

Perception of the portrayal of autism in Netflix's *Atypical* within the autism community

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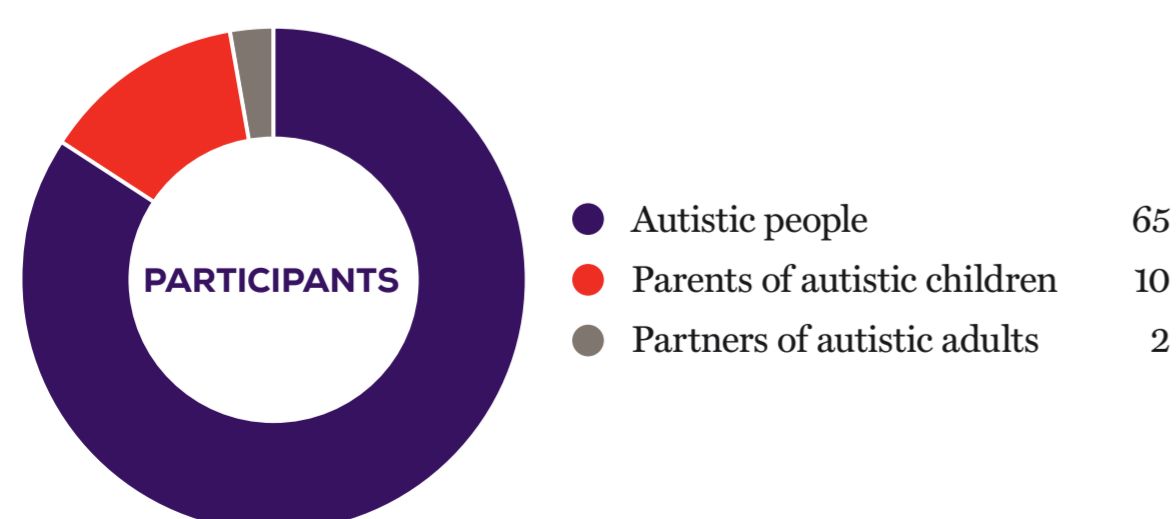


BACKGROUND

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

Portrayals of autism on television and in movies can increase autism awareness and knowledge, and improve attitudes towards autistic people. However, they can 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.

We recruited 77 people who had watched *Atypical*. 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.



FINDINGS

The majority of participants thought 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 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.

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.

It is hoped that studies such as this one will 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.

"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)