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## Perception of the Portrayal of Autism in Netflix's *Atypical* Within the Autism Community

Sandra C. Jones,<sup>1</sup> Emma Trott,<sup>2</sup> Chloe Gordon,<sup>1</sup> and Lisa Milne<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

**Background:** Fictional portrayals of autism play a role in raising awareness, shaping knowledge, and influencing attitudes toward autism. However, the accuracy of these portrayals is a topic of debate. Limited research has been conducted with the autism community regarding their perceptions of fictional portrayals of autism. This study aimed to explore autistic people's perceptions of the accuracy, educational benefits, and impact of *Atypical*, a Netflix comedy drama series focused on the experiences of an autistic protagonist.

**Methods:** Participants were 77 members of the autism community (autistic  $N=65$ , parent/partner  $N=12$ ), recruited via social media. Participants completed a cross-sectional predominantly qualitative survey. We undertook descriptive statistical analyses on the quantitative data and used a reflexive thematic analysis approach to analyze the qualitative data.

**Results:** The majority of participants described Sam's portrayal as accurate, emphasizing that it was accurate as *one example of autism*. Family members appeared more likely to perceive *Atypical* as having informative benefit and being likely to improve attitudes toward autism than were autistic people. The primary concerns identified were the stereotypical representation of a popular media image of autism, the lack of diversity, and the depiction of autism as a burden or challenge for the protagonist and his family.

**Conclusions:** This study builds on previous research on the portrayal of autism in entertainment media by investigating the perception of the autism community regarding one such fictional portrayal. It identifies that for entertainment media to better represent the lived experience of autistic people and improve community understanding of autism, there is a need for increased diversity of portrayals and for the involvement of autistic people in the development and production process.

**Keywords:** media, entertainment, television, autistic representation

### Community Brief

#### *Why was this study done?*

Portrayals of autism on television and in movies may increase autism awareness and knowledge and improve attitudes toward autistic people. However, they may also reinforce autism stereotypes and negative attitudes. Research shows that there are an increasing number of autistic characters in movies and television stories. Some studies find that these portrayals are largely accurate, others that they are misleading, and some that they are mixed. What has not been studied is what members of the autism community think about the accuracy, value, and likely impacts of these fictional portrayals.

<sup>1</sup>Research Impact Unit, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>2</sup>School of Behavioural and Health Sciences, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia.

**What was the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of members of the autism community—autistic people and their families—about the Netflix television series *Atypical* and its autistic main character Sam Gardner.

**What did the researchers do?**

The researchers recruited 77 people who had watched *Atypical*: 65 autistic people, 10 parents of autistic children, and 2 partners of autistic adults. Participants were recruited through social media and completed an anonymous online survey. Questions addressed their perceptions of the accuracy of the portrayal of Sam as an autistic person, and whether they thought the show would improve autism knowledge and attitudes.

**What were the results of the study?**

The majority of participants thought that Sam's portrayal of autism within *Atypical* was accurate and that it would have some degree of educational benefit for non-autistic people. Family members appeared more likely than autistic people to think that Sam's portrayal was accurate, to believe that the show had educational benefit, and to agree that the show was likely to lead to more positive attitudes about autism. Participants expressed concern that Sam's portrayal was a stereotypical male representation of autism that was not representative of the broader autistic community and that the show presented a deficit-focused view of autism.

**What do these findings add to what was already known?**

This study provides valuable information regarding the autism community's perceptions of the accuracy of the portrayals of autism, the potential educational benefit, and the likely influence on attitudes. It identifies that for entertainment media to better represent the lived experience of autistic people and improve community understanding of autism, there is a need for increased diversity of portrayals.

**What are potential weaknesses in the study?**

The main weaknesses of the study are the overrepresentation of females (64%), the focus on a single television series with a male protagonist, and the limited detail on the participants' life experiences due to the anonymous nature of the study.

**How will these findings help autistic adults now or in the future?**

This study should assist in advocacy with the producers of entertainment media, enabling them to hear the voices of the autism community and take on board their suggestions for more inclusive and representative portrayals of autism. Doing so has the potential to raise awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of autistic people in the broader community.

**Introduction**

WHILE THE FREQUENCY of fictional entertainment media portrayals of autism has increased, the accuracy of such portrayals remains a subject of debate,<sup>1,2</sup> particularly among members of the autism community.\* Media portrayals have the potential to positively influence public knowledge and understanding of autism, contribute to inaccurate stereotypes and stigma, or a combination of the two, depending on the content and context of the portrayal.<sup>2-4</sup>

Reviews of the accuracy of fictional portrayals of autism have reported mixed findings,<sup>3</sup> likely due in part to the generally subjective nature of these assessments as well as the varied presentation of autism. However, the accuracy of representation of autism is central to the distinction between beneficial and detrimental portrayals, and whether portrayals

positively influence public knowledge and awareness or contribute to stereotypes and inaccurate beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

Stereotypical portrayals of autism within widely accessible media can have negative effects on the public's understanding of autism. One common stereotypical portrayal of autism is the “autistic savant”—exceptional cognitive skills in domains such as mathematics, memory or music, and the presence of developmental disorder(s).<sup>5-7</sup> Nordahl-Hansen et al. explored films ( $n=22$ ) and television series ( $n=4$ ) with autistic characters and found that savant skills were reported in 12 of 26 characters.<sup>7</sup> This is significantly higher than real-world estimates of approximately 1 in  $10^6$  and is likely to reinforce the misconception that all autistic people are savants.

Fictional portrayals of autism fail to represent the diverse nature of the spectrum. Wolff<sup>8</sup> analyzed portrayals across television genres and found that autistic characters are often socially awkward and highly intelligent (e.g., *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical*), a familial burden (e.g., *Black Balloon* and medical dramas), and experience difficulties communicating

\*Within this research study, the term autism community encompasses autistic people, family members, close friends, and intimate partners of autistic people.

but are relied upon for their knowledge (e.g., crime dramas). Treweek et al. explored the perceptions of autistic adults regarding autism stereotypes, with a key theme being the heterogeneous nature of the autistic spectrum.<sup>9</sup> The media's limited and stereotypical portrayal of autism fails to acknowledge the diverse nature of autistic people.

It also has the potential to reduce understanding and acceptance of autistic people as presentations not aligned with stereotypical portrayals could be considered "not autistic" or "less autistic" than the media-developed image in people's minds. While one fictional portrayal could never accurately portray the experiences of all autistic people, as each person's experience is different,<sup>8</sup> consistent stereotypical media portrayals fail to capture the full scope of autism, rather than endeavoring to be representative of the experiences of a broad range of autistic people.<sup>4,8</sup>

Holton argued that fictional media fails to convey portrayals from the point of view of an autistic character,<sup>10</sup> which is important if we are to move beyond the representation of autistic people as burdens or plot twists. *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical* are recent exceptions to this representation of autistic people as "other" (both released after Holton's review was published). Dr Shaun Murphy from *The Good Doctor* is an autistic protagonist with savant syndrome,<sup>8,11–13</sup> and previous research has suggested the portrayal of autism in *The Good Doctor* may lead to positive attitudes toward individuals with autism.<sup>11</sup>

*Atypical* is an American comedy drama Netflix series following Sam Gardner, an autistic protagonist. Concerns have been expressed that Sam is another stereotypical portrayal of autism (White, male, socially awkward).<sup>1,2,8,14</sup> Nonetheless, *Atypical* is a highly viewed series that focuses on the day-to-day experiences of an autistic character from that character's perspective. *Atypical* portrays an autistic experience from the perspective of a clearly stated autistic protagonist, unlike autistic-coded characters from *The Big Bang Theory* or canon minor characters such as Max from *Parenthood*. Unlike *The Good Doctor*, which is a medical drama, *Atypical*'s focus is Sam's autism, offering the audience a unique perspective into the complexities of autism.<sup>2,8,10</sup> Additionally, Sam's character shows audiences that autistic people do not lack interest in romantic connections, have the capacity for independence, and—unlike *The Good Doctor*—are not always savants.<sup>1,2,8,14</sup>

Previous research highlights the potential benefits of fictional portrayals of autism in teaching, shaping positive attitudes, and increasing interest in autism within non-autistic populations.<sup>11,15,16</sup> However, missing from our current understanding of the accuracy and impact of entertainment media portrayals of autism is the perspective of autistic people.<sup>4,8,11,17</sup> This absence of the voices of autistic people in the literature on this topic is concerning as this is the group most greatly impacted by these portrayals.

The current research aimed to explore with members of the autism community (1) their perceptions regarding the accuracy of the portrayal of autism in *Atypical*, and (2) the perceived educational benefits and potential positive and negative impact of the portrayal on attitudes toward autism.

The study is novel in centering autistic voices in analysis of fictional portrayals of autism. This began with study conception; a research team led by an autistic researcher and questionnaire content informed by reviewing discussions on

autistic social media groups, focusing on a television program with an autistic character as the protagonist. It continued through development (think aloud and pilot testing with autistic people), data collection (participants were predominantly autistic people), and interpretation (including peer review by autistic researchers before submission).

## Methods

### Research design

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we utilized a cross-sectional mixed-methods survey via an online questionnaire on Qualtrics. This approach offers a range of advantages<sup>18</sup>: allowing participants to provide candid responses; containing standardized questions allowing ease of comparison within the data set; lowering participant burden; and improving feasibility and convenience of access. Quantitative questions (such as ratings of the accuracy of portrayals) enable us to compare participant groups and stimuli and thus answer specific research questions. However, they lack the depth of insight that comes from qualitative research; open-ended questions that allow participants to expand on the "why", revealing the thoughts and feelings behind the answers. Participation was voluntary and the survey was anonymous.

### Participants

The study protocol was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were members of the autism community recruited via (1) posts within social media groups and/or pages for members of the autism community, and (2) posts in comment sections of social media groups and/or pages discussing *Atypical*. The study posts provided a brief overview of the research and a weblink to obtain more information. To meet the inclusion criteria, participants had to (1) identify as autistic (formally or self-diagnosed) or as a family member or friend of an autistic person, and (2) have viewed a minimum of one full episode of *Atypical*.

### Phase one (survey development)

The second author read reviews and posts about *Atypical* by members of the autism community on publicly accessible social media platforms and discussed these with the research team. Commonly raised issues included the accuracy of Sam's portrayal; family dynamics and relationships; and the educative benefits of fictional portrayals of autism. This informed the development of the survey, ensuring that the study explored the issues of importance to the autism community. Questions explored themes of accuracy, educational benefits and attitudes, and the resonance of the portrayal.

### Phase two (pilot testing)

We conducted a think aloud<sup>19</sup> review and pilot testing to ensure that the questions were clear, relevant, and respectful. The think aloud ( $n=2$ ) was conducted via telephone with an autistic adult and the father of an autistic son. Changes made in response to their feedback included adding participant subcategories within the close family member demographic question, and adding a series of questions exploring Sam's relationship with all main characters. We then conducted

pilot testing ( $n=2$ ) with members of the Autism at ACU Expert Advisory Panel, which consists of autistic students, alumni, and university employees. Changes made in response to their feedback included removing questions about authenticity (as the pilot testers were confused with the difference between accuracy and authenticity) and providing a clear definition of “accuracy.”

The final survey instrument commenced with basic demographic information and exposure to *Atypical* (not having watched one full episode was an exclusion criterion). Participants then answered five quantitative questions about the portrayal of autism in *Atypical*:

- Based on your personal experience/s with autism and/or understanding of autism how accurate is Sam’s portrayal of autism? (5-point scale from “very accurate” to “very inaccurate”)
- To what extent did Sam’s experience as an autistic person resonate with your own understanding of autism? (5-point scale from “did not resonate at all” to “resonated a lot”)
- Do you think Sam’s portrayal of autism within *Atypical* has any informative benefit for individuals with no prior experience with autism? (4-point scale from “no benefit” to “high benefit”)
- Do you think Sam’s portrayal of autism within *Atypical* will contribute to positive or negative perceptions of autism within the general community? (5-point scale from “very negative” to “very positive”)
- Each of these was followed by one or more open-ended prompts, such as “Please explain why you think Sam’s portrayal of autism will have that effect”; “Can you think of an example of a scene within *Atypical* that did [not] resonate with your personal experience with autism? Please describe.”

Participants then answered an open-ended question about each of the five key relationships portrayed in the show: “How would you describe the portrayal of Sam’s relationship with [character]?” Finally, they rated the accuracy of the portrayal of autism by a list of film and television characters who are explicitly identified as autistic (5-point scale from “very accurate” to “very inaccurate,” with an N/A option if they had not seen the portrayal).

#### Phase three (survey dissemination)

A written statement was presented on the questionnaire’s landing page outlining in plain language the purpose of the research, consent information, and study withdrawal procedures. Participants provided informed consent by submitting their survey upon completion. They were required to respond to demographic questions but were able to skip or complete all other questions and to provide as much detail as desired, with no character limits on open-ended questions. Participants were also able to complete the questionnaire across several sittings if preferred. We collected data over an 8-week period, between May and July 2021, and the median survey completion time was ~13 minutes.

#### Analysis

We extracted the data from Qualtrics and used IBM SPSS statistical package version 27 to analyze the quantitative data,

and NVivo 12 to manage the qualitative data. The quantitative data analysis consisted of descriptive analyses; we did not undertake subgroup analyses (e.g., autistic and close family member, male and female) due to the small cell sizes for a number of questions.

We used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze and report on the participants’ open-ended reflections on *Atypical* as this theoretically flexible approach utilizes researcher subjectivity and reflexivity to analyze patterns in data.<sup>20,21</sup> We used inductive analysis— informed by the researchers’ subjectivity, experience, and training—in an iterative and reflexive process. The first and second authors independently coded the data and then discussed their coding with the full research team. Based on a thorough review of all codes and their content, we generated five provisional themes. These were further refined and combined to eliminate overlapping themes and to ensure that all included text was relevant to the overarching theme, resulting in a total of three themes.

#### Research positionality

The research team brings varying perspectives and personal strengths to the current research. The first author is autistic and has conducted extensive research with the autism community; the second author is a trainee Educational and Developmental Psychologist with experience working with autistic clients; the third author is an educator with research expertise in media literacy; and the fourth author is a Clinical and Educational and Developmental Psychologist and academic who works with autistic clients. The research sits within an established unit (led by the first author) that focuses on participatory autism research within an interpretivist framework, seeing neurodiversity as a strength that is currently undervalued in academia.

#### Community involvement

As noted in the Methods Section, the study questions were initially formulated based on commentary from autistic people in social media, the first author is an autistic autism researcher, and the survey was pretested with autistic people in two phases. Furthermore, two autistic peers reviewed the article before submission.

#### Results

A total of 109 members of the autism community commenced the survey; 32 were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criterion of having watched at least 1 full episode ( $N=18$ ) or they did not complete the survey ( $N=14$ ). Thus, 77 participants returned complete surveys and were included in the data analysis: 65 autistic people,<sup>†</sup> 10 non-autistic parents, and two non-autistic partners of autistic people. The majority identified as female (64%), currently residing within Australia (55%), and had viewed more than one season of *Atypical* (84%). Participants were aged between 20 and 73 years (mean [ $M$ ]=36.01, standard deviation [ $SD$ ]=10.71). See Table 1 for more details on participant characteristics.

<sup>†</sup>Some of whom would have also been parents/friends of other autistic people.

TABLE 1. RESEARCH PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS ( $N=77$ )

	N	%	$M (SD)$
Lived experience			
Autistic (diagnosed/ self-identified)	65	84.4	
Close family member/friend	12	15.6	
Gender identity			
Female	49	63.6	
Male	9	11.7	
Other gender identity	19	24.7	
Age			36.01 (10.71)
20–30 Years	28	36.4	
31–40 Years	30	38.9	
41–50 Years	11	14.3	
51 Years and above	8	10.4	
Country of residence			
Australia	43	55.8	
A country other than Australia	34	44.2	
Viewing history of <i>Atypical</i>			
At least one full episode	5	6.5	
Two to four episodes	5	6.5	
Five to eight episodes	2	2.6	
More than one season	65	84.4	
Relationship to an autistic individual <sup>a</sup>			
Parent	10	83.3	
Romantic partner/spouse	2	16.6	
Gender identity of autistic individual <sup>a</sup>			
Female	2	16.7	
Male	10	83.3	
Age of autistic individual <sup>a</sup>			9.58 (8.87)
12 Years and below	10	83.3	
12 Years and above	2	16.7	

<sup>a</sup>Question presented to participants who identified as “close family member/friend of an autistic person” ( $N=12$ ).

M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

RQ1: Does the autism community perceive the portrayal of autism in *Atypical* to be accurate?

More than half felt that Sam’s portrayal of autism within *Atypical* was accurate (63.7%) and only seven (9.1%) thought that it was inaccurate (Table 2). In comparison, only 19.1% considered Shaun Murphy (*The Good Doctor*) and 28.6% Raymond “Ray” Babbitt (*Rain Man*) to be accurate portrayals of autism.

Of the 41 who responded to the question on whether Sam’s portrayal resonated with their own experiences, approximately half (51.2%) reported that it did. Family members appeared more likely to report that Sam’s portrayal resonated with their experience than were autistic people, and Sam’s portrayal appeared to resonate more with the experiences of male participants than female participants (Table 2).

RQ2: Does the autism community perceive the portrayal of autism in *Atypical* to be of educational benefit?

Forty-six participants responded to the question regarding informative/educational benefit. Most felt that Sam’s portrayal had moderate (43.5%) or high (28.3%) informative

benefit. Of the 42 who responded to the question on the impact of the portrayal on community attitudes, ~40% felt that Sam’s portrayal would contribute to positive attitudes toward autism, whereas 9% felt that it will have a negative impact (Table 2).

#### *So, who is Sam?*

In exploring participant responses to the open-ended questions, three major themes were generated: (1) *Atypical* as an informative representative portrayal of autism; (2) *Atypical* as an inaccurate and harmful portrayal of autism; and (3) *Atypical* as more of the same in the media.

*Atypical* as an informative representative portrayal of autism. Many participants commented positively on the portrayal of Sam in *Atypical*, commending the accuracy and authenticity of the character’s representation of the thoughts, behaviors, and experiences of autistic people. This included aspects of autism that are not typically the focus of entertainment-focused portrayals.

I thought Sam’s character did a great job of portraying sensory difficulties—noise, touch, food, & also the overwhelm he experienced at school. Also, the way that he would retreat into his room when overwhelmed, angry or upset & watch something to help him relax/calm. (Non-autistic family member, female, 42)

He exemplifies autistic characteristics that are usually unrecognised ... but nevertheless are experienced. (Autistic, non-binary, 73)

Some commented on similarities between Sam’s behaviors and problems and their own, perceiving the show as representative of their lived experience.

Sam has difficulties understanding other people and their boundaries as well as their own problems unless they are laid out in front of him. I have experienced similar problems. (Autistic, male, 21)

I related to his need to wear the same brand and style of shirts and his need to wear headphones to avoid sensory overload. (Autistic, other, 38)

He’s trying to process a lot of new information and apply it, but there’s a mis-application and delay sometimes. I’m like that. (Autistic, female, 44)

Sam’s overwhelm and noise sensitivity is similar to mine. (Autistic, female, 20)

Others, while not identifying personally with Sam, felt that the portrayal was nonetheless accurate in its representation of one example of autism.

Autism is a very diverse thing. Sam’s portrayal is not a portrayal of autism but a portrayal of Sam with autism. (Autistic, non-binary, 45)

The portrayal of autism is very accurate when you consider that the experience and look of autism varies so considerably. (Autistic, female, 50)

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND SUBGROUP DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Total participants n (%)	Experience with autism		Gender identity	
		Autistic n (%)	Family n (%)	Male n (%)	Female n (%)
<b>Accuracy of portrayal (77)</b>					
Inaccurate	7 (9.1)	6 (9.3)	1 (8.3)	1 (11.1)	5 (10.2)
Neither accurate nor inaccurate	21 (27.3)	21 (32.3)	—	2 (22.2)	12 (24.5)
Accurate	49 (63.7)	38 (58.4)	11 (91.7)	6 (66.6)	32 (65.3)
<b>Informative educational benefit (46)</b>					
No benefit	2 (4.4)	2 (5.0)	—	—	1 (3.6)
Low benefit	11 (23.9)	11 (27.5)	—	2 (33.3)	4 (14.3)
Moderate benefit	20 (43.5)	18 (45.0)	2 (33.3)	—	16 (57.1)
High benefit	13 (28.3)	9 (22.5)	4 (66.7)	4 (66.7)	7 (25.0)
<b>Positive or negative perception (42)</b>					
Negative	5 (11.9)	5 (13.9)	—	—	2 (7.4)
Neither positive nor negative	20 (47.6)	18 (50.0)	2 (33.3)	2 (50.0)	10 (37.0)
Positive	17 (40.5)	13 (36.1)	4 (66.7)	2 (50.0)	15 (55.6)
<b>Resonation with portrayal (41)</b>					
Did not resonate	8 (19.5)	8 (22.8)	—	—	3 (11.5)
Neither resonated nor did not resonate	8 (19.5)	8 (22.9)	—	—	4 (15.4)
Resonated	25 (61.0)	19 (54.3)	6 (100.0)	4 (100.0)	19 (73.0)
<b>Accuracy across fictional history<sup>a</sup></b>					
Shaun Murphy from <i>The Good Doctor</i>					
Inaccurate	11 (52.4)	10 (50.0)	1 (100.0)	—	7 (53.9)
Neither accurate nor inaccurate	6 (28.6)	6 (30.0)	—	—	3 (23.1)
Accurate	4 (19.1)	4 (20.0)	—	—	3 (23.1)
Raymond "Ray" Babbitt from <i>Rain Man</i>					
Inaccurate	15 (53.5)	13 (54.1)	2 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	10 (55.6)
Neither accurate nor inaccurate	5 (17.9)	5 (20.8)	—	1 (50.0)	1 (5.6)
Accurate	8 (28.6)	6 (25.0)	2 (50.0)	—	7 (38.9)

<sup>a</sup>Less than 20% commented on Max Braverman from *Parenthood*, Dr. Virginia Nixon from *Grey's Anatomy*, and Fiona Helbron from *Elementary*, so these data are not reported.

No one character can capture the full range of autistic experience, but Sam is a step in the right direction for representation of autistics as real people who live and interact in the world. (Autistic, non-binary, 40)

Many participants perceived the portrayal of Sam's relationships with other main characters as reflecting *realistic relationship* dynamics, particularly between Sam and his parents. Family members were able to share their own experiences of being a parent of an autistic child and acknowledge the realism of the portrayal:

I am autistic with 2 autistic kids ... I also didn't know much about autism with my first child ... I did a lot of wrong things, got info from the wrong places, struggled really hard. By the time my second kid was born and later diagnosed, I knew a lot more ... I think that is a good representation of a parent/child relationship, especially one that evolves. (Autistic, non-binary, 40)

I think it's fairly accurate—a lot if fathers of autistic kids seem to stand back & let the mother do most of the parenting, learning about autism & advocating. (Non-autistic family member, female, 42)

I can relate greatly to Sam's relationship with his father as my own father was in somewhat denial of my diagnosis when I was a child. (Autistic, male, 21)

Participants commented on the largely positive relationship between Sam and other main characters, with some able to personally relate to these relationship portrayals, particularly Sam's relationship with his sister Casey. Autistic people with siblings, and family members with autistic children, were able to identify similarities between the fictional relationships and relationships within their own families.

The same way my sister treats me ... They tease each other but also love and care for each other. (Autistic, non-binary, 22)

Casey reminds me a little of my autistic daughter and the relationship she has with my son (her brother). (Autistic, female, 40)

I really like it, his dad actually accepts Sam as Sam. He doesn't try and control him and say he knows best. He just accepts his son for who he is. (Autistic, non-binary, 30)

It is nice that it's never a problem for Zahid when Sam has a meltdown or needs help. Zahid seems to be a true friend. (Autistic, female, 38)

Participants who considered *Atypical* to be informative for viewers noted that it provided insight into the experiences and challenges faced by autistic people. Some suggested that *Atypical* provided a good starting point for future portrayals,

and others commented on the personal benefit gained from the series in educating themselves and/or those in their social circle:

It's just showing how in this TV world the different characters live being autistic and knowing someone autistic. It's a steppingstone, it needs to do even better. (Autistic, non-binary, 28)

It deals with the topic respectfully and shows a varied range of experiences ... a good starting point for a lay audience. (Non-autistic family member, female, 29)

Many family, friends and colleagues have reported the show has helped them understand [autism] better. (Non-autistic family member, male, 52)

From my experience, as a late-diagnosed autistic, I loved watching a character that I really could relate to. I kept saying to the tv, yeah, I totally get that. (Autistic, female, 40)

There was a perception among some participants that the portrayal had the potential to not only increase *awareness* about autism and how it may present, but could also lead to positive attitudes as it portrayed an *acceptance* of autism, and could encourage an *appreciation* of autistic people.

Less stigma. He's not portrayed with superpowers or substantial special talents. He's a normal kid with some struggles and thinks differently. (Autistic, female, 35)

Just about everything people did to accommodate Sam or understand why he was doing something was positive advice for how to interact with autistic people. (Autistic, female, 20)

I think the fact that Sam is shown to have growing independence and is capable is a positive portrayal. (Non-autistic family member, female, 29)

It shows that he can be a valuable and contributing member of society. (Autistic, non-binary, 40)

*Atypical* as an inaccurate and harmful portrayal of autism. Conversely, some considered Sam's portrayal stereotypical and thus inaccurate and harmful; or as notionally "accurate" but a negatively positioned outsider perception of how other people may perceive or experience an autistic person rather than what it is like to be an autistic person.

All the autistic traits were greatly exaggerated. And they made sure the main character displayed basically every autistic stereotype there is. (Autistic, female, 27)

There was nothing wrong with the portrayal factually, but the tone of the show was very negative. (Autistic, non-binary, 29)

There were also moments I thought were very condescending. (Autistic, male, 56)

I think Sam's character is more of a portrayal of how the non-autistics experience his autism than a portrayal of how Sam experiences the world. (Autistic, female, 49)

These participants considered Sam's portrayal to be exaggerated and stereotyped, reinforcing inaccurate beliefs about autism, and therefore likely to increase rather than decrease stigma. This "offensive, negative depiction of being autistic" (autistic, other, 59) was seen as having the potential to lead to negative perceptions of autistic people.

It reinforces some stereotypes about autism that could lead people to understand it less. (Autistic, male, 53).

It's a very stereotypical portrayal of autism so unlikely to challenge any preconceptions or prejudices. (Autistic, non-binary, 36).

One of the negative effects the show may have ... is that a lot of the problems the family faces is centered around Sam's autism. (Autistic, male, 21).

I think this portrayal in *Atypical* actually makes things worse ... it is promoting this idea that autism is like this overly exaggerated portrayal where he is infantilised by everyone. This portrayal of autism ticks all the stereotype boxes. (Autistic, female, 27)

Participants commented on Sam's portrayal as being from a *deficit-focused* perspective and felt that the show could negatively impact the attitudes of others regarding autism. Participants expressed concern about the representation of Sam (and his autism) as a burden on his family and friends, as well as the use of autistic characteristics as a source of humor and a target for mockery.

People will focus on his deficits rather than skills and strengths. (Autistic, female, 27)

Sam's autism is always portrayed as a challenge to himself and those around him. (Autistic, non-binary, 36)

I got frustrated with how they exaggerated autism so much to provide entertainment to the masses but at the cost of true understanding of the autistic community. I think the show does a disservice by giving viewers an inaccurate idea of what autism is. (Autistic, female, 27)

The 5 episodes I watched kept mocking Sam and his autistic traits. The audience was laughing AT Sam, not with him ... The show mostly just portrayed [autism] stereotypes and was very limited in scope. A lot of the terminology was wrong and some of it was offensive. (Autistic, other, 38)

Participants also commented that the show did not address key characteristics of autism and lived experience accurately or adequately; thus, the portrayal did not resonate with their lived experience. Furthermore, these omissions resulted in a missed opportunity to educate audiences about the challenges, and strengths, of autistic people.

There is little exploration of the magnitude of discomfort of executive dysfunction—sensory overwhelm, emotional dysregulation, time blindness. (Autistic, female, 49)

Another point of inaccuracy is that many autistic individuals have comorbidities like ADHD, OCD, BPD, CPTSD, etc. Those comorbidities alter the expression of autistic traits and

the autistic experiences of those who have them. (Autistic, other, 38)

Moving house and being chill with it ... Sam showed no signs that such a significant change was affecting him at all. (Autistic, non-binary, 45)

Aspects of Sam's relationships considered problematic were those that conveyed interactions, which invalidated Sam's experiences or portrayed autistic people as easily manipulated. The lack of realism and negative tone of Sam's relationships were described as normalizing unequal and unsupportive relationships with autistic people:

Sometimes the show writes Sam to do completely nonsensical, irrational or illogical things because they want to emphasise that autistics have trouble with relationships. (Autistic, female, 20)

Zahid is a neglectful and inconsiderate friend who constantly forgets and ignores accommodations that Sam needs. (Autistic, female, 20)

He is infantilised in general and in this relationship [Sam's relationship with Casey]. All relationships actually. (Autistic, female, 27)

It [Sam's relationship with Paige] gives the impression that autistics can't love or express love in regular ways, but we can. (Autistic, non-binary, 22)

Furthermore, Sam's relationship with his sister Casey, his father Doug, and his girlfriend Paige were considered by some to be stereotypical, due to the relationships being a typical fictional relationship: the siblings that fight with each other and for each other; the absent father who struggles to understand his child and leaves parenting to the mother; and the romantic relationship that is not understood by the autistic.

It's like most TV siblings. (Autistic, non-binary, 28)

It would have been nice to see a bit more of a nuanced representation of how autistics can function in relationships. I think sometimes the show leant into the caricature of the 'logical autistic who doesn't understand relationships'. (Autistic, female, 20)

I feel that it is a little stereotypical ... I feel in many 2-parent families, there is usually 1 person that does more work than the other. I feel he is more aloof to the parenting. (Autistic, non-binary, 40)

*Atypical* as more of the same in the media. Participants commented that—once again—the “autistic” was a White adolescent middle class male. Sam's portrayal was seen as reinforcing the “white adolescent male autism” stereotype, limiting the extent to which the show was able to present an autistic character who resonated with a broad base of autistic viewers.

People have worked very hard to spread the awareness that autism presentation like Sam's is not the actual truth for most of us and in based on cis-white-male presentations. This just

ignores all of that and reinforces those stereotypes. (Autistic, non-binary, 49)

It only represents stereotypically male presentation. (Non-autistic family member, female, 33)

As a female, my experience with autism is very different than that of a male teenager in this decade. (Autistic, female, 48)

I experience very different traits of autism to Sam. Being a female, autism is much more covert. (Autistic, female, 27)

Many participants also felt that *Atypical* lacked further exploration of topics that other shows explored in better detail and provided suggestions for future directions of fictional portrayals including racial and gender diversity, and the inclusion of autistic voices in writing and portraying autistic characters.

Needs more female or non-binary perspectives. (Autistic, female, 35)

I would like to see more from people that are from different races, social economic background. And more late diagnosis. (Autistic, male, 53)

I'd like to see a show with an autistic character with different constant and variable needs, different life, ethnicity, gender expression, financial situations etc. (Autistic, non-binary, 28)

Autistic characters should be played by autistic actors. At the very least, autistic people must be involved in the writing and creation of the show. Ask the autistic community what terminology is preferred. (Autistic, other, 38)

## Discussion

This study explored the perceptions of the autism community regarding the accuracy of the portrayal of autism in *Atypical*, the perceived informative benefits, and the positive and negative impact the portrayal has on attitudes toward autism. The majority felt that the portrayal was accurate, with few describing it as fundamentally inaccurate; and that it would have some degree of educational/informative benefit, with family members perceiving greater benefits. However, there were more mixed views regarding the potential impact of Sam's portrayal on attitudes toward autism.

Family members were more likely to consider Sam's portrayal as accurate than were autistic people, which is likely due in part to family members seeing “autism” from the outside rather than it being an intrinsic part of their identity. It is important to note that many participants commented that Sam's portrayal was an accurate reflection of *one presentation* of autism. They described Sam's character as a vehicle for portraying some characteristics and traits of autistic people, including underrecognized autistic traits and aspects of relationships with others.

Some expressed concern that Sam's portrayal was a stereotypical male representation of autism, consistent with previous research that demonstrates entertainment media fails to show varying presentations.<sup>4,8</sup> While one fictional portrayal can never fully portray the diverse spectrum or the variety and complexity of lived experiences,<sup>2</sup> this consistent homogeneous portrayal of autism fails to accurately reflect

the spectrum,<sup>22</sup> which is likely to further perpetuate stereotypical beliefs about autism. However, participants were more likely to perceive Sam's representation of autism as accurate than prior well-known autism portrayals in entertainment media, such as *Rain Man* and the *Good Doctor*.

The majority of participants felt that *Atypical* would have at least a moderate educational/informative benefit. However, as with perceived accuracy, family members were more likely to believe that the show would be beneficial in educating people about autism. Almost one third of autistic participants, but no family members, believed that the show would have little or no informative benefit. This suggests a possible caveat on previous research findings that fictional portrayals have the capacity to positively inform public knowledge about the experiences of autistic people.<sup>7,17</sup>

The main concern expressed was that the stereotypical, young adult, White, male autistic trope is too familiar and fails to be representative of the autism spectrum. As noted in previous research, such fictional portrayals may not only lack informative benefit but also further perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce inaccurate beliefs.<sup>4,17</sup> However, many perceived *Atypical* to be a positive starting point for future portrayals by showing the autistic experience from the protagonist's perspective. This provides a more holistic view of autistic experiences and relationships than previous characterizations, which contribute to the belief all autistic people are savants.<sup>3,7,8,11–14</sup>

Participants commented on the potential for *Atypical* to have a positive impact on attitudes by raising awareness and acceptance of autism, as well as increasing empathy by demonstrating the struggles and experiences of an autistic person. Consistent with previous research, some suggested that viewing the show could potentially contribute to an increased interest in learning about autism.<sup>11,15,17</sup> However, many commented on the deficit-focus of Sam's portrayal, with Sam's autism often presented as the cause or catalyst for negative interactions and outcomes for Sam as well as for his family and friends.

The value of the mixed-methods approach to the study was particularly evident in identifying the nuances in perceptions of the accuracy and impact of the portrayal of autism. Consistent throughout the responses was the diversity of autism and of autistic people. While participants considered *Atypical* to be accurate and of some informative benefit, they also saw it as yet another example of the autism trope of the heterosexual, middle class, White male. It is not surprising that participants in our study who did not meet this description found that aspects of Sam's portrayal did not resonate with their experience.

#### *Strengths and limitations*

A major strength of this study was the high involvement of autistic participants. This is important as autistic people are those most impacted by the portrayal of autism in entertainment media. However, due to the anonymous nature of the study, little is known about the participants' life experiences, co-occurring conditions, and so on, and this may limit the generalizability of the findings. The overrepresentation of females in the sample (64%) is likely to be a result of both the gendered nature of social media and the lower willingness of males to participate in online research. The use of a male

character as the study focus is a limitation that is inherent in current entertainment media portrayals. At the time of the study, *Atypical* was one of only two high-profile television series with an autistic protagonist, the other (*The Good Doctor*) was also a male.

The fact that 84% of participants reported having watched more than one season of the show suggests that the study may have disproportionately attracted fans of the show; thus, the findings may overrepresent positive attitudes toward Sam's portrayal in the autism community. It is also important to note the interaction between television viewing, social media usage, and attitudes toward fictional portrayals.<sup>†</sup> Our participants were active on social media and will likely have been exposed to other people's comments about *Atypical*, which may have influenced their opinions as much as actual exposure to the program content. This is consistent with recent research on the bandwagon effect in digital media, which shows that negative comments both affect perceived "crowd opinion" and reduce viewer enjoyment.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Implications and directions for future research and practice*

It is clear that further improvements can be made (and are needed). The autism community wants more diversity in portrayals, including female autism phenotypes, late-life diagnoses, variety in symptom presentations, and different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

There is a need to work with the producers of entertainment media to improve the diversity and accuracy of autism portrayals, in accordance with suggested directions from the autism community. Well-rounded, diverse, and holistic autism portrayals serve as an opportunity to correct misperceptions about autism. Viewing a combination of portrayals of autism has the potential to provide a more diverse understanding of the condition *only if* these portrayals represent different autistic experiences.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the primary purpose of fictional media is to entertain, not serve as an educational platform. Fictional shows, such as *Atypical*, seek to create a profit, spark viewer interest, and be renewed for additional seasons. Viewers need to identify with and feel connected to characters within a television series if they are to continue watching. Given their majority status in the population, neurotypical audiences are the primary audience for entertainment media. However, while they need to be entertained, they also need to be educated about autism. Finding the balance between producing a fictional portrayal that accurately represents autistic experiences and allows neurotypicals to resonate with the portrayal is complicated.

This can best be achieved by more diverse and holistic portrayals of autistic people interacting in society—with both autistic people and non-autistic people—and by portraying their strengths as well as their challenges. It also requires working with autistic people in all aspects of development, including autistic actors playing autistic characters, autistic writers writing autistic characters, and autistic people being involved in production and dissemination decisions.

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<sup>†</sup>We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

This study conducted an in-depth exploration of one portrayal of an autistic protagonist; future research could explore autistic people's perceptions of a range of portrayals. This is particularly timely given the recent explosion in portrayals of autistic characters in entertainment media, including the welcome release of television programs with autistic actors playing autistic characters, such as *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*, *As We See It*, and *Heartbreak High*. Furthermore, future research could explore whether fictional portrayals, such as *Atypical*, are influential in shaping knowledge and attitudes toward autism in non-autistic populations, to better understand the potential impact fictional portrayals can play in educating about autism.

### Conclusions

This study builds on previous research on the portrayal of autism in entertainment media by investigating the perception of the autism community regarding one such fictional portrayal. It provides valuable information about perceptions of the autism community regarding the accuracy of autism portrayals in fictional media, their potential informative benefit, and influence in shaping attitudes. It identifies that for entertainment media to better represent the lived experience of autistic people and improve community understanding of autism, there is a need for increased diversity of portrayals and for the involvement of autistic people in the development and production process.

### Authorship Confirmation Statement

S.C.J. and C.G. conceptualized the study, and all four co-authors collaborated on the study design and instrument development. E.T. undertook the data collection and initial data analysis, and prepared the first draft. S.C.J. prepared the article for journal submission and undertook the revisions, with input from L.M. and C.G. All co-authors have reviewed and approved the article before submission. This article has been submitted solely to this journal and is not published, in press, or submitted elsewhere.

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Address correspondence to:  
 Sandra C. Jones, PhD  
 Research Impact Unit  
 Australian Catholic University  
 St Patrick’s Campus  
 Level 2, 340 Albert Street  
 East Melbourne  
 VIC 3002  
 Australia

Email: sandra.jones@acu.edu.au