Histrionics of Autism in the Media and the Dangers of False Balance and False Identity on Neurotypical Viewers

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Abstract

Contemporary US media increasingly portray autism “positively.” Based on critical realism and guided by the Disability Studies in Education (DSE) framework, three television shows—Atypical, Touch, and The Good Doctor—with fictitious Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) character(s) are qualitatively analyzed to understand the impact of the media’s portrayal of autism on the perceptions of neurotypical educators from the perspective of a disabled teacher educator. Autism in the three comedy-drama series is portrayed as a savant syndrome of White heterosexual male experience affecting middle-class families. These portrayals of ASD are less representative of the autism community and therefore lead to two prominent television strategies of misleading information—false balance and false identity. Since media are not neutral informers, entertainers, educators, and persuaders, it is vital for consumers especially educators to engage in DSE informed critical literacy to ensure the consumption of meaningful information about autism.

Keywords

autism – false balance – false identity – educator – critical literacy – disability

An increased representation of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) characters in the media in the past two decades is creating awareness about autism...
(Baron-Cohen, 2015), but also possibly shaping viewers’ perceptions of autistic people (Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2017a). Considering the role of media in educating, informing, and entertaining the public (Mullins, 2014), the portrayal of ASD in comedy-dramas can either positively or negatively shape viewers’ perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards autistic people. While it is good that contemporary media has evolved to showcase autism beyond the “freak shows” of yesteryear (Bogdan, 2012; Siebers, 2008), the degree of the gain or damage of this broadcasting on educators is unknown.

In one of my teacher education classes, teacher candidates recommended I watch Atypical, Touch, and The Good Doctor after they learned that I had never watched American television shows with autistic characters. Even though the majority did not want to pre-empt the plot, some students briefly shared their views: I suppose to encourage or entice me to watch them. Meanwhile, I had discussions with teacher candidates throughout the semester, and although not enough for me to make concrete conclusion on their perception of autism, these episodic conversations provided insight into how influential the media was on educators’ learning and understanding of autism. Students knew the storylines of each of the three TV shows, but I was later baffled by the numerous untruths about autism they contained. This paper aims to explain how media portrayals of autism impact perceptions of neurotypical educators of autistic students from teacher educator’s perspective.

While I recognize the purpose of media in disseminating information about autism matters, the media also made me appreciate my students’ funds of knowledge (González & Moll, 2002) and the power in educating the masses (Mullins, 2014; Nordahl-Hansen, 2017). With the media at their disposal, it was clear to me that besides teacher curriculum our teacher candidates are very informed (and sometimes misinformed) about autism by the public discourse (i.e., public curricula that is readily accessible to them via the media, but that is beyond teacher educators’ control). While the TV shows provided a rich orientation to autism culture from the view of contemporary western media (Furlong, 2017), the veracity of the information and the influence on educators remained unclear to me. Our teacher candidates may be learning about disability matters and pedagogical practices from certified scholars and

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* I declare that I have no conflict of interest and had no funding for this study. Also, this study did not involve human participants. Still, ethical standards of the institutional review board were considered throughout the study process.

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standardized curricula, but the impact of the public curricula on their understanding of autism remain mysterious.

Though comedy-dramas can enhance teaching and learning about autism, their efficacy in inculcating appropriate perceptions of autistic individuals is debatable. The paper purposefully shares presentation of autism in TV shows from the perspective of a disabled Black African immigrant teacher educator at a US higher education institution. The goal is to examine the impact of media with autistic characters popularly watched by teacher candidates to discern the presentation of autistic characters and the potential impact on educators’ disposition to autistic learners. My objective is to delineate perceptions from the media representation of ASD characters and identify risks they pose to the autistic community when educators uncritically consume this information. In addition, I share ways of addressing prejudices that the media perpetuate and ways of disabusing inadvertent biases that viewers, including educators, develop. The guiding question is as follows: How do TV shows with autistic characters influence teacher educators and teacher candidates’ knowing and understanding of autism? To answer this question, I circumscribe autism and autistic people based on current knowledge.

**Definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder**

The genesis of the autism can be understood either through the medical or social lens (Siebers, 2008). Understanding how autism is portrayed in the media requires the definition and knowledge of autism and its qualities by key players. Although autistic people\(^1\) have been members of society from time immemorial, there is growing discussion on who they are. Thus, the literature includes several autism qualities depending on the philosophical standpoint. Autistic advocates (Sinclair, 2005) who mostly embrace tenets of social models of disability theory (Siebers, 2008) consider autism a natural human experience and identity, and just like race, sex, or gender, a difference as naturally

\(^{1}\) Disability terms including autism definitions are contested although the two major schools of thought have common guidelines for terminology when referring to disabilities: avoiding patronizing praises and pejorative terms. Even though person-first language (e.g., a person with autism) is widely used in the literature by neurotypicals, I mostly used identity-first language (e.g., autistic people) because I value the rights of the autistic community to choose and accept the language that makes them more comfortable and empowered (Brown, 2011; Sinclair, 2005). I also use terms such as handicap, idiot, or savant contextually and/or as counterdiscourse to the dominant ways of knowing disability and therefore, to elevate the disabled voices.
occurring in society irrespective of one's family status, class, race, nationality, region, or culture. It is because of this naturalness of autism as a human phenomenon that autistic self-advocate groups, such as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), want autistic individuals to be valued for who they are as part of a neurodiverse\(^2\) and enriched human existence (Sinclair, 2005). From this social standpoint, autism identity is not a handicap, nor does it make one a lesser being, but rather it enriches a multicultural human existence. From the social model worldview (Siebers, 2008), autistic categories and labels are social constructs imposed by neurotypicals to denigrate autistic identity and experience and to degrade autistic people to qualify and justify the oppression of the autistic population (Sinclair, 2005).

From the medical perspective, autism is a neurological disorder that affects brain functioning. According to the American Psychiatric Association's (2013) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), ASD is a lifelong developmental condition that affects the human central nervous system and significantly influences a person's physical, social, and communication behaviors. “Spectrum” refers to an array of behaviors, such as repetitive and restricted patterns of actions (e.g., repetition of words or phrases, clapping of hands, hypersensitivity to certain stimuli such as noise), obsessive interests (e.g., inquisitiveness about machine parts or numbers), and deficiencies in social communication, interaction, and relations (e.g., lack of eye contact), which occur consistently in different contexts after the age of three. People with ASD may be categorized as high functioning or low functioning based on the above criteria. DSM-5 also suggests that there is no one diagnosis that can identify ASD because the symptoms exist across a spectrum (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, the four major forms of ASD include Asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental delay – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), childhood disintegrative disorder, and autistic disorder. Individuals with Asperger syndrome have average or above average intelligence but also experience difficulty with communication besides restricted and obsessive interests (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], n.d.). Individuals with autistic disorder exhibit different functioning behaviors, including restricted and repetitive behaviors, poor reciprocal social interaction, and overall communicative problems (NIMH, 2016). Children with childhood disintegrative disorder are typically developing children who regress in behaviors after age two. Such children often develop complications, including the loss of speaking

\(^2\) Neurodiverse refers to the variation and differences in neurological structure and function that exist in the human population while neurotypical refers to people that do not display neurological autistic qualities.
ability and struggle to eat (NIMH, n.d.). Lastly, PDD-NOS describes children who exhibit composite challenging developmental skills that affect socialization, communication, and imagination (NIMH, n.d.).

Autism identity or categories and labels remain controversial today just as a century ago, and so past and present media portrayals of autism also remain debatable (Cumo, 2019). The history of autism reveals that neurotypical people especially medics have grappled to identify autism for over a century; therefore, the term remains contentious even as its use grows and diversifies. As early as 1908, the word autism described children that struggled to fit in the world of neurotypicals. However, in 1943, Dr. Leo Kanner, a US child psychiatrist popularized the label when he described 11 children under his care who displayed interaction problems as having an inborn disorder of affective contact. He explained the social problems these children exhibited as a result of an inheritance disorder, which made them uninterested in other human beings besides themselves. In the 1940s, Hans Asperger (whose name is used in the Asperger syndrome) described four children in his care who exhibited severe social and communication problems as suffering from autistic psychopathy. Since the 1960s, many terms have emerged and used to refer to autism including infantile autism, early childhood psychosis, and symbiotic psychosis.

Irrespective of where one stands in terms of the social or medical constructions of autism, it is clear that like the larger population, autistic people are heterogenous and so knowledge about them is diverse and inconclusive. Despite the differences, contemporary media are obsessed with savants, and often, comedy-dramas exaggerate the magical skills of characters with Asperger syndrome (Maich, 2014). This portrayal markedly falsifies the public perception of autism. Next, I review the literature on autism and media.

Past and Present Portrayal of Autism in the Media

Autism in Audiovisuals

Murray (2008) conducted a historical analysis of autism in media. Although understanding of autism is relatively new, Murray (2008) found that John Langdon Down used the terms “idiot” and “savant” in his 1887 book Mental Afflictions of Childhood and Youth to describe patients who exhibited “prodigious feats of memorization” (p. 66). Still, little information about autism was learned during that time through the 1970s. The scarcity of autism in the media can be attributed to the lack of awareness and a cultural deficit perspective, a view that autistic people lack the ability to be human because of their impairment or background (Sinclair, 2005). However, the representation of autistic
people in the media gained momentum in the late 1990s, particularly in picture motion media, such as films and TV (Murray, 2008).

The public understanding of autism gathered momentum after the production of *Rain Man* in 1988 (Murray, 2008). With *Rain Man*, the public began to believe that autistic people possessed magical skills. Considerable generalization based on *Rain Man* has led to the notion that all autistic children have savant skills even though the autistic character in the film was a real adult without autism. Nonetheless, studies have demonstrated that autistic children have varied intelligence quotients (IQ) (Herzberg, 2014) and abilities (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Howlin et al., 2009). In the 1990s, studies contributed to the identification of the “sentimental savant,” an individual who realizes fundamental human concerns and attempts to work toward normalcy (Murray, 2008, p. 13). Thus, the creation of autistic people has happened among professionals, and the media have overhyped different autistic traits mostly without the input of the autistic community. The lack of “autistic” perspective (Sinclair, 2005) has seen autism presented as a medical or health condition under development despite these portrayals being debunked scientifically (Murray, 2008).

Media shape people’s perceptions of autism (Mullins, 2014; Nordahl-Hansen, 2017); it can create autism awareness or spread deficit beliefs (Baron-Cohen, 2015). An analysis of 26 films (23 from America and three from Asia, Australia, and Europe) by Nordahl-Hansen et al. (2017b) found that autistic characters matched DSM-5 traits and that most movies valued savant-like skills despite the fact that high-functioning autistic individuals made up less than a third of the autistic population. A study by Nordahl-Hansen (2017) also found that contemporary media unrealistically displayed ASD groups in comparison to other disabilities. They usually leaned toward and heightened the savant stereotype, thus misrepresenting the autistic community. Prochnow’s (2014) study identified three different ways that the media labeled autistic characters: undiagnosed and/or unlabeled, savant and/or magical savant, and different and/or quirky (a more realistic portrayal). Furthermore, Prochnow (2014) found that on the positive and negative scale of qualities, the present-day media focused on autistic qualities that appealed to a neurotypical audience. In doing so, forms of contemporary media avoided characters with severe or profound autism (Prochnow, 2014). Furthermore, contemporary media invest in neurotypical Caucasian actors and, in the process, disseminates their hyper-positive culture (Prochnow, 2014). So far, in America, most of the autistic population, especially those with savant syndrome, come from the White community as opposed to communities of color, which may be attributed to factors such as their easier
access to healthcare and their awareness of autism services (Mai-Han et al., 2017).

The Harmful Nature of Partial Media

Information shared by the media with the public is never neutral but is rather a political and cultural process in which some information are given more weight than others (Turin & Friesem, 2020) to achieve an agenda (Ruiz, 2017), such as fostering patriotism during war time. Therefore, audiovisual stories greatly influence people’s opinions and help establish norms that govern communities’ ways of life, including interactions and relationships (Mullins, 2014; Samsel & Perepa, 2013).

As powerful influencers of people’s thoughts and behaviors, the media have for centuries influenced how disabled people are perceived and treated in society (Holton, 2013; Mullins, 2014; Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2017ab; Samsel & Perepa, 2013). Unlike the twentieth century when media blatantly constructed disabled people as freaks and monsters (Bogdan, 2012; Siebers, 2008), today media focuses on the disability exceptionalities or heroism of disabled people and in the process create disability awareness (Brenna, 2013). However, the media also explicitly and implicitly perpetuate biases that marginalize the disabled (Mullins, 2014; Siebers, 2008). Disabled people are still underreported in the media, and whenever they are in the news, they are primarily portrayed as misfits (i.e., pitiful victims of their own impairments) or superheroes (i.e., overcomers of their own impairments) (Schalk, 2016). Either stereotype, which are achieved through false balance and false identity, negatively impacts viewers’ perceptions, and therefore negatively affects the relationships between neurotypicals and neurodiverse population. False balance is a phenomenon in which the media attempts to provide both sides of an argument on a subject (e.g., whether climate change is true or a hoax, whether use of spies as journalists or journalists as spies is right or wrong, whether abortion is right or wrong) (Koehler, 2016). False identity happens when one masquerades or imitates someone else’s identity; for example, when a detective takes the identity of a journalist to access certain information (Lashmar, 2017).

Both false balance and false identity are harmful. Journalists’ “false balance” of (non)controversial subjects have been found to impair the perceptions of the public of such matters (Koehler, 2016). Koehler (2016) conducted a study in which conflicting comments from two experts who disagree on an issue was scored among experts on a panel who favored either side to understand the effect of false balance reporting on the decision making of experts. Koehler concluded that “false balance’ can distort perceptions of expert opinion even when participants would seem to have all the information needed to correct
for its influence” (2016, p. 24). Considering that the public relies on experts for final judgement on controversial issues, they are vulnerable to consumed information, especially now that studies show that in some situations “false balance can exert a distorting influence on public perceptions of expert opinion” (Koehler, 2016, p. 25). Conversely, Lashmar (2017) examined the use of spies as journalists by the Anglo-American intelligence agencies and the harm (arrest, kidnaps, murder) caused to real journalists by these covert practices. Lashmar argued that the use of journalistic cover by spies blurred the borders between spies and journalists and in the process caused unquantifiable hurt to journalism and bona fide journalists. It is not easy to differentiate masquerading intelligence officers from real journalists, and in a situation of conflict, a crisis of confidence arises in the communities experiencing conflict when spies cannot be differentiated from real journalists, and because of the conflicting information, mistrust arises and groups hostile to each other were likely to hurt suspected spies that do not embrace beliefs and goals. To overcome a crisis of confidence, Lashmar (2017) argued that journalists must be journalists and not spies and that spies must be spies and not journalist. Based on these examples it is evident that both false balance and false identity affect the relationships of film viewers and nonviewers since media shape people’s perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors based on the represented object.

**Educators Perceptions**

Perception occurs when stimuli through senses—touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing—are identified, organized, and conceptualized to make meaning of the information (Samsel & Perepa, 2013), and so, perception influences people’s feelings and attitudes, which in turn inform behaviors and relationships (Danforth, 2017; Sinclair, 2005). The important role of the media, including TV, in disseminating information (Salomon, 1979) means that the media significantly influence audiences’ perceptions about disabled people (Holton, 2013; Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2017a). Like other members of society, teachers consume media information on autism and so are vulnerable to developing certain behaviors and feelings based on the media representation of autism. Teachers’ perceptions of disabled students in general are informed by history of disability, cultural orientation, their training (Samsel & Perepa, 2013), schoolwide culture, which is influenced by whether the school stakeholders value or devalue the disability community, which determines many things such as funding of disability programs (Danforth, 2017; Gabel & Connor, 2016; van Garderen, 2019). Because of these factors, educators have ambivalent perceptions of disabled learners, ranging from low expectation and fear to empathy and care, majorly influenced by the catchment culture (Murray, 2008; Sinclair, 2005). Studies
have demonstrated that different educators treat disabled learners differently based on their perceptions of disability as either a medical condition or social identity (e.g., sympathetically, discriminately, aggressively, or empathetically) (Danforth, 2017; Gabel & Connor, 2016). Samsel and Perepa (2013) examined the impact of the media portrayal of disabilities on teachers’ perceptions of their students, and they revealed that TV programs and films influenced how teachers understood disability, became aware of it, and gained knowledge about it and disabled people, as well as indirectly influencing how they taught. Furthermore, participants in the study mentioned that most media omit or misrepresent disabled people and in the process sensationalized disability in ways that perpetuated stereotypes. Participants also mentioned that “documentaries focusing on a particular condition or disability, give them a better understanding of general issues, such as the home environment, the process of diagnosis or insight into personal difficulties which their students may face in day-to-day life” (Samsel & Perepa, 2013, p. 142).

Even though contemporary media are becoming responsible in the representation of autistic people as competent humans, little information is available on how these portrayals influence consumers’ perspectives of the autistic population. In particular, there is a dearth of knowledge on the impact of popular autistic TV shows on the perspectives of educators on autistic individuals. Nonetheless, the unbiased representation of autistic people in the media is critical in challenging normalcy and the hegemonic practices that have pushed the autistic population to the periphery of society (Holton, 2013; Sinclair, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

I adopted a critical realist approach to distinguish the “real” world from the “observable” world and to gather data from the media but also to use my extensive experience as a disabled teacher educator to analyze experienced and observed happenings, while remaining cognizant of the locus of my own subjectivity in the process (Fletcher, 2017; Lashmar, 2017).

Disability Studies in Education

The study also used the Disability Studies in Education (DSE) framework (Danforth, 2017; Danforth & Gabel, 2016), which allowed for flexibility in my interpretations of the subjective data of the TV shows (Smith et al., 1999). DSE “is an intellectual and practical tradition intersecting disability studies and educational research, creating a general orientation to disabilities as a...
social and political phenomenon within activities of education, schooling, and learning” (Danforth & Gabel, 2016, pp. 4–5). Two major DSE models that inform the understanding of disabilities and society are medical and social models. Each model reflects deep philosophies stemming from a complicated history of disability, which has for centuries been shaped by social, cultural, economic, linguistic, and political forces (Danforth & Gabel, 2016; Davis, 1995; Siebers, 2008). The medical model principle considers the impairments of an individual student as the cause of his or her learning barriers and low quality of life, whereas the social model principle considers disability as a social construct, and therefore, oppression of the disability community in schools, as being caused by sedimented cultural biases that nondisabled people enact. Considering that the social model of disability locates barriers in the society rather than in the individual disabled person, I adopt the social model in order to challenge the culture of deficit that orients neurotypical educators into silencers of disabled people’s voices, propagators of negative images of disability, and perpetuators of disability myths and stereotypes and therefore stigma (Bogdan, 2012; Goffman, 1986). Humanization of education is vital to encourage the embrace of genuine diversity and inclusion and for the creation of safe learning environments that nurture respect and care and allow sharing of knowledge among disabled and nondisabled people. Therefore, DSE enables the examination of the representation of autism in the media, showing how autistic characters shape educators’ perceptions and how attitudes and behaviors impact the schooling lives of autistic children.

Data Collection
The three TV shows recommended by my class had autistic characters, were recent release in English, and very popular. By November 2020, Touch had a 33% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and 80% from Google users. The Good Doctor had 53% on Metacritic and 97% among Google users. Atypical had 83% on Rotten Tomatoes, 66% on Metacritic, and 97% among Google users. These three TV shows are very long, dense, and broad in terms of their varied subjects and autism themes because of their multiple seasons and episodes. In brief, The Good Doctor, composed by Dan Romer, is an ongoing American Broadcasting Company (ABC) show that first aired on September 25, 2017 (and had four seasons and over 13 episodes by May 2020) (Gordon, 2017; Listo, 2019; Shore, 2017). It features Shaun Murphy, a young man with savant syndrome at the prestigious hospital where he is a surgeon (Brown, 2020; Gordon, 2017). Atypical, composed by Robia Rashid, is a three-season drama on Netflix that first aired on August 11, 2017 (Fernandez, 2017). It features Sam, a high-functioning teenager with autism in high school, who is on a quest for romance and
needs to gain independence to achieve his dream. Touch, composed by Wendy Melvoin and Lisa Coleman and produced by Tim Kring, is a two-season drama that aired on Fox Broadcasting Company from January 25, 2012, to May 10, 2013 (Karlin, 2012; Kring, 2012; Lawrence, 2012; Toynton, 2012). It features Jake, an autistic young boy who does not speak but is high functioning and remains mostly dependent on his guardian, Martin Bohm, a widower. The storylines of these comedy-drama series are interestingly informative and persuasive regarding autistic people.

Data collection involved watching and reviewing the three comedy-dramas for approximately 50 min to 2 h a day during weekdays and up to 4 h during weekends from September 2018 to May 2020 (on Netflix, Hulu, and Google). With captions on, I transcribed the audio and described scenes that illustrated autism qualities. Guided by dse principles and autistic qualities, I examined several of the disability issues (broadly) and autism issues (specifically) that were presented and how they were similar or varied (either within- or between-subjects), depending on the TV show and possible perceptions. I factored different elements: tone, lighting, settings, characters traits—physical (clothes), social (friends), mental (e.g., schooling), relationships (e.g., families, teachers, friends, and parents), interactions and activity (e.g., locations—home, the community, shopping, dating), behaviors (e.g., withdrawn and alone) and feelings (e.g., loving, caring, sad, happy, cheerful, or detached) to self and others and among themselves in different contexts. Specific excerpts were selected (i) that offered a clear evaluation of the characters’ behaviors and feelings and (ii) that relied heavily on identifying features of autism or reactions to autistic behaviors and feelings. The selected excerpts were linked to the title of the TV shows and to the names of actors, directors, producers, and/or writers.

**Data Analysis**

I thematically analyzed the three comedy-dramas guided by dse and informed by my extensive disability experience to identify individual identities and environmental enablers and inhibitors so I could discern possible interaction and relation between teacher educators and candidates and teachers and autistic students. To understand autistic identities relative to environmental enablers and inhibitors, media analysis involved the differentiation and identification of autistic characters based on the major autistic traits—repetitive, savant-like skills, obsessive interests, not understanding social cues, lack of eye contact, and difficulty in regulating emotion (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). I also focused on the settings, autistic and nondisabled characters’ feelings, behaviors, communication (e.g., words uttered), and reactions to delineate the possible responses of the audience and impact on their perspectives of autistic learners in learning settings. Using Nvivo software,
I coded the possible perceptions educators may develop as a result of viewing these comedy-drama series. Using the thematic approach (Smith et al., 1999), major themes in each comedy-drama were identified based on the research question and medical and social models of disability theory. Then, I compiled data linked to delineate themes of neurotypical perceptions of autism. Later, I merged subthemes into mega themes that would inform educators of media fallacies and ways teacher educators can inculcate positive perceptions and attitudes of autistic learners among pre-kindergarten-high school (P-12) teacher candidates who consume information from contemporary popular TV shows with characters with autistic traits. Next, I discuss the overarching themes.

**The Dramatics of Autism in Contemporary Media**

The findings revealed that all ASD characters were clinically portrayed as high functioning, socially deficient, emotionally detached, and heterosexual males from middle-class White families. These were collapsed into two mega-themes: misrepresentation of the invisible silent majority and clinical misrepresentation of ASD condition. I present each perception below.

**Misrepresentation of the Invisible Silent Majority**

The three media create visible, invisible, and hypervisible autism identities for various communities with autism by perpetuating autism as a White, male, and heterosexual phenomenon. The audience perceive autism as white people’s phenomenon since all comedy-drama series have autistic characters of European descent. *Atypical* is about the joyful and challenging life experiences of Sam, an 18-year old boy with autism, who is a senior in high school with an afterschool job at a technology center but still dependent on his family. Sam lives with his overprotective parents, Elsa and Doug, and older sister, Casey. This family is constructed as a middle-class White family. Likewise, *Touch* is about a young White boy with autism, Jake, who lives with his father in New York, and *The Good Doctor* features a White young man, Shaun, a savant who uses his extraordinary abilities to do a remarkable job as a surgical resident.

Furthermore, viewers perceive autism as a male and heterosexual condition. Shaun, Sam, and Jake are all presented as heterosexual beings through their adventures with members of the opposite sex. Shaun and Sam both pursue love by dating neurotypical females. Shaun is in a relationship with Carly and is often close to Leah. Sam is constructed as in search of love. As the Netflix series evolves, he is shown to be in love with Julia, his psychologist, an older woman who is affectionate and caring but has no interest in him except for...
supporting him through his schooling and teenage journey. In his love adventures, Sam finds a lovely classmate, Paige, who becomes his girlfriend. During one visit, Sam is irritated when he finds Paige touching his things. He locks her in his closet. Soon, his parents find them and tell Sam that it is unacceptable to lock someone in the closet—especially his girlfriend. Paige, however, seems unbothered and even takes a piece of clothing as a remembrance of Sam. Thus, by default, these three comedy-drama shows make autistic people of color—who have different sex, genders, orientations and are from different classes and communities—the silent, invisible majority. Bombarding educators with the images of autism as a White, male, and heterosexual phenomenon and the resultant loud silence about autistic people of color create skewed perceptions in favor of the former, and since perception involves consolidation of sensory information to understand one’s environment, silence and invisibility engrain in the educators’ mind the culture of deficit about the otherized.

**Clinical Misrepresentation of ASD Condition**

ASD is presented clinically as a high- and low-functioning experience. Autistic characters in the three comedy-drama series are mainly constructed based on the DSM-5 criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) with savantism as the dominant trait. In *The Good Doctor*, Shaun is constructed as having extraordinary abilities to be an excellent surgical resident. Likewise, in *Touch*, Jake is constructed around the DSM-5 criteria, and savantism is prominently featured. Jake’s ingenuity is shown throughout the comedy-drama. His ability to find connections that link various people in various parts of the world and his mind helps viewers see the interconnected world that is less visible to neurotypicals. In the show, there is a phone that is randomly passed around the world after people who find it have taken videos and pictures explaining their experiences. Ironically, unlike Jake, whose superhuman abilities allow him to understand the interconnected world, the experiences are unobvious to neurotypicals. Even though he initially does not speak, his father Martin thinks Jake’s cognitive functioning is at an above-average level. In the first episode of Season 1, Jake is speaking to the audience through the voiceover machine, and one can perceive that in his head, he does display consistent autism characteristics. He is constructed as obsessively involved with numbers in his quest to understand human complexities around the world as it relates to him—things that affect humanity but are divorced from the understanding of neurotypical people. He is so submerged into numbers and details—every circumstance around him—that are not obvious to neurotypicals.

In all of the comedy-dramas, savantism is lessened by the social deficit of autism. Autistic characters are represented as deficient in social norms, emotionally detached, and experiencing communication disorders. They also
struggle with generalization issues. Moreover, they lack the ability to differentiate literal from metaphorical languages although they have magical skills. As a result, they find many sayings ambiguous, which affects their interactions and relations with neurotypicals. For example, during his interaction with his father Martin, Jake in *Touch* displays exceptionally stereotypical autistic behaviors. He does not smile, laugh, or maintain eye contact with his father. He is socially disconnected despite his father’s relentless attempts to connect with him. Jake also frequently throws tantrums when someone touches him. At some point, Jake attempts to walk on a windowsill. He starts screaming out of fear when he begins to fall. Still, he resists help because he does not like physical touch. Jake is also presented as a loner—a quiet, atypical young boy.

Shaun in *The Good Doctor* also suffers from a social deficit—the inability to read social cues—a major *DSM-5* criteria. For example, in *The Good Doctor* Season 1 in the episode “Mount Rushmore,” Shaun struggles with overgeneralization issues that many autistic people experience in real life. Dr. Melendez sends Shaun to the pathology lab to collect biopsy results. At the reception window, Dr. Lever asks Shaun to wait because she is busy. This interaction triggers a childhood memory in which Shaun’s brother, Steve, threw a rock through a neighbor’s window when the neighbor would not give Steve a donation. Since his brother told him he needed to be persistent and even fight back, Shaun threatens to stone the pathology lab window if he is not quickly given the biopsy results. Out of pity, Carly expedites the results. Furthermore, when a thief storms an Apple store and orders everyone to lie down, show their hands, and hand over their wallets, Shaun argues with him, asking how he can do all these requirements at the same time, something that endangers his life. Moreover, there are some well-respected doctors in the hospital, but Shaun is portrayed as less competent with social cues, especially when he calls his group leader arrogant. Often, Shaun interacts with his superiors as equals, even though he respects them. When an emergency happens at the airport, Shaun rushes to the security guard and orders that a sharp knife be confiscated from a passenger so he can operate on a sickly young boy. In one instant, Shaun exhibits several detached feelings that are apparent to viewers. People in the series that Shaun interacts with consider him as lacking emotion. For example, Dr. Melendez, one of the head surgeons, remarks that what matters is Shaun’s skills and not whether he is cold. The construction of Shaun’s feelings happens after he witnesses a shooting that leaves him traumatized. Even though he helps the victim of violence, as the series evolves, other nondisabled characters are portrayed as thinking that Shaun does not care. However, the audience can tell that Shaun does care and wants to exert his best skills to help. In all of these situations, Shaun does not realize he
is acting socially inappropriate. Thus, besides using the DSM-5 criteria of savantism to construct the main comedy-drama characters as superhuman, the same but negative criteria construct them as suffering from socioemotional and communication deficits.

Moreover, both savantism and social deficit qualities are used to construct the three comedy-drama series autistic characters as vulnerable to societal problems and circumstantial mistreatments and, therefore, highly dependent on their families, friends, and loved ones for protection, guidance, and support. In the process, they are burdensome to these neurotypical individuals who somehow are entrusted to care for them because of autism. In Atypical, Sam is dependent on his overprotective mother (Elsa), his father (Doug), sister (Casey), girlfriend (Paige), and workmate (Zahid). Elsa is presented as motherly and protective of her son. For instance, when Sam decides to go with her to shop for his clothes, she calls the mall to make accommodations for him because she fears he will find the setting too overwhelming. Elsa is overwhelmed from juggling many life activities because of Sam's autism. Additionally, Elsa is constructed as thrilled and free but also imprisoned by Sam's journey to independence and his improved interactive skills with other people in different environments.

As Sam becomes more independent, Elsa finds herself caught between her own self-discovery and motherhood. Sam's father is also leading a double life. We learn later in the series that Sam's father, Doug, once left the family after Sam was diagnosed with autism. He still experiences some withdrawal from Sam, even though near the end of the series, father and son are shown to be bonding slowly. Sam's older sister, Casey, is portrayed as a protective figure. She stands up for her brother at home and school. Furthermore, Paige, Sam's girlfriend, is constructed as someone who understands an autistic boyfriend when she organizes a silent dance at the school despite many disappointments and embarrassing incidences. Throughout the series, these neurotypical characters are depicted as Sam's main advocates and people who are deeply involved in autism awareness. In Touch, Jake's father, Martin, is overwhelmed by a full-time job to support himself and Jake in addition to the demands of dealing with his son's problematic behaviors, which include throwing temper tantrums when touched and running away when things do not go his way. Martin thinks Jake is cognitively functioning at an average level, so he lives in denial about Jake's autism. He believes that Jake has a different health issue besides autism that makes him nonverbal or something that pushes him to be unwilling to speak. In the first season and episode, Martin receives a call that Jake has skipped school and was dangerously sighted on the edge of a cell phone tower. He gets there when the emergency team and anxious crowd are pondering how to safely rescue him. Since this is the second time that Jake has climbed the
cell phone tower, the emergency responding officer warns Martin that the next time, they would call Child Protective Services on him.

Overall, the three comedy-drama shows present autistic characters as incapable of standing up for themselves despite being savants, and because of their social and communication incompetence, their networks must support and advocate for them. By having characters that exhibit both clinical traits of ASD—superhuman abilities presented alongside social and communication deficits—these comedy-drama producers and directors aim to normalize the lives of ASD people in different ways; instead, they inculcate the perception of deficit. In the process they falsify autistic experiences in ways that distorts audience/educators understanding of autism.

The Media’s Autistic Characters and False Balance and False Identity

The purpose of my study was to examine the representation of autistic people in the three comedy-dramas (Atypical, Touch, and The Good Doctor) to understand how they affect the perceptions of P-12 teacher candidates regarding autistic students from the perspectives of a disabled teacher educator. The clinical portrayal of autism as a high-functioning, socially deficient, emotionally detached, and heterosexual male experience of middle-class White families lead to two megathemes: misrepresentation of the invisible silent majority and clinical misrepresentation of ASD condition. These mega themes reveal two major TV strategies used to promote autism fallacies: false balance and false identity, which answers the research question on how TV media with autistic characters influence educators’ knowing and understanding of autism.

False Balance

Many fallacies are spread by the media, intentionally or unintentionally, often to the disadvantage of viewers but more so to the disadvantage of autistic people. Contemporary media with autistic characters are not immune to fallacies. Most are vulnerable to false balance, which educators in particular should be aware of. False balance occurs when media producers incorporate balanced opposing viewpoints that may not be supported by evidence (Koehler, 2016). False balance manifested itself throughout the three TV shows and in the process contributed to identity, content, and cultural deformation (Xu & Tian, 2013), which enables perpetuation of the culture of deficit. The TV shows employed many approaches to deforming autistic identity, including omission, deletion, additions, alterations, and explications of information. These
approaches make information open to interpretation and misinterpretation and therefore content deformation. Some autistic traits (e.g., Jake’s muteness in *Touch*) are either exaggerated through omission of other qualities (e.g., Jake’s inability to relate socially with his father), and in the process, the content is altered to bring out the medical condition of the autistic actor. Thus, the TV shows are based on the established understanding of autism: namely, an Anglo-American DSM-5 medical and historical labeling system. Besides, autistic characters are presented as privileged individuals who live with loving families even though they are socially burdensome because of their medical deficit. Educators that perceive autism through the Anglo-American DSM-5 prism are culturally oriented in understanding autism as an individual medical condition affecting privileged families. Such perceptions, however, are problematic because the prevalence of autism in society is not restricted to a race, class, sex, gender, or geography. Consequently, emphasis on autism as a White, male, and heterosexual phenomenon creates skewed perception that otherize autistic people of color, and through this distortion of realities about autism, educators understanding of autism become a barrier to reciprocal relationship required for building a community of learners. Unless teachers’ mental picture of autistic learners is disabused, they become gatekeepers that discriminate and obstruct education of autistic female learners of color, for example.

Furthermore, each TV show has one autistic individual throughout the show, and viewers are bombarded with images of a character with extraordinary abilities as the protagonist but also to captivate the audience. Inadvertently, autism as an individual defect is socially constructed through comparison of neurodiverse and neurotypical characters. The able-disabled binary perpetuate the normal-abnormal perception in which neurotypicals’ ways of life are normalized over that of neurodiverse characters. Moreover, the construction of characters as either neurodiverse or neurotypical (i.e., autistic or nonautistic) and by extension normal or abnormal creates a dichotomy of characters that leads to a false balance of good or bad. In this way, the audience are invited to align with either group because of their distinctive stereotypical audiovisual actions. The binaries created by the media about autism reinforce educators belief that autistic learners are differently bad. Educators that embrace the medical school of thought which believes that autism is a neurological disorder are less likely to perceive autistic learners as capable of schooling even though studies show that autistic learners have IQ that is representative of the neurotypical population (Herzberg, 2014).

The TV shows also have social and medical aspects highly juxtaposed in all the seasons and episodes. Considering that teacher educators and teacher candidates are more likely to have multiple disability perspectives (González &
Moll, 2002), having a false balance of autism is likely to create a visual paradox (i.e., ambiguous images that can be interpreted in more than one way) that may again contribute to teacher candidates confusion about autism identity and therefore possibly reduce their abilities to positively work with autistic learners in different learning settings. False balance conceals the qualities of different autistic individuals and groups (e.g., autistic Black people or autistic female individuals), and in the process, enforces traditional views of the autistic community as a monolith with shared traits, which is generally a medical perspective of autistic people. False balance creates a narrow view of autism and so erases some identities and accentuates others, which reveal a concealed power dynamics that undergird the culture of deficit that for decades have marginalized autistic population (Sinclair, 2005). This form of colonizing viewers’ thoughts and perspectives of autism ensures continued culture of deficit and oppression of autistic people beyond the autistic actors in the media to the real autistic population. False balance thus perpetuates false identities in which the disguised power of nondisabled ensures the medical model of disability remains the dominant one of understanding autism. Since the medical model of disability differentiates neurodiverse people from neurotypical one, this allows discrimination and separation of autistic from non-autistic people and thus the degradation of autistic identity and the dehumanization of this community (Davis, 1995; Siebers, 2008; Sinclair, 2005). Unlike educators that value social model that would create a safe and enriching social learning environment for autistic learners (Mims et al., 2012; Stringfield et al., 2011; Williamson et al., 2015), educators that value medical model perceive autistic learners as faulty and in need of medicalized interventions (Omar & Bidin, 2015). While autistic learners benefit from research based interventions (e.g., echo reading; Mims et al., 2012), perception of autism as a medical condition cause teachers to perceive autistic students as patients rather than learners. In this way, false balance perpetuates false identity.

**False Identity**

False identity occurs when actors pretend to be what they are not (Lashmar, 2017). Media provides manipulated spaces where false identities of autistic people are nurtured. False identity is marked by deliberate deceptiveness, especially when autistic characters act autistic (i.e., exhibit DSM-5 traits) when they are not and when they reveal actions and feelings influenced by other neurotypical actors to influence neurotypical viewers. Neurotypical educators are likely to take lightly the rights of autistic people to education when the DSM-5 presentation of autism is glorified as in the case of the three TV shows where neurotypicals masquerade as neurodiverse people (e.g., exhibitions of
savantism and social deficits). The dangers of masquerading is captured in the area of journalism. Lashmar (2017) argued that real journalists working in volatile regions or spaces are targets of harm when opponents lose confidence in reporters when they suspect that spies masquerade as journalists. Therefore, Lashmar (2017) suggested that neither professional should disguise their identity if journalists are to overcome a crisis of confidence. This is important since false identities make journalists targets of aggression and violence (Lashmar, 2017). The same argument can be extended to the autistic population. Falsified autistic identities or autistic misrepresentations lead to misconceptions and misperceptions of autism and thus, causes crisis of confidence in educators. Crisis of confidence endangers autistic learners’ lives because educators develop misconceived ideas of who autistic people are. In situations where savantism is overwhelmingly presented as autism, it inculcates in educator psyches that autistic individuals have superhuman abilities. The danger of this misrepresentation and misinterpretation lies in teachers treating every autistic learner as having superhuman abilities, when in reality two-thirds of autistic people have average to below average IQ ability (Herzberg, 2014). The autistic population is a heterogenous group, just like the neurotypical population, and so generalization of who an autistic person is can cause irreparable damage to the whole autistic population, especially when an autistic learner is treated based on someone else qualities or generalized traits. As such, educators should be aware of the impact of fallacies on their perception, attitudes, and behaviors towards autistic population.

*Countering Fallacies Through Critical Media Literacy and Disability Studies in Education*

The three films I analyzed were recommended by my class, and so one can adduce that educators’ understanding of autism is influenced by the popular contemporary TV shows. This possibility makes infusion of critical media literacy and DSE in teacher curricula vital in inculcating positive perceptions and attitudes of autistic learners in P-12 teacher candidates (Lee, 2010). Media is a profitable business venture mostly dependent on neurotypical viewers and so are likely to present autistic information palatable to neurotypicals to attract and maintain these consumers (Samsel & Perepa, 2013). Driven by profit that increases with improved viewership, the media usually maintain ideals of correctness and impartiality when broadcasting on intricate matters such as autism or autistic people. Lack of accountability is driven by the knowledge that autistic people are sensitive to certain sounds or noises and so more likely to make the smallest viewership relative to neurotypicals. Moreover, as in the broader disability population, the autistic community mostly live in poverty.
because of biased practices and so many do not have enough resources to invest in accessible technologies. It is here that critical literacy becomes a vital tool of counterdiscourse (Couser, 1997).

Counterdiscourse requires inclusion of the lived experiences of real autistic people in TV programs (Connor, 2013). Consumers of autism information disseminated by TV shows (e.g., educators) should be able to analyze and synthesize the information to understand its underlying meaning. In journalism, attempts to ensure balanced reporting on controversial subjects has seen journalists resort to the weight of evidence; for example, by bringing two experts with divergent opinion about the subject matter to share their beliefs, findings, and so on. Dunwoody (2005) claimed that “weight-of-evidence reporting requires journalists … ‘find out where the bulk of evidence and expert thought lies on the truth continuum and then communicate that to audiences’” (cited in Koehler, 2016, p. 25). Unfortunately, within the autism realm, the opinion of neurotypical experts (e.g., special education teachers and medics) hold much weight than the opinions of neurodiverse people even though current studies and lived experiences of autistic people are disapproving “expert” opinions and canonical normalized knowledge of autism (Connor, 2013; Davis, 1995; Sinclair, 2005). Therefore, having the audience (i.e., educators) “use the weight of evidence information to adjudicate between conflicting expert opinions” (Koehler, 2016, p. 25) are likely to perpetuate biased practices and hence confuse teacher candidates who rely on some misinformed or prejudiced teacher educators or corrupted TV show directors or producers for their understanding of autism. Koehler (2016) also noted that “presenting weight of evidence information may not prove to be an effective remedy for the potentially distorting influence of false balance” because “people tend to neglect weight-of-evidence considerations” for statistical summaries (p. 25). Considering that autism is controversial among educators and professionals such as doctors, psychiatrists, and psychologists, and considering that much of the statistical summaries favors knowledges of nondisabled informants (some ableist oriented), then false balance “can make it more difficult for people to discriminate between issues where there is higher and lower levels of expert consensus” (Koehler, 2016, p. 25). Whereas weight-of-evidence is important, it is likely to fail in its intent in teacher education where much validated information is informed by nondisabled professionals, some of whom do not share principles with the autistic population. Experts such as teacher educators are not immune from media influence or influence from other experts in the field. Even though disability matters have recently been informed by empirical research, for a long time, conclusions and therefore practices have been driven by the norms that established disability as a human flaw, and as such, expert opinions on
disability have been flawed and in contradiction with disability realities and lived experiences. This when intentional inclusion of autism narratives by autistic people becomes important in teacher education as a counterdiscourse to normalized autism nondisabled discourses (Davis, 1995; Sinclair, 2005).

Educators’ familial culture of deficit is due to environmental stimuli and accumulated knowledge passed down from generation to generation. This means that educators’ practices are both shared and learned through established academic norms. Then, to avoid this culture trap, it is crucial for teacher education to embrace critical literacy and DSE (Connor, 2013). The history of eugenics and freak films (Bogdan, 2012) reveals that media can habitually (mis)inform, (mis)educate, (mis)persuade, deter, suppress, incite, and rally the public into physically and psychologically hurting the disability community (Ruiz, 2017; Turin & Friesem, 2020). These processes of malpractice legitimation against disabled people lie at the heart of the public order of policing disabled bodies (Bogdan, 2012; Davis, 1995; Dolmage, 2011; Siebers, 2008). Therefore, investing in critical literacy to help educators confidently tread through the labyrinth of explicit and implicit biased autism information (aimed to perpetuate an agenda to win over neurotypical consumers) to decipher the truth about autism is key for teacher candidates to make appropriate judgements of the subject matter. Moreover, integrating DSE in teacher education programs would ensure that educators develop repertoires to decipher all kinds of media (e.g., films, books, road signs, clothing) and their controversial information, understand their impact on perception, attitudes, and behaviors, and the influence these have on faculty relationships and teacher and autistic population relations in different settings. A combination of DSE and critical literacy should help educators not only assume the adjudicator role of two controversial and divergent opinions about autism but also facilitate authentic learning about autism when presented with juxtaposing information or expert opinions on autism. Use of both DSE and critical literacy would ensure that the school curricula override, correct, supplement, or complement public curricula (i.e., where consumed information is valid) to disabuse educators of erroneous autism beliefs and therefore authentically inform educators about autism so they can develop positive and real perceptions of autistic people and positive attitudes and behaviors towards them.

Conclusion

Contemporary media deserve appreciation for presenting autism in a manner much more positive than a century ago. Still, the media broadcast “new” autism
with nuanced biased information that require problematizing. Contemporary comedy-dramas cannot fully inform audiences because they are more obsessed with the clinical portrayal of autism as high functioning, socially deficient, emotionally detached, and heterosexual males from middle-class White families condition. This narrow portrayal of autistic people is achieved through false balance and false identity. Lack of diversity advances partial narratives and incomplete knowledge that sustains autism myths and cause disempowerment of autistic population. Critical assessment of consumed media information can ensure that fallacies do not negatively influence educators’ judgement and image of autism that may harm autistic learners.

The imperfections portrayed and the damage to viewers perceptions can be minimized by addressing biased audiovisual information through critical media literacy and social model of disability. Both seek to bring to the surface misperceptions, challenge prejudices, and dismantle sedimented biased practices to build a caring society. Without understanding the finer nuances through social model of disability educators cannot comprehend the damage on their perceptions of autism. However, having open conversations about sensitive matters related to ableism and other invalidating “isms” can help educators develop new perspectives that are beneficial to all learners. Important in challenging fallacies related to false balance and false identity is the inclusion of lived experiences of autistic people. Revealing naked truths requires the involvement of autistic people in scientific and logical thinking about their identity and culture. The essence of dialogue is to include diverse perspectives to discover truth and decenter each other to democratize society starting with its institutions. Autistic people’s voices are important counter-discourse, and so it is vital for teacher curricula to incorporate critical media literacy and the social model of disability standpoint to ensure recent developments in disability rights aligns with the needs, expectations, and dreams of autistic people.

This study has some limitations. Data only came from Anglo-American TV shows recommended by my class. Moreover, all ASD characters were fictitious and so these autism portrayals are not representative of the autistic population considering that the condition is a spectrum experience. Additionally, I engaged in reflexive practice as a disabled teacher educator and used a deductive approach in data collection and analysis. Despite these limitations, many comedy-drama aspects can be used to further understand the physical, cognitive, social, linguistic, and cultural behaviors and relationships of neurodiverse and neurotypicals in different environments including schools. A discussion about these topics can enrich educators’ understanding of autism. Future studies should focus on how the use of media perpetuate the culture of deficit and their impact on in-service teachers’ efficacy from their perspective.
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