

THE EFFECT OF MASS MEDIA ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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Abstract: *The media has a significant impact on public attitudes and understanding of autism. Media representation can perpetuate negative stereotypes and misconceptions or promote positive and accurate portrayals that challenge stereotypes and promote acceptance. Autism is a spectrum, and media outlets must strive to accurately represent the diversity of experiences associated with it. Mass media awareness campaigns can educate the public about the realities of the condition and promote inclusivity. The media has a crucial responsibility in shaping public attitudes towards autism and must provide accurate and respectful representation of the condition and those affected by it to support the development of a more inclusive and understanding society. The study aims to investigate the impact of mass media on the attitudes of primary school teachers towards children with autism and their inclusion in mainstream public schools in Romania. It will use a mixed methods design with a large sample size from all schools in Brasov and the outskirts. The study will employ content analysis, questionnaires, focus group studies and semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The results will provide insights into how mass media influences general attitudes towards individuals with autism and their inclusion in mainstream public schools. In this proposed research study, a mixed methods design combining quantitative and qualitative methods will be used to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' attitudes towards autism, including the impact of mass media on these attitudes. The results could be used to develop targeted interventions for promoting inclusive education practices and providing programs for teachers on creating an inclusive environment for students with autism.*

Keywords: mass-media, autism spectrum disorder, public schools, attitudes.

1. The effect of mass media on society in general

In contemporary times, mass media holds a major influence over our daily lives and has the capacity to shape our perceptions and understanding of the world and society. Additionally, the types of mass media we are exposed to impacts the way we form our attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives towards society and, therefore, the manner in which we interact with society (Duffy and Turow, 2009). The pervasiveness of various forms of media, including television, print, and the internet, means that we are consistently exposed to a constant flow of information and news (Turow, 2010). As a result, mass media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, raising awareness about critical issues, entertaining, and educating. Consequently, it is essential to acknowledge the influence of mass media on our daily lives and approach it with a critical mindset. Although mass media can be a useful tool for education and societal change, it can also spread misinformation and reinforce harmful stereotypes. Additionally, it is important to understand that the media is often driven by commercial interests and the desire for profits (McChesney, 2008). As consumers of media, it is important to critically assess the information and news we encounter to maintain a well-informed and nuanced viewpoint.

2. Mass media and autism

With regards to the topic of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), mass media serves a dual function in our society both as an educational tool and as a shaping influence on public attitudes towards autism and the inclusion of autistic individuals in educational institutions and other societal settings (Gemegah, Hartas and Totsika, 2021). The media is a major source of information and can greatly influence public understanding of autism through its portrayal of the subject. The diverse perspectives and information presented through various forms of mass media, such as television shows, movies, and print media, contribute to the formation of societal norms and beliefs regarding autism and inclusion (Belcher and Maich, 2014). In addition, another form of popular media is social media that not only facilitates information dissemination, interpersonal connectivity, and academic pursuits (Bularca, et al., 2022), but also serves as a platform for individuals on the autism spectrum to express themselves more effectively, circumventing inherent challenges associated with social communication (Gillespie-Smith, et al., 2021).

Given the significant impact that mass media has on public attitudes towards autism, it is critical to approach the representation of autism in mass media with a nuanced and informed perspective, to promote accurate and inclusive representations of autism. This involves analyzing and carefully considering the way in which autism is portrayed, considering the diversity of experiences associated with autism.

3. What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Before evaluating media representation of autism, it is important to comprehend the nature and characteristics of the condition. Autism is a condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) provides four criteria for diagnosis of autism, with the first criterion focused on social deficits. This criterion requires the demonstration of three symptoms, including deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, impairments in nonverbal behaviours used for social interaction, and difficulties in developing and maintaining relationships. These social deficits are the primary characteristic of autism, but an individual must also exhibit additional criteria to receive a diagnosis. The second criterion for diagnosing autism is the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. This criterion requires at least two of four symptoms, which include stereotyped or repetitive speech or movements, excessive adherence to routines, highly restricted fixated interests, and hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input. These symptoms, although important for a diagnosis of autism, are not exhibited by all individuals with autism and should not be assumed to be universal characteristics of the condition (as they are usually portrayed in representations of individuals with autism in popular media). It is important to dispel the stereotype that all people with autism display all of these behaviours. Additionally, the third criterion for the diagnosis of autism requires that symptoms be present in early childhood (prior to age 8), with the possibility of not fully manifesting until social demands increase. The fourth criterion stipulates that the symptoms must limit and impair everyday functioning, which is rated on a three-level severity scale: requiring support, requiring substantial support, and requiring very substantial support. The boundaries between levels of severity are not well-defined, but it is important to differentiate between levels as autism is a spectrum with a variety of diagnoses under one umbrella (this is why autism is represented on a spectrum).

4. Mass media representation of autism

The importance of understanding the symptomatology of autism lies in the fact that media representation of autism can perpetuate negative stereotypes and misconceptions, or it can raise awareness and promote understanding of the condition. Additionally, stereotypical and negative depictions of autism in media and popular culture can lead to the reinforcement of harmful biases and misconceptions about the condition. These representations often portray individuals with autism as socially isolated, lacking intellectual capacity, or as being a burden on society (Huws and Jones, 2011). Such portrayals contribute to the perpetuation of negative attitudes and stigmas towards individuals with autism and can discourage them from seeking support or resources.

Conversely, more nuanced and positive depictions of autism in media can help to raise awareness and understanding of the condition. These representations can showcase the strengths and abilities of individuals with autism, highlighting their unique perspectives and contributions to society (Urbanowicz, et al., 2019). Such portrayals can help to challenge common misconceptions and stereotypes, encouraging a more inclusive and accepting society. Additionally, positive depictions of autism can provide hope and inspiration to individuals with autism and their families and can help to promote greater understanding and acceptance of the condition.

Therefore, accurate representation is crucial in the portrayal of autism in mass media. Unfortunately, mass media representation often falls short in accurately depicting diverse social groups, including those with medical conditions such as autism. The autism community is a diverse group of individuals with unique lives and experiences, presenting a complex challenge for accurate representation in the media (Haller, Ralph and Zaks, 2010; Prochnow, 2014). Television and film, as media outlets, are limited in their ability to fully depict the complexities of autism in their programmes (Young, 2012). Despite the wide range of characteristics and types within the autism community, media representation of autism is often limited and fails to encompass the full spectrum of the condition and these limited portrayals fail to fully represent the diversity within the autism community (Hadley, Batch, & Whelan, 2021). Nonetheless, it is imperative for the media to take responsibility for striving towards accuracy in their representation of autism, taking into consideration that complete accuracy may not be attainable for every aspect or story.

5. Sensationalization of autism in mass media

Furthermore, mass media often depicts sensational or extreme stories about individuals with autism, which can perpetuate misunderstandings and reinforce negative attitudes towards autism (Yu and Farrell, 2020). These sensationalized stories can also contribute to the misconception that autism is a rare and unusual condition, which can lead to a lack of understanding and empathy among the general public. This can result in the further marginalization of individuals with autism, as well as their families, and can also discourage them from seeking support and resources (Loftis, 2015).

Moreover, the media's portrayal of autism can also impact public policy, funding, and research priorities, and can result in a lack of resources and support being directed towards individuals with autism (Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman, 2014). It is of great importance for the media to accurately and fairly represent individuals with autism, as mass media plays a critical role in shaping public attitudes and perceptions towards the condition. The media should aim to tell stories that are representative of the diversity of experiences of individuals with autism and that challenge common stereotypes and misconceptions.

6. Awareness campaigns towards understanding autism

Additionally, the media should strive to promote a more nuanced and informed understanding of autism, which can help to break down barriers and promote greater inclusion and support for individuals with autism. It is important for mass media to depict individuals accurately and respectfully with autism and their experiences. This can be achieved through increased representation of autism in media, in a manner that is not sensationalized or stereotypical, namely through awareness campaigns (Bie and Tang, 2015). Mass media awareness campaigns for autism aim to increase understanding, acceptance, and inclusion of individuals with autism by educating the public about the realities of the condition and promoting inclusivity. These campaigns use various forms of media, such as television commercials, billboards, and social media platforms, to reach a large audience and promote positive attitudes towards autism. By utilizing a combination of these forms of media, these campaigns can reach a larger audience, as well as target specific demographics that are more likely to benefit from the information. In order to reach a wide audience and ensure participation, mass media awareness campaigns can be included, within a city wide cultural promotional event, such as the European Capital of Culture Program. In such an event city promote themselves as cultural and touristic destinations and organize various artistic performances (Coman, Bularca and Otovescu, 2021). The events organized on this occasion have been found to have a positive impact on the city, as they offer valuable opportunities for cultural, social, and economic development. Such events serve as a platform for showcasing the city's rich cultural heritage, while also facilitating social interaction and community engagement (Coman, et al., 2021) - therefore providing an excellent opportunity for raising awareness about autism.

Additionally, media can be used to showcase the experiences of individuals with autism and their families. This can be done through the use of personal anecdotes and stories, as well as documentaries and video features. By sharing these experiences, the public can gain a better understanding of what life with autism is like and the challenges faced by those with the condition. The goals of these campaigns are two-fold: first, to dispel misconceptions about autism and to provide accurate information about the condition; second, to raise awareness about the challenges faced by individuals with autism and to promote inclusion and understanding. For example, a mass media awareness campaign could feature individuals with autism sharing their personal stories and experiences, highlighting their strengths, and discussing the challenges they face. The inclusion of individuals with autism in the production and representation process can also ensure that accurate and authentic narratives are created and portrayed (Gillespie-Lynch, et al., 2017; Fletcher-Watson, et al., 2019). This can not only promote understanding and acceptance of autism but also help to challenge the harmful prejudices and misconceptions associated with the condition. This type of campaign could also feature experts in the field of autism, such as psychologists, educators, and researchers, providing information about autism and addressing common misconceptions. Expert input from individuals with specialized knowledge in the field of autism can aid in the dissemination of accurate information and understanding of the condition (Gillespie-Lynch, et al., 2017). The information provided should be based on both scientific research and practical experience, and must aim to dispel common misconceptions about autism. Through this medium, expert opinions can help challenge stereotypes and promote a more informed public understanding of autism. By reaching a large audience and promoting understanding and acceptance, mass media awareness campaigns can have a significant impact on public attitudes towards autism and on the lives of individuals with autism.

Moreover, by working to promote inclusive narratives and images of autism in the media, we can strive to create a more accepting and equitable society, where individuals with autism are valued and accepted for who they are. Also, these mass media awareness campaigns

can also collaborate with local organizations, schools, and support groups to spread their message. These organizations can offer educational workshops and events that are focused on increasing awareness and understanding of autism. These events can provide opportunities for the public to meet individuals with autism and ask questions in a supportive and non-judgmental environment. Furthermore, schools can use these campaigns to educate students about autism, helping to foster a more inclusive and understanding environment for individuals with the condition.

7. Media and the perception of autism - final remarks

Finally, mass media has a significant impact on the general public's perception and understanding of autism. As a result, media outlets have a crucial responsibility in educating the public and shaping attitudes towards the condition and inclusion. It is imperative that media outlets consider their role in shaping public attitudes and understanding of autism and strive to provide accurate and respectful representation of the condition and those affected by it. By doing so, they can play a significant role in dispelling misconceptions and promoting a better understanding of autism. Moreover, mass media can act as an effective tool for promoting awareness and acceptance of autism, by providing accurate information and showcasing the experiences of individuals with the condition. This can help to challenge stereotypes, foster inclusivity, and support individuals with autism in reaching their full potential. Therefore, media outlets have a responsibility to actively engage in promoting positive and accurate representation of autism, in order to support the development of a more inclusive and understanding society.

8. Future search: mass media influences on teachers attitudes towards autism

To fully understand the potential impact of mass media on the public's perception and understanding of autism, and to effectively utilize mass media as a means of educating the general public on autism, it is necessary to firstly assess the current understanding and attitudes towards autism and inclusion within schools and other public institutions. Future research could involve an investigation into the effect of mass media on the attitudes of primary school teachers in Romania. By evaluating the impact of mass media on this specific population, valuable insights into the role of media in shaping public opinions on autism can be obtained. This information can then be used to inform strategies for promoting greater understanding and inclusion of individuals with autism in society.

Therefore, in a future research study, we would like to investigate the effects of mass media on the attitudes of primary school teachers from public schools in Romania (specifically public schools from Brasov) towards children with autism and their inclusion. We would include a large sample size from all schools from the city of Brasov and the outskirts of the city in order to ensure generalizability of the findings study. The enrollment of the study participants would be based on a stratified random sampling method in order to ensure representativeness.

Regarding the methods used to evaluate teacher's attitudes, we would incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the of the phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007), as qualitative methods provide rich and nuanced data, while quantitative methods offer the ability to generalize findings to a larger population. A mixed methods design could even uncover a discrepancy between what people report in surveys and questionnaires and how they actually express their attitudes, as they may perceive their views to be different from what their survey responses indicate (for example they may think their views are more or less positive towards autism than their survey responses suggest). On the other hand, the two datasets may confirm each other, with the qualitative data yielding insight into the meaning of the quantitative data

(Leavy, 2022). By using specific research techniques such as content analysis, questionnaires, focus group studies and semi-structured interviews, we would provide a more robust and nuanced understanding of how mass media influences general attitudes towards individuals with autism in and the attitudes towards their inclusion in mainstream public schools.

9. Designing a longitudinal study

Ideally, the study would be designed as a longitudinal study and would include schools that have already integrated students with autism and schools that have not yet done so, therefore we would be including in the sample of participants both teachers who already have experience in working with students with autism and teachers who do not have such experience, but who are likely to encounter these students in the future. In a longitudinal study the same individuals would be repeatedly examined in order to detect any changes that would occur over a long period of time (Ruspini, 2003; Baur, 2009). The period of time we have in mind is a five year framework including classes zero through four, inclusively; so as to follow the teachers and their experience with students respectively, and to allow for teachers to finish teaching one whole generation of students (when students finish their primary education and transition to the next level of education). This would allow us to track changes and development in teachers' attitudes over time and identify any correlations with exposure to mass media. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how media influences their attitudes. A five year period would allow us to measure the change in attitudes over time and determine if mass media has played a significant role in shaping teachers' attitudes. The longitudinal study would enable us to compare attitudes and behaviours at the start, middle and at the end of the five year period and determine if there has been a significant shift in teachers' general attitudes towards autism and in attitudes towards the integration of autistic students in their schools and classrooms.

Additionally, we would investigate whether previous experience in teaching and/or interacting with autistic students influences the type of mass media these teachers consume, and respectively how the choice of media coupled with previous experience influences their general attitudes towards autism and integration. The integration of teachers' previous experience is derived from the "contact hypothesis" introduced by Brown and Hewstone (2005), which posits that there is a strong body of evidence that demonstrates that previous interpersonal contact with individuals with disabilities can lead to a reduction in negative attitudes and biases. The theory suggests that through direct interaction and exposure to individuals with disabilities, individuals are able to challenge their preconceived notions and overcome stereotypes. This can ultimately result in a more positive and accepting attitude towards individuals with disabilities, contributing to the promotion of social inclusion and acceptance.

10. Designing a cross-sectional study

A more cost-effective and time-efficient alternative to a longitudinal study design could be using a cross sectional study design, particularly because the goal of the study is to obtain a snapshot of the current attitudes and perceptions of the participants. This method allows researchers to gather data from a large sample of participants in a relatively short period of time as it does not require repeated assessments of the same individuals over an extended period of time (Cummings, 2018). A cross-sectional research design is a research method that involves collecting data from a sample of different individuals' representative of a developmental trajectory at a single point in time (Al-Sharbati et al., 2015). The purpose of the current proposed study is to obtain information about the attitudes of teachers from schools from grades including classes zero through four, inclusively (grade one representing the start of students' primary education and grade four representing the end of primary education and

transition to the next level of education). Specifically, we will address primary school teachers from public schools in Romania and try to uncover their attitudes towards children with autism and their inclusion. Additionally, we would also assess the effect of mass media on these attitudes at the current point in time and the data would be analyzed to determine the relationship between exposure to mass media and attitudes towards children with autism and their inclusion in schools.

11. Preliminary content analysis

Before starting the field work investigation study, a content analysis would be used, specifically a media content analysis, which is a specialized sub-set of content analysis (Macnamara, 2005) to examine the representation of autism in Romanian and international prominent popular media content widely distributed through online media outlets and popular television programmes. This analysis includes identifying the frequency, tone, and context of the representation of individuals with autism. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of the types of information that people in the general population are exposed to. The media content analysis would include the following steps: defining the scope and the types of media included in the analysis; collecting the data from popular broadcasting networks and the internet, such as movies and documentaries depicting individuals with autism. The next step would be developing and coding of the data namely, creating a list of categories or themes that will be used to code the media content, such as frequency of representation, the type of tone used (either positive, negative, or neutral), and the context of representation (primarily medical, educational, or social) and, the final step would be analyzing the results (Macnamara, 2005).

The results of the content analysis would inform the design of the field work investigation study, helping to explain the valence of attitudes (either negative or positive) the general population has towards autism and the inclusion in general mainstream education of individuals with autism. For instance, if the content analysis would show that autism is frequently portrayed in a negative light in the media, this could help explain why some teachers may have negative attitudes towards individuals with autism and therefore they may be more prone to opt for the exclusion of students with autism from their own classrooms. Similarly, the results of the study conducted by Gómez-Marí, Sanz-Cervera and Tárraga-Mínguez (2022) revealed that teachers in Saudi Arabia displayed more unfavorable views towards the integration of children with autism into mainstream classrooms compared to teachers in the United States, who held more positive attitudes towards inclusion in general mainstream schools. The authors suggested that these negative attitudes and reservations regarding the inclusion of children with autism in schools may be due to the lack of awareness, lack of teacher training and stigmatizing attitudes held within the general culture.

12. Using quantitative methods: the survey method

With regards to the attitudes of the teachers from public schools in Romania, towards autism we aim to conduct a comprehensive investigation to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives by firstly using a quantitative method such as the survey method. This quantitative approach will allow us to collect data from a large sample of teachers and use statistical methods to identify patterns and relationships in the data, providing us with a more comprehensive understanding of the teachers' attitudes towards autism and the inclusion of students with autism in their schools and classrooms. We will begin by examining the teachers' general knowledge of autism, including the sources of information from mass media that they typically rely on for entertainment and/or educational purposes. Our survey will also examine whether prior experiences with children with autism have any impact on their attitudes and the types of media they frequently use to stay informed about the topic. The survey data will be

collected and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics will be used to describe the sample and summarize the data, while inferential statistics will be used to test our hypotheses and make inferences about the general population based on the sample data. For example, we may use chi-square tests to determine if there is a relationship between prior experiences with children with autism and the teachers' attitudes towards autism. We may also use regression analysis to examine the relationship between the mass media sources of information the teachers rely on for knowledge about autism and their attitudes towards the inclusion of students with autism in their schools and classrooms.

13. Using qualitative methods: the focus group method

Afterwards, we would use a focus group study to investigate the valence (to find out whether their attitudes are mainly positive or mainly negative) of their respective attitudes towards autism in general and towards the inclusion of autistic children in their schools. A focus group study is a useful research method for investigating the attitudes of a group of people towards a particular topic (Acocella, 2012). In the case of the current proposed study, a focus group study can provide valuable insight into the collective views of the participants. The focus group method is useful for this type of research because it allows for a nuanced understanding of the attitudes and beliefs of the participants. It would involve a controlled and moderated setting where we would bring together a group of primary school teachers from public schools from Brasov and we would facilitate a discussion about their attitudes towards autism and the inclusion of autistic children in their schools. The discussion would be semi-structured, meaning that there would be a set of questions or topics to guide the conversation, but the participants would also have the freedom to raise any additional points they feel are relevant. Additionally, participants would be encouraged to discuss and debate the topic and, because they would be in a group setting, they could also provide feedback and challenge each other's views, resulting in a more complete understanding of the attitudes and beliefs of the group as a whole. Through the focus group discussion, we would be able to identify any common themes or patterns in the participants' attitudes towards autism and inclusion. Using this research method we would be able to identify the level of positivity or negativity in these attitudes by noting the words and expressions used by the participants, as well as observe nonverbal cues such as their body language and tone of voice. This type of research would provide a rich, qualitative understanding of teachers' attitudes towards autism and inclusion, and would give insight into the underlying reasons for these attitudes, as well as the possible ways to improve the integration of autistic children in schools. By gathering the views of a group of teachers, researchers would be able to gain a broader perspective on the issue and could make more informed recommendations for future policy and practice.

14. Using qualitative methods: the semi-structured interview method

Additionally semi-structured interviews could be conducted with a selection of teachers. Semi-structured interviews are a valuable tool for exploring the impact of mass media on teachers' attitudes towards children with autism and their integration into mainstream schools. We would ask open-ended questions to allow the teachers to express their views and experiences, while also using follow-up questions to gather more specific and detailed information. For example, we would ask teachers about their sources of information about autism, what types of media they consume (such as television, magazines, or websites), and how these sources have influenced their attitudes towards autism and the integration of autistic students into their classrooms. We could also ask teachers to reflect on specific media representations of autism they have seen and how those representations have shaped their perceptions of the condition itself and the children who live with it. The semi-structured interview format allows for a flexible and in-depth exploration of the teacher's experiences and

attitudes, while also providing a more systematic and controlled way to gather data compared to a completely unstructured format (Leavy, 2014). In addition, by using the semi-structured interview approach we could more easily compare responses between different teachers, which can be useful in exploring the broader impact of mass media on teacher attitudes.

15. Conclusion

In conclusion, in our proposed research study, by using a mixed methods design, and therefore combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, we aim to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of teachers' attitudes towards autism. Specifically, we aim to examine the impact of mass media on the overall valence (positivity or negativity) of these attitudes. The integration of these two methods will allow us to gain a more complete picture of the topic, providing both numerical data and rich, nuanced information. The results of this study could be used in a later project to develop more targeted and effective interventions aimed at improving public attitudes towards autism and promoting inclusive education practices. Additionally, qualitative research would provide insights into teachers' concerns and needs with regards to integration of students with autism in their schools and their own classrooms. This further identification of teachers' needs could provide valuable information about intervention practices such as programmes for teachers. This type of programme would teach them about how to create an inclusive environment for the students with autism and how to handle specific symptoms and difficulties autistic students may have in school.

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