Disability as a Social Construction:

Investigating How Autism is Represented in the Mainstream Media

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Abstract
This paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the representation of autism within a small sample of mainstream newspaper articles. The paper concludes that media, as a communicative tool, has enormous cultural power whereby the portrayal of Autism as a disability is predicated on notions of normality and underpinned by ableist ideology. Such promotion of normalcy and disability in general can serve to generate and sustain disabling barriers and oppression. This hegemonic practice therefore produces a replicative process that is detrimental to the production of social justice and equality within contemporary society and culture.

1. Introduction

Previous enquiries and debates within the field of Disability Studies suggest that societal perceptions of disabled people are formed and perpetuated through the media (Barnes, 1992) and often contextualised within a medical deficit model thereby resulting in a critical avoidance that spans across society in a self-fulfilling process of fear and ignorance. Similarly, existing research within the field of Disability Studies, particularly the work of Hodkinson(2007), shows that historical frameworks have failed to both capture and reflect the experience and voice of both disabled and autistic people, failing to acknowledge and recognise dominant power structures or relations within contemporary society, therefore reinforcing segregation and prejudice within a continuous cycle of deprivation and dependency. As such this paper aims to critically examine the social construction of disability within contemporary society, exploring how autism as a cultural concept is represented within mainstream media texts. Equally, the paper aims to assess the view that misrepresentations of autism within contemporary media form the foundation of negative attitudes and beliefs (Solis, 2004). This is where prejudicial stereotypes of autistic people become absorbed into the public and political consciousness (Kitchin, 2010), an oppressive discourse that serves to both reproduce and reinforce social injustice and segregation by abetting cultural inequalities.

1.1 Cultural Representations of disability

The work of Barnes (1993, 1997, 2003) and Griffiths (2001) highlights how we are constantly subjected to negative, often stereotypical representations of disability as a tragedy to be pitied. It is this ableist representation of disabled people preserved within the media that consequently shapes a society's understanding of, and attitudes towards, disability. This is where contemporary media, used as a communicative tool, uses disability to play on individual emotions (Schalk, 2016), to either evoke fear (of a villain role), or to exploit sympathy in order to raise money. This imagery is not only negative, and impairment focused (aligned with the hegemonic medical model of disability), but also provides a distorted, misrepresentation of autism and disability in general, serving to maintain and reproduce a dominant and hegemonic societal hierarchy. It is this prevailing orthodoxy of social oppression (Lang, 2001) and segregation which both produces and reinforces disabling stereotypes and prejudice, an ideology which then becomes absorbed as a social value, rooted within prevailing societal expectations and mistakenly viewed and recognised as a collective cultural truth or fact. Equally, these negative reinforced interpretations, of prejudgment, towards disabled people, an enforced classification framework, leads to the continued reinforcement of a destructive cultural stigma (Augoustinos and Reynolds, 2001) and hostility, framing disability as an inferior category. As such, this destructive imagery (Hosey, 2009, 2010) enforced within a culture, and reproduced within the media, not only has detrimental, long term effects on a society's attitudes towards disability, a process of socialisation, but also indicates that autistic people are not given equal rights, a cultural intolerance and social preference which reinforces and generates profound social barriers of cultural isolation and exclusion.

Similarly, Cameron (2014) and Goffman’s (1963) work notes that media and societal representations of disabled and autistic people are often impairment specific, centralised around what Jones and Harwood (2009) term a “deficit perspective.” The significance of this stated authority and control, exercised through dominant normative values and oppressive representations of disabled people, subsequently equates to a ‘social imperative’ that exaggerates a disabled person’s depiction as other, a form of social or cultural death (Waltz, 2007) whereby disabled people are portrayed and stigmatised as sub-human and therefore deficient or incompetent. It is this leading medical binary which suggests that disabled people are culturally rejected due to their failure to meet normative social standards, therefore suggesting that disabled people are systematically placed outside the range of what is culturally accepted as normal. As a result, this damaging labelling theory advocated by society and the media, not only dehumanises and objectifies autistic people by centralising an individual’s personal limitation, their perceived deficit, but also suggests that there is a need for improvement. This in turn systematically suggests that autistic people have to change to fit into society by conveying assumptions of failure, a leading and discriminatory framework within contemporary culture which views autistic people as a ‘comparable group’ (Huws and Jones, 2010) within society, a capitalist discourse reproduced by the disability business. Consequently, a capitalist society and culture becomes organised upon cultural interpretations of impairments, a process that guarantees autistic people’s social isolation from mainstream culture.

Organisations or institutions, such as the media, often run by non-disabled and defined by ‘modes of production’ (Fritsch, 2004), operate as a business, raising money by exploiting sympathy based on the portrayal that disabled people, including autistic people, are reliant on those who are viewed as able-bodied. It this cycle of capitalism (Oliver, 1990), reproduced within culture, which could be said to exclude and exploit autistic people by suggesting that the inclusion of disabled and autistic people has an economic base. As such, this cultural and political exploitation of disabled people, formed through public opinion and facilitated by the media, not only allows society to avoid its obligation to remove social barriers, used as a scapegoat (Shakespeare, 1994, 2002) for a damaging and disabling society, but also implies that disabled and autistic people have an inability, reinforced via an oppressive social hierarchy which highlights the bi-directional nature of segregation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is this two-way or dual process related to inclusion, impacted by a variety of external influences, such as media, or other environmental systems which affects the majority.

The media encourage certain demeaning ideals of disabled people in an attempt to rationalise disability, dehumanising and stigmatising (Sullivan, 2011) autistic people in order to provide false generalisations that become engrained within a culture. This labelling cycle reinforces and encourages ableist behaviours that place those with a disability, including autistic people, on the fringe of a society, outside the spectrum of the 'normal' (Haller et al, 2006). Equally this ideology manifested with a notion of inclusion-ism (Mitchell et al, 2014), a false or tokenistic sense of inclusion reproduced in current culture and media, may consequently result in environments or conditions where disabled people feel obliged to adhere to simplified, one-dimensional portrayals of disability. This is consolidated within society and media, whereby in order to feel like a valued member of a community, an environment of false consciousness must be created (Perepa, 2013) and with it a mistaken belief that society and culture is just and fair.

1.2 Autism as a deficit to be avoided

Popular perceptions of autistic people within the media and society are often constructed around pervasive historical superstitions, myths and beliefs surrounding autism and disability. Waltz (2010) and Sinclair's (1993) work suggests that this is where the predominant narratives of autism, a disability viewed as an appendage, centralise around triumph over adversity, or focus on autistic people as objects of pity, evil or ridicule in order to aid in the cultural construction of power relationships. Equally, it is this notion of liminality, used to justify the social status or position of disabled people, which consequently (re)enforces simplified, one-dimensional metaphoric depictions of autistic people as marginal or inadequate bodies. This emphasises a politics of resentment which not only systematically portrays autism solely as a medical condition or deficit in need of a cure, but also highlights a socio capitalist process and categorical distancing.

The 'dilemma of difference', coined by Terzi (2005, 2010), underpins a complex system of social constrains and norms imposed on disabled people by a discriminatory society and a structured classification system. This is where the embodiment of these discriminative social and economic relations within an ideological hegemony, defined by capitalist relations, leads to the exclusion and alienation of autistic people within capitalist societies, ensuring a prejudicial culture in which diversity is undervalued.

Similarly, society and the media portray and stereotype autistic people as curios, perceiving disability as a curiosity to be explored. This perspective encourages non-disabled people to consider impairment imagery as an opportunity for potential voyeurism, ensuring a critical avoidance and autistic peoples' continued perception as an objectified other, as non-human, or inferior. These oppressive portrayals of disability undermine the notion that disabled and autistic people can be respected and valued members of society and therefore significantly lower the self-worth of the individual. This highlights a categorical dehumanising process where disability, as a notion, becomes solely understood as a deformity or anomaly, a manifestation of physical weakness and limitation: a hegemonic and disabling discourse which centralises extreme bodily abnormality and perceived difference, something which treats disability and autistic people as a spectacle (Slater, 2013) and is paradoxically pervasive within a society. Consequently, autistic people become scapegoats for 'social anxieties' of ruptured identity and vulnerability, viewed as a comparable group or discursive category within society. It is this underlying focus on a deficit model perspective which provides little consideration to the barriers, discrimination, negative images and lack of opportunity that shape autistic people's experience, objectifying disabled people through a reinforced perpetual state of un-belonging within manifestations of abnormality and despair.

2. Methodology

2.1 Mainstream Media and Newspapers

Over a three-month period, from December 2016 – February 2017, the paper employed Critical Discourse Analysis to explore media coverage of autism within one mainstream broadsheet newspaper: *The Guardian* and two tabloid newspapers: *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, assessing all relevant articles using the research methods below.

The search was carried out on the newspapers in order to recognise, evaluate and critically compare current dominant, prevailing discourses and ideologies (Hosey, 2009) of autism, which are expressive of different readerships and political profiles (Wilkinson and McGill, 2008) in the United Kingdom. The *ProQuest News Stand* and *Infotrac* online database, a catalogue or record of international, national and regional newspapers, was employed to retrospectively search for all relevant electronic newspaper articles comprising of the search terms ‘autistic’ or ‘autism’ in the specified months. Each article was then analysed to effectively and systematically disregard any articles which did not mention or specifically refer to autism, or which were not newspaper articles, for example adverts or transcriptions. The researcher included all articles that contained autism coverage, excluding any stories that had been repeated in different publications of the same newspaper, public or social statements, advertisements for study enrolments, cinema listings and letters to the editors. All outstanding articles were then manually inputted into a secure database. All articles were then read independently and autonomously by the researcher and coded as either ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ in overall focus, and then further coded (Barton, 2006) into dominant themes.

2.2 Framework

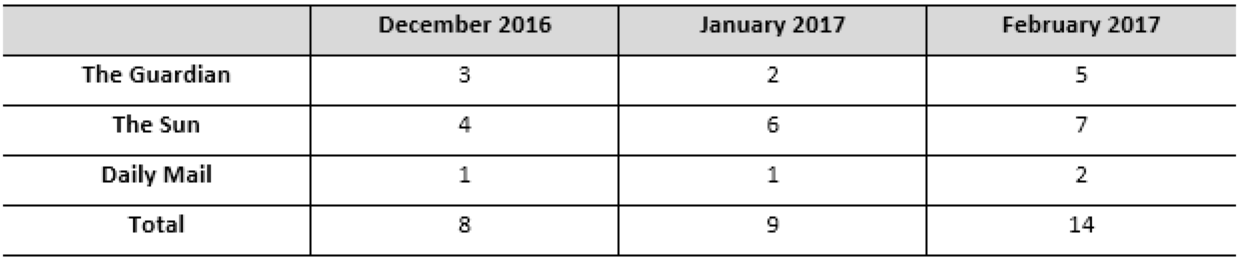
A qualitative approach, specifically Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is used to examine the use of the medical model in the mainstream press. As such the paper seeks to decode the hegemonic ideologies which underpin contemporary cultural assumptions surrounding the nature of knowledge and societal perceptions of complex social and physical environments. It aims to investigate whether disability and autism are socially constructed through an inability to value diversity. In particular, a dialectical-relational approach to CDA, developed by Fairclough (1989), was employed throughout to support enquiry on the basis that specific frameworks or discourses, for example news reports, are systematically framed and organised in a way that corresponds to prevailing societal or cultural structures and practices. Serving as a methodological tool, CDA is effective in examining and decoding dominant power relationships and cultural assumptions between ruling class ideologies and social practice.

I use the term ‘discourse’ in various senses: as a three-dimensional concept which involves texts (the objects of linguistic analysis), discourse practices (the production, distribution and consumption of texts) and social practices (the power relations, ideologues and hegemonic struggles that discourses reproduce, challenge or restructure). This interplay between text, discourse and historical context enables the researcher to understand the causality of oppression along with the broader reality of how both disability and autism as concepts are constructed and experienced. Focusing on the incorporation of textual analysis allows the researcher to study the ‘context and structure’ (Oliver, 2002) of indirect messages which may be embedded within the text, allowing the researcher to challenge the hegemonic ideals (Kress, 2012) of disability that are present within newspaper articles. Similarly, textual analysis has the potential to centralise dominant representations of autistic people, again allowing the researcher to outline autism and disability as a social construction rather than a deficit to be avoided or cured.

CDA permits the researcher to gain a profound understanding of the hidden agents within a text, centralising the bi directionality (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), or relationships between text and society through critical consideration of how texts are produced and structured, a process which allows the researcher to uncover how autism as a medical deficit is perpetuated within mainstream media and contemporary culture. This methodology centralises the connection between societal attitudes and text (Creswell, 2013), producing codes which reflect common themes and traits within the research, a thematic approach which enables the researcher to determine how autism as a social construction is represented and portrayed within culture, highlighting dominant power relations and broader themes within society such as normality and societal attitudes.

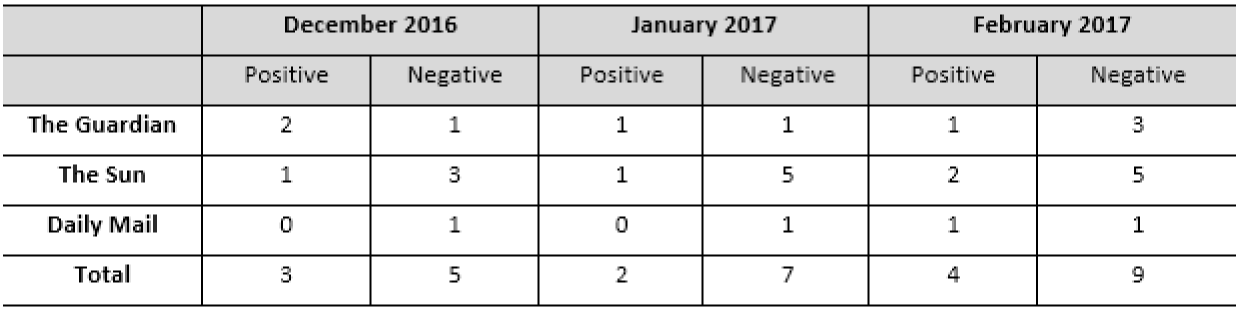
3. Analysis

In total, 31 ‘autism’ or ‘autistic’ related articles were accessed over a three-month period (Fig. 1). The results suggest an increase in media coverage over the three-month period. As previously stated, the articles were coded or identified as predominantly either ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ (Fig. 2). Within the three months, 21 ‘negative’ articles outnumbered the 9 ‘positive’ articles, highlighting a prevalence of newspaper articles focusing on negative or derogatory stories. As a whole, ‘positive’ articles primarily focused on financial or physical capitals or resources, for example the continued donation of funds to autism research or treatment or on an individual’s ‘triumph over adversity’ (Barnes, 1997). An example includes ‘How Disney gave voice to a boy with autism’ (Saskia, 2016), published in *The Guardian*. Similarly, ‘Negative’ articles were often centralised around the perceived or subjective complications or perceived problems of living with an autistic child, underlining a medical model framework, or about parents, carers or family that could not cope and abandoned or injured their autistic child. For example, see ‘Autistic’s Anguish’ (Miller, 2017), published in *The Sun*.



	December 2016	January 2017	February 2017
The Guardian	3	2	5
The Sun	4	6	7
Daily Mail	1	1	2
Total	8	9	14

Fig. 1 Number of articles accessed per newspaper.



	December 2016		January 2017		February 2017	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
The Guardian	2	1	1	1	1	3
The Sun	1	3	1	5	2	5
Daily Mail	0	1	0	1	1	1
Total	3	5	2	7	4	9

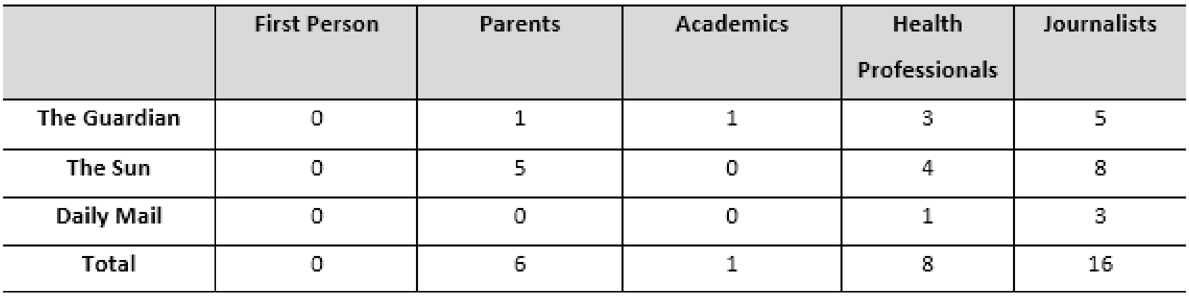
Fig.2 Number of articles coded as being ‘positive’ or ‘negative’.

3.1 Absent voices

The voice of autistic people within media coverage is predominantly silenced and overlooked with newspaper articles under-representing autistic people by primarily focusing on second-hand accounts of autism as a perceived deficit or medical condition. For example:

> People would see me as being the problem… I began to seek a medical diagnosis.
> (Hill, 2017, The Guardian Online)

The analysis found that news or media coverage generally stemmed from the perspectives or viewpoints of academics, journalists, parents and health care or medical professionals (Fig. 3), rather from autistic people themselves. This approach not only centralises a medical model binary but also fails to recognise the complexity and diversity, or personal experience, of an individual’s personality and character (Hyun, 2012). Similarly, the evaluation unexpectedly highlighted a binary juxtaposition where autistic adults were rarely referred to, therefore presenting autism as a medical condition primarily affecting children. This media preference reinforces a symbolic annihilation, or under-representation, of minority groups, where autistic people, and people with perceived disabilities, are systematically excluded from mainstream media representation within significant cultural constructions, denying their status as equal humans and rendering them voiceless.



	First Person	Parents	Academics	Health Professionals	Journalists
The Guardian	0	1	1	3	5
The Sun	0	5	0	4	8
Daily Mail	0	0	0	1	3
Total	0	6	1	8	16

Fig. 3 Number of articles written from a particular perspective.

The concept of symbolic annihilation leads to a cultural preference (Hehir, 2010) that reflects and maintains the hegemonic control of powerful elite, or ableist members of society, suggesting that prejudice and discrimination is replicated and reproduced through the media. As a result, the opinions and attitudes of central or salient groups (those who are viewed as able-bodied) hold other marginalised groups (for example, disabled or autistic people) in subordination (Ho, 2004), where they are viewed as sub-human, reinforcing a prevalent cultural hierarchy which systematically ensures social injustices. It is this under-representation of autistic people's voice and expression within both media coverage and society that enables and facilitates the reiteration of negative stereotypes. It highlights a politics of resentment, a socio-cultural view of unequal power relations and predominant orthodoxy of social oppression underpinned by newsworthiness which prevents equal opportunity for independence and autonomy. This, in turn, suggests that newspapers and contemporary media converge systematically frame and structure autism in a way that captures and maintains a society's dominant attitudes and beliefs. For example:

> Believing [autism] restricted his development and contributed to his [social] isolation. (Baron, 2016, The Guardian Online)
>
> I threw myself into "curing" my son. (Demby, 2016, The Guardian Online)

These medicalised accounts of autism as a deficit, or insufficiency (Abrams and Hogg, 2011), fail to capture and reflect experience of autism and disability from the knowledge or perspective of an autistic or disabled person by taking an individualised perspective, instead focusing on disability as a personal misfortune. This focus fails to acknowledge the struggles and disabling barriers within society, highlighting autism as a medical or personal issue rather than a political or social one. As a result, the media supports the reproduction of inequalities within a society by providing a distorted cultural lens through which to examine autism, leading to the continual suppression and disempowerment (Swain et al, 2004) of autistic people, who then become stigmatised.

3.2 Autism as a burden

The media often portrays autism in a standardised and homogenised (Gold and Richards, 2012) way that fails to recognise and value human diversity. As a result, autistic people are often overlooked, depersonalised and reduced to one-dimensional characters which centralises the medical condition, or perceived impairment, reinforcing and creating prejudicial attitudinal barriers and resulting in social exclusion.

The analysis revealed underpinning dominant dualist discourses, previously discussed by Sinclair (1993), that portrayed autism as both an appendage, or an affiliation, of suffering and as autistic people being vulnerable and dependent. It is this categorisation process, or grouping of autistic people, which serves to systematically ignore each individual's uniqueness by reinforcing a lowered expectation. This in turn systematically undermines autistic people's personhood, centralising a standardised group who are identified solely by a medical condition, perceived as a neurological minority. For example:

> 'Owen had so many alarming behaviours… although luckily he was never violent or aggressive,' says Cornelia, 'I feared that he would never speak, that we would be taking care of him for his entire life.' (Baron, 2016, The Guardian Online)

> Devoted themselves to exploring every therapy on offer… The family assembled a team of specialists to support them and give advice. (Baron, 2016, The Guardian Online)

These discourses, disseminated in mainstream and contemporary media, also present a discriminatory dual stereotype (Rosenhan, 1973) of autistic people being either out of control, violent and aggressive individuals who trigger stress or trauma to their families and carers, perceived as an unsolicited burden (Dudley-Marling, 2004) to society, or as unhappy, unloved and poorly treated. For example:

> Autism makes him a difficult person to deal with. (Hill, 2016, The Guardian Online)

> When he was a child… I lived with this burden. (Baron, 2016, The Guardian Online)

Such labels replicated within the media serve to distinguish autistic people from the rest of society, encouraging and centralising a dilemma of difference, or false generalisation, that reflects dominant discriminatory ideologies within mainstream culture by suggesting that autistic people are victims of their condition, a reinforced negative social-emotional impact or affliction of suffering (Benson and Keyes, 2013). This systematic process of marginalisation and ostracism underpins the bi-directional, or reciprocal, nature of segregation and exclusion whereby individual and cultural perceptions of autistic people are impacted by a variety of external influences, or environmental systems, such as the media. The analysis therefore highlights how the media advocates for particular patronising ideals of autistic people in an attempt to validate and rationalise political and economic discrimination or social rejection.

This predominant crisis of misrepresentation of autistic people, based on notions of normality and collectively accepted values and beliefs, encourages social stigma and polarisation of a symbolic cultural order (Ellen, 2004), suggesting that multi-dimensional processes of isolation are driven by unequal power relationships which obscure the need for change. It is this fortified assumption and mistaken belief that autistic people are helpless (Gelh, 2010) and dependent, defined in terms of their perceived limitations, which demonstrates the dominance of ‘normative’ (Coogan and Mallet, 2013) medical notions of autism. As such, it is this cultural intolerance and prejudice which consequently assumes that autistic people want to be normal, indicative of how this dominance of the medical model is likely to encourage medical stereotypes as a problem waiting to be cured, where autistic people have to change to be accepted and valued within society.

3.3 Sensationalising, falsification and exploitation of a label

Centralising a misrepresentation framework, the analysis of the media coverage found that newspaper articles frequently alluded or referred to an individual’s perceived demonstration of particular traits or behaviours that could potentially be indicative of autism, despite the absence of a medical diagnosis. These negative misconceptions as highlighted by Cameron (2011) and Sullivan (2014), centre around a medical model binary and have the potential to perpetuate a distorted or biased reality, centralising a sensationalised, inaccurate and mistaken stereotype of autistic people based on false generalisations of a perceived disability. For example:

> He was unresponsive… we worried about his future. (Boseley, 2016, The Sun Online)
>
> Lack of empathy with other's emotions. (Pemberton, 2017, The Sun Online)

These limited portrayals of autism as medical deficit, where autistic people are predominantly portrayed in a standardised and homogenised way, fails to recognise human diversity placing autism within an umbrella term, or a single category of impairment. As a consequence, the socially constructed label of autism reinforces limited and dominant negative portrayals of autistic people. Consequently, it is this cultural construct of autism, reinforced within the media and upheld within contemporary culture and prejudicial social schemas, which serves as a scapegoat, used to validate (Cole, 2008, 2011) and justify behaviours that appear to deviate from socially constructed norms and expectations. For example:

> Autistic people struggle with social interaction. (Pemberton, 2017, The Sun Online)

Such derogatory terminology predominantly used within the media, and replicated within a society, reinforce an epidemic framework, or medical view, which fails to take into account individual experiences, viewing autism exclusively as a medical disorder. This stereotypical and discriminatory media framing highlights a hierarchy of preference where oppressive labels reinforced within society act as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Here, autistic people subconsciously internalise prejudiced labels and language used analytically to inculcate them as passive recipients, reinforcing an oppressive discourse that serves to exploit and marginalise them. In such instances autism, as a concept, is systematically and methodically portrayed as a commoditised (Terzi, 2010) impairment label and primarily transformed into a commercial enterprise (Snyder and Mitchell, 2005). This dominant capitalist binary is where the media, operating as a business, is predominantly run by able-bodied people, thus not considered to be disabled. Hence media coverage is primarily impairment-specific, targeting its resources at autistic or disabled people in order to fix or cure them, serving as an advocate for medical intervention. As a result, autism, as a socially constructed label, is exploited and manipulated for financial purposes, used as an exemplar within a capitalist market to justify segregation and exclusion. For example:

> Marketplace for autism treatment. (Mitchel, 2016, The Guardian Online)

> Early diagnosis and intervention is one of the major goals of autism research… we are on the brink of a new era in autism diagnostics. (Brock, 2017, The Guardian Online)
>
> The hope is for early intervention before the age of two. (Sample, 2017, The Guardian Online)

The depersonalising process where segregation is founded on irrelevant medical labels, suggests that it is has an economic base (Michael, 1990), a process grounded in misinformed representations of autistic people. This systematic process of oppression and segregation in turn underlines and upholds a hierarchal structure of unequal power relations by reinforcing a prejudiced cultural lens which shapes a society's perceptions of autistic people, where disability, discrimination and prejudice is systematically reproduced by the disability business. As a result, this marketisation process fails to recognise external barriers (Hodkinson, 2010) and oppressive social relationships within society, failing to recognise that autism, as a cultural concept, is not a possession or attribute of an individual but is, in fact, a different way of being which should be universally celebrated.

4. Conclusion

It is evident that the media has enormous cultural power, used as a communicative tool to uphold and reproduce hegemonic societal ideals and dominant cultural norms. This paper found that the media primarily promoted a leading binary that is primarily aligned with the medical or individualistic (Wendell, 2001) model of disability, an oppressive framework underpinned by prejudice and discriminatory terminology and language that both justifies and reinforces social stigma and marginalisation. As a result, autism was predominantly presented or stereotyped in a homogenised way that failed to both acknowledge and recognise human diversity and autistic people's rights within the neuro-diversity movement. This oppressive labelling process prevents interdependence and equality by continuously failing to recognise that autism, as a concept, is not a deficiency to be fixed or cured but in fact a difference to be respected and celebrated. It is evident within the research that this perpetual continuation of a medical and derogatory labelling process, replicated within the media, primarily uses and manipulates the autism marker as a scapegoat in order to validate or justify behaviours that appear to deviate from prevailing social norms and expectations.

In addition, the paper emphasises the dominance and repercussions of the medical model of disability within contemporary culture and wider society. It serves to reinforce negative cultural values and expectations through cultural representations such as media, labelling and normalcy. This negative reinforcement produces a negative social or scientific lens that ensures segregation and exclusion, preventing universal inclusion and equality. It is this prevailing concept of inequality, or cultural hierarchy of unequal power relations, based on a cultural dichotomy (Sullivan, 2011) surrounding notions of normality, which serves to reinforce disabling barriers underpinned and maintained by prejudice and ableist stereotypes within the media and society.

Autism, as a concept, is principally and systematically viewed by the media as inferior and helpless, perceived exclusively as a medical limitation or deficit, and therefore dependent or socially undesirable, resulting in perpetual societal hostility. Equally, it is this structured classification system which continuously problematises autism and disability through dominant cultural representations in the media, a prevailing prejudiced discourse supported and maintained by privileged social groups (Timmi and Radcliffe, 2005) such as medical professionals and the able-bodied. This results in incessant cultural discrimination, a lowered expectation within a systematic process that fails to take into account individual capabilities and choices of autistic and disabled people.

Equally, the enforced application of social ontology and emphasis on a social comparative discourse, or classification system, ensures the continuation of common culture within prevailing discriminatory societal hierarchies leading to the reproduction of the status quo. Therefore, autism, as a social concept or cultural label, is culturally employed and constructed as a source of exploitation rather than liberation, as it is used and employed to reproduce current social relationships.

In order to promote an egalitarian culture, a society needs to first challenge prevailing assumptions upon which dominant definitions of disability exist, and broaden perspectives on the experiences and voices of disabled and autistic people, weaving disabled people back into the fabric of society. A culture needs to allow for a social constructivist perspective which recognises the disability identity as a symbolic description of how individuals are perceived, treated and integrated within culture, viewing the norm of ability as arbitrary (Michael, 1990) and disability as inseparable from other forms of oppression. It is this recognition of disability as a socially constructed phenomenon which will aid in redefining disability in terms of a disabling environment and classification system, realigning disabled people as individuals with equal rights by enhancing awareness and understanding of the fabrication, misrepresentation and social production of disability within prevailing culture.

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