



# **Does the Film industries' portrayal of Autism represent a problem for its audiences?**

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## Literature Review

(Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024)

To help make my argument in my dissertation and answer the question of the representation issue surrounding autism in media, first off, I had to establish the facts about autism spectrum disorder (ASD) which would help lay the groundwork for my argument. To do this I found a clear and concise article from the American National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) that explained what the condition is, most of the signs, symptoms and behaviours associated with autism, the causes and risk factors of autism, how the condition is diagnosed with furthermore information on how the condition can be treated. The article helps clearly set out

what autism spectrum disorder is by explaining how it develops and shows in someone on the spectrum, why there is a spectrum and how anyone from any type of background can be diagnosed with the condition and has a very detailed guide to how the diagnostic process takes place for children suspected to be autistic and for adults as well with also much information on different types of treatment for people on the spectrum (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024). In the part of this article where it explains the common behaviours and signs and symptoms of autism, I find that not all the behaviours associated with the condition are necessarily listed in this article, but the more important and more frequent ones are with also a range of information regarding treatment and the different paths of treatment for the condition. (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024). This article helps me for the dissertation to clearly lay out for the

reader what autism spectrum disorder is, how it works, its behaviours etc and provides me information regarding treatment of the condition and how the condition can be more prevalent in particular people so that when I come to make my core argument in the dissertation, I will have a wide range of knowledge regarding the facts of autism and importantly I will be backed up by the scientific research done on the condition to make my argument but what is a little more difficult is the scientific or factual evidence for the existence and use of stigmas of autism which lead me to dive deeper into the scientific research to find out more.

(Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022)

This paper that examines the role of stigmas in autism and the theoretical model included gives a helpful insight into how certain stigmas associated with the condition lead to a worsening of mental and physical health for people diagnosed with the condition. (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022) first delve into the model itself which shows all the areas and factors that go into the creation and use of stigmas towards autistic people which according to the model first stem from both the public and professional understanding of the condition and any expressed traits of autism which once manifested leads to what they term 'Enacted Stigma' which is discrimination or rejection felt by a stigmatized person which also lead onto 'Felt Stigma' and 'Affiliate Stigma' with the former being an internalized prejudice experienced by the stigmatized person with the latter being stigma experienced through the association with a

stigmatized person. The model then leads on from these certain stigmas into affecting wellbeing, mental and physical health etc in what is a very helpful model to understand just how stigmas affect particularly people on the autistic spectrum. The paper from (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022) goes further into what is the public and professional understanding of the condition and the expressed traits of autism to explain how the model truly works in what is for my dissertation a very important academic paper to help me present my argument which does centre quite a bit around the existence of stigmas, their use and just how they manifest in the mind of the neurotypical public with the theoretical model especially once clearly laid out and explained provides key understanding surrounding the topic of stigmas in autism. To really solidify though my research of the scientific work into understanding all the

areas of autism spectrum disorder I need to look at some key research that has discovered new elements to the condition to understand how the research into autism has evolved to the last decade or so.

(Baker, 2013)

In the New England Journal of Medicine, (Baker, 2013) explains at what was a very important step in the autistic community with the new DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) at the time declaring that autism would now be termed officially as 'Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)' with (Baker, 2013) providing key analysis of what the news meant but also how it related back to the early days of autistic research with (Baker, 2013) focusing on Leo Kanner's research

from 1943 which focused on eleven children. The piece delves into how for more than thirty years, professionals debated how the condition should be categorized with Kanner leaning towards the schizophrenia camp which autism was first thought of as a symptom of schizophrenia but never considered autism compatible with mental retardation from his own studies. (Baker, 2013) then discusses how autism and the scope of knowledge has evolved with each updating of the diagnostic manuals uncovering more about the condition which led to the DSM-5 determining that autism is a spectrum with many people with autism sitting at different points of that spectrum. This research for my dissertation is crucial into explaining why autism is now a spectrum compared to previous iterations of the conditions and is key in discussing the current and up to

date facts about the condition on which my dissertation is about in regards to media representation.

(Milton, 2012)

From just over ten years ago is another key piece of research found from this academic paper on a new type of behaviour associated with autism which is the 'double empathy problem'. As (Milton, 2012) explains, the 'double empathy problem' suggests that when people with vastly different experiences of the world interact with each other, they will struggle to have empathy for each other with (Milton, 2012) stating that the 'theory of mind' and 'empathy' which is lauded in what is considered normal psychological models of human interaction, refers to a neurotypical's ability to assume

the mental states and motives of others. However, (Milton, 2012) then states that when that empathy is applied towards people on the autistic spectrum that that it is often wildly inaccurate due to those vastly differing experiences of the world that neurotypicals experience compared to autistic people. The conclusion from (Milton, 2012) of how the 'double empathy problem' works is not only important for my argument in showing how the knowledge and understanding of autism is constantly evolving but helps me personally understand more about the condition which then helps me further in my analysis of the relationship between autistic people and neurotypical people and why there is such a disconnect between the two when it comes to empathy, understanding of experiences which can often lead to neurotypicals misjudging how autistic people experience the world truly especially when neurotypicals are in

control of media representations of the condition. I have plenty of scientific research on my side but importantly need good further analysis of not just the condition but how its representation within media has been troubled.

(Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009)

In a deeper dive looking into the stereotypes with autism I managed to find a detailed but varied look at stereotypes with the condition, its different ways of showing itself in different pieces of media and whether there are clear misrepresentations of the conditions in certain pieces of media. (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009) starts out in his scientific paper by reviewing the case studies conducted by Austrian physician Hans Asperger on three different children with

autism, this was conducted during a time in the German-speaking world where Gestalt psychology was dominant in the psychological field. It's school of thought looks at the human mind and behaviour with it suggesting that human beings don't focus on separate components but instead perceive objects as elements of a more complex system. (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009)

concludes from his review of Asperger's case studies that his introduction to readers of the three boys studied with autism shaped a Gestalt-like stereotype of autism but moves on from his analysis to mainly focusing on the portrayals and representation of autism and autistic stereotypes in media (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009). Draaisma's focus begins to centre on the film 'Snowcakes (2006)' starring Alan Rickman and Sigourney Weaver who plays the autistic character of 'Linda' in which the character of Linda displaying

behaviours such as carefully aligning her shoes, being intrigued by the spinning of a coin or throwing a tantrum when being touched is seen by other autistic characters in other media which (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009) argues leads the viewers and even Alan Rickman's character in the film Alex to not questioning the behaviours of Linda and believing that those behaviours are all just normal parts of autism which he argues that since Asperger's interpretation of the more 'normal' behaviours of autism which fit into the Gestalt psychology school of thought, that stereotype is still valid due to further experts' analysis of the three boys from Asperger's studies being very much of what we consider today to be a 'normal' autistic person (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009). Draaisma continues to focus more on the more obvious stereotypes of autism shown in media and how actors,

directors and script writers' claim of intense research being done into the reality of being autistic for the benefit of their media productions. He argues that more common portrayals of autistic characters focus on the savant abilities that some in the autistic community do possess and gives the audience more of a false view that autistic people have these abilities as is portrayed and that there is more autistic savants within the community than there actually is which helps me to understand the problem of autistic representation in media within my dissertation question as it highlights a key reason as to why portrayals can be overexaggerated or to the point of blatantly false (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009). The analysis of production crew's work to get an autism portrayal done correctly however has helped open my eyes in regards to the reality of the research done by film/TV

productions to present a closer to truth representation.

Draaisma draws from examples such as from the 2005 film 'Mozart and the Whale' in how the autistic character of 'Donald' glances at his watch and calculates exactly how long it has been since he has been employed or when later in the film Donald explains to his autistic support group how he wasn't viewed as normal with a flashback scene showing a couple of kids asking him what  $5589 \text{ burgers} \times 3972 \div 17$  with Donald instantly producing a correct answer. As (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009) points out with this particular film, Donald being an autistic savant is in no way essential to the plot of the film which is just one of the examples he uses to illustrate how this stereotype continues which gives me key examples to draw from for answering my question of why there is a problem of representation with autism (Draaisma, Stereotypes of

Autism, 2009). He delves deeper into what he calls a strange discrepancy with the research done by the key people involved with a media production when it comes to autism by pointing that the actors insist that they do months of intensive preparation to understand every fibre of the condition and that script writers read scientific articles on autism. Yet as he points out they end up writing a character with savant abilities that has almost nothing resembling a normal autistic person (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009). Draaisma also points out another stereotype of autism that 'we're all a bit autistic' when certain autistic characters are used to teach certain neurotypical characters a lesson which helps bring both characters closer together with an example from the 1988 film 'Rainman' which used the autistic savant character 'Raymond' establishing a loving relationship with his brother 'Charlie' who starts the film

as egocentric and self-centred but becomes more caring and loving by the end of the film. However by the end of this literature, (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009) argues that particularly the stereotypes of 'savant' and 'we're all a bit autistic' misrepresent the condition in opposite directions with the savant stereotype putting autistic people into the bubble of being considered extraordinary and exceptional and the second stereotype making autism seem more co-extensive with what is considered normal behaviour by neurotypical standards (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009).

This literature on the stereotypes of autism will be very helpful in helping make my argument as Draaisma laid out how the stereotype of autism was created, how they have been largely accepted during different times in history when viewing specific media and clear cases of how a stereotype was used in media and how it

misrepresents the condition which will help me in the dissertation when it comes to firstly proving that the stereotype of autism is real and has been around for decades, how it has been accepted by the neurotypical audience and how these stereotypes are used to misrepresent the reality of autism spectrum disorder.

(Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009)'s work also widened my ability to research further into the amount of autistic representations and their accuracy due to (Draaisma, Stereotypes of Autism, 2009) shining the light on films I had not seen when writing this and teaching me that the problem I am investigating of correct and positive representation is bigger than I previously thought. This has led me though to find out from specialists and/or film theorists from specific media what the relationship is between the audience and the media they directly consume and how particular

representations of autism spectrum disorder can lead to the audience's viewing experience being affected with certain autistic stereotypes being portrayed on screen.

(Hayward, 2006)

I came across a particular film theory that could help me explain and analyse how the audience's viewing experience is affected by 'the reveal' of a character's status on the spectrum and how the condition of autism itself can unstitch a viewer or audience from the narrative of a film or television production. This theory is called 'Suture Theory' which describes the mental task of stitching yourself as a viewer into the narrative of a story regarding media and particularly film, however there can be moments within said media production that

can unstitch you from that narrative. But to truly understand from a psychoanalytic standpoint how this process occurs in the brain, I read a specific part of the book 'Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts – Third Edition' written by Susan Hayward which is detailed look and explanation into the many key theories surrounding the media we consume and how we consume it. The part of the book that centres on 'Suture Theory' looks at the history of the terms use and how it began as a term back in the 1960s before being used as a key concept in film by Jean-Pierre Oudart. However this theory was based on the studies done by Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who conducted the psychoanalysis of a child for this study. In these studies, Lacan used the term 'suture' to describe the relationship between the conscious and unconscious which he perceived as an uneasy conjunction between what he

terms the 'imaginary' and the 'symbolic' orders in which these two orders after infancy are always co-present (Hayward, 2006). In summary, the 'symbolic' order does not dislodge the 'imaginary' but functions to regulate it as the writer of the book (Hayward, 2006) explains that it can be summed up by simply saying, the early jubilation felt at the mirror stage which is the point at which Lacan says first glances at its reflection in the mirror and sees itself as a unified being, that stage is soon threatened by the child's realization that she is not a unified being at the centre of the world but instead part of a larger social and 'symbolic' order within and against which the individual is constantly trying to define her identity. Therefore, in psychoanalytic terms, (Hayward, 2006) writes that 'suture' is perceived as the striving of the ego to stitch both the 'imaginary' and 'symbolic' orders together (Hayward, 2006). This summary written by

Susan Hayward and the psychoanalysis done by Jacques Lacan is very useful to my dissertation as to deliver my argument I am going to use the theory of 'Suture' to explain how particular depictions of autism spectrum disorder and even just the depiction of the condition itself can destroy the stitching in effect and that psychological process for audience members. To be able to explain how this is done I need to know myself from a psychological point of view how this process of 'suturing' is done and how it affects the relationship between the viewer and film itself to use for my argument and from this piece of literature I have understood the most important pieces of the theory from a psychological basis which is key to answering my dissertation question with my research on this film theory actually leading to me to theorize myself of an alternate explanation for how misrepresentations of

autism are generally accepted among audiences. What I needed to understand though was why media representation in relation to stereotypes was so important but also learn more about how productions do manipulate their audiences into agreeing and accepting stereotypical portrayals of different types of people.

(Hayward, 2006)

Once again, I looked to (Hayward, 2006) for further answers and in the way of stereotypes and representation in film, I found an interesting explanation for how the process of displaying stereotypes when representing different groups of people works.

(Hayward, 2006) explains how stereotypes when applied figuratively means a fixed and repeated characterization

in film with an example used regarding western films illustrating how that genre had a few stereotypes such as the hero-puts-things-right against all odds and the hero as the positive value going up against the stereotypes as a negative value. The purpose of the stereotypes serves as (Hayward, 2006) writes to clip into the codes and conventions associated with belonging and exclusion with stereotypes in film representing a release of prejudice whilst also playing on them. (Hayward, 2006) makes the point that the production allows us as an audience typically to feel belonging to a social group despite not even being a part of that social group with this explanation really opening my mind to the relationship between the production and audience and how stereotypes are used in particular ways to make the audience accept or enjoy certain characters. These theories surrounding stereotypes and

how they are used to represent characters with different social and/or physical characteristics has led me to deeply thinking about the relationship between the screen and the audience and has forced me in regards to my own question of media representation of autism, to really look at from a psychological perspective just how stereotypes of autism not only are displayed but then accepted by viewers.

(Kurchak, Sia's Music Disability Debate Goes Beyond Representation, 2021)

During the days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the release of a film centred around the topic of autism caused much controversy with popular musician Sia the producer of the film 'Music (2021)'. This film though due

to its mishandling of the condition and clear misrepresentation left a very sour taste especially for (Kurchak, Sia's Music Disability Debate Goes Beyond Representation, 2021) who is on the autistic spectrum herself managed to critique the film for Time magazine. She openly states right off the bat that from watching the teaser trailer for the film, the tone and intent left her with distaste for what the film would go on to be with (Kurchak, Sia's Music Disability Debate Goes Beyond Representation, 2021) stating that "I thought it looked like a bad movie". The review then goes on to describe how (Kurchak, Sia's Music Disability Debate Goes Beyond Representation, 2021) feelings towards the film worsened once they learned more about the production of the film, particularly the casting decision for the non-verbal autistic character of 'Music' which was played by Maddie Ziegler who is both not non-verbal and not on

the autistic spectrum with this prompting a justified backlash as to why an autistic actor was not considered for such a role with the review delving into some of the online reaction to these production choices. (Kurchak, Sia's Music Disability Debate Goes Beyond Representation, 2021) then summarises why the film was upsetting by identifying certain scenes which caused much reaction in the wider community. The most important part of this review though for my dissertation comes in the first couple paragraphs of the article with (Kurchak, Sia's Music Disability Debate Goes Beyond Representation, 2021) stating that going into watching the film they knew the film was going to bad from their perspective due to watching the teaser trailer and researching the production process and choices made for the film which is a key example that I can use for explaining in my dissertation how 'Suture Theory' which

is the mental process of stitching into the media you are consuming has in this example been broken due to knowledge of the production and poor impressions of the teaser trailer.

(McCarthy, 2018)

Another key review of autistic media representation is (McCarthy, 2018) and it's look back at the film 'Rain Man (1988)' which was the first major media representation of autism with Dustin Hoffman playing 'Raymond' who in the film is an autistic savant. (McCarthy, 2018) doesn't just review the film and judges it from how it looks to the mind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century compared to when it was released in 1988 but examines some key areas in determining what its current legacy is especially for the

autistic community. The key parts for my research in this article firstly focused on information about the production process was undertaken with Hoffman developing the character of 'Raymond' by examining other autistic people and particularly autistic savants and focusing quite a bit on the mannerisms and key details to the people he was examining but most importantly the differing reactions from different areas of the community from current day to the film and its representation. What I found from those reactions is that commonly they all agree that the representation whilst maybe not exactly accurate was incredibly important to having autistic people and its community being seen and heard for the first time in a major way and at least started the journey for further representations of autism. (McCarthy, 2018) is helpful for my dissertation to learn of certain facts from the production of the film itself which plays an important

role in my dissertation and in the media representation of autism arc itself but also learn of the widely held view from the article that the film's release was important for the condition's visibility despite what is considered even by autism advocate Chris Bonnello who features in the piece saying that he thinks the film is still a poor representation despite its importance.

Overall, from what I have reviewed in this literature review I now have a much better understanding of the scientific side of the condition that I will be analysing in my dissertation which is of course autism spectrum disorder, I have found evidence of where the stigmas and stereotypes for the condition have started and developed which will help me identify them in my textual

analysis to come in my dissertation and how those are used in media and how particular theories in film and media in general work psychologically in practice which will help my analysis of how the audience is affected by the portrayals of autism in media.

## Preface

I am diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and have been officially on the spectrum since the early months of 2009. As I have grown into an adult, the portrayal of autism in all facets has interested me and concerned me more with myself seeking to understand why these portrayals differ from my own personal

experience of being autistic both as a child and an adult.

# **Does the Film industries' portrayal of Autism represent a problem for its audiences?**

”Representation is not a simple reflection of reality, but a powerful mode of shaping and constructing our understanding of the world.” Stuart Hall, British Sociologist (Hall, 1997)

One of the most crucial parts of how a particular group of people are understood and viewed in the general public's mind is through media representation which helps introduce us to different types of people but

rarely can it be absolutely truthful in its portrayal as there is not one absolute true reflection of reality (SmarterStudy, 2025). Media's representation of certain groups like the autistic community though most of the time is focused less on the facts on these groups and more on stereotyping and stigmatized those groups to suit an overall narrative. This distortion of reality has led to a split in audiences experiences particularly within the film industry with neurotypical audiences accepting portrayals of the condition and enjoying them for what they are with autistic audience members unable to stitch into the narrative of these certain film productions. This rift between these two distinct audiences has furthered misinformed

viewpoints about the autistic spectrum within the neurotypical audience whilst for the autistic audience it has led to ruined viewing experiences and this rift all starts with the productions and the choices made for those productions by key above the line staff.

These choices to portray autism in this fashion is part of what should be called a ‘subconscious manipulation’ of audiences particularly the non-autistic audience viewing these films with the key production staff behind these certain films making subconscious choices to write and portray autistic characters in certain ways which has led to two distinctive outcomes of autism in film. The first is a portrayal of the autistic

character being used for particular abilities to assist a key neurotypical character to achieving an end goal with the autistic character being clearly displayed as inferior until they have a particular use to the neurotypical with the second being mostly or a completely incorrect portrayal of autism that only insults the community at large whether consciously intentional or not. This dissertation will look at the facts behind autism and its socially constructed stigmas and stereotypes to show how they are used for the benefit of neurotypicals on screen, incorrectly portrayed due to lack of understanding or subconscious biases' which leads to a split in the audiences viewing experience and how when dealing with 'autistic coded'

characters, the film industry does a better job of correctly and respectfully portraying them in a better than actual autistic characters.

In its infancy, film was used to show what people had not seen of other cities, countries, cultures and continents of the world and other remarkable sites that people had never witnessed. As the development of film continued after its creation in the 1890s, we soon had films depicting fictional stories with fictional characters. These films even in the silent era of filmmaking proved very popular amongst the public, but little did filmmakers and audiences know at this time that these films are now only seen as

representations or constructions of the world we knew rather than a glimpse at the real world. Since the very beginning of film, the world and all the different locations, cultures, races etc of earth have been represented to audiences and stereotyped to the point of making certain images seem natural or normal. But if those certain repeated images were to depict a particular group of people in a way that is not necessarily accurate or even maliciously inaccurate then audiences without the necessary knowledge are likely not to question these representations. That is why truthful and positive representation, particularly of marginalised groups, is important to audience members when viewing pieces of media that represent

certain groups to change the narrative and biases that people may have against certain groups of people.

“Instead, representation should be intentional.

People in power should aim for their content to reflect their audiences—especially if they know that doing so could assist in increasing people's self-esteem and wellness.” (Nadal, 2021)

This dissertation will be focusing on the representation of the people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder with it investigating how truthful the representation of this condition is in film but also how the audience is subconsciously manipulated into accepting certain portrayals of autism as truth due to the repetition of

stereotypes of the condition in film. It will then focus on how the media industry sometimes better portrays some behaviours associated with autism in characters that aren't explicitly autistic compared to those that are. To examine this, the facts about autism spectrum disorder will be established with its behaviours and effects, whilst examining the stigmas and stereotypes that are associated with the condition. Evidence will be provided and showcase what the reality of autism is and the undeniable existence of certain stereotypes and stigmas that have been used later in media portrayals to show that they have been accepted to a degree by society. It will then delve into the psychoanalytic process of the audience's connection to

the media they consume by examining the role ‘Suture Theory’ plays in that and how also the process of the subconscious manipulation of the audience to accept repeated portrayals of autism as truth works. Textual analysis will be used to illustrate examples of where research into autism for film productions has increased stereotypes about the condition and to showcase how ‘Suture Theory’ works in this case. Further textual analysis will analyse how specific media productions have portrayed certain traits of autism better in non-autistic characters than has been seen in other media productions which involve autistic characters to show how stereotypes associated with the condition cause many portrayals to not deliver in accuracy.

To properly understand the disability that we see represented infrequently in media, we must clearly answer the question of, what is autism? Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is both a neurological and developmental disorder which affects how people diagnosed with the disorder interact with others, communicate, learn and behave (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024). The reason autism currently is known as a “spectrum” disorder whereas twenty years ago it was not, is because there is a wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms that people experience with people from all races, gender, ethnic and economic backgrounds able to be diagnosed with autism. There

are many social communication and restrictive/repetitive behaviours associated with the condition, but the main and most common ones are included in Appendix i:

What causes someone to be diagnosed and placed on the autistic spectrum is a topic that is still being researched but studies into this topic suggest that a person's genes can act together with aspects of their environment to affect development that leads to ASD.

Some of these factors that are associated with the increased likelihood of developing the condition are included in appendix ii:

How autism spectrum disorder is diagnosed can and does differ based on the region and country that someone lives within but the treatment for the condition is more common across the board with medication helping to treat some symptoms such as hyperactivity, anxiety, depression and repetitive behaviours whilst there are also behavioural, psychological and educational interventions that can be done to help someone on the spectrum learn social and communication skills, reduce behaviours that affect daily functioning and learn life skills to help them live independently if needs be (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024).

That is our understanding of autism spectrum disorder in the year 2025 but this understanding has evolved not just in the last one hundred years but specifically since the last year of the second world war when a landmark scientific study was conducted by Austrian physician Hans Asperger. Hans submitted a thesis on the topic of autism to the University of Vienna in October of 1942 with the thesis being published with only minor changes in June of 1944. This paper's title translated into English "The "Autistic Psychopaths" in Childhood" with the paper including four case studies and related analysis of four young boys. Asperger was able to identify behaviours that by the 1980s would be accepted as the symptoms and behaviours of people

with autism. Aspergers' studies identified typical behaviour patterns that he saw amongst these autistic children, with Asperger concluding that

"the individual personalities [of autistic people] stand out from one another not only through the degree of the contact disorder, through the level of intellectual and character strengths, but also through numerous individual traits, special ways of reacting, and special interests." (Asperger, 1944).

The patterns that he identified in his findings would later become known as "Asperger Syndrome" with the syndrome being named after Asperger by English psychiatrist Lorna Wing in 1976. Once his findings were

translated to the English-speaking world in the 1970s, Aspergers' work set the standard of identifying autism particularly in children for many decades even until today.

After the second world war more research was done into different aspect of autism by British psychiatrist John Bowlby and Austrian American psychologist Bruno Bettelheim which led to what is now a largely abandoned psychological theory called "Refrigerator Mother Theory" which sought to explain that autism was caused by a lack of parental warmth as a child. Correct observations into the condition would be made post war with important awareness being raised about

autism starting in the 1950s with the 'League for Emotionally Disturbed Children' being founded in New York in 1950, a starting point of awareness for autism and other mental disabilities particularly in the United States, where case studies on many children with mental disabilities such as autism would be conducted (Bender, 1953). However, it wouldn't be until 1978 that autism became fully recognized as a developmental disorder which was distinct from schizophrenia, as recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) at the turn of the 1980s. Since the 1980s there has been further behavioural analysis carried out with further updates to the diagnostic tools to search for the condition in people as well with the DSM-5 (Diagnostic

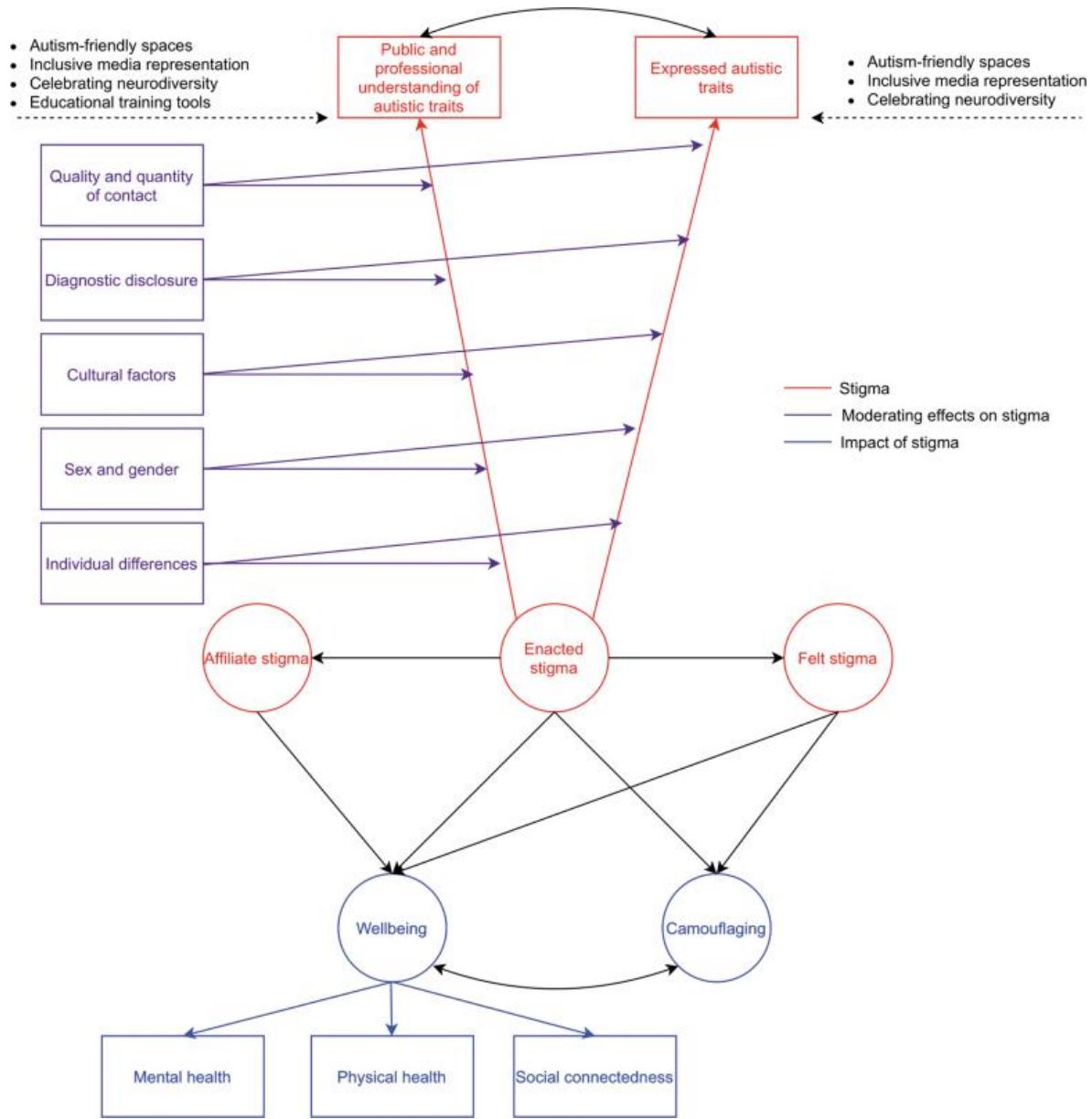
and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition) resulting in 2013 eliminating Asperger syndrome as a separate diagnosis with the DSM instead considering autism as a spectrum which led to the creation of 'autism spectrum disorder' (Baker, 2013). Due to further behavioural analyses conducted even more has been found out about autism such as the concept of the 'Double Empathy Problem' coined in October of 2012 by British psychologist Damian Milton which proposed that interaction problems between autistic and non-autistic people are at least in part because they both think differently to each other, understanding people in their own group but having difficulties understanding people that think differently

to them. This contrasts with the idea that the interaction problems are necessarily down to autistic people having a lesser ability to socially understand compared to non-autistic people (Milton, 2012). The 'Double Empathy' problem represents also a reason for why neurotypicals and autistic people experience films and media in general as an audience member differently especially when dealing with the topic of autism due to the neurotypicals lack of understanding of the realities of autism whilst autistic people can struggle to relate to either more so neurotypical issues or experience autistic portrayals in media much differently to that of a neurotypical with an autistic viewer much more able to identify an incorrect

portrayal due to the experience of having the condition as opposed to not. Research into the condition continues to this day with the elusiveness of what primarily causes autism to develop in people continuing to evade researchers in the scientific and psychiatric communities.

The behaviours that have been studied and observed by psychiatrists but also experienced by the general neurotypical public have led to many stigmas being created for the condition which has resulted in people with autism being viewed in a negative light that almost entirely discredits the person and leaves the person being seen as not as valuable a member of

society as others are. But how does a stigma get not only constructed but used in a negative light which furthers the discreditation of autistic people? This diagram lays out the importance of stigma within the autistic community and its key effects with the paper including a theoretical model of causes and impact of autism stigma seen below (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022).



The ‘Enacted Stigma’ circle of the diagram is

represented by the convergence of the public and professional understanding of autistic traits and

expressed autistic traits. The ‘Enacted Stigma’ being when discrimination or rejection is experienced by the stigmatized person in question. The other two stigmas in this model of ‘Felt Stigma’ which is an internalized prejudice experienced by a stigmatized person and ‘Affiliate Stigma’ which is a stigma experienced by association with a stigmatized person such as a parent or other family members are experienced through the main type of stigma of this model being the ‘Enacted Stigma’. The ‘Enacted Stigma’ then leads onto affecting wellbeing and camouflaging as well with indirect effects felt through the other two stigmas laid out with bullet points above indicating what can be done to

possibly to reduce stigma.<sup>1</sup> Stigmas being created around autistic behaviours also go on to create stereotypes for the condition that whilst not all stereotypes are necessarily negative can still be inaccurate. As listed in the diagram one of the key components of how autistic people and autistic behaviours are seen and interpreted is media representation.

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<sup>1</sup> If we use this model as an example of how stigma is used to define autistic people, stimming is a common behaviour for people on the spectrum that normally happens during moments of feeling stress, fear, anxiety etc and is at least an occasional behaviour for autistic people no matter the type of stim. The public's understanding of this behaviour leads straight into discrimination and rejection of the autistic person (Enacted Stigma) because of this behaviour as it is widely deemed as most unusual for a human to display this behaviour due to the still overwhelming majority of neurotypicals in the human population. This then leads into firstly an internalized prejudice experienced by the autistic person for displaying this behaviour which has come from being discriminated/rejected (Felt Stigma) and secondly leads to the stigma being experienced by close associates of the autistic person such as family, friends, caregivers etc (Affiliate Stigma) with all three of these types of stigma leading to a downturn of mental and physical wellbeing through also a lack of social connection which gets lost due to the type of stigmas experienced with masking of particular behaviours taking hold to avoid being stigmatized.

A key film in developing public understanding and spreading further knowledge of the condition was the motion picture ‘Rainman (1988)’ which hit cinemas in December of 1988 and was the first acclaimed production that touched on autism and autistic people. ‘Rainman’ is a story about two brothers, one is a neurotypical called Charlie, and the other is a high functioning Autistic savant named Raymond or known in this film as Ray. The narrative of the film is that Charlie after the passing of his father seeks to claim what he believes he is owed in the will before finding out that Ray has been left the outstanding amount which leads Charlie to discover his brother’s existence. Charlie then uses Ray by taking him outside of his care

facility to bargain for a portion of his father's estate but eventually finds himself needing to pay back debts which he uses his brother to help pay it back by using Ray's mathematical genius. To prepare for this role Dustin Hoffman who plays Raymond, drew from not only from his experience working at the New York Psychiatric Institute when he was younger, but also when accepting an Oscar for his performance, thanked Peter Guthrie who was autistic, an autistic savant named Joseph Sullivan, and a second savant named Kim Peek. Hoffman was the only key member of the production to have done any key research (Hoffman, 1989). After personally putting off viewing this film due to a base knowledge of certain stigmas within the film,

it was time to finally take a look at this film and more importantly for this dissertation, the autistic character of Raymond to see just how accurate the portrayal of the condition was, whether the portrayal was positive or negative in the writers choices for the character's decisions and whether this film could have been a key contributing factor to the formation of stigmas for the autistic community. Sadly, it was as I found not only from my own personal experiences as an autistic person but also from observing the factual data collected on the behaviours and mannerisms that this film was almost entirely inaccurate whilst also portraying Raymond as being useless and hopeless when operating in society. The most inaccurate part of

Raymond's character was not his ability to memorize factual and key numerical information about a particular car or a baseball player or even the exact amount of toothpicks that have fallen on the floor when Ray is searching for toothpicks to play with, it was the display of Ray rattling off these numbers and statistics like an audible calculating machine at times with nobody prompting him as to how many toothpicks were actually on the floor or the numerical facts about his father's car. This angle of the portrayal reduces Ray's savant ability with numbers into him sounding like a robot rather than a human being (Draaisma, 2009). Many autistic people are able to remember and memorize key information about subjects that they

hold special interests in, especially subjects that involve numerical data due to the patterns that can occur within that data but it is Raymond's behaviour of listing off key facts and figures that is quite over exaggerated and takes the behaviour of Information dumping to a quite extreme and inaccurate level (Draaisma, 2009). This repeated display of this behaviour stigmatises autistic people into being seen by the neurotypical public as closer to robots rather than genuine humans with the savant abilities, with Raymond also creating the stigma for autistic people that we have a shocking or unbelievable level of mathematical knowledge about subjects whilst being

almost completely hopeless at anything else

particularly social skills.

The film industry's role in stigmatizing the autistic

community continues even to this decade as another

film that garnered huge attention, namely for its poor

and quite shocking portrayal of autism was the film

'Music (2021)' which was directed, produced and

written by famous Australian pop star Sia. The autistic

character for this film is named Music and played by

Maddie Ziegler and the performance and its portrayal

astonished me so negatively to the point where it was

only possible to watch the first seven minutes of the

one hundred- and forty-seven-minute disaster that was

this film. Many others within the autistic community were not only shocked by the portrayal but how direct the offensive and insulting parts of the film were to autistic viewers of the film such as a group of autistic people who together sat through, watched and reacted to the film for the Youtube channel ‘Evasive’.

“I feel like I only know the stupid faces that she’d make.

But then there’s A LOT more to this movie with what makes it so detestable.” (Evasive, 2024), 49:15

In this film Music is a non-verbal autistic character but during almost the entirety of what I watched had a facial expression and pulled facial mannerisms which have been used by people who have bullied and demeaned autistic people for generations. This is an

expression of the teeth positioned and stuck out clearly ahead of the mouth whilst moving her head side to side in what resembles a person you would expect to see in a psychiatric ward and/or institute. This has always been a way to bully and put down autistic people and has stigmatized the way autistic people express themselves physically for decades which this film just makes even worse. These two films demonstrate that despite the gains in knowledge and research about autism, portrayals of the condition still fall into the inaccurate bracket and still cause real world harm for the autistic community with a key autistic community member on X posting how the film

and their viewing experience left them reliving the trauma of yesteryear.

“Today I am haunted by the decisions of others to restrain me. Traumatic memories brought up by watching a clip of Sia’s new movie Music where she proudly displays abuse of autistic people through restraints. Nearly 20 years later and still paying the price.” (GhillieGuide, 2021)

These inaccurate portrayals have continued to cause others in the autistic community to be unable to continue watching these films especially when a main character that has autism is portrayed in such an

incorrect manner (Luterman, 2021). A theory within

film that describes this experience well is 'Suture

Theory' coined by film critic Jean-Pierre Oudart with

suture as a concept being introduced by Jacques

Lacan's psychoanalyses conducted in the 1960s.

'Suture Theory' is the process as a viewer of stitching in

mentally into the narrative of the film you are watching

to the point where you forget that the camera is the

one doing the looking for you, however this stitching

into a narrative can be broken by anything within a

particular film that can take the viewer out of the

mental process of stitching in such as an obvious

mistake within the film's production, a horrible piece of

acting or in this case a questionable representation of a

certain race, gender, ethnicity, disability etc. In the case of 'Music' and its portrayal of non-verbal autism through the character Music, it has harmed the ability for other autistic viewers of the film to be able to stitch into the narrative of the film with Sarah Kurchak, a film critic for Time website delving into their viewing experience of the film. Kurchak's article explores how many parts of this film caused such an outrage, its key issues and their overall view of the film but informs us as to how they couldn't enjoy the film and were unable to closely follow the narrative of the film with an open and clear mind. Kurchak explains at the start of her research before watching the film, that debuted in the early months of 2021, that she watched the teaser

trailer for the film that was released online in November 2020 which left her with a bitter taste due to what others in the autistic community had already remarked on that the trailer was an inaccurate and rather insulting take on a non-verbal autistic girl.

Kurchak stated

“As someone who cares about film as an art form—and as someone who has covered and reviewed it for over 20 years—I thought it looked like a bad movie.”

(Kurchak, 2021)

Which hurt her ability to possibly enjoy and to stitch into whatever the exact narrative of the film was going

to be. This wasn't helped when she learned further of the type of production the film had and importantly the interaction between the autistic community and Sia online in the months leading up to the release of the film. Moreover her view of the film upon release discussed that it looked like a bad film remained unchanged especially after a scene in the film, which was widely condemned by people within the autistic community, where the non-verbal autistic character Music is tackled to the ground in a violent manner during an autistic meltdown in what is called 'prone restraint', a technique used to subdue autistic people in these cases which has in real life caused multiple deaths. The reaction to this scene likely leads many

autistic viewers of the film to not be able to truly engage with the film's narrative due to its upsetting and violent nature but would not necessarily be recognised as problematic by a neurotypical audience due to either a lack of understanding of why that behaviour is bad or an inability to relate to autistic people who have suffered this physical assault.

Many portrayals though of autism whether accurate or highly exaggerated have still found success for not only the quality of the film but also the autistic characters themselves with 'Rainman' a clear example of this with the film itself winning Best Film and Best Original Screenplay at the 61<sup>st</sup> edition of the Academy Awards

with the director Barry Levinson picking up the Best Director award, but most importantly Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of autism through the character Raymond won him Best Actor. What this points to, especially with the portrayal of autism in 'Rainman', is a general acceptance particularly by neurotypicals that Hoffman's portrayal of a high functioning autistic savant is correct and more so accurate, which is what leads to the stigmas and stereotypes being created and illuminated by films such as these and leads to a further general acceptance of those stigmas and stereotypes by the majority of the population which is neurotypical. This is what should be called a 'subconscious manipulation' of audiences into

accepting these representations due to its popular and repeated portrayals in media (Hamilton, 2019). The process of 'subconscious manipulation' starts with the people involved in the production's decision in representing for example autism in a certain way that already draws from the stigmas and stereotypes associated with the condition which allows more of a chance for the audience to relate with and enjoy the character more if it fits the narrative or societal stigmas and stereotypes that are already known and exist in society. This then leads to the neurotypical audience very much accepting the portrayal which thus helps them enjoy the story and characters of the film more and can help the viewer stitch into the narrative of the

film if the representation of certain characters doesn't contradict their perception of the condition. The neurotypical audience then accepts this representation as truth most likely due to either sharing similar subconscious bias against autistic people that the production may have or having an open mind towards the condition due to not having the knowledge of the condition required to know what the reality of autism is (Hamilton, 2019). The reason that I call this process 'subconscious manipulation' is because it is likely due to subconscious biases of certain above the line staff that inaccurate autistic portrayals are able to manifest on screen and this decision to write and display the autistic character in that particular way leads to a

subconscious manipulation of the neurotypical audiences view of autism which fits into certain stigmas and stereotypes of the condition and creates a vicious cycle where inaccuracies related to the understanding of autism largely fester (Hamilton, 2019). ‘Rain man’ is a key example of this as in certain scenes Raymond sounds pretty much robotic and computer like when listing off key statistics and numbers about the car his brother is driving. The portrayal of this area of autism was considered mostly accurate and at least fit the narrative and neurotypical audience’s understanding of autism to the point that Dustin Hoffman’s portrayal of autism was considered by many key reviewers of film to be brilliant with

official validation coming in the way of the best actor award at the Academy Awards. Once again, this process is how stigmas and stereotypes of autism fester and operate on a large scale in society especially when what is a more inaccurate portrayal of autism is accepted by the neurotypicals on a large platform.

But whilst ‘Rain Man’ is the most popular film to date that deals with autism and has for many an important place in history due to it being the first major film production to highlight the disability, it isn’t without its flaws (McCarthy, 2018). Due to the number of portrayals of the condition that the community isn’t satisfied with, over recent years the term ‘Autistic-

'coded' has grown within the community which describes characters that whilst not explicitly labelled as autistic, display many of the common traits and behaviours associated with autism (Mullis, 2016). One particular character that displays some traits and behaviours associated with the condition is 'K' who plays a Blade Runner/police officer for the Los Angeles Police Department in the film 'Blade Runner 2049'. In the film 'K' is tasked with hunting down old replicant models and 'retiring' them but is soon given the task of eliminating the child of a replicant thought not possible to be birthed from a replicant. In comparison to the type of task undertaken this time with the autistic character Raymond from 'Rain Man', Raymond is taken

out of his care facility by his brother Charlie to help wrestle control of the money that Raymond was to receive from the passing of their father with Raymond also being used by his brother purely for financial gain for his autistic savant abilities such as being able to correctly work out and answer vastly complicated mathematical questions to recover unpaid debt Charlie owes. We can see with the task the writers set these two characters that Raymond's task for the film and journey is purely manipulated by his brother for the gain of his neurotypical brother and Raymond purely exists as mathematical assistance to help Charlie recover his debt meanwhile 'K' is given what is at least considered by his superiors, an important job to keep

peace within society and to keep the replicants and natural human beings from going to war. Thus 'K' is given an important task by the film's writers that relies on him performing the task to where he does not require assistance and is seen within the film trying to piece together who exactly he is looking for in what is a role that shows a certain level of respect for the character's abilities to detect the answer to his task and allows the character's abilities to benefit his own self without him being used purely for the benefit of another character's story arc as opposed to Raymond who is used in his film for his abilities to assist the main character of his brother Charlie in his

task to first claim his father's will then pay off his debts.

Another key difference between these two characters is the display of each of their compatibility with the society they inhabit with the two societies these characters inhabit about sixty years apart. For Raymond he is shown to almost completely incompatible with his society such as stopping in the middle of the road when the traffic sign says 'stop' or being unable to successfully greet somebody at the door of a family's house due to his fascination with what he can see on the television from looking just outside the living room window. This makes Raymond

look more like belonging to a different species that cannot possibly live what is considered a normal life due to the writers using particular behaviours and stereotypes of autism to set Raymond up in making himself look like such an alien in comparison to the neurotypicals. For 'K' on the other hand, his compatibility with his society is displayed in a much more realistic sense for an autistic-coded character with him generally avoiding any real contact with people when outside of his apartment which is a common trait of autistic people to avoid the possibility of conversation or even eye contact due to anxiety or inability in this area. 'K' does not necessarily avoid socializing for the same reason but the display of

avoidance is a correct portrayal of that behaviour but a key scene that really highlights his lack of social skills is his interaction with a woman named 'Mariette' in downtown Los Angeles. In this scene we see 'K' approached by the female, his expressions seem to lack any sense of a natural spirit with him unsure why the female has approached him despite the obvious intentions of the female with her mannerisms and facial expressions. This also represents a truer representation of what a lack of social skills looks like especially when conversating with someone who has and displays clear intentions but the person lacking in social skills is unable to pick up on this therefore displaying 'K' as compatible enough with his society

that he can live normally despite the lack of social life which for the autistic community is a common trend in their attempt to live a meaningful life. This difference in societal compatibility between the two characters shows how with the autistic-coded character of 'K', you can display an area of incompatibility such his social skills without making the character look alien like for the world he resides in compared to Raymond who at times is displayed as being as far from normal as one could be.

This comparison is a clear example of how an 'autistic-coded' character can be a truer representation of the condition of autism than a popular character with the

condition with 'K' being a more realistic, respectful and meaningful character that displays some of the common traits and behaviours whilst Raymond comes across as an exaggerated, incompatible soul used purely for the benefits of his brother. This shows that without the stigmas and stereotypes of the condition being used and abused for the plot and without any subconscious biases of the condition present in the mind that more so correct representations of the traits, behaviours and experiences of autism is possible.

More and more each decade is being discovered about why autistic people experience life the way they do and how they differ in life experience from non-autistic

people but what is key is that the facts we know and the facts we don't know yet, are not used to stigmatize and treat the autistic community as lesser. For decades certain neurotypicals have discredited and continued the portrayal of unfavorability for the autistic community which has led to the continuation of societal oppression to this very day but the role of representation within media and most importantly film can change this view going forward. As the film 'The Accountant (2016)' mentions towards the end of the film, autistic people are just different rather than a lesser kind of human. This thought about autistic people is the one that should permeate through the writers and producers across the industry with films

like 'The Accountant' (2016) showing the way for well written autistic characters that are treated with respect and treated on at least the same playing field as everybody else but all starts with proper education and understanding about what autism really is. If writers and producers can delve down this new path of truly understanding autistic people and showing autistic people as being equal to and having their own unique character, then it will help shape future thought and opinions about autism from neurotypicals and will allow autistic audience members to enjoy films with autistic characters rather than potentially loathing them. Ultimately though it all starts with correct

education which is truly what allows different groups of people to be represented truthfully and respectfully.

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” (Ellis, 2019)

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## Appendix i: National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

- Making little or inconsistent eye contact
- Appearing not to look at or listen to people who are talking
- Infrequently sharing interest, emotion, or enjoyment of objects or activities (including infrequent pointing at or showing things to others)
- Not responding or being slow to respond to one's name or to other verbal bids for attention
- Having difficulties with the back and forth of conversation
- Often talking at length about a favourite subject without noticing that others are not interested or without giving others a chance to respond
- Displaying facial expressions, movements, and gestures that do not match what is being said
- Having an unusual tone of voice that may sound sing-song or flat and robot-like

- Having trouble understanding another person's point of view or being unable to predict or understand other people's actions
- Difficulties adjusting behaviours to social situations

Difficulties sharing in imaginative play or in making friends

- Repeating certain behaviours or having unusual behaviours, such as repeating words or phrases (a behaviour called echolalia)
- Having a lasting intense interest in specific topics, such as numbers, details, or facts
- Showing overly focused interests, such as with moving objects or parts of objects
- Becoming upset by slight changes in a routine and having difficulty with transitions

Being more sensitive or less sensitive than other people to sensory input, such as light, sound, clothing, or temperature  
(Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024)

## **Appendix ii:**

Having a sibling with ASD

- Having older parents
- Having certain genetic conditions (such as Down syndrome or Fragile X syndrome)

Having a very low birth weight (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024)