Portrayal of Autism in Film and Television: Discrepancies with Real Life and Their Impact

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Abstract. Movies and television, with their influential power, shape societal perceptions of individuals with autism, a multifaceted neurodevelopmental disorder. This study examines how the media portrays autism spectrum disorder (ASD), using the TV show "The Good Doctor" as a case study. Through a comparison between the show's portrayal and actual experiences, the research identifies both correct and potentially misinterpreted representations. It highlights how the media shapes how the general public views people with ASD and advocates for a reasonable strategy that takes into account the condition's complexity. The study notes potential preconceptions regarding genius talents while highlighting sections where the show accurately depicts social obstacles. In an effort to debunk misunderstandings and lessen stigma, it promotes responsible storytelling as a means of fostering compassion, understanding, and awareness of autism. For a more thorough understanding of the impact of media on perceptions of ASD, empirical data should be incorporated into future research.

Keywords: Autism, savant skill, film representations.

1. Introduction

Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder that is defined by deficiencies in three primary areas: social interaction, language acquisition, and restricted and stereotyped behavioral patterns [1]. Movies and television have the ability to influence how society views and perceives people with autism [2]. In today's society, one of the most common and popular ways people get exposed to autism is through film and television.

Prior studies on the subject of autism depictions in the media have been conducted, although many of them had narrow scopes or concentrated on particular issues. For instance, one of the research's purposes was to investigate the impact media has on knowledge about and attitudes towards ASD, compared to that of a college lecture on the subject [3]. Only a small number of studies have offered a thorough analysis of the problem, examining the differences between the popular and accurate depictions of autism as well as the influence of these representations on public perceptions and attitudes regarding the illness.

The fact that prior studies have not sufficiently addressed the manner in which popular media shapes public perceptions of autism is one of its primary issues. A lot of individuals first learn about autism from television and film, where the disorder is frequently portrayed in a highly stereotyped and erroneous way. These representations have the potential to spread false beliefs and stereotypes about autism, which would further marginalize and stigmatize those who have the disorder.

This study offers a thorough examination of how autism is portrayed in movies and television shows, pointing out the differences between these representations and reality and investigating how these portrayals affect how the general public views autism and autism itself. The study chooses one of the most popular TV series, compares the typical representations of autism in it with documented autism behavior, and analyzes some potential effects on both autism and the audience by some research.

2. Related Concepts and Theories

2.1. The General Knowledge of Autism

Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or hobbies, as well as persistent difficulties in social communication and interaction across many situations, are characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD includes a broad spectrum of presentations, differing in severity and presentation characteristics. ASD's primary behavioral characteristics include problems with social reciprocity, difficulties communicating nonverbally, and difficulties forming and sustaining relationships. Furthermore, repetitive behaviors, emphasis on sameness, and sensory sensitivity are common in people with ASD. Comprehending and identifying these behavioral traits is essential for precise diagnosis and suitable remediation tactics." [4] In other words, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a condition characterized by restricted behaviors, social communication challenges, and a strong inclination towards sameness. Its severity varies across the spectrum, and accurate diagnosis and remediation strategies require a comprehensive understanding of these traits.

2.2. The Background Information for The Good Doctor

The Good Doctor is an American medical television series based on the South Korean drama of the same name, written by Park Jae-beom and developed by David Shore. It premiered on ABC on September 25, 2017. Co-produced by ABC Studios and Sony Pictures Television, the series is executive produced by Korean actors Dae-Hyun Kim and Shoal, who is also a show coordinator, and is led by Faraday Highmore [5,6]. It's one of the most recent successful TV medical dramas. Shaun Murphy, a doctor with savant syndrome and autism who has just begun his residency in surgery, is the primary character. In addition to being a young resident learning how to practice medicine, he also has a lot of limitations, especially in terms of his lack of empathy and communication skills with both patients and colleagues since he has autism.

3. The Elements of Autism Appeared in The Good Doctor.

3.1. The Interpretations that Correspond to the Real Situation

Some specific details from "The Good Doctor" help illustrate how the show incorporates elements of real-life situations of autism into the character of Dr. Shaun Murphy, providing viewers with insights into the strengths, challenges, and experiences of individuals on the autism spectrum. As for the challenges and social skills shown in The Good Doctor, Shaun's struggles with social interactions and understanding social cues are evident throughout the series, including his difficulty in reading facial expressions and body language, as shown in Season 1, Episode 7 ("22 Steps"). One of the most defining and debilitating aspects of autism spectrum disorder is difficulty interacting with others [7]. The show depicts this characteristic correctly. In terms of sensory sensitivities, the portrayal of Shaun's sensory sensitivities is depicted in scenes where he is shown covering his ears in response to loud noises, such as in Season 1, Episode 4 ("Pipes"). Hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sensory input is a common feature of autism spectrum disorder [8]. This little detail and special symptom of autism are revealed in the show.

3.2. The Interpretations not Correspond to the Real Situation

The savant abilities mentioned in the show may have the possibility of misleading the audience. In Season 1, Episode 4 ("Pipes"), Shaun is shown to possess an extraordinary ability to visualize complex pipe systems in his mind. While individuals with autism can have exceptional skills, the portrayal of such highly specialized, savant-like abilities may not be representative of the majority of individuals on the autism spectrum. Autism spectrum disorders affect people at all levels of cognitive functioning, from profound mental retardation to excellent intellect [1]. Rimland (1978), in a postal survey of 5400 parents of children with autism, found that 531 (9.8%) were reported to have savant

skills [6]. So, the savant skills shown in the show may make people believe all the people with autism have something in common.

The process of overcoming challenges is exaggerated in the show; throughout the series, Shaun is frequently depicted as overcoming his social and communication challenges with relative ease. For example, in Season 1, Episode 14 ("She"), Shaun successfully navigates a difficult ethical dilemma, demonstrating emotional intelligence beyond what might typically be expected for someone with autism. Also, the show occasionally portrays Shaun's personal growth and progress in social skills occurring at a quicker pace than what is typically observed. In Season 2, Episode 1 ("Hello"), Shaun shows significant improvement in his ability to communicate with his colleagues after a short period of time, which may not align with the more gradual progress seen in many individuals with autism, leading people to assume that autism is curable since they can recover so well and fast in the show. But actually, at present, there is no known cure for autism spectrum disorder [9].

4. The Potential Impact that A Good Doctor Has on Autism

4.1. The Positive Impact on Autism

Films about autism have had a broad and positive impact on the general public. By showcasing the daily lives, challenges, and achievements of people with autism, these works convey to the audience their unique experiences and enrich their inner world. This presentation helps the general public better understand autism and reduces misconceptions and prejudices about this group. Through these films, viewers can gain an in-depth understanding of the symptoms, characteristics, and difficulties of autism, thereby enhancing their empathy for and understanding of autistic people. This positive portrayal helps break down stereotypes and negative perceptions and encourages more people to accept, support, and include people with autism.

Films also have some positive impact on the autistic community. Self-awareness in individuals with autism spectrum disorder can vary, with some individuals demonstrating a strong understanding of their conditions and their impact on their lives. However, many individuals with autism lack understanding of autistic mental health conditions; they tend to view or misunderstand them as personal weaknesses or flaws and have a strong sense of stigma. Early identification of autism can assist individuals with the condition in gaining self-awareness and access to resources, laying the groundwork for long-term well-being[10]. In this case, autistic children can get exposed to their mental and physical conditions in an implicit way and have more confidence but less stigma about their illness, believing that they can be the protagonists of their own lives.

4.2. The Negative Impact on Autism

As for the general public, some films and television works may leave a negative impression on the audience, such as emphasizing the defects and sufferings of autistic people and ignoring their personalities and strengths. This negative impression may cause the general public to hold a relatively negative attitude, which in turn affects their awareness of and support for the autistic community. Unconsciously hurt the autism by anonymously commenting online since the information they captured from films and media is misleading, which quickens the spread of rumors, misleads more people, and ends up in a vicious cycle.

Media portrayals of autism have a significant impact on how the general public perceives and understands autism, as well as how individuals with autism see themselves and their place in society. If the description and portrayal of autism in movies and television works are inaccurate or exaggerate its symptoms and difficulties, it may cause misunderstanding and prejudice in the audience. Such misconceptions and prejudices can lead to discrimination and exclusion, which in turn exacerbate the plight and challenges of autistic people and their families. Since they are coping with the stress of sensory sensitivity—such as receiving a hug or being touched in the hallway—it is a daily struggle for kids and teenagers with AS and HFA [11]. In this case, the misconceptions and potential opinions and actions the general public has about watching related films can cause a lot of emotional damage

to them. They are frequently misinterpreted as being defiant or off-putting because of the mismatch between the expectations for suitable and socially traditional behavior [11].

5. Discussion

The representation of autism in film and television not only serves as a source of entertainment but also has a significant impact on public perceptions and attitudes toward individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Artistic expression originates from life but also goes beyond life, which requires creators to find a balance between art and reality in creation. Fictional representations may involve some degree of exaggeration or artistic treatment, but the key is to distinguish artistic interpretation from factual accuracy. Finding the right balance between the authenticity and artistry of shaping autism is crucial.

Autistic individuals are diverse and multifaceted, and their experiences should be treated with sensitivity and respect. It is important to portray the nuances of autism with a nuanced understanding of the condition and its impact on the individual. While some degree of creative embellishment may be necessary for narrative purposes, care needs to be taken, and accuracy sought in portraying autism.

Realism in the representation of autism may elicit emotional resonance in the audience, but excessive realism may also cause discomfort or harm. Balancing authenticity with artistic interpretation involves respecting the boundaries of reality while allowing a degree of creative license to enhance the narrative and emotional impact. Art comes from life, but it is higher than life. It is necessary to establish a sense of boundary and distinguish it. If it is mixed up, it will have a certain impact on real life. Art can be moderately exaggerated, but it should be emphasized that this is an artistic quality that can be distinguished by the audience through their own judgment. For example, when depicting their rich spiritual world, it can be handled artistically because the audience can see that this is their imagination, not real life. There are also depictions of autism that do not exaggerate the symptoms, so that they build up a sense of shame, and do not overplay their differences from ordinary people to avoid making them feel offended. For example, we should pay attention to some artistic treatments, such as dementia, and make appropriate adjustments to avoid making the audience feel uncomfortable.

Filmmakers and creators should strive to approach the representation of autism from a thoughtful and informed perspective, incorporating research, expert consultation, and sensitivity to the lived experiences of individuals with autism. By emphasizing the importance of a balance between artistic expression and reality, the representation of autism in the media can contribute to greater public awareness, compassion, and acceptance of individuals with ASD. Only through careful and respectful storytelling can the complexity and reality of autism be truly and meaningfully represented on the screen.

6. Conclusion

The research compared how autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is portrayed in the media to more conventional teaching strategies like college lectures. It emphasized the necessity of a fair approach in media depictions, recognizing the creative liberty that can be exercised in character development while simultaneously stressing the significance of accurate portrayals. The study emphasized how important it is to prevent negative effects on public attitudes and awareness of ASD by making sure that people with the illness are not offended by media representations of the condition.

The comparison between how autism behaviors are portrayed in The Good Doctor and how real-life cases are portrayed in medical materials was the focus of the analysis. It was advised that media portrayals acknowledge the possibility of exaggeration for the sake of entertainment value and strike a balance between realism and artistic expression. The study also underlined how crucial it is for viewers to understand the distinctions between art and reality in order to dispel myths about ASD.

It is crucial to remember that the study did not include enough major empirical data, surveys, or experimental reports to support the described cause-and-effect linkages. More trustworthy data sources should be included in future studies to improve the analysis's validity and accuracy. Overall, the results point to the necessity for a nuanced approach to media portrayals of ASD that takes into account the entertainment value as well as the possible influence on public understanding and views.

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