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As the term neurodivergence becomes more widely recognised, there has been growing scholarly interest in how it is understood by the public. As a site of informal learning, the media we consume plays a significant role in shaping these understandings (Happer & Philo, 2013). However, portrayals of neurodivergence across screen media remain limited, often relying on narrow or stereotypical depictions (Jones et al., 2023). To better understand the influence of these portrayals, this study examines audience responses to representations of neurodivergence within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The research examines portrayals of neurodivergence in screen media through the perspectives of both neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences from diverse backgrounds within Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. It investigates how audiences interpret existing representations, how these portrayals shape public understandings of neurodivergence, and how intersectional factors such as gender, age, and race influence the representation of neurodivergent individuals within media.

Using a qualitative design, the study comprised two focus groups – one with neurodivergent participants and one with neurotypical participants – supported by a pre-focus group survey to facilitate preparation and comparison. Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) within an interpretivist, social constructivist framework. My positionality as a late-diagnosed autistic woman further informed the analysis.

This presentation focuses on one of the study's central findings: the emergence of what I term the "savant vs. stupid" framework, a representational binary that positions neurodivergence at opposing extremes, and its contribution to "stereotype spillover," where repeated portrayals shape audience expectations of what neurodivergence "should" look like beyond the screen. Drawing on discussions from both focus groups, I examine the implications of audiences relying predominantly on global rather than local representations of neurodivergence, and consider how these findings can inform future portrayals that better reflect the diversity of neurodivergent experiences within Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords

Neurodivergence, Media representation, Audience interpretation, Screen media, Aotearoa New Zealand, Autism, Reflexive thematic analysis, Intersectionality

References

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