Canon v Headcanon:

Gender And Fan Self-Identification In The Search For Autistic Representation On Television

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Abstract

Autistic characters on British and American television have a mixed impact on autistic and non-autistic viewers alike. Autistic viewers often identify alternative characters as being autistic, generating their own representation through their 'headcanon', representation that is often more akin to their own experiences. This research built on existing work to explore narratives of disability and the role of autistic characters in those narratives. It built on existing analysis of autistic characters across media by investigating the experience of autistic people in relation to these representations and self-identification with characters. It sought to understand the specific experiences of autistic women and non-binary people.

Survey and interview methods were to explore the relationship that autistic people have with existing representation, including emotional responses and the impacts of these characters on autistic people and those around them. Participants then identified alternative characters who they consider to be autistic, and the traits and behaviours that lay beneath these headcanons.

The research found that participants had mixed emotions, sometimes about the same character. They often felt that characters were stereotypical and did not provide a diversity of autistic experiences, but characters have impacts on the viewer's perceptions and understanding of autism. In headcanon, participants identified more female characters than in canon, and a wider range of behavioural traits, such as different social behaviours in autistic women. Participants also identified a number of non-human or not entirely human characters, reflecting and improving upon existing narratives of the autistic person as other- not only other, but sometimes a more powerful other.

The research provides small-sample insights into autistic people's perceptions of autistic characters and how they could be improved. It outlines how participants' personal interpretations of characters reflect their own experiences and understanding of autism, providing particular insight into the experiences of autistic women and non-binary people.

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Introduction

With a recent influx of (frequently male) autistic characters on British and American television, including programmes such as The A Word, Everything's Going to be OK, and Atypical, it seems a key point in time to understand more about the experience of autistic people, particularly women and non-binary people, when encountering these representations of their lives and community. Also prominent are concerns about accurate representation across media types as seen in the outcries from the autistic community which bookend this research project. These were the controversies around both the use of a grey puppet to play an autistic child in the play All in a Row (Ryan, 2019) and casting and treatment of the autistic character in the SIA film Music (Shoard, 2021). These conversations highlight a need to better understand the autistic experience and its relationship with media representation. These representations of autism are contrasted by the positive reviews of other media, such as Everything's Gonna Be Okay which has been recognised for having an autistic actress playing an autistic character (Birch, 2020).

The research is situated in the context of existing research on existing autistic film and television characters, and the broader field of disability media studies (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick, 2017). It builds on work to understand autistic people's place in media (Mullis, 2019) , and the role of the disabled character in narratives (Shakespeare, 1994). It also engages with the intersectionality between disability and gender, recognising that the experience of disabled people can be significantly impacted by their gender (Albrecht, 2006, p.765-766) and the experience of being both disabled and not male, building on Crenshaw's (1989) articulation of intersectionality that observes how two personal characteristics do not act independently on an individual. The role of gender is particularly prominent in the heavily male understanding of autism that permeates both medical and popular understanding (Milner et al, 2019), so this research aims to understand a wider experience of autism across different genders. This research recognises the diversity of gender experiences, particularly welcoming insights from people who experience gender outside of a male-female binary.

To understand the experience of autistic people when engaging with autistic characters it is also important to understand the nuances of the representation they're experiencing, and the role of finding characters with whom the viewer can

personally identify, regardless of whether or not they were intended to be autistic. As such, the objectives of this research are to investigate the personal and emotional reactions of autistic individuals to characters who are intended to be autistic. It then focuses on how they engage with and identify characters whom they consider to be like themselves. The particular focus is on the concept of the 'headcanon', or personal interpretation of a character, and how these connections with characters are both instinctive and informed by autistic people's lived understanding of what it means to be autistic. As an interview participant shared, reflecting on their instinctive understanding of characters who are like themselves, "I've always gravitated a lot to characters on TV who were a certain kind of eccentric" (I5).

This research uses a mixed methods approach of surveys and interviews, and both quantitative and qualitative data, focusing on hearing directly from autistic participants about their experiences and feelings.

This focus on the 'nothing about us, without us' (Charlton, 1998) mantra of the disability rights movement is additionally essential to me as an autistic researcher, as is recognising the experience of autistic people of minoritised genders as a non-binary person.

Recognising that disability studies and film/media studies do not overlap as often as they could, this research begins with an outline of the key terms used throughout. Chapter two outlines the literature and fields within which this project is located, and chapter three outlines the methodologies used to embed it in the first hand autistic experience. Chapter four outlines how participants describe autistic characters on British and American television, reflecting on their emotional responses and how they describe the impact of this representation on themselves and those around them. Chapter five reviews the characters with whom participants self-identified, both identifying quantitative data on the traits and behaviours they recognise in these characters, but also more reflective themes around the role of non-human characters and how the role of women on television affects their connections with characters. Chapter six provides a concluding summary, and proposals for future research in this field.

Terms and Definitions

This work uses several key pieces of terminology, as outlined here. Many of these terms do not have a single definition, so it is important to establish a common understanding of them as used in this research.

Autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition, medically considered to be a disorder, which has impacts on an individual's skills. These impacts are in the following areas: social interaction and communication, sensory processing, and rigid or repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests (National Autistic Society, 2020).

This research incorporates the different diagnoses of autism and Asperger Syndrome. As it is considered part of the autistic spectrum, self-identifying participants may also have Pathological Demand Avoidance. This research works with survey and interview participants who identified themselves as autistic when volunteering. It includes both individuals with formal diagnoses, and those who have self-diagnosed, to recognise that it is difficult to secure an autism diagnosis in many countries (All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism, 2019) (Ning et al., 2019) and that self-diagnosis is the first step to securing formal diagnosis for many adults.

This research uses identity-first language such as 'autistic person', reflecting the community preference to use language which reflects the perspective that autism is a fundamental part of a person's existence. (Brown, 2011) (Identity First Autistic, 2020)

Transgender, Cisgender, and Non-Binary

This research refers to transgender and non-binary people, where transgender (commonly shortened to 'trans') is defined as "[a]n umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth" (Stonewall, 2021). Some research participants also refer to the term 'cis' or 'cisgender', which is the opposite of transgender — someone whose "gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth" (Stonewall, 2021).

Non-binary is "a term that defines several gender identity groups, including (but not limited to): (a) an individual whose gender identity falls between or outside male and

female identities, (b) an individual who can experience being a man or woman at separate times, or (c) an individual who does not experience having a gender identity or rejects having a gender identity" (Matsuno and Budge, 2017)

Television 'Canon'

The term 'canon' is commonly used in both fan and academic circles to describe the source material of a television show or film fandom — the "official or sanctioned 'reality' as defined by the source material" (Jamison, 2013, p.328). Although precise definitions vary from fan to fan and fandom to fandom, in this context it is used specifically to refer to that which is seen or heard in the episodes of the television programme.

'Official' or 'Word of God'

Many fandoms use the term 'Word of God' to describe statements and information provided by a creator which is outside of that in the canon (Word of God-Fanlore.org, 2019). This term does not seem to have made its way into academic literature, but is recorded on the community led Fanlore wiki owned by the Organisation for Transformative Works to preserve fan history and culture. In this research, the term 'official' is also used (with a definition) for participants as a more accessible term to those who are not in fandom circles. It means all statements by creators, here including directors, writers, producers, and actors, as well as accompanying materials such as press releases and tie-in materials.

'Headcanon'

The term headcanon refers to a fan or viewer's personal interpretation of a character or other element of the story and is "an idea about the text that only exists inside the head of the fan creating it" (Mullis, 2019). For example, fans may interpret a character's actions as having a particular motivation or cause, such as their sexuality, perspective, or a disability or neurotype. In this case, they are taking their interpretation and adding it to their own understanding of the truth of that character or element, adding it to their personal understanding of canon. It can be used as both noun, "a headcanon", and verb "to headcanon".

It is important, however, to distinguish this from 'fanon' or 'fan canon'— "details or character readings contributed by members of the fan community that add to or

delimit interpretations within the *meta-text"* (Duffett, 2013), usually which become widespread and accepted as a level of truth. Headcanons can become fanon when they are shared, accepted, and incorporated by other members of the fandom- "their rewritings become accepted as 'canon' within larger fandom discourse communities" (Finn and McCall, 2016, p.30).

Literature Review

This research project is grounded within the context of three main academic approaches.

First, it sits within the field of autism within disability studies, specifically analysis of representation of disabled people in popular media, such as Conn and Bhugra's (2012) work that acknowledges that across film, "autism is generally used as little more than an emotive tool" (p.58).

The second element of the academic background is within the research into fan communities and their engagement with media. This will particularly focus on the concept of the headcanon or personal interpretation of a character, in comparison to canon and "Word of God" (statement by the creator). Fan communities such as the Tumblr blog 'Your Fave Is Autistic' where users submit characters that they view as autistic (Anonymous, 2019), is part of "a growing autistic fandom community for whom this practice of 'headcanoning' characters as autistic is an important part of their fandom experience" (Mullins, 2019). The blog demonstrates that autistic fans will identify autistic traits in a wide range of characters, particularly a range of genders, ethnicities, and behaviours. This, perhaps, reflects Nordahl-Hansen and Oien's observation that "character portrayals are somehow overemphasized when it comes to displaying autistic traits, which in turn may reinforce stereotypes" (2018, p.3) - so less commonly portrayed autistic traits are more likely to be identified by people who are experiencing them themselves.

Finally, the research is grounded in a transgender and non-binary approach to gender, rather than viewing gender as a singular binary, and acknowledging that gender identity has an impact on how individuals will interpret characters.

1) Disabled and Autistic Representation

The Context of Disability Studies

Disabled representation to the viewing public has a broad history, from early "freakshows" (Gerber, 1992) through to more recent and increasingly nuanced storytelling in a wider variety of media, gradually in line with the shift in approaches to disability.

Older medical models of disability have slowly given way to the popular social model, which views impairment as separate to disability and disability as inherent to barriers being created by the society within which an impaired person exists. In the UK, this was developed particularly by the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) in 1975. As Owens (2015) summarises, "UPIAS viewed disability as an artefact of society rather than something inherent in, or a product of the body. If society did not create dependency then disability would disappear." (2015, p.386). However, she argues that the model is not sufficient:

> In the UK social model, disability is seen as a social construct and any differences, physical, cognitive or behavioural, are defined by whatever label is applied. An individual is evaluated and labelled through a process of power which then serves to separate them from mainstream society, education, work or social interaction, because they deviate from the dominant norm and difference is not valued. What becomes apparent is the rigidity of the definition of disability for the UK social model in particular; focusing exclusively on oppression and linking disability to capitalism as the causative factor. What this has failed to recognise is that while forms of oppression share similarities, they simultaneously exhibit important differences. (2015, p.386)

As she suggests, the model has faced criticism for a number of reasons such as arguments that it does not fully recognise the everyday experiences of a disabled individual and their intersections with other characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality (Barnes, 1998). Furthermore, there is a demand for greater nuance to recognise that some impairments are in and of themselves disabling, for example those that cause chronic pain. Owens also suggests that this focus has the potential to be exclusionary: "Defining impairment and disability in terms of their consequences may exclude people with cognitive impairment, acquired impairment, and fluctuating impairment; failing to consider that their experiences of externally imposed restrictions may not be similar to those of people with physical impairments." (2015, p.388-9)

Nonetheless, the social model remains an easy to understand approach that is heavily used even as it demands greater nuance- as an example, the Welsh Government refers to the Social Model in publications (Welsh Government, 2019).

Disability and Media Studies

Throughout this, the growth of disability studies has included analysis of cultural representations of disabled people in which, as Shakespeare describes, "disabled people become ciphers for those feelings, processes, or characteristics with which non-disabled society cannot deal" (1994, p.287).

Sasha_feather gives the example of *Battlestar Galactica*, a programme that they hoped would provide a better example of disabled characters in media, but yet how they were failed by the show, as it continued to give disabled characters traumatic and fatal story arcs:

> I was excited about the show's promise of diversity for several reasons but particularly from the standpoint of disability: here was Laura Roslin, a female president of the colonies living with chronic cancer; Saul Tigh, an alcoholic executive officer who had lost an eye; and Felix Gaeta, a bisexual military officer who had lost his leg. These were recurring, main-cast characters. There was not a "very special episode" devoted to a disability topic, which is a standard trope on other shows. Characters were not magically or suddenly healed, which is a common science fiction and fantasy story line, but instead lived with their changed and changing bodies…
> …
> Battlestar Galactica showed its audience just how disposable disabled people are when Samuel Anders, after experiencing a traumatic brain injury and being hooked into the flagship via Cylon technology, piloted the fleet into the sun and oblivion. Felix Gaeta was executed as a traitor. President Laura Roslin died from her cancer at the end of the series. Humanity as a whole decided to abandon technology, without any mention of how this would affect particular members of the population, such as the child, Nicky, who used a dialysis machine. (Sasha_feather, 2010)

These characters, despite their presence, continue to be thrown aside- but having had some stories of their own, and it is important to not ignore this.

As Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick (2017) highlight, "media-analyses informed by the socio-textual approach tend toward the moral evaluation of "positive" or "negative" depictions of disability, rather than considering representation in a broader context of media production, consumption, interpretation, and cultural impact." It is in this vein that this research aims to incorporate another key area of disability studies, that of ethnography and the focus on disabled voices to understand how disabled individuals are engaging with the media they consume, and their interpretation. This engages with the media studies approach that "seeks to identify meanings that *could*

be activated and subject positions that *could* be adopted when "reading" (making sense of) a given text in a given context." (Ellcessor et al, 2017, p12-13)

They further argue that disability studies and media studies have not, as of 2017, done enough to work together and create an integrated disability media studies, using an interdisciplinary approach to disabled people's interactions with all forms of media, including "the industrial conditions of production, the social, political, and material contexts of their reception, and the active participation of audiences in producing meanings- all as interrelated phenomena." (Ellcessor et al, 2017, p14) It is within this crossover that this research endeavours to place itself.

Autistic Narratives

This research focuses on the ways in which autistic people are represented in forms of media, specifically within British and American film and television. Autistic people appear in stories even before the diagnostic term existed, with studies of the concept of a 'changeling child' suggesting that the changes in behaviour displayed by this 'new child' are in line with common behavioural traits seen in young autistic children. (Leask et al, 2005)

The way in which autism is presented dates back to its identification and the descriptions given of autistic children by Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner, and into the work of prominent 1970s autism theorist Bettelheim. Descriptions even in clinical notation are of children who are cold, empty, and 'machine-like' (Waltz, 2005). Waltz further explores this in an earlier article, examining the metaphors used when discussing autism, particularly the concept of being 'locked away' with the possibility of being released or rescued. "The heroic ideal is sometimes expressed in more mechanistic terms, using the metaphor of the lock and key. The "key" might be a person or a method, but regardless of the metaphor employed, the message is that some special outside influence is required to unlock the potential of the person with autism" (Waltz, 2003, p.3). As she highlights, this returns us to the changeling myth, in which "the changeling must be killed, beaten, or abandoned, or the correct spell must be said, to force the return of the "real" child it replaced" (p.4). This is continued in the metaphor of the puzzle piece to be solved, with numerous autism charities using a puzzle piece within their logo (Autism Speaks, 2021) (Autism East Midlands, 2021). The concern raised by such a narrative is the impact it has on the care, education, and treatment of autistic people, presenting this as heroism.

Not only does it position people with autism as abnormal and so in need of normalising actions, it also tends to encourage the use of "heroic measures" in the quest for a cure. Perhaps as a result, people with autism have been subjected to a variety of unpleasant and even dangerous programmes, ranging from untested drugs and therapies to restraints and "rebirthing. (Waltz, 2003, p.4)

Broderick and Ne'Eman (2008) continued this, summarising the overarching narrative and counternarrative. The dominant narratives of autism, they outline, include the autistic person having come from a foreign space (the alien), retreating behind a wall or shell, and, arguably most significantly, autism as disease. This latter is evidenced by organisations such as the US charity Autism Speaks previously describing autism as an 'urgent global health crisis' (the narrative on their website has since changed) (Autism Speaks, 2019 - 2021) and investing in biomedical research (Broderick and Ne'Eman, 2008, p.468). This again encourages an 'aggressive' approach to autism treatment, where "autism is seen as an invasion of a diseased alien entity, to which parents or society must respond by engagement in militaristic intervention operations" (p.469).

The counter narrative, as they describe, is the concept of neurodiversity as proposed by the autistic community, in which the development of 'atypical' brains ('neurodivergent' rather than 'neurotypical') is normal and should be considered, tolerated, and celebrated like other human differences. The Autistic Self Advocacy website positions this within the framework of disability rights activism:

The disability rights perspective within the Autistic community is represented in the neurodiversity movement, which promotes social acceptance of neurological difference as part of the broad landscape of human diversity and seeks to bring about a world in which Autistic people enjoy the same access, rights, and opportunities as all other citizens. Acceptance of difference is essential to understanding, accepting, and benefiting from the contributions of everyone in our society, thus allowing all people to live up to their potential. (ASAN, 2019)

Broderick and Ne'Eman (2008) continue to outline the way in which neurodiversity positions autism "within social, cultural, and political discourse, and flatly rejecting the dominance discourse's positioning of autism within solely medical and disease-oriented language and practices" (p.470). This, they argue, situates autism within the social model of disability, in that the issues faced by autistic people are largely the result of societal and cultural barriers. They go on to express their hopes for the future:

The counter-narrative of autism within neurodiversity may serve not only to resist cultural and ideological hegemony by illustrating the political and economic power circulating in the current regime of truth, but also to inform an emergent and more emancipatory regime of truth in which public opinion and public policy around autistic children and adults centres, rather than actively subjugates, the self-representation and self-advocacy efforts of autistic citizens. (Broderick and Ne'Eman, 2008, p.474)

Autism in Media Representations

Having explored self-representation of autistic people, and their representation by the non-autistic narrative, we shift into media representation. In their review of 23 films, Conn and Bhugra (2012) highlight some key tropes and stereotypes of autistic people in those films. They identified the films as those in which a diagnosis of autism is specifically stated or discussed in the script or in the promotional material. One is that the autistic character is present to push the narrative forward- "in numerous examples, the action in 'autism' films is driven by the protagonist's idiosyncrasies" (p. 57). Autism is used for the filmmakers' benefit with little aim for accuracy- they are "exploiting the condition for cinematic effect" (p.57). Other examples of this include the use of the autistic character for contrast, either with society as a whole or with a particular individual: "The naivety of an autistic character is commonly used to contrast rapidly changing technological, political and social environments. Frequently, the autistic character is paired with a neurotypical but psychologically troubled counterpart." (p.57)

Further, this is often to the benefit of the neurotypical character who learns from the autistic character- there is little character arc for the autistic individual, but they are an instrument for the development of someone else, such as Dustin Hoffman's character Raymond in '*Rain Man*' (1988). Raymond is also an example of the Hollywood appreciation for the 'savant'- the autistic person has useful skills such as card counting, code breaking, or 'supersonic' hearing despite savants being very rare in reality.

Films also reflect autism narratives active in popular discourse at the time of production, such as older narratives around 'curing' autism, Bettleheim's 'Refrigerator Mothers' causing their child's autism, autism as the result of a 'changeling' swap or demonic intervention, and autism as a form of response to trauma (p.59). Further, Conn and Bhugra reflect on a dangerous stereotype: "This cinematic association of autism and violence is all too common. In *Relative Fear*

(1994), directed by George Mihalka, the audience is encouraged to believe the affected child is a serial killer. Numerous others instruct us that autism is volatile or dangerous." (p.60)

They also identify that films fail to identify those elements of autism and related conditions, such as the high incidence of epilepsy in autistic people going unreflected on film as well as the absence of hearing difficulties and gastrointestinal symptoms. Finally, they comment on the absence of "non-pharmacological interventions, such as educational support, speech and language or occupational therapy" (p.60).

They do, however, highlight a selection of films which offer more accurate representations, including the use of autistic actors to play autistic characters. In summary, however, they conclude that "the portrayal of autism in Hollywood film is primarily dramatic and rarely realistic" (p.62).

In the context of television, Mullis (2019) argues that "at the most autism can be a shorthand for traits that a character possesses, but never a real quality that defines who that character is". Mullis also argues that some characters are written in ways that can be easily read or interpreted as autistic, but the concept of making the character canonically and deliberately autistic is challenging for the creator.

> "Bryan Fuller, creator of NBC's Hannibal, will go as far as to speculate within his own show's pilot episode that one of his characters is autistic, but then adamantly deny his own charge…
>
> The fact that he has very accurately described the experiences of many autistic people doesn't seem to sway the matter. Autism is too big, too scary, too real, too hard, and more importantly, autistic personhood, is far too removed from the (presumably) non-autistic audience's own world to possibly be a part of a fictional one." (Mullis, 2019)

Gendered Autism

A key element of this research will focus on the way that representations of autism are gendered. Nordahl-Hansen and Oien (2018) observed that there is an overrepresentation of autistic characters who are middle-class white males, either teens or young adults, who are "high-functioning" and verbal with low levels of support needed. One common example is the autistic detective, as Loftis (2014) explored when considering the interpretation of Sherlock Holmes as autistic:

> The figure of the autistic detective has enjoyed a recent comeback in television shows that feature detective heroes with autistic characteristics: Spenser Reid of Criminal Minds, Temperance Brennan of Bones, Charlie Eppes of Numb3rs, Gregory House of House, and Adrian Monk of Monk all have character traits that could be traced back to Holmes's autistic tendencies. (Loftis, 2014)

It is worth noting in this list that the majority are men, and all of the characters are white. Whilst this research is not engaging directly with race and ethnicity, issues of the intersection of disability and ethnicity remain for future research. But the question remains unanswered in these texts of why there are so few autistic women (and non-binary people) on our screens.

This gendered representation is likely to be a reflection of the difference between genders within autism diagnosis and recognition. Tharian et al. (2019) in their review of autistic women in fiction discuss some of the ways in which autism can present differently in women and girls, such as 'masking' and being perceived as 'shy' rather than a 'loner'. When considering autistic representation they suggest that the limited representation of autistic women is "likely to alienate women and girls with ASD, contribute to the lack of awareness of autistic women in both wider society and in clinical practice, and perpetuate the marginalisation of this group." (Tharian et al, 2019) In their review of television, they identify three particular characters of whom two (Temperance Brennan, *Bones,* and Sonya Cross, *The Bridge [USA adaptation, Saga Noren in the original])* are 'non-canonical' or not explicitly identified as autistic within the text but rather suggested to be by creators. The third is the character of Julia on *Sesame Street*, who was deliberately created to help children understand autism and has had a significant impact on the understanding of adults and children in the US.

Of the four autistic women they specifically identify in films, all are major characters where their autism is a significant part of the narrative. One is a very early representation (Amanda, *Change of Habit*, 1969) where much of the focus is on cause and treatment that now seem outdated. Whilst another involves the autistic woman being abducted and exploited (Jhilmil, *Barfi!,* 2012), there is at least an element of her own narrative and love story. The other two are equally focused on the autistic character (Linda, *Snow Cake,* 2006 and Poppy, *Dustbin Baby*, 2008), with the latter featuring an autistic character played by an autistic actress.

As the authors identify, "Numerous examples were identified where viewers and readers have speculated about whether characters have ASD, but this has not been clarified directly by writers", which is consistent with other literature on the topic, and it is this element that triggers this research to ask which other characters are arguably identifiable as autistic.

There is, of course, a caveat here. Many of the characters identified by Loftis earlier and by fans themselves are believed to be autistic, rather than being described as such "officially' either within the canon of the text or by the creator. As such, Loftis argues, we must be careful not to assign a diagnostic label to characters purely based on stereotypes and criteria:

> Amateur diagnoses based on popular stereotypes foster a one-dimensional way of thinking about people on the spectrum. In addition, such informal diagnosis may lead people to think that the experience of being autistic can be reduced to a list of criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. For those who self-identify as autistic, being on the spectrum is not just a list of traits, but an entire person, an entire life experience. That experience is always much more than (and sometimes simply other than) the diagnostic criteria (Loftis, 2014).

However, for an individual with a certain characteristic, finding characters like themselves can be valuable. It is in this vein that this research pursues an understanding of how it is that autistic viewers engage with their media, and find characters like themselves.

2) Fan Interpretations

If we have established that there are few autistic women on television (and likely no autistic non-binary people) for fans to identify directly with, how do autistic fans engage with their media? Here we turn to the concept of 'headcanon' and of fan readings of texts.

As Jenkins defines in *Textual Poachers,* "[f]an reading... is a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussion with other readers. Such discussions expand the experience of the text beyond its initial consumption." (1992, p.45). Fan reading is connected to concepts of gossip, and is heavily influenced by the interpersonal- "fans often refocus their attention from events in the story onto the interpersonal themes that have always been the focus of gossip- onto religion, gender roles, sexuality, family, romance, and professional ambition." (Jenkins, 1992, p.82) In this way, readers make narratives more relevant to their own lives, seeking adaptations to the narrative to reflect what they want from it and what they may not have in their own lives, as "[f]ans react against these unsatisfying situations, trying to establish a 'weekend-only world' more open to creativity and accepting of differences, more concerned with human welfare than with economic advance." (Jenkins, 1992, p.282) This revision, whether in the form of discussion or fan creation (fiction, art, or other creative transformative works), can then "rework the program ideology (foregrounding marginalized characters, inverting or complicating codes of good and evil, introducing alternative sexualities) in order to make the texts speak to different perspectives" (Jenkins, 1992, p.176).

This research, therefore, will investigate the readings that autistic fans make in relation to the media that they consume. How do they use and interact with these characters, and how does the representation affect their identity? Jenkins argues that "[f]ans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media." (1992, p.23) In this scenario, where fans are taking images and adding their own inflections that represent personal experiences, how do autistic fans do this?

Mullis (2019) outlines autistic fans' engagement with media and how "[f]or autistic fans, an "autistic-coded" character is not merely a character they would like to be

autistic, or that they see a few sprinklings of autistic traits in, but one who is so obviously autistic, they must actually be autistic".

There has otherwise been limited academic engagement with the concept of fan reading by disability scholars, so instead queer studies provides a useful parallel with examples where fans take their own interpretations of a character's sexuality or gender identity. Jenkins gave the example of queer *Star Trek* fans, particularly the Gaylaxian group originally based in Boston. His research with the group found that they would interpret characters as queer, finding the spaces in the existing narrative for the queerness which was not explicitly present.

> If the producers have trouble thinking of ways to make homosexuality visible within *Star Trek*, if they couldn't seem to find a 'good script' to tell that particular story, the Gaylaxians have no trouble locating possibilities. Watch any episode with and they will show you the spot, the right moment, for a confession of previously repressed desire to come out from hiding. (Jenkins, 1995, p.259)

In order to find characters like themselves, fans here both must find the small indicators in the text, and the places where it would be easy to add queerness. They take character traits and behaviours, looking for what they recognise. Jenkins gives the example of the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* character Q, who was considered by many of the Gaylaxians to be in some way queer. "The one point on which almost all of the Gaylaxians seemed to agree was that Q was possibly, though you can't be certain, queer, with the evidence residing as much in his evocation of subcultural codes of camp performance as in anything specifically said about his character within the series." (Jenkins, 1995, p.261) Here, they identify with the queer coding, the use of elements of behaviour used in 'camp', to find this character as potentially one of their own.

It is not just these subtextual elements that fans find. Often, when seeking to find characters' queerness, they look as much at what is not said, as what is. "For these fans, the text's silences about characters' sexuality or motives can be filled with homosexual desire, since, after all, in our society, such desire must often go unspoken." (Jenkins, 1995, p.259)

In a similar way, Vena suggests the same thing about identifying transgender characters. He uses Superman as his example of how "a figure does not need to be intentionally written as trans or as having transitioned bodily forms in some capacity (for instance, Mystique from the X-Men) to potentially resonate with trans fans"

(Vena, 2017) His personal experience of identifying with Superman as a trans fan is drawn from elements such as the navigation of identity in Superman comics.

> Clark's years in Smallville are consistently characterized by feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety as he begins to navigate his changing body and a potentially new identity. Though this reads like any other individual's transition through puberty, there is still something affective and materially different about his experiences that cannot be accounted for or described as typical teenage angst that resonates with me as a trans fan. (Vena, 2017)

Although it is not essential for a fan to be from a particular group (e.g. queer) to identify a character as having that identity or experience, this more often is the case, based on identifying with a character's experience. As such, there is a high level of personal involvement and engagement with fan interpretation, from the creator to the reader/viewer, and to those conducting research. Vena argues that "personal engagement is necessary when investigating alternative reading practices since they remain contingent on our own lived experiences and the axes of identity that we all continually navigate" (Vena, 2017)

Finding Queer Characters on Television

The limited number of queer characters in television, particularly at the time that Jenkins was writing, reflects the status of television in the 'everyday'. To offer queer characters was to disrupt the mainstream nature of television. 'Television has, for decades, been taken as the very determinant of the mainstream, and it is still typically seen as the most ordinary, everyday, and commonplace of our media forms. Conversely, queer is defined precisely as the subversion of the ordinary, as the strange, the irregular, which would seem to necessitate some sort of disruption to "our regularly scheduled programming." '(Joyrich 2014, p.134)

The growth, however, in gay and lesbian characters is being slowly followed by bisexual and trans characters, but does not reflect the wider and more varied identities under the Queer/LGBT/LGBTQ+ umbrella. The *Where We Are on TV* report by GLAAD for 2019 showed the growth in queer characters in primetime broadcasts: "Of the 879 series regular characters expected to appear on broadcast primetime scripted programming in the coming year, 90 (10.2 percent) were counted as LGBTQ. This is the highest percentage of LGBTQ regular characters GLAAD has counted on primetime scripted broadcast programming, and up from the previous year's 8.8 percent." (GLAAD, 2019) They also identified the LGBTQ

characters in streaming media, and the breakdown of queer identities. For example, they identified that 26% of characters were bisexual, and that the volume of trangender characters had increased from the previous year (to 38 characters, 8%). In contrast, they identified only 1 asexual character and 5 non-binary characters across all platforms.

GLAAD also tracks the volume of disabled characters, and found that it had increased to 3.1% of characters, but this is still well below the proportion in the population (they use 13.3% in the US population, the last UK census indicates 18% of the population (ONS, 2015)).

In this absence, then, individuals continue to turn to fan interpretation and creative mediums such as fanfiction to find characters like them. Fans use can creative works to demonstrate their interpretations and incorporate personal experiences, such as slash (male/male relationships) in early *Star Trek* fandom- "Slash, by translating politics into the personal, gave them a way to speak about their experiences and commitments." (Jenkins, 1995, p.264) This has expanded into a wider variety of identities and experiences. For example, the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own (AO3) has recorded an increase in works tagged with "non-binary character", from 1 work in 2010 to 4489 in 2019 (from 0.001% of works, to 0.36% of total works).

Similarly to Vena, Valentine has examined queer interpretations of the BBC's *Sherlock* and Sherlock's own position of queerness in the show. As Valentine identifies from fanfiction on AO3, fans have created their own interpretations of Sherlock Holmes' queerness (both in *Sherlock* and other adaptations) including many interpretations of him as an asexual character. In fact, Sherlock Holmes in all forms and adaptations is a large proportion of the works tagged with "asexual character" or "asexual relationship" (Valentine, 2016). They argue, furthermore, that the BBC adaptation does not clearly position Sherlock in a particular identity, but rather in opposition to the norm of cisgender, romantic, heterosexuality:

> What Sherlock does, with or without the validation of its producers, is to present a character whose identity is entirely illegible, and in this very quality, it is a site of profound recognition for its queer audience. Holmes may be gay, or he may not. He may be asexual, or he may not. He may even be straight (or he may not). What he continues to be, however, is a point of identification (or disidentification) for viewers to whom his inability or unwillingness to find a place within the hegemonic, heteronormative paradigm of "traditional values" is a point of rare representation in popular culture. (Valentine, 2016)

For fans, then, finding Sherlock as a site of queerness is not unexpected, but it is their own personal interpretation that identifies him with one label or another, particularly in the creation of fan work.

If we, then, take as expected the idea that fans will form their own interpretations of characters, we can then apply this back to disability and autism. Fans find their own interpretations of characters in this space too. The AO3 tag for 'autism' has grown from 1 work in 2007 to 1596 works in 2019 - not as fast as for non-binary characters but still a significant growth in fans identifying characters as being autistic and making creative works on this topic.

We cannot imagine that this is sufficient as representation- Jenkins reminds us that "[a] model of resistant reading quickly becomes profoundly patronising if it amounts to telling already socially marginalized audiences that they should be satisfied with their ability to produce their own interpretations and should not worry too much about their lack of representation within the media itself." (Jenkins, 1995, p.264) As such, this work does not seek to assume that fan interpretation of characters means that there is sufficient representation of autistic people on television, but rather that the characters who are identified as autistic by autistic people can tell us more about the autistic traits which are under recognised.

3) Non-binary Gender Approach

Disability studies has grown from a number of traditions, including gender and queer studies (Ellcessor et al, 2017, p.4) and it is in this vein that this research takes a non-binary gender studies approach. This research recognises that some people have a gender identity other than the 'standard' binary of male and female, and that this affects their experiences and how they engage with media.

Richards et al (2016) provide an overview of a variety of gender identities outside of the binary model, from "Those people who incorporate aspects of both male and female, but who have a fixed identity, may identify as 'androgynous', 'mixed gender' or sometimes 'pangender'" to people with fluid identities, those who identify with a third gender, and those who identify with no gender at all. All of this recognises that this is a categorisation of a fluid spectrum of identity. The prevalance of non-binary identities in the population is uncertain, but estimates from studies (as Richards et al review) vary from approximately 1-4% of overall populations. The UK National

LGBT survey (2019) found that of the respondents (who all self identified as LGBT and were averagely younger than the UK population), 6.9% identified as non-binary.

Hines (2010, p.12) acknowledges that "[s]ociological work on gender- and sexual-identity formation and experience has, in the main, taken the gender binary as read" and it is in contrast to this that this work seeks to recognise and include this wider spectrum of identity. However, it has a basis in wider queer and feminist studies, such as Butler's *Gender Trouble* and her outline of a basic paradigm in which gender is performative and the binary division between male and female is a social construction (Butler, 1990), although this concept of purely socially constructed identity seems at basic level to not entirely match with the trans community's concept of a clear personal identity that is separate from gender expression and presentation (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2020; Human Rights Campaign, 2020).

This has additional cause in the field of autism studies- as Shapira and Granek (2019) address, there have been a variety of scholarly works engaging with the intersections between transgender identities and autism. Overall meta studies suggest that there is an "over-representation of co-occurring GD [Gender Dysphoria] and ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] compared to what would be expected by chance based on the estimated prevalence in the general population of both conditions" (Van Der Miesen, Hurley, and De Vries, 2016)- that is, autistic individuals are more likely to be gender non-conforming or transgender. It is vital, therefore, that this research engage with a wider spectrum of gender identities.

It has certainly been a key area for activists, recognising that an autism spectrum diagnosis can actively impact an individual's access to gender identity support (National LGBTQ Task Force, 2016), and it is in this vein that this research recognises the difference experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals throughout.

Methodology

Overview

I have devised 3 research questions and used these to structure the research activities.

1. How do autistic people describe the personal effect of the heavily male representation of autism in film and television?
2. In the absence or limitation of "canon" autistic women and non-binary characters, which characters do autistic women and non-binary people identify with?
3. What traits do autistic people identify in characters who are not canonically autistic?

In order to get a broad spread of perspectives, the first question was partially answered by an online survey, with 46 respondents. The second and third questions then formed the basis of the second survey, with 22 participants. I then completed 5 one to one interviews with participants, to discuss all three questions in more detail.

Participant Group- Identification and Approach

This study targeted people who either have a formal diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder (including Asperger Syndrome) or who have self-diagnosed as autistic, recognising that access to diagnosis is difficult, limited, and subject to local area available resources. It targets those who were over 18 and able to independently consent to participating in the research. They also needed to be able to understand the questions enough to answer mostly independently, although may have required support to complete the survey or when communicating in an interview. Verbal participation in an interview was not required if the individual used another form of communication.

Social media was used to find participants, using hashtags on Twitter (such as #ActuallyAutistic) and the tagging system on Tumblr to target communications at autistic individuals. This was in the form of short posts with links to surveys or invitations to email the researcher. The retweeting/reblogging mechanism meant that it reached a wider audience. Specific individuals and organisations with a large

reach were asked to retweet or reblog in order to reach their audience, although this was difficult to achieve as they receive a large volume of requests.

A similar text was used to reach autistic adults through a connection with the Public Sector Neurodiversity Network and their newsletter and other staff networks at my workplace.

Survey participants were asked whether they would like to receive the next survey and/or participate in interviews and were able to provide their email address for this purpose. This was particularly useful, as over 90% of respondents to the first survey were willing to participate in the second survey, for example.

Ethics approach

Participant information and consent was included at the start of each survey. The individual could choose to exit at this time, and participation in the survey was taken as consent. Interview participants were talked through the project, given the participant information in either verbal or written form, and asked to sign a consent form either in person or digitally. At any point, participants could email for more information with contact information for myself and my supervisors available throughout.
Further ethics information can be found in Appendix 4.

Surveys

For both surveys, I used the online survey system 'SmartSurvey', as I am familiar with this system, it offers good data security, and it offered more questions and participants than other systems. Survey participants were invited to join each online survey directly through a link in social media posts. The survey data was transferred from the online survey system to Excel on a password protected computer.

Each of the surveys focused on a particular theme of the research. The first was on how autistic people experience autistic representation, and the effects of gender. The second was on which characters autistic viewers identify as being autistic, collecting some high level demographic data and information about autistic traits for each character. The full text of the surveys can be found in Appendix A.

Surveys were chosen to collect a broader volume of data more quickly. They "gather information from large samples, about large and diverse populations;... to incorporate both open and fixed questions…; and, finally, in the internet era, their

ability to reach widely dispersed populations" (McLafferty, 2010, p.86). As McLafferty suggests, using the questionnaire style provided the opportunity to access members of a population otherwise inaccessible due to geography or difficulty finding participants, which may prevent an interview. Furthermore, they provide the ability to contact and canvass a wider population than interviews allow, although this comes at the cost of the depth of information gained (Parfitt, 1997).

Once drafted, surveys were reviewed for accessibility (including dyslexia) and for readability.

Survey 1

The first survey saw a total of 46 respondents. This is a larger sample than anticipated, which reflects the nature of seeking participants from a potentially small statistical group.

During the 5 weeks that the first survey was open, it saw a higher proportion of female respondents to male, at a ratio of 8:1. In the aim of gathering more male participants, the survey was reopened for 2 weeks with communications focusing on the importance of men completing the survey. During that time, the total number of respondents increased from 27 to 46, with the number of men increasing from 2 to 5. However, the number of women also increased from 17 to 28.

The total increase is potentially related to the survey being circulated in the newsletter of the Public Sector Neurodiversity Network, which seems to have gained more rapid interest than other sources, but it is not possible to say for certain.

Whilst it is not possible to identify specifically why the survey had such a low proportion of men responding, there are some possibilities. The survey was specifically circulated in a 'women with autism' group, and an 'LGBT+ autistic adults' group on Facebook, which may explain the higher proportion of women and non-binary people. Additionally, the survey was circulated on Tumblr, and although Tumblr does not require gender information for user accounts, it is possible that the reach of the account was primarily female. Finally, other possibilities include the wording potentially dissuading men from participating- for example, whether directly referring to being a study about gender made men feel less welcome or interested.

Additionally, throughout the survey open periods, the volume of partially completed surveys was considerably higher than those not completed (91 partially completed).

The majority of these completed the 'About You' first page, but did not go on to complete further questions. This, along with some comments from completed responses, indicated that the first question on page 2 (question 4) was too complicated or possibly required more in depth thought than participants were prepared to answer. This question was amended during the initial open period (see note in Appendix 1, Survey 1, Q4), to support participants' understanding, but this does not seem to have been fully sufficient. This question may have been better as a 2 part question, one which asked about canonical characters, and one which asked about characters identified as autistic by the creators.

Notably, of the individuals who gave partial responses and answered questions on the first page (74 of 91 people), 41% were men, 34% women, and 24% non-binary. This indicates that there were a large proportion of men who clicked on the survey but did not continue after the demographics question. This could be due to the issues with question 4, as discussed above.

Nonetheless, the completed surveys provided quality data with useful insights, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Survey 2

Survey 2 was more straightforward, in that the number of unique questions asked was lower, and they were easier for participants to answer. The survey used the same demographic questions as survey 1, and added a question asking users to identify where they had heard about the survey. This was followed by asking the participant to provide information about a character that they identify as being autistic, despite being non-canonical. This page asked for details such as the name, gender, and TV series of the character, as well as why the participant interpreted them as being autistic. This page was repeated 4 times, offering the participant up to 5 characters they could provide. At the end of each page, they could choose to add another or to finish. The full questions can be found in Appendix 1, Survey 2.

The survey was open for 4 weeks, had 22 respondents, and a total of 33 characters identified by participants. There were 11 partial responses, of which most did not provide anything after the 'About You' page.

As with Survey 1, it was circulated on Tumblr and Twitter, but was also emailed directly to survey 1 participants who volunteered to complete survey 2. The first

page of the survey asked participants where they had heard about the survey, and 36% selected email. As an indicator, 13% said Twitter, 9% Facebook, and 18% Tumblr. As this survey wasn't specifically shared on Facebook, it is highly likely that those participants carried out the first survey via Facebook and gave their email address for participation in survey 2. Of the 23% who said 'other', some could not remember, and others identified an event where the research project was advertised- and they provided their email address for participation.

As many of the participants had been part of survey 1, the demographics were expected to be similar, especially in terms of gender. This was the case, although the proportion of men to women evened a little to 1:3, with 18% men, 55% women, and 27% non-binary people. No participant chose to self-identify or chose to prefer not to say

This was still a high proportion of non-binary people. There are no statistics for the UK for comparison but the National LGBT Survey (2019) had 6.9% of respondents identify as non-binary in a sample of only LGBT people in the UK, so the statistic for the overall population could reasonably be expected to be lower. As with survey 1, this may reflect the higher proportion of autistic individuals who identify as non-binary, and it may also reflect the audience of my Twitter and Tumblr accounts.

These proportions were considered to be appropriate as the focus of this exercise was to understand more about the characters that autistic women and non-binary people identify as autistic. As such, the few men who answered the survey function as a non-statistical comparison sample.

Survey Analysis

Smart Survey offers basic analysis tools, which were used alongside Excel functions for a light quantitative analysis of the numerical data. Brief percentages were produced of the individuals' demographic data, and data about character gender. The character names and television series were categorised to identify examples that recur. This required some interpretation, for example where a participant identified a character by programme, but were not able to recall the name. The programme was searched online, using available information to identify the character as far as possible.

The free text from both surveys was analysed using thematic coding, looking for common themes. This began with identifying recurring words and phrases, then grouping these into common emotions, themes, or views. This required some interpretation, based on my understanding of the message the participant was conveying.

For identifying emotional themes, a "Feelings wheel" (Wilcox, 1982) was used. These are rings of emotion words, with overarching terms such as 'happy' and angry' in the middle, then branching each term into more specific language. They are usually used to help people identify the specific emotion that they are feeling but, in this case, was used to approximate emotion types. Some emotions come into more than one "category" so some interpretation of the context was required.

For all of this textual analysis, categories were tallied in order to identify which themes occurred most frequently. For example, in the first survey, participants' answers on changes they would like to see to autistic representation, "Characters "written/created by autistic people", "Characters played by autistic people", and "Character vetted in concept by autistic people/charities (sensitivity readers)" were grouped together under "Autistic creators". Similarly, the traits of 'headcanon' characters in the second survey that were grouped as part of "Social difficulties/differences" included "Difficulty with social cues", "Not understanding social conventions", and "Scripting social situations".

In following chapters, Survey 1 participants will be cited as "SA*" with the asterisk replaced by a number, i.e. SA3 for the third participant. Similarly, Survey 2 participants will be cited as "SB*", i.e. SB5. In order to maintain the voice of the participants, they are quoted directly with only minor correction of spelling or grammar for clarity.

Interviews

One to one interviews of 45 minutes (1 hour allowed in total) were used to get more detailed data on participants' experiences of watching autistic characters on television and their experience of identifying characters as being like themselves. The participants were sourced as individuals who had completed one of the surveys and had volunteered to participate in an interview.

These volunteers were categorised by gender, and within each category they were given a number. A random number generator was used to select an initial 5

individuals to contact by email, 2 women, 2 non-binary people, and 1 man (reflecting the gender diversity of the survey participants). An additional 5 back up volunteers were selected.

After contacting both the initial and back up sets of 5, 3 individuals had volunteered. One of these, though keen, proved difficult to arrange a time with due to time zone differences. Following this, the remaining volunteers were contacted, inviting them to interview, which secured the further 3 participants.

It did not prove possible to secure a male interview participant, possibly as a result of the low participation in the surveys. As such, and reflecting the focus of this research on the experiences of female and non-binary autistic individuals, the final interview group consisted of 3 women and 2 non-binary people.

The interview used open questions to give the individual space to expand on their comments in the survey(s) and go more deeply into the topic, and were conversational in style. Where necessary, the approach was adjusted to account for the individual's autism and how they best processed questions, based on adjustments requested when setting up the interview. For example, where a very open question was used, for some individuals I provided more detail, or examples that I had from surveys. This was necessary if they found it was too complex to provide an answer to questions that could have many different answers. This is in line with the Equality Act (2010) approach to reasonable adjustments.

5 interviews were completed over a 2 week period, all over the video conferencing platforms Zoom and Skype. With consent of the individual, the sessions were audio recorded and transcribed using Otter AI automatic captioning, and then reviewed for accuracy. From this, the text was reviewed using the thematic coding approach used on the surveys, using the same theme categories as far as possible.

The interview questions can be found in Appendix 2. In future chapters, Interview participants will be cited anonymously using a letter, i.e. 'Interviewee 3' or 'I3'. As with survey respondents, they are quoted directly with only minor correction of spelling or grammar for clarity.

Experiencing Canon Representation

The first survey and early questions in the interviews gave insight into the participants' experience of existing canonical representation, and of autistic characters they are aware of or have seen on British and American television.

Identifying canon representation

The first element of the first survey involved participants identifying canonical (or official/Word of God) characters and then sharing their reactions to these characters. Participants were asked to provide examples of canonical or official autistic characters, and many suggested multiple characters. Of the 51 characters identified by participants, thirteen were not from television, but covered a range of mediums, including films, podcasts, books, and web comics. Additionally, it was not possible to identify two characters from the information provided by the participants. Another point to note was that in the case of two characters, they canonically have Down Syndrome, but are not confirmed to be autistic (although it is possible). Finally, two participants said that they were not aware of any canonical or official autistic characters.

The most commonly identified canonical characters were Sam Gardner from *Atypical* (thirteen mentions from 46 survey participants), and Shaun Murphy from *The Good Doctor* (twelve mentions), followed by Julia from *Sesame Street* (seven mentions) and Joe Hughes from *The A Word* (five mentions). In the case of all three male characters, the main focus of the programme is that character and their autism, which is perhaps indicative of the nature of autistic representation, at least that which is familiar to autistic people. In the case of Julia, she was designed as an autistic character for educating children as part of 'Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children' (Minutaglio, 2015; Sesame Workshop, 2021), but she participates in many of *Sesame Street*'s educational activities much like other characters.

There were two further characters mentioned more than once, each mentioned by two participants. Both were female characters, Matilda from *Everything is Going to Be OK*, and Brooke Hathaway from *Hollyoaks.*

However, there was some confusion around certain characters, where participants quite often assumed characters were canonically or officially autistic but are actually not. The main examples of this were Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory*

(sixteen mentions), Abed Nabir from *Community* (five mentions), and Sherlock Holmes from *Sherlock* (five mentions).

Three further non-canonical characters were each suggested by two participants, of whom two were female characters. These were Amy Farrah-Fowler, also from *The Big Bang Theory,* who features as friend then romantic partner for Sheldon, and Tina Belcher from *Bob's Burgers,* whose connection with autism is complicated in canon. The additional character mentioned by two participants was Spock, from *Star Trek*.

All of male characters have spoken about ways in which they are different within their programmes, but despite the perception of the research participants they have never been confirmed as being autistic in their respective canons. The closest example is Abed, to whom another character in the first episode says "Yeah, well you have Aspergers" as a way to respond to a comment from Abed after being rejected romantically by a third party (*Pilot, 2009).* Its use in this case, therefore, seems to be with the intent of being hurtful when lashing out, commenting more on Abed's emotional or romantic experiences. However, this is never confirmed by Abed or any other character around him. Whilst it may not have been intentional, writer Dan Harmon has commented on learning more about Aspergers whilst writing Abed, and has commented on how he may have Aspergers himself, saying "I know I'm not normal, but I think the important thing is that [...] I started to discover that I had a lot more in common with Abed than I did with Jeff" (Harmon, 2012).

With Sheldon Cooper, meanwhile, viewers repeatedly hear the phrase "my mother had me tested" as a way of denying that there is anything diagnosably different about him. It occurs as a running gag, appearing six times in seasons two - six. It first appears in season two episode four after being accused of being insane, he replies "I'm not insane, my mother had me tested." (*The Griffin Equivalency, 2008*). The rebuttal comes from his mother in season five episode six, when she remarks that "Actually, I had him tested as a child. Doctor says he's fine. Although I do regret not following up with that specialist in Houston." (*The Rhinitis Revelation, 2011).* This suggests that it is possible that some diagnosis was avoided, but there is no canon evidence for Sheldon being autistic. Nonetheless, it is evident that many participants considered these characters to be canonically autistic, due to the traits they outlined when describing the characters- as we will return to later.

In the case of the female characters, Tina Belcher has a complicated relationship to autism in canon. In the first episode, her younger sister Louise says that Tina is not good with interacting with customers because "She's autistic, she can't help it". Tina agrees, echoing "Yeah, I'm autistic." Her father, Bob, disagrees saying "No, you're not autistic, Tina." This is followed by Tina's younger brother Gene dropping toothpicks on the floor to see if she can count them, as Raymond does in the film *Rain Man.* When Tina fails to count three and then four toothpicks, Louise comments "you're the worst kind of autistic" and then the conversation moves on (*Human Flesh, 2011).* The topic of Tina being autistic is then not raised again, and it is unclear whether, given her father's rapid denial, it is meant to be a joke.

It is interesting that these three characters, and Amy Farrah-Fowler, all appear in sitcoms, and thus character behaviour is frequently intended to be a source of humour. Similarly, for both Tina and Abed, the suggestion of them being autistic is made in the first episode and it does not return. Whilst the writers have not said why this is the case, it may be possible to speculate on the cause. This use of possible autistic behaviours as a source of humour is something that the survey participants commented on, and which will be reviewed more closely in a later section

Emotions about Canon Representation

The 46 Survey 1 participants were asked to describe their emotional reaction to canon characters, and they described a range of emotions. Individuals often described multiple emotions, and some described conflicting emotions, such as happiness and disappointment. The most common single emotion that participants felt when thinking about these representations was happiness from seven participants, but this was followed by frustration from five. These emotions were then collated into broader categories of emotion, and for all genders together, the total highest emotion was happiness from 27 participants (32% of all emotions given), followed by anger from twenty participants. Additionally, sadness was mentioned by eleven participants.

Whilst the comparative lack of male participants makes the data here more difficult to use, it is worth noting that happiness was the single most common response for male participants (all five), whilst for female participants this was equal with anger. For non-binary participants, happiness was also higher, but only by one additional

mention. Four participants mentioned happiness, in comparison to three responding that they felt anger or felt bad.
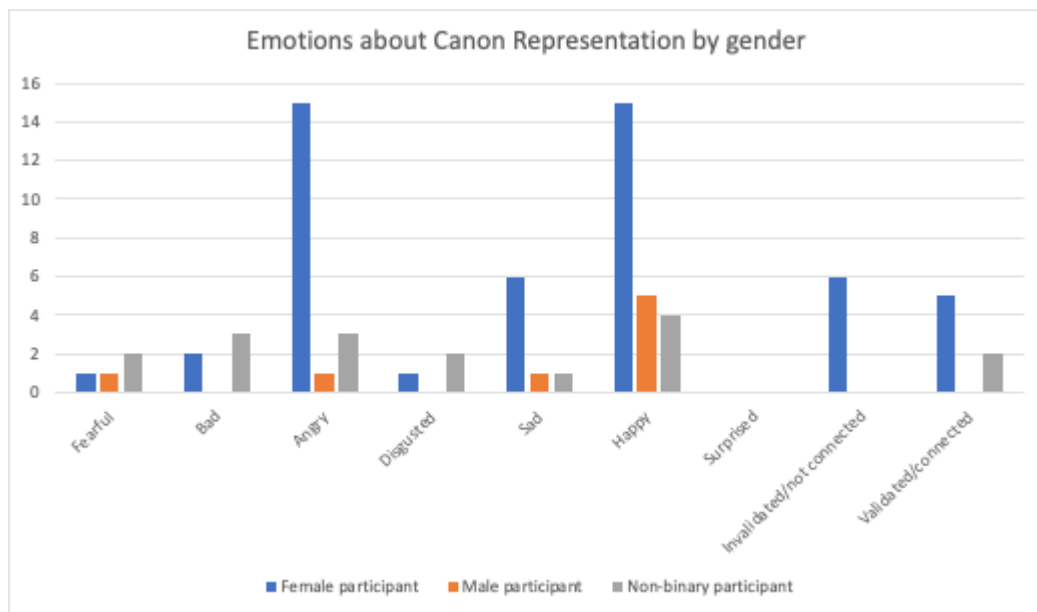

Fig 1. *A bar chart showing the number of participants expressing different emotions about canon representation, divided by participant gender.*

When the different negative emotions (such as anger, disgust, and sadness) were totalled, they collectively outweighed the positive emotions, with 43 mentions in total — 51% of all emotions felt by the participants. No participants expressed a feeling of surprise, either positive or negative.

Female participants were much more likely to comment on a feeling of validation (five) or invalidation (six) to a total of eleven of the 46 participants. Male participants did not comment on this at all, and three non-binary or self described participants mentioned feeling validated by or connected to a character.

Participants expressing positive emotions were mostly focused on how they felt pleased to be represented, to be recognised in media, such as the reflections on how they felt like the representation resonated with them and how they felt validated by or connected to the characters. One male participant, for example, commented that "[w]hen a character is done well, I absolutely love them and feel happy and excited. I feel like I have examples to show people to make them understand." (SA48) Similarly, one of the female participants was "glad to be seen… I wish there had been more fictional representations of autism when I was younger, so I could have found out earlier." (SA20) But she also expressed a wish for the characters to be less stereotyped.

Additionally, one male participant commented "[d]epending on the character I feel proud" (SA15) whilst also expressing criticism of the portrayals, feeling that sometimes "they get it wrong with skewing it too far in one direction or another" (SA15). One female participant talked about feeling inspired by a character she mentioned. Although from a book and film, the participant felt that Lisbeth Salander from *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* had a positive impact: "I wish that I had had an icon like her to look up to when I was growing up, as the inspired way she makes me feel seems psychologically very helpful. Above all she makes me feel capable" (SA12).

In contrast, negative emotions were focused on the content itself, often focusing on how the traits and behaviours shown by the characters did not align with their experience, were inaccurate, or lacked variety. One participant commented that autistic characters are "Most of them men and sterotypical [sic]." (SA25) Some participants also expressed how they did not find that they connected with, or felt they couldn't identify with, the characters they saw on screen.

There was no surprise expressed by the participants. This, perhaps, ties into the lack of variety in the characterisation of these autistic people — they are sufficiently similar that participants do not have the opportunity to be surprised by someone different. Four participants, instead, talked about being cautiously optimistic, or otherwise anticipating misrepresentation, with one participant discussing a feeling of resignation. They said that their reaction to autistic characters is "[u]sually "oh god, here we go again". Sometimes they get it right though (eliciting feelings of validation), but it's usually only for a short while before they become another caricature" (SA4).

Five participants reflected that their emotions often varied, depending on the portrayal of autism they were seeing, and these mixed emotions were also reflected by a female participant who commented about feeling "[e]xcited that there's some representation, disappointed that it's often bad representation." (SA7)

Reactions to and Perspectives of Canon Representation

The Survey 1 participants were also asked to reflect on how they would describe canon characters, and the following table shows the top ten themes described by participants.

Combined themes	Total
Stereotyping/lack of nuance	34
Gender- male	17
Social differences	17
Representation negatives	14
Ethnicity	8
High intelligence including savants	8
Misrepresentation	7
Character positives	6
Representation positives	6
Lack of representation	4

Fig.2 : *A table outlining the ten most common themes from participant reactions to canon autistic representation, and the total number of participants who mentioned each theme.*

The two most common reflections were around stereotyping and characters being primarily male. These two far outweighed any other single statements at thirteen and sixteen comments respectively, and were followed by eight comments about characters being white. After collating comments into themes, these areas remained prominently discussed, with the majority of comments based around stereotyping, lack of variety in characters, and a lack of nuance (a total of 34 mentions).

This was further reflected in another theme (eight mentions) around characters commonly being highly intelligent or savants- or occasionally being characters with high support needs, particularly children, or people who are non-verbal (four mentions). As one male participant put it "They aren't varied. It's either rain man [sic] savants or the nonverbal, sensory overloaded all the time character." (SA48)

Two themes occurred most frequently after stereotyping, with seventeen mentions each. First, gender again, although including comments on characters commonly being cis male, the lack of women, and the lack of characters of other genders. Second, the heavy focus on social differences, such as characters being eccentrics, outcasts, socially awkward, and frequently rude.

These social differences covered a variety of social skills and norms, but primarily covered three categories. First, their social behaviour, such as being 'eccentric' or 'weird' (two participants), bad at speaking to people (one) and being a social outcast (one), as well as having poor social understanding or being socially awkward (two).

The second category focused on their behaviour being in some way inappropriate, such as being inconsiderate or rude (two participants), selfish (two), or arrogant (one). This also overlapped with communication differences, such as being robotic or cold (one), or naive and gullible (one). Their communication and social skills could also lead to them being funny, if unintentionally (one).

The third category incorporated the characters' emotional differences, especially having contained or controlled emotion (one) "that can sometimes burst open and destroy everything around them" (SA15).

After the key categories of gender and social differences, fourteen participants reflected on the way in which the representation was a negative reflection of autism. For example, participants described canon representation using terms such as 'pathetic', 'needy', and 'bland' (one participant each). Others commented on canon characters lacking ambition, or having no positives at all. Another recurring theme in these negative aspects of the representation was how autistic characters are treated by others. For example, being "treated like a baby or like a servant" (SA8), and being othered "by story, situation, and characterisation" (SA47).

This treatment of autistic characters was also reflected in participants' reflections on how the narrative uses the character, with four participants describing characters as 'comic relief' or the 'butt of jokes'. As discussed earlier, despite the lack of any canonical confirmation of his autism, *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper was suggested by many participants in the surveys, and was also raised by three of the five interview participants. Multiple participants commented on the use of Sheldon to create comedy, in his context as a sitcom character. Participants particularly commented on the potentially deliberate choice to not situate Sheldon as a canonically autistic character. Interview participant five acknowledged that "they're very careful to not call him officially autistic, but they totally benefit from the cultural stereotype of an autistic guy… I have to assume that he's either you know, that he's either autistic or he's kind of — that people are playing into stereotypes of autism to make him funny" (I5).

Similarly, a female survey participant reflected that autistic characters were largely "young, white, male and geeky. They're often implicitly treated as comic relief, especially on shows where the character has never officially been identified as autistic, but they're arguably coded that way" After then identifying Sheldon as an example, the participant argued that it is "a sneaky way for writers to set up a character who it's okay to patronise and laugh at, because that's what we do to autistic people, but without having to admit that yes, they're making fun of disability." (SA33)

Whilst Sheldon was the character for whom these concerns and arguments were most frequently made, it is worth reflecting on this in relation to four of the non-canonical characters who were heavily mentioned, as addressed earlier, all of whom are situated in comedies.

Across the other themes shared by participants were reflections of some characters as good examples, and mixed responses to characters. For example, a female participant commented that "Some are well done, and the complexities of being neuro-atypical in a society that is not designed for us are presented in a way neurotypicals can hopefully understand. Other times autistic characters are often used for comedic purposes." (SA39)

Impact of Canon Representation

When asked about the impact of autistic characters on their lives, 37% of Survey 1 participants felt that the representation had had an impact on their lives (a total of seventeen participants), whereas 33% said it had not, and 30% were unsure. However, these participants who were unsure also contributed to the text responses, on the topic of how representation didn't affect them or they didn't allow it to affect them. One interview participant shared that "I think that the effect has maybe been indirect, more because of what I don't see than what I do" (I5). The following table outlines the themes shared by survey participants.

Combined themes	Total
Expectations about capability/skills	14
Gender	12
Negative awareness/understanding	11

Expectations about behaviour	8
Connect individual to character	8
Expectations about autism	7
Affected diagnosis/adjustments	6
Positive awareness/understanding	6
Ethnicity	2
Age	2

Fig 3: *A table showing the main ways in which canon representation affected participants, with the total number of participants identifying each impact.*

Of those seventeen Survey 1 participants who said 'yes' to representation having an impact on their life, the most common response was that the representation made them feel negatively about autism. These six participants highlighted different negative impacts of the representation, such as their own perceptions of autism, and how they engage with others. For example, one non-binary participant shared that "[w]hen I was younger I definitely internalized a lot of negative or simply untrue ideas of what being autistic is based on misrepresentation on television" (SA6). A female participant also shared that "it has made me doubt what I am capable of" (SA7). Participants also shared that the characters had impacted their mental health, and made them feel insecure about being autistic. Another female participant expressed how representation made them feel "[n]egatively when my behaviour is similar to the tv characters behaviour being mocked" (SA27).

Additionally, three participants commented that canon representation has caused them to be less open about being autistic or to not be themselves. For example, one commented that "it makes me feel like i can't fucking /tell/ anyone i'm autistic or they'll argue with me about it OR start treating me like a stupid child who can't do anything for themselves and whose opinions don't matter" (SA8). The other two participants also expressed their concerns around knowing that "people's perceptions of autism are shaped by characters like that" (SA37). The third participant was positive about canon characters giving them a frame of reference, but reflected that "I sometimes find myself copying them rather than expressing myself how I feel comfortable" (SA21).

The next highest theme was around the impact on diagnosis for five participants, all female, but this was mixed in terms of impact. For example, one participant shared that "I would never have guessed my own autism from how it is depicted on TV!" (SA38) and this was echoed by another participant. Similarly, one of the interview participants agreed, sharing that ""The diagnosis was first brought up when I was 11. But I wasn't actually formally diagnosed until 21. And that was mostly because I think… in their [their parents'] experience of what they thought it was like … I didn't fully fit that … one dimensional idea of what autism is like" (I3).

In contrast two Survey 1 participants said the opposite, that they sought diagnosis either after identifying with a character's traits, or being compared to them by others. As one participant said "I was diagnosed as an adult, and decided to discuss pursing a diagnosis with a medical professional after so many people compared me to Sheldon Cooper and Maurice Moss" (SA40). Although both Sheldon and *The IT Crowd*'s Moss are both non-canonical, the common perception of them as autistic has had an impact here. The final participant in this category reflected on how autistic representation has made them doubt whether their diagnosis is correct.

Four participants felt that the canon representation had supported understanding of autism more broadly, which had a positive impact on them. This was more closely connected to the next question, which asked about the impact of canon representation on how others think of autism or of the participant.

The most common response was about other people's expectations of the participant's capability and skills, from fourteen participants. Of these, seven commented specifically on the expectation of autistic people as geniuses or savants. Five participants, by contrast, reflected on expectations of autistic people as being of low intelligence and/or high support needs. One male participant observed that "I find people assume that we all are cold calculating, intelligent masterminds who see the world as something to be exploited. Others see us as socially and emotionally stunted idiots who will never develop past the 4th grade" (SA15). Another participant said that their experience was impacted by representation, that "because I present as 'normal' when I ask for reasonable adjustments or sometimes things as simple as having stuff at work... explained in a different way people usually just treat me like I'm useless" (SA4). They explained that this is based on an expectation that autism will be obvious.

Similarly, eight participants reflected on how the representation impacted people's expectations of their behaviour. Some of these expectations were around the participant's interests, ability to be warm and smile, and stereotypes of autism. As one participant suggested, "people think that it's okay for autistics to be assholes because we 'don't know better'" (SA3). Additionally, four participants commented that people around them had expected them to behave in a certain way because of a character, such as one non-binary participant who shared that "my parents have tried to treat me like I'm the autistic boy from *Parenthood* even though they know how we differ" (SA17). Another participant suggested that representation was helpful but still affected how they expected others to treat them, anticipating the concerns shared by other participants — "It makes others more aware of it but I still wouldn't feel comfortable telling people I was autistic in case they think I'm like a character on tv." (SA21)

The second highest theme, from twelve participants (no male participants), was around gender. Two participants identified characters as being cis (cisgender), and ten commented on characters being primarily boys and men. For example, one female participant reflected that there is "next to no representation of female autistic characters" (SA26), and a genderqueer participant commented that "people generally think of autistics as all being cis straight white boys" (SA3). Similarly, another participant felt canon representation absolutely had an impact on others and their expectations of autistic people, saying that "it makes it very difficult to be accepted as an autistic female in general. When we're acknowledged at all it's also within an extremely narrow range" (SA32).

For one participant, this lack of female characters and the ability to seek diagnosis were intertwined:

> I think it probably, subtly made it harder for me to get diagnosed, because it helps emphasise to the public that an autistic person is going to be male. It certainly made it hard for me to talk about my own suspicion that I might be autistic, which went on for a couple of years before I got a new psychologist and he figured it out on his own. I just didn't think I would be believed. It would have been easier for me if I could've pointed to characters on TV and prominent autistic women in real life and said, "Look, that's like me. (SA33)

For some participants, this was heavily connected with the intersection of their gender, perceived gender, and ethnicity. As non-binary participant SA44 shared, ""I'm Black, present as female, and am an adult. people think I can't be autistic

because they only see white children or white men portrayed as autistic in screen [sic], by allistic [non-autistic] actors".

Finally, the third highest category was around the lack of awareness and misunderstanding of autism (eleven mentions), from those around the participant, and was often connected to expectations of autism (seven participants). In some cases, this was related to gender and to stereotyping (three participants mentioned stereotypes). As one female participant reflected, "most people have no idea what autism actually means or is beyone [sic] cis male stereotypes" (SA38). For others, it affected their interpersonal and working lives — as one female participant shared, "some people assume that I don't want to be involved in social activities. I have actually also had a few close friends and (not so close) colleagues assume that I'd be good at/really interested in maths/science/programming/pretty much any STEM subject. I have even been assigned work before (at a previous company) based on how "I must love boring repetitive tasks that nobody else wants to do" (SA40).

One participant shared an experience of the impact of news media, that "[s]omeone once said to me to be wary of autistic people walking around, as they might stab you" (SA27). They continued "[a]s for tv fiction programmes, people think we must be geniuses. So if we're not, we disappoint them." (SA27).

Another female participant highlighted the impact of people assuming they understand autism: "I get less support and understanding from people if their only, or main, exposure to autistic people is on the tv as I do not match with what they've seen. "You don't look autistic" is a frequent comment and so I then get less understanding from people when I need assistance." (SA7) Similarly, another participant said people can be surprised by them being autistic, and 3 participants commented on others not perceiving them as autistic. As one female participant put it, "People have always thought I am weird or difficult but never autistic" (SA24).

However, there were positive reflections, including one participant who shared that their fiancée "has been given an extra lens to understand how I see the world" (SA22). Similarly, another commented that "[p]eople are now more accepting and understanding / accommodating of my needs. Prior to diagnosis I was made to feel weird or odd or strange. Now it's more mainstream to see people with autism working or having relationships" (SA18). In total six participants expressed an impact on awareness and understanding which was specifically positive.

Improving Canon Representation

Following the experiences and emotional responses to canon representation, it was not surprising that when asked what changes they would make to the representation of autistic people on television, several similar themes emerged, particularly around the desire for diversity in all its forms including autistic traits, race, age, socio-economic background, personality, and life elements such as work and relationships.

The most common element was gender diversity, mentioned by 27 participants (none of whom were male). Of these, nineteen referred to having more women and girls as autistic characters, and eight talked about gender diversity more broadly, alongside concepts of gender presentation. As a non-binary participant suggested, "We need WOMEN represented. All different kinds of women" (SA2). A female participant argued that "I'd like to see more female representation. A character who's a woman, but she's weird and butch and unfeminine and that's portrayed as totally OK. A character who's clearly female but who knows it's OK not to conform to gender stereotypes, because she doesn't have to be exactly like everyone else. (SA12), whilst another was looking for more "femme" representation (SA30).

The second highest category from twenty participants was around autistic creators, including writers, actors, and producers. Of these, nine participants specifically mentioned writers and creators, and eight talked about autistic characters being portrayed by autistic actors. The remaining three referred to the use of autistic people and charities as a 'vetting' process or as sensitivity readers. One participant highlighted all three, suggesting them as fundamental requirements for effective characterisation, saying "I don't think there should be autistic characters that don't meet at least one of the following criteria: created/written by an actual autistic person, played by an actual autistic person, heavily vetted early in their conception by a team of more than one autistic sensitivity readers." (SA6). Another participant suggested that autistic writers and actors creating characters would have a huge impact, commenting that "That's the main change: with that comes all the necessary nuance that is needed" (SA10).

Two categories each had sixteen mentions, and were closely related — variety in characterisation, and particular behaviours or traits that participants would like to see. In many cases, this was about the different traits and personalities that autistic

people can have and show, such as the suggestion to "have a lot more subtle forms of autism tastefully pointed out. Like the police detective that relentlessly follows a case, or guitarist that can practice the same 4 bars for 8 hours at a time, or the office worker that's excellent at devoting themselves successfully to a single project but incapable of working in overwhelming sensory environments" (SA4)

Numerous participants talked about the desire for diversity, and to see characters who are "[j]ust treated as being equal, normalised" (SA47). As one male participant suggested, "Autism is a spectrum, I would like to see it be represented as such. I would like for all types of media to stop acting like its something abnormal." (SA15). The desire to be recognised and represented, including the portrayal of particular traits also came through clearly, such as from a female participant who said "i'd love it for autism to be protrayed [sic] with more diversity. like i want to see someone like me. i want to see someone who's basically like everyone else but just doesn't get jokes sometimes, who has a hard time putting their feelings into words but who doesn't talk in a stilted, halting, deep voice. someone who flaps when they're really happy. but like. *normal* you know?" (SA8)

A few minor topics that also stood out were the desire for autism to be seen as a positive, where "People celebrate the diagnosis" (SA28), and where characters being autistic is explicit canon. A female participant suggested that "I feel like a lot of producers shy away from using "the a word" explicitly. I would like to see more producers own up to the fact that their neuro-atypical characters are purposely written that way. I think that in doing so, producers who write in autistic characters as the butt of jokes (looking at you Big Bang Theory) would be forced to face up to that fact." (SA40).

These emotions and desires for improvement are likely to have an impact on how participants create headcanons, and how they look for representation outside of canonical sources.

Identifying Autistic Representation- Participant Headcanon

Having reviewed the data on the experiences of participants on canon characters, this chapter uses the data from Survey 2 and the interviews to understand how autistic people use headcanon to identify alternative autistic representation. This includes which characters that participants identified and headcanoned as autistic, which traits are part of those headcanons, and the impact of the gender of the participants on the traits they identify. It also considers how they use headcanon to identify with characters, and the use of non-human characters as a substitute for autistic characters.

Commonly Suggested Characters

The survey allowed the 22 participants to identify up to five characters whom they headcanon as autistic. 55% identified multiple characters and the remaining 45% identified only one character each. Some characters were identified multiple times, to a total of 32 characters identified by participants.

The most commonly identified character was Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*) by seven participants. In this survey, he was recognised as non-canonical, but participants identified him as a character that they believe to be autistic. Sheldon was the only character mentioned by more than three of the 22 participants. Three participants identified Entrapta (participants identified both *She-Ra: Princess of Power* 1985 and the 2018 reboot *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*).

Six characters were each identified by two different participants: the Doctor from *Doctor Who*, Sherlock Holmes from *Sherlock* (although one participant also referenced *Elementary* and the Granada 1984 *Sherlock Holmes)*, Eve Polastri from *Killing Eve*, Julian Bashir from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, Spock from *Star Trek,* and Elsa Gardner from *Atypical.*

During the interviews, participants were also asked to give examples of characters that they headcanon to be autistic. The five interview participants identified nineteen characters as being an autistic headcanon, of whom 37% (seven characters) were also mentioned in the survey. Most of the interview participants also completed the

survey so this data cannot be added to the character totals in order to avoid duplication.

The characters mentioned by two interview participants were Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Anne Shirley with one mention each for *Anne of Green Gables* (1985) and *Anne with an E*, and Sherlock Holmes who was mentioned twice each for the BBC *Sherlock*, and *Elementary*, as well as one mention of the 1984 Granada *Sherlock* *Holmes* series. Four of the interview participants also made reference to Sheldon Cooper as autistic, although they did not specify this as their headcanon.

Survey participants were asked to provide the gender of the character, and 52% of the characters were female, 42% male, and 6% non-binary. The two non-binary characters were the result of different interpretations of characters' canonical gender.

Although the data is only indicative due to the small sample of 22 participants (12 female, 4 male, 6 non-binary), it was possible to break down the gender of the characters identified by the different genders of participant. For example, of the characters identified by female participants, 58% were male and 42% female. Male participants identified only male characters. In contrast, the characters identified by non-binary participants were 71% female, 14% male, and 14% non-binary. They were the only participants to identify non-binary characters.

These non-binary characters are both reflections of the uncertainty of canon gender despite presenting primarily as male. One was The Doctor, who has been presented as both male and female, using different pronouns depending on the actor portraying them. The other was *Good Omens*' Aziraphale, who is played by a male actor, presents as male, and uses he/him pronouns, but is an angel. The book of *Good Omens* describes him and another character as "men-shaped creatures" (1991, p.52), and says "angels are sexless unless they really want to make an effort" (p.169), although the latter is in reaction to the text describing most people meeting him assuming him to be gay but implies an absence of physical sex which may influence gender. Author Neil Gaiman, who was writer and an executive producer on the series added "They don't identify as males. They mostly present as males." (2019)

The characters identified in Survey 2 were also assessed for the genre of the source materials. Detailed genre types were identified, where crime dramas were the most common genre for suggested characters at 24%, followed by both animated fantasy and science fiction for 4 characters (12%). The genres were then collated into overarching groups, and can be seen in the following table.

Genre summary	Total characters	% of characters
Children's	2	6%
Comedy	5	15%
Drama	16	48%
Fantasy	6	18%
Science Fiction	4	12%

Fig. 4 *A table showing the total number and percentage of characters from overall genre categories.*

With crime dramas a common genre, one participant identified three female characters involved in crime solving or related fields (Job Cloovers of *Van der Valk* [2020], Eve Polastri of *Killing Eve*, and Vera Stanhope of *Vera)*, and acknowledged that "[i]t's beginning to look as though I think anyone who 'solves crimes' in tv must be autistic but I don't" (SB10).

This is potentially related to the expected role of the detective, as someone who thinks in ways that are different, finds patterns where others might not, and perceives differently- traits that are common in autism (Samson et al, 2011). Additionally, interview participant 5 commented on the role of setting in how a character behaves, saying "a great deal of television is police procedurals, hospital dramas, you know, there's tonnes of television where the character works because they're in that setting" (I5), particularly making reference to male characters and how "there's a certain amount of affordances that are made for professional men" (I5). Whilst this doesn't apply to the characters identified by the survey participant above, it does engage with the role of gender in expectations of behaviour, which we will return to later.

The Non-Human as reflections of the Human

Across the 32 characters identified by the survey participants (and several of these were also discussed by interview participants), nine are non-human or have non-

human qualities. An additional three non-human or not entirely human characters were identified by interview participants. Of these, six are aliens or humanoid beings, two robots or androids, one is an angel, and three are some form of enhanced or changed human being. It was difficult to find a distinction between what is considered to be in some way non-human, but for these purposes these numbers include humans with non-standard human traits such as being genetically enhanced or having psychic abilities.

This research encompasses all of these characters, seeking to understand how their behaviours and traits reflect autistic behaviours in a way that is identifiable to the autistic participants. Their non-human nature calls into question whether they can be autistic, given that it is a definition and diagnosis based on human neurology — as interview participant 1 highlighted, "if you're going to include aliens, then I feel like you could include a lot of Vulcans [*Star Trek*]. But that's a whole species thing." They also raised the question of being able to use the example of Data (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*), given that he's an android, but then compared him to his 'brother' (Lore, an identical android made by the same creator), suggesting that "I guess he would work because his sibling wasn't autistic" (I1). However, despite the cultural and neurological differences of these characters, it is clear that nonetheless they provide a useful mirror for the autistic experience.

Although it is not possible in this research to fully explore the reasons and nuances of the relationship between autism and non-human characters, some key themes and hypotheses emerged from the initial consideration.

First, that these characters are often considered to be in some way other to the narrative. Where other characters function as reflections of humanity, characters such as Spock and River Tam (*Firefly*) stand out as different, a narrative foil to the other characters. For Spock, this is a cultural difference and thus "might feel like people are following a different set of social rules" (I3), reflective of the different ways in which autistic people function and communicate in social settings. Autistic people then identify and relate to characters who are considered to be other, and to be non-human, in the way that those othered people think and function and in the way that they interact with human characters.

One element of this, however, is that some of these characters are considered to be 'ideal' or in some way superior to humans. For example Data is an android who thinks faster and is stronger than humans. Similarly, Aziraphale is an angel, and

thus created directly by God to be an ideal, and Julian Bashir was (illegally) genetically engineered to be more intelligent — as a survey participant explained "he had some kind of developmental disability as a child that was "cured" through genetic engineering when he was six" but they went on to say "I feel like he is still autistic anyway, regardless of the genetic enhancements" (SB8). If these characters, who are somehow considered better than the average human, are identifiable to autistic characters, this raises questions about what creators consider to be superior or better, and how this results in traits that are perceivably autistic.

Why? Autistic traits

Participants in both the survey and interviews were asked why they headcanon characters as autistic, which traits had led them to identify the character as being autistic.

There are two caveats here, around the source and justification of a headcanon, identified by interview participants. The first was an observation that it can be a method of engaging with a character they like, saying that "I'll also headcanon characters that I like, because I want to relate to them more" (I2). Another participant also highlighted that it can be difficult to identify the specific traits they identify with, recognising that the intrinsic nature of being autistic makes it difficult to know whether the behaviour they relate to is specifically an autistic one — "I never know which aspects of, because you know, it autism affects everything right so like, I'm, I can't be like this is the autistic part of me and like that's why" (I3).

However, all survey and interview participants were able to identify traits or behaviours that they interpret as autistic in the characters that they headcanon.

The traits that survey participants identified in the characters they interpreted as autistic were primarily social and communication differences (35%). The most common example of this was not understanding or taking a long time to understand social conventions, norms and situations, mentioned eight times by participants. Similarly, four participants mentioned difficulty with social cues. For example, one participant described Anne Shirley-Cuthbert (*Anne with an E)* as having social difficulties, observing that "[s]he doesn't often understand what is acceptable in social situations"(SB11). Another participant described the way Parker (*Leverage*) uses social scripting and prompting from others to navigate situations, highlighting "for some of them, she wears an earpiece so her teammates can tell her what to

say" (SB13). Similarly, Ramona (*Santa Clarita Diet*) was highlighted as referring to her own social differences — "When another character pulls a knife on her, she replies, 'Is that another gift, or are you threatening to kill me? ...I'm not great with social cues'" (SB13).

Another frequent example from six participants was being unconventional or nonconformist in some way, including not wanting to look appealing to others — this was more common for female characters, mentioned four times. One example was Lisbeth Salander (*Millennium* mini series), about whom a participant said "she likes to be left alone and doesn't want to look too appealling [sic] and people-pleasing" (SB16).

Four participants described characters as having difficulty fitting in or being the way that other people expect. One participant described Will Graham (*Hannibal*), outlining his social differences and how his behaviours and dialogue show "difficulty being the way people expect someone to be: he's unconventional and doesn't do small talk, but becomes intensely animated and communicative when he's focused on something he's good at and obsessed with" (SB9).

The second common theme from survey participants at 14% (27 mentions) was very focused/specific interests, known as special interests. Participants talked about characters' highly focused interests and their ability to focus on those interests. They described a variety of special interests across the sixteen separate mentions, from Roy Cropper's (*Coronation Street*) interests in model railways, bat spotting and train spotting (SB19), to Tina Belcher's (*Bob's Burgers*) interest in horses (SB13). Participants also referred to an ability to hyperfocus or hyperfixate on these interests, which was also described as being single-minded. In two examples, these could come at the expense of other aspects of their lives — hyperfixation on a special interest leads Entrapta to "wondering [sic] into danger" (SB5), and for Dr Julian Bashir "medicine always comes first whatever situation he's in even if it's at the expense of his personal relationships" (SB12). Two characters (The Doctor and Anne Shirley-Cuthbert) are also described as "infodumping" (SB8, SB11), or giving a large quantity of information on their special interest or something they know a lot about. Infodumping is also described (negatively) in storytelling as "where the author crams as much information into a paragraph or page as possible" (Wilkins, 2012).

Alongside these different social behaviours were reflections on different ways of communicating (7%, 13 mentions). Verbal differences ranged from being overly

literal, such as Shawn Spencer (*Psych*), and difficulty with metaphor and figurative language, as seen in Spock, to Entrapta being described as having difficulty being understood by others. Observations about Entrapta's communication also referred to the use of non-speaking communication, such as expressing emotions using vocalisations when she is enthusiastic or scared. Similar non-verbal elements included Aziraphale being "bad at making the correct facial expression for situations" (SB13).

Another trait that occurred frequently (8% of all comments, fifteen mentions) was a need for structure and routine, with six examples focusing on the use of daily routines, such as Sheldon Cooper — as one participant outlined "He is shown to follow a set routine by only eating the same specific meal on the same day each week. He also only does his laundry on Saturday nights and has his own specific spot on the sofa that no one else is allowed to sit in." (SB14). Similarly, Entrapta was described by another participant as only eating a certain type of food (SB6), and a participant highlighted an occasion where Peridot (*Steven Universe*) is "shown on a day out obsessively typing on her tablet, the same word over and over", drawing on a need for or focus on repetition.

This is similar to another trait commonly mentioned by participants — logical or rigid thinking, and use of categorisation (eight mentions from the 22 participants). One referred to Spock's focus on logic (SB11), another spoke of Sherlock Holmes' "analytical mind… and a mania for categorisation systems and facts" (SB9) in multiple iterations of the character, and a third of Job Cloovers (*Van der Valk*) being "noticed as very analytical and clever by others" (SB7). Similarly, the first interview participant suggested systematisation as a trait that they might look for or observe in headcanon characters.

The traits outlined here are consistent with the diagnostic criteria for autism, however participants often identified nuances. For example, comments about social differences included elements of varying levels of desire to be part of social groups. Interview participant four described Anne Shirley's (*Anne of Green Gables)* social behaviours, "she's pretty chatty. But, you know... not very good at communicating with people around her own age". She outlined the kind of social difference she would recognise as autistic in girls, such as "a social butterfly type character, kind of, so flitting from group to group, to group. Maybe not settling in with one group of

friends, or having a kind of a bit of a loner". This can be set in contrast to Lizbeth Salander (*Millenium*), who "likes to be left alone" (SB16).

Participants also identified specific traits that are not directly part of the diagnostic criteria. A commonly mentioned trait, which at 11% was more common than other previously mentioned traits, was emotional differences. Although this is recognised in relation to autism, it is not part of the diagnostic criteria. Most frequently this was seen as characters appearing to be unempathetic, such as Sheldon Cooper , or not visibly showing emotion (known as a 'flat affect), as seen in Ramona of *Santa Clarita Diet*, and Tina Belcher.

Although some characters appear unemotional, participants also gave examples of deep emotion and empathy such as Will Graham having hyperempathy (SB9), and Spock is shown to feel very deeply "the episode… where they have an inhibition lowering hormone Spock cries a lot" (SB11). These emotional differences also extend to a difference in understanding and processing emotion, and the need for emotional support. One participant described The Doctor as "highly intelligent but needs the humanity and 'emotional admin' of a companion(s) to survive despite being 'superhuman'" (SB1), and another described Saga Noren (*The Bridge*) as being "uncomprehending [of] others' emotions" (SB3).

Further traits included having a different perspective or way of thinking, such as Vera Stanhope who is "extremely perceptive" and "puts things together" (SB7), useful traits for a detective. Additionally, The Doctor was described by a participant as having "a unique way of looking at things and thinking about things" (SB8)

Having a strong sense of justice or morality was also included here, with Adora (*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*) described as having "a rigid sense of right vs wrong" (SB17) and Mr Bean's (*Mr Bean*) autistic traits including "the way he reacts to inequality and injustice" (SB18). Similarly, interview participant four described this as being "very focused on justice. That is, in the kind of way 'all of this is wrong, we need to fix it'."

Interview participant five particularly also reflected on how their perception of a character as autistic can equally be a result of the behaviour of other characters around them. For example, she highlighted that "there's a certain atmosphere that develops around autistic people, whether we are diagnosed or not, where people around us, people talk about us in a certain way. It's like, 'Oh, he's a bit of a

character'." She went on to observe the way in which characters are described by others, such as "introductions to a character through people saying, 'oh, he's quite brilliant, but very prickly'" (I5). Similarly the fourth interviewee commented on the interrelationships between characters can be reflective of autistic behaviour, particularly with pre-established relationships — "seeing how they negotiate... info dumping and things like that... and seeing how other people relate to them… like, 'Oh yeah, well, this is Bob, we know they're a bit odd, but they're really good at x y and z'… It doesn't necessarily have to be super obvious.". As the fifth interview participant summarised, autistic headcanons can be drawn from "not only the character's own behaviour, it's the fact that the character's behaviour brings something out in the people around them, and allows people to treat them differently".

One final theme from several participants was what interview participant one described as a "degree of relatableness". Similarly, the third interviewee said that although one part of their brain might be looking for specific autistic traits or the way that autistic characters are commonly portrayed, but the other part is working on a recognition basis — "Oh, this character's like me or this character's like [name], my friend". Four survey participants also mentioned relatability or a character's trait being something they personally recognise, reflecting the role of headcanon as often being about identification with a character. This self-identification with the character also reflected an ability to recognise behaviours in a way that they couldn't specify. The first interviewee described it as "a degree of weirdness. but it's a specific type of weirdness" (I1).

Impact of the gender of the participant on the traits they identify

The traits suggested by survey 2 participants were summarised and analysed for the impact of both the gender of the characters and the gender of the participants.

The gender distribution of the participants identifying traits in each category did not vary significantly from the diversity of the survey participants as a whole. There were two exceptions, as this was not the case for communication difficulties, which was identified particularly by nonbinary participants, and having a different way of thinking or functioning was identified entirely by female and non-binary participants.

Similarly, male participants were less likely to mention emotional differences, though this may be a reflection of the small proportion of male participants.

Furthermore, the traits that participants of different genders identified in those categories varied. For example, in the social differences category non-binary participants particularly identified difficulty with social norms and conventions. The female participants particularly identified elements such as unconventionality and non-conformity, loyalty and strong attachments to a small group of people, and being treated as different by others. These aren't significantly different at first glance, but the traits identified by female participants were less likely to be those mentioned in the diagnostic criteria or common stereotypes.

Although the participant's gender had a minimal impact on the traits identified, the next section considers how the character's gender impacted the traits they identify, in the broader context of how character gender impacts their relationship with them and with headcanon as an interaction with the media.

Traits identified by participants and impact of the gender of the character

Through the character gender provided by the survey participants, it was possible to see whether the gender of the character affected the autistic traits identified. Whilst most categories of traits were proportional to the gender of the characters, this was notably different in two categories. Male characters were disproportionately likely to be identified as having communication difficulties at 69% of mentions when male characters made up 42%. Similarly, only male and non-binary characters were identified as 'stimming' or having self stimulating behaviours, and 89% of these descriptions were about male characters. This was also affected by the more thorough descriptions of male characters — across all categories, male characters had more total descriptions of traits.

For both male and female characters, the most common trait was social differences or difficulties, followed by special interests, and emotional differences. As a proportion of the total number of trait descriptions for that gender, female characters were slightly more likely to be described as having a special interest (17% compared to 12%) and as having emotional differences (14% compared to 10%) but the small sample size means it is difficult to know if this significant. An interview participant observed that the differences could be subtle, giving the example of Kaylee (*Firefly*),

and the way that she formed relationships with different characters, particularly other characters who are considered to be outsiders.

The way that the characters were described within these categories varied, with female characters more likely to be described as non-conformist, whereas more male characters were described as having difficulty with social situations and norms. Male characters were also more likely to be described as analytical or logical, and to have their routine described (though this was for the same character several times).

Interview participants also reflected on the different traits that they identify, and how those were affected by the gender of the character. One participant reflected on how male autistic stereotypes could be reflected in their own headcanon — "the nerd archetype or stereotype is more often a male character thing. So that kind of, I mean, you know, nerds are kind of often can be seen as autistic… If I see a female character who's a nerd, I will probably headcanon them as autistic" (I2).

Relationship between representation of women and headcanons of autistic women

During the interviews, participants were asked whether the gender of the character affected the way in which they identified and sought out autistic traits to create autistic headcanons. The participants felt that if they identified different traits due to gender, it wasn't a deliberate or conscious choice of which they were aware. As one observed,

> Most of the autistic people that I know and I'm friends with aren't men. So, although I've like learned to pick up these like this shorthand or whatever. I guess the ones that I relate to or can be like oh that's like my friend, or whatever, doesn't really have bearing on their gender. (I3)

Similarly, another didn't feel that the gender of the character affected them identifying a behaviour as autistic, saying "I think if I see a trait, like any trait, if it, whether it's in a male character, or a female character or another gender, like, I won't write that off, I guess as autistic? Yeah, depending on the gender, I think I'll just see it as autistic" (I2). For another, there was a distinction between the conscious acknowledgement of traits, and the subconscious impact of gender stereotypes and expectations — "I've spent a lot of time trying to move away from these like

preconceived notions that were sort of false. But I suppose probably on some subconscious level that it might still be acting a little bit" (I3).

However, one participant did feel that the characteristics they might identify were affected by gender, commenting that "men have more range for being rude and it being seen as cute, or quirky and them being able, able to be rude" (I4), commenting on how Gregory House (*House*) and Sherlock Holmes could be seen as being coded as autistic and they are often considered to be rude. Similarly, they also specified particular traits as being ones they associate with female characters, such as "looking a bit kind of deeper at how they relate to others, and things that can be read as a special interest" (I4), such as "your typical horse girl type thing that could just be a little girl, being obsessed with horses. But it also could be a little autistic kid with a special interest in horses." (I4).

Four of the five interview participants commented on how the roles and portrayal of women on television affected their perceptions of potentially autistic characters. The four of them observed that the common roles for and behaviours of female characters impacted how they understood these characters — one suggested that "there's… a couple of, like, roles that they'll have women play in the shows, and none of those roles are kind of very autistic... maybe part of it is also... that notion that only men are autistic, and so... they'll only put autistic coded men, male characters in it" (I2). To these participants, the lack of autistically coded female characters, and the limited roles of women could make it difficult to identify female characters as autistic. Interview participant five commented that she found it difficult to think of female characters.

Participant 2 went on to add that "I will headcanon female characters or as autistic but they don't often have the traits" (I2), reflecting on the need for desire in creating a headcanon, particularly where autistic traits may not be present. Another participant also reflected on her lack of expectation that autistic traits would be present or deliberately written into the creation of a female character, acknowledging that "I know, you know, a woman on television will almost never actually be autistic. So I'm not expecting the scriptwriters to have intended it that way" (I5). This presumption that autistic women will not be deliberately written, and that any autistic traits are accidental, impacted directly on participant five's ability to interpret female characters as autistic.

For participant five, this was also an impact of her relationship with womanhood and autistic womanhood.

> I don't think that I have a traditional relationship to being a woman… I'm always looking at women on TV, because by definition, with TV, mainly being written by men, and commissioned by men, the women who we see on TV tend towards a traditional femininity for the most part. And so I'm always kind of looking at that stuff as if I'm reading something in a foreign language. You know, I think that makes it harder for me to relate to it. (I5)

As a result, she reflected that "there have been times in real life whenever I have met autistic women, and simply not known them because I didn't know what I, what to look for" (I5), and this had an impact on her ability to recognise potentially autistic female characters. She provided Elsa Gardner (*Atypical*) as an example, having taken three seasons to identify and headcanon the character as autistic "because, you know, she's portrayed as conventionally feminine" (I5). For this participant, the way that she engages with the concepts of womanhood and femininity impacted her expectations of what it means to be an autistic woman, as well as her experiences of traditionally feminine characters. As someone who described herself as not "perform[ing] femininity well" and not "hav[ing] a traditional relationship to being a woman" (I5), it affected her understanding of how autistic traits might show in people who experience being female differently.

Participant three also connected headcanons of autistic characters to gendered expectations of behaviour, and a degree of difference from those expectations — "if I'm looking at deviations of how they're supposed to act... in a social situation, and [they] are acting differently" (I3). They went on to acknowledge "gender does impact that in that there is an expectation for a female character to behave differently than a male character or a non binary character in certain situations based on the stereotypes that we hold unconsciously" (I3), and although they try to not act on subconscious stereotypes and expectations this may still be having an impact on how they observe and recognise characters as autistic.

However, participant five also acknowledged that it was not entirely possible to ascribe the behaviours of female characters being out of the norm as a result of being autistic. She reflected that "I think we do have a concept where we have a concept of a non-traditional woman who are difficult very often it gets attached to caricatures of feminism" (I5). As a result, there were too many possibilities for these characters to be behaving in a way that is considered to be unusual.

> An unconventional woman on TV, I'm almost never going to be able to assume that she's autistic, that that's meant to be rep, you know? … [S]he's going to be the feminist that may or may not be kindly portrayed… maybe it's going to turn out that she's gay, or that she's bi… maybe she's eccentric, because this is a TV show where they do a lot of eccentric personalities. (I5)

Other participants across the interviews and surveys did not raise this issue with identifying unconventional female characters as autistic. They may have less difficulty with this both for reasons of being able to identify specific traits and behaviours, and the aforementioned interaction of the desire to create a headcanon potentially balancing out the need for full accuracy. Across multiple interview and survey participants, what was commonly identified was a character who acts in ways that are not part of the commonly expected behaviours and social norms of their cultures. As such, as interviewees identified, if autistic viewers are anticipating that they will interpret as autistic someone who acts outside of the social norm in some way, then that will be affected by what they subconsciously consider the social norm — and this is directly impacted by social expectations of women (and non-binary people) and their representation on television.

Conclusion & Evaluation

Recognising the limited role that fan research has had in engaging with the representation of autistic people in British and American television, this research used both quantitative and qualitative data to provide insights into the autistic experience of television characters. The existing research focuses primarily on academic and clinical reflections on representation, as well as narratives of autism across media types. Additionally, autism research, including in stories and narrative, has usually taken a binary gender approach, despite recognition that autistic people are more likely to experience gender in other ways (Van Der Miesen, Hurley, and De Vries, 2016). As such, the use of surveys and interviews to engage directly with autistic individuals allows this research to connect television representation directly with the autistic experience. This sits parallel to existing research on disabled and queer representation, such as Shakespeare's (1994) work on the role of disabled characters, and Jenkin's (1995) reflections on the role of fan interpretation for queer viewers. It then also builds on Loftis' (2015) examination of the roles of autistic characters in literature, bringing the fictional narratives together with Broderick and Ne'Eman's (2008) work on autism narratives and Nordahl-Hansen and Oien's (2018) more medical oriented research on autistic characters on film and television.

Throughout Survey 1 (see Chapter 5), participants returned frequently to concerns and experiences around the gendered nature of canon representation, as well as the quality, accuracy, and diversity of that representation. Their diverse and mixed responses to these existing characters came alongside varied emotions of sadness, happiness, and anger. Happiness was the most prominent single emotion, but was outweighed by the volume of negative emotions such as sadness and frustration.

37% of Survey 1 participants felt that TV characters had impacts on their own conceptualisation of autism, and a further 30% were unsure. 96% also shared impacts of these characters on how people around them conceptualise and understand autism, both positive and negative. Impacts on the individuals included when they chose to go through the diagnostic process, their own choices around disclosing their autism to other people, and the expectations of others in regards to their support needs and intelligence.

For some, this mix of emotions and impacts left a complex response to these canonical characters. One female participant described feeling "[e]xcited that there's

some representation, disappointed that it's often bad representation. Bad representation can be worse than none as it contributes to incorrect stereotypes that can prejudice people against us" (SA7).

One area in which this was particularly noticeable was comedy, with the impact and emotional response to characters in comedies mentioned by many participants. When asked for improvements to representation, one participant said, "I wish writers would stop doing the thing where they make a character autistic to mock them but then deny that they've done it." (SA42)

These desires to change autistic representation that participants outlined were often reflected in the headcanons described in Survey 2 and the interviews. This was particularly noticeable where headcanon characters were described with a wider diversity of gender and more varied autistic traits, which participants had wished to see in future representation. Overall, more female characters were identified than male- whilst this was possibly a reflection of the sample gender diversity, it remained a higher proportion of women than when participants identified canon characters. The data for the diversity of character gender was also affected by participants' headcanon for the character's gender in two cases, where they also shared headcanons for Aziraphale (*Good Omens*) and The Doctor (*Doctor Who*) as non-binary.

Across both Survey 1 and 2, Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory)* was named repeatedly, both as a character assumed to be canonically or officially autistic, and as a character recognised as non-canonical but believed to be autistic by participants. Other common characters included Entrapta (*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*), and Sherlock Holmes in multiple adaptations. Characters appeared from across the range of genres, but crime dramas particularly recurred, reflecting the narrative of a detective who is intelligent but not social but has found a niche for their skills in which their 'unusual' traits are accepted or ignored. This potentially reflects autistic people (diagnosed or not) who do thrive in careers which use their skills and autistic traits, such as making connections in investigative work. These headcanons may also reflect the desire of the participant to be accepted in the same way as the characters, particularly where these characters have friends who accept their autistic traits.

In the same way that these detectives stand out from the norm and may be seen as other, participants identified several non-human or not-entirely-human characters.

These headcanons reflected both conceptions of autistic people as 'other', but some characters also suggest narratives of being 'other' in a way that is 'superior' in some ways.

Participants did identify the role of desire in creating headcanon and did not always need to have specific reasons to create a headcanon of a character as autistic, but rather wanted to identify with the character. However, they were still able to identify core behaviours and traits that contributed to their headcanon. These were predominantly in line with the categories of the diagnostic criteria, around social and communication differences, special interests, and need for structure and routine. However, participants often identified nuances around difficulty with fitting in, being unconventional or non-conformist. They also identified the use of vocalisations and facial expressions in less common ways, such facial expressions that could be considered 'incorrect', and vocal sounds other than words to express emotions. Other traits outside the criteria focused on autistic characters having different emotional experiences, and a strong sense of justice.

Participants also highlighted the behaviour of those around the character as an indicator, both how they communicate or interact with the character, but also how they talk about the character to others. They suggested that the behaviour of other characters and how they refer to the autistic character can show how that individual is different in a way that they recognised, connecting with narratives of the autistic person as 'other'. Participants also relied on a self-identification with the character that they could not necessarily articulate or place on a specific trait, referring instead to a 'degree of relatableness'. As one participant described, "autism affects everything right so... I can't be like this is the autistic part of me and like that's why" (I3), but rather they understood that the character was similar to them.

The gender of the participant did not have a significant impact on the traits that participants identified, though it did have some relationship with the detail of what they identified. Character gender had a more noticeable impact on the traits participants identified, with male characters more likely to be described as having communication difficulties, and female characters marginally more likely to be described as having emotional differences. However, the scale of these differences are affected by the sample size.

Participants also recognised, particularly in the interviews, that this was affected by the expectations and roles of different genders. From the perception of the male

nerd to the limited roles of female characters, participants shared that these directly and indirectly impacted their engagement with female characters and how they shape headcanons. When looking for someone 'other', these limited roles can make it both easier and harder to identify an autistic female character, where autism is the cause of the character being unusual.

This research has sample limitations which prevents the quantitative data from being any more than indicative. The low uptake from men means that it was not possible to make effective comparisons across gender, so whilst the conclusions drawn are indicative, replicating the research could verify or challenge the data. Additionally, a larger sample group would increase the likelihood of the conclusions being replicable, but the group size (particularly for survey 1) provided data suitable for drawing these indicative conclusions.

Further research in this area would benefit from drawing a broader group, including recruitment via routes outside of social media. Although social media drew interest from fan communities, using additional routes may draw a broader range of autistic people. This could also lead to further participation, especially men, and it would be interesting to use link tracking tools to see whether the language to describe the research affects the take up by different genders.

Drawing on the conclusions and insights provided by participants, it would be beneficial to investigate further several different topics around this autistic experience. The desire of the participants to see specific changes to television representation of autism could be investigated in more detail to establish what is lacking and understand the role of autistic people in creating their own narratives. Additionally, the personal identification narratives of headcanon deserve further analysis to both understand in more detail what autistic people are identifying with, perhaps through identifying examples of character behaviour. It would also be useful to consider how this approach is applicable to other communities for whom headcanon is a key source of representation, such as the LGBT+ community and broader disabled community. The role of women is key, understanding the intersection between expectations of female characters and how that affects headcanon across groups would be a valuable insight.

Finally, there is also the opportunity to understand in more detail the role that non-human characters play in representing the 'other' and how this fits with lived autistic experiences of being outside the norm. There is value here in understanding both

how these comparisons are imposed on but also chosen by autistic people as an analogy for their own experience. When an autistic individual chooses to headcanon as autistic, or identifies strongly with, a non-human character, they use their agency to align with a character who is both 'other' but can also have superhuman abilities. This may be a direct parallel to their own experiences, or may also be desire based, seeking to be recognised for their own capabilities.

In exploring the autistic experience of autism on television and the role of self-identification, this research offers an insight into the impact of current autistic representation, and even unintentional representation. The recurring presence of Sheldon Cooper and his impact reflected the way that characters can have an impact regardless of whether they are intended to be autistic. As Loftis (2015) suggests similarly for Sherlock Holmes, "[u]ltimately, whether Holmes meets the modern diagnostic criteria for autism is irrelevant: as a literary figure frequently connected with autism in the popular imagination, this figure has the power to perpetuate stereotypes about autism."

This research also provides insights into the autistic experience and relationship with narrative. The way that autistic people use narratives and self-identification with character forms a vital part of the autistic voice in explaining the autistic experience needs to be recognised by anyone looking to understand the autistic experience. If, as Mansfield (2007) suggests, "[t]o overcome the resistance to truth, literature makes use of fictions that are images of truth" then the stories that autistic people tell and retell are a sharing of experience through engagement with character and narrative, and a way to overcome resistance to understanding the autistic experience.

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Appendix 1- Surveys

Both surveys were hosted on SmartSurvey.

Survey 1- Experiences of Autistic Representation

Survey 1 went live on 16th March and closed on 10th May. One amendment was made on 3rd April, as per the note on the question (q4), along with two minor typo corrections.

Page 1. Introduction

The aim of this survey is to understand how autistic people experience autistic representation on British and American television, and whether gender is an element.

I am conducting research for my MA at Kingston University.

My project investigates the way that autistic people experience media presentations, and whether this is affected by gender. It also looks at characters that autistic people identify as being autistic other than 'official' or 'canonical' characters, and whether this can inform how academia understands the autistic experience.

Your answers to this survey will support my research process and incorporated in my final thesis. Your responses will be anonymous. After submission, my thesis will be uploaded to the British Library ETHoS system and be available electronically. This data may also be used in papers that I submit for publication.

If you wish to participate in the interviews you can provide your email address and this will be held separately to your responses. Personal information such as your gender and age will be used only in the interpretation of data.

If you prefer not to answer any of the survey questions, please leave them blank.

The information I gather through this survey will be processed in accordance with GDPR guidelines. It will be stored under password protection and will not be shared with anyone except my supervisors, named below. When the information is no longer needed, it will be deleted- by September 2022 at the latest.

For further details, or if you have any questions, please contact me at k1843919@kingston.ac.uk, or my MA supervisors: Professor Will Brooker at w.brooker@kingston.ac.uk and Dr Colette Balmain at c.balmain@kingston.ac.uk

Thank you for your help with my research.

Page 2. About You

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-Binary

Prefer Not to Say

Prefer to self describe (please specify)

2. What is your age?

18-24

25-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

61-70

71+

Prefer Not to Say

3. Do you have a formal Autism Spectrum diagnosis (including Aspergers Syndrome) or are you self diagnosed? (This is purely for statistical purposes)

Formal Diagnosis

Self-diagnosis

Prefer Not to Say

Other (please specify):

Page 3. Emotional Impact of Characters

4. Some characters are considered to be 'canonical', which means they are described as autistic (by themselves or others) within the programme.Others are considered to be 'official' because someone in authority, such as a writer or producer, has said they are autistic. This is the fan idea of 'Word of God'. What examples would you give of these kinds of autistic character?

(Prior to 3rd April, the last sentence read "What examples would you give of **this** kind of autistic character?")

[Free text box]

5. How would you describe autistic characters on television?

[Free text box]

6. When you see these autistic characters, what emotions do you feel?

[Free text box]

Page 4. Understanding autism from television

7. Has autism representation affected how you think of autism or of yourself?

    Yes

    No

    Not Sure

8. If yes, how has representation on television impacted you?

[Free text box]

9. Do you think autism representation has affected how other people think of autism or how they think of you? If so, how?

[Free text box]

10. What change(s) would you make to the way autistic people are represented on television?

[Free text box]

5. Participate Further

11. The next stage of this research involves a survey about characters that people identify as being autistic. Would you like to participate in this research? *

Yes

No

12. This research will also use one to one interviews to understand individuals' experiences and opinions in more detail. Would you like to participate in this research? *

Yes

No

13. Would you like to receive information about the completed research? *

 Yes

No

14. If you have said yes to any of these questions, please provide your email address

[Free text box with email address validation]

Survey 2: Autistic Headcanons

1. Introduction

The aim of this survey is to understand how autistic people interpret characters on British and American television as autistic.

I am conducting research for my MA at Kingston University.

My project investigates the way that autistic people experience media presentations, and whether this is affected by gender. It also looks at characters that autistic people identify as being autistic other than 'official' or 'canonical' characters, and whether this can inform how academia understands the autistic experience.

Your answers to this survey will support my research process and incorporated in my final thesis. Your responses will be anonymous. After submission, my thesis will be uploaded to the British Library ETHoS system and be available electronically. This data may also be used in papers that I submit for publication.

If you wish to participate in the interviews you can provide your email address and this will be held separately to your responses. Personal information such as your gender and age will be used only in the interpretation of data.

If you prefer not to answer any of the survey questions, please leave them blank.

The information I gather through this survey will be processed in accordance with GDPR guidelines. It will be stored under password protection and will not be shared with anyone except my supervisors, named below. When the information is no longer needed, it will be deleted- by September 2022 at the latest.

For further details, or if you have any questions, please contact me at k1843919@kingston.ac.uk, or my MA supervisors: Professor Will Brooker at w.brooker@kingston.ac.uk and Dr Colette Balmain at c.balmain@kingston.ac.uk

Thank you for your help with my research.

2. About You

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-Binary

Prefer Not to Say

Prefer to self describe (please specify):

2. What is your age?

18-24

25-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

61-70

71+

Prefer Not to Say

3. Do you have a formal Autism Spectrum diagnosis (including Aspergers Syndrome) or are you self diagnosed? (This is purely for statistical purposes)

Formal Diagnosis

Self-diagnosis

Prefer Not to Say

Other (please specify):

 4. How did you hear about this survey?

Email

Twitter

Facebook

Tumblr

Newsletter

Other (please specify):

3. Interpreting Characters

5. Some characters are not 'officially' or 'canonically' autistic but viewers interpret them as autistic. Do you have any examples of characters from British or American television that you interpret or 'headcanon' as autistic?

Yes

No

[If Yes, the participant continues to page 4. If no, the participant goes to page 9]

4. About the Character -1

Please give a little information about the character that you interpret as autistic.

6. Character name

[Free Text Box]

7. Television Series

[Free Text Box]

8. Character's Gender

Male

Female

Non-binary/other

9. Are they stated to be autistic either within the series, or by a creator?

Yes

No

Not Sure

10. Why do you think they are autistic? What traits do they have or things do they do that you identify as being autistic?

[Free Text Box]

11. Do you have another character you would like to suggest? *

Yes

No

[If Yes, the participant goes to the next 'About the Character' page, which is identical to page 4. There are a total of 5 'About the Character' pages. If No, the participant goes to page 9. The same question is asked at the end of the first 4 'About the Character' pages.]

9. No Interpretation

35. You have said that you don't interpret characters on British and American TV as being autistic. Is there a reason for this?

[Free Text Box]

10. Participate Further

36. This research will also use one to one interviews to understand individuals' experiences and opinions in more detail. Would you like to participate in this research? *

Yes

No

37. Would you like to receive information about the completed research? *

Yes

No

38. If you have said yes to any of these questions, please provide your email address

[Free text box with email address validation]

Appendix 2- Interview Questions

Semi-structured interview questions

This was a semi-structured interview, with conversation flowing around these topics. Participants were reminded that if they participated in the surveys, some of this may be duplicative but this was seeking more detail.

Talked the participant through the consent form (emailed in advance), and ensured consent to a] continue and b] be recorded.

1. Has autism representation on TV affected how you think of autism or of yourself?

Definition of 'canon' and 'official' being used in this research: canon is what fans agree "actually" happened in the television show, and official includes statements by show runners, writers, and official press releases (also known as 'Word of God).

'Headcanon' or interpretation is a fan's personal interpretation of canon, such as habits of a character, the backstory of a character, or the nature of relationships between characters.

2. Some characters are not 'officially' or 'canonically' autistic but viewers interpret them as autistic. Do you have any examples of characters from British or American television that you consider or 'headcanon' to be autistic?
3. Why do you think they are autistic? What traits do they have or things do they do that you identify as being autistic?
4. When you are watching a TV programme, what are the traits that would initially make you think a character might be autistic?
5. Does the character's gender affect the traits you see or look for? If so, how?

Appendix 3- Ethics Committee Approval

Kingston University London

2 March 2020

Dear Mx Tia Shafee

Your application 1369 -Autistic engagement with autistic representation has been reviewed. After careful consideration, ethical approval has been granted - Congratulations!

Should you make any changes to your project that impact on your ethics application, please submit an application for amendment.

Yours sincerely,

Research Ethics Administrator

on behalf of the Kingston University Research Ethics Committee