Viewing these inaccurate portrayals could have potential effects on the individual's sense of self, as what they are seeing on screen is supposedly a representation of the group that they belong to. Where the focus is on negative depictions of autism this may even affect the individual's mental health (Cage et al., 2018).

Additionally, the current study's findings that viewers with autism feel that the frequent featuring of the 'autistic savant' stereotype is not representative of people with autism supports previous research which highlights its overuse (e.g. Anjay et al., 2011). This also further validates criticism of one of the earliest representations of autism in film *Rain Man* (Levinson, 1988) for its stereotypical focus on the 'autistic savant' trope (Hannam, 2014). In addition, the current study expands upon the overuse of the 'autistic savant' stereotype by highlighting the potential effect that the overuse of this trope can have. Specifically, it can lead to the unrealistic expectation in others that all people that they encounter with autism will essentially be geniuses. This can lead to confusion in individuals with autism when they encounter people who have formed this view, as they may not understand why this expectation is being placed upon them. When they are subsequently unable to live up to this unrealistic expectation they may be left feeling negatively about themselves or may even not understand why they are not able to do the things that they see autistic characters do in television and film media.

It could potentially be argued that asking participants about their views on neurotypical people writing autistic characters and people with autism not being cast for autistic roles may have negatively slanted participant's views of how autism is represented in television and film. However, neurotypical people writing autistic characters and people with autism not being cast for autistic roles are well documented features of current representation of autism on screen. And finding out how participants felt about the current state of autism representation they were seeing was a key focus of the current study. Also, the questions wording did not inherently state that these were negative things e.g. the question was not 'how do you feel about the terrible practice of neurotypical people writing autistic characters?'. Rather it stated that this was an aspect of autism representation in television and film media, and the participants were free to give their views on it either way.

In summary it seems that while wider representation of diverse groups is an admirable goal within the media, when it comes to the representation of people with autism, representations in the media may not be having the positive impact on autistic audiences it would be hoped for. It appears that rather than empowering and including people with autism, the representations in the media that they see can be quite distressing to them. This may largely be the result of an over-reliance on stereotypical depictions and the use of neurotypical actors to play characters with autism in television and film, which can render the representations of autism inaccurate and potentially distressing or insulting to the autistic viewer, and autism representation appearing to be more focused on acting as entertainment for neurotypical people, rather than supporting and including people with autism.

While the use of neurotypical actors to play autistic characters appears to be viewed negatively by audience members with autism, it could be asked whether an accurate and representative portrayal of a character with autism by a neurotypical actor might be better received. However, regardless of the accuracy of the portrayal, the representation may still be rejected as the casting of neurotypical actors to play autistic roles may potentially be viewed by viewers with autism as representative of an overall lack of involvement of individuals with autism in the creation of media that represents them. And a major reason for the perceived negative aspects of autism portrayal appears to be the lack of involvement of individuals with autism. For example, when discussing autism representation in the show *The Good Doctor*, which features a neurotypical actor playing a person with autism, participant Harriet said, “The Good Doctor made me so angry because I refuse to believe they ever consulted a single autistic person when they were creating it”. It may be that even a good performance by a neurotypical actor in an autistic role may be perceived negatively, as some participants in the current study used the term ‘offensive’ to describe neurotypical actors portraying features of autism. The use of actors with autism may therefore go some way to attenuating potential negative views around a portrayal of autism in film and television media, as it would represent a perceived involvement of a person with autism.

In terms of limitations of the current study, while it is felt that the findings have transferable relevance to people with autism’s perceptions of autism representation in television and film media and the effects these representations have on them more broadly, it is acknowledged that conclusions are drawn from a small sample of individuals with autism. The views expressed by the participants are their views on representations of autism and how they have made them feel and alternative views are possible. It should also be noted that the current study explored participants views and while

comments such as “I refuse to believe they ever consulted a single autistic person when they were creating it”, were made by participants, writers approach and whether or not they consulted with people with autism in the creation of media were not directly investigated as part of the current study.

Characteristics depicted in some of the more ‘stereotypical’ representations of autism may represent more negative aspects of autism that viewers with autism may find discomforting. It is unsurprising that, like any group, people with autism would want to see positive representations of themselves and might be concerned about more negative portrayals. However objectively, it must be considered that overly positive representations of autism, which ignore the difficulties that people with autism face may potentially ignore important realities of autism.

The current study expands on existing research into the representation of autism in the media, by specifically interviewing people with autism to explore their views and discovering how what they are seeing makes them feel. Significantly, this gives a voice to the autistic audience and highlights specific potential problematic areas in how autism is represented in the media from their viewpoint. The highlighting of potential problematic areas is the first step towards being able to address them and can help to make autism related media inclusive for the population it represents, rather than potentially insulting or distressing.

Based on this there are some important takeaway points from this study that could potentially be used to improve the representation of autism in television and film media. Clearly an overreliance on stereotypical depictions needs to be avoided in order to more accurately depict what is a diverse condition. More accurate depictions could be achieved by giving the autistic community a voice and seeking their input into the conception of characters with autism. Actors with autism could also be employed in these roles to aid authenticity and promote accuracy of depiction. And an overall greater input of the autistic community into media that aims to represent them is required, to ensure accuracy and avoid misrepresentation. This would also help to prevent representation of autism being potentially used as solely entertainment for neurotypical people.

An additional avenue for potential further investigation would be to consider the views of the families of individuals with autism on autism representation in television and film media and the effects that such representations have on them. In this way it could be determined if the people who are closest to individuals with autism highlight similar factors with regard to autism representation and if they are being similarly affected by what they are viewing to their family member with autism.

In conclusion, representation of autism in the media is important for this group, as it is for all groups. To see accurate information about the group that you belong to and to be able to see on screen characters that you can relate to and in an ideal world draw support from. However, this representation needs to be done sensitively and accurately in order to avoid it being potentially distressing or insulting to the group that it is aiming to represent.

Appendix: Interview Questions

1. How do you feel about taking part in the research?
2. What is your favourite TV show/film?
3. Why is it your favourite TV show/film?
4. Can you recall your first encounter with representation of autism in the media?
5. How do you feel about neurotypical people writing autistic characters?
6. How do you feel about autistic people not being cast for an autistic role?
7. What TV shows have you seen that had autistic representation?
8. Did you perceive anything negative?
9. Did you perceive anything positive?
10. Have you encountered any negative representation of autism in film?
11. What is your favourite positive representation of autism in film?
12. In an ideal world where you could create a TV show/film with an autistic character what would you like to be represented?
13. Do you think negative portrayals have ever influenced masking your autistic traits?
14. Have representations of ASD you have seen shaped your view of yourself?
15. Is there anything you would like to add that is relevant to the subject?

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Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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