***Extraordinary Attorney Woo*:**

A study into perceived representation of autism by autistic women

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EXTRAORDINARY ATTORNEY WOO:

A STUDY INTO PERCEIVED REPRESENTATION OF AUTISM BY AUTISTIC WOMEN

ABSTRACT

The last decade has seen media productions increase the portrayals of autistic characters. While the increased visibility of autism has raised public awareness, shows and movies still lack sufficient representation of the diversity of the autism spectrum to be considered inclusive. In addition, autistic female characters are also scarce in media productions, thus resulting in feelings of exclusion among them, and impeding wider societal recognition of this community. Consequently, not many studies have investigated how autistic women perceive the representations of autism in media productions, along with the changes they would like to see to feel more represented. The present research aims at studying the perception autistic women have on autism representation in the Netflix series "Extraordinary Attorney Woo" in relation to other media productions. By exploring their diverse experiences and perspective, the study helps promote greater understanding and inclusion of women on the autism spectrum. This qualitative study was carried out by conducting 10 in-depth, semi-structure interviews with autistic women recruited via Reddit, between 20 to 39 years old and who could speak English. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Most of the participants shared a positive perception of autism representation in "Extraordinary Attorney Woo", empathizing how it openly portrayed autistic traits which reflected the interviewees' individual experiences. Moreover, the women interviewed expressed relief in seeing an autistic character in a healthy relationship with a neurotypical, contrary to stereotypical representations. Nonetheless, the participants shared a desire for more diverse portrayals of autistic characters, as well as variety in the genres in which they are depicted. This study builds on previous research on the portrayal of autism in media productions by investigating the perception that underrepresented autistic women have on such representations. It identifies the importance of diversity in the portrayal of autistic characters in order for the whole autistic community to feel represented, and increases understanding of autism within society. The positive perceptions reported for series which included autistic individuals in their casting or production highlights how the involvement of autistic individuals with lived experiences contributes to the authenticity and reception of these narratives.

KEYWORDS: *Autism, autism representation, media, female representation, Extraordinary Attorney Woo*

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1. Introduction

Over the past 10 years, media productions have seen a rise in representations of minority identities, in particular of autistic characters (Veltri, 2020). Given the diverse range of autism diagnosis and the large number of people within this community, achieving a perfect representation in the eye of all autistic individuals would be impossible. While it may be challenging to capture and reflect every autistic trait or personal experience, it is necessary for media to make earnest efforts to portray autism as comprehensive as possible (Prochnow, 2014). However, even though increased visibility of autism has raised public awareness, shows and movies still lack sufficient representation of the diversity within the spectrum to be considered inclusive (Prochnow, 2014). In fact, while recent studies have disproved a common belief whereby autism is considered as predominantly affecting males (Milner et *al.*, 2019), female representation in media remains superficial (Tharian et *al.*, 2019). If limited research has been conducted thus far to gather insight of autism representation and common stereotypes, even fewer studies have investigated how autistic women perceive the representation of autism in media productions (Treweek et *al.*, 2019). Therefore, the present research aims at investigating the representation and inclusion of autistic female characters in media productions, with focus on the Netflix series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Lee & Lee, 2022 – present), as perceived by autistic women themselves.

Belcher and Maich (2014) explain how visual representations of disabilities in media have greater influence on the general public's perception of disabilities than research itself. Moreover, studies have indicated that media portrayals of disability play a crucial role in shaping and preserving the identity of the disability community (Haller et *al.*, 2006). Given that media often relies on stereotypes, these narratives result in a limited portrayal of autism which reinforces stigmas and misconceptions. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand how autistic individuals actually perceive these narratives, and which alternative storylines they believe could challenge prevailing social norms. The emerging era of online video platforms such as Netflix, offers a valuable avenue for presenting alternative representations of autism (Ellis et *al.*, 2019), influencing and leading a societal transition towards a more inclusive environment which embraces and accommodates individuals with autism.

Netflix, market leader in the Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) industry (Rataul et *al.*, 2018), streams and produces several TV shows and movies which portray autism, with varying levels of accuracy and sensitivity. Although some of these productions, like *HeartBreak High* (Heaton et *al.*, 2022 – present), attempted to inclusively represent the experiences of people with autism and raise awareness (Dempsey, 2022), others have been subject to criticism for enforcing

stereotypes, such as the first season of *Atypical* (Rashid, 2017 – 2021) portraying an autistic character as a burden or object of pity (Martin, 2020).

Netflix's lates series portraying an autistic character is the Korean drama *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Attorney Woo Young-woo, played by non-autistic actress Park Eun-bin, is an autistic savant who is hired by Hanbada law firm after six months of struggling for employment due to her autism. Articles and reviews from autistic writers have highlighted positive differences in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* from previous shows, along with strides forward in the media production that allow autistic people to identify with neurodivergent characters in the Korean drama (Moss, 2022; Perlman, 2023). Others, however, have highlighted how the show fails to challenge the underlying system that generates ableist attitudes, thus perpetuating them through the portrayal of related issues (Bunting, 2022; Visser, 2022). Indeed, while ableism permeates Western societies, the stigma surrounding autism is notably more pronounced in Korea, as societal normalcy traditionally holds great importance (Kim et *al*., 2022).

1.1 Research Question and Aim

Over the past 30 years, numerous content analyses have exposed the problematic representation of disabled people and their issues in the media (Zhang & Haller, 2013). Nonetheless, only a limited number of researchers have actively sought the perspectives of autistic individuals, and in particular women, regarding the depiction of the community in movies or series. Therefore, the present study will investigate women's perspective on autism representation guided by the following research question:

How do autistic women perceive the representation of autism in the Netflix series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* in relation to other media productions?
The research will adopt the perspective of autistic women with the objective of exploring their interpretation and evaluation of autism representation within the Korean drama *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, relating it to different media productions. The theoretical frameworks of neurodiversity (Jurgens, 2020; Ortega, 2009), along with ableism and media representation (Campbell, 2009; Ellis, 2019; Robledo et *al*., 2012) are integral to the analysis, providing a theoretical basis for understanding and interpreting the participants perceptions.

In light of these concepts, the study introduces the following three sub-questions to facilitate the investigation of the main research question. The first two sub-question, "*How is autism perceived by autistic people in "Extraordinary Attorney Woo" in relation to other Netflix productions?*" and "*How do autistic women perceive ableism in "Extraordinary Attorney Woo"?*", explore autism representation in the recent Korean series, while comparing it to other

movies and series. These sub-questions seek to explore the perspective of autistic women regarding Netflix's depiction of autism in this recent drama, along with analysing whether it perpetuated harmful ableist attitudes.

The third sub-question, "*What would autistic people like to see in future media productions in order to feel more represented?*", is based on the concept of media representation. It is imperative to gain insight into the participants wishes for future representations of autism, given the limited number of studies examining their point of view (Robledo et *al*., 2012). Therefore, this research aims at comprehending autistic women's opinions to foster better representations which cater their needs and the diversity of the autistic community.

1.2 Scientific and Social Relevance

While the increasing prevalence of autism diagnosis has corresponded with a rise in the depiction of autism in the film industry, representations do not showcase a broad range of narratives and experiences (Matthews, 2017). In fact, the portrayal of various disabilities often diverges significantly from the lived experiences of disabled people, as they establish enduring stereotypes that influence society's perception of the disability community (Murray, 2008, as cited in Osteen, 2007). Individuals within the disability community have consistently voiced the need for greater representation of diverse and well-rounded characters, which has not yet been achieved (Zhang & Haller, 2013) as they are predominantly portrayed as heterosexual, western males reinforcing stereotypical "masculine" traits (Matthews, 2017). The lack of diversity in autism representation also reflects in academic research examining portrayals of autism in media. Numerous studies have indicated that the gender gap in autism diagnosis is not as pronounced as previously assumed (Tharian et *al*., 2019); however, underrepresentation of females in these studies remains a significant concern. Although a few studies have explored the perspective of autistic females in regard to their experience and relationships (Milner et *al*., 2019; Sedgewick et *al*., 2019), they did not investigate their views on autism representation in media and the changes they would like to see in order to feel more represented.

Thus, academically, the present research aims at contributing to the current literature on autism representation, advancing the comprehension on the perspective of autistic women on the topic. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no prior studies have examined autistic women's perspective on autism in the show *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, making this study the first of its kind in this area of research.

In terms of social relevance, the research could help understand how to better include women

with autism in media industries, as they play a significant role in shaping societal views on disability and promoting more inclusive and inclusive representation (Zhang & Haller, 2013). As a matter of fact, Tharian et *al*. (2019), illustrates how the scarce representation of autistic women might result in feelings of exclusion among them, perpetuating their marginalization and impeding wider societal recognition of this community. Therefore, exploring the perspective of autistic women on autism representation can offer valuable insight to enhance social awareness, foster better comprehension and sense of inclusion among this underrecognized group.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This section presents the organizational structure of the thesis, to cover the research topic and offer methodological and theoretical explanations addressing the research question.

The theoretical framework of the study is defined in the second chapter. It begins by providing an introduction to autism, exploring its evolving reception over time, and highlighting the role of the neurodiversity movement in driving a shift in the mainstream perception of autism. Then, it will discuss the concept of media representation of disabilities, calling attention on autism representation and the ableist behaviours often perpetuated with it. Finally, the chapter will focus on Netflix's representation of autism in current series, delving into the perspective of autistic audiences regarding these and other portrayals.

The third chapter illustrates the methodology employed in the study. It clarifies the rationale behind adopting a qualitative approach and extensively discusses the data collection process through interviews. Furthermore, it establishes the connection between the theoretical framework and the chosen methodology by presenting the operationalization of the research. Lastly, the research presents the quality of the research and reflects on its related credibility and ethics.

Chapter four carries out the discussion of the findings. This chapter is divided in four subsections based on the emerging themes identified during the analysis: Autism Within Women, Understanding Ableism, Examining Autism Representation, Request for Future Representations. Each theme is discussed by incorporating excerpts of the interviews and complementing them with relevant literature. The final chapter of the thesis outlines the main findings and addresses the research question, along with pointing out the theoretical and social implications of the research. To conclude, it acknowledges the limitations of the study and provides suggestions for future research proceeding from these limitations.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to examine how autistic women perceive *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*'s autism representation in relation to other media productions, the following chapter will introduce what autism is and how its reception has changed throughout the years, from a strictly medical point of view to a more social perspective. It will then explain how our neurotypical society creates barriers for the neurodivergent, and how the neurodiversity movement is leading the shift in mainstream awareness of autism. To research perceptions of autism in media, it is fundamental to understand the evolution of disability and autism representation and recognize the significance of media portrayals in fostering societal connections with the autistic community. Closer attention will then be given to Netflix's representation of autism in current series, and how autistic people perceived them. Lastly, the chapter will illustrate previous studies which have researched autism representation from the point of view of autistic audiences.

2.1 Autism

Throughout history, disability has allowed to condone inequality and discrimination towards disabled people (Baynton, 1997, as cited in Dolmage, 2014). For instance, law and practices from the beginning of the 20th century in the United States restricted immigrations of disabled people from southern and Eastern Europe to the United States, since their image stood out from the standard norms constructed by society. As illustrated by Davis (2017), disability is a complex phenomenon as well as a social construct, generated by cultural values, expectations and attitudes. It is therefore influenced by economic, political and social factors, resulting in the exclusions of disabled people from these three dimensions of society, subjecting them to discrimination. Similarly, Hall (1997) points out how cultural representations, such as literature and media, control social practices, impacting our behaviours and producing tangible outcomes. Consequently, it is important to understand how autism and its different views are nowadays conceptualized. As there is no one-size-fits-all approach to representing autism (Veltri, 2020), comprehending these diverse views can impact how autism is seen in society. The stereotypes generated by the lack of understanding of certain aspects of autism can be reimagined to represent the diversity of experiences within the autistic community.

Medically, autism is defined by the 5th version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM) presented by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) (2013), and by the 11th version of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) written by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2019). The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) defines autism as a condition characterized by difficulties in communication and social interactions, as well as the presence of

restricted patterns of behaviour and interests. Moreover, it combines the mild form of autism, known as Asperger Syndrome (AS), with Pervasive Developmental Disorder and the older distinction Autistic Disorder all along the single Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The spectrum, also adopted by the ICD-11 (WHO, 2019), reflects how each individual with autism is unique due to variations in the severity of the impairments.

Although the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) does consider the environment as part of what defines ASD, the medical understanding of autism as a disability suggests that disabilities have a physical cause and therefore, can and should be cured or managed. Within this view, autistic people are mostly reflected as weak and dependent on others for help (Kenny et *al*., 2016). Consequently, the medical model has received criticism for emphasizing limitations that autistic people may have rather than their abilities (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). Scholars and advocates of disability rights challenge this model of disability, framing autism within a socially inclusive perspective (Kenny et *al*., 2016).

The field of disability studies, emerged in the middle of the 20th century, addresses the need to change the idea that people with disabilities can only be defined by them, as these are neither a flaw nor a deficiency that requires correction (Dolmage, 2014). It criticizes the portrayal of disability that conforms to the hegemony of normalcy, which sees disabled people as deserving pity or charity, or as something to be hidden, overcome, or compensated for (Dolmage, 2014). Conscious of the fact that there are various disabilities, diverse communities of disabled people and many perspectives; disability studies offer an aligned viewpoint on disability: that those with disability share an understanding of the experience of prejudice and oppression, along with the effort to attain physical and intellectual accessibility whilst fighting for more positive depictions of disability (Dolmage, 2014).

Issued by disability advocates during the 1980's and 1990's in the United Kingdom, the social model opened the conversation on how society oppressed people with disabilities (Dolmage, 2014). To begin with, the social model differentiates between impairment and disability: the former refers to a medical condition that results in disability, whereas the latter occurs when an individual with an impairment interacts with barriers in the physical, attitudinal, communication and social environment (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). In other terms, impairment can be viewed as a physical limitation, whereas disability can be created by the environment, resulting in social exclusion. Consequently, the social model argues that disabilities are also caused by the way society is structured with the lack of accommodations and support provided to disabled individuals, thus affecting them from equally participating in society (Kwari, 2021). Accordingly, the moral obligation falls on society to alleviate the barriers imposed and facilitate

the inclusion and engagement of people with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2006, as cited in Davis, 2017). Indeed, being able to participate in society can build on the pride and self-esteem of disabled people, while constructing a positive sense of shared identity (Shakespeare, 2006, as cited in Davis, 2017).

Along with the social model, the 1990's saw the emergence of the neurodiversity movement, which promoted a shift from the psychoanalytical approach towards an understanding of autism that is focused on neurobiology and genetics (Ortega, 2009). As such, it challenges the traditional idea that disabilities are problems to be fixed or overcome, and instead emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive and accommodating environments for all individuals. It asserts that neurological differences, such as autism, should be recognized and valued as a normal aspect of human diversity, rather than being pathologized as medical conditions (Ortega, 2009). Singer (1999), who introduced the term 'neurodiversity', argues that certain characteristics often classified as illnesses are actually just atypical or "neurodivergent," meaning they stem from a particular neurological wiring. Therefore, autism is seen as a human difference that should be respected like any other difference, equally to sex, race and culture (Ortega, 2009). The neurodiversity movement acknowledges the difficulties faced by autistic individuals but argues that many of these difficulties could be overcome in a more inclusive environment, which is currently designed by and for neurotypicals (Ortega, 2009).

In addition to perpetuating exclusion towards the disabled community, modern society drives the population to conform to certain standards (Davis, 2017). As a result, the power of the norm dictates that individuals whose bodies or behaviours do not conform to the idealized standard are labelled as deviant, rather than accepting that not everyone can meet this generalized ideal. Furthermore, this hegemony of normalcy is endorsed in public spaces, such as media and literature, reinforcing the image of what can be considered normal and abnormal (Davis, 2017). Thus, cultural productions perpetuate the idea and implication of the hegemony of normalcy, as it affects both the content of cultural products and the ways in which they are created and distributed. In this context, autism is often viewed through the lens of this hegemonic discourses, comparing it to what is contemplated as ordinary behaviour, and stigmatizing autistic people for not reflecting this norm (Dolmage, 2014). Consequently, autism is perceived as a deviation from the so-called "neurotypical" or normal patterns of development and functioning. Nonetheless, media creators can challenge these dominant values, expanding the perspectives represented in cultural products and eradicating these harmful patterns of discrimination and exclusion.

As discussed, our society predominantly accommodates neurotypical individuals since the structures of societal institutions are geared towards catering for their needs (Jurgens, 2020).

Fenton and Krahn (2007) explain how social institutions tend to establish a social hierarchy, whether consciously or unconsciously, in which the interest and needs of individuals are prioritized according to what is considered appropriate cognitive functioning. The neurodiversity movement challenges this social hierarchy by highlighting the needs and interests of minorities which should be met, along with recognizing how contemporary social practices and interaction with institutions can have harmful impacts on neurodivergent individuals. While autistic people can have difficulties when taking part in neurotypical practices, due to sensory differences towards lights, sounds, smells, and touch (Milton, 2012, as cited in Jurgens, 2020), also neurotypical individuals have trouble with recognizing and acknowledging common practices of autistic people. For instance, self-stimulatory practices which autistic individuals use to accustom to changing surroundings, such as finger-snapping and repetitive vocalizations, are not well understood by neurotypicals during social interactions. The lack of appropriate response and awareness can lead to negative views of these practices by society, making interactions even more problematic (Jurgens, 2020). By raising awareness among neurotypicals about the significance of autistic behaviours, harmful responses could be prevented, and autistic individuals would be better accommodated in neurotypical institutions (Jurgens, 2020).

Thereupon, understanding how autistic women experience autism within our society allows to better translate their perceptions on autism representation. Comprehending the diverse experiences within the spectrum, scarce in current narratives, could lead to the creation of nuanced portrayals which reflect a more inclusive and destigmatized environment for the autistic community.

2.2 Autism Representation

Culture can be defined as a process made up of a set of practices; these practices construct and exchange cultural meanings within societies (Hall, 1997). As such, cultural meanings extend beyond being purely subjective, producing practical and tangible outcomes in communal practices along with shaping our behaviour. Nowadays, cultural meanings are created by a diverse range of languages, utilizing mass media and sophisticated technologies to facilitate their circulations between various cultures. Stuart Hall (1997) refers to these as the 'systems of representation' (p. 4), in which written language communicates through words, spoken language through sounds, but also televisions convey meanings through dots on a screen produced digitally or electronically. In this context, representation is viewed as a secondary process which succeeds in the creation and establishment of a meaning. Consequently, representation relates language and meaning to culture: it can be seen as the product of complex social, cultural, and

political processes that shape how the world is perceived and understood. Hall (1997) argues that representation is never impartial, as it is influenced by the viewpoints of its creators: it shapes and controls cultural categories, including race, sex, and class. Therefore, he emphasizes the importance in acknowledging and contesting dominant representations which carry unequal power dynamics. The link between representations and cultural perceptions takes form in the relationship between the image portrayed and the responses of the audience (Hall, 1997).

A prevailing narrative used to represent disabilities in Western societies is ableism (Campbell, 2009). The disability rights movement developed the term ableism to describe the concepts, customs and social relations that presuppose and value able-bodiedness, thus marginalizing people with disabilities (Chouinard, 1997, as cited in Nario-Redmond, 2020). Viewed as an unconscious process of prejudice and discrimination regarding people with either physical or mental impairments, ableism generates the negative impression society tends to have toward disabled people (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Ableism can have repercussions on multiple aspects, impacting people's self-perception, interpersonal relation, and intergroup interaction. This is because it affects emotions and behavioural practices, along with cognitive stereotypes which go above mere negativity. Campbell (2009) outlines how ableism is characterized by the concept of norm and the enforcement of an institutionalized separation between a conformed form of humanity and those who deviate from it, rendering them an inconceivable, quasi-human or even non-human form. Indeed, normative culture uses a logic of negation to establish what is not to be considered normal, while at the same time enforcing conformity within its norms (Dolmage, 2014). Therefore, the concept of difference cannot exist without ableism. Coleman-Brown (1986, as cited in Ainlay et al. 2013) explains how the institutionalized division of human differences also conceives stigmas. A stigma refers to a characteristic which sets an individual apart from others within a particular social category, resulting in the stigmatized person being viewed as flawed or having a lower status (Goffman, 1997, as cited in Davis, 2017). This portrayal of stigma highlights how any human distinction can be subjected to stigma: one social context may welcome a difference, whereas another may see it as unwanted thus labelling it as a stigma (Coleman-Brown, 1986, as cited in Davis, 2017). Furthermore, this perspective of stigma underlines how a dominant group can determine which human distinctions are desirable and which are undesirable (Coleman-Brown, 1986, as cited in Davis, 2017). The concept of stigma within the relationship between disability and television identifies three key areas of interest: the inclusion of disabled people in the dynamic and often closed off media workforce labour market, stereotypical portrayals of disability in movies and series, and the potential influence of cultural accessibility in creating a more inclusive television context through participation and narration

(Ellis, 2019). As previously illustrated, media has long been criticized for representing, through its global reach and influence, a medical model of autism, framing it as something excluded from the boundaries of normality, thus perpetuating and reinforcing stigmatization and ableism (Ellis, 2019).

Consequently, Hall's (1997) concept of representation demonstrates Davis' (2017) understanding of how normalcy is enforced through a wide range of social and cultural practices which maintain a limited representation of disability. As such, representation of disability and autism can either strengthen existing stereotypes and stigmas or counter these views by challenging dominant norms. Examining the perceptions autistic women have on autism representation can help apprehend how these portrayals contribute to uphold the normalization of certain beliefs and behaviours towards the female autistic community, and how to contest these views by fostering inclusivity and reflecting more diverse experiences.

One of the broad ways in which representations are promoted in society is through television. Within our contemporary society, television is much more than an object in our homes: it is our computers, tablets and smartphones, or even images projected on a surface. Television, as a primary medium of communication on large scale, refers also to targeted content created for niche audiences which challenges the traditional content created for mass audiences. Through the representation of disability on broadcasting, television has also marginalized individuals with disabilities (Goggin & Newell, 2003, as cited in Ellis, 2019). Indeed, inadequate or limited representations in media, including film and series, can have negative impacts on societal norms, thus preserving social and political inequalities (Fürsich, 2010). Television frequently portrays individuals with disabilities in stereotypical manners to emphasize the medical model that promotes disability as something that requires a cure, rather than the more contemporary social and cultural models of disability. These common representations are criticized by disability studies, urging more positive portrayals which leave behind the stereotypical tropes (Dolmage, 2014). Undoubtedly, identifying a common experience of disability is not possible, as embodiment and social disablement are experienced differently by individuals with diverse impairments (Murray, 2008, as cited in Osteen, 2007). The movie industry though, has maintained numerous stereotypes throughout the years which have become the mainstream perception society has of disabled people, while also making it difficult for individuals with disabilities to have their own self-perception on screen. Although depictions of disability can generate negative effects on viewers, they can also provide a chance for self-reflection and bring to light the implicit assumptions regarding embodied differences, offering an opportunity to challenge and alter those assumptions (Ellis et *al*., 2019). As the broadcasting model is

frequently characterized as catering to the 'lowest common denominator' (Chae & Flores, 1998, p. 42), leading to a bias towards the interests of minority groups, the advent of the widely available broadband allows for a shift in television toward a limitless array of choices (Chae & Flores, 1998). As a result, producers are now more willing to take risks and invest in tailored programs to appeal to niche. Online video can therefore provide alternative representations of disability, rewriting and expanding existing approaches to disability representation on television (Ellis et *al*., 2019).

The last decades have seen a significant increase in the number of individuals diagnosed with autism, as the expansion of the diagnostic criteria with the implementation of the autistic spectrum allows to recognize the diversity in behaviours along the spectrum (Singh, 2014). The growth in diagnosis reflected in the film industry increasing portrayals of autism, potentially offering the space to represent diverse narratives. The representation of autism, however, has generally been reinterpreted through the lenses of the mainstream, able-bodied storytelling (Murray, 2008, as cited in Osteen, 2007). Barnes (1992) suggests that the stereotypes represented derive from the misinformation on the disabled community, giving into the belief that media can be seen as responsible for causing the social disablement of individual with impairments.

Certainly, a series of traditional tropes seem to have saturated all the possible representations autistic people could have on the big screen, even though as we have seen each individual experiences autism in its own way. Dolmage (2014) and Barnes (1992) offer an exhaustive description of the portrayed stereotypes of disabled characters in media productions. Throughout history, people with disabilities have been categorized by the medical model, ranked and evaluated based on how much they differ from the established norms, thereby representing disability as a pathology. This portrayal is often accompanied by medical definitions and commentary within the scientific discourse, casting disability as a personal deficiency which needs to be cured. Barnes (1992) presents how the disabled person is often seen as a burden, perpetuating the idea that disabled people are incapable and dependent on non-disabled people for care. However, this stereotype overlooks the fact that with the right support, disabled people can attain the same level of independence and self-sufficiency as everyone else. The author also argues that, for as long as this portrayal exists, also the idea that the needs of disabled people present a drain to society will remain (Barnes, 1992). Moreover, disabled individuals are also depicted as incapable of fully participating in community life by, for instance, being workers or parents, thus reinforcing the notion that disabled individuals should be separated from the rest of society (Barnes, 1992). These depictions can be viewed alongside media stereotypes illustrated by Prochnow (2014), which are specific to autism. One of the most frequent tropes of autism

sees the autistic characters presenting savant skills, as being genius, even though the vast majority of autistic people are not savant (Murray, 2008, as cited in Osteen, 2007). This misconception can be detrimental to the average person with autism, as having such high expectations could lead to potentially harmful behaviours toward them (Draaisma, 2009). The savant stereotype can also be understood as the 'super crip' who displays some unique abilities which overcompensate the impairment; this stereotype allows the audience to focus on and celebrate the person's talent and not the disability (Dolmage, 2014). To continue, media represents autistic characters as different and quirky individuals, labelling them as abnormal not due to their medical diagnosis but because of their personality and behaviour. While they may exhibit symptoms of autism, they tend to fit better within society as they embrace their unique traits, not viewing them as a disorder but as part of themselves (Prochnow, 2014). Beside the autistic characters that are explicitly labelled as such in mainstream media, there are also characters who exhibit autism traits without an official label; as such, these undiagnosed characters may display behaviours that align with the DSM-5 criteria, yet their autistic traits are either unnoticed or emphasized without a label (Prochnow, 2014).

A final portrayal of autistic characters, which has a limited presence in media, is known as the 'realistic portrayal' and it closely adheres to the criteria specified in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Within this representation, characters are not exaggerated or subdued in their display of symptoms, in neither an overly positive nor negative light. Instead, their behaviours align with those associated with autism, while also including additional characteristic to make the personas more unique and realistic (Prochnow, 2014).

One issue that often is discussed when analysing media's representation of autism is the absence of autistic actors portraying characters with autism, as casting non-autistic actors in these roles can lead to questionable or even derogatory representations of autism (Prochnow, 2014). Although disability and autism representation in movies and TV shows may not be flawless, the inclusion of disabled actors in casting, as well hiring disabled writers, consultants and members of the production team, can steer these productions toward a more genuine and representative portrayal (Ellis et *al*., 2019). In fact, Barnes (1992) argues that disabled actors should be casted to portray disabled characters in all forms of media representation, whenever possible, in addition to ensuring the diversity of disabled people in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender and sexual orientation.

In relation to the diversity in gender representation, autism has been predominantly associated with males, and studies investigating autism exhibited a gender bias with most of the research population being predominantly male (Tharian et *al*., 2019). Despite extensive autism

research suggesting that the gender gap in autism is not significant as previously believed, the underrepresentation of females in these studies remains a critical issue (Tharian et *al*., 2019). This exclusion could isolate and marginalize autistic women and girls, perpetuating the lack of awareness and understanding of this group, especially if this division extends to the already challenging media representation of autism. Tharian et *al*. (2019), analysing the representation of autistic women and girls in fiction, illustrated how Julia, an autistic character in the educational American series *Sesame Street* (Connell et *al*., 1969 – present), was positively portrayed. Being described as someone who "does things differently, in a Julia sort of way" (Sesame Street, 2018), Julia's character emphasizes that children with autism may have different behaviours than other, while promoting understanding and acceptance. Indeed, the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development (2017) illustrated how she was able to improve public perception of autism and decrease stigma, also in other countries of broadcasting, such as Pakistan, which still have a culture that conceals autism in children. In relation to the context in which *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* was created, recent studies suggest that the high cultural tightness and enforcement of societal norms in South Korea led to more explicit stigma towards autism than in other countries (Kim et *al*., 2022). Nevertheless, a generational shift has been identified, as younger Koreans are demonstrating a greater tendency to hold positive implicit behaviours towards people with autism (Kim et *al*., 2022).

Overall, as people with disabilities actively participate in media as subjects, audiences, consumers, and users, it is essential they gain a positive experience and feel they can identify with characters when consuming media productions. Therefore, understanding how autism representations are perceived by autistic women, and whether they observe a difference between autistic narratives on streaming platforms and in traditional TV, allows to uncover if this new era of television and online video presents itself as ideal to guide a societal shift towards a more inclusive environment for autistic and disabled people.

2.3 Autism Representation on Netflix

As streaming platforms in the past years have surpassed broadcast and cable in the United States, claiming over one-third of total TV time, Netflix is managing to maintain its position as market leader in the streaming business (Rataul et *al*., 2018). Streaming in over 190 countries and 30 languages, Netflix presents itself as a platform which could reassess and revisit disability representation in media on a global scale. Netflix's aim to present recent and updated representation of autism include *Atypical* (Rashid et *al*., 2017 – 2021) released in 2017, and *HeartBreak High* (Heaton et *al*., 2022 – present) released in 2022, both Netflix original shows.

Atypical (Rashid et *al*., 2017 – 2021) follows the story of Sam Gardner, played by non-autistic actor Keir Gilchrist. The first season faced criticism from autistic advocates who viewed the show as misrepresenting stereotypes and lacking in female diversity and participation from autistic actors (Rowe, 2017). As a result, the show's creators added autistic writer David Finch to the team and casted eight autistic actors from The Miracle Project to portray participants of a peer support group. Additionally, more women were hired as directors and writers to integrate voices from the autistic community, earning the show more positive reviews for its second season (Lee & Deng, 2020).

HeartBreak High (Heaton et *al*., 2022 – present) revolves around a group of high school students including Quinni Gallagher-Jones, portrayed by autistic actress Chloe Hayden. Hayden, who is also a disability rights activist, closely collaborated with the writers of the show to shape the character of Quinni, drawing on her personal experiences and perspectives (Adams, 2022). Moreover, Quinni's autism does not present the sole focus of her storyline as she delves into experiences related to dating, sex, and her queer identity (Secher, 2022). The presence of a character like Quinni, played by an autistic actress, on a global platform such as Netflix holds the potential to challenge stereotypes by offering an authentic representation for the women within the autistic community.

As previously mentioned, in both movies and series produced in the United States, autistic characters are frequently portrayed as white, male, young, heterosexual, and highly intelligent or academically successful (Veltri, 2020). Furthermore, when portraying people with ASD, there is a clear absence of autistic actors playing characters with autism (Prochnow, 2014). While Netflix recent shows have attempted to educate viewers on the language surrounding autism, terms like 'Asperger's disorder' used in *Atypical* (Rashid et *al*., 2017 – 2021) are no longer viewed as appropriate by autism advocates; it is important to recognize that the terminology and diagnostic labels in the field are constantly evolving and may become outdated. Autism representation in *HeartBreak High* (Heaton et *al*., 2022 – present) offers a departure from the prevailing patterns observed in media productions by showcasing a more diverse and inclusive perspective of autism. Therefore, these popular Netflix originals, by developing and improving throughout the seasons, can help teenagers and young adults better understand their autistic peers, reshaping the view of autistic and disabled people perpetuated on media.

Upon assessing Netflix's discourse on disability representation, the Inclusion in Netflix Original Report (Netflix, 2021) well presents the awareness the streaming platform has on its own limits and future aims. In fact, when evaluating Netflix productions from 2018 and 2019, only 5.3% of Netflix's stories were led by characters with a disability, including physical,

communicative, and cognitive disabilities (Netflix, 2021); if compared with the 27.2% of U.S population which identifies as disabled, Netflix's productions did not meet the criteria in representation. Moreover, disabled people were predominantly white and male, in accordance with Veltri's (2020) overview of autism representation, with very few characters with disabilities also being part of the LGBTQ community. As there has been minimal evidence of representation of LGBTQ individuals and people with disabilities in the entertainment industry, Netflix acknowledges that it is essential to keep developing authentic and inclusive representations that reflect all communities. In order to do so, Netflix recognized the need to hire storytellers from underrepresented communities for future productions, along with increasing diverse representation of people with disabilities (Netflix, 2021).

Analysing Netflix's past representations of autism and the steps they intend to take in future portrayals of disability allows to better understand the context in which the streaming platform created *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, providing a sound basis of comparison for the perception autistic women have on autism representation.

2.4 Audience responses to representation of disabilities

Media scholars have given limited attention towards exploring audiences' perceptions regarding narratives on disabled characters (Kama, 2004). Zhang and Haller (2013) explored how individuals with disabilities viewed media portrayal of their community. Their findings reiterated how disabled characters are often depicted as either superhuman or sub-humans, therefore rarely portrayed as ordinary individuals. Moreover, the study provided evidence that portraying people with disabilities as 'supercrips' elicits positive response (Zhang & Haller, 2013). Similarly, Kama's (2004) research with disabled people illustrated how, while the 'pitiful handicap' image was strongly rejected by disabled people who perceived it as negation of their identities and a means of excluding them from society, the 'supercrip' stereotype was positively noted. In fact, 'supercrip' characters were perceived as role models by the peopled interviewed, embodying the potential for disabled people to be normal. Opposing Barnes' (1992) illustration of these stereotypes as not well perceived by the disabled community, these studies highlight the complex dynamics in the cultural construction of disabled identities.

Research analysing autistic stereotypes in relation to media representations has rarely been conducted through the perception of autistic individuals, favouring instead neurotypical perspectives (Robledo et *al.*, 2012). For instance, Stern and Barnes (2019) demonstrated the perception and influence *The Good Doctor* (Shore et *al.,* 2017 – present) had on neurotypicals, which increased their desire to learn more about autism. Moreover, Audley (2020) conducted a

study analysing autistic representation in television through a survey which included people engaged with the autistic community and just 4.1% autistic individuals. The research proved how autistic individuals perceive autistic characters as inauthentic at a higher frequency than the other group, confirming how autistic portrayals are underrepresented in media. In addition, Jones et *al.* (2023) explored how accurate and educational *Atypical* (Rashid et *al.*, 2017 – 2021) was perceived by members of the autism community, including autistic people, along with relative parents and partners. The study reported how most of the participants, while finding the portrayal accurate, had concerns about stereotyping and lack of diversity. Aligning with Audley's (2020) survey, which depicted family and friends of the autistic community perceiving autistic characters as generally authentic, Jones et *al.* (2023) research shared how family members are more likely than autistic individuals to see educational benefits in *Atypical* (Rashid et *al.*, 2017 – 2021). However, both studies did not highlight the perception of only individuals with autism, nor the underrepresented female view. In a recent study, Milner et *al.* (2019) interviewed only autistic females, and a few of their mothers, between the age of 11 to 55 to better understand their experiences in society, and how these can impact various aspects of life. Nonetheless, the study did not question neither their view of autism representation in media, nor if they believe the possibility to identify with characters in movies and series could bring them positive impacts.

Consequently, researching autistic women's perspective on media representation of autism can help to improve knowledge about the experience autistic females face, breaking away from the male-centric bias in autism research.

2.5 Chapter Summary

The present chapter illustrated how understanding autism, along with its current place within society and media allows to better comprehend the perception autistic women may have on autism representation, specifically in relation to Netflix's recent show *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*.

Societal practices, still designed towards catering requirements of neurotypical individuals (Jurgens, 2020), often create barriers and perpetuate ableist attitudes toward people with disabilities (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). As these practices are constructed through cultural and media representations (Hall, 1997), there is an urgent need to investigate how representations are perceived by autistic individuals themselves, in order to comprehend their experiences and promote better engagement with the autistic community. Portrayals of autism have generally been filtered through the perspective of mainstream storytelling, centered around able-bodied experiences (Murray, 2008, as cited in Osteen, 2007). Indeed, the gender and narrative

stereotypes on autism stem from the misinformation of the disabled community (Barnes, 1992). Ellis (2019) described how media has long been criticized for its portrayals of disabilities as deviating from the norms of normality, herby perpetuating and strengthening stigmas and ableism. The streaming industry, in this new era of television and online video, offers the chance to revisit the perpetuated representations of autism by broadening the existing narratives used to represent disability (Ellis et *al.*, 2019) and shifting the hegemony of normalcy towards a more diverse portrayal of individuals with autism. Consistently to media's restricted representation of autism, literature has limited research exploring autistic audiences' perspective on their on-screen representations. As the lack of representation contributes to the marginalization of autistic women (Tharian et *al*., 2019), analysing how the female autistic community perceives *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*'s autism representation in relation to other shows is fundamental to comprehend if media productions, and potentially the streaming industry, are giving more space to a nuanced neurodivergent perspective.

Figure 2.1 visualizes how the concepts of neurodiversity, ableism and media representation explored in this chapter significantly overlap in the understanding of perceptions of autism representations. Indeed, when researching autistic women's perspective of autism portrayed in media, their neurodiverse perspective must be taken into consideration along with the influence this perspective and ableism have in media representations.

Figure 2.1

Connection of the Theoretical Framework Concepts
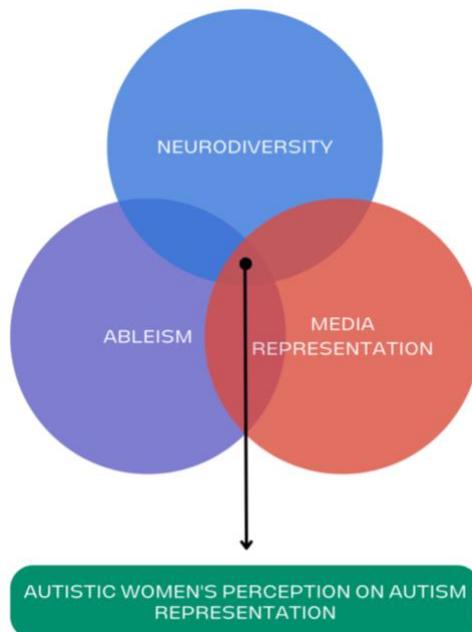
3. Method

The upcoming chapter will focus on the methodology employed in this study. Firstly, a detailed explanation will be provided regarding the chosen methodological choices. Secondly, the sample and the process of data collection will be discussed. Thirdly, the operationalization will be presented, followed by an outline of the thematic analysis process applied to the data. Lastly, the research methodology will be critically evaluated, and the ethical considerations of the study will be discussed.

3.1 Choice of Method

Qualitative analysis is a flexible and ideal method when comprehending meanings and experiences (Crowe et *al.*, 2015). It allows to discover subjective attitudes and social processes, providing a deep understanding of the perspectives and meanings of those being studied (Brennen, 2017). Moreover, qualitative research has been emphasized as crucial in exploring the experiences of individuals with autism, as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences (van Schalkwyk & Dewinter, 2020). This approach can be particularly valuable in shedding light on understudied topics such as perceptions of representation. Therefore, this research aims to explore the perspective of viewers in regard to autism representation, as personal experiences and subjectivity can lead to diverse interpretations of meaning depicted in the Korean show *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, as well as other media productions.

A qualitative approach carried out through interviews examined using thematic analysis could help promote greater understanding and inclusion of women on the autism spectrum by showcasing their diverse experiences and perspectives. Braun and Clarke (2006) illustrate how thematic analysis presents itself as a flexible tool to provide a detailed report of the data. In fact, thematic analysis allows to identify, examine and report patterns of meanings within the data, hence explaining and clarifying the significance of the patterns uncovered (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.2 Sampling & Data Collection

The data was gathered by means of 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with autistic women who have watched the Netflix series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. According to McGrath et *al*. (2019), qualitative interviews are particularly suitable for gathering data when the goal is to gain an understanding of an individual's subjective perspective on an experience, as opposed to producing generalizable findings about larger groups of people. Braun and Clarke

(2006) suggest that qualitative research can contest dominant narratives and highlight the voices of marginalized groups. Since qualitative research methods allow individuals to convey their experiences and perspectives using their own words, it can work to promote understanding and empathy towards individuals who may be excluded or marginalized in society. Qualitative interviews can therefore offer valuable insights into how autism, along with its representation in media, is perceived (Brennen, 2017). In addition, interviews can allow to uncover what changes autistic women would like to see in the industry to feel represented. Moreover, it could help understand how to better include people with autism in the media industries, as the media plays a significant role in shaping societal views on disability and promoting more inclusive and accurate representation (Zhang & Haller, 2013).

To find relevant participants, a non-probability sampling method was built based on criteria (Campbell et *al.*, 2020). Purposive sampling aims at selecting the participants of a study in order to increase the depth and understanding of the results, along with improving the accuracy of the data (Campbell et *al.*, 2020). Accordingly, it is often used for in-depth interviews as it allows for the selection of participants who can provide rich information and insights into the research topic. As the present study centres around women's perspective, purposive sampling was chosen as an adequate method to recruit female participants with particular characteristics.

For the present research, four criteria were considered when selecting the participants. To begin with, participants must have watched the series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* so that opinions on autistic behaviours and representations portrayed on the show can be discussed. Then, participants must be able to speak English in order to clearly communicate their thoughts and perspectives to the researcher. To continue, respondents must be autistic women, as the study focuses on understanding their female perspective on autism representation. The protagonist of the show is also an autistic woman, thus creating an opportunity for the participants to identify themselves with the experiences and behaviours portrayed by the protagonist. Moreover, autism is mistakenly believed to affect male more, as recent research indicates that the gender difference in prevalence may not be as large as previously thought (Milner et *al.*, 2019). This belief reflects in the lack of female representation present in media, hindering awareness and understanding of autistic women, and further marginalizing this group (Tharian et *al.*, 2019). As Treweek et *al.*, (2019) mention, not many studies have investigated how autistic women believe to be seen by others or asked them how they perceive the representation of autism in media productions. Thus, it is important to give space to their perspective on autism representation in the media. However, one participant who was assigned female at birth but now identifies as non-binary was also included in the study as they replied to the call asking for women participants. Bush's (2016)

study with the University of Massachusetts illustrates how a significant portion of the autistic community reports having a genderfluid identity. Thus, the inclusion of the non-binary participant in this study was warranted due to their unique perspective, capturing the diverse range of experiences within the studied population, and reflecting the complexity of gender identities experienced by autistic individuals. Lastly, participants must be 20 to 39 years old: the determined age range allows to understand how the younger generation of women on the autism spectrum, who as of now lacks representation (Tharian et *al.*, 2019), feels represented by in media. As the generation depicted in the show is of young adults starting on their career, 20 to 39 years old female interviewees might be more inclined to identify with the portrayed characters.

The majority of the participants in the study were sourced through Reddit. To recruit participants, a statement was shared on different communities outlining the research requirements (see Appendix A). The communities chosen either covered autism or Korean drama, such as r/AutsimWithinWomen, r/autism, r/KDRAMA and r/asiandrama, to increase the chances of finding women who fit the pre-set criteria.

The interviews took place from the 18th of April to the 13th of May 2023, and the interviewing process lasted between 45 and 88 minutes. All the interviews were conducted remotely via Google Meet, due to geographical distance. Having an international sample allows to explore potential differences in perceptions based on nationalities and customs and emphasizes the benefit of utilizing online interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Participants were asked to give their verbal approval to the consent form (see Appendix B) previously provided and agreed on being recorded. To ensure privacy, the researcher highlighted the anonymity of the interviewees before the interview. As not everyone might be open to discuss sensitive or personal experiences, participants were already informed on the general interview topics on the recruitment post.

The interviews were semi-structured, thus carried out following an interview guide with questions prepared in advance (see Appendix C). The interview guide ensured that the most relevant topics, which emerged from the theoretical framework, were covered during the data collection process and that the data itself could be comparable (Boeije, 2010). Nonetheless, it was important to remain flexible during the interview process, being open to follow-up questions or changes in the order of questions. This adaptability allows interviewees to provide more detailed and comprehensive answers, resulting in richer data (Boeije, 2010). At the beginning of the interview process, the researcher introduced the study by sharing her interest in it, which originated after watching the Korean series from a neurotypical perspective. This approach aimed to create a more friendly relationship with the participants and foster rapport. The purpose

of the research was then explained to the respondents, highlighting how their answers are for research purposes only. For the first five minutes, the participants were asked general questions about their age, their studies and/or occupations, and their place of residence. The interview was then divided into two main sections. The first part of the interviews explored the behaviours and opinions of the participants on media in general, to give context to their perspectives on autism representation in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* questioned in the second part. The data was subsequently examined through thematic analysis, as it allows to identify, analyse, and report patterns of meanings within the data, thus interpreting the significance of the patterns discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data analysis process was facilitated by transcribing the interviews using a software called Descript. In order to enhance the precision of the transcriptions, the researcher listened to the recordings again and rectified any errors found in the transcriptions. Detailed information about the participants is presented in Table 3.1, arranged in the order of the interviews conducted.

Table 3.1

Overview of the participants' demographics

Interviewees	Nationality	Age	Occupation
Participant 1	British	20	Unemployed
Participant 2	Canadian	39	PhD researcher
Participant 3	American	25	Accountant
Participant 4	Belgian	21	Student
Participant 5	British	33	Marketing
Participant 6	Dutch	21	Student
Participant 7	American	22	Teacher
Participant 8	Scottish	22	Furniture restorer

| Participant 9 | American | 26 | PhD researcher |
| Participant 10 | French | 29 | Art gallerist |

3.3 Operationalization of Interview Guide

The central aim of this study is to investigate how autistic women perceive the representation of autism on the Netflix series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* in relation to other media productions. In order to assist in addressing the main question of the thesis and provide structure to the study, three sub-questions were framed:

How is autism perceived by autistic people in "Extraordinary Attorney Woo" in relation to other Netflix productions?

This first sub-question is answered through the concepts of neurodiversity and media representation. Based on the theoretical framework presented, it can be observed that neurodiversity allows to better understand how autistic people may perceive differently media products created by neurotypicals (Ortega, 2009). Thus, broad questions addressing the participants personal view and experience with autism, along with their media consumption behaviours, aimed to comprehend the context in which they view autism representations. Moreover, as there have been few studies that have explored the perspectives of autistic women on autism representation and stereotypes (Robledo et *al.*, 2012), it is crucial to comprehend participants' perceptions of one of the first popular efforts towards representing autism in females, and to determine whether they perceive it as authentic and reflective of their own experience. Consequently, questions ranging from general thoughts of autism representation to perceptions of stereotypes, in both media productions overall and Netflix's *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* in particular, were asked to the participants. Addressing these two concepts combined refines the understanding of the perceptions of autistic women, along with how these can differ based on personal experiences and upbringings.

How do autistic women perceive ableism in "Extraordinary Attorney Woo"?

Even though research suggests that media productions are being influenced and expanded by subscription platforms (Ellis, 2019), a limited representation of disability, often accompanied by ableist behaviours, is still maintained and enforced by normalcy (Davis, 2017). Therefore, the concept of ableism is used to answer the second sub-question by asking the participants to share their personal experience with ableism along with their perception of ableist behaviours portrayed in media and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*.

What would autistic people like to see in future media productions in order to feel more represented?

 Veltri's (2020) analysis on the screen representation of autism illustrates how, despite an increase in autistic characters, many depictions are rigid and limit the full diversity of the autism spectrum. By discussing hopes for future portrayals of autism during the interview, the study aims at enriching the research field with ideas for new portrayals of autistic women in media productions which are currently lacking.

Figure 3.1 provides some examples of how these topics were translated into interview questions. It is important to acknowledge that due to the connection of the topics discussed in the interviews, it was not always feasible to clearly categorize the questions, resulting in some overlap between topics. Moreover, the follow-up questions, prompted by the participants' responses, occasionally transitioned the discussion from one topic to another, further complicating the classification of the topics.

Figure 3.1

Topics discussed on the interview guide.
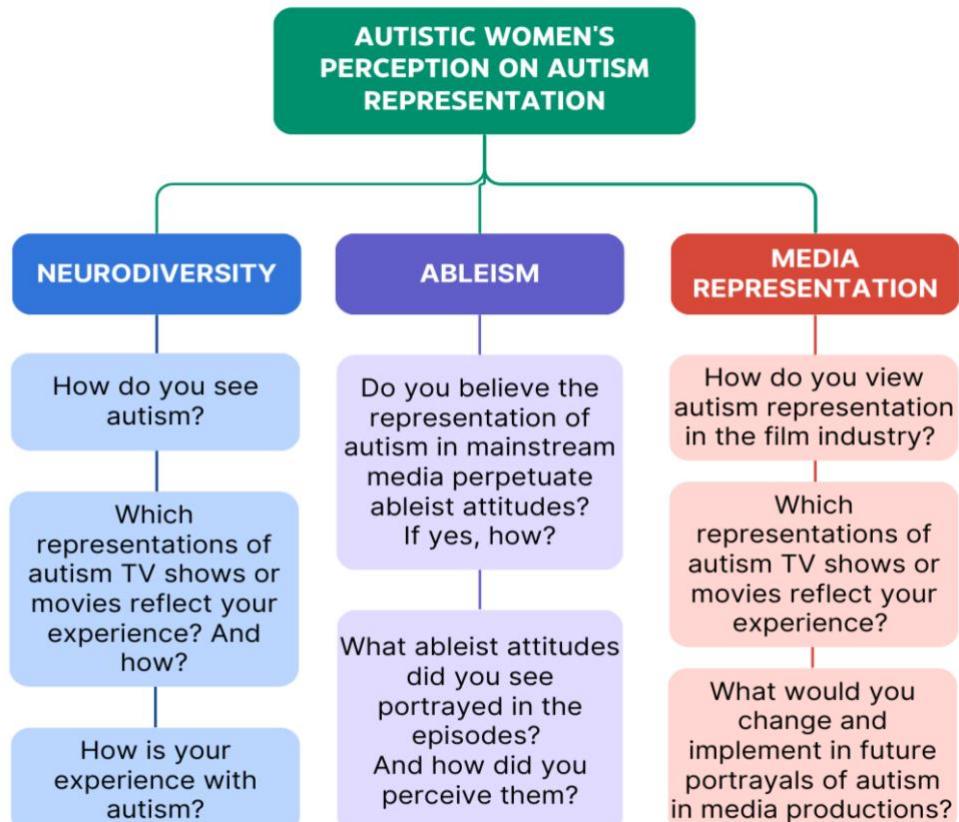
3.4 Data analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis is described by Boeije (2010) as a research method used to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meanings, referred to as themes, within qualitative data. The data analysed for the present study consists of interviews, which are audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The computer software Descript was used to facilitate the organization and analysis of data by transcribing the interviews conducted. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that the coding process begins with breaking down the data into segments and then reorganizing them to identify different themes. The analysis then progresses towards interpreting the meaning and importance of the patterns that emerge from the data. Thematic analysis supplies flexibility when analysing the data, allowing for different coding to be added if they come up during the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the analysis follows an inductive approach, meaning that the data guides the identification of themes (Patton, 1990, as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006). Theoretical sensitivity is also practiced, allowing the researched data to guide the interpretation of themes with the support of theoretical knowledge on the topic of autism and its representation in the media. Through the use of a thematic analysis, a method which provides a certain level of freedom, the present study uncovers previously undiscovered topics related to the perspective of autistic women on their media representation.

Following a step-by-step guide to thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest viewing the process of transcription as an ideal first approach to familiarize with the data: reading through the data at least once before coding could lead to the recognition of possible patterns. Therefore, the researcher thoroughly reviewed the interview transcripts by reading them over and listening to the audio recordings multiple times, along with taking notes while conducting this process to determine which fragments were relevant to answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These fragments were then named generating initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), before being compared. The next step involved categorizing the codes: after identifying which codes were more meaningful, they were merged into various themes. For instance, the comment 'I feel like stereotypes do play a big role into how people perceive autism' became 'influence stereotypes have on society'. Additionally, codes that were used only once were either combined with similar codes that were used more frequently or marked as irrelevant. Following these steps resulted in a coding scheme of 225 different codes. Once the main themes present in the transcript which depict the perception autistic women have on autism representation in the media were uncovered, the data was reassembled so that a comprehensive description of the different themes was possible. Lastly, Braun and Clarke (2006) propose to elaborate the patterns in order to interpret their meanings in relation to the research question;

therefore, the themes are described and interpreted with the help of existing literature.

After the analysis, a total of four main themes were identified (see Appendix D): Autism Within Women, Understanding Ableism, Examining Autism Representation, Request for Future Representations. These themes are identified as the primary findings of this study and will be elaborated in the results section of this thesis.

3.5 Credibility

Silverman (2011) illustrates how the concept of validity and reliability are essential when discussing the credibility of research. While validity refers to the degree to which the research findings inclusively represent the social phenomena being studied, reliability is described as the consistency of research findings over time and across different studies (Silverman, 2011). In qualitative research, reliability can be improved by systematic data collection and analysis methods, along with a transparent approach to data interpretation. A discussion on the chosen method used to carry out the present study, along with the description of the steps included in the process of data analysis, make the research process transparent increasing the reliability of the coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure the validity of a study, the researcher performed constant comparison between each cycle of data collection and analysis to describe the variations found. Even though remote interviewing might have resulted in a restricted perception of participants' body language and hindered the establishment of a deeper connection with them, it facilitated a diverse sample selection by eliminating geographical constraints. Regarding the research's methodological limitations, it should be acknowledged that environmental and researcher biases can influence data interpretation (Silverman, 2011). To minimize this risk, the researcher cross-referenced the findings with previous literature throughout the study (Silverman, 2011). In addition, it is important to note that the researcher cannot guarantee the generalizability of the study results to all autistic women. However, the study's objective is not to generalize the findings, but rather to implement the gap in existing literature on women's perspectives on autism representation.

When collecting data, ethics also must be considered. Ethical guidelines often classify individuals with disabilities, including those with autism, as a vulnerable group (Antunes, 2018). However, classifying autistic people as vulnerable often leads to a negative view of disabled individuals as less capable and dependent, enabling traditional stereotypes (Svalastog & Eriksson, 2010). Furthermore, Antunes and Dhoest (2019) argue that the vulnerable label given to autistic people does not reflect an inherent aspect of their identity, but rather the result of a discriminatory society that can be perpetuated through narrow academic standards. Challenging

this perspective on vulnerability offers the chance to increase inclusion and acceptance (Mackenzie, 2013).

  While not excluding autistic people from academic research, the researcher safe-guarded that only participants who are not under guardianship were included in the research. Moreover, their identity is kept anonymous by replacing the real names of the interviewees with numbers. Interviewees were also informed at the start of their interview about their rights to decline to answer or comment on particular questions, as the interview featured some questions about sensitive topics such as ableism. Taking into consideration that participants may not have fully comprehended the implications of academic publishing, any sensitive information and data collected during the interviews are kept anonymous. The American Anthropological Association (2012) guided the research during choices concerning ethical guidelines and upholding the participants well-being, rights, and dignity. Therefore, the researcher respected the participants' social, cultural, and personal beliefs and values, making sure to avoid stigmatizing or harming them through the research process.

4. Results

The analysis of the interviews generated four main themes: Autism Within Women, Understanding Ableism, Examining Autism Representation, and Request for Future Representations (see Table 4.1). The themes were analysed keeping the three sub-questions in mind. The themes looking into Autism Within Women and Understanding Autism Representation connect, providing insight to explore the first sub-question regarding autistic women's perception on autism representation in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. The second theme specifically addresses the second sub-question by examining the perception of ableism in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* among autistic women. The last theme answers the third sub-question, exploring the preferences and wishes of autistic women regarding future portrayal of autism in media productions.

Table 4.1

Overview of the themes and subthemes

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
AUTISM WITHIN WOMEN	Being neurodivergent
	Diversity within autism
	Understanding autism in women
UNDERSTANDING ABLEISM	Experiencing ableism
	Ableism in media
	Ableism in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*
UNDERSTANDING AUTISM REPRESENTATION	Perception of autism in media representations
	Autism representations outside and within Netflix
	Perception of autism representation in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*
REQUEST FOR FUTURE REPRESENTATIONS	Representing the diversity of the spectrum
	Representing diversity in the autistic community
	Representing diversity in the narrative

4.1 Autism Within Women

The present theme aims to explore the unique experiences autistic women have, and how their individual perspectives shape their perception of autism in media representation, to later support the answer of the first sub-question. By gaining insight into how women conceptualize autism through both medical and social models, it becomes possible to contextualize their interpretations of autism as depicted in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Accordingly, this analysis highlights the potential for diverse interpretations of autism representation within the Korean series compared to other Netflix productions, as they are influenced by the personal experiences of each woman on the spectrum.

4.1.1 Being neurodivergent

When describing their views and experiences with autism, the participants' replies reflected how each of them regard autism in different ways. Six people openly disclosed viewing autism as a disability, as they experienced "enough difficulties in autism to consider it a disability" (Participant 1). Nonetheless, three participants shared encountering positive outcomes in being diagnosed as autistic: they described it as "liberating" (Participant 2) from self-perceived deficits and feelings of inadequacy, as after the diagnosis "coping felt less like coping" (Participant 9). Participant 5 sums up how helpful and important recognizing autism in women, who are currently underdiagnosed (Tharian et *al.*, 2019), can be:

> It's very much an answer for a question I didn't know I had. I spent a lot of my life asking a question, "why don't I fit in? Why don't I understand the joke? Why can't I understand my friends' problems the way other people seem to?" […] And then when you do finally get an answer, you're like, "oh my God, has it always been that easy?" And you meet other autistic women and suddenly you no longer have these problems communicating.

Alternatively, three participants perceive autism in line with the neurodiversity movement, which recognizes certain traits as variations stemming from unique neurological wiring (Ortega, 2009). Therefore, autism is not viewed as something positive or negative, but rather "just something that is there in my daily life" (Participant 4). Participant 7 also well described how the discrimination and barriers faced in education and employment are "not effects of autism, but effects of a society catered to non-autistic". Indeed, the neurodiversity movement recognizes how these difficulties could be overcome in a more inclusive environment, presently constructed to accommodate neurotypicals (Ortega, 2009).

Half of the women interviewed expressed the challenges associated with autism, particularly in the context of personal and work relationships. Participant 2 expressed a sense of

frustration regarding the persistent need to demonstrate her abilities in her work environment, as her accomplishments often go unrecognized. This statement proves how the perpetuated representation in media of autistic people as incapable of participating in society can indeed influence real life (Barnes, 1992; Hall, 1997). Moreover, three participants emphasized their sensitivity to become overstimulated, whether due to environmental factors such as light and sound or even overwhelming physical sensations. Jurgens (2020) explained how these variations in sensitivities can also impact the social interactions of autistic people, as the sensory environment can make it more challenging to focus on general aspects of others' behaviours.

Despite these adversities, interviewees also pointed out positive traits brought by being autistic. Two participants reported how autistic individuals have a unique perspective to problem-solving and are able to see things differently from others. However, instead of being recognised for its value, their distinctive viewpoint often makes them target to prejudices (Participant 6). A couple of participants also shared how autism positively influenced special interests and talents they have, such as singing, music and marketing.

All autistic women interviewed explained their experiences in unique ways, confirming the divergence in perspectives often present when trying to describe autism (Kenny et *al.*, 2016). Indeed, it is possible to gather from the interviews how autistic women perceive the concept of "norm" imposed by society, as they are often reminded how they deviate from it. They offer valuable insights to analyse the representation of autism in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, highlighting challenges in communication, sensitivity to overstimulation and the constant need to prove oneself.

4.1.2 Diversity within autism

Every participant, whether implicitly or explicitly, displayed the individualistic nature of their approach to autism. Comprehending the diversity of experiences present in the autism spectrum can enhance comprehension of the distinct ways in which every participant engages with and interprets autism representations in media. Therefore, media portrayals can be critically analysed to identify whether they encompass the nuances of autism or perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions.

Two participants explained how "the stakes are different for different groups of autistics" (Participant 1), even though these distinct needs and traits are not often represented in media. In agreement, autistic professor Dr. Stephen Shore said, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism" (as cited in Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020). This quote describes the immense diversity present within the autism spectrum. Although the participants

recognize certain shared commonalities, such as social interactions, communication and sensory sensitivity, the combination of these characteristics differs for every individual. For example, Participant 8 illustrated the differences between her and her brother, who is also autistic: while she is more of a recluse and controls her emotions well, her brother's experience is characterized by severe anger issues and emotional outburst.

The reflections shared by the participant demonstrate the absence of a universally applicable framework for representing autism. As autistic people struggle in finding someone who shares similar characteristics, the challenge is even greater when trying to discover an autistic character who represents their own experiences. Understanding the range of perspectives can thus influence the portrayal of autism within society and media representations (Veltri, 2020), moving beyond one-dimensional depictions and more inclusive narratives.

4.1.3 Understanding autism in women

Clearly noted throughout the interviews is the limited awareness and understanding of autism in relation to females (Tharian et *al*., 2019). Seven participants highlighted the ongoing discrepancy which, still to this day, sees a disparity in the rates of autism diagnosis between young men and women. Participant 9 stated how it is a struggle to get women diagnosed in the first place: "a lot of autistic women still don't know that they are autistic" as the traits are not well publicized. Participant 1 gave some more context as to how this can occur: the prevailing image of an autistic individual remains predominantly associated with a specific archetype, often portraying an autistic man with strong affinity to typical male hobbies, such as trains and buses. While individuals with such interest do exist, it is crucial to recognize that they do not represent the entire autistic community (Participant 1). Autism is frequently subject to misconceptions, especially concerning girls and women, who are often raised with societal expectations of being highly sociable (Tharian et *al*., 2019). As a result, autistic women who do not conform to these norms by not exhibiting social adaptability are placed in uncomfortable and challenging situations, as elaborated by Participant 1:

> So, a lot of autistic women and autistic girls present autism in a very different way because they are put in these social situations where, you know, you are expected to blend in […] That is a nuance that I feel has not quite been picked up yet.

Participants reiterated this tendency for girls to face greater pressure to conform to social expectations, leading to increased masking of their autistic traits, which Dean et *al*. (2017) describe as camouflaging: for instance, "I'll bite my fingernails or kind of fidget in some way so that somebody's not gonna clock me" (Participant 2). In contrast, boys are given more space to

pursue their individual interests, thus exhibiting fewer masking behaviours (Participant 6). This binary perspective places autistic women in a position where they have to conceal their true selves more extensively than autistic men. Tharian et *al.* (2019) confirm how characteristics associated with autism may manifest differently between genders, as females often exhibit relatively stronger socio-communication skills on the surface. Due to the under-recognition and delayed diagnosis of autism in women compared to men (Lai et *al.*, 2011), along with stereotypical notions conveyed in media, women tend to face increased scepticism and disbelief when disclosing their autism. Therefore, the discrepancy between societal expectations and individual experiences of autism poses additional challenges in navigating social interaction and fostering awareness.

A comprehensive understanding of the characteristics exhibited by autistic women provides a critical framework for analysing the representation of autism in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo.* Given that the show has gained international success and served as a prominent example of female representation for the autistic community, it becomes essential to examine its depiction in relation to the distinct experiences and perspectives shared by autistic women.

4.2 Understanding Ableism

The present theme addresses the second sub-question "How do autistic women perceive ableism in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*?". As previously elaborated, ableism enforces a division between those who conform to a predefined societal norm and those who deviate for it (Campbell, 2009). Through the portrayal of autism as something positioned outside the realm of normality, media tends to preserve the stigmatization and ableism surrounding autism (Ellis, 2019).

Consequently, this section explores how autistic women often experience and perceive ableist attitudes in their daily life. Moreover, it analyses how the interviewees perceive ableism in media representation, with a focus on *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Valuable insight into the perspective through which autistic women interpret the portrayal of ableism in the show can be acquired by examining their personal encounters with ableism, thus providing a foundation to research how the Korean series reflects or questions dominant ableist narratives.

4.2.1 Experiencing ableism

Comprehending the ways in which ableism shapes the participant's lives is crucial to make sense of their reactions and interpretations of ableism in media, as well as in *Extraordinary*

Attorney Woo. By gaining this knowledge, it is possible to contextualize the responses and identify nuances in their perceptions.

Half of the participants conveyed how ableist attitudes directly shape multiple aspects of their lives, including their academic and work environments, and even their personal self-perception. For instance, Participant 1 shared how external relationships subjected her to ridicule through ableist attitudes, disregarding her mannerism and way of life. Moreover, the pervasiveness of ableism excluded a couple of participants from taking part in certain school classes: Participant 1 received a report card from school communicating how "I should not partake in Drama anymore because I was too disabled", while Participant 8 requested to sign up for a chemistry class, but was instead assigned to a class with only disabled students as "they just want all the [disabled] kids in the same class". Similarly, a couple of participants explained how ableist attitudes also affect the workspace, as their skills are undervalued or they are posed distressing and ableist questions by their colleagues, such as "Can autism be cured with yoga?" and "Why is it that autistic people are either super intelligent or too dumb to talk?" (Participant 5). These testimonies substantiate why Participant 9 would not openly disclose she is autistic in a workspace, since she would not expect people "to come into that with gracious minds and understanding". Indeed, throughout the interviews, women elaborated how this view on not coming out as autistic is a widely held belief within their autistic community, since it often seems to be only to their detriment. While ableism can generate compassionate responses, it can also generate hostile behaviours such as the ones presented, hindering the full participation and equality of individuals with disabilities (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Nario-Redmond (2020) explained how, as a consequence, these attitudes can influence multiple dimensions such as interpersonal interactions and intergroup relations presented above.

As previously mentioned, ableism can frame an individual's personal self-perception (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Participant 6 shared her ongoing efforts to overcome internalized ableism, a challenge frequently faced in the autistic community. She emphasized that media depictions of autism did not assist her in the process of self-acceptance: while on one hand autism portrayals showed traits which came off as normal for an autistic character, on the other hand some behaviours were exaggerated to an unrealistic extent. This exemplifies how society's reinforcement of ableist narratives plays a role in fostering the internalization of negative perceptions regarding disability, referred by Campbell (2009) precisely as internalized ableism.

The personal experiences shared by the interviewees clarify how ableism can manifest in both apparent and unintentional way, as it is deeply rooted in social norms and systems. Nario-Redmond (2020) illustrated how, due to a lack of understanding of disability issues, individuals

may unintentionally harbour ableist beliefs, or participate in ableist practices such as the one manifested in the respondents work and school environments. The participants' first-hand encounters with ableism could enhance their awareness of detrimental portrayals in media. Hence, participants may develop a propensity to critically analyse autism representations, fostering a desire for empowering portrayals which challenge ableist norms.

4.2.2 Ableism in media

Exploring the general view participants have on ableism in media allows to identify common opinions or criticisms on portrayals encountered in the past decades. By being aware of their broader opinions, it is possible to assess how they perceive *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* as perpetuating or rectifying ableist narratives.

When asked about ableism in media, all participants believe media representations of autism perpetuate ableist attitudes. A common opinion between the interviewees was that these representations "send the wrong message to the audience" (Participant 4), as they lead the viewers to believe they fully understand what autism is only through one representation, "when in reality what they are seeing is most likely just misinformation to begin with." (Participant 7). Participant 3 elaborated on how these representations are usually conceived through a neurotypical perspective, as the autistic character is presented from society's point of view. Consequently, the failure to inclusively represent the internal experiences and emotions of autistic individuals within media contributes to the perpetuation of ableist attitudes at their core.

Participant 8, in accordance with Barnes' (1992) illustration of media representation, elucidated another consequence of ableist representations, asserting that media portrayals of autism foster the misconception that individuals on the spectrum are inherently incapable of certain occupations or face struggles to function in society. Consequently, instead of promoting assistance and inclusivity, these representations can reinforce the belief that autistic people are limited by their condition, leading to a dismissive attitude and a lack of efforts towards accommodation and inclusiveness. Participant 9 also highlighted how ableist portrayals present additional concerns as it "ends up infantilizing people with autism". Dolmage (2014) refers to it as the rhetoric of infantilization, which denies autistic characters to be neither bad nor fallible, effectively stripping them of their full humanity. The infantilization aspect is also brought up in multiple analysis of *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, as many perceive the main autistic character is portrayed through an exaggerated child-like demeanour, thus being infantilized by both the writers of the show and the other characters in the series. Upon viewing such representations, the interviewees expressed feelings of distress, as these portrayals resonated with their own personal

experiences encountering ableist attitudes.

As discussed, popular culture serves as an important platform for understanding disabilities as it mirrors how disability is valued by our society: it is often where dominant ableist culture is incorporated but also challenged (Ellis, 2019). Therefore, media representations are frequently criticized as they contribute to the reinforcement of ableism, generating concerns for the lack of diversity present in these representations. The view shared by the participants confirms how autism representation in media is no exception: they believe portrayals of autism perpetuate ableism as they are often presented from a neurotypical point of view, disregarding the lack of diversity within the spectrum.

4.2.3 Ableism in Extraordinary Attorney Woo

When discussing the perception of ableist attitudes portrayed in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, many women explained how they placed those representations within the context of Korean culture considering how, for example, "the attitude towards autism in the UK would be very different to the way that it's seen in South Korea" (Participant 1). Participant 2 regarded the ableist behaviours depicted in the show as "sort of didactic":

> […] they're trying to represent that experience on purpose […] Their attitude is being presented exactly how problematic it actually is, or how hurtful it is really. Because you see it from her [Attorney Woo] perspective of how that would feel to be labelled in that way. And that makes it seem not legitimate, which is something that you don't get if you're always looking at it from the perspective of the person being ableist.

These ableist behaviours towards Attorney Woo Young-woo were "a common theme throughout the show" (Participant 9). Nonetheless, three interviewees noticed how, even though the show consistently highlighted this problematic aspect present in society, it fell short of directly challenging the systemic factors that perpetuate such discrimination. In this regard, Participant 3 explained how the series initiated an interesting dialogue in episode 3 (Moon Ji-won & Yoo In-shik, 2022) by portraying how Attorney Young-woo's autism was utilized by the prosecution in court as evidence to argue the reduced capacity of a high-support autistic defendant. Regrettably, the show failed to present a definite resolution to this dialogue.

Participant 3 noticed how many situations depicted Attorney Young-woo being appreciated only when using her savant skills, not understanding why her being very smart would "make her more valuable" (Participant 3). Korean society's ableism is openly showcased throughout the show, while simultaneously reinforcing the notion that disabled individuals are valued based on their contributions. Indeed, this depiction could give the widespread belief that

people with autism are deemed valuable only if they can be productive and contribute to society (Bunting, 2022).

On one hand, six participants observed a significant number of negative reactions toward Woo Young-woo, ranging from dismissiveness and rudeness to expectations of her to perform poorly or mess up. In particular, ableist behaviours were seen coming from the family and friends of her love interest Jun-ho, as they regarded Attorney Young-woo would be unable to provide support or enhance his life. These attitudes emphasized the discriminatory nature of such beliefs and demonstrate how ableism permeates various aspect of life, including romantic relationships (Nario-Redmond, 2020). One interviewee expressed a sense of exhaustion due to the pervasive presence of ableism all along the show, explaining how she believes Attorney Young-woo "gets treated so dehumanizing" (Participant 6) as she is given opportunities exclusively because of her connections and nepotism. Conversely, a couple of women attribute the character's ableist behaviours to the specific cultural context depicted in Korean setting, as well as the limited knowledge available within this society regarding interactions with individuals on the spectrum. While acknowledging that a co-worker's perception of Attorney Young-woo receiving perks for being autistic may have stemmed from ableist attitudes, a participant is hesitant to label any of the characters openly ableist. The questionable behaviour is therefore attributed more to societal norms in South Korea rather than an individual's perspective. Nevertheless, no characters' realizations of their mistaken attitude and subsequent growth were depicted in the series, coming short of a possibly didactic purpose intended for the audience.

Overall, seven interviewees acknowledged that in a dramatic representation, certain aspects are likely to be exaggerated for storytelling purposes, which involves some level of amplification to create a compelling narrative. Participant 1 shared how she personally related to the challenges depicted in the *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, and appreciated how the series effectively portrayed this aspect:

> But I do have my own difficulties in real life which have been represented: the sense that if you behave in a certain way, you are like undeserving of being able to be talented or able to be special in a way that they're not.

When watching *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, the participants interpreted its representation of autism in the context of Korean culture and society, justifying why the show is applauded for its alleged intent to raise awareness about autism in a country where it is still highly stigmatized (Bunting, 2022). Nonetheless, the women interviewed perceived it perpetuated ableist narratives often identified in media representations. As reported, the show

missed the opportunity to directly confront ableist behaviours prevalent in society, thus potentially reinforcing misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding autism. Furthermore, the lack of faith in Woo Young-woo's abilities contributes to the perception of autistic people as incapable of actively engaging within society.

4.3 Understanding Autism Representation

The current theme seeks to examine the perspectives of autistic women regarding the representation of autism, while providing further context to address the first sub-question. It investigates whether autistic women hold distinct perceptions of autism portrayed in Netflix productions compared to other media platforms. The study delves into the participants perspectives on stereotypes and how they perceive them in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, along with exploring whether the Korean drama resonates with their personal experience with autism.

4.3.1 Perception of autism in media representations

Exploring the participants perceptions of autism in media representations allows to analyse whether *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* differs significantly from previous media productions in its portrayal of autism. When discussing their views on media representation in general, opinions varied as participants presented mixed feelings on the topic.

Two participants explained how "the concept of good or bad portrayal can be very subjective" (Participant 1). As stated in the first theme, autistic traits differ within each individual; thus, portraying an autistic character which inclusively reflects all experiences present in the autistic community is extremely challenging. Moreover, a couple of participants shared how watching representations of autism can be beneficial: while prompting self-reflection on their own experience with autism (Participant 2), it can also help them understand how to better work or socialize (Participant 3). Three participants agreed on the importance of visibility and representation for autistic individuals, given the growing interest in representing women with autism in movies and TV series (Tharian et *al.*, 2019). Nonetheless, the growth in autism portrayals does not necessarily reflect an improvement in the approach through which autistic characters are created.

Half of the participants reported perceiving media representations as controversial. While recognizing the potential benefits of representation, they also noted the risk of misinterpretation. Participant 7 emphasized the audiences' tendency to mistakenly believe they understand autism based on a single autistic character, leading to generalizations about the entire autistic community. Even though having representation can be positive, media portrayals do tend to

recreate the "worst case scenarios" (Participant 8) in which autistic characters notably struggle or their autistic traits are really evident. These situations in which autistic characters are depicted as either "geniuses or a person who can barely even breathe" (Participant 6) have led a few participants to generally avoid autistic portrayals. To contest these repetitive portrayals, the advocacy within the disability community has been urging for greater diversity and complexity in the representation of disabled characters (Zhang & Haller, 2013).

During the interviews, some autistic women shared their impression on allistic, or non-autistic, actors portraying autistic characters. Clarifying they spoke on behalf of autistic people with lower support needs, thus basing their opinions on their own experiences, three participants agreed on being untroubled by the frequent casting of allistic actors for autistic characters. This view is influenced by the fact that requiring autistic actors to disclose their autism in order to secure autistic roles raises ethical concerns: "it would be the same as forcing gay actors to out themselves as gay" (Participant 4). While there is emphasis on having pride in being autistic, participants believe it remains personal information which individuals should not be obligated to share. Considering whether only autistic actors can play autistic characters raises another concern: "if only autistic people can portray autistic characters, do you have to portray autistic characters that are similar to you?" (Participant 4). As the experiences and needs along the spectrum are vastly different, autistic actors would still be interpreting a role that does not fully reflect their experience with autism. Participant 8 provided further commentary on the challenges of realistically navigating scenes involving autistic actors, such as those featuring loud noises that may genuinely cause distress for them. Taking these factors in consideration, the participants agreed on not holding significant concerns if allistic actors are casted for autistic roles, as long as it is approached with respect and authenticity. As Participant 4 stated, "you can't fix a bad autistic character with an autistic actor". Contrarily, Participant 7 argued how "when you don't cast autistic people, you are casting stereotypes". Without the first-hand lived experiences, these representations may rely on preconceived notions and thus perpetuate stereotypes in media representations. Indeed, incorporating autistic actors among the cast, writers, consultants and production team members can contribute to a more authentic and genuine representation (Ellis, et *al.*, 2019).

When discussing stereotypes, participants frequently identify CGI animations of what autistic people experience in their minds as an unrealistic representation. Participant 7 referred to these animations as "autism supervision", often placed together with savant skills which are also very rare among autistic people (Draaisma, 2009). Moreover, autistic characters are recurrently associated with an obsession with animals; while this stereotype may provide some insight into

the experience of certain autistic individuals, it could also lead to a misconception by reinforcing preconceived notions about the autism community. Indeed, Barnes (1992) explains how stereotypes play a crucial role in perpetuating the discrimination and exploitation faced by disabled people. The autistic women interviewed agreed on how stereotypes can significantly influence the public's perception of autism: the tendency to invalidate or downplay someone's autism may stem from the influence of media portrayals that heavily inform societal perceptions of autism (Participant 1). Participant 4 concluded how even the most exceptional and thoughtfully created autistic character will inevitably provide some sort of misinformation to the neurotypical audience, as fictional representation cannot fully capture the complexity of autism as, for instance, a documentary.

Overall, autistic women acknowledge the potential benefits that media representations could offer to the autistic community if portrayals were to better reflect the diverse experiences within the spectrum. While they all recognised the presence of certain stereotypes in media narratives, their receptions to these stereotypes varied.

4.3.2 Autism representations outside and within Netflix

Given that *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* is a Netflix original series, it presents an interesting opportunity to explore whether autistic women perceive differences in the portrayal of autism between streaming platforms and traditional broadcast TV. In this regard Ellis et *al.* (2019) argue how online streaming platforms such as Netflix offer a valuable avenue for presenting alternative representations of disability. Catering to niche audience, they allow for the reimagining and broadening of existing approaches to disability portrayal on television.

When discussing portrayals outside of autism in traditional TV, two participants highlighted how a couple of series aired in northern Europe a decade ago were the first to present autistic adult women as main characters. Participant 7 enjoyed watching the American series *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* (Thomas et *al.*, 2020 – 2021), as it deliberately casted actresses and actors on the autism spectrum to portray characters with autism. She discussed how the intentional inclusion of individuals with lived experiences contributed to the authenticity and integrity of the storytelling process. *Mr. Fisher's Murder Mysteries* (Cox et *al.*, 2012 – 2015), created by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, portrayed an autistic woman who stood out as exceptionally positive to Participant 1 as the depiction did not perpetuate any sense of negativity, but rather presented the character as a person with autism in a respectful and genuine manner.

Aside from these examples, the majority of the series mentioned were found to originate

from Netflix. Notably, the internationally known *Atypical* (Rashid et *al*., 2017 – 2021) received the most substantial criticism by the participants. While recognizing how the show might have improved from its first season, the women interviewed did not perceive the main autistic characters to be at the centre of the storyline. Moreover, the show primarily portrayed the stereotypical male autism experience, emphasizing the emotionless side boys tend to have. Veltri (2020) explained how this portrayal depicted in the series failed to capture the diverse range of people within the autistic community. Nonetheless, six participants reported enjoying other Netflix shows which included autistic characters, besides *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. The character in *Move To Heaven* (Chung Jae-yun & Kim Mi-na, 2021) displayed numerous nuances, making it relatable to autistic women. Along with not being infantilized, this autistic character is treated "not only as a leading character, but also as a love interest in the story" (Participant 7). Participant 6 explained how Netflix has notable cartoons which provide better representation. For instance, in *Hilda* (Mueller et *al*., 2018 – 2020) the participant is able to discern elements of an autistic accent, highlighting the fact that autistic individuals indeed have a distinct way of speaking. The teen drama *Heartbreak High* (Heaton et *al*., 2022 – present) was also positively perceived by a couple of participants, as the autistic actress Chloe Hayden was casted to portray an autistic character. These series are appreciated for depicting autistic individuals as having life aspirations and objectives beyond their autism, therefore adding depth and complexity to their portrayals. Lastly, *Love On The Spectrum* (O'Clery, 2019 – 2021), a reality show which follows people on the autism spectrum as they navigate the dating world, elicited mixed feelings from the interviewees. On one hand it was perceived as uplifting to witness individuals facing similar challenges and succeeding in their relationships by embracing their differences. However, "it was presented in such a silly way, with the music being sort of childlike […] it's kind of a stereotypical version" (Participant 2), thus perpetuating the stereotype that people on the spectrum are simplistic due to their communication being straightforward.

While there may not be a clear distinction perceived in quality content between autism representation on Netflix and broadcast TV, three participants pointed out how the presence of autistic narratives on major streaming platforms contributes to increase autism awareness. In addition, Participant 7 explained that streaming platforms provide greater freedom of expression compared to traditional cable TV, which may be subject to censorship that can silence the voices of autistic people. Therefore, television endeavours to keep up with advancements in portrayals of disabilities, signalling a desire to emulate the progress observed in digital media.

4.3.3 Perception of autism representation in Extraordinary Attorney Woo

In order to evaluate the perception of autistic women regarding the Korean drama *Extraordinary Attorney Woo,* stereotypes, experiences and relationships of the character Woo Young-woo were discussed during the interviews. This allows to comprehend why certain depictions were deemed as positive by some participants and negative by others. It also revealed how Attorney Woo reflects autistic traits or personal situations experienced by the participants.

The interviewees recognised three major stereotypes portrayed in the show. To begin with, Woo Young-woo is presented as having savant syndrome, which perpetuates the belief that autistic people are only valued if they possess extraordinary talents or abilities relevant to their chosen venture (Veltri, 2020). Accordingly, seven participants noticed how Attorney Woo seemed to be appreciated specifically for her skills in law, determining her as worthy of a place at Hanbada because she is able to solve problems which other attorneys cannot. While understanding how her savant skills might have been used to make the storyline more captivating, four participants stated they would have preferred to see her abilities in law as a consequence of her studies and creative thought process. In contrast, Participant 4 perceived her employment at the law firm was not based on her exertional skill, but rather on the manipulation of the CEO who used her as a pawn in a political manoeuvre due to her status as the undisclosed daughter of the rival CEO. Similarly, Participant 5 shared how she viewed Young-woo's genius as not her most defining trait: "I think her sense of justice, or morality, is more defining than her savant attributes". Indeed, having a heightened sense of what is right and wrong is also a significant part of autism, as it can be "a way of framing and making sense of the world" (Participant 1), which can otherwise feel chaotic.

Another controversial stereotype regarded the inclusion of a high-support autistic character in episode 3 (Moon Ji-won & Yoo In-shik, 2022). Six participants shared how the comparison between the two autistic characters opened an interesting discussion on the differences which can be found along the spectrum, depicting well the communication challenges faced by certain autistic individuals. For instance, Participant 5 appreciated the empathic behaviour Attorney Woo had for the other autistic character, believing it helped avoid infantilization and fostered understanding. On the contrary, three participants perceived the representation of the autistic man as extremely negative. In this regard, Participant 7 explained how the show incorporated exaggerated sound effects resembling those of a monster as the character entered the room. Moreover, the frames recorded emphasized his unattractive appearance, imposing physical stature and conveying an impression of being uncontrollable and menacing. Participant 5 shared how Attorney Woo might have felt an internal struggle facing the

other autistic man, since if Young-woo was to show compassion for the other autistic man, she would face similar mistreatment. Unfortunately, neurotypicals fail to grasp this perspective and persist exposing autistic individuals to these confrontational scenes without comprehending its underlying dynamics.

The last stereotype discussed tied back to infantilizing traits and behaviours subjected to Attorney Woo, as a result of ableist attitudes earlier presented when analysing ableism. On one hand, two participants perceived her character was not infantilized, as she is treated as an adult woman in search of her independency throughout the show. Nonetheless, Participant 7 explained how Young-woo's haircut has gained popularity among young Korean girls in elementary school, exemplifying how her character presented infantilized traits. Participant 2 also expressed how the friends and family of Jun-ho reinforced preconceived notions of autistic individuals as incapable of making independent choices or exhibiting childlike behaviours. As it may authentically reflect the reality of how others perceive Young-woo, it provided valuable insight on how people form judgements on wrong preconceived notions. If this narrative was perceived as educational, it could foster more acceptance and understanding in the audience, as each portrayal of disability has the capacity to influence a broader understanding of it (Zhang & Haller, 2013). Young-woo's friendship with her female co-worker was also seen as infantilizing, as 3 participant had difficulties in determining whether the co-worker genuinely cared for Attorney Woo or was rather moved by pity. Barnes (1992) illustrated how evoking sympathy serves to redirect the public's focus away from the social factors that contribute to the disability. In Attorney Woo's case, these social factors could refer to the lack of accommodations in the work environment.

When analysing the work environment, three participants expressed scepticism over its narrative as they believed that certain behaviours exhibited by Attorney Woo would in reality lead to her termination. Furthermore, they assumed that the reactions from her love interest's family would have also been more severe in real life, especially within the stigmatizing Korean culture (Kim et *al*., 2022). Nonetheless, Participant 7 shared how the representation of social sigma surrounding people with autism was well depicted by highlighting the challenges faced by the autistic community.

Six participants shared their enthusiasm in watching Young-woo's romantic relationship with Jun-ho:

> […] Showing a person understanding her limits and still loving her and still seeing value in her even though she relates differently, and like being willing to work around her sensitivities, around touch and still wanting to love her […] That's like really affirming.

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(Participant 2)

In addition, Participant 7 shared how she appreciated Jun-ho being a conventionally attractive person who did not make her object of pity. Barnes (1992) explains how it is crucial to portray disabled people in affectionate relationships, showing their range of sexual needs and desire which are comparable to non-disabled people. Participant 1 though, noted how exploring in depth Jun-ho's life and perspective would have enriched the narrative, as witnessing his journey of detachment from the prejudiced and ableist environment would have been both interesting and beneficial for the audience.

Overall, the participants expressed positive views on the portrayals of Young-woo's self-regulating behaviours and stemming, as it is important to "show people physicalizing the autism in different ways" (Participant 2):

> We were watching the show and the way she flicks her fingers and stretches, a lot of us
> do that […]it was a real connected moment. And I wonder how many other people were
> watching the show and doing it alongside me. (Participant 5)

Furthermore, the supportive relationships that Young-woo's had with her dad and friends were positively perceived by eight participants, particularly appreciating the presence of a caring parent. A couple of participants also acknowledged the show's emphasis on the challenging nature of communication between parents and autistic children, highlighting the need for efforts to establish a connection and common ground. Moreover, seven participants identified with certain traits or experiences portrayed in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* which reflect their own personal experiences. For instance, Participants 3 goes though meltdowns in a similar way to Young-woo, and two women interviewed identified with Attorney Woo's sense of justice, while others also experience sensitivity to sounds. As affirmed by the participants in the first theme, many autistic women employ strategies to camouflage their autistic traits and better conform to societal norms. Participant 9 shared how "as a consequence of watching Attorney Woo be very openly unmasked […] I found myself masking less […] I don't have to try to not do these things that I do naturally", thus positively impacting her experience with autism.

For the most part, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* was perceived as a refreshing representation of an autistic female. Particularly criticized were the savant stereotype and the depiction of two autistic characters set against one another. Nonetheless, the female participants expressed appreciation for the portrayal of Young-woo, highlighting in particular her romantic relationship which was never seen in such a comprehensive way. Ultimately, the interviewees recognised how the show initiated important conversations on autism representation which require more attention, viewing it as the beginning of more inclusive depictions of autistic female

characters in media.

4.4 Request for Future Representation

Identifying the preferences of autistic women regarding future media representations is important as it enhances their sense of representation (Belcher & Maich, 2014). Considering their perceptions can promote inclusivity and facilitate the shift away from harmful stereotypes by avoiding negative narratives perpetuated till now. Addressing the third sub-question, the women interviewed expressed how a shift in the narrative of autistic characters could be accomplished by representing more of the diversity present on the spectrum, as well as within the autistic community itself.

4.4.1 Representing the diversity of the spectrum

Advocating for more diversity in the portrayal of autistic traits was a priority for half of the participants, as the constant use of stereotypes discussed throughout the interviews has discouraged autistic women to take an interest in autism representation.

Indeed, visual media still relies on stereotypes as a means of educating the audience, thereby offering a narrowed perspective of the autistic community rather than a comprehensive understanding (Draaisma, 2009). While recognizing that the depiction of stereotyped characters may resonate with certain autistic individuals, there is a shared belief among the participants that it would be valuable to witness the portrayal of autistic characters with a broader range of traits beyond those commonly seen. To this regard, a couple of participants highlighted the importance in depicting more interesting and meaningful autistic characters, instead of being solely objects of pity or elevated as superhumans.

Participants also shared how greater efforts should be made to bridge the gaps in representation to ensure inclusivity for autistic people with higher support needs. In addition, Participant 3 discussed the significance of incorporating more scenarios in which multiple autistic characters demonstrate the mutual support they can offer to each other, considering their unique needs. Certainly, there is room for improvement in terms of recognizing the vast array of experiences within the autistic community: "there are as many different experiences of autisms as there are autistic people" (Participant 3).

4.4.2 Representing diversity in the autistic community

Much attention was also given towards the lack of diversity within the autistic community currently represented in media. As stated earlier, a reoccurring pattern sees autistic

characters often depicted as young, white, heterosexual males (Veltri, 2020).

Three interviewees mentioned how there is a prevailing sentiment among the autistic community for greater representation of characters of colour, queer characters, and older individuals portraying autism. As most autistic representations in media are primarily children, teenagers, or young adults undergoing their coming-of-age narratives, there is a desire for inclusion of adult and senior characters with autism in order to provide a more comprehensive representation. Indeed, when depicting individuals with disability in media, it is essential to inclusively portray the diverse range of their sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, gender, and age (Barnes, 1992)

Furthermore, Participant 3 discussed how the representation of non-binary people within the autistic community is an important aspect to consider, as she noted that there is a higher prevalence of transgender individuals among autistic people. Participant 7 reiterated how neurotypicals "don't seem to realize that autistic people are weird about gender […] gender is mostly a social construct, and if you think a social construct with not clear rules plus autism doesn't really work very well". As a matter of fact, a study carried out by Bush and the University of Massachusetts (2016) illustrated how a substantial portion of individuals on the spectrum demonstrate a higher level of open-mindedness in comparison to neurotypicals. This included a reduced inclination to conform to societal norms and expectations concerning traditional gender roles and monogamy (Bush & University of Massachusetts, 2016). Although recognizing that portraying such double sensitive characters may be deemed as difficult by studios (Participant 3), it would be meaningful to include them in media representations, aligning with the experienced of the autistic community.

4.4.3 Representing diversity in the narrative

Diverse narratives of autism in media are needed in order to challenge and broaden the limited perspective that have been perpetuates thus far. More varied storylines can also empower autistic women by providing them with relatable and authentic representations, allowing them to see they can be positively integrated in society. Osteen (2007) explains how the prevailing representation on autism predominantly fails to delve into diverse aspects of autistic experiences.

When discussing alternative narratives, four participants expressed a need for more diversity in the genres in which autistic characters are currently depicted, namely comic-dramas and teen-dramas. Expanding the representation across period dramas, animations, sci-fi and fantasy, for instance, would not only provide more varied storytelling opportunities but also offer a comprehensive portrayal in different narrative contexts. Wilde (2010) explained how disabled

characters should have the opportunity to transcend stereotypes and occupy diverse roles, seamlessly integrated into all aspects of narrative representation: angels, villains, heroes and so on. In addition, a couple of women shared they would like more characters "where autism isn't the focus" (Participant 4), believing it would be beneficial to incorporate an autistic character into a mainstream program without making their autism the sole significant centre of attention. Moreover, Participant 6 pointed out the absence of "periods of rest" in depictions of autistic experiences. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these periods of rest are essential for reducing overstimulation; contrary to common assumptions, these characters' typical obsessions or special interests actually require energy instead of providing a calming effect.

Reflecting on *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, Participant 2 perceived Young-woo as being accepted and supported by the community around her. Therefore, she would wish to see portrayed communities which, rather than individualizing difficulties, collectively embrace the challenges as shared responsibilities. It would definitely be beneficial to cultivate more of this mindset, where being autistic is accepted and society becomes more welcoming: "it is not just about representing the autistic individual correctly, it's about modelling how an entire community incorporates autistic people within them safely" (Participant 2). Certainly, it would be valuable to showcase in media representations examples of environments that accommodate autistic individual, as many people lack knowledge on how to do so. Garland-Thomson (2005) similarly noted how society rarely coincides disability as an aspect which necessitates accommodation and inclusion within society and community. The focus should therefore extend to emphasize the creation of communities which work towards emancipating disabled individuals though providing resources to go above their limitations, rather than solely focusing on reducing discrimination (Shakespeare, 2006, as cited in Davis, 2017). Consequently, the diversification of narrative can contribute to a richer and more inclusive representation of autism in media and society.

4.5 Chapter Summary

To understand how autistic people perceive *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*'s representation of autism in relation to other Netflix productions, the study investigated their unique personal experiences compared to media portrayals. In agreement with past theory (Kenny et *al*., 2016), the participants' individual autistic experience mirrored the diverse perceptions of autism representation, with all participants viewing one or more narratives as representative of their own experience. Most of the autistic characters recalled were present in recent Netflix series, as those on traditional TV seemed outdated. With the exception of *Atypical*'s (Rashid et *al*., 2017 – 2021)

controversial first season, Netflix has created in the past 5 years autistic characters which have been positively perceived by autistic women as relatable. Among them, Attorney Young-Woo presents a refreshing portrayal of autism within women through her unconcealed mannerisms and romantic storyline with a non-autistic character. However, the Korean drama still perpetuated stereotypes, unlike *HeartBreak High* (Heaton et *al.*, 2022 – present) which has been unanimously perceived as a positive representation of autism with no fault. Overall, the participant's perceptions of autism representation in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* and other recent Netflix productions prove how the streaming platform is pursuing its intents in increasing diverse and inclusive representation of people with disabilities (Netflix, 2021).

Moreover, the autistic women interviewed illustrated how ableist attitudes experienced in their work and social environment were effectively portrayed in the Korean drama. While recognizing how ableism still permeates Korean culture (Kim et *al.*, 2022), therefore partly justifying ableist behaviours portrayed in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, the participants criticized the show's reinforcement of stereotypes and failure to challenge ableist behaviours surrounding autism.

Lastly, to overcome the prevailing stereotyped portrayals of autism (Osteen, 2007), the research uncovered various narratives which would be appreciated by the autistic community in future media productions. Since current representations offer a limited viewpoint of the autistic community (Draaisma, 2009), participants shared how a broader range of autistic traits should be included to present the diversity within the spectrum. As argued by Barnes (1992), autistic characters should also represent the different ages, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations present within the autistic community. In addition, the women interviewed expressed a wish to view autistic characters in a variety of genres aside from comedies and dramas, leaving behind stereotypes and depicting diverse roles (Wilde, 2010).

5. Conclusion

The present study answered the research question "*How do autistic women perceive the representation of autism in the Netflix series Extraordinary Attorney Woo in relation to other media productions?"* by interviewing 10 autistic women and understanding their views on media representations. After gaining valuable insight into their experiences and perspectives, the study illustrated how, despite perpetuating certain stereotypes, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* is a step in the right direction for more inclusive portrayals of autism, compared to previous narratives. This positive portrayal has further been developed by Netflix's latest show *HeartBreak High* (Heaton et *al*., 2022 – present).

The interviewees expressed an overall positive perception of the narrative following autistic Attorney Young-woo, aware of the fact that their understanding of good and bad representation can be just as subjective as their individual experience with autism (Veltri, 2020). In fact, while some women interviewed found the depiction of the two autistic characters in the show comforting and respectful, others perceived it as extremely offensive and overdone. Nonetheless, all participants shared how Woo Young-woo embodied more than one of their autistic traits and experiences, from stemming to sensory sensitivity, to her work ethic and the way she understands society.

The present research highlights improvements *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* brought for autism representation on many fronts. Indeed, participants expressed how Attorney Young-woo represents one of the first authentic portrayals of autistic women in media who, surprisingly, is also the main character (Tharian et *al*., 2019). In addition, great appreciation was given to the unique romance storyline present throughout the show, as it displayed how autistic people can be in healthy relationships with neurotypicals, contrary to stereotypical representations (Dolmage, 2014). By honestly depicting the challenges faced by the character, along with her journey in understanding her limits and working around them, Woo Young-woo exemplifies how autistic people are capable of fully participating in community life and should not be excluded from society (Barnes, 1992; Veltri, 2020). Furthermore, the study revealed the importance of portraying Attorney Young-Woo's autistic traits so bluntly, as it gave participants the courage to mask their own traits less, thus reducing their camouflaging used to conform to ableist societal norms (Dean et *al*., 2017).

Although *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* may not have satisfied all the requirements desired by the autistic community, as it adopted certain stereotypical traits and hired an allistic actress to portray an autistic character, the empirical findings brought together the concepts of neurodiversity, ableism and media representation to display how Attorney Young-woo was

perceived as a starting point for more inclusive representations of autistic women in media. Presented as a well-rounded character, with much depth to all aspects of her life, Attorney Young-woo could be one of the first autistic characters long advocated by the disability community which had yet to be achieved (Zhang & Haller, 2013).

Lastly, the viewpoints shared by the autistic women interviewed confirmed how their inclusion in media narratives matters, as it promotes inclusion in society (Rowe, 2017). Their positive perceptions reported for other media productions, such as *HeartBreak High* (Heaton et *al.*, 2022 – present) and *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* (Thomas et *al.*, 2020 – 2021), illustrate how the inclusion of autistic individuals with lived experiences highly contributes to the authenticity and integrity of the storytelling process (Ellis, 2019). These representations not only improve the perception the autistic community has on them, but also foster curiosity and understanding within society, just as Attorney Young-woo's elaborate point of view sparked curiosity in the researcher to better comprehend autistic women.

5.1 Theoretical and Social Implications

This section explains the theoretical and social implications offered by this research. To begin with, the present study opposes previous research which suggested disabled people positively perceive disabled characters depicted through the 'supercrip' stereotype, symbolizing their potential to be normal (Kama, 2004; Zhang & Haller, 2013). In fact, as Attorney Woo's savant skills were used to add value to the characters, the participants interviewed negatively perceived this stereotype, thus aligning with Barnes (1992) view on the disability community also not viewing it well. Moreover, an issue which may prove challenging to address is the lack of autistic individuals casted to portray autistic characters (Prochnow, 2014). Previous theory illustrates how disabled characters should be played by disabled actors (Barnes, 1992; Prochnow, 2014; Zhang & Haller, 2013), whereas the present study highlights the diverse opinions within the autistic community on the topic. While half of the participants argued allistic people should not be casted for autistic characters, as their representation would be unauthentic, the other half explained how neurotypicals portraying autistic characters is no cause for concern so long as it is done respectfully by consulting the autistic community (Jones et *al.*, 2023).

In terms of social implications, Ellis et *al.* (2019) expressed how streaming platforms could develop existing approaches to disability representation through alternative narratives. By analysing and comparing Netflix's representation of autism with traditional broadcasting production, the findings suggest that Netflix seems to be improving and increasing portrayals of autism, preceding normal TV. While *Atypical* (Rashid et *al.*, 2017 – 2021) was heavily criticized

by the autistic community back in 2017, 2022 brought unique and authentic narratives though *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* and *HeartBreak High* (Heaton et *al*., 2022 – present). Professionals in the media industry could take the present findings into account to better understand the perspective of autistic females on autism representation, thus developing more authentic and inclusive narratives. As the limited portrayal of autistic women in media could further marginalize them (Tharian et *al*., 2019), improving their representation could generate significant social benefits for this community. In this regard, the research exemplified how identifying with Attorney Young-woo impacted the viewers' lives by encouraging them to unmask their own autistic traits and comforting their apprehensions on romantic experiences. Moreover, studies indicate how entertainment media can improve autism understanding within society (Jones et *al*., 2023). As watching *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* introduced autism to the researcher, who consequently became interested in exploring the autistic perspective of media representations, more diverse autism depictions could enhance curiosity and conversation within a society still catered to neurotypicals.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

The methodological approach chosen to explore the perception of autistic women was deemed the most appropriate to answer the research question and sub-questions. Nonetheless, the researcher recognizes the limitations of this study, providing for future suggestions.

Firstly, the limited sample size of 10 participants renders it difficult to explore how race, ethnicity and social backgrounds might affect the findings. Indeed, while the participants from seven different countries resulted in a heterogenous sample, they explored autism experiences from western countries, thus not personally reflecting on the stigmatizing cultural aspects typical of South Korea and depicted throughout *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Kim et *al*., 2022). In addition, as is common with qualitative studies, the small sample size implies that the findings may not be representative of all the perspectives of autistic women.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study investigating how autistic women perceive autism representation, focusing mainly on the narrative carried out in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Therefore, additional research is deemed necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The findings presented in this study can serve as groundwork for future investigations. Considering how autistic characters are increasing within media, future research could investigate recent female autistic representations, such as Quinni from *HeartBreak High* (Heaton et *al*., 2022 – present), as well as the upcoming seasons of *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore the perceptions that

Korean autistic women have on Attorney Young-woo, comparing it to the perception of the western audience. Similarly, a potential avenue could involve examining the perspective of older generation of autistic women, to confirm whether they share similar perceptions or if notable differences are present.

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Appendix A – Recruiting Statement

Seeking Research Interview Participants for Perspectives on Extraordinary Attorney Woo

Hi everyone,

My name is Allegra and I'm a Master student in Media & Creative Industries. For my master's thesis, I am researching how autistic women perceive the representation of autism on the Netflix series Extraordinary Attorney Woo. After seeing the series as a neurotypical, I became interested in understanding how autistic women relate to it, since few studies to date have interviewed autistic adults on their perspective on autistic representation and stereotypes.

I am looking to interview, in the months of March and April of 2023, autistic women aged 20-35 who have seen the series for around 45-60 minutes (either online or offline), keeping anonymity on the publication of the research of course. I would like to talk about how you viewed the show, if you related to attorney Woo, if you felt ableist attitudes portrayed in the episodes, and if you feel autism has been represented differently in Extraordinary Attorney Woo than previous Netflix and media productions.

As the series made me reflect on various aspects of autism from a neurotypical point of view, I feel compelled to research and give space to the perspective of the autistic community.

I would really appreciate your participation! Please leave a comment if you are interested and I will reach out to you.

Thank you for taking the time to read.

Appendix B – Consent form

Information and Consent Form

Extraordinary Attorney Woo: A study into the perceived representation of autism

Introduction

I am Allegra Guizzon and I do research for Erasmus University Rotterdam. I am conducting research on the perceived representation of autism by autistic women. I am conducting this research independently, with no financial contribution.

I will explain the study below. If you have any questions, please ask me. While reading, you can mark parts of the text that are unclear to you.

I will ask if you have read this form and agree to participate in the study at the beginning of our interview.

What is the research about?

As not many studies have investigated how autistic women believe to be seen by others or asked them how they perceive the representation of autism, I believe it is important to give space to autistic women's perspective on autism representation in the media. Therefore, this study will research how autistic women perceive the representation of autism, particularly on the Netflix series Extraordinary Attorney Woo.

Why are we asking you to participate?

I ask you to participate because your opinion and experience as an autistic woman can help us learn and better understand how you wish to be represented in media production. Being on the same age range of 20 to 35 years old as the characters portrayed in Extraordinary Attorney Woo, I believe your insight and perception of the show will allow to understand how the younger generation of women on the autism spectrum feel represented by media.

What can you expect?

The qualitative study, which will last 6 months, will gather data by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews. If you participate in this study, you will take part in these interviews online and they will last around 1 hour. I would like to talk about how you viewed the show, if you related to attorney Woo, if you felt ableist attitudes portrayed in the episodes, and if you feel autism has been represented differently in Extraordinary Attorney Woo than previous Netflix and media

productions. If you do not want to answer a question during the interview, you are not required to do so. I will make an audio recording of the conversation. Here is an example of a question that I will ask during the interview: How did you perceive Young-Woo's relationship with her family and friends?

You decide whether to participate

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and without financial compensation. You can stop at any time and would not need to provide any explanation.

What are the potential risks and discomforts?

During the interview, there is a risk that questions may trigger unpleasant memories and emotions. You may therefore wish to not answer those questions and change topic.

Who can see your data?

Your interview is going to be transcribed and fully anonymized. The anonymized transcripts will be provided to the university. Personal data is going to be accessed only by me and stored safely while the research lasts.

What happens with the results of the study?

You may indicate during the interview if you would like to receive the results by email once the research is complete.

Do you have questions about the study?

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me via email 667961ag@student.eur.nl

Appendix C – Interview Guide

Topic Guide

Introduction

I am going to record the conversation, in order to listen to it again and transcribe it, so that I can use it in my study; are you okay with it? Also, have you read the consent form, and do you agree with it? As previously mentioned, I am not going to use your name in the study, so that the information you give will be anonymous. You do not have to answer to my questions if you don't feel comfortable, and you can ask me for clarifications at any time. Are there any things that you would like to ask me about before we start?

Thank you for taking the time to talk today. After seeing the series as a neurotypical, I became interested in understanding how autistic women relate to it, since I saw that few studies to date have interviewed autistic adults on their perspective on autistic representation and stereotypes. As the series made me reflect on various aspects of autism from a neurotypical point of view, I feel compelled to research and give space to the perspective of the autistic community.

Questions/prompts

1. Let's talk a bit about you: How old are you, where are you from… (what do you do in life?) How does your everyday life look like?

2. How do you see autism? (Social or medical view, thoughts about neurodiversity movement…)

3. How is your experience with autism? (TAKE NOTES)

4. What role does media consumption occupy in your everyday life?

5. How has it changed with the introduction of online video platforms, such as Netflix? (Does it make you consume more or less broadcasting programs? Did it increase your consumption of movies and series?)

6. How do you view autism representation in the film industry? Could give some examples? Did you view on representation change (maybe after diagnosis, maybe you didn't think about it much a first)?

7. What do you think of Netflix's representation of autism? Thinking of shows like Atypical, Heart Break High (Quinni, played by autistic actress Chloe Hayden), and The Good Doctor (An ABC original also available on Netflix).

8. Do you perceive stereotyped portrayals of autism in media representations, if yes which ones and how do you perceive them? (Maybe realistic but limited, maybe unrealistic…). How do these stereotypes inform or misinform people about the autistic community?

9. Do you believe the representation of autism in mainstream media perpetuate ableist attitudes? If yes how?

10. Which representations of autism TV shows or movies reflect your experience? And how?

11. How do you feel autism has been represented differently in Extraordinary Attorney Woo than previous Netflix and media productions, having a female autistic protagonist?

Let's dive into Young-woo's life…

12. How do you think Netflix represented her personal development? (Working on being more independent...)

13. Some argue that Young-woo's savant skills are what defines her at the law firm: so not who she is, but rather that she can solve problems that others can't. How do you perceive this stereotyped representation? And how much do you think it impacts her character?

14. How did you perceive Young-woo's relationships with her family and friends? Supported by her friends, communication with her father.

15. What do you think about Young-woo's love life and relationship with Jun-ho (love interest)? Struggles to demonstrate affection, judgement from Jun-ho's family and friends.

16. How did you perceive her career struggles and successes? Initial prejudice from boss, co-workers, and clients…

17. In which characters traits of Young-woo, and situations depicted on the series, do you see yourself?

18. What ableist attitudes did you see portrayed in the episodes? And how did you perceive them?

19. In the series we also see portrayed a young autistic man on the spectrum (Jeong-hun), also called Pengsoo: how did you perceive it? Realistic/educational? His mother says most autism people are like him…

20. What would you change and implement in future portrayals of autism in media productions? It's unrealistic to expect one character — or even one series — to fully represent the full scope of a disability.

Appendix D – Coding Tree

THEME	SUB-THEME	EXAMPLES OF OPEN CODE	EXAMPLES OF QUOTES
AUTISM WITHIN WOMEN	Being neurodivergent	Autism as a disability	"I do see it as a disability" (Participant 1)
		Diagnosis was helpful	"It's very liberating" (Participant 2)
		Neurodevelopmental difference	"It's just something that it's there in my daily life" (Participant 4)
	Diversity within autism	Diverse needs	"We used to live together, and we all had very different supports levels" (Participant 6)
		Different traits	"The type that I have isn't as pronounced as, let say my brother" (Participant 8)
		Confrontation between autistic people	"Shocking to know that we have the same sort of condition, and yet we're so different" (Participant 5)
	Understanding autism in women	Lack of understanding	"The thing about like autism, which

		towards autism in females	I feel like is not understood, especially when it comes to like women and girls" (Participant 1)
		Low diagnostic rates	"There's still great discrepancy between diagnostic rates between young men and or girls and boys with autism" (Participant 7)
		Autistic women in society	"Girls tend to be forced more to be social, which means they mask more" (Participant 6)
UNDERSTANDING ABLEISM	Experiencing ableism	Consequence of ableism	"I also have issues with like internal ableism" (Participant 6)
		Personal experience with ableism	"I have these like external relationships where they were making fun of me" (Participant 1)
		Overcoming ableism	"Overcoming ableism is also just accepting diversity

			in a lot of ways" (Participant 2)
	Ableism in media	Ableism in autism representation from neurotypical pov	"So typically, they're usually from how the person is being perceived from the outwards, which is from the neurotypicals perspective, they're not like how we're feeling outward" (Participant 3)
		Consequence of ableism	"I feel like it sends the wrong message to the audience" (Participant 4)
		Negative perception of ableism	"It ends up infantilizing people with autism" (Participant 9)
	Ableism in Extraordinary Attorney Woo	Ableist attitudes in the context of Korean culture	"This is something that you have to place within the context of the culture" (Participant 1)
		Ableism depicted as educational	"That's ableist, but it's like supposed to be, that was the point" (Participant 2)

		Negative perception of ableism in the series	"It's all over. And it exhausted me" (Participant 6)
UNDERSTANDING AUTISM REPRESENTATION	Perception of autism in media representation	View on representation as subjective	"The concept of good and bad portrayal can be very subjective" (Participant 1)
		Positive aspect of autism representation in media	"I think it's cool that autistic people are being seen and having a voice of their own" (Participant 3)
		Influence stereotypes have on society	"I feel like stereotypes do play a big role into how people perceive autism" (Participant 1)
	Autism representation outside and within Netflix	*Atypical* Netflix improvement	"I do feel they listened to the feedback and criticism of the representation" (Participant 1)
		Perception of autism in Netflix	"*Atypical* and *Attorney Woo,* I think both of them were pretty decent" (Participant 7)
		Influence of streaming platforms	"If something is on large streaming

			platforms like Netflix, it also brings more awareness to it" (Participant 4)
	Perception of autism representation in Extraordinary Attorney Woo	Difference from other series	"Attorney Woo had two examples of autistic people in it, which is more than most. So, I thought that was a really interesting discussion" (Participant 3)
		Positive romantic portrayal	"I think it's very important also for non-autistic audiences to kind of see like, this sort of relationship can happen, and they do exist" (Participant 4)
		Perception of savant stereotype	"They could have toned it down a little bit" (Participant 5)
REQUEST FOR FUTURE REPRESENTATION	Representing the diversity of the spectrum	More than one autistic character per series	"More than one autistic person on the screen at the same time to show directly the differences in how

			they communicate" (Participant 3)
		Characters with more depth	"Portray autistic people as three-dimensional" (Participant 5)
		Request for more authentic representation	"I would just be happier if I saw less stereotypes" (Participant 3)
	Representing diversity in the autistic community	Diversity in sexual and gender identities	"More characters of colour, more queer characters" (Participant 4)
		Diversity in age	"Older characters, adults and seniors" (Participant 4)
		Diversity in gender	"Non-binary things" (Participant 3)
	Representing diversity in the narrative	Autistic characters in society	"I'd love to see autistic people taking a real interest in society" (Participant 1)
		More depth in character	"More characters where autism isn't the focus" (Participant 4)
		Diversity in genres	"I would like to see just like a basic cartoon show of like an autistic girl

			or guy, or non-binary person or something like that" (Participant 6)