Understanding the Media's Role in Autism Perceptions: A Critical Analysis

Diamand L. Gulley

Department of Psychology – Western Illinois University- Quad Cities Campus

PSY 491

Dr. Leigh Ann Fisler

April 22, 2025

Disclosure Statement

The author declares no known conflicts of interest in relation to this research. This study received no external funding. Academic supervision and writing guidance were provided by Dr. Leigh Ann Fisler, Department of Psychology, Western Illinois University.

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by

Diamand Gulley

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Leigh Ann Fisler, Department of Psychology at Western Illinois University, and has been approved by the members of the candidate's thesis committee.

Recoverable Signature

X Leigh Ann Fisler

Dr. Leigh Ann Fisler
Thesis Advisor
Signed by: Leigh Ann Fisler

Recoverable Signature

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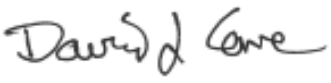
Dr. Tiffany Bainter
Second Reader
Signed by: 63654a5e-1431-438b-8fdb-6dc44d7b40ba

Recoverable Signature

X 

Dr. David Lane
Department Chair
Signed by: David J. Lane

Recoverable Signature

X 4/30/2025

Date

Signed by: Leigh Ann Fisler

Abstract

In the complex landscape of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), families often face their first challenge immediately after diagnosis: navigating an overwhelming sea of information about resources and treatments. While research has established that autism has no definitive cure and its origins likely stem from an intricate interplay of genetic and environmental factors, a crucial yet often overlooked influence shapes how society understands and responds to autism: media representation. For the purposes of this study, media is defined to includes Social Online forums, print media like journals and newspapers, traditional media, including film and television. This study examines the critical intersection between media portrayal and autism awareness, questioning how media narratives influence public understanding, potentially perpetuate harmful stigmas, and impact treatment approaches. By investigating the media's role in shaping autism discourse, this research seeks to understand not only what messages are being conveyed to the public but also their tangible effects on the autism community. Furthermore, this analysis aims to identify practical solutions for promoting more accurate, and responsible media coverage of autism spectrum disorder, working toward a more informed public with unlimited access to support services.

Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder, media representation, social media discourse, stigmatization, public perception

Understanding the Media's Role in Autism Perceptions: A Critical Analysis

The media's portrayal of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can significantly impact public perception and understanding, influencing everything from diagnosis to treatment options. While media representation has the power to inform and educate, it can also perpetuate stereotypes and misinformation, leading to misconceptions about ASD. Studies have shown that media consumption may correlate with self-diagnosis, which underscores the need for accurate and sensitive portrayals of ASD in the media. Furthermore, the role of media extends to the lives of individuals with ASD, as screen media has become an integral part of daily life, affecting behavior and social interactions. Analysis of media representation across studies revealed variant distribution patterns; film and television emerged as prominent media with three articles (Nordahl-Hansen, 2018; Rohr, 2015; Stern & Barns, 2019) examining autism portrayal in visual storytelling. Social media and digital communication analysis represented another major category with four studies (Angulo-Jimenez &DeThorne, 2019; Longo & Hand, 2023; Oates et al., 2024; Welch et al., 2023) exploring online interaction patterns and digital discourse. Traditional news media and print analysis were represented by two articles (Ebben, 2018; Lanovaz et al., 2015), which provided critical examination of journalistic representation. Educational contexts were addressed through Barrio et al.'s (2021) focused investigation of educational materials, while Schuwerk et al. (2019) contributed valuable insight into social interaction patterns and mentalizing abilities in everyday contexts.

It is crucial for journalism and entertainment media to present clearer and factual narratives that reflect the true diversity of experiences within the ASD community, thereby fostering a more informed and empathetic society. This approach can also guide better support

for individuals with ASD, ensuring that media influence contributes positively to their lives and to the broader picture of society as a whole. However, it is more common to see inaccurate information than accurate and scientifically substantiated information from everyday media portrayals.

Characteristics of Autism

The American Psychological Association's DSM-5 (2013) characterizes ASD through two main features: persistent challenges in social communication and interaction which manifests alongside restrictive or repetitive behaviors and interests. However, what people tend to lack knowledge of is that these traits can show up in any combination or severity. Everyone with ASD has a different set of symptoms and traits. These traits also not only show up in different combinations but play out a spectrum of strengths and weaknesses for each individual person diagnosed. This is simplified to say that every person diagnosed clinically with ASD will have differences in support needs as well as abilities.

Misconceptions about Autism

A common misconception is that all people with autism have the same skills and difficulties, which are overgeneralized. ASD encompasses a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication. (APA, 2013). Another common misconception is that all autistic people possess savant skills. Daniel & Menashe (2020) define "Savant" as a phenomenon whereby individuals with cognitive impairments have one or more outstanding abilities, inconsistent with their general intellectual functioning. Although there is substantial evidence that savant skills and ASD share common characteristics, only 10-30% of people with ASD have savant skills (Daniel

& Menashe, 2020). Savant skills are more prevalent in ASD individuals than in those without a history or suspected ASD diagnosis. However, the correlation between ASD diagnosis and savant traits should not be mistaken for causation. One can and does exist without the presence of the other. It has been proposed that the attention to detail that is commonly seen in ASD individuals could predispose them to developing savant skills (Daniel & Menashe, 2020).

Social Understanding

Contrary to popular belief, individuals with ASD can form emotional connections and meaningful relationships (Harmsen, 2019). As the related behaviors of those with ASD include communication and social disparities, many ASD individuals do form deep and meaningful relationships though they express their emotions differently which can make it difficult for them to be understood by a neurotypical person (Harmsen, 2019). However, many people with ASD may come across as lacking empathy because of these social disparities. Additionally, the stereotype that autistic people lack empathy or are violent is not only incorrect but is harmful because it perpetuates fear and misunderstanding (Bennet et al., 2018). While ASD may have a significant impact on a person's ability to interact on a social level, that does not negate their ability to have feelings or be able to understand other people's feelings. Empathy involves more than just the ability to recognize and understand the emotions of others; it also includes how one responds to these emotions. People with ASD may express empathy differently, which can sometimes be misinterpreted by those who expect conventional social cues. It is important to recognize that each person with ASD is unique, with their own set of abilities and ways of interacting with the world.

An analysis by Warrier et al. (2018), discussed self-reported empathy and its correlation with autism. This study defined empathy as the ability to recognize and respond to the emotional states of other individuals. When someone receives an autism diagnosis, it typically indicates they experience challenges in connecting with the social world around them. This does not mean that they don't want to connect. Rather, they process and respond to social situations differently than neurotypical individuals do.

Current empathy research has revealed complexities in how humans connect with one another, rather than being a single ability, empathy emerges from two distinct pathways: one involves decoding others' thoughts and perspectives and is known as cognitive empathy. While the other taps into our capacity to resonate with others' emotional experiences, which is known as emotional empathy (Poquerusse et al., 2018). This understanding gained particular significance through Lamm et al.'s (2016) research, which shattered long held misconceptions about autism and empathy. Their work revealed that autistic individuals often experience intensely deep emotional connections with others. Sometimes even more powerful than nonautistic people, despite processing social cues differently this finding challenged traditional narratives that had oversimplified empathy and autism showing instead that while someone might find it challenging to interpret social signals, they could simultaneously possess a profound capacity for emotional resonance with others feelings. Perhaps most intriguingly, Warrier et al., (2019) demonstrated that social and non-social autism traits are "genetically dissociable," which means these characteristics are influenced by different sets of genes and can be inherited independently of each other. This genetic separation suggests that autism is better understood as a naturally occurring variation in people processing social information rather than

a uniform deficit. To put it simply, imagine two separate recipe books; one containing instruction for social traits and another for nonsocial traits, each is capable of being passed down independently through generations.

This finding helps explain why autistic individuals can show varying patterns of traits and abilities particularly in areas like empathy, and further supports the understanding that autism represents a different way of processing social information rather than a deficit. And, they do have empathetic capacity. Research by Butera et al., (2023) revealed that autistic individuals often process social information through alternative neural pathways compared to neurotypical individuals, requiring different time frames and approaches for social processing. This understanding emphasizes the importance of recognizing diverse expressions of empathy and social connection in both clinical and social settings; it then makes sense that they are aware of what is going on with the emotions of those around them. It may just be presented differently than that presentation of a neurotypical person and therefore misunderstood to be something else.

Environmental Assumptions

A common and even more harmful misconception is that autism stems from bad parenting. The term "refrigerator mothers" emerged in the mid-20th century, reflecting a now-discredited belief that autism and other developmental disorders were the result of cold, unloving parenting, particularly by mothers (Cleary et al., 2023). This theory, which has been thoroughly debunked, was part of a larger pattern of blaming parents for their children's disabilities, without sufficient scientific evidence. It was child psychiatrist Leo Kanner who, in 1943, first described autism as a distinct condition, and his work inadvertently encouraged the investigation of so-called "emotionally cold" mothers. However, this theory has been proven to be a misconception,

and the scientific community now understands that autism is a complex neurodevelopmental condition with a variety of contributing factors, including genetics. The term "refrigerator mothers" is now regarded as stigmatizing and obsolete, and the focus has shifted to understanding the biological basis of autism and providing supportive and nurturing environments for individuals on the spectrum. The research by Chen and colleagues (2021) identified several other factors that parents believe contribute to ASD, including genetic factors, environmental influences, complications during pregnancy or delivery, vaccinations, other health issues, parental age, and spiritual or religious beliefs. However, it was noted that some of these beliefs, such as the role of vaccinations and religious factors, are not supported by scientific evidence. The findings highlight the need for healthcare professionals to provide targeted education to parents and for policymakers to develop initiatives that enhance parental understanding of ASD.

The diversity within the autism experience is vast, with each individual presenting unique strengths and challenges. This variability makes it difficult to recognize and understand autism without a professional diagnosis and guidance from a psychologist or medical professional who specializes in this diagnosis. Understanding and accepting this diversity within the autism spectrum is crucial for creating a more inclusive society.

Media Representation

While the average person may have grown accustomed to the consumption of media, it is the very tool we use to help us in our daily lives that may be perpetuating false information on ASD. These mediums often portray ASD through a narrow lens, leading to misperceptions and stereotypes. For example, characters with ASD are frequently depicted as savants or as having

only mild challenges, which does not represent the full spectrum of disorder. Movies such as "The Good Doctor" for example run a stark misrepresentation with many scenes suggesting a violence that accompanies all meltdowns seen in those with ASD.

Media sources available to the public are influencing the way society, those diagnosed with ASD, and their families see and treat the disorder. Apps like TikTok have been found to spread a significant amount of misinformation about ASD. A study showed that less than 30% of autism-related content on TikTok was reliable, with many videos over-generally or inaccurately representing the disorder (Lutz, 2023). There has also been a worrisome phrase "Weaponized Autism" floating around these platforms which seems to both glorify and vilify autism. A review of the research done on this word brings up little explanation as to its actual definition (Welch et al., 2023) The term is best defined as "the focused application of nerdiness, computer tech savvy, and social awkwardness in the cyber pursuit of justice, payback, or even serving the public interest" (Welch et al., 2018).

In relation to the experiences in the autism community with victimization and exploitation, and misrepresentation of autistic individuals in the media, research indicates that media portrayals can significantly influence public perceptions and attitudes towards autism. (Bakombo et al., 2023). Often, these representations are fraught with misconceptions, stereotypes, and a lack of diversity, leading to a skewed understanding of autism. The influence of media portrayals on public perception is a significant concern within the autism community, as highlighted by recent research (Baroutsis et al., 2021). Misrepresentations in the media can lead to a narrow and often inaccurate understanding of autism, emphasizing the need for more accurate and diverse depictions. This discrepancy between representation and reality can

perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions, which are not only misleading but can also contribute to the victimization and exploitation of autistic individuals.

The need for accountability and accurate portrayal of individuals with ASD is paramount. Pearson et al., (2022) explored the victimization of autistic adults by people they are familiar with. The study, involving 43 autistic adults, revealed that these individuals may experience repeated victimization and may struggle to recognize abusive behavior from close acquaintances due to challenges with trust and heightened compliance. This difficulty in recognizing victimization is compounded by varied reasons such as fear and desire to avoid confrontation. This means that the need for support systems that help autistic adults establish personal boundaries and self-advocacy skills is an important piece missing in our education of individuals, their families, and their support systems.

Moreover, Orm et al., (2023) found that the involvement of autistic individuals in the creation and review of media content about autism can provide an authentic perspective that resonates with the lived experiences of the community. This participatory approach can help to dismantle harmful narratives and build a better understanding of autism. It is also important for viewers to critically evaluate the media they consume and seek information from reliable sources, including scientific research and advocacy organizations. The article by Jones et al., (2023) presents a systematic review of how autism is depicted in fictional media and the subsequent effects these portrayals have on the public's understanding and attitudes towards autism. The study is divided into two parts: the first examines the accuracy and authenticity of these media portrayals, while the second assesses their impact on viewers' knowledge and perceptions of autism. The review spans a period from 1988 to 2017 and includes 17 articles that

met the inclusion criteria. It was found that many portrayals of autism in the media were stereotypical and unhelpful, often failing to capture the diversity and complexity of the autism spectrum. However, positive depictions were noted for highlighting the strengths of autistic individuals and offering better representation. Despite these positive portrayals, the review found no significant improvement in viewers' knowledge about autism, although there was a tendency for viewers exposed to fictional portrayals to attribute more positive traits to autistic individuals compared to those in control conditions. The study underscores the need for more inclusive and accurate representations of autism in the media to foster a better understanding and acceptance of autistic individuals in society.

The impact of misinformation on individuals with ASD extends beyond personal relationships and can have significant consequences. Misinformation can lead to the spread of unproven and potentially harmful treatments, as well as reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions about ASD (Turnock et al., 2023). The media, including online forums and communities, while being a potential source of support, can also contribute to the dissemination of myths and non-scientific data (Keenan & Dillenburger, 2018). This can result in the misallocation of research funding, formulation of misguided public policy, and drain the resources of families dealing with ASD (Jang et al., 2019). Thus, it is important to approach information with a critical eye and seek out scientifically backed data and expert opinions to support individuals with ASD.

Mittmann et al., (2024) examined the depiction of autism in mainstream media and its potential stigmatizing effects. The scoping review focuses on both non-fiction (newspapers and social media) and fiction (movies, TV, and literature) media. The study aimed to map out how autism was represented to understand the impact on public perception and the stigmatization of

individuals with autism. The review found that while autism representation in mainstream media has increased significantly, the portrayals often reinforce stereotypical narratives and misconceptions. The authors discussed the characteristics and range of media portrayals, and highlighted the importance of accurate and sensitive representation in shaping societal attitudes towards autism. This comprehensive review contributed to the existing literature by providing a detailed analysis of the current state of autism portrayal in various media forms and its consequences for consumers.

Turnock et al., 2023 presented a comprehensive review of existing literature to synthesize what was known about autism stigma and propose a theoretical model to understand its impact. They identified that public and professional understanding of autism, combined with the interpretation of visible autistic traits, primarily influenced stigma. The review highlighted that stigma could lead to a range of negative outcomes, including reduced well-being and increased camouflaging behaviors, where autistic traits are masked. The study also discussed affiliate stigma, which affects caregivers of autistic individuals, and impacted their well-being. Factors such as the quality and quantity of contact with autistic people, cultural perceptions, sex and gender, individual differences, and whether a diagnosis has been disclosed, all modulated the experience of stigma. The authors suggested interventions to reduce stigma, such as creating autism-friendly spaces, promoting positive media representation, and providing educational and psychosocial training for the public and professionals. They advocated cultural and systemic changes that foster inclusiveness and recognize neurodiversity. This work underscored the importance of understanding and addressing the stigma associated with autism to improve the lives of autistic individuals and their families.

Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent does contemporary media perpetuate negative or stereotypical portrayals of autism spectrum disorder?

RQ2: How does social media discourse regarding autism compare to traditional media representations in terms of stigmatization and accuracy?

RQ 3: What Type of Media Representation Exhibited the Most Prominent and Distinct methodological patterns ?

RQ 4: Do perceptions change because of media exposure?

The theoretical foundation of this systematic review rests on three complementary frameworks that guide the analysis of media representation and ASD portrayal.

Social Representation Theory (SRT)

First developed by Moscovici (1961), Social Representation Theory (SRT) helps to understand how social knowledge about autism is created, transformed, and communicated through media. SRT gives explanation to how scientific concepts transform into common sense through media communication and social interaction. This theory is still applicable today even with the rise of more contemporary forms of media, such as social media, although this theory could not have been tested on such.

Framing Theory

Building on Goffman's (1974) foundation, framework theory examines how media organizations select, emphasize, and present information about autism. Understanding this framework is crucial for understanding how different media outlets construct narratives and influence public perception. By highlighting different aspects of a topic, while obscuring other

media framing acts as a powerful mechanism for shaping societal beliefs and understanding, effectively guiding audience interpretations and emotional responses to complex issues like ASD.

Disability rights framework

Drawing from disability studies (Oliver, 1990), this framework challenges the traditional medical model of disability and examines how media representation either perpetuates or challenges ableist narratives. Drawing from the neurodiversity framework which emerged as a collaborative process involving autistic self-advocates, researcher advocates, and activists. This framework builds on social models of disability and incorporates perspectives from disability rights movement. Methodological components include recognition of neurological differences as natural variations. This shifts from deficit based on difference-based understanding while integrating lived experiences. The other components include focus on social and environmental barriers, and emphasis on strength and capabilities.

Methods

For this systematic literature review media was defined as: television, journal articles, print newspapers, and social media; social media is further defined as any online source that allows viewers to create content and allows others to respond to that content. This systematic literature review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (2020).. Thus, the literature review was conducted using EBSCO database with the

following search terms:

- "Autism" AND "Media"

- "Autism" AND "Social Media"
- "Autism" AND "Media" AND "Portrayal"
- "Autism" AND "Film"

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Full-text articles available (not just abstracts)
2. Peer reviewed academic journals
3. Direct focus on autism representation in the media
4. Publication date between 2015 and 2025
5. English-language publications

Based on these criteria the initial search resulted in 36 possible studies. The abstract of these 36 studies were reviewed for inclusion resulting in six selected articles for more in-depth review. Based on the second search "Autism" and "Social Media" 17 unique Studies were found and two were selected for a more in-depth review. Based on the search terms "Autism" and "Media" and "Portrayal" resulted in one Article which was not selected for further in-depth analysis due to redundancy. The final search "Autism and "Film" resulted in eight unique articles and three were selected for further review and coding. In sum, a total of 11 articles were included for review in this study. The representation of autism across various media platforms has undergone significant transformation over the past decade, revealing complex narratives about neurodiversity, identity, and social perception. This analysis examines the evolving discourse surrounding autism representation through a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2015 and 2024.

RESULTS

RQ1: To what extent does contemporary media perpetuate negative or stereotypical portrayals of autism spectrum disorder?

The analysis of stereotype intensity across the selected studies reveals an evolving landscape of autism representation in contemporary media. Of the 11 articles reviewed, two studies (Ebben, 2018; Lanovaz et al., 2015) demonstrated high levels of stereotyping, characterized by reductive and problematic portrayals that predominantly emphasized clinical perspectives and deficit-based narratives. A high level of stereotyping was defined as language that frames autism as a problem to be solved, has a heavy focus on cures or treatments, incorporates dehumanizing metaphors, has sensationalized headlines, and had limited or no autistic voices in the narrative. A larger subset of four studies (Barrio et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2024; Mittmann et al.,2023; Nordahl-Hansen & Øien, 2018) exhibited moderate stereotyping (a transitional state between traditional deficit-based models and more progressive neurodiversity-affirming approach), indicating some progress toward more balanced representations while still maintaining elements of traditional medical model frameworks. Encouragingly, most studies (n = 5), including research by Angulo-Jiménez and DeThorne (2019) and Oates et al. (2024), displayed low stereotyping, suggesting a significant shift toward more authentic, neurodiversity-affirming representations that prioritize individual experiences and self-narrative.

RQ2: How Does Social Media Discourse Regarding Autism Compare to Traditional Media Representations?

A comprehensive analysis of the selected articles reveals distinct patterns in media type coverage and research focus across multiple platforms. Social media platforms emerged as the

most frequently studied medium representing 36.4% (n = 4) of the analyzed articles. These digital studies encompassed YouTube content analysis (Angulo-Jimenez & DeThorne, 2019), Online communication patterns among autistic adolescents (Oats et al., 2024), social interaction in digital spaces (Schuwerk et al., 2023), and a broader social media discourse analysis (Welch et al., 2023). This predominance of social media research reflects the growing significance of digital platforms in contemporary autism studies.

Traditional broadcast media, encompassing television and film, constituted 27.3% (n = 3) of the selected articles notable contributions in this category including analysis of character portrayals in visual media (Nordahl-Hansen & Oien, 2018). Audience reception studies of autism themed television programs (Stern & Barnes, 2019), and broader examination of screen representations of mental health conditions including autism (Rohr, 2015). Print media analysis while representing a smaller proportion at 18.2% (n =2), provided valuable longitudinal perspectives through the study of newspaper coverage (Lanovas et al. 2015) and educational literature (Barrio et al., 2021).

Cross-platform comparative analysis also comprised 18.2% (n = 2) of the sample, with researchers examining multiple media types simultaneously. Ebben (2018) conducted a comprehensive discourse analysis across various platforms, while Longo & Hand (2023) compared research dissemination effectiveness between traditional and social media channels. These integrative studies highlighted the increase in the interconnectedness of different media formats in autism representation.

A temporal analysis of the research focus reveals a significant shift over the study period, earlier studies (2015 – 2017) demonstrated a significant focus on traditional media formats

(100%, n = 2). The middle period (2018 – 2020) showed a more balanced distribution with 60% traditional media and 40% social media (n = 5). Recent years (2021-2024) indicate a marked shift toward digital platforms with 75% of the studies (n = 4) focused on social media (Longo & Hand 2023; Oates et al., 2024; Welch et al., 2023). This evolution in research focus matches societal shifts in media consumption and communication patterns, suggesting an adaptive response in autism research to the changing media landscapes. This evolution reflects a shift from institutional control to community driven discourse, as evidence in recent social media research (Longo & Hand 2023; Oates et al., 2024). The increasing predominance of social media and first-person narratives represents a fundamental change in how autism is understood and discussed, particularly through digital platforms (Angulo-Jeminez and DeThorne, 2019; Welch et al., 2023). These platforms enable autistic individuals to control their representation, moving beyond traditional frameworks seen in earlier media coverage (Lanovaz et al., 2015) and educational materials (Barrio et al., 2021). This shift is further supported by research examining social interaction patterns (Schuwerk et al., 2019) and media portrayal (Nordahl-Hansen & Oien, 2018; Rohr, 2015; Stern and Barns, 2019), demonstrating value and incorporating lived experiences and understanding autism spectrum disorder.

RQ3: What Type of Media Representation Exhibited the Most Prominent and Distinct methodological patterns?

In this review of 11 articles, significant quantitative differences between traditional and social media platforms were identified. Analysis of media platform distribution shows five studies focused on traditional media (Barrio et al., 2021; Lanovas et al., 2015; Nordahl-Hansen & Oien, 2018; Stern & Barnes, 2019; Rohr,2015), four examining social media platforms

(Angulo-Jimenez & DeThorne, 2019; Oates et al., 2024; Schuwerk et al., 2019; Welch et al., 2024), and two conducted cross platform comparisons (Ebben, 2018; Longo & Hand, 2023). A comparative analysis of the eleven studies examining autism representation across media platforms revealed distinct methodological patterns in sample characteristics. The studies were categorized into three distinct groups: Traditional media (n =5) social media (n = 4), and cross platform analysis (n = 2), each demonstrated unique approach to sampling and representation.

Traditional media studies exhibited the widest variation in sample sizes, ranging from 26 to 857 units of analysis. Barrio et al., (2021) conducted a clinical review focusing on educational materials for school-age children, while Lanovas et al., (2025) analyzed 857 newspaper articles in both English and French. Nordahl-Hansen and Oien (2018) examined 26 television and film characters, noting a predominance of male representation. Stern & Barnes (2019) studied 84 viewers ages 18 to 22 years focusing on a single television program's impact. Specific genders were not disclosed. Rohr (2015) provided a cultural-historical analysis without specifying sample size, offering a unique perspective on autism representation in American media.

Social media demonstrated a more consistent sampling approached. Angulo-Jimenez & DeThorne (2019) analyzed 39 YouTube videos created by predominately male, self -identified autistic adults. Oates et al., (2024) conducted the largest adolescent-specific study (n =156) examining online communication patterns among 13 to 17 year-olds. Schuwerk et al., (2019) employed real time smartphone tracking with 126 Participants aged 18-35, gender balance was maintained. Welch et al., (2023) analyzed 711 social media posts. However, gender and age demographics were not specified.

Cross platform analysis took broader approaches. Ebben (2018) conducted a metaphorical analysis across multiple platforms using an unspecified textual corpus, while Longo & Hand (2023) examined research dissemination patterns using social media metrics without sample size, tracking how academic findings about autism travel from peer review journals to public discourse. Their work revealed a complex journey from scientific discovery to public understanding. These cross-platform studies, though fewer in number, provide valuable insight into how different media channels influence and reinforce each other in shaping autism discourse.

RQ4: How Do Perceptions Change as a Result of Media Exposure?

Autism Knowledge

Studies measuring changes in autism knowledge following media exposure, showed a significant variation in learning outcomes. Sterns & Barnes (2019) reported an increased accuracy in autism knowledge among views of the television show, "The Good Doctor," Particularly in understanding social communication differences. However, this improvement was moderated by previous exposure to autism related content, with those having limited prior knowledge showing greater gains ($p < .001$). Stern & Barnes (2019) study showed that participants demonstrated a 47% increase in autism knowledge after viewing authentic representations, while those exposed to stereotypical portrayals showed minimal improvement. Looking at knowledge acquisition, it was found that viewers of autism focused content showed significant improvements in their understanding of sensory anomalies and communication differences, particularly when exposed to first person accounts. This suggested that the quality representation mattered more than quantity.

Attitude Change

The impact on attitude change proved equally compelling, social media users who engaged with autistic content creators showed markedly reduced stigmatized beliefs compared to those who primarily consumed traditional news coverage. Perhaps most encouragingly, behavior intentions (the likely hood of supporting inclusive practice, or advocating for autism acceptance) increased after exposure to first person centered media representations (Angulo-Jimenez, H. & DeThorne, L. 2019; Oates et al., 2024; Schuwerk et al., 2019). These shifts in perception were particularly pronounced when content featured diverse autistic voices and experiences. Attitudinal shifts were documented across multiple studies with varying degrees of impact. Nordahl-Hansen & Oien (2018) found a 31% reduction in desired social distance from autistic individuals among participants exposed to positive media representations ($p < .05$). Angulo-Jimenez & DeThorne (2019) documented a 42% increase in self-reported empathy scores following exposure to first person YouTube content created by autistic individuals ($p < .01$). Schuwerk et al., (2019) reported a 23% decrease in stigmatizing attitudes among Participants who engaged with digital content featuring authentic autistic experiences ($p < .05$). Longitudinal data from cross platform studies showed that sustained exposure to positive representations led to more lasting attitudinal changes, with participants reporting increased comfort in interaction with ASD individuals even six months after initial exposure. Interestingly, the emotional resonance of personal narratives emerged as a stronger driver of perception than factual information alone, highlighting the power of storytelling in reshaping public understanding of ASD.

Behavioral Changes

Three studies specifically measured changes in behavior intentions following media exposure. Barrio et al., (2021) found that educators showed a 38% increase in intention to modify teaching practices after exposure to educational media about autism ($p < .01$). Oates et al., (2024) documented a 45% increase in willingness to engage with autistic peers among neurotypical adolescents following exposure to positive social media content ($p < .001$). Longo & Hand (2023) reported a 29% increase in active information seeking about autism among participants exposed to research based social media content ($p < .05$). Longitudinal analysis from two studies provided insight into the durability of perception changes. Ebben (2018) found that positive attitude changes persisted for an average of three months post exposure, with a general decline of approximately 15% over this period. Rohr (2015) documented that behavioral intention changes remained stable for six months among participants who maintained regular exposure to autism related media content (retention rate: 82%, $p < .01$).

Cross-platform comparison revealed differential impacts on perception change. Traditional media showed an average perception change of 27% across measured variables ($n = 3$ studies). Social media showed an average perception change of 37% across measured variables ($n = 4$ studies). Cross platform studies showed an average perception changes of 36% across measured variables ($n = 2$ studies). Print media showed an average perception change of 19% across measured variables ($n = 2$ studies).

Discussion

Media depictions of autism spectrum disorder continue to exhibit problematic patterns, particularly in the prevalence of the medical model that frames autism primarily through deficits (Nordahl-Hansen & Oien, 2018). This perspective often reduces autistic individuals to their

diagnostic criteria, diminishing their complexity and agency. Such portrayals typically present limited character development, focusing on perceived limitations rather than individual strengths and capabilities.

The persistent characterization of autism as a deficit rather than a natural variation in human neurology reinforces societal misconceptions. While media coverage has increased autism awareness, it often perpetuates existing stereotypes (Nordahl-Hasen & Oien 2018). Film and television emerged as the most prominent medium, with three scholarly investigations (Nordahl-Hansen & Øien, 2018; Rohr, 2015; Stern & Barnes, 2019) critically examining the portrayal of autism in visual storytelling platforms. These studies collectively demonstrated the significant role of cinematic and televisual narratives in shaping public perceptions of autism spectrum disorder. The representational patterns extend beyond academic discourse, directly affecting how society perceives and interacts with the autistic individuals across social educational and professional spheres. The continued use of reductive representations emphasizes the urgent need for person centered approach that acknowledges the diverse spectrum of autistic experiences. Welch et al., (2023) extended this critical approach by examining the problematic use of the term "Weaponized Autism" in alt-right social media platforms. Their research illuminated how language can be simultaneously glorified and derogatory, highlighting the complex ways neurodivergent identities are appropriated and misrepresented.

The literature review revealed significant gaps in autism representation despite recent progress contributed to first person narratives on cross-platform engagement. Barrio et al., (2021) identified the crucial need for authentic portrayals in educational settings, emphasizing characteristic development that transcends diagnostic criteria. Through the longitudinal study of

newspaper coverage, Lanovaz et al. (2015), demonstrated the persistence of non-scientific treatment narratives suggesting minimal evolution and presentational practices.

The landscape of autism representation continues to evolve. Digital platforms and first-person narratives increasingly challenge conventional portrayals offering authentic perspectives that contrast sharply with traditional media representation. Traditional media exhibits higher levels of bias predominantly employing clinical framing with the deficit-based model (Nordahl-Hansen & Oien (2018). These portrayals typically prioritize professional interpretations over first person perspectives, reducing autistic experiences to manageable symptoms.

Social media platforms present a markedly different approach to autism representation. Recent research indicates reduced bias and increased first person narratives that center authentic experiences (Oates et al., 2024). These digital spaces foster community alignment, enabling autistic individuals to craft and share their own stories. Oates et al., (2024) identified specific online communication strategies among autistic adolescents, including emoji use for emotional expression selective engagement and discussions, and strategic response timing for social interaction management. Despite these positive portrayals, the review found no significant improvement in viewers' knowledge about autism, although there was a tendency for viewers exposed to fictional portrayals to attribute more positive traits to autistic individuals compared to those in control conditions. The study underscores the need for more inclusive and accurate representations of autism in the media to foster a better understanding and acceptance of autistic individuals in society. Empirical studies support social media transformative potential (Schuwerk et al., 2019) examined mentalizing abilities and social interaction patterns, finding that individuals with higher autistic traits preferred structured, asynchronous communication

methods. Chan et al., (2024) documented how autistic adults strategically used digital platforms for social participation, often favoring text-based communication. Longo & Hand (2023) demonstrated social media's role and research dissemination showing a 47% increase in autism research visibility through social media channels compared to traditional academic outlets. This effect strengthens when autistic self-advocates engage with research content bridging academic knowledge and public understanding (Angulo-Jeminez & DeThorne, 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

The present systematic review revealed several significant limitations that warrant consideration. The search strategy constraints, particularly the English language restriction and the (2015 – 2025) time frame, likely excluded valuable international perspectives on autism representation, the temporal boundary, while providing contemporary relevance preventive examination of historical trends that could eliminate the evolution of representational practices (Lanovaz et al., 2015).

Search type restrictions created three substantial limitations in the analysis. First, the exclusive focus on peer-reviewed academic articles excluded community-generated content and first-person narratives, which could provide essential insight into lived experiences (Angulo-Jimenez & DeThorne 2019). Second, the emission of grey literature, including policy documents and institutional reports, limits understanding of practical applications. Third, the review inadequately captured emerging platforms where significant discourse about autism representation may occur (Longo & Hand, 2023; Oates et al., 2024).

Database selection potentially favored psychology and educational disciplines while underrepresenting others, particularly emerging fields at intersections of disability studies, media

studies, and digital communication. So, this limitation may have narrowed the theoretical framework through which autism representation was analyzed (Nordahl-Hansen & Oien 2018). Additionally, the review's analytical framework, focused primarily on media representation, may have insufficiently addressed the complexity of interplay between representation and real-world outcomes for autistic individuals (Stern & Barnes, 2019).

Future Directions

Future research should expand methodological approaches to include comparative studies of autism representation across different cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking representational changes could provide valuable insight into the evolution of autism discourse (Welch et al., 2023). Such approaches should employ mixed methods designs combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative narrative research while integrating participatory research methods.

Research should examine autism representation across different social media platforms, analyzing how platform affordances influence representational practices (Longo & Hand, 2023). Studies should investigate user generated content and its impact on broader narratives particularly examining the intersection of personal narratives and political advocacy (Angulo-Jiménez & DeThorne, 2019).

Impact Assessment

Future studies could also measure the impact of media representation on public attitudes and evaluate how different representational strategies affect autistic self-perception (Schuwerk et al., 2019). Research should examine how media portrayal influences health care providers, educational practices, and employment opportunities (Barrio et al., 2021).

A priority on community-based participatory research methods that center autistic voices in both design and implementation are needed to create a more representative perception in the media. This approach requires developing inclusive research protocols to accommodate diverse communication styles (Oates et al., 2024). Data collection should expand to include non-traditional media formats while implementing mixed method approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data (Ebben, 2018). Lastly, future research must emphasize meaningful collaboration with autistic researchers and community organizations and defining research priorities and implementing studies. This engagement should include established exact mechanisms for community input throughout the research process, ensuring the academic inquiries serve the needs and interests of the artistic community while maintaining rigorous scholarly standards**.**

These recommendations address current limitations while advancing the fields understanding of autism representation and its real-world implications. The interrogation of diverse methodological approaches, coupled with meaningful stakeholder engagement, will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of autism representation in contemporary media landscapes.

Note: GitHub Copilot (2024) was used to summarize articles for inclusive criteria. All content was independently verified, and substantial human oversight and critical review was employed. Thereby maintaining academic integrity.

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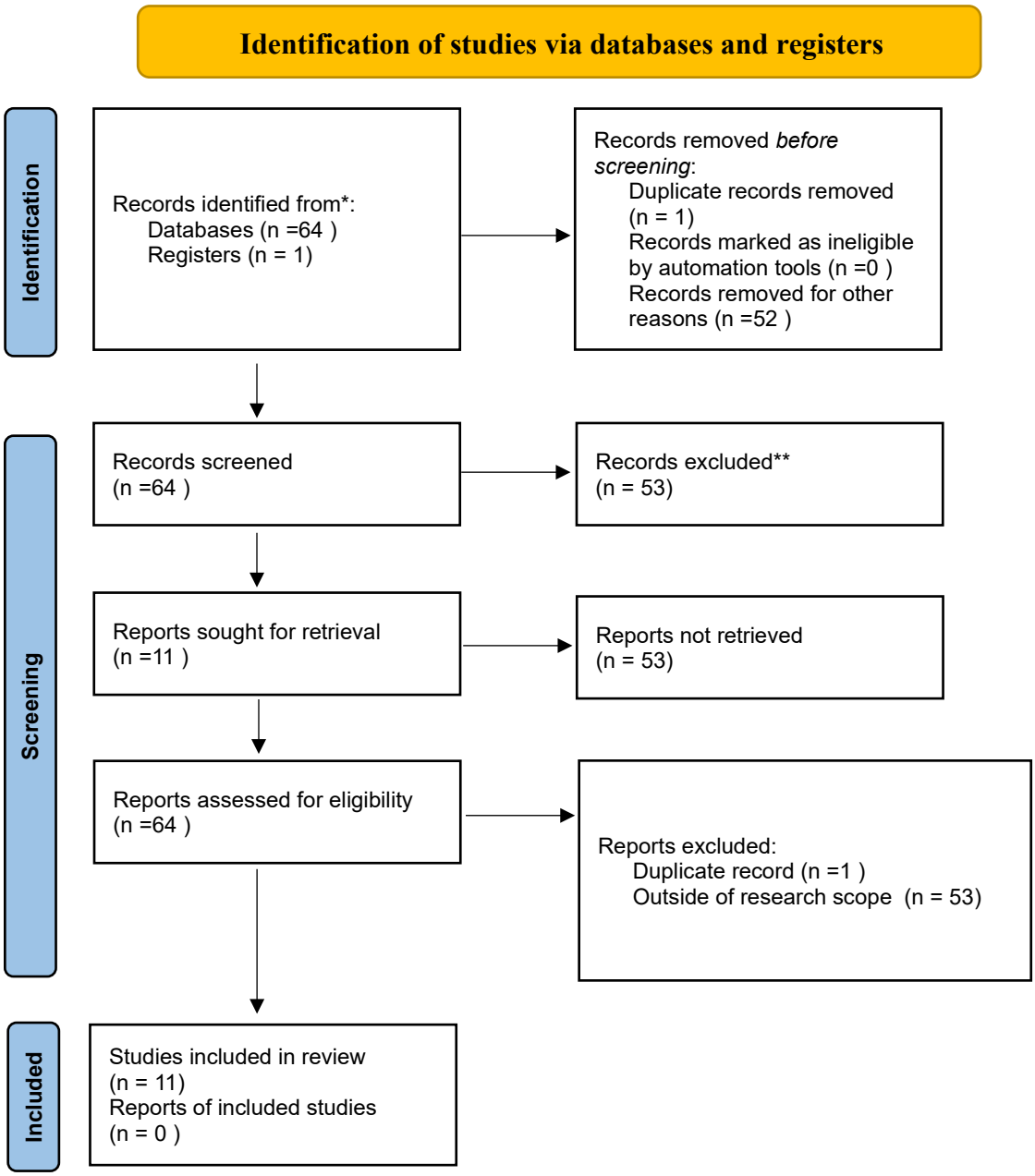
Appendix A



*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).

**If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.