# “Do They Actually Behave Like That?”:

## How Audiences in Aotearoa New Zealand Interpret Media Representations of Neurodivergence

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A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Communication Studies (MCS)

2026

School of Communication Studies

# Abstract

As the term neurodivergence becomes more widely recognised, there has been growing scholarly interest in how it is understood by the public. Like any form of education, the media we consume plays a significant role in shaping this understanding. However, portrayals of neurodivergence across film, television, and streaming media remain limited, often relying on narrow or stereotypical depictions. This leads to the central question of the thesis: how representations of neurodivergence are interpreted and internalised within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

To explore this, the study examines portrayals of neurodivergence in screen media through the perspectives of both neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences from diverse backgrounds within Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. It investigates how audiences interpret existing representations, how these portrayals shape public understandings of neurodivergence, and how intersectional factors such as gender, age, and race influence the representation of neurodivergent individuals within media. Drawing on these insights, the study seeks to identify how representation might move beyond dominant global frameworks toward more authentic and locally grounded approaches within Aotearoa's media landscape.

Adopting a qualitative methodological approach, the study consists of two separate focus groups – one with neurodivergent participants and one with neurotypical participants – supported by a pre-focus group survey designed to encourage reflection prior to discussion. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis within a reflexive qualitative framework informed by interpretivist and social constructivist perspectives. The study is also shaped in part by the researcher's positionality as a late-diagnosed autistic woman, informing its interpretive and intersectional lens.

The findings reveal several tensions within contemporary media representations of neurodivergence. Participants identified a recurring representational binary, conceptualised in this study as the "savant vs. stupid" framework, in which neurodivergent characters are depicted through either exceptionalised or deficit-based portrayals. Neurodivergent and neurotypical participants often interpreted these portrayals differently, illustrating what this study terms "stereotype spillover," whereby simplified media tropes shape broader public understandings of neurodivergence in both positive and negative ways. Intersectional disparities were also evident, particularly in relation to gender, age, and race. Participants frequently struggled to recall examples of neurodivergent representation within New Zealand media, instead referencing

international productions, highlighting ongoing challenges surrounding the visibility and cultural recognisability of local portrayals.

This research contributes to scholarship on neurodivergent media representation by offering an audience-centred analysis within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, examining how global media representations are interpreted at a local level. Addressing the supporting research question – what can be done to improve representation moving forward – the study also provides insights relevant to media producers, policymakers, and organisations such as New Zealand On Air and TVNZ seeking to support more authentic and culturally grounded portrayals of neurodivergence.

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# Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature: _____

Date: 29/05/26

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# Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my parents, Amanda and Andrew, for their unwavering support – not only throughout the writing of this thesis, but also during my autism diagnosis at 20 years old. Your encouragement and understanding have been invaluable as I have navigated and adapted to adulthood, following what was often a confusing childhood and adolescence. A special mention to my mother for constantly picking me up early from school – we both understand a little more now why that happened so often!

I am also especially grateful to my partner, Finn, whose insight and presence have been instrumental in helping me understand and make sense of my autism. You have helped me develop a stronger sense of self, and your unfailing patience has made all the difference in helping me realise that my autism is not a burden, but simply a difference. This research truly would not have been possible without you.

To my supervisor, Dr. Matt Mollgaard, thank you for your genuine interest in and support of this study. Your encouragement, expertise, and commitment to advancing the neurodivergent academic field have had a far greater impact than you may realise and have been a constant source of inspiration throughout this research.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank New Zealand On Air for supporting this research through scholarship funding. Their investment in emerging research and storytelling within Aotearoa's media landscape has made this study possible. I hope this thesis can contribute, in some small way, to the ongoing efforts toward more diverse, authentic, and representative screen media in Aotearoa.

Finally, I extend my sincere thanks to all 16 participants who contributed to this study. Your openness, honesty, and willingness to share your experiences and perspectives formed the foundation of this research, and this thesis quite literally would not have come to fruition without your time and contributions.

# Ethics Approval

This study attained ethical approval by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 18 September 2025, reference number 25/258.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## Conceptualising Neurodivergence & Disability

Representations within screen media serve as a key context through which understandings of communities and identities are constructed, circulated and interpreted (Wheatley, 2024). This is particularly significant in relation to neurodivergence, a concept that continues to be shaped through both cultural and academic discourse (Baumer & Frueh, 2021). Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in neurological functioning across individuals, recognising differences in cognition, behaviour and ways of experiencing the world as part of human diversity (Botha et al., 2024; Doyle, 2024; Helmold & Martensen, 2025). In this context, neurodivergence is defined as neurological functioning that differs from societal norms. While Australian sociologist Judy Singer is widely credited with coining the term neurodiversity in her 1998 thesis, its origins are more complex, with the concept emerging collectively through discussions within autistic communities, including early online spaces (Botha et al., 2024).

Over the last decade, the relationship between neurodivergence and disability has remained a topic of discussion, as the two concepts are not always considered synonymous (Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Robison, 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People (see Appendix A for a glossary of Māori terms used throughout this thesis) draws on the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006) in its definition of disability, recognising that disability arises through the interaction between impairments and societal barriers that may restrict full participation in society. Applied to neurodivergence, this understanding highlights how experiences of disability may vary according to individual circumstances and the social and structural barriers encountered (Thorneycraft, 2024).

For example, forms of neurodivergence such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) encompass diverse experiences that may not always be physically visible. Whether individuals experience their neurodivergence as disabling can be influenced by societal expectations, particularly those surrounding productivity and independence, alongside the availability of appropriate accommodations and support. However, the less visible nature of neurodivergence does not diminish its legitimacy as a potential form of disability (Ahtoy, 2024; Skelling, 2020). This reflects Linton's (1998) understanding of disability as an increasingly “capacious category” (p. 12), reinforcing that the distinction between neurological difference and disability is not fixed but shaped by individual and social contexts (Thorneycraft, 2024).

These understandings of neurodivergence and disability provide a foundation for the study's adoption of the social model of disability. As outlined by Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People (n.d.), the social model emerged from the disability rights movement during the 1970s and 1980s. Developed in opposition to medicalised understandings of disability, the social model challenged the positioning of disability as an individual medical problem, instead emphasising the disabling effects of societal structures and barriers (Berghs et al., 2016; Oliver, 1990). Notably, the New Zealand Disability Strategy adopts the social model of disability, establishing its relevance within Aotearoa's disability policy framework. For these reasons, this study prioritises the social model over the medical model, reflecting its adoption within the national policy context and its alignment with the study's interpretivist approach to examining how popular media narratives shape public understandings of neurodivergence.

Given the influence of global media in shaping public perceptions of different communities, this study considers how representations of neurodivergence are interpreted within local contexts. Such an examination raises broader questions about the authenticity and cultural relevance of neurodivergent portrayals within Aotearoa New Zealand's media landscape. By identifying how audiences interpret existing portrayals and where current representations fall short, this research seeks to contribute insights that may support media organisations, policymakers and funding agencies such as New Zealand On Air (NZOA) in fostering more representative portrayals of neurodivergence across Aotearoa and beyond. NZOA remains central to this research as Aotearoa's primary public media funding agency. Established under New Zealand's Broadcasting Act 1989, NZOA is responsible for supporting media content that reflects New Zealand identity and culture. Due to its significant influence over local screen production, NZOA serves as a key reference point throughout this thesis when examining how neurodivergence is represented and how future portrayals within Aotearoa might become more authentic and visible.

## Media Representation: Local and Global

Storytelling remains one of the most powerful ways through which individuals make sense of the world (Happer & Philo, 2013). Public opinion, understood as the collective attitudes and beliefs held within society, is not formed in isolation but is significantly influenced by media across various formats, including news, film, television and digital platforms (Hall, 1997). Accordingly, media plays a central role in shaping public discourse and collective perceptions (Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010), including how neurodivergent individuals understand themselves and are perceived by others (Hungerford et al., 2025). When representations are stereotypical or reductive, they risk reinforcing stigma and limiting public understanding. Conversely, nuanced

and authentic portrayals have the potential to challenge misconceptions, foster understanding and contribute to more inclusive societal attitudes (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Oliver, 1996; Wheatley, 2024). This relationship aligns with the social model of disability, which emphasises how societal barriers, attitudes and structures contribute to experiences of disability. From this perspective, media representations can either reinforce or challenge the social barriers encountered by neurodivergent individuals, further underscoring the importance of authentic and inclusive representation.

As a small nation with a strong sense of cultural identity, global media inevitably exerts influence; however, locally produced content carries particular significance for New Zealand audiences. For example, in July 2025, 15 of the 20 most-watched programmes were New Zealand-made, reflecting the value placed on locally relevant storytelling (Daly, 2025). Even within a highly globalised media environment, local content remains important to audiences seeking stories that resonate with their own cultural and social realities. Recent research also indicates that the rapid growth of global media platforms in New Zealand is beginning to slow, while engagement with local platforms may be stabilising (NZ On Air, 2024a). This creates opportunities for renewed investment in local content that can circulate globally, rather than positioning local audiences primarily as consumers of imported media (Currie, 2025). For neurodivergent individuals in Aotearoa, this presents an important opportunity: in the absence of local representation, imported stereotypes may dominate, whereas stronger local content has the potential to more accurately reflect the diversity of lived experience.

## New Zealand’s Representation Gap

Although this appetite for local content is promising, it makes the limited representation of neurodivergence on screen in Aotearoa all the more concerning. This gap likely reflects broader structural challenges within the media industry rather than simply an artistic oversight. It is important, however, to acknowledge New Zealand's efforts to reflect its diverse communities on screen. As previously discussed, NZ On Air is mandated to support content that reflects Aotearoa's diversity. According to its website, its primary function is to “reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture” (NZ On Air, n.d., "Our strategy" section). Within this framework, NZ On Air also emphasises its commitment to ensuring audiences “discover, value and enjoy diverse New Zealand content” (NZ On Air, n.d., "Our strategic framework," "Engage" section). Despite these commitments, the neurodivergent portrayals identified in this research suggest that representation remains limited, particularly within locally produced fictional content. NZ On Air-funded programmes such as *Attitude TV*, including more recent episodes of *Wired This Way*, have offered valuable insights into the lived experiences of neurodivergent New Zealanders. However, these examples also highlight the reliance on non-fiction formats,

raising questions about the opportunities for neurodivergent characters and experiences to be represented through local fictional storytelling.

## Positioning This Thesis

Situated within this representational shortfall, this research examines portrayals of neurodivergence across global and local screen media to explore how these narratives relate to identity, inclusion and public perceptions among neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rather than focusing exclusively on a single form of neurodivergence, this study adopts a broader approach that recognises the diversity and frequent co-occurrence of neurodivergent conditions. While existing scholarship has often examined individual conditions separately, this research seeks to explore how representations across the wider neurodiversity spectrum may intersect, reinforce or challenge one another, and whether common themes emerge across otherwise distinct experiences. The examination of screen media encompasses both fictional and non-fictional portrayals, including canonically neurodivergent characters and those coded as neurodivergent, recognising that each offers distinct insights into representation. Beyond these portrayals, social media is also considered as an extension of screen media, both in circulating representations and advertisements and in fostering neurodivergent communities and discussions.

The research also adopts an intersectional lens to examine how audiences interpret these representations in relation to factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Intersectionality refers to the dynamic interactions between social categories such as race, class, and gender, and how these shape lived experiences and systems of disadvantage (King-Mullins et al., 2023). Scholars emphasise the importance of this framework in understanding neurodiversity as shaped by overlapping identities and structural inequalities (Chellappa, 2026; Milner-Campbell, 2025). Given that media characters are constructed through these intersecting factors, it is essential that analysis moves beyond one-dimensional interpretations of neurodivergence to account for this complexity.

Therefore, the core research question guiding this study is:

**How do on-screen portrayals of neurodivergence shape how neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive themselves and each other?**

To address this question, the study is guided by the following research sub-objectives:

1. To explore how neurodivergent individuals interpret on-screen portrayals of neurodivergence, particularly in relation to identity and personal experiences.
2. To examine how neurotypical individuals perceive these representations and how they relate to their understandings of neurodivergence.
3. To identify similarities and differences between neurodivergent and neurotypical audience interpretations.

From this inquiry emerges a supporting question that extends the study's implications beyond its immediate findings and towards industry practice:

**What directions might future portrayals of neurodivergence take, both locally and globally, to support more authentic and inclusive representations?**

To address this supporting question, two further research sub-objectives are established:

4. To identify audience perspectives on what constitutes authentic, inclusive and meaningful representations of neurodivergence.
5. To consider how these perspectives may inform future media practices and recommendations for media producers, broadcasters and funding organisations.

It is important to acknowledge that my positionality as a late-diagnosed autistic woman, having received my diagnosis at the age of 20 and recognising the significant role media representation played in shaping my own understanding of autism, informs and underpins this study. Within qualitative research, positionality refers to the ways in which a researcher's identity, experiences and standpoint influence the research process and interpretation of findings (Goundar, 2025; Holmes, 2020; Yip, 2024). It encompasses the perspectives, assumptions and experiences that researchers bring to their work, recognising that knowledge is not produced independently of those conducting the research. Accordingly, this study adopts an emancipatory framework grounded in critical disability studies, positioning lived experience as both a valuable source of knowledge and a foundation for ethical and inclusive research practices (Hall, 2019; Hodge, 2008; Reaume, 2014). Rather than attempting to separate the researcher's experiences from the research process, this study acknowledges and critically engages with these perspectives to explore how media representations influence neurodivergent individuals' understandings of themselves and how such representations are interpreted by neurotypical audiences.

This reflexive stance shapes the overarching methodology of this research, which draws on both social constructivism and interpretivism. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study utilises surveys and focus groups to explore how audiences interpret on-screen portrayals of

neurodivergence. This design enables in-depth discussion and comparative insights, foregrounding lived experience while also identifying broader patterns of perception. As Hodge (2008) argues, a defining characteristic of emancipatory research is empowerment: participation should enrich the lives of those involved, including both participants and, where applicable, the researcher. Guided by this principle, the study avoids replicating traditional outsider approaches to disability research and instead seeks to amplify neurodivergent voices and perspectives from an insider position, both in its analysis and its recommendations.

The contribution of this thesis is twofold. First, it deliberately foregrounds Aotearoa's media landscape, contributing to academic scholarship in a context where global portrayals often dominate in the absence of local counter-narratives. Second, it offers a practical dimension by engaging directly with New Zealand audiences and considering their relationship to New Zealand On Air's policies aimed at reflecting the diversity of Aotearoa on screen. By identifying where current portrayals fail to adequately represent neurodivergent experiences – and how they might evolve – this thesis provides insights that can guide local funders, commissioners, and creators toward more authentic representations of neurodivergence. Ultimately, the project advances the vision of a mana-enhancing media culture that NZOA aspires to – one in which all New Zealanders, neurodivergent and neurotypical alike, are seen, heard, and valued as integral to the nation's collective storytelling.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

Having established the definitions of neurodivergence and disability, alongside the contributions this research aims to make both academically and within the media industry, this literature review now turns to existing scholarship on media representations of neurodivergence. It examines why these portrayals matter and how they are received and interpreted in global contexts, providing a foundation for considering their relevance to Aotearoa New Zealand's media landscape. A critical review of existing scholarship and screen portrayals is particularly important, as media can serve as a key point of exposure to neurodivergence, especially for audiences with limited personal experience of neurodivergent individuals. Such exposure may occur through portrayals of autism, ADHD, dyslexia, Tourette's syndrome and intellectual disabilities.

While this review considers neurodivergent representation broadly, some forms of neurodivergence receive greater attention than others due to differences in their visibility within existing media portrayals and academic scholarship. This emphasis reflects the literature and representations currently available, rather than suggesting that any particular form of neurodivergence is more significant than another. Although these forms of neurodivergence are distinct, existing scholarship raises questions about how their complexity is communicated through media, particularly when portrayals rely on simplified or stereotypical characterisations.

With this in mind, the literature review draws on scholarship across the wider neurodiversity spectrum, examining both fictional and non-fictional media to explore the narratives they present and what is currently known about their reception and interpretation by neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences. This includes peer-reviewed research alongside relevant industry publications, media examples and commentary. While academic scholarship provides the primary foundation for examining existing research, industry publications and commentary offer additional insights into contemporary representational practices and perspectives. Together, these sources provide a basis for critically examining recurring representational tropes, identifying gaps in existing scholarship and highlighting areas requiring further investigation.

## The Foundations of Media Representation

Before turning to the existing literature, this section establishes the theoretical foundations of media representation and audience interpretation that underpin this study, particularly how

media may shape public understandings of neurodivergence. As one of the most influential scholars in the field of media representation, Stuart Hall provides a key theoretical foundation for this discussion. Hall (1997) argues that representations of social identities, such as race, sexuality, gender and class, do not simply reflect reality. Instead, meaning is constructed through language and the ways individuals interpret it. Hall further explains that these interpretations are influenced by shared cultural codes and conventions, which shape how people understand the world around them. A related contribution to understanding audience interpretation is Hall's earlier encoding/decoding model. Hall (1980) examines how media messages are produced and interpreted, challenging the assumption that audiences passively receive information. Instead, he proposes that media producers encode messages with preferred meanings, while audiences decode, or interpret, these messages according to their cultural backgrounds and experiences.

Notably, Hall (1997) recognises that meaning is constructed not only through words but also through visual forms such as photography, making his theory of representation particularly relevant to contemporary screen media. These theories provide a basis for understanding how media portrayals of marginalised communities, including neurodivergent individuals, may shape public perceptions without fully reflecting the diversity of their lived experiences. Hall's work also highlights that audiences do not necessarily interpret these portrayals in the same way. This is particularly significant when considering how members of marginalised communities may interpret representations of their own identities differently from audiences with limited personal experience of those communities, especially when such portrayals rely on stereotypes.

The relationship between representation and stereotyping is also examined by Hall (1997), who draws on Richard Dyer's earlier work on stereotyping. Dyer (1977, as cited in Hall, 1997) examines how stereotypes function within media representation, particularly their role in maintaining social boundaries and reinforcing existing power relations. Drawing on Dyer's work, Hall (1997) distinguishes between typing, which helps individuals make sense of the world through recognisable categories, and stereotyping, which reduces people to a limited set of characteristics that become exaggerated and fixed. Hall argues that stereotyping establishes boundaries between what society considers normal and abnormal, reinforcing exclusion and existing inequalities. Although his analysis primarily focuses on racial representation, he acknowledges that these processes extend to other forms of difference, including disability. This is particularly relevant to neurodivergence, where media portrayals may similarly establish expectations of what constitutes typical or atypical behaviour, reinforcing narrow understandings of neurological difference. Dyer's examination of stereotyping also continued in his later work, where he considers how stereotypes in media reflect the values and interests of

those who produce and circulate them (Dyer, 1993). In the context of neurodivergence, this illustrates how those responsible for shaping media portrayals may influence whether neurodivergent perspectives are accurately represented or overlooked.

Building on these discussions of stereotyping, another foundational theory informing this study is Gerbner and Gross's (1976) cultivation theory, which provides further insight into why repeated media characterisations, particularly those grounded in stereotypes, matter beyond the screen. Originally developed in relation to television, cultivation theory proposes that prolonged exposure to recurring media representations can gradually shape audiences' perceptions of social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). In the context of neurodivergence, this suggests that repeated stereotypical portrayals may contribute to broader public expectations about how neurodivergent individuals look, behave and interact, with potential implications for both neurodivergent individuals' self-understanding and neurotypical audiences' perceptions. Although cultivation theory does not establish how individual audiences will interpret particular portrayals, it provides a useful foundation for considering how the continued prominence of certain stereotypes may influence social understandings over time.

Together, Hall, Dyer, and Gerbner and Gross establish the theoretical foundations for this study. Hall's work informs the examination of how neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences may interpret the same portrayals differently, while Dyer's work provides insight into how stereotypes simplify identities and reinforce existing inequalities. Gerbner and Gross's cultivation theory further highlights the potential influence of repeated representations on broader social understandings. Having established these foundations, the literature review now turns to existing scholarship on neurodivergence in screen media, including audience reception and gaps in current research.

## Fictional Media

There is a substantial body of research examining how neurodivergent characters are represented in fictional media and how these portrayals are understood by audiences, particularly in relation to autism (Jones et al., 2023; Mittmann et al., 2024; White & Snape, 2026). As autism has gained increased social visibility through the neurodiversity movement (Gerlach, 2024), it has become one of the most frequently represented – yet often oversimplified – forms of neurodivergence in media (Bogart, 2025). Prevailing portrayals risk reinforcing assumptions, producing one-dimensional representations of the autism spectrum while simultaneously marginalising other forms of neurodivergence (Atkinson et al., 2024; Wiltshire, 2021). Although scholars consistently critique this reliance on stereotypical frameworks, they

also identify emerging efforts towards more nuanced and diverse portrayals, both within and beyond autism (Ryan, 2025).

This sustained scholarly focus on fictional representation is significant, particularly given that such media often functions as a site of informal public education, shaping broader understandings of neurodivergence (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Kadar, 2024). As Kadar (2024) explains, "in a world increasingly dominated by visual media, films serve not only as entertainment but as influential cultural artefacts that shape societal attitudes and individual self-perceptions" (p. 1). In this sense, fiction holds the capacity to both reflect and shape societal attitudes toward neurodivergence, with stereotypical or absent representations influencing how such groups are positioned within the social imagination (White & Snape, 2026).

In Aotearoa, fictional representations of neurodivergence remain largely absent, with portrayals more commonly confined to non-fiction formats, rendering these debates less visible, yet no less important. As a result, neurodivergence continues to be not only underrepresented locally, but also widely misrepresented globally, reinforcing the need for more diverse and authentic forms of fictional representation. It is within this context that the present research seeks to contribute through its analysis of both canon and coded neurodivergent portrayals.

## Canon Characters

When a fictional character is described as "canon," it refers to "the official storylines and back stories invented by the creators of television shows, movies, and books" (Chaney & Liebler, 2007, p. 1). In this context, a character explicitly identified as neurodivergent within a text is considered canonically neurodivergent within that media universe. Jones et al. (2023) highlight that canonically neurodivergent characters can have either positive or detrimental impacts on the neurodivergent community, depending on how they are portrayed. While such representations offer visibility through explicit identification, they can become problematic when characters are reduced to a limited set of archetypes rather than meaningfully integrating neurodivergence into their broader identity – a pattern identified within existing scholarship (Babar, 2023; Gaus et al., 2025; Hungerford et al., 2025). As discussed earlier, these portrayals can position autistic characters at opposing extremes, depicting them as either childlike and socially unaware or exceptionally gifted in particular areas. In some cases, these characteristics coexist within the same character, where exceptional abilities, such as mathematical proficiency, are contrasted against perceived limitations in social understanding. Such portrayals risk presenting neurodivergence through a narrow set of characteristics rather than reflecting the diversity of experiences across the spectrum (Mittmann et al., 2024).

Drawing on recurring patterns identified in existing scholarship, which are examined in greater detail throughout this literature review, this study introduces the *"savant vs. stupid"* framework as an original conceptual approach to understanding these contrasting portrayals. Developed specifically for this research, the framework is used throughout the literature review and subsequent analysis to examine how neurodivergent characters may be positioned at opposing extremes of perceived ability or characterised through a combination of exceptional strengths and exaggerated limitations.

## The "Savant vs. Stupid" Framework

To establish the historical context underpinning this framework, it is useful to consider the origins of the term *"idiot savant,"* which emerged in nineteenth-century medicine. Coined by French physician and educational reformer Édouard Séguin in the 1860s, the term reflected an apparent contradiction between exceptional ability and intellectual disability (Ruiz, 2025; Treffert, 1988). Ruiz (2025) examines this historical categorisation, describing how individuals displaying extraordinary musical or numerical abilities alongside significant disabilities challenged conventional understandings of intelligence, creating a paradox in which someone could simultaneously be considered both a "genius" and an "idiot."

Although contemporary understandings of neurodivergence have moved beyond these earlier classifications, Ruiz (2025) argues that the fascination surrounding exceptional abilities persists. In particular, the disproportionate visibility of exceptionally talented autistic individuals has attracted criticism from disability advocates, who argue that such representations risk marginalising those whose experiences do not involve extraordinary abilities. These historical assumptions remain evident in contemporary screen media, where portrayals of neurodivergence may continue to prioritise exceptional talent over the diversity of lived experiences. This can reinforce narrow understandings of neurodivergence, particularly when portrayals are shaped by mainstream entertainment conventions rather than informed by neurodivergent perspectives (Wolff, 2025).

Drawing on these recurring patterns, the "savant vs. stupid" framework, a concept developed for this study, conceptualises how fictional representations of neurodivergence frequently position characters at opposing extremes of perceived ability. These extremes may be portrayed separately or coexist within the same character, as reflected in the historical concept of the "idiot savant". Rather than capturing the complexity and diversity of lived experiences, such portrayals can suggest a narrow, linear understanding of neurodivergence.

At one extreme, the *"savant"* archetype presents neurodivergent characters as possessing extraordinary or seemingly "genius" abilities, often overshadowing other aspects of their identities and everyday experiences. This trope is particularly prominent in portrayals of autism, as illustrated by Dr Shaun Murphy in *The Good Doctor,* whose exceptional medical abilities are central to his characterisation. Such portrayals risk reinforcing perceptions of autism as synonymous with extraordinary talent rather than recognising the diversity of autistic experiences (Poe & Moseley, 2016).

By contrast, the *"stupid"* archetype positions neurodivergent characters at the opposite extreme of perceived ability, portraying them as passive, socially incapable or childlike. Characters such as Sam Dawson in *I Am Sam* exemplify this trope through portrayals centred on limited intellectual capacity and dependence on others. The film further reinforces this deficit-based framing through the use of derogatory language, including the term "retarded" (Ejaz, 2020). As Draaisma (2009) observes, autistic people are frequently depicted as possessing either "diminished capacity or superhuman capacity, but nothing in between" (p. 1477), illustrating the narrow binary that underpins such representations.

Research has consistently demonstrated that both tropes within the *"*savant vs. stupid*"* framework flatten neurodivergent identity in media. While they offer visibility, they simultaneously reinforce stigma by failing to accurately reflect the lived experiences of the broader neurodiversity spectrum, which is far more multidimensional than these polarised representations suggest (Hungerford et al., 2025). When considered through an intersectional lens, these tropes also reveal a narrow demographic bias reflected within broader societal norms (Milner-Campbell, 2025). Film and television have overwhelmingly defaulted to the figure of the young, white, cisgender, heterosexual neurodivergent male – typically autistic and often portrayed, once again, as either a "savant" or *"*stupid" (Bassett, 2023; Wolff, 2018).

This "culturally acceptable" template carries significant intersectional implications, as it is inherently male-presenting and marginalises diverse neurodivergent identities. Part of this imbalance is rooted in the historical focus of research on neurodivergence in males, which has shaped dominant media reference points by privileging male experiences of neurodivergence (Maciver et al., 2026). As Tharian et al. (2019) suggest, this lack of research, and its subsequent translation into limited representation, may alienate underrepresented neurodivergent groups such as women. Therefore, further examination of how the "savant vs. stupid" framework is consistently reflected within these characterisations across the existing body of literature is necessary, not only to understand how these traits are constructed and interpreted, but also to examine their intersectional implications.

**The "Savant"**

To examine this binary in greater detail, the "savant" archetype draws on the real but rare phenomenon of savant syndrome – a condition in which individuals, often autistic, demonstrate exceptional abilities in narrow domains such as music, mathematics, or memory (Treffert, 2009). While such cases can be compelling, research indicates that fewer than 30% of autistic individuals exhibit any savant-like skills, with prodigy-level abilities remaining exceptionally rare (Howlin et al., 2009; Treffert, 2009). Despite this, the "savant" has become one of the most dominant media tropes associated with canonical fictional representations of autism and broader neurodiversity (White & Snape, 2026), exaggerating extraordinary ability while obscuring the everyday realities of most neurodivergent people.

Lutz (2022) cautions that media portrayals of autistic "geniuses" are far from neutral. While intelligence may appear to be a positive trait, framing it as the defining feature of autism transforms it into a stereotype that dehumanises autistic people. Hungerford et al. (2025) expand on this, explaining that even seemingly positive stereotypes, such as the "savant," can be harmful by reinforcing the misconception that all autistic or neurodivergent individuals possess extraordinary abilities. This, in turn, may marginalise those who do not conform to these expectations, leaving them feeling less visible or valued. Belcher and Maich (2014) similarly note that popular media privileges portrayals deemed "exceptional and worthy of awe" (p. 104), diminishing the ordinariness of autistic life and creating unrealistic expectations. Quirici (2015) reinforces this, arguing that savantism has come to function as autism's signature quality.

To illustrate, one of the most recognisable examples of savant syndrome in popular culture is Raymond Babbitt, a canonically autistic character from *Rain Man*. The film became a defining cultural touchstone for autism in the late twentieth century, cementing the association between autism and savantism (Knights, 2018). Raymond's extraordinary memory and mathematical abilities are presented as central to his condition, while his dependence and social difficulties reinforce the notion that autism is simultaneously characterised by both genius and incapacity. Research suggests that this archetype has shaped decades of subsequent media (Treffert, 2009), contributing to public fascination with autistic "otherness" while obscuring the lived realities of many autistic individuals whose experiences do not align with such extremes.

From an intersectional perspective, Ejaz (2020) observes notable cross-cultural differences in representations of neurodivergence, finding that Indian Hindi-language remakes of U.S. films are less stigmatising towards neurodivergence than their original counterparts. For example, these adaptations more frequently depict autistic characters in romantic relationships and employment contexts, in contrast to Hollywood productions, which offer narrower

representations in both traits and intersectionality (Ejaz, 2020). These findings suggest that media with the greatest reach – namely mainstream film and television – tend to propagate the most damaging stereotypes to the widest audiences, through tropes such as the "savant vs. stupid" framework. As such, there is a need to build on more positive examples and expand portrayals that shift audience attitudes in constructive ways, ideally grounded in local cultural contexts. This includes representing autistic characters as central, multidimensional figures rather than reducing them to a set of archetypes (Stern & Barnes, 2019).

Moving beyond a sole focus on autistic representation, research suggests that the logic of the "savant" trope extends to other forms of neurodivergence, particularly dyslexia and ADHD. As Shirley and Nair (2024) note, dyslexia was historically framed in deficit terms, but from the 1990s onwards it began to be reframed as a "gift" within media representation. Originally popularised by texts such as *The Gift of Dyslexia*, this discourse links learning differences to creativity and exceptional thinking, echoing the *Rain Man* phenomenon of equating neurodivergence with unusual abilities.

A prominent example of this "boosterism" can be seen in the book series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and its screen adaptations. Kirby (2019) examines how the series reframes Percy's dyslexia and ADHD as gifts associated with his divine parenthood, with his dyslexia described as his brain being "hardwired for Ancient Greek" and his ADHD as "battlefield reflexes" (Riordan, 2005, as cited in Kirby, 2019, p. 7). Kirby (2019) connects this portrayal to the *super-crip* model of disability, whereby disability is associated with extraordinary abilities or overcoming limitations. While this framing may appear more positive than deficit-based portrayals, it also risks reproducing aspects of the "savant" archetype by suggesting that neurodivergence is most valuable when associated with exceptional abilities.

Scholarly analyses of the "savant" trope, as seen in characters such as Raymond Babbitt and Percy Jackson, illustrate how media anchors different forms of neurodivergence to distorted extremes. Raymond Babbitt helped cement autism in the public imagination as synonymous with savantism, while Percy Jackson reframes dyslexia and ADHD as divine gifts. Both portrayals seek to make neurodivergence legible to mainstream audiences but do so at the cost of flattening its diversity and complexity. In each case, everyday realities are sidelined in favour of spectacle, reinforcing the notion that neurodivergent lives are valued primarily when they are framed as either inspirational or extraordinary.

**The "Stupid"**

At the opposite end of the spectrum lies the "stupid" archetype, which is similarly prevalent in neurodivergent media. A substantial body of literature demonstrates that this trope most commonly applies to autistic characters, further reinforcing an "all-or-nothing" mode of representation. Jones et al. (2023), in their systematic review of autism in fictional media, provides a comprehensive synthesis of this pattern. Reviewing 14 qualitative studies, they found that portrayals of autistic characters are often narrow, stereotypical, and marked by ableism. Characters are typically depicted as having high support needs, thereby sidelining the diversity and variability of neurodivergent experience. Recurring tropes include non-human othering (e.g., "robotic," "superhuman") and derogatory labelling (e.g., "retarded," "stupid").

One of the most damaging manifestations of this archetype is what Stevenson et al. (2011) term the "eternal child." Autistic people are frequently represented as "childlike entities" whose disability is framed as precluding self-determination. Even when written as adults, autistic characters are often portrayed with mannerisms, speech, and relationships that suggest arrested development – implying that while autistic bodies age, autistic minds remain fixed in childhood. This framing diminishes autistic autonomy, casting their lives as inherently dependent rather than self-directed (Kurchak, 2025). A particularly harmful example is the film *Molly*, which not only infantilises its protagonist, Molly McKay, through deficit-based tropes but also suggests that autism itself is reversible following experimental brain surgery. In doing so, the film reinforces both the "eternal child" and "stupid" archetypes, while advancing the damaging notion that autistic identity is a defect to be cured.

Jones et al. (2023) also emphasise the relational dimension of this stereotype, particularly in how autistic characters are positioned in relation to others. Two negative patterns are especially prevalent. First, neurodivergence is depicted as a burden on others, particularly parents, and framed as a form of family catastrophe, as seen in portrayals such as Max Braverman in *Parenthood* (Rosenberg, 2014). Second, neurodivergent individuals are portrayed as socially dysfunctional and incapable of sustaining relationships (Poe & Moseley, 2016), as reflected in storylines such as Shaun Murphy in *The Good Doctor*, where communication and interpersonal interaction are frequently positioned as challenges within his role as a doctor.

While the majority of existing scholarship centres on autistic representation due to its prevalence within the neurodiversity umbrella, it is important to note that the "stupid" trope is not confined to autism. Dyslexia, for instance, is frequently portrayed in media through reductive stereotypes, with characters often depicted as failing at school, disengaged, or incapable of sustaining employment (Shirley & Nair, 2024; Tittel & King, 2020). As Shirley and

Nair (2024) observe, dyslexia has historically been reduced to a marker of low intelligence rather than represented as a legitimate cognitive difference. An example can be seen in the film *Pearl Harbor*, where the character Rafe McCawley is portrayed as having dyslexia. The film equates his childhood struggles with writing with general stupidity, perpetuating the outdated misconception that dyslexia implies a lack of capability.

Research has also found that ADHD is frequently trivialised within popular culture. As EnglandKennedy (2008) observes, media representations often reproduce prejudice by reducing ADHD to the image of hyperactive, mischievous young boys who disrupt classrooms because they cannot sit still. While this may reflect one manifestation of ADHD, the condition presents in diverse ways across individuals. Rather than capturing this complexity or depicting access to professional support, ADHD is typically framed through tropes of quirkiness or humour. Robb-Dover (2026) notes that ADHD characters are rarely portrayed authentically; instead, they often function as comic or eccentric devices, as seen in characters such as Barney Stinson from *How I Met Your Mother*, whose impulsivity and erratic behaviour are frequently framed for comedic effect rather than understood as expressions of neurodivergence.

Tourette's syndrome has also been distorted within the "stupid" trope in fictional portrayals, most commonly through its reduction to coprolalia (involuntary swearing), despite this symptom being present in only a minority of individuals with Tourette's. For example, Calder-Sprackman et al. (2014), in a review of 37 films and television programmes produced between 1976 and 2010, found that fictional portrayals of Tourette's frequently rely on exaggerated tics and offensive stereotypes, with physicians often depicted as unsympathetic and focused solely on medicalised "fixes." These representations not only misinform audiences but also trivialise the complexities of living with Tourette's by reducing it to shock value or perceived stupidity (Müller-Vahl et al., 2026).

**The "Defiers"**

Alternatively, scholars have also identified more positive canon portrayals in fictional media over the past decade that deliberately challenge both the *"*savant" and *"*stupid" tropes, particularly in contrast to the older representations that have historically dominated mainstream media. These portrayals – termed in this study as the "*defiers"* – depict neurodivergent characters with greater empathy, relational depth, and engagement in everyday experiences, reflecting a more contemporary approach to representation which is exceptionally done when neurodivergent involvement is in the forefront. This is significant because representations that foreground interpersonal dynamics and ordinary life experiences have been shown to offer more

authentic depictions of neurodivergence and can positively influence public attitudes (Belcher & Maich, 2014; O'Neal, 2013).

One example of a contested "defier" is Sam Gardner, the canonically autistic protagonist of *Atypical*. While some critics argue that his character continues to reflect broader representational limitations, particularly through the casting of a neurotypical actor and his positioning as a young, white, heterosexual male, others acknowledge the series' efforts to develop more nuanced portrayals of autism. Following criticism of its first season for its lack of neurodivergent involvement (Rowe, 2017), the production introduced changes in subsequent seasons, including the appointment of autistic author David Finch as a script consultant and greater involvement of neurodivergent individuals (Hutchins, 2018). As Kurchak (2021) observes, "Coverage of these shows still has its problems, too. But the small victories that we're experiencing matter" (para 17).

Throughout the series, Sam is portrayed pursuing romantic relationships, attending therapy to develop his social understanding and navigating increasingly complex family dynamics (Wolff, 2018). Importantly, these storylines extend beyond his autism, exploring challenges such as his parents' marital difficulties and his sister's struggle to feel equally supported within the family, which are also shaped by the experiences and decisions of other characters. Rather than presenting autism as entirely positive or negative, these narratives offer a more relatable and multidimensional portrayal of Sam's life, illustrating how neurodivergent representation can acknowledge difficulties without reducing characters to their diagnoses.

More recently, screen media has expanded its portrayal of canonically neurodivergent female characters, challenging the predominantly male-centred representations of earlier decades. One such "defier" is Quinni in *Heartbreak High*, a teenage autistic character portrayed by autistic actress and advocate Chloé Hayden. Her lesbian identity and close relationships with other queer characters challenge both the male-centred and heteronormative tendencies of earlier portrayals. The series also explores experiences such as masking, autonomy and sensory overwhelm (Kapit, 2023; Webb, 2024). Particularly significant is Quinni's later storyline involving unmasking in Season 2, Episode 5, "The Demon King," where she begins expressing herself more openly without adjusting her behaviour to meet others' expectations (Khan, 2024). However, this shift is met with criticism from those around her, who perceive her as rude or unlikeable. Rather than presenting unmasking as an entirely positive or straightforward experience, the storyline explores the social consequences of autistic authenticity, challenging the expectation that neurodivergent individuals must continually accommodate others to gain acceptance.

Similarly, *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* features Kayla Cromer, recognised as the first autistic actress to portray a leading autistic character in an American television series (Cromer, 2020). Her performance as Matilda challenges conventional portrayals by presenting an autistic young woman whose identity extends beyond her diagnosis. In particular, Matilda's exploration of romantic relationships and sexual intimacy challenges stereotypes that portray autistic individuals as inherently asexual or incapable of meaningful romantic connections (Bastow, 2020). By allowing Matilda to express her own desires and navigate relationships independently, the series presents a more multidimensional portrayal of autism that acknowledges the romantic and sexual agency of neurodivergent individuals.

Positive canon representations that defy stereotypes also exist beyond autism, and while they remain relatively rare, they provide important examples. For instance, in *Grey's Anatomy,* Cristina Yang's dyslexia is acknowledged as part of her backstory without being framed as a limiting trait. Instead, she is depicted as a highly accomplished surgeon, allowing her success to stand independently of reductive stereotypes (Kantor, 2018). This can also be seen in *Front of the Class* (2008), which follows Brad Cohen, a man with Tourette's syndrome who navigates discrimination while pursuing his goal of becoming a teacher. The film has been praised for its more grounded portrayal of Tourette's, avoiding an overreliance on coprolalia and instead emphasising persistence without ridicule (Rose & Firdiansyah, 2023).

Another example of a "defier" across the neurodiversity spectrum can be seen in the film *Juno*, which tells the story of a pregnant teenager whose character has ADHD. Refreshingly, Juno's impulsivity, creativity, and vulnerability align with characteristics familiar to many individuals with ADHD (Gregory, 2020). While the narrative does not focus on Juno's ADHD, it allows these traits to exist as part of her broader characterisation, offering a rare example of neurodivergent traits woven into a story that does not reduce her identity to neurodivergence.

What these portrayals share is not only their ability to defy the trait-based constraints of the "savant vs. stupid" framework, but also their capacity to challenge it through an intersectional lens. Many of these portrayals centre neurodivergent women from diverse backgrounds. This is particularly significant given the longstanding underrepresentation of neurodivergent women in media, a pattern closely tied to the historical prioritisation of male presentations of autism within both research and diagnostic frameworks (Jack, 2021). Although autism is more commonly diagnosed in males – with a reported ratio of approximately 4.3 males for every 1 female (Fombonne, 2003) – scholars argue that this disparity may also reflect gendered biases in how neurodivergence has traditionally been identified and understood. Consequently, public perceptions of who is "expected" to be neurodivergent, and what neurodivergence is perceived to "look like," have largely been shaped around male-coded presentations, despite the fact that

neurodivergence may manifest differently in women (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022; Pham et al., 2022; Prochnow, 2014). The limited visibility of neurodivergent women within both research and media can contribute to feelings of alienation by restricting opportunities to see their experiences reflected on screen (Tharian et al., 2019), reinforcing the importance of more diverse canonical representations across the neurodiversity spectrum.

### Where is Aotearoa?

A consistent limitation across the fictional "savant", "stupid", and "defier" tropes discussed is that the examples drawn from both media and literature are overwhelmingly situated within global contexts. The absence of local examples reflects a broader gap in canonical representation, where portrayals of neurodivergence within Aotearoa remain limited or largely absent. One of the few canonical portrayals within the New Zealand context is Dr. Gabrielle Jacobs in *Shortland Street*, a neurosurgeon with autism portrayed by Virginie Le Brun, who is neurotypical (Bowles, 2025). Her character was widely praised by audiences and organisations such as Autism New Zealand at the time for raising awareness and presenting an autistic woman in a position of professional authority. However, such examples remain the exception rather than the norm.

This is particularly concerning given that older screen portrayals rooted in exaggerated tropes continue to function as major cultural touchstones. This is reinforced by their longstanding cultural visibility and widespread circulation, alongside the relative scarcity of newer nuanced representations capable of challenging them. The persistence of this gap more than a decade later, both locally and globally, highlights the ongoing need for more consistent, authentic, and multidimensional neurodivergent representation in fictional media. This is especially important within the Aotearoa context, where public media institutions and funding bodies emphasise the importance of reflecting the full diversity of New Zealand society on screen, including groups who have historically remained underrepresented or overlooked within fictional storytelling.

## Coded Characters: Positives and Negatives

Moving beyond the official terminology of canon in fictional works, the concept of coded characters becomes essential to discussions of neurodivergent screen media. "Coded" – a term evolving from the earlier fan concept of fanon, itself derived from canon – refers to traits that audiences or fan communities collectively interpret as part of a character despite never being formally stated. Chaney and Liebler (2007) note that fanon (and, by extension, coding) often emerges to "correct" perceived flaws in canon or reinterpret elements audiences consider

implausible or undesirable. Building on this, Johnson (2023) argues that recognising such traits as potentially neurodivergent – even when not canonically identified – is essential to challenging neurotypical bias and reducing stigma, as coded portrayals are often perceived as more nuanced. Coded representations are therefore valuable when considering the broader neurodiversity spectrum, as they enable the inclusion of experiences beyond explicitly diagnosed characters (Webber et al., 2024). However, similar to canonical portrayals, research suggests that coded representations also possess limitations that constrain their capacity to contribute positively to neurodivergent representation.

## Negative Codings

While coding a character as neurodivergent can offer creative flexibility for media producers and interpretive space for audiences, its educational value may be limited when the character's neurodivergence is not explicitly acknowledged. Such portrayals may be less effective in increasing understanding of neurodivergence if audiences do not recognise the traits as neurodivergent (Jones et al., 2023). It has also been argued that coded roles enable writers to present neurodivergent traits as comic relief or objects of derision in ways that might be less acceptable with canonically identified characters (Jones et al., 2023; Shafee, 2021). Audience responses reflect these concerns. In Shafee's (2021) study comparing canonical and coded autistic portrayals, one participant criticised how media producers can use autistic-coded characters as targets of ridicule without explicitly acknowledging the disability being mocked, stating that “that’s what we do to autistic people, but without having to admit that yes, they’re making fun of disability” (p. 38). Similarly, Williams (2024) notes that sitcoms frequently position coded autistic characters as the butt of jokes, rather than multidimensional figures capable of shaping humour and narrative.

A prominent example of negative coding is Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* and *Young Sheldon*, whose character has attracted criticism in both academic scholarship and wider media commentary (McMahon-Coleman & Weaver, 2020; Stansel, 2020; Zauderer, 2025). His rigid routines, blunt communication and difficulty interpreting social cues closely resemble commonly recognised autistic traits, yet these characteristics are frequently exaggerated for comedic effect (Gaeke-Franz, 2022). Although audiences widely interpret Sheldon as autistic-coded, the decision not to explicitly identify him as autistic raises questions about the responsibilities of media producers when drawing on recognisable characteristics of neurodivergence (McMahon-Coleman & Weaver, 2020). This tension is particularly evident in commentary from television critic Alan Sepinwall (2009), who offers the following explanation for the writers' reluctance to identify Sheldon as having Asperger's syndrome:

> In the writers' minds, calling it Asperger's creates too much of a burden to get the details right. There's also the danger that the other characters' insults about Sheldon's behavior - in other words, 90 percent of the show's comedy - would seem mean if they were mocking a medical condition as opposed to generic eccentricity. In general, it's more responsibility than they feel a relatively light comedy can handle. (para. 4)

This explanation suggests an awareness of the representational responsibilities associated with explicitly identifying a character as autistic. Nevertheless, the continued use of exaggerated autistic-coded traits for humour raises concerns about whether avoiding a diagnostic label allows potentially harmful stereotypes to circulate without equivalent scrutiny. Sheldon's character therefore illustrates how implicit neurodivergent coding can reinforce ableist assumptions while withholding the explicit recognition associated with canonical representation.

A parallel example can be seen in Dr. Gregory House from *House*. Similar to Sheldon, he is widely interpreted in media discourse as autistic-coded, exhibiting traits such as bluntness, obsessive focus and social detachment (Ajagunla, 2023; The Autlaws, 2024). However, these characteristics are frequently reframed through misanthropy. The series even gestures toward an autism diagnosis in Season 3, Episode 4, “Lines in the Sand,” when one character suggests that House may have Asperger's syndrome, only for another to dismiss it, stating, “House doesn't have Asperger's. The diagnosis is much simpler. He's a jerk” (Hoselton, 2006, 39:45). This exchange, alongside House's implicit autistic coding, risks reinforcing associations between autistic characteristics and socially undesirable behaviour. This mirrors the approach seen in *The Big Bang Theory*, whereby recognisable autistic-coded characteristics are incorporated into a character's portrayal, often through negative stereotypes, while an explicit diagnostic label is withheld. Despite this, audiences continue to interpret House as autistic, citing behaviours such as an aversion to small talk and a fixation on objects like his tennis ball. Within the narrative, however, these same traits are frequently framed as evidence of arrogance or moral failing, transforming difference into dysfunction.

Together, Sheldon Cooper and Gregory House illustrate how negative coding operates across media. Crucially, the ease with which viewers recognise both characters as autistic-coded suggests that the absence of explicit canonical identification does little to prevent such interpretations (Jones et al., 2023). Moreover, their positioning as white, male, and heterosexual continues the narrow representational patterns identified earlier in canonical portrayals. Rather than mitigating stereotypes, this absence of labelling enables autism to be represented without accountability, reinforcing a feedback loop of misrepresentation. As Jones et al. (2023) explain, coded portrayals carry inherent risks: without explicit identification, they may undermine

understanding and reinforce stereotypes. However, when handled with care, coding can also create space for more subtle, relationally grounded representations that challenge reductive archetypes.

## Positive Codings

Conversely, scholarship also suggests how coded characters can function as sites of reclamation and reinterpretation within fan communities. Kang (2024), for example, examines how audiences reinterpret characters across fandom spaces, arguing that this process of reinterpretation can become an important form of reclamation for different viewer types. Given that canon portrayals have so often misrepresented neurodivergence, audiences frequently construct their own readings of characters whose traits resonate with lived experience. This process can create points of empowerment, allowing viewers to reclaim characters who may not have been intentionally written as neurodivergent. Notably, many viewers report coded portrayals as more authentic than canonical ones, precisely because they do not rely as heavily on reductive frameworks such as the "savant vs. stupid" binary to drive the narrative (Kang, 2024).

A prominent example is the recent adaptation of Wednesday Addams in the television series *Wednesday*. In an analysis examining the significance of Wednesday's character to the autistic community as a coded character, Bassett (2023) dissects the components of her characterisation and analyses how viewers have responded to her portrayal. While interpretations of her coded traits varied, Bassett (2023) observes that "in the eyes of many Autistic individuals, Wednesday Addams—at the very least, this latest version of her—is clearly and profoundly coded as autistic" (p. 1). For these viewers, the character offered something relatively rare within fictional media: the opportunity to see neurodivergent traits reflected in a complex and multidimensional protagonist. The intersectional dimensions of her identity – including her positioning as a Latina woman and interpretations of her as queer – further suggest a shift toward more diverse and inclusive representations of neurodivergence, particularly within fictional media where strong emotional connections to characters are often formed (Bassett, 2023).

Further examples of positive coding can be identified in the TV series *Anne with an E*, based on the book series *Anne of Green Gables*, which is frequently cited as a positive example of neurodivergent representation. The protagonist, Anne Shirley, is often interpreted as both autistic- and ADHD-coded. Kingdon and Lowry (2025) suggest that Anne's experiences mirror many autistic realities, including feeling like an outsider, struggling to mask, and being told she

is “too much” for simply being herself. Crucially, these characteristics are not ridiculed or pathologised, but instead framed as central to her individuality and charm (Lilley, 2023).

A similar dynamic is evident in the character of Beth Harmon from *The Queen’s Gambit*. While never explicitly identified as autistic, she has been widely interpreted as autistic-coded. As Price (2020) observes, Anya Taylor-Joy’s performance balances social difficulty and focused brilliance without exaggerating either into caricature. Unlike the “savant” or “stupid” frameworks, Beth is written with nuance: her passion for chess and obsessive focus is central to her identity, yet coexist with vulnerability and resilience (Neil, 2020). This layered depiction resists deficit-based framing and has been reclaimed by many autistic viewers as a form of authentic representation.

Finally, Abed Nadir from *Community* offers a contrasting example of neurodivergent coding. Unlike Sheldon Cooper, whose autistic-coded characteristics are frequently exaggerated for comedic effect, Abed's passion for film, literal communication style and difficulties interpreting social cues are generally portrayed through humour without consistently reducing him to the subject of ridicule (Ellis, 2021). His friendships and emotional development demonstrate how neurodivergent-coded characters can contribute meaningfully to a narrative without being defined solely by their perceived neurological differences (Mullis, 2019). Importantly, Abed also introduces an intersectional dimension to representation. As a Palestinian American character, he challenges the predominantly white, male characterisation that has historically shaped portrayals of autism in screen media.

Extending this intersectional lens, what is particularly significant about Wednesday, Anne, and Beth is that their portrayals centre female characters, marking a departure from the overwhelmingly male-dominated neurodivergent stereotypes that characterise mainstream media. Abed, too, offers an important counterpoint to the white, male “geek” archetype by illustrating how race and culture intersect with neurodivergence. Together, these portrayals help explain why audiences turn to coded interpretations in search of recognition: they gesture toward forms of authenticity and diversity that canonical representations have yet to consistently reflect.

Much like the positive canonical portrayals discussed earlier, subtlety emerges as a key strength in these coded representations. By capturing the ambiguity through which neurodivergence is experienced in everyday contexts, these portrayals challenge the oversimplifies “savant vs. stupid” framework, reinforcing what is possible when representation is approached with nuance. This perspective is also supported by Tistje (2024), who argues that subtle portrayals of neurodivergence can often be more meaningful than overt ones, as they are

conveyed in less explicit and more nuanced ways. While such portrayals provide visibility for a select audience, the progression toward more explicit and accurately labelled representation remains an important next step in supporting broader public understanding.

### Again... Where is Aotearoa?

Within Aotearoa New Zealand's screen industry, the apparent scarcity of both canonically neurodivergent and neurodivergent-coded fictional characters highlights a significant gap in local representation. Across the literature and screen productions examined in this review, Dr Gabrielle Jacobs from *Shortland Street*, who is explicitly portrayed as autistic, emerged as the only prominent example identified. While this does not establish a complete absence of other portrayals, it suggests that neurodivergent characters remain comparatively underrepresented within mainstream New Zealand fictional screen media. This limited visibility may also contribute to the continued prominence of older international productions in audience recognition and interpretation, particularly those that reproduce narrow or outdated stereotypes. In the absence of a substantial body of contemporary local alternatives, such portrayals may continue to shape public understandings of neurodivergence, both within Aotearoa and internationally. Nevertheless, this representational gap also presents an opportunity for New Zealand's screen industry to develop more nuanced, contemporary and diverse portrayals that move beyond established stereotypes and reflect the complexity of neurodivergent experiences.

## Non-Fiction Media

Unlike fictional media, non-fictional figures are neither canonical nor coded, but real people whose lives and identities are already nuanced and multidimensional, with stories grounded in lived experience. This makes non-fiction one of the most prominent forms of neurodivergent representation in Aotearoa, where local fictional depictions remain limited. However, the way these individuals are framed on screen – both locally and globally – is rarely neutral. Particularly when neurodivergent individuals are not involved in the production process, research consistently shows that representation often reverts to polarised categories that echo fictional tropes (Price, 2026; Webber, 2024; Wolff, 2025). Where fictional characters are framed through the "savant vs. stupid" binary, real neurodivergent people in documentaries, news features, and reality programming are frequently positioned as either inspirational or burdensome – two categories that this non-fiction analysis will examine. This binary reduces complex lived experiences to extremes of pity or praise, limiting public understanding of neurodivergence even in contexts that claim to present "reality."

## The "Inspiration"

Representations of neurodivergent and disabled individuals in non-fiction media are frequently framed through narratives of inspiration, reflecting a broader tendency to position disability as something extraordinary, tragic or inherently worthy of public admiration. One prominent example is the "feel-good" news story, such as coverage of a non-disabled student inviting a disabled peer to prom. Although typically presented as an act of kindness or inclusion, the elevation of such interactions into public spectacles can position disabled individuals as objects of inspiration, with their perceived value implicitly validated through the actions and recognition of others (Gerlach, 2025). This framing is particularly evident in representations of visible disabilities, where every day experiences and achievements are frequently celebrated as exceptional acts of perseverance or triumph over adversity. Disability activist Stella Young popularised the term "inspiration porn" to critique this phenomenon, which Trombka (2022) describes as "the objectifying of disabled people as models of inspiration for able-bodied people simply because they are disabled" (para. 2). Such narratives risk reducing disabled individuals to their perceived struggles, positioning their experiences as motivational lessons for non-disabled audiences rather than recognising them as complex individuals with agency and identities beyond disability.

Closely related to inspiration porn is the "super-crip" trope, which shares similarities with the "savant" archetype introduced earlier in this literature review. Ruiz (2025) also draws this connection in their examination of the historical concept of the "idiot savant," discussing how exceptional abilities can become central to narratives of disabled individuals overcoming their disabilities. Similarly, "super-crip" narratives frame disabled or neurodivergent individuals as extraordinary for overcoming perceived limitations, often turning their achievements into spectacles (Wigg-Stevenson, 2023). In some cases, these portrayals verge on the fantastical, aligning with the "superpower" narrative, where exceptional talents are presented as compensating for disability (Schalk, 2016). Disability advocates have criticised such representations for reinforcing unrealistic expectations, particularly when individuals are celebrated as heroic for accomplishing everyday tasks that would otherwise be considered unremarkable.

Reality competition shows exemplify these dynamics. For instance, *The Amazing Race* has often foregrounded contestants' disabilities as a source of inspiration. Contestants such as Charla (seasons 5 and 11), who has dwarfism; Luke (seasons 14 and 17), who is deaf; and Zev (seasons 15 and 18), who is autistic, are frequently positioned through this lens. Even when not explicitly intended, their disabilities are framed as inspirational spectacles in real life that affirm and

comfort neurotypical audiences, rather than offering fair or balanced portrayals that reflect their capabilities (McGillivray et al., 2021; Valfer, 2026).

This narrative framing also extends to runway-based reality shows such as *America's Next Top Model*. In Season 9, Heather – a 21-year-old contestant with autism – was listed under "medical disabilities" on her application and was quickly framed as inspirationally disadvantaged (Shepard, 2010). Through selective editing, the show amplified her difference, portraying her as someone to be admired or marvelled at, rather than as a model competing on equal footing. She was positioned as heroic simply for existing and competing within a largely neurotypical environment. While this framing may have contributed to increased visibility of autism at the time, particularly given the positive audience reception (Shepard, 2010), it nonetheless relied on an inspirational framing that limits more nuanced understandings of neurodivergence.

Such portrayals are harmful because they legitimise the consumption of disability as a spectacle for neurotypical audiences. In this way, non-fiction depictions often reinforce the very stigma they claim to challenge, framing neurodivergence as a source of inspiration rather than as a valid and varied way of being. As Lennon (2025) argues, these portrayals perpetuate harmful stereotypes by reducing neurodivergent people – particularly autistic individuals – to objects for neurotypical consumption, a process that is both profoundly dehumanising and ableist.

### The "Burden"

At the opposite end of the "inspiration" trope lies the "burden" trope, which shares similar underlying dynamics and is particularly evident in parenting-focused reality television. While neurodivergence can involve support needs that place demands on families, friends and communities, it is important to distinguish these challenges from the harmful framing of neurodivergent individuals themselves as burdens (Jones, 2022). Such narratives shift attention away from neurodivergent individuals and instead centre the experiences of caregivers, potentially obscuring the lived realities of neurodivergent people. As Dosch Brown (2019) argues, television and film often portray autism through a lens that positions it as something that "destroys families" (p. 153), reflecting narrow ideals of what constitutes a normal family. As she explains, "Being in a family with an autistic child alters the family not because of the child, but because society set up such a constrictive space for its mythic ideal of normalcy" (p. 156). She further observes that this framing perpetuates harmful assumptions that autistic people are undesirable burdens. This is particularly concerning in portrayals of individuals with higher support needs, highlighting the importance of more equitable and accurate representations across the spectrum.

Parenting programmes such as *Supernanny* reinforce this narrative. Jo Frost's methods have attracted criticism for framing autistic and ADHD-related behaviours as naughtiness or defiance rather than expressions of unmet needs, placing the burden on parents to "fix" their children (Bradbury, 2022). One example can be seen in Season 2, Episode 7, with a segment subsequently uploaded to YouTube under the title "How to Get an Autistic Child to Speak" (Supernanny, 2022). The segment has attracted criticism, including in the video's comment section, for its emphasis on encouraging verbal speech rather than recognising and accommodating alternative forms of autistic communication. ADHD is similarly treated reductively, often equated with stereotypes of "naughty boys," overlooking the ways in which the condition can manifest differently in girls (Bradbury, 2022). Such portrayals risk positioning parents as victims of their children's behaviour while the children themselves are framed as problematic or dysfunctional, reinforcing the "burden" trope.

Another example is the documentary film *Autism Every Day*, produced by the non-profit organisation Autism Speaks. Presented as an unfiltered glimpse into life with autistic children, the documentary has attracted criticism for foregrounding parental suffering while portraying autistic children as a "burden". This framing is particularly evident when one mother featured in the documentary describes autism as a constant challenge from which she cannot take a break, positioning autism as an ongoing hardship for families while shifting attention away from the lived experiences of autistic children themselves (Thierry, 2006). Audience responses on Letterboxd, a social media platform where users review and discuss films, further illustrate these concerns. Reviewers described the documentary as "ableist propaganda" (Ian, 2025, para. 1), "the most evil shit i have ever seen" (Raised On Popcorn With Grant, 2022, para. 1) and "Terrible parenting 101" (MendouKusai, 2023, para. 2). While such language is informal, it reflects the intensity of criticism expressed by some viewers. These portrayals also echo the "stupid" framework identified in fictional representations, infantilising neurodivergent people and defining their worth primarily in terms of the strain they are perceived to place on others.

As Gaus et al. (2025) caution, the popularity of non-fiction platforms such as reality television, news, and documentaries has blurred the line between journalism and entertainment, making sensationalised portrayals easier to circulate among neurotypical audiences. Negative stereotypes – particularly the "burden" trope – spread more readily than nuanced accounts because they are more easily sensationalised and therefore more "engaging" for audiences. This dynamic renders non-fiction portrayals a double-edged sword: they can increase visibility, but often at the cost of reinforcing reductive and stigmatising associations with neurodivergence.

## The "Defiers"

Beyond the "inspiration" and "burden" tropes, a smaller body of non-fiction portrayals can be understood as the "defiers", extending the framework introduced in the fictional analysis. These representations resist dominant patterns and offer more authentic perspectives. Scholarship often highlights literature as leading this shift, particularly through autobiographies and memoirs that foreground lived experience (Jones et al., 2023). This autobiographical sensibility also extends into documentary film and, at times, biographical re-creations. While not strictly non-fiction, a notable example is *Temple Grandin*, a biographical film depicting the life of the American academic. Diagnosed with autism in the 1950s and expected to be institutionalised, Grandin – supported by her mother – went on to become a leading animal behaviourist. The film has been widely praised for its accuracy and authenticity, with Grandin herself affirming that it is "a very accurate depiction" of her life, having been closely consulted throughout its production (Bates & Fachette, 2023).

As Bates and Fachette (2023) argue, meaningful disability representation relies on active involvement both behind and in front of the camera – an element often absent in fictional works, which tend to fall back on reductive framings shaped by neurotypical perspectives. This emphasis on lived experience is further reinforced by Powell (2025), who establishes the importance of integrating neurodivergent voices throughout production. Doing so ensures that a broader spectrum of experiences is represented across age, background, and communication styles, while also avoiding tokenism by enabling neurodivergent individuals to occupy fuller and more meaningful narrative roles (Tabor, 2025).

Another example of a non-fiction "defier" emerges from reality television, where representation is framed through first-person perspectives rather than external narration. An eminent case is *Love on the Spectrum*, produced in both Australian and American versions. The series follows autistic adults as they navigate dating and relationships. Reviews have praised the show for its nuanced and grounded depiction of romance, communication, and sensory challenges – areas rarely explored with such depth in mainstream media. Its greatest strength lies in foregrounding the diversity of autism, presenting participants not as stereotypes but as individuals with distinct personalities, desires, and relational experiences. This is particularly significant given that, as Alschech (2023) argues, in relation to sexuality and romantic relationships, people with disabilities have long been framed as childlike and incapable of forming long-term romantic relationships. By portraying autistic individuals as adults with romantic agency, the series challenges one of the most entrenched stigmas in disability media.

Individual participants on the show also provide important insight into the value of non-fiction representation. Olivia Sharpe, one of the Australian cast members featured in Season 1, Episode 4 of *Love on the Spectrum*, reflected on her experience of being diagnosed as an autistic woman, noting that "there's no girl [ASD] criteria; there's only boy [criteria], so you get assessed by how male you are" (as cited in Cosner, 2023, p. 22). This observation demonstrates how reality television, when constructed with care, can illuminate differences in lived experience and potentially educate both neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences (Cosner, 2023). It also highlights the potential of non-fiction media to move beyond the reductive narratives of "inspiration" or "burden" and instead offer more nuanced and representative portrayals.

### What About Aotearoa?

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, non-fiction is where representation has excelled in ways that fiction has not. For example, *Attitude TV*, funded by NZ On Air, has consistently represented the lives of disabled New Zealanders with sensitivity and depth. More recently, its *Wired This Way* episodes have focused explicitly on neurodiversity. One episode follows Tamara Grant, an autistic and dyslexic woman who is also a mother, CEO, and advocate, offering a multidimensional portrayal that challenges deficit-based assumptions (Attitude Live, 2025b). Similar to Olivia Sharpe in *Love on the Spectrum (AU)*, Tamara's story foregrounds the specific challenges autistic women face in diagnosis and recognition, while also demonstrating their capacity to lead and advocate. Another *Wired This Way* episode centred on Tom Little, diagnosed with ADHD and auditory processing disorder at age five, who went on to become a national Young Enterprise winner and university hall president (Attitude Live, 2025a). Tom's journey – from being labelled "unteachable" to becoming a parliamentary advocate for neurodiversity – demonstrates both the barriers neurodivergent people face and the transformative potential of support (Attitude, 2025).

Although Down syndrome is often recognised as distinct from conditions typically grouped under the neurodivergent umbrella due to its chromosomal basis, it can still be understood within a broader framework of neurological difference and therefore offers a valuable point of inclusion within discussions of representation. An example is *Down for Love*, another NZ On Air–funded programme that follows six New Zealanders with Down syndrome as they navigate the complexities of dating and relationships. While some critics note the risk of such programmes veering into inspiration tropes (Clement, 2024; Gaus et al., 2025; Gillani et al., 2025), *Down for Love* has been discussed as adopting a more participant-centred approach. Developed in consultation with the New Zealand Down Syndrome Association, the series foregrounds participant autonomy, with families actively involved in the production process (McMillan, 2022). Rather than positioning participants as objects of inspiration, the show

instead depicts them as independent adults capable of making their own decisions. In this way, *Down for Love* can be understood as an example of locally produced disability representation that attempts to move beyond reductive tropes towards more grounded and participatory storytelling.

These examples represent an important achievement for Aotearoa, demonstrating that there is a solid library of first-person narratives of neurodivergence available to audiences, as well as a clear audience appetite for this kind of content. At the same time, they highlight how limited such content remains. Much of *Attitude*'s programming – and New Zealand's disability media in general – has focused on physical impairments, leaving neurodivergence and more hidden disabilites comparatively underrepresented. Addressing this gap presents a clear opportunity to commission more neurodivergence-specific programming. This could take the form of standalone series or deeper integration within *Attitude TV*; however, it must also involve neurodivergent individuals behind the camera as writers, producers, or consultants to ensure authenticity. Expanding these efforts would not only help normalise neurodivergent lives for New Zealand audiences but also lay the cultural groundwork for more nuanced fictional portrayals in the future. Importantly, these programmes also demonstrate that Aotearoa's media sector already has both the creative capability and infrastructure needed to produce meaningful neurodivergent content – reinforcing that greater representation is not a question of possibility, but of priority and investment.

## Media Representations Impact on Audiences

### Neurodivergent Audiences

The body of literature reviewed thus far has not only identified and examined the varying patterns through which neurodivergent characters are represented in screen media, but also highlighted the potential implications of these portrayals for the lives of neurodivergent individuals (Jones et al., 2023; Mallipeddi et al., 2025; Wiltshire, 2021). The persistence of stereotypical depictions underscores the need to critically examine existing scholarship on how such patterns may shape identity, public understanding and social inclusion, while identifying opportunities to improve representational practices and enhance visibility for neurodivergent communities.

#### Validation and Identity Formation

For neurodivergent individuals, research suggests that media can serve not only as a point of recognition but also as a source of validation, contributing to identity formation through

characters with whom they identify (Lind, 2015). This makes the lack of authentic characterisation particularly concerning, given that across the broader neurodiversity spectrum, "the experiences of millions go unseen both in life and on screen" (Friedman & Kahn, 2025, para. 4). As a result, the absence of relatable representations may make self-recognition and acceptance more difficult, particularly for those whose identities fall outside dominant stereotypes such as the "quirky genius", the "troubled student" or the "chaotic creative" (Friedman & Kahn, 2025, para. 4).

A similar gap also exists within academic scholarship. Gibson et al. (2025) note that the connection between media representation and its internal effects on neurodivergent individuals' everyday lives remains underexplored. In their institutional ethnography study, the authors sought to address this gap by inviting participants to reflect on the representations that had influenced their own experience with neurodiversity, rather than analysing media texts themselves. Grounded in lived experience, this approach revealed that participants consistently described the representational landscape as limited and expressed a desire for more diverse and accurate portrayals (Gibson et al., 2025). It also found that, when media representations fail to reflect lived realities, neurodivergent individuals often turn to alternative forms of representation – such as social media – in search of more accurate and relatable reflections of identity (Armstrong et al., 2025; Gibson et al., 2025).

When examined through an intersectional lens, particularly in relation to individuals whose identities are often absent or misrepresented in mainstream media, online communities have become important spaces for alternative narratives of identity and belonging (Duffy, 2024). While social media enables self-representation and peer connection, it can also facilitate the spread of misinformation, particularly when information is derived from unverified sources. Skafle et al. (2024) explore this dual role of social media, particularly its use as an information source regarding autism. Their qualitative study, involving twelve autistic participants, found that social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube offered more nuanced and positive representations of autism, contributing to participants' sense of identity and self-understanding. This was particularly significant for autistic women, who reported finding relatable experiences online that were often absent from mainstream media and health information websites. Despite recognising the potential unreliability of social media information, participants continued to engage with these platforms due to the limited availability of relevant information elsewhere.

Harnett (2000) further contextualises these intersectional issues, observing that popular television often stereotypes neurodivergent female characters and restricts their emotional or intellectual development. Disabled characters, she argues, face similar reduction, portrayed not as complex individuals but as symbols of struggle or tragedy (Harnett, 2000). For individuals

who are both women and neurodivergent, this layered underrepresentation helps explain why many turn to social media in search of more relatable and validating information. However, the risk of misinformation is heightened when social media becomes a primary source of information, rather than professional or academic resources – particularly in relation to diagnosis (Armstrong et al., 2025; Skafle et al., 2024).

### Towards Authentic and Own-Voices Representation

By confining neurodivergence to narrow stereotypes, screen portrayals may not only influence individuals' perceptions of their own identities but also contribute to broader social expectations that shape how they navigate their daily lives. Research has shown that neurodivergent individuals may engage in behaviours such as masking or attempting to "pass" as neurotypical to meet societal expectations, potentially contributing to exhaustion and burnout (Cook et al., 2021, 2024; Evans et al., 2024; Grodniewicz & Urbanek, 2026). Alternatively, individuals may adopt behaviours that align more closely with stereotypical portrayals to make themselves more easily understood by neurotypical audiences (Wiltshire, 2021).

Existing research has identified pathways to address these issues and move toward more complex representation. Wolff (2025) argues that authentic representation can be achieved when neurodivergent individuals are embedded within creative roles – such as writers, directors, producers, or consultants – ensuring that portrayals are informed by lived experience. Similarly, Mittman et al. (2024), in their scoping review of media portrayals, identify recurring gaps in autistic input and identify that inclusion in production processes significantly shapes how characters are conceptualised and received.

These collective findings acknowledge that neurodivergent involvement behind the scenes in media enhances both accuracy and emotional resonance and represents a pathway that should be further developed. It is also important, as emphasised by the reviewed research, to continue examining emerging digital platforms – such as social media – in order to better understand how participatory forms of communication can reshape neurodivergent representation from the ground up. When these conditions are prioritised, representation can not only challenge stigma but also transform media into a vehicle for belonging and social change, rather than something to be feared.

## Neurotypical Audiences

While existing research has begun to explore how stereotypical media portrayals shape neurodivergent individuals' sense of self, far less attention has been given to how these

representations influence neurotypical viewers' understanding of neurodivergence. This gap is particularly striking given that neurotypical creators and audiences often dominate both media production and the internalisation of neurodivergent characterisations (Atkinson et al., 2024). It is therefore important to examine how neurotypical audiences interpret these portrayals, and how current scholarship positions these perspectives in relation to broader representational dynamics. As Hungerford et al. (2025) illustrate, such portrayals play a significant role in shaping community attitudes towards neurodivergence, making them critical to examine.

**Media as a Knowledge Source**

For neurotypical viewers, research suggests that media portrayals of neurodivergence can serve as a primary source of knowledge about communities with which audiences have limited direct experience (Rebuelta, 2025). In the absence of direct engagement or prior understanding, neurotypical audiences may rely on readily available mainstream portrayals as their primary point of reference, rather than actively seeking out more nuanced or accurate representations (Murray, 2008). This dynamic can be further understood through Arias's (2019) discussion of the "social effect" (p. 565), whereby shared exposure to media information can contribute to common understandings of social norms and encourage individuals to accept information more readily when they believe others have also accepted it.

This distinction is important to consider, as while neurodivergent individuals may actively seek out representations that resonate with their lived experiences – such as coded over canonical portrayals – neurotypical audiences are more likely to encounter mainstream representations passively, often without critically evaluating them due to a lack of personal identification with the experiences being portrayed. Many of these representations continue to be treated as cultural "classics" despite relying on outdated and stereotypical depictions of neurodivergence, as discussed previously (Babar, 2023). Conversely, in the absence of explicit or recognisable portrayals of neurodivergence, coded representations may go unnoticed or unrecognised, particularly when they do not align with more visible or stereotypical presentations associated with higher support needs (Draaisma, 2009). As a result, reliance on such narrow framings can reinforce implicit boundaries between what is considered "normal" and "not normal" (Bulluss & Sesterka, 2023). This is particularly significant given that many forms of neurodivergence are not immediately visible, contributing to the ongoing lack of recognition and support for individuals whose experiences fall outside dominant or easily identifiable portrayals.

**Positive and Negative Outcomes**

Research examining neurotypical audiences' perceptions of neurodivergent representation does exist, though its findings remain complex. For example, Jones et al. (2023) illustrate this in their systematic review, which assesses both neurodivergent and neurotypical audience responses to fictional portrayals of autism. Their findings indicate that stereotypical and unhelpful portrayals continue to persist, shaping how both neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences understand neurodivergence. However, when representations are more nuanced and positive, audiences attribute more favourable traits to neurodivergent individuals. Importantly, such portrayals have also been shown to reduce social distancing intentions among neurotypical audiences, demonstrating that storytelling can foster greater openness toward contact and inclusion (Stern, 2020; Stern & Barnes, 2019).

Other studies similarly suggest that exposure to accurate and empathetic depictions of neurodivergence can increase sensitivity to disability discrimination and reduce negative affect during interactions with disabled individuals (Atkinson et al., 2024; Black & Pretes, 2007; Farnall & Smith, 1999). However, these attitudinal gains do not always translate into improved factual understanding, suggesting that even positive portrayals may be limited in their capacity to convey accurate or comprehensive knowledge about neurodivergence. This distinction is reflected in Jones et al. (2023), whose findings indicate that while attitudes towards neurodivergence improved following exposure to fictional portrayals, participants' factual knowledge did not increase substantially. In some cases, respondents reported increased uncertainty, more frequently selecting "I don't know" when asked to identify autistic traits (Jones et al., 2023).

This indicates that while screen portrayals may improve affective attitudes, they often fail to correct – or may even leave unchallenged – misconceptions about diagnosis, behaviour, or support needs related to neurodivergence (Friedman & Kahn, 2025). Consequently, these findings suggest that media producers hold a sense of responsibility that extends beyond creating merely positive representations; portrayals must also be sufficiently nuanced and in-depth to foster meaningful understanding among broader audiences. Without this, representations may cultivate empathy without accuracy, whereby neurotypical viewers develop sympathetic attitudes while remaining inadequately informed (Garland-Thomson, 2002).

**Short- vs. Long-Term Exposure Effects**

Research examining neurodivergent media representation has also highlighted the need to distinguish between short-term attitudinal shifts and longer-term social impacts. Many

experimental studies – such as those by Jones et al. (2023), Stern (2020), and Stern and Barnes (2019) – measure audience responses immediately after exposure but rarely assess whether these changes persist or translate into sustained empathy and behaviour towards neurodivergent individuals. For example, Favazza et al. (2017) note that early exposure to stereotypical on-screen portrayals during childhood and adolescence can solidify distorted expectations of neurodivergent people over time. Repeated exposure to these representations – especially within fictional media that continues to dominate youth entertainment (Pile, 2021), where family may also introduce children to older cultural "classics" shaped by outdated portrayals – can reinforce stigma and make such perceptions increasingly difficult to challenge or dismantle over time.

This creates tension within both media and the literature, as short-term improvements in attitudes resulting from more positive portrayals do not necessarily lead to sustained or meaningful understanding of neurodivergence. Jones et al. (2023) similarly conclude that further evidence is needed to determine the conditions under which fictional media can foster lasting attitudinal shifts. They advocate for longitudinal and culturally situated research designs that incorporate measures reflecting both autistic and broader community perspectives. These insights directly inform the present study, as a distinct gap remains in understanding how neurotypical audiences engage with media as a primary source of knowledge, rather than solely in terms of empathy or attitudinal response. Furthermore, there is limited research that directly compares neurodivergent and neurotypical perspectives on screen representations of neurodivergence. Addressing this gap enables a more comprehensive understanding of how such representations shape audience perceptions over both the short and long term.

## Implications for Aotearoa

Based on the reviewed literature, there is clear evidence that media portrayals of neurodivergence shape both neurodivergent individuals' self-understanding and neurotypical audiences' knowledge of neurodivergence. This underscores the significance of the media we consume from both perspectives. However, little is known about how these processes unfold within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, as much of the existing literature focuses on the analysis and impact of American and British media. While there is a growing body of research on neurodivergence in Aotearoa particularly in relation to Māori perspectives (e.g., Emerson et al., 2024; Goodman, 2023; Tupou et al., 2026) – there remains a lack of research that critically examines both the influence of global media representations on New Zealand audiences and the local media landscape itself, including how it might be strengthened to serve as a more relevant and culturally grounded point of reference. This reflects both the limited visibility of local productions as well as the global dominance of mass-produced media.

Along with the other gaps identified, this omission in the literature is a primary driver of what this study seeks to address, with the aim of better reflecting the diversity of New Zealand's neurodivergent communities. It is particularly important to consider that imported representations – and the stereotypes they may carry – have the potential to shape local attitudes and behaviours towards neurodivergence within schools, workplaces, and communities. As Arjun Appadurai (1996, as cited in Powell & Steel, 2011) argues, global "mediascapes" enable the circulation of media narratives across national boundaries, influencing how audiences interpret social groups within their own cultural contexts. In this way, dominant American and British portrayals of neurodivergence may inform perceptions in Aotearoa, despite emerging from different cultural frameworks and often failing to reflect local experiences and values.

When such portrayals dominate as primary points of reference, they risk overlooking the cultural specificity of Aotearoa, particularly when Māori and Pasifika perspectives are already underrepresented (Goodenough et al, 2024). Addressing these gaps is therefore critical to strengthening Aotearoa's own scholarship and storytelling practices in relation to neurodivergence, and to fostering more accurate and culturally grounded understandings. In doing so, locally produced media may not only benefit audiences in Aotearoa but also contribute to globally impactful understandings of neurodivergence.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

## Research Process

Building on the previous chapter's review of existing literature – and with a clearer understanding of the research gaps that remain – this chapter outlines and justifies the methodological framework used to investigate the guiding research question of this thesis:

**How do on-screen portrayals of neurodivergence shape how neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals in Aotearoa perceive themselves and each other?**

From this inquiry emerges a supporting question that extends the study's implications beyond the immediate findings and toward industry practice:

**What might be next for neurodivergent portrayals in Aotearoa – and within the global media industry – to ensure more authentic and inclusive representations?**

Based on the empirical nature of these questions, and the need to understand how meaning is socially constructed, a qualitative methodology was selected. This study examines neurodivergence as socially constructed in nature, with multiple layers of interpretation; therefore, qualitative methods are best suited to capturing the nuanced experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes of participants (Creswell, 2014; Tenny, 2022). Without qualitative inquiry, Lim (2025) contends, research risks oversimplifying social realities and overlooking the richness of human meaning-making.

In keeping with this qualitative approach, the analysis was primarily inductive, allowing participants' perspectives and experiences to guide the development of themes. Although the research questions established an overall focus on how neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences interpret on-screen representations of neurodivergence, the analysis was not guided by a predetermined coding framework or fixed theoretical categories. Instead, themes were developed through close and repeated engagement with participants' accounts, allowing patterns of meaning to be identified and interpreted in relation to their experiences.

To address how this qualitative methodology is employed in answering these questions, this chapter outlines the research design, methodological approach, and data collection methods used. In doing so, particular attention is given to how these choices support an inclusive and reflexive understanding of neurodivergent lived experience.

## Philosophical and Epistemological Foundations

To appropriately support a qualitative methodology, it must be grounded in strong philosophical and epistemological foundations (Arnold-Saritepe et al., 2026; Matta, 2022). The study is therefore guided by interpretivist and social constructivist frameworks. From an interpretivist perspective, reality is understood as subjective and can only be accessed through an individual's lived experiences and the meanings they assign to them – such as neurodivergent individuals' interpretations of media representations. This positions qualitative inquiry as inherently nuanced and in-depth, privileging rich, contextual insights over the generalisability typically associated with quantitative methods (Nickerson, 2026; Payne & Williams, 2005).

Social constructivism extends this position by emphasising that meaning is co-created within shared cultural and social contexts (Bandura, 1977). Building on Hall's (1997) constructionist theory of representation, discussed in the previous chapter, this perspective informed the study's exploration of how neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences interpret media representations through their differing social and cultural experiences. It also aligns with the social model of disability, which recognises the role of societal structures and norms in shaping understandings of neurodivergence (Jung, 2019).

Unlike positivist paradigms, interpretivist and constructivist frameworks reject the notion of a single, objective truth. Instead, they recognise the existence of multiple, contextually situated realities (Tenny et al., 2022). As Lim (2025) argues, the meaning of any "fact" is contingent upon its context and the perspective through which it is interpreted – precisely what this study seeks to interrogate. Given that different groups, such as neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals, may interpret the same representations of neurodivergence in media in distinct ways, the world of meaning is inherently pluralistic.

This epistemological stance positions knowledge as co-constructed between researcher and participant (Herber et al., 2026; Poucher et al., 2020), which is particularly relevant given my positionality as an autistic researcher. This distinction is significant, as much of the existing literature has been produced by neurotypical researchers examining representations of the neurodivergent community from an outsider perspective. As established, the inclusion of neurodivergent voices behind the scenes is crucial to ensuring authentic representation within media, and this same logic extends to academic research. However, the intention of this study is not to privilege my own voice above others, but to position lived experience alongside the perspectives of both neurodivergent and neurotypical participants. In this sense, my positionality informs the research while still allowing space to learn from and critically engage with the perspectives of others. Accordingly, this insider perspective offers a unique lens

through which to amplify neurodivergent voices while also critically engaging with, and contrasting, outsider interpretations.

## Theoretical Framework: Critical Disability Theory & Critical Social Theory

To further ground the study in the lived realities of the community involved, this research adopts Critical Disability Theory (CDT) as a central analytical lens. CDT supports the social model of disability drawn on in this study and situates knowledge production within broader systems of power, challenging the ableist assumptions that underpin social institutions, cultural narratives, and research practices (Hodge, 2008). As Goodley and Tregaskis (2006) argue, critical disability studies have played a key role in challenging traditional research approaches that positioned disabled people as passive subjects, instead advocating for research that actively involves and centres their experiences. This conveys the importance of incorporating insider viewpoints in research, not only by foregrounding participant perspectives but also by recognising the value of the researcher's positionality in producing work that meaningfully benefits the neurodivergent community.

Hall (2019) extends this perspective by describing CDT as an evolving discourse that both critiques and transforms the socio-political constructions of disability, particularly as it is grounded in Critical Social Theory (CST) (Horkheimer, 1972; Hosking, 2008). CST broadly examines how power, inequality, and social structures shape people's lives, while seeking not only to understand these systems but also to challenge them – making it a foundational framework for CDT. Hall (2019) further explains that, within CDT, ableism operates in conjunction with other systems of power, as understood within CST – such as race, gender, class, and sexuality – to produce and reinforce disability as a social construct. As such, CDT adopts an intersectional lens to improve the material and social conditions of marginalised groups, aligning with feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Sleeter, 2010). This research therefore draws upon both CDT and CST in response to its focus on how systems of power shape representations of neurodivergence in screen media.

## Phenomenological Strategy

As the methodology progresses from theoretical grounding towards the strategy of examining participants' perspectives on neurodivergent screen media – particularly through emancipatory frameworks such as CDT – a phenomenologically informed approach was adopted. Situated within the study's interpretivist and social constructivist foundations, this approach prioritises depth of insight over generalisability by centring the meanings individuals attach to their lived experiences (Lim, 2025). Central to phenomenology is the value placed on first-person

perspectives, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own words rather than having these defined solely through the researcher's assumptions. Tenny et al. (2022) similarly emphasise the importance of understanding how and why individuals perceive and respond to particular experiences, positioning their voices as primary sources of knowledge.

Within this research, a phenomenologically informed orientation was well suited to examining how neurodivergent and neurotypical participants interpreted media portrayals of neurodivergence. Rather than seeking to determine whether particular portrayals were objectively accurate, the study explored how audiences understood these representations through their own identities, experiences and perspectives. While a discourse-oriented approach could have provided valuable insights into how participants constructed meaning through language and group interaction, the primary aim was to identify and interpret patterns across audiences' subjective experiences of neurodivergent media representation. Accordingly, reflexive thematic analysis was employed to examine shared and divergent interpretations across the two focus groups, while maintaining an emphasis on participants' lived experiences. By recognising participant experience as legitimate knowledge, this approach also supported a critical examination of dominant media narratives and how representations of neurodivergence might be improved.

Although phenomenological research is frequently associated with individual interviews, focus groups were selected to explore both participants' lived experiences and the collective negotiation of meaning. Participants were encouraged to share their individual interpretations while engaging with the perspectives of others, allowing similarities, differences, and tensions to emerge through discussion. This approach aligned with the study's social constructivist foundations, recognising that meaning is shaped not only through individual experiences but also through social interaction. Morgan and Spanish (1984) suggest that focus groups provide researchers with access to participants' "common sense conceptions and everyday explanations" (p. 255), offering insight into how individuals interpret and make sense of their social realities. By combining a phenomenologically informed orientation with focus group discussions, this study enabled participants to situate their lived experiences and interpretations within broader cultural and media narratives. This approach supported a more nuanced understanding of how neurodivergent representations are interpreted by audiences in Aotearoa New Zealand, while also providing opportunities to explore participants' perspectives on how these representations could be improved within the local media landscape.

### Reflexivity and Researcher Position

Finally, before outlining the logistical design of this research, it is essential to acknowledge its primary driver: reflexivity. Reflexivity underpins both the theoretical and practical dimensions of this study and involves the ongoing examination of the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and influence throughout the research process (Goundar, 2025; Wilson et al., 2022). As an autistic researcher working within an emancipatory framework, I occupy a dual position as both investigator and member of the community being studied. However, this positionality is not intended to privilege my own experiences above others, but rather to inform a more reflexive and critically engaged approach to the research. In this sense, my insider standpoint shapes how the study is designed, conducted, and interpreted, while still allowing space to learn from and engage with perspectives both within and outside of the neurodivergent community.

My positionality informs the aim of this research, which is not to "fix" neurodivergence, propose universal solutions, or prescribe a singular or idealised mode of representation. Instead, it seeks to contribute theoretically informed insights that support understanding, reflection, and more responsible media practices capable of representing neurodivergence as a complex and dynamic spectrum. Maintaining an emancipatory lens ensures the research remains oriented toward ethical, respectful, and socially meaningful outcomes, without claiming to resolve the systemic issues it examines.

Guided by these principles, the approach to data collection was intentionally conversational rather than extractive. I positioned myself less as a distant researcher and more as a peer, creating a trusting environment in which participants could share honest, nuanced, and authentic reflections. This subsequently ensured that all participant experiences – whether formally diagnosed, self-identified, or undiagnosed – were treated as valid and valued. By continuously embedding reflexivity throughout the research process, this study seeks not only to analyse representations of neurodivergence in media but also to model an inclusive and ethical research practice. In doing so, it ensures that neurodivergent perspectives remain central to both the methodological approach and the knowledge produced.

## Research Design

With the methodological foundations now established, the remainder of this chapter outlines the research design used to address the study's guiding questions. Following the literature review, it became clear that the project could address a significant gap in existing scholarship by

examining the perspectives of two distinct participant groups: neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals within Aotearoa New Zealand. This enables a meaningful comparison of experiences with neurodivergent screen media across separate groups, identifying where perspectives converge and diverge. Such comparative analysis remains largely overlooked within existing literature, which has traditionally prioritised generalised perspectives over nuanced differences between audiences.

## The Strategy: A Complementary Qualitative Approach

To thoughtfully interrogate the perspectives of both neurotypical and neurodivergent participants, a complementary qualitative strategy was chosen, utilising both surveys and focus groups to enable comparison across the two groups. This combination offered both breadth and depth: surveys encouraged individual reflection and captured demographic information, while focus groups facilitated collective discussion and shared meaning-making among participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Wolff et al., 1993). This approach was selected as each method presents distinct strengths and limitations. Surveys alone risk generating surface-level insights, while focus groups without prior reflection may privilege more outspoken voices (Leung & Savithiri, 2009). Integrating both methods therefore creates a more balanced research design. In terms of sequencing, participants first completed an online survey to privately reflect on their experiences before engaging in group discussion – aligning with phenomenological principles by allowing time for individual sense-making prior to collaborative interpretation (Erdoğan, 2019).

## Participant Recruitment

In relation to participant recruitment, this study aimed to include a broad and diverse range of perspectives from both neurodivergent and neurotypical populations. Given that the literature highlights the need for more varied representations of neurodivergence in media, it was important to include participants across different genders, ages, neurodivergent identities, and cultural backgrounds to reflect a diversity of knowledges and lived experiences. All participants were required to be aged 18 years or older, based in Aotearoa New Zealand, and share a common point of interest: the representation of neurodivergence in media. As Gundumogula (2020) notes, qualitative participants should be selected based on their relevant experience or knowledge of the research topic, as this ensures meaningful contributions to discussion.

To achieve diversity across the sample, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed. Purposive sampling enabled the deliberate selection of individuals who expressed interest in the study and met the inclusion criteria. Importantly, this method was not intended to

privilege one particular type of participant or experience over another, but rather to capture a broad range of perspectives across gender, age, neurodivergent identities, and cultural backgrounds. Given the study's focus on audience interpretation and lived experience, purposive sampling was particularly appropriate, as it ensured participants possessed relevant knowledge, familiarity, or personal engagement with neurodivergent representation in media (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Snowball sampling then complemented this approach by allowing participants to share research information within their own networks, including through social media, thereby expanding recruitment through trusted community connections (Etikan et al., 2016; Tenny et al., 2022). This proved especially valuable when engaging neurodivergent participants, as trust, accessibility, and community familiarity are often significant considerations within qualitative research involving underrepresented groups. Together, these methods supported the recruitment of individuals with varied perspectives while helping to reduce barriers to involvement.

## Group Formations

Recruitment was primarily conducted through an advertisement poster (Appendix B) distributed across AUT's City Campus within the WG building for two weeks following ethics approval from AUTEC (Appendix C). Interested participants were invited to contact the researcher directly via email if they wished to take part. The response to recruitment was exceptionally strong, with expressions of interest exceeding the number of participants that could ultimately be accommodated within the study. To maintain fairness, participants were allocated to groups on a first come, first served basis until the required number of participants had been reached. Recruitment was finalised relatively quickly, taking only around one and a half weeks due to the high level of interest in the research topic. Although it would have been possible to include larger focus groups of ten to twelve participants, each group was intentionally capped at eight participants. This decision was made because, while focus groups can include up to twelve participants (Tenny et al., 2022), intentionally limiting each group to eight helped foster a safer and more supportive environment in which participants could share openly and engage in more in-depth discussion (Nyumba et al., 2018).

Once selected, participants were provided with the relevant participant information sheet (Appendices E.1–E.2) and consent form (Appendix E.3), outlining the full research process and ensuring informed and voluntary participation prior to involvement in the study. Two focus groups were then formed: one neurodivergent and one neurotypical, each comprising eight participants, resulting in a total sample of sixteen participants. Separating the groups by neurotype was intended to support participant comfort and shared understanding – particularly

for neurodivergent individuals – while also enabling clearer comparison between group perspectives. However, this distinction was not intended to establish rigid identity binaries or suggest that experiences within either group were uniform. Rather, group allocation was guided by how participants understood and identified their own neurotype, recognising that individual experiences and identities are complex and may not fit neatly into predetermined categories. While this comparative structure offered valuable insight into potential similarities and differences between audiences, it was not intended to position neurodivergent and neurotypical perspectives as inherently opposing or mutually exclusive. Instead, the aim was to explore how participants' differing experiences and relationships with neurodivergence might inform their interpretations of its representation in screen media. To contextualise the resulting sample, summaries of each focus group are provided below.

**Neurodivergent Recruitment**

The neurodivergent focus group (n = 8) consisted of an even split between participants aged 18–24 and 25–34, comprising five women, two men and one non-binary participant. In terms of ethnicity, Pākehā/New Zealand European participants represented the largest proportion of the sample (62.5%, n = 5), alongside those identifying as Asian/Indian (25%, n = 2), Māori (12.5%, n = 1) and Bulgarian (12.5%, n = 1).

Participants identified across a range of neurodivergent experiences, with co-occurrence common throughout the group. ADHD was the most frequently reported neurodivergent identity (88%, n = 7), followed by dyslexia (25%, n = 2), autism or suspected autism (25%, n = 2), dysgraphia (13%, n = 1), and OCD (13%, n = 1). Several participants described overlapping experiences, particularly combinations of ADHD alongside dyslexia, dysgraphia, or autistic traits.

Holding a formal diagnosis was not a prerequisite for participation in this study, as excluding undiagnosed individuals risked replicating the same gatekeeping patterns critiqued within media representation itself. Within the sample, 63% (n = 5) held a formal diagnosis, while others reported either informal or partial assessment pathways (25%, n = 2), or no formal diagnosis (13%, n = 1).

**Neurotypical Recruitment**

The neurotypical focus group (n = 8) similarly aimed to provide a range of perspectives across age and gender. The group included six participants aged 18–24, one participant aged 35–44, and one participant aged over 50, introducing additional generational variation into the

discussion. In terms of gender, the sample consisted of five women and three men. All participants identified as Pākehā/New Zealand European.

Most neurotypical participants were already familiar with the term "neurodivergent" prior to the study (88%, n = 7), while one participant (13%, n = 1) reported uncertainty surrounding the term. This existing awareness proved useful in generating discussion around media representation, audience interpretation, and broader public understandings of neurodivergence.

## Survey Design and Implementation

After both groups were successfully recruited, participants were invited to complete a warm-up survey prior to the focus groups. Separate versions of the survey were developed for the neurodivergent and neurotypical groups (Appendices F.1–F.2). While the core questions remained consistent, minor wording adjustments were made to reflect each group's respective perspectives and experiences. The survey served both as a foundation for, and complement to, the subsequent group discussions. As Braun et al. (2021) explain, online qualitative surveys can facilitate rich, multi-perspective engagement by providing participants with time to formulate and articulate their ideas. This aligns with the study's design, in which the survey preceded the focus groups to support individual reflection prior to collective discussion. Administered online via Qualtrics approximately one month in advance, the survey provided participants with ample time for reflection and encouraged them to consider their individual encounters with neurodivergent representation in media, as well as how these portrayals shaped their understanding, empathy, and perceptions.

The survey included a mix of open- and closed-ended questions to capture demographic information and stimulate personal reflection on the topic. Demographic questions – including age, ethnicity, and gender – were placed at the beginning of the survey to examine how these factors may relate to participants' engagement with neurodivergent screen media. This approach was informed by research suggesting that placing demographic questions at the beginning can increase response rates without negatively affecting other responses (Goodfellow, 2023). Each question was designed to be concise, clear, and unambiguous, in line with best-practice guidelines for qualitative survey design (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Questions encouraged participants to describe the media they consume, recall portrayals of neurodivergent representation, and evaluate their perceived accuracy or authenticity. Participants were invited to reflect on a range of media forms – including fiction and non-fiction, canon and coded representations, and both global and local content – as discussed throughout the literature review, in order to prepare their thoughts for further exploration in the

focus groups. Following survey completion via Qualtrics, both quantitative and qualitative data from participants were collected (depending on the question type) and could be directly exported for analysis in the subsequent data analysis phase.

## Focus Group Design and Direction

Following completion of the surveys, the study progressed to the focus group stage, with two sessions scheduled one week apart to allow sufficient time for data collection and initial processing. Each session extended beyond the lower estimated duration of 60 minutes, running to 90 minutes or slightly over. This duration reflected the depth and engagement of participant discussions, while remaining mindful of participants' time commitments. Conducted online via Microsoft Teams, both sessions were recorded and transcribed with participants' informed consent. Participants were encouraged to keep their cameras and microphones on, where possible, in order to capture not only verbal responses but also non-verbal reactions and interactions within the group. The neurotypical focus group was conducted first. While this sequencing was not initially intentional, it proved methodologically valuable, offering an early understanding of external perspectives – particularly given my neurodivergent positionality – which could then be considered in the facilitation and interpretation of the subsequent neurodivergent focus group conducted the following week.

Following best-practice principles for focus group facilitation (Almutrafi, 2019; Braun et al., 2018), both discussions were structured around separate guide sheets for each group (Appendices G.1–G.2), containing broad questions organised across six thematic prompts: stereotypes, authenticity, personal connection, public perception, representation, and future directions. Questions relating to these themes were used throughout each session as a flexible point of reference, with slight variations in wording between groups. However, the discussions remained intentionally loosely structured to allow flexibility and responsiveness to participant input. This approach positioned the focus groups as an "interactive journey" (Roller, 2018), through which insights could emerge that may not surface in one-on-one interviews. Research emphasises that the strength of focus groups lies in their non-directive nature and in observing participants interact in real time as they collectively negotiate attitudes, assumptions, and experiences (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). This enables analysis not only of what participants think, but also how meanings are formed, challenged, and reshaped through dialogue (Basnet, 2018).

Accordingly, my facilitation style remained largely unobtrusive, intervening only to clarify points, refocus discussion, or prompt further reflection when appropriate. I positioned myself as a facilitator of dialogue rather than a director of discussion, encouraging a natural and

collaborative exchange in which participants could take turns, respond to one another and build upon each other's perspectives as the conversation unfolded. When conversations inevitably overlapped or pauses arose, I briefly intervened to guide the speaking order, ensuring that participants had an opportunity to contribute without feeling pressured or overlooked. This approach aimed to promote balanced participation and psychological safety, aligning with Neville's (2007) assertion that effective facilitation depends on creating environments in which all voices feel valued and supported.

Throughout both focus groups, reflexivity was an inevitable and ongoing aspect of the research process. This was particularly evident in the neurodivergent group, where my sensitivity to diverse communication styles informed my facilitation approach; I avoided abrupt transitions, allowed extended pauses for reflection, and actively validated each contribution. As an autistic researcher, I experienced a greater sense of ease when facilitating the neurodivergent focus group, where shared experiential understanding reduced the need for explanation or self-monitoring. In contrast, facilitating the neurotypical group heightened my awareness of positionality and, at times, led to masking behaviours. This experience was both emotionally and methodologically significant, as these dynamics manifested differently across the two groups, reinforcing the relational and situational nature of researcher presence.

Overall, the discussions across both groups were highly productive, with participants engaging deeply and often requiring minimal prompting. While moments of masking involved additional emotional labour, they also functioned as an adaptive facilitative strategy that supported respectful and inclusive dialogue. In this context, masking was not solely a limitation, but part of an ethical commitment to creating a calm, accessible, and participant-centred environment. By prioritising comfort, clarity, and conversational flow, this approach contributed positively to group dynamics and enabled participants to engage openly and meaningfully.

### Online Format and Accessibility

As noted, each session was conducted online via Microsoft Teams for several reasons. This format enhanced accessibility and comfort for participants across varying locations in Tāmaki Makaurau, allowing them to join from familiar environments – an important consideration for neurodivergent individuals who may experience in-person settings as overstimulating or restrictive. Conducting sessions online also reduced travel-related carbon emissions, aligning the research with principles of sustainable practice (Gundumogula, 2020). Furthermore, as Gill and Baillie (2018) note, digital technologies have transformed qualitative research by enabling the inclusion of participants who may otherwise face barriers to participation, particularly within disability- and accessibility-focused studies. This approach also enabled the screen

recording and automatic transcription of all focus group sessions via Microsoft Teams, with participants' informed consent, ensuring that spoken contributions – including pauses, tone, and emphasis – were accurately captured and timestamped to support detailed coding and analysis.

Accessibility was prioritised throughout the entire data collection process, not only within the focus groups themselves, to ensure participants could engage comfortably and meaningfully. All materials (including surveys and participant information sheets) were written in plain, inclusive language, and participants were invited to contribute either verbally or via the chat function during sessions. Scheduling remained flexible to accommodate participants' routines and sensory preferences, while clear and supportive pre-session instructions were provided to reduce uncertainty and allow adequate time for preparation. Together, these measures reflect the study's emancipatory commitment to inclusivity and participant empowerment, positioning participants as respected and central contributors to the research process.

## Use of Artificial Intelligence

In preparation for the data analysis phase, the use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) was carefully considered in alignment with AUT's Guidelines for the Ethical Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Research (January 2026) and AUT's Research Data Management & Storage Guidelines. This approach was developed in consultation with the research supervisor to ensure that any use of AI adhered to ethical standards and best practice. As part of this process, it was agreed that AI would be used selectively and cautiously throughout the research process, with Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT models used only for limited support tasks. All data was anonymised prior to any interaction with AI tools, with identifying details removed to protect participant confidentiality and minimise privacy risks.

AI was not used to generate original research findings or produce substantive analytical content. Instead, its use was limited to administrative, organisational, and writing-support tasks. These included refining sentence structure and wording, summarising researcher-generated notes, title suggestions, potential ways of grouping ideas, and prompting consideration of alternative perspectives or areas for further review. Any outputs generated by AI were treated as prompts for reflection and were critically evaluated by the researcher. All interpretations, insights, and conclusions were developed independently through my own engagement with the data, informed by the relevant literature, methodological framework, and knowledge developed throughout the research process.

Particular care was also taken to avoid the reproduction of biases or cultural risks associated with AI systems (Hanna et al., 2025; Hofmann, 2025), especially given the study's focus on

neurodivergence and disability. This cautious approach ensured that the integrity and ethical positioning of the research remained central throughout. While AI played a limited role in supporting organisation, reflection, and refinement, all substantive contributions remain the work of the researcher.

## Data Analysis

Following the completion of the surveys and focus groups, all data was prepared for analysis in accordance with the ethical considerations outlined in the previous section. Consistent with the study's qualitative orientation, the aim of the analysis was not to measure frequency or produce generalisable claims, but to explore how participants understood, internalised, and discussed neurodivergent representation across different media forms and social contexts. The analytic process was initially considered through a combination of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). However, as engagement with the data deepened, it became evident that RTA was the most appropriate primary analytic approach for this study.

This decision was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2022) assertion that thematic analysis is not a singular or standardised method, but rather a family of approaches shaped by differing epistemological and methodological assumptions. As such, it can be applied within an experiential framework, where language is treated as a window into people's experiences, perspectives and practices, or within constructionist and critical frameworks, where language is understood as actively constructing meaning and social reality (Burr, 2003; Hall, 1997). This theoretical flexibility allowed thematic analysis to align closely with the study's epistemological positioning and research aims.

While qualitative content analysis (QCA) was initially considered as a supplementary approach, it generally involves a more structured process of categorisation and can be used to examine the frequency of particular references or portrayals (Schreier, 2012). However, the focus group discussions extended beyond identifying recurring characters or media examples, instead exploring how participants made sense of neurodivergent representations and envisioned their future development. Given this emphasis on subjective meaning rather than frequency-based categorisation, QCA was considered less suited to the study's analytical aims.

Consequently, the study proceeded with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as its sole analytical framework, providing greater flexibility while remaining consistent with its interpretivist and social constructivist foundations. Unlike grounded theory approaches, which are primarily concerned with developing theory from data, RTA focuses on generating and interpreting

patterns of meaning. It also explicitly acknowledges the researcher's theoretical perspective and positionality as integral to the analytical process, rather than treating prior knowledge as something to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This enabled the analysis to remain grounded in participants' accounts while recognising the researcher's active role in interpreting their significance for neurodivergent media representation.

## Braun and Clarke's Six-Phase Thematic Analysis

To clarify the primary analytic approach underpinning both the findings and discussion chapters, Reflexive Thematic Analysis is structured around six interrelated phases: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The following section outlines how each phase was applied in practice within this study.

### Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

The first phase of RTA was familiarisation with the dataset, with the aim of developing an in-depth understanding of the content "inside out" (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The process began with an initial review of all survey responses, allowing early impressions to develop without formal notetaking. Following this, pseudonyms were assigned to participant identities within the focus group transcripts to ensure confidentiality and ethical protection throughout the analytic and write-up process. The analysis then progressed to repeated readings of the two focus group transcripts, both around 20,000 words in length. Each transcript was read in full approximately three times without coding or annotation, allowing the data to be absorbed over an extended period before progressing to the next analytic phase. This deliberate slowing of the analytic process supported deeper immersion and reflexive engagement with participants' accounts. Rather than attempting to set aside prior knowledge or experience, I remained attentive to how my perspectives – both during and following the focus groups – shaped what emerged as meaningful, recognising interpretation as an integral component of analysis. This reflexive awareness laid the foundation for the subsequent coding phase.

Following guidance from my supervisor, an exploratory word cloud (Appendix B) was generated for each focus group transcript as an additional familiarisation tool. This was used as an orienting exercise to visualise frequently occurring terms and note differences in language across participant groups. While this provided a broad overview of recurring vocabulary, it lacked the depth required to capture meaning, context, and interpretive nuance. As such, the word clouds functioned as a preliminary familiarisation tool rather than an analytic method in their own right.

**Phase 2: Coding**

The second phase of RTA involved systematically coding the dataset to generate initial codes relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Given the volume of data, qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) was initially considered to support the process. However, as engagement with the data deepened, manual coding was ultimately determined to be more appropriate, enabling closer attunement to participants' language, affect, and narrative flow. For the focus group transcripts, coding operated across two levels. Semantic coding attended to participants' explicit statements through colour-coded highlighting, capturing direct references to concepts such as identity and impact. Latent coding involved written annotations that explored the underlying meanings, assumptions, and cultural logics shaping these statements, helping to identify broader patterns of meaning across the dataset (see Appendix H for an example of the coding process).

Given my positionality as an autistic researcher, this phase was also informed by principles drawn from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), particularly Smith et al.'s (2009) emphasis on engaging with participants' accounts through both descriptive and interpretive lenses. In practice, this involved documenting analytic reflections alongside codes, attending not only to what was said, but how it was expressed and why it mattered in relation to broader narratives of neurodivergence and media representation. This phase laid the foundation for subsequent theme development, ensuring that emerging patterns were grounded in both participants' accounts and sustained interpretive engagement with the data, rather than treated as self-evident or objectively "found."

**Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes**

In the third phase of RTA, the analytic focus shifted from detailed coding to identifying patterns of shared meaning across the dataset. As Braun and Clarke (2022) demonstrates, there is no single or "ideal" way to generate themes; rather, researchers rely on analytic judgement to determine what is meaningful in relation to the research questions. Theme development in this study followed directly from the coding phase, with themes constructed by examining relationships between codes, identifying points of convergence and divergence across participant accounts, and considering how these patterns addressed the study's guiding question. In line with Braun and Clarke's approach, themes were treated as distinct yet interconnected concepts that collectively formed a coherent interpretive "analytic story."

Through ongoing engagement with the data and discussion with my supervisor, it became evident that the emerging themes followed a narrative arc moving from representation, to

impact, and ultimately to industry reflection. While thematic analysis can be used to summarise patterns within data, Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that high-quality RTA extends beyond description. Accordingly, as initial themes were developed, the analysis sought not only to report what participants said, but to construct an interpretive account explaining why these patterns matter in relation to their broader impacts and implications for industry. This interpretive orientation was particularly significant given the study's forward-looking focus, where understanding both existing representations and their implications for future practice is critical.

**Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes**

The fourth phase of RTA involved the development and review of initial themes through two interconnected levels of analysis. First, initial themes were examined in relation to the coded data to assess whether they meaningfully captured the most significant features relevant to the research question. Second, initial themes were reviewed in relation to the dataset as a whole, involving repeated analytic readings of both survey responses and focus group transcripts to ensure coherence and consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within RTA, there are multiple conceptualisations of what constitutes a "theme," ranging from topic-based summaries or data domains to shared patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). In this study, themes were developed primarily through recurring patterns of shared meaning that participants consistently returned to across the dataset. Through this process, three guiding themes were identified:

**Theme 1: The "Typical" Media Construction of Neurodivergence**

Focuses on the characters most frequently discussed, how their neurodivergence was portrayed, and how participants evaluated the authenticity, complexity, and limitations of these representations.

**Theme 2: The Media's Influence on Public Understanding of Neurodivergence**

Examines how these portrayals shaped participants' self-perceptions, emotional responses, and understandings of neurodivergence, as well as their perceived influence on broader public attitudes.

**Theme 3: The Future of Neurodivergent Representation in Aotearoa New Zealand**

Explores participants' reflections on what current representations reveal about the media industry at both global and local levels, with particular attention to the Aotearoa New Zealand context and implications for institutions such as NZ On Air.

**Phase 5: Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes**

The fifth phase of RTA is concerned with refining, defining, and naming themes, and represents the stage at which the most substantive interpretive work occurs. As Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest, this phase requires the development of detailed and nuanced definitions of each theme, capturing not only its central concept but also its boundaries and relationships to other themes within the analytic framework. At this stage, the primary focus was refining sub-themes within each overarching theme, resulting in five sub-themes for each of the three main themes. This process involved extensive trial and error, as many initial sub-themes overlapped, lacked conceptual clarity, or did not align coherently with the broader analytic structure.

This phase also involved the final naming of themes, which was treated as an analytic act rather than a descriptive task. Considerable attention was given to selecting labels that accurately reflected the underlying meanings within each of the three themes, particularly in relation to the overarching narrative arc they collectively formed. This required precision and selectivity, ensuring that each theme and sub-theme was coherent, distinct from others, and clearly aligned with the research questions. As Braun and Clarke (2022) note, this iterative and reflexive process is central to high-quality thematic analysis, as it resists simplistic categorisation and instead foregrounds interpretation. This phase therefore played a crucial role in shaping the final analytic framework underpinning the presentation and discussion of findings.

**Phase 6: Writing Up the Analysis**

The final phase of RTA centres on writing up the analysis. Within Braun and Clarke's approach, writing is understood as integral to the analytic process rather than a task confined to the final stage (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Once the three overarching themes and their associated sub-themes had been clearly defined, the discussion chapter emerged organically from the analytic work already undertaken. With a well-established coding framework in place, I revisited the focus group transcripts from both neurodivergent and neurotypical participant groups, systematically organising coded excerpts under their corresponding themes and sub-themes. This ensured that each theme was grounded in participants' words and experiences, strengthening the connection between data and interpretation.

The writing of each theme was primarily guided by latent-coded qualitative data, allowing the analysis to remain closely anchored to the source material. Survey data were also integrated to

provide additional contextual depth, offering insight into participants' backgrounds, perspectives, and positionalities, and situating their contributions within broader patterns of intersectional interpretation. Through this process, participants' words were not treated merely as illustrative, but as central analytic material through which meaning was constructed and interpreted. This final phase consolidated the analytic work by transforming patterns of meaning into a coherent interpretive narrative, ensuring the findings are both theoretically informed and firmly grounded in participants lived experiences.

## Limitations of Methodology

Before presenting the final thematic analysis, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the methodological approach adopted in this study. As with all research designs, qualitative methodologies carry inherent constraints that shape the scope and applicability of findings.

To begin with, the relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of the study's findings, which is characteristic of qualitative research. As Lim (2025) notes, qualitative studies typically prioritise depth, context, and specificity over representativeness. Rather than aiming to reflect broader populations, their value lies in the detailed and situated insights they produce. In this study, however, the limitation of scale was partially offset by the substantial volume and richness of material generated across both focus groups and the survey phase. Although conducted within the scope of a 90-point master's thesis, the project still produced a significant body of qualitative data through two 60–90 minute focus groups, participant surveys, reflexive notes, and extensive thematic coding. As a result, there became a practical point at which expanding recruitment further risked making the project unmanageable within the timeframe and scope of the thesis.

Relatedly, while participants represented a range of neurotypes, the balance between formally diagnosed and self-identified individuals may have influenced how certain experiences were articulated. Both forms of identification were treated as equally valid expressions of neurodivergence, consistent with the study's emancipatory framework and its commitment to recognising lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. Nevertheless, differences in diagnostic access and identity formation may have shaped how participants framed their perspectives. Additionally, the neurotypical focus group was ethnically homogeneous, with all participants identifying as Pākehā/New Zealand European. More broadly, all participants across both focus groups were based within Tāmaki Makaurau. As a result, the study was less able to capture how regional and cultural differences across Aotearoa may shape understandings of neurodivergence and media representation.

In addition to sampling considerations, the use of focus groups introduced further methodological challenges. While valuable for fostering collective dialogue and shared meaning-making, focus groups are shaped by group dynamics and moderator influence (Kaplowitz, 2000; Sagoe, 2012). Dominant voices may steer conversation, while some participants may hesitate to share dissenting or sensitive views. To minimise these risks, I adopted an unobtrusive facilitation style that prioritised psychological safety and encouraged balanced participation. Participants were reminded that confidentiality could not be fully guaranteed in a group setting (Patton, 2002) and were invited to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing. Sensitive topics, including stigma and misrepresentation, were approached with care to minimise potential discomfort or distress.

Finally, as Litosseliti (2003) and Gundumogula (2020) illustrate, focus group research can make it difficult to separate individual perspectives from collectively negotiated viewpoints, and findings are not statistically representative. Baillie (2019) further notes that focus groups are less effective for analysing subtle individual differences. To address these limitations, the study incorporated a survey phase as a complementary method, providing space for individual reflection and helping to deepen the insights generated through group discussion.

Overall, while these methodological constraints limit the broader applicability of the findings, they do not diminish their interpretive or social value. The high level of participant engagement and interest suggests a broader desire for public dialogue surrounding neurodivergent representation in media. The depth of this approach therefore offers meaningful insight into how such representations shape public understanding, identity, and self-perception within Aotearoa New Zealand.

# Chapter Four: Findings

## Theme 1: The “Typical” Media Construction of Neurodivergence

This first theme addresses the central motivation of the study by examining the neurodivergent characterisations most readily recalled by participants and their responses to them. It explores how these portrayals appear across different media texts and how they are interpreted by both neurodivergent and neurotypical participants within the two focus groups. This comparative approach enables analysis of how such portrayals are received differently depending on lived experience, identity, and positionality. While similar characters and narratives were frequently referenced across both groups, participants’ interpretations were shaped by a range of demographic factors, including neurotype, gender, age, and media consumption habits. These insights are woven throughout the analysis and revisited in later themes, highlighting how early impressions of representation underpin broader perceptions, responses, and impacts explored elsewhere in the findings.

### Recurring Stereotypes and Tropes in Neurodivergent Representation

Following the initial introductions, participants in both focus groups were invited to reflect on which characters or media texts came to mind when considering neurodivergent representation. This question had also been included in the preliminary survey, providing an early indication of participants' familiarity with such portrayals before the discussions took place. The survey responses suggested that participants across both groups had encountered neurodivergent representation in international screen media, although their familiarity and perceptions of its accuracy varied. Among neurodivergent participants, all eight (100%) reported having encountered such portrayals. However, their assessments of accuracy were generally unfavourable, with most participants considering international representations to be only slightly accurate. Similarly, among neurotypical participants, six (75%) reported having encountered neurodivergent representation in international media, while two (25%) were unsure. When asked to assess the accuracy of these portrayals, five neurotypical participants (63%) rated them as slightly accurate, two (25%) as moderately accurate and one (13%) as very inaccurate. These responses provided an initial indication that, despite participants' familiarity with neurodivergent representation, many held reservations about how accurately it was portrayed.

When invited to identify specific examples, neurodivergent participants referenced *Sex Education*, *Heartbreak High*, *Steven Universe* and *Love on the Spectrum*, all of which were subsequently discussed during their focus group. In contrast, neurotypical participants primarily referenced *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Good Doctor*, *Monk* and *Atypical*, which were similarly explored in greater detail during their discussion. These responses offered an early indication of how the discussions might differ, with neurodivergent participants referencing potentially more nuanced portrayals, while neurotypical participants tended towards more established mainstream examples. Drawing on these responses, I encouraged both groups to share their thoughts on the portrayals they had identified, using familiar examples as a starting point for further discussion. This provided an accessible entry point for participants to collectively explore recurring characterisations, including those associated with tropes identified in the literature review. Across both groups, a relatively small selection of familiar examples continued to feature throughout the conversations.

One of the first and most frequently cited examples across both focus groups was Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* and *Young Sheldon*. As previously discussed, although Sheldon is never canonically identified as autistic within either series, both neurodivergent and neurotypical participants consistently recognised him as an example of autistic representation, while also acknowledging the limitations of his portrayal. Participants attributed these limitations to the exaggerated and dramatised presentation of his traits, including his exceptional intelligence and success in physics, rigid adherence to routine, monotone speech and strong need for control. These observations were discussed in relation to the "savant vs. stupid" framework conceptualised and introduced in the literature review. The framework was also presented to participants at the beginning of each focus group as a reference point for discussing how neurodivergent characters are frequently portrayed through two reductive extremes. Participants expressed that the framework resonated with representations they had encountered, providing a basis for further discussion.

Participants expressed concern that such portrayals risk reinforcing reductive binaries and verge on exploitative representation. For example, Isla, a neurotypical participant, noted that Sheldon is required to be "brilliant" in his field to render his autistic-coded traits more "palatable" to wider audiences. This is further reinforced through the audience's encouragement to laugh at Sheldon's behaviour, with Eliza, another neurotypical participant, describing his role as not only a "savant" but as primarily functioning as comedic relief within the narrative. Maya, a participant with dyslexia and ADHD, identified a similar dynamic in the show's attempted "humorous" contrast between Sheldon's intellectual ability and his sister Missy's emotional intelligence. She explained that by juxtaposing high IQ with strong EQ, the series reinforces

narrow assumptions that autism is inherently linked to intelligence, privileging Sheldon's cognitive brilliance while undervaluing Missy's emotional skills. Theo described this "savant" characterisation as "annoying as hell" – a reaction that prompted him, as an autistic individual, to reflect on whether he himself may have been perceived negatively in similar ways by others in real-life contexts. Hannah, a participant with ADHD, similarly expressed a desire for the character to be more "well-rounded," noting that his savant-coded autism appeared to function as his defining characteristic rather than one aspect of a more complex identity. Her observations reflected a broader concern among participants that, despite recognising the character's potential for meaningful representation, his exaggerated traits often made him appear more like a caricature than a fully developed individual.

This discussion extended to other characters, with Shaun Murphy from *The Good Doctor* emerging as another frequently cited example of narrow autism representation. Responses across both focus groups were notably aligned, with participants describing Shaun as a highly visible and dramatised portrayal of autism, characterised by traits such as literalism, social naivety and exceptional medical skill. Similar to Sheldon, participants associated Shaun with the "savant" end of the framework, although they also recognised an important distinction: Shaun is canonically identified as autistic, whereas Sheldon is only implicitly coded. Some participants expressed concern that Shaun's explicit identification as autistic could lead audiences to associate his exaggerated characteristics with autism more generally.

Neurotypical participant Harriet added that creators may be attempting to "raise awareness and educate" through such portrayals, but argued that the over-dramatised depiction of Shaun's character – particularly in the widely referenced "I am a surgeon" scene from Season 2, Episode 17, *Breakdown* (Moran & Gilyard, 2019), in which his meltdown is portrayed in an intense and highly theatrical manner – has contributed to the moment becoming a pop culture reference. She suggested that this, in turn, reinforces a narrow narrative of neurodivergence that is often not taken seriously. A similar perspective was shared by neurodivergent participant Maya, who described the character as "Hollywood babble" and suggested that he fits squarely within the extreme end of the "savant" spectrum that media so often favours.

Another character frequently mentioned across both focus groups was Sam Gardner from *Atypical*, whose portrayal received more favourable responses, particularly among neurotypical participants. Neurotypical participant Isla noted that while Sam's autism remains central to the series, his character is situated within a broader narrative exploring family dynamics, relationships and support systems. In contrast to the more exaggerated portrayals of Sheldon Cooper and Shaun Murphy, Isla perceived Sam as a more well-rounded character whose autism was presented as one aspect of his identity rather than his sole defining characteristic. Within the

context of the "savant vs. stupid" framework, participants generally positioned Sam closer to the middle, rather than at either extreme. Neurotypical participants, including Isla and Eliza, also expressed an appreciation for portrayals that acknowledge support needs and the role of relationships without relying heavily on exaggerated or stereotypical characteristics.

Despite these differences in character reception, participants across both focus groups noted that the most referenced portrayals shared striking similarities: they were predominantly young, white, heterosexual, male, and more overtly autistic protagonists in screen media. Although participants acknowledged that individuals with traits associated with both ends of the "savant vs. stupid" framework do indeed exist, they argued that exaggerated characterisations – such as Sheldon's and Shaun's – reinforce a narrow and distorted understanding of autism. This, in turn, contributes to a limited public understanding of neurodivergence, not only in terms of traits but also in relation to intersectional experiences.

To extend this perspective, generational similarities and differences in character tropes emerged as a clear point of discussion within the neurotypical focus group. While the majority of participants were Generation Z, two participants – Harriet (Millennial) and Marcus (Generation X) – offered a valuable perspective on the characterisations they grew up with, extending beyond the early 2000s and 2010s examples predominantly discussed within the group. Marcus drew attention to characters such as Sherlock Holmes from *Sherlock Holmes*, Spock from *Star Trek*, and Dr. House from *House*, noting that these figures exhibited dramatised neurodivergent-coded traits long before such conditions were formally recognised or named.

He argued that these characters functioned primarily to create contrast and narrative intrigue, often framed as possessing near-superhuman insight or intellect rather than reflecting lived neurodivergent experience. For instance, Spock's superhuman abilities, Sherlock Holmes' investigative skills, and Dr. House's medical expertise illustrate how exceptional ability is accompanied by social "otherness," reinforcing alignment with the "savant" trope. Marcus questioned whether contemporary portrayals simply reproduce these established tropes in a more explicit form. Isla, a Gen Z neurotypical participant, supported this perspective by noting that social difference continues to be rendered acceptable only when balanced by extraordinary ability in contemporary screen media.

When prompted to consider neurodivergent representations beyond canonically or implicitly coded autism, participants struggled to identify equivalent examples, particularly those of cultural significance. Following some reflection within the neurodivergent focus group, Hannah, a participant with ADHD, identified predominantly animated characters, citing Homer Simpson from *The Simpsons*, also mentioned by Harriet in the neurotypical group, and Peter Griffin from

*Family Guy*. Hannah interpreted these characters as strongly ADHD-coded, highlighting how their traits are exaggerated for humour and frequently associated with incompetence. She suggested that such portrayals primarily serve a comedic purpose, aligning with the "stupid" end of the framework. Another participant with ADHD, Maya, agreed, describing these representations as problematic because they offered little insight into how ADHD manifests beyond comedic stereotypes. Reflecting on her own experiences, Maya suggested that the absence of accurate and relatable portrayals had contributed to her late diagnosis, highlighting the potential implications of limited representation for neurodivergent self-recognition.

Similarly, participants with dyslexia, such as Leila and Maya, noted a profound lack of representation, with the examples they identified often limited to narrow tropes. Leila identified Tiffany "Pennsatucky" Doggett from *Orange Is the New Black* as a rare example of a dyslexic character, whose storyline culminates in Season 7, Episodes 12 and 13, "The Big House" (Chamberlayne, 2019) and "Here's Where We Get Off" (Kohan, 2019), respectively. Within this storyline, Doggett struggles with her GED studies and ultimately dies from a drug overdose after believing she was not intelligent enough to pass, despite having successfully passed the examination without knowing it. Leila discussed the troubling implications of this portrayal, particularly its association of learning disabilities with low intelligence and personal tragedy. They noted that learning disabilities are already associated with marginalisation and disadvantage, yet media rarely explores dyslexia outside these contexts. Within the neurotypical group, no screen-specific examples were initially identified, with Harriet eventually referencing the *Percy Jackson* book series and its screen adaptations as her only point of reference. While acknowledging its attempt at positive representation, she critiqued how dyslexia is framed as a literal superpower, enabling communication with the Greek gods, thereby echoing the "savant" trope rather than reflecting everyday lived experience.

OCD representation was discussed in a similar vein. Neurotypical participants struggled to name examples beyond Monica Geller from Friends, whose coded traits were criticised for reducing OCD to cleanliness and control. Across both groups, participants noted that these behaviours are often used casually within the narrative for comedic relief – such as when she uses a smaller vacuum to clean a larger one – emphasising obsessive cleaning as a humorous trait associated with being "so OCD," without meaningfully acknowledging the seriousness and diversity of the condition. Nadia, the only neurodivergent participant with OCD, reflected that she did not recognise her own symptoms for many years due to such watered-down portrayals. Her experiences did not align with either the trivialised depictions exemplified by characters like Monica or the more extreme, ritualised portrayals often assigned to minor characters in the screen texts she consumed while growing up.

Across focus group discussions, participants consistently identified characters perceived as neurodivergent in ways that aligned with the "savant vs. stupid" framework. Based on the examples raised, both groups more frequently associated dyslexia and ADHD with the "stupid" or low-IQ end of the binary, while autism and OCD were often framed through the "savant" or perfectionist narratives – both of which risk distorting lived realities. Participants suggested that the prevalence of this binary reflects its effectiveness in prioritising entertainment value by maximising dramatic effect; however, in doing so, it reinforces harmful misconceptions about neurodivergence.

### The Intersectional Dimensions of the "Default" Neurodivergent Profile

As established in the prior sub-theme, discussions highlighted how common characterisations of neurodivergence in mainstream media centre on straight, white, heterosexual men, with traits frequently framed within the reductive "savant vs. stupid" binary. Moving beyond this, participants considered how such patterns intersect with age, gender, and ethnicity, particularly in relation to their own positionalities and lived experiences. The diversity of age ranges and gender identities represented across the focus groups proved especially valuable here, enabling participants to reflect on how experiences and perceptions of neurodivergent representation can vary across different social and generational contexts. Across discussions, older neurotypical participants offered a valuable contrast to the perspectives of younger Gen Z participants. For example, Harriet and Marcus reflected on how neurodivergence was historically both poorly understood and largely unnamed in earlier media contexts, mirroring broader societal understandings at the time. While contemporary portrayals continue to rely on outdated narratives, participants noted that they at least reflect a growing awareness and recognition of neurodivergence in society.

Participants also connected this historical context to shifts in diagnostic awareness. Harriet explained that widespread recognition and diagnosis were not available during her upbringing. She described a pattern observed in adulthood, whereby parents seek assessments for their children and subsequently recognise similar traits in themselves, leading to late diagnoses – often in individuals in their 30s, 40s, or 50s, as a result of increased access to information and diagnostic resources. Marcus similarly summarised this generational reality, stating that "Gen X doesn't do mental illness," articulating how neurological differences were often suppressed during his adolescence, as such conditions were not widely recognised and were considered socially 'taboo'. Participants noted that aspects of this thinking persist across older generations, continuing to shape how neurodivergence is understood today, and reflecting patterns that were also evident in media portrayals of the time.

This generational gap was reinforced by a younger neurotypical participant, Eliza, who observed that within the contemporary media she consumes, autistic characters are rarely portrayed as older than their mid-twenties. Neurodivergence, she argued, is overwhelmingly depicted as belonging to teenagers or young adults, creating the impression that it exists only within her generation and reinforcing the notion that such conditions "didn't exist" for older generations. This framing erases autistic adults and older neurodivergent individuals, reinforcing the misconception that neurodivergence is something one "grows out of" rather than a lifelong identity.

This observation prompted further discussion about the representation of neurodivergence across generations. For example, Marcus referenced *Rain Man* as one of the few examples of an older autistic character. However, neurotypical participants pointed out that, while the film remains culturally significant, its age made it less relevant to their experiences of contemporary media. Younger participants clarified that their concern was not necessarily the absence of historical examples, but rather the limited visibility of older neurodivergent adults in more recent portrayals. Several neurodivergent participants similarly emphasised the importance of seeing older neurodivergent individuals represented, suggesting that such portrayals could offer a sense of continuity and reassurance that it is never "too late" to recognise or better understand one's neurodivergence.

Another neurotypical participant, Isla, when attempting to identify a positive example of older neurodivergent representation, referenced *Love on the Spectrum (U.S.)* and noted the inclusion of an older autistic man, Steve, in the first season. She described him as kind and genuine, and therefore particularly memorable; however, she also observed that he was not brought back in subsequent seasons. Eliza suggested that this absence was likely driven by commercial considerations, implying that younger participants were prioritised for marketability. This example reinforced a broader pattern identified across the discussion: even when older neurodivergent individuals do appear in media, they are frequently sidelined, given limited narrative focus, or excluded altogether.

These concerns were further reinforced through discussions of limited gender representation in media. Sophie, a participant with ADHD, reflected on how the condition is particularly gendered in both diagnosis and representation. Her brother's hyperactive traits aligned with the loud, external behaviours commonly portrayed in media, leading to his diagnosis in early childhood. In contrast, her own internalised traits went unrecognised. When teachers later suggested she might have ADHD, she initially felt offended – a reaction she attributed to media stereotypes that frame ADHD as something that affects "hyperactive little boys," rather than quieter, overwhelmed girls. This gendered discrepancy was echoed by neurotypical

participants. Isla noted that autistic male characters, such as Sam Gardner in *Atypical*, are often perceived as being more socially "forgiven" for meltdowns or high support needs than autistic women would be. She recalled discussions suggesting that female autistic characters are less likely to be afforded the same tolerance, reinforcing unequal expectations around emotional expression and support needs across genders.

Harriet also referenced *The Good Doctor*, recalling plans for a spin-off centred on a female neurodivergent lawyer who briefly appeared as a strong and positive portrayal. While participants welcomed this example, they noted that it remained peripheral and was not developed into a sustained narrative. This missed opportunity was viewed as particularly significant given the mixed reception of Shaun Murphy's character, with participants suggesting that a female-led narrative could have offered a meaningful counterbalance. This reinforced broader concerns that female neurodivergent representation is often marginal rather than foregrounded.

Neurodivergent participant Nadia also reinforced this pattern by returning to research and diagnostic history early in the focus group discussion, echoing the generational diagnostic gaps raised by older neurotypical participants. She explained that early ADHD and autism research focused almost exclusively on boys, resulting in diagnostic criteria that failed to account for how neurodivergence commonly presents in girls and women. Gendered expectations around behaviour meant that girls were socialised to mask from an early age, while boys' traits were more readily identified and labelled. As a result, the only neurodivergent individuals she encountered growing up (both in real life and in the media) were boys. Neurodivergent participants broadly agreed that this male-centric diagnostic history has shaped who is recognised as neurodivergent, delaying diagnosis and self-understanding for many women in the group and reinforcing an ongoing cycle of invisibility in media representation.

When asked what kinds of neurodivergent stories participants would like to see in the future – both locally and globally – the response across both focus groups was immediate and consistent: greater representation of women and gender-diverse individuals. Neurodivergent participants expressed a strong desire for more authentic portrayals of neurodivergent women, noting that they had rarely seen themselves reflected on screen. Several neurodivergent participants reflected on how access to nuanced female representation earlier in life may have shaped their own diagnostic journeys and self-understanding. They advocated that such representation is not only personally significant but also has the potential to influence broader patterns of on-screen portrayal.

## Canon vs. Coded Portrayals of Neurodivergence

The distinction between canonical and coded neurodivergent representation emerged as a recurring and significant point of discussion across both focus groups. Drawing on the survey results, participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the difference between canonical neurodivergence (explicitly named within a narrative) and coded neurodivergence (implicitly suggested but left unnamed). The focus group discussions further revealed a notable divergence in how neurodivergent and neurotypical participants evaluated and preferred these forms of representation, particularly within fictional media.

Perhaps unexpectedly, neurodivergent participants expressed a more favourable response to coded portrayals than to explicitly canonical depictions. However, they were careful to distinguish between nuanced, intentional coding and more exploitative forms of implication, such as those associated with Sheldon Cooper. Positively coded characters were described as less stigmatising and more reflective of lived experience, allowing for personal connection without reducing neurodivergence to a singular defining trait. Participants explained that canonical portrayals in fiction often rely on exaggerated, selectively emphasised traits that compress neurodivergence into a highly visible and simplified personality type (as seen in characters such as Sam Gardner and Shaun Murphy). While there was a clear desire for more nuanced canonical representation, participants noted that many writers have yet to meaningfully engage with what feels authentic to neurodivergent audiences. As a result, coded portrayals were often preferred.

For example, a positively coded character brought up by Nadia during the discussion was the protagonist from *Amélie*, who is socially unconventional and introspective, with distinctive quirks often read as neurodivergent-coded despite never being explicitly labelled. Her preference for indirect communication, rich internal monologue, and sensitivity to sensory experiences led participants to describe her as a relatable character with whom they could naturally identify. Another positively coded character was Dwight Schrute from *The Office*. Nadia also described him as “so autistic,” reflecting how viewers often interpret Dwight as neurodivergent-coded due to his rigid thinking, differences in social communication, and literalism. While Dwight’s portrayal is exaggerated for comedic effect, participants noted that it was grounded in reality and afforded the character a sense of agency, allowing him to exist as more than a collection of stereotypical traits.

The strongest example discussed by the neurodivergent group was Adam Groff from *Sex Education*, initially raised by Maya, a dyslexic participant, who was widely recognised as dyslexic-coded despite never being explicitly identified as neurodivergent. Participants

responded positively to Adam's portrayal because the series avoids heavy-handed exposition or diagnostic framing. Instead, his struggles emerge through difficulties in learning and school, communication challenges, and issues of self-worth – portrayed with emotional realism rather than caricature. Maya explained that Adam's inability to find value through academic success leads him to seek validation elsewhere, shaping his behaviour and relationships in complex, sometimes destructive ways. Participants conveyed that his neurodivergence does not define his entire character arc, but rather sits quietly in the background, influencing how he navigates the world. This subtle integration was seen as far more authentic than stereotypical portrayals and helps explain why Adam resonated so strongly with the group.

Another notable example raised by Maya was *The Bear*, which neurodivergent participants discussed as offering layered and indirect autistic-coded representation. Participants identified both Carmy and Sydney as characters displaying traits they associated with autism, including sensory overwhelm, rigidity, emotional intensity, hyperfocus and social difficulties. Drawing on her personal experiences, particularly growing up alongside an autistic sibling, Maya explained that these traits felt grounded and recognisable, despite never being explicitly identified as autistic within the narrative. Importantly, participants did not seek to diagnostically label the characters, instead emphasising recognition rather than certainty. For these participants, the behaviours and emotional patterns portrayed reflected aspects of their own experiences or those of neurodivergent people they knew. This recognition was particularly meaningful because it allowed them to identify with characters without requiring an explicit diagnostic label. Subtlety therefore emerged as a valued aspect of representation within the neurodivergent group, with participants appreciating portrayals that reflected recognisable traits without exaggerating them or reducing them to spectacle.

In contrast, neurotypical participants tended to adopt an almost opposing position to that of the neurodivergent group. Coded portrayals were often viewed more critically, largely due to uncertainty around interpretation and a preference for clarity. Unlike neurodivergent viewers – who are often attuned to subtle behavioural cues – neurotypical participants were less likely to recognise coded neurodivergent traits, leading to feelings of confusion rather than empowerment. For this group, explicit labelling was generally preferred, as it provided narrative clarity and educational certainty, while ambiguity was frequently perceived as a barrier to understanding.

One neurotypical participant, Jamie, illustrated this clearly when discussing characters such as Jake Peralta from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, who is widely interpreted as ADHD-coded by neurodivergent audiences. Despite the show being one of his favourites, he explained that he had never recognised these traits and instead felt as though he was "missing something" that

others seemed to understand. From his perspective, making such characters canonically neurodivergent – "touching on it and moving on" – would make these traits more visible and meaningful for viewers like himself. He emphasised that explicit acknowledgement would "bring it to the front of our minds," increasing awareness and encouraging learning among neurotypical audiences. This contrast was particularly striking when compared to more exaggerated portrayals, such as Sheldon Cooper or Shaun Murphy, whose neurodivergence was easily identifiable due to its overt and often reductive framing, yet was simultaneously recognised by participants as unrealistic and unrepresentative of everyday neurodivergent experience.

Eliza and Farah raised a more industry-focused perspective, questioning whether the limited presence of well-executed canonical characters may be partly influenced by concerns around audience engagement. They suggested that explicitly identifying a character as autistic or having ADHD could reduce their perceived "universality," potentially limiting broader audience identification. From their perspective, creators may avoid diagnostic labels to preserve narrative ambiguity, maintain mass appeal or avoid the responsibilities associated with accurate and accountable representation, instead relying on coding. Other neurotypical participants expressed similar views, acknowledging that coded portrayals could make characters feel more multidimensional, allowing audiences to interpret their behaviours organically rather than primarily through a diagnostic lens. However, they also recognised that leaving neurodivergence unnamed could reproduce some of the limitations associated with poorly executed canonical portrayals, including reinforcing stereotypes, enabling misinterpretation and limiting opportunities for education, particularly among neurotypical audiences. Harriet further suggested that coding could allow creators to avoid responsibilities such as consulting neurodivergent individuals or ensuring representational accuracy. Despite recognising the potential value of coding, participants generally favoured canonical representations that were grounded, nuanced and realistic, suggesting that explicit identification was most meaningful when accompanied by authentic, experience-led characterisation.

Isla – drawing on her background as a film student – expressed a strong preference for explicit labelling, viewing it as a deliberate and meaningful creative choice. She argued that canonical representation demonstrates intentionality from writers and producers and avoids reliance on vaguely "relatable" coded characters designed to remain palatable to all audiences. In contrast, Marcus explained that diagnostic labels often "go in one ear and out the other" for him, having little impact on how he interprets or engages with a character. He expressed concern that labels – especially when attached to narrow or exaggerated portrayals – may misinform audiences rather than educate them, referencing characters such as

Raymond Babbitt, Spock, and Sheldon Cooper. Farah echoed this caution, noting that some media texts introduce labels superficially, using neurodivergence as a diversity marker without meaningfully integrating it into character development. In these cases, the condition is named but not embodied, which risks downplaying its impact and reinforcing misunderstanding.

Despite these differences, participants across both focus groups consistently highlighted that what mattered most was not whether a character was canonical or coded, but whether they were written as well-rounded individuals – a point that emerged as a shared conclusion across discussions. Neurodivergence, they argued, should form one aspect of a character's identity rather than their defining feature. While coding was seen as effective in achieving this subtle integration, participants also acknowledged the importance of explicit labelling from an educational perspective. This "show, don't tell" approach – where traits are portrayed naturally and sensitively without excessive exposition – was therefore viewed as preferable to both reductive labelling and vague implication.

## Platform Logics and the Commercialisation of Neurodivergence in the Entertainment Industry

Following discussion of a range of characters, both focus groups naturally shifted toward interrogating why exactly these patterns continue to dominate within the entertainment industry. Notably, participants across both groups arrived at these structural explanations independently, demonstrating a shared awareness of the platform and industry logics shaping media production. Participants consistently identified commercial and platform imperatives as central to understanding why neurodivergence is so frequently framed through reductive or stereotypical tropes, with comedic framing emerging as the most common.

Within the neurodivergent focus group, participants repeatedly identified portrayals they perceived as exploitative in their commercialisation, particularly in relation to autism, which was viewed as the neurotype most frequently rendered as "funny" in media. Maya articulated a key reason certain forms of neurodivergence may dominate screen representation: visibility. She explained that conditions such as dyslexia or OCD are often more internalised and therefore more difficult to visualise onscreen, whereas autism and ADHD lend themselves more readily to exaggerated behavioural traits that can be commodified for entertainment. Participants pointed to examples such as Sheldon Cooper's autistic-coded traits and Barney Stinson's ADHD-associated behaviours, whose primary narrative function often centres on comedic relief. In these cases, neurodivergent-coded traits are frequently reduced to plot devices rather than meaningfully developed as aspects of lived experience.

Importantly, participants clarified that the issue with these character portrayals was not the presence of humour itself – many acknowledged that comedy can be affirming when audiences are "laughing with" rather than "laughing at" a character – but rather the cumulative effect of decades of caricatured portrayals. These portrayals have gradually normalised a distorted understanding of neurodivergence that continues to shape social perceptions in everyday life. As participants discussed, the industry recognises that subtle, internally experienced forms of neurodivergence are less commercially viable, resulting in a skewed representational landscape in which only conditions with stereotypically recognisable traits are deemed "real" or screenworthy.

This discussion led participants to contrast commercially driven portrayals with more nuanced representations. When asked to compare Shaun Murphy from *The Good Doctor* with Adam Groff from *Sex Education*, neurodivergent participants unanimously identified Adam as the more authentic and resonant portrayal. Shaun's character was described as sensationalised for dramatic effect – particularly in moments that prioritise spectacle over complexity. In contrast, Adam's neurodivergent traits were understood as subtle, relational, and embedded within a broader character arc, allowing audiences to engage with his struggles without reducing him to a diagnostic label.

The neurodivergent focus group further extended this critique of the commercialisation of neurodivergence beyond fiction to non-fiction, where the stakes of representation were perceived as even higher. An interesting example raised was *Love on the Spectrum*. While the series is often regarded as a more positive representation in mainstream media, several neurodivergent participants expressed discomfort with how many participants' moments are portrayed, particularly through comedic editing and awkward timing, often at the expense of participants' dignity for audience humour.

Participants argued that, beyond isolated positive examples, such as Isla's mention of Steve as a rare portrayal of an older autistic individual, *Love on the Spectrum* often presents a narrow range of autistic experiences rather than reflecting the diversity of the spectrum. Eliza suggested that the series appeared to favour casting individuals with more readily recognisable autistic traits, including those associated with higher support needs, potentially reinforcing the expectation that autism must conform to a particular image to be recognisable or engaging on screen. This raised further concerns about participant vulnerability. Farah agreed, with the group questioning whether individuals with higher support needs might face additional challenges in understanding or influencing how their portrayals are constructed through production and editing processes. Participants consequently raised concerns about informed consent and the extent of control individuals may have over their representation.

These concerns were further explored through discussion of Kayelynn Partlow, an autistic woman who appeared in *Love on the Spectrum (U.S.)* and was independently mentioned in both the neurodivergent and neurotypical focus groups. Eliza recalled Partlow discussing on social media that she had not been invited to return for subsequent seasons despite not finding a partner, with speculation that she had appeared "too normal" on screen. Participants interpreted this account as potentially reflecting a preference for more readily recognisable or dramatised portrayals of autism, questioning whether the programme prioritised narratives considered engaging for mainstream audiences over representing the diversity of autistic experiences. For these participants, the example highlighted broader concerns about how casting and production decisions may shape which autistic identities become visible on screen.

Neurotypical participants echoed many of these concerns about reality television operating at the expense of neurodivergent individuals, particularly in relation to casting choices. From a fictional context, several also noted that explicit labelling of neurodivergent characters can be perceived by some audiences as "too political" or "too woke," leading producers to avoid clear diagnoses to minimise backlash or protect commercial appeal. Eliza and Jamie suggested that large studios may deliberately avoid canonical labelling to sidestep the responsibility of accurate representation, consultation, and public accountability. The discussion repeatedly returned to the idea that representational decisions are ultimately driven by profit, with the entertainment industry tending to prioritise marketability across both fictional and non-fictional contexts. Farah described this dynamic as a form of "emotional extraction," in which neurodivergent lives are used as markers of diversity and sources of moral value for neurotypical audiences, often without genuine or meaningful representation.

### The Memeification of Neurodivergent Representation

Given the close interlinking of mainstream media discoverability and social media platforms, discussions across both focus groups turned to the role of social media in promoting shows featuring neurodivergent characters and shaping their visibility. Both groups described how media discovery is now largely driven by social platforms rather than traditional advertising or scheduled television. Participants such as Maya (ND) and Farah (NT) noted that they often become aware of shows through still images, short clips, or peer recommendations online – recommendations that are themselves frequently mediated through platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. While this convergence increases visibility, it also enables particular characters and scenes to circulate far beyond their intended narrative contexts, often reaching audiences who engage with them in reductive or dismissive ways.

Across both focus groups, the memeification of neurodivergent characters online emerged as a significant concern. Exaggerated and stereotypical portrayals, already prevalent in mainstream media, were perceived as particularly vulnerable to being isolated into short, decontextualised clips and repurposed as social media memes. The most frequently cited example was Dr Shaun Murphy from *The Good Doctor*, specifically the viral "I am a surgeon" scene. Within the narrative, this moment depicts Shaun experiencing an emotional outburst following concerns about his ability to communicate effectively in a surgical environment. His repeated assertion, "I am a surgeon," can be interpreted as an attempt to reaffirm his competence and autonomy in the face of these challenges. However, as neurotypical participant Harriet explained, when extracted from its narrative context and circulated online, the scene becomes a viral meme rather than a moment of vulnerability, frequently repurposed through humorous edits, filters and exaggerated visual effects. Participants suggested that viewers encountering the clip without its original context may interpret Shaun's behaviour as excessive or comedic rather than recognising the distress underlying his response. This highlighted a broader concern across both groups about how social media can reshape the intended meaning of neurodivergent portrayals, potentially reinforcing the very stereotypes that more nuanced representations seek to challenge.

Neurotypical participants in particular noted that repeated exposure to the meme led them to question the realism of the portrayal, with Harriet asking whether an autistic person would "actually behave like that." A similar concern was raised regarding Sheldon Cooper in *Young Sheldon* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Even participants who had not closely followed either series were highly familiar with Sheldon's character through viral clips circulated online. Theo, a neurodivergent participant, pointed to scenes such as Sheldon's detached reaction to his father's death in *Young Sheldon*, arguing that these moments are often stripped of their emotional context and reduced to viral shorthand for "odd" behaviour. Participants also noted that this process is not limited to meme formats. Short-form clips are frequently circulated on platforms such as TikTok, where accounts selectively repost exaggerated or sensationalised scenes to maximise engagement.

Another example discussed was the TV series *There She Goes*, where clips featuring Rosie – a young girl with an intellectual disability – are frequently shared out of context, particularly moments depicting distress or behavioural escalation, such as throwing a picture frame down the stairs or redirecting attention during her brother's birthday by demanding gifts for herself. Participants noted that these scenes are subsequently amplified online in ways that prioritise audience reaction over narrative meaning. Neurodivergent participants expressed particular frustration with how characters intended to offer more complex portrayals become flattened through short-form circulation. Maya and Sophie observed that, despite the inherent complexity

of neurodivergence, online spaces increasingly reduce these experiences to simplified and repeatable traits, with viral clips reinforcing narrow and performative characterisations.

Across both focus groups, discussion also repeatedly returned to *Love on the Spectrum*, highlighting that this memeification is not limited to fictional portrayals. Participants noted that clips of participants' interactions – already shaped through awkward or comedic editing – are frequently repurposed as humorous content on social media. Neurodivergent participants articulated that, although such clips may be perceived by largely neurotypical audiences as harmless or "cute," they often introduce viewers to a carefully curated and narrow version of autism. This selective framing risks infantilising participants and limits the potential for meaningful or educational engagement, particularly when circulated through decontextualised social media formats.

Across both groups, there was strong consensus that authenticity – defined as organic, unprompted, and grounded in lived experience – is what distinguishes educational representation from exploitative content. Participants foregrounded the need for more of this form of representation within mainstream media, which would, in turn, shape how neurodivergence circulates across social media beyond meme-based or decontextualised content. Participants concluded that social media's entanglement in the memeification and circulation of both fictional and non-fictional portrayals contributes to the persistence of reductive and commodified representations of neurodivergence.

## Theme 2: The Media's Influence on Public Understanding of Neurodivergence

This second theme shifts the analytical focus from character representation and audience interpretation to the broader social consequences of these portrayals, examining how media depictions of neurodivergence shape public beliefs, attitudes, and judgements. Rather than functioning as passive reflections of society, film, television, and social media emerged throughout the discussions as active forces in shaping how neurodivergence is understood and responded to within everyday life. Participants across both focus groups repeatedly reflected on how familiar tropes – particularly exaggerated, narrow, or comedic portrayals – become embedded as cultural reference points through which real neurodivergent people are interpreted and assessed. In many cases, these portrayals were seen to shape expectations surrounding behaviour, support needs, emotional expression, and even whether neurodivergence is considered legitimate or serious. As a result, participants described media as operating almost as

an informal educational system, one that frequently reinforces misunderstanding and misrecognition rather than nuance or complexity.

A comparative focus remains central to this theme. While both groups frequently referenced the same characters and media texts, their interpretations diverged significantly depending on neurotype, age, gender, and media literacy. These reflections are woven throughout the analysis to demonstrate how early and repeated media encounters establish ideas that continue to shape understandings of neurodivergence over time. This was particularly evident in how participants described their perceptions of neurodivergence before and after direct lived exposure to it. Together, this theme highlights how media does not simply represent neurodivergence but actively participates in constructing the social conditions under which neurodivergent people are received, influencing neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences in distinct ways.

### The "Stereotype Spillover" into Everyday Life

A recurring discussion point across both focus groups concerned the broader social consequences of stereotypical portrayals, conceptualised in this study as *"stereotype spillover."* Building upon the previously established "savant vs. stupid" framework and existing scholarship, this concept extends the analysis beyond stereotypical characterisation to consider its potential implications for public understanding and individual experiences. Specifically, "stereotype spillover" refers to the process through which repeated stereotypical representations of neurodivergence may extend beyond the screen and influence perceptions, expectations and assumptions in everyday life. Participants identified two interconnected dimensions of this process: internally, neurodivergent individuals may develop perceptions of how they are viewed by neurotypical others, potentially influencing their identity and self-understanding; externally, neurotypical audiences may draw upon familiar media stereotypes when forming expectations about what neurodivergence is supposed to "look like."

Within the neurodivergent focus group, participants expressed significant concern about how they are perceived by others as a direct consequence of inaccurate and stereotypical media representations of neurodivergence – representations that are further amplified and trivialised through social media, as discussed earlier. Several participants described how these portrayals translate into everyday social judgements, shaping how neurotypical peers interpret, respond to, and treat them in real-life interactions. Two dyslexic participants, Maya and Leila, for example, shared that people frequently make extreme and harmful assumptions informed by media stereotypes, leading them to be treated as unintelligent or incapable. They explained that these responses stem not from their actual abilities, but from culturally ingrained ideas about dyslexia shaped by screen media. The persistence of these assumptions has been deeply damaging, as

others' preconceived notions continue to shape how they are perceived and often underestimated in academic contexts, contributing to increased insecurity when sharing their work.

In contrast, Sophie noted that ADHD is often met not with exaggerated judgement, but with disbelief. She explained that, in screen media, ADHD is more commonly portrayed through traits such as restlessness or inattentiveness in boys; as a result, her own neurodivergence as a woman is frequently invalidated rather than recognised by those around her. Maya, who is also dyslexic and suspects she has ADHD, added that neurodivergence is often trivialised as a "fun personality trait" through social media, a sentiment echoed across the group. Participants also referenced the popular term "neurospicy," widely circulated online as a way of framing neurodivergence as quirky or playful. While acknowledged as humorous or reclaiming in some contexts, participants noted that it can also minimise lived experience when detached from the realities of neurodivergent life.

Maya also described being told that her suspected ADHD was simply the result of habits such as watching TikTok's at double speed, a claim she found deeply frustrating. Such comments, she explained, erase the emotional regulation difficulties, distress, and compulsive behaviours she experiences, which are often concealed out of embarrassment or fear of judgement. She expressed exhaustion at feeling required to "prove" that her neurodivergence is real, rather than merely quirky or trendy. Reflecting on these accounts, it became clear that limiting and stereotypical representations are not only inaccurate but deeply confining. Across diagnoses, participants described feeling caught between misrecognition and disbelief, leaving them marginalised both on screen and in their everyday lives.

For the neurotypical focus group, it was essential to examine how these media patterns have shaped participants' perceptions of neurodivergent people, and whether they recognised the extent to which their understanding had been influenced by a narrow set of highly recognisable characters. When asked where their knowledge of neurodivergence originated and how they had learned to interpret it, participants provided varied yet reflective responses. Eliza explained that media did not initially shape her understanding of neurodivergence; instead, school environments played a more prominent role, a view echoed by Farah. Her earliest exposure came from classmates who had teacher aides or additional learning support, and she felt that her deeper understanding developed later through real-life relationships. However, she noted that encountering neurodivergent characters in media often created confusion rather than clarity. She described seeing characters such as Sheldon Cooper framed as comic relief and feeling unsettled because she had "never seen that in my day-to-day," particularly when compared to neurodivergent peers she had known at school or in her adult life. This disconnect revealed, for

her, the extent to which media portrayals rely on exaggeration and contributed to her realisation that she had been "taught the wrong things" through media.

Marcus added to this by explaining that his first exposure to neurodivergence came through social contexts in which peers used diagnostic labels to excuse poor behaviour. Media representations later reinforced this association, leading him to retroactively interpret those experiences through the exaggerated portrayals he had seen on screen. He described this as a form of "social learning," in which impressions are formed passively through cultural cues rather than through informed education. Growing up with characters such as Raymond Babbitt as primary reference points led him to associate neurodivergence with extremes of intelligence or dysfunction, aligning with the "savant vs. stupid" binary discussed earlier. He acknowledged that these early templates continue to shape his assumptions, making him more likely to recognise neurodivergence only when traits appear dramatic or highly visible – an insight he attributed to generational context and media exposure.

When asked directly whether media had shaped assumptions they held about neurodivergent people – particularly in adulthood – Eliza responded candidly that she had internalised common stereotypes: that neurodivergent individuals struggle to communicate, have a single obsessive interest, or possess personalities defined entirely by their diagnosis. She recognised that these beliefs stemmed directly from repeated media portrayals. Georgia explicitly linked her assumptions to the "savant vs. stupid" framework, noting that mainstream media rarely offers representations outside these extremes. This lack of nuance, she argued, makes it difficult for audiences to recognise the breadth of neurodivergent experience and reinforces the phenomenon conceptualised in this study as "stereotype spillover".

### Media's Role in Diagnostic Delay Among Neurodivergent Audiences

For the neurodivergent focus group in particular, an important area of exploration was how media representations – and the associated process of "stereotype spillover" – related to participants' lived experiences of recognising and understanding their own neurodivergence, particularly in relation to the diagnostic process. As noted earlier, however, participants were not required to have a formal diagnosis to participate. Instead, greater emphasis was placed on their self-identification with neurodivergence and their lived experiences, particularly how these aligned – or failed to align – with the portrayals they had encountered on screen. Preliminary survey responses indicated considerable variation in the extent to which neurodivergent participants felt represented in media, reflecting their differing experiences of diagnosis and self-understanding. Of the eight participants, two (25%) reported feeling represented, three (37.5%) reported not feeling represented, and three (37.5%) indicated that they only sometimes

felt represented or remained unsure. These initial responses provided useful context for the subsequent focus group discussion, where participants elaborated on their experiences of recognition, identification and the extent to which media portrayals reflected their own understandings of neurodivergence.

In the discussion, almost all participants described not recognising or aligning their neurodivergent traits with mainstream media portrayals of neurodivergence. For example, Sophie, a participant with ADHD, explained that because autism dominates neurodivergent representation in media, she rarely encountered portrayals of ADHD; and when she did, they did not reflect her experience as a woman. Elliot, who also has ADHD, reinforced this point, reflecting that ADHD is frequently portrayed as a "boys' condition," meaning she never saw herself represented in those depictions either. As a result, both did not recognise themselves in these portrayals and therefore did not initially suspect their own ADHD. Sophie shared that it was not until high school, when a teacher identified traits consistent with ADHD, that her experiences were validated. She noted that this reflects a broader pattern for women, given that ADHD in girls is rarely portrayed in media, remains under-discussed, and often presents in more internalised ways.

Hannah, who has ADHD, also shared a contrasting experience: she did recognise aspects of herself in exaggerated television characters, particularly within cartoons and comedies. However, this led her to interpret her behaviours as simply "normal" rather than as connected to ADHD. Because the more subtle and challenging aspects of ADHD were rarely represented, she did not associate her experiences with the condition, even as her brothers were diagnosed. Similarly, Nadia described being diagnosed with OCD in her early twenties, explaining that she had never identified with the extreme, ritualised depictions of OCD commonly portrayed in media. Because her experiences did not align with these exaggerated portrayals, she did not recognise her symptoms as indicative of OCD earlier in life. This reinforced how narrow portrayals can delay self-recognition, particularly for women. Nadia also noted that, prior to her diagnosis, she observed neurotypical individuals casually "diagnosing" others, which contributed to confusion and frustration around what neurodivergence actually entails.

By contrast, some participants who recognised their neurodivergence earlier described feeling uncomfortable or ashamed as a result of how neurodivergence is portrayed in media. Despite benefiting from early identification through family support, therapy, and educational intervention, these participants reflected on the negative affective impact of such representations. For example, Leila and Maya explained that while their early dyslexia diagnoses enabled access to support, repeated exposure to portrayals of dyslexia as synonymous

with failure or low intelligence contributed to internalised insecurity, particularly in academic contexts. Leila linked this directly to media narratives that frame dyslexic individuals as "problem students." Similarly, Theo, an autistic participant diagnosed at a young age, reflected that media representations made him feel more insecure about how he might be perceived by others. He described worrying that he came across as "annoying," mirroring traits he associated with certain on-screen characters.

### Educational Impacts of Media on Neurotypical Audiences

Across both focus groups, participants reflected on the influence of media representations on their understanding of neurodivergence, identifying both positive and negative effects. However, this sub-theme focuses specifically on the educational role of media for neurotypical audiences. Preliminary survey responses provided further context for these discussions. When asked how media had influenced their understanding of neurodivergence, seven of the eight neurotypical participants (87.5%) reported both positive and negative influences, while one (12.5%) reported a solely negative influence. Similarly, neurodivergent participants expressed mixed perceptions of how media shapes public understanding of people like them, with six (75%) identifying both positive and negative influences, one (12.5%) reporting a solely positive influence and one (12.5%) reporting a solely negative influence. These responses provided an initial indication of the varied ways participants perceived media's influence, which were subsequently explored in greater depth during the focus group discussions.

Based on the neurotypical focus group discussion, participants' responses reflect this pattern. For example, Eliza explained that she often found media portrayals confusing, as they frequently clashed with her real-life experiences of neurodivergence. She described struggling to "fit [a character] into a box," particularly when encountering an on-screen character with ADHD who performs well academically – an image that conflicted with the simplified frameworks she had internalised. Because she has close friends and partners who are autistic and/or have ADHD, she naturally compared media portrayals to the people she knows. She reflected on how her perspective shifted after her best friend received an autism diagnosis – something she would not have anticipated based on the characters she had previously encountered in media.

However, she added that this contrast ultimately contributed to improving her understanding of neurodivergence, even when she recognised that portrayals were not always accurate. She grew up in a small school where autistic and ADHD peers were frequently bullied or treated as the "butt of jokes," and noted that encountering neurodivergent representation in media helped to counteract these harmful attitudes. For her, media offered a sense of possibility, demonstrating

that neurodivergent individuals could have friendships, interests, and fulfilling lives beyond the harsh social environment she witnessed at school.

Building on Eliza's point, Georgia expressed a desire for fewer extreme or exaggerated portrayals, advocating instead for more subtle, everyday depictions of neurodivergence. She suggested that such representations would have supported a more comprehensive understanding of the spectrum during her earlier stages of learning. While acknowledging the importance of representing individuals with higher support needs, she stated that it is equally important to portray those whose neurodivergent traits are less visible or do not align with dominant stereotypes. Jamie further emphasised that the most critical factor underpinning effective representation is strong, thoughtful writing. He argued that neurodivergent characters should feel authentic and grounded, noting that, growing up, he held a very narrow understanding of what neurodivergence looks like, shaped by portrayals that consistently "looked a certain way."

Harriet, who has more personal experience with neurodivergence, also contributed to this educational point by observing a gradual shift toward more respectful and accurate portrayals in some mainstream media. She described being particularly aware of how misinformation about neurodivergence "leak" into real-life attitudes (i.e. "stereotype spillover") can. As an example, she referenced recent portrayals on Survivor, where an autistic contestant was not framed through the familiar "inspiration porn" lens. Instead, the programme demonstrated greater care and respect for participant agency, including a moment in which the host explicitly asked how the contestant wished his stutter to be addressed. She interpreted this as evidence that some mainstream media is beginning to move toward more thoughtful and less exploitative forms of representation.

The neurotypical group reflected that encountering these types of portrayals earlier in life would have improved their understanding of neurodivergence and expressed a desire to see more of this kind of representation in the future. For example, Isla described the recent New Zealand series *Four Go Flatting* as feeling less like "inspiration porn" and more like a grounded depiction of a neurodivergent person's everyday life, including the presence of meaningful support systems and community. She contrasted this with international reality formats such as *Love on the Spectrum*, arguing that *Four Go Flatting* demonstrated a more respectful approach to storytelling, casting, and narrative framing. The general consensus across both focus groups was that increased representation of this kind would not only support earlier self-recognition and self-acceptance among neurodivergent audiences but also foster greater understanding and empathy among neurotypical viewers.

## Misunderstanding and Misclassification of Neurodivergence in Media

As discussed in the introduction, the term neurodivergence is relatively recent, which indicates why misunderstanding remains so common. This may include not recognising one's own neurodivergence, misinterpreting it in others, or lacking a clear understanding of the concept more broadly. Survey responses from neurotypical participants reflected this confusion, with several noting that their understanding of neurodivergence had primarily developed through personal relationships rather than media. However, they also indicated that this understanding was often complicated or distorted when encountering media portrayals.

A particularly significant moment that informed this sub-theme emerged within the neurotypical focus group. During a discussion about mental health, anxiety, and depression – and how these can intersect with the often isolating experiences of neurodivergence – Eliza asked whether depression "counts" as neurodivergence. She referenced the death of a news anchor and the increased media attention surrounding depression that followed, explaining that the prominence of mental health narratives in media (compared with more limited representations of neurodivergence) led her to question whether the two were equivalent. This moment identified a broader issue: mental health conditions and neurodivergence are frequently conflated in public discourse. While the two can overlap, they are not synonymous.

Harriet agreed that this distinction is commonly misunderstood. She reflected that, while preparing for the focus group, she became aware of how easily neurotypical people – including herself – blur these categories, often assuming that anxiety, depression, or similar experiences fall under the umbrella of neurodivergence. Eliza extended this reflection through a personal example, explaining that her partner who has ADHD, was surprised to learn that ADHD is considered a form of neurodivergence. He had previously associated the term more closely with mental health, partly due to stereotypes around emotional instability. His reaction underscored how unclear the boundaries and definitions can be, even for individuals who are themselves neurodivergent.

Eliza suggested that this confusion can lead to embarrassment, hesitation, or discomfort when individuals are unsure how to describe their own experiences or disclose them to others, noting that both her partner and a close friend had experienced similar uncertainty. She also referenced ambiguity surrounding conditions such as borderline personality disorder, explaining that while some scholars debate its relationship to neurodivergence, it is currently classified as a mental health condition. This further demonstrates how evolving terminology and emerging research can contribute to ongoing public uncertainty.

These misunderstandings also carried significant weight within the neurodivergent focus group. Several participants described how public confusion surrounding neurodivergence affected their sense of being believed and validated. While participants often had a strong understanding of their own experiences, they felt that external perceptions were frequently one-sided or misinformed. Maya expanded on this, explaining that despite having a dyslexia diagnosis and strong self-awareness, she felt hesitant to disclose that she was likely ADHD while awaiting formal assessment. Her reluctance stemmed from uncertainty about whether she would be taken seriously, particularly by neurotypical individuals. This illustrates the vulnerability involved in self-identification and the social risk associated with not being believed.

Leila similarly explained that their disability often went unrecognised because they had learned to mask effectively at school, meaning even teachers were unaware until their parents intervened. Multiple participants – particularly women – described similar experiences of masking in educational settings, with their traits often misinterpreted as shyness, sensitivity, or overwhelm rather than recognised as neurodivergence. This reinforces the framing of neurodivergence as a hidden disability – one that often remains invisible unless others know what to look for. The group agreed that continued reliance on stereotypes, both in media and in everyday discourse, reinforces misunderstanding and contributes to the "stereotype spillover" effect discussed earlier.

### Medication, Addiction, and Pathologised Understandings of Neurodivergence

Building on these broader misunderstandings of neurodivergence, participants noted that much of this may stem from autism being positioned as the "primary" form of neurodivergence in media, often with higher-functioning presentations serving as the dominant reference point. As a result, ADHD was frequently discussed in contrast within the focus groups, often framed as the "other" within neurodivergent representation. Notably, participants across both groups converged on the same critique: ADHD is commonly reduced to narratives centred on medication, rather than being portrayed as a complex lived experience in media.

Within the neurotypical focus group in particular, participants reflected that their understanding of ADHD had been shaped largely by media storylines centred on medication misuse, pill theft, or casual references to stimulant use. When asked to identify specific ADHD characters, the group struggled to name any. Instead, Farah described a recurring trope across film and television – particularly within romantic comedies – in which parents are depicted casually taking their child's ADHD medication to cope. One example discussed was the comedy-drama series *Desperate Housewives*, where Lynette Scavo becomes dependent on her twin sons' ADHD medication. Participants noted that the twins' ADHD is largely framed as comedic,

while narrative attention centres primarily on Lynette's drug use. Farah explained that this framing reduces ADHD to either (1) a plot device involving medication misuse or (2) an identity defined solely through medication. The group agreed that this absence of character depth, alongside the dominance of medication-based tropes, effectively erases the lived experience of ADHD and contributes to broader public misunderstanding.

When this critique was presented to the neurodivergent focus group, participants strongly resonated with it. Maya acknowledged that while medication can be genuinely helpful and necessary for some individuals, it is not appropriate for everyone. She critiqued the way ADHD is repeatedly framed as a "medication storyline," arguing that it should instead be treated as an everyday health reality rather than a defining narrative device. She compared this to contraception, which is not typically used as a central storyline for female characters, and described the persistent focus on medication as both unrealistic and reductive. Building on this, other ADHD participants connected these representations directly to their lived experiences. Elliot and Sophie described how, upon disclosing their ADHD, others particularly men – would often immediately joke about obtaining medication such as Adderall from them.

Sophie shared a particularly illustrative example involving her brother, who also has ADHD. Despite medication having negative effects on him, friends in their late twenties continued to pressure him to share his prescription for recreational use. She explained that her brother is often described as "lucky," rather than recognised as someone who struggles with a disability. She further noted that he had turned to cannabis as a form of self-regulation, underscoring how substance use can become a coping strategy for neurodivergent individuals. This opened a broader discussion around routine, regulation, and vulnerability to addiction, particularly for those seeking to manage overwhelm or feel "normal." Participants expressed concern that media narratives about addiction often lack this nuance, instead presenting substance use in oversimplified or trivialised ways.

Elliot shared that, prior to receiving an ADHD diagnosis, she had relied on recreational drugs to manage aspects of daily functioning such as cleaning, organising, and completing tasks. After beginning prescribed medication for her ADHD instead, she recognised that it produced a similar regulating effect, helping her understand why the substance had previously felt "functional." She explained that limited access to diagnosis and support can lead some individuals to self-medicate or rely on others' prescriptions. Sophie described a similarly distressing interaction with a doctor who dismissed her concerns about assessment, implying that she was just seeking medication for recreational use and questioning whether she could afford a diagnosis. She explained that this left her feeling humiliated and discouraged from pursuing further support.

Despite the dominance of medicalised portrayals in media – and the ways these shape lived experiences – Hannah, an ADHD participant, identified one positive example related to this discussion of addiction: the television series *Mom*, particularly the character Bonnie Plunkett, who eventually recognises her ADHD in relation to her experiences with addiction. Participants noted that the show addresses addiction, relapse, and recovery with greater realism, while also acknowledging the relationship between neurodivergence and coping behaviours without sensationalising it. ADHD participants described this as a rare example of representation that reflects lived experience rather than relying on stereotypes.

## Theme 3: The Future of Neurodivergent Representation in Aotearoa New Zealand

This third and final theme completes the narrative arc of the thematic analysis, moving from how neurodivergent characters are portrayed, to the impacts of those portrayals, and finally to participants' forward-looking visions for what neurodivergent representation should become. Building on the concerns identified across the previous themes, this section explores what participants believe is missing from current media portrayals and the changes they want to see in order to support greater authenticity and inclusion.

From the early stages of this research, it became clear that part of this project's contribution lies not only in identifying the limitations of current global representations, but also in offering insight into why neurodivergent representation can feel limited within the New Zealand media landscape – and what might be done to address this. Rather than treating representation as a fixed outcome, this theme positions it as an evolving cultural practice shaped by both creative decisions and structural conditions.

Participants' perspectives are situated within the realities of the New Zealand media landscape, where factors such as funding structures and discoverability systems influence which stories are told and whose voices are amplified. As such, this theme also examines the systemic constraints that limit the visibility of neurodivergent narratives in Aotearoa, including barriers to diverse storytelling, limited industry risk-taking, and the ongoing marginalisation of voices outside dominant screen cultures.

### Discoverability and Visibility Challenges in New Zealand Media

As discussed earlier, there is a growing body of both fictional and non-fictional New Zealand–made content that engages with neurodivergent experiences – often with care and quality, as

seen in programmes such as *Four Go Flatting*, supported in part by diversity frameworks from NZ On Air. However, across both neurodivergent and neurotypical participants, the vast majority of examples referenced were drawn from international media, with very few participants able to recall New Zealand-made content featuring neurodivergent representation. This led both groups to the same conclusion: the issue lies less in content creation and more in discoverability. In other words, it is not that New Zealand media is failing to produce meaningful neurodivergent representation, but that audiences are struggling to find, access, and recognise that this content exists at all.

Within the neurotypical focus group, the conversation shifted organically toward questions of discoverability, driven by participants' curiosity about why they had not encountered such content in their everyday media consumption. This prompted the same line of inquiry to be introduced to the neurodivergent group for further reflection. This concern was not exclusive to the neurotypical group; both groups reported similar difficulty when asked to recall New Zealand-based examples. Where examples were offered, they were often niche (e.g., a podcast called *It's Personal*), peripheral to screen media (e.g., Will & Able, a disability-led business), or centred on historical narratives (e.g., *In Dark Places*), rather than contemporary fictional or non-fictional representations. Even within the neurodivergent group – where awareness was initially expected to be higher – the number of New Zealand examples raised was lower than anticipated.

Preliminary survey data provided further context for this pattern. Among the eight neurotypical participants, only two (25%) reported encountering New Zealand–based neurodivergent representation in their everyday media consumption. By comparison, five of the eight neurodivergent participants (62.5%) reported some exposure, suggesting a difference in familiarity with local portrayals between the two groups. This distinction was also reflected in the focus group discussions, where participants considered how personal relevance, media consumption habits and the visibility of local content shaped their encounters with neurodivergent representation. For the purposes of this sub-theme, the analysis focuses primarily on the neurotypical group's discussion of discoverability, particularly in relation to the visibility, promotion and accessibility of neurodivergent content on TVNZ+. The neurodivergent group's reflections, which centred more closely on platform accessibility and individual media consumption habits, are examined in a later sub-theme.

Following the group's shared recognition of this visibility gap, I asked the neurotypical participants why they believed this lack of discoverability exists. Isla immediately raised an insightful critique of TVNZ's marketing priorities. She recalled a recent TVNZ+ advertisement she had seen on TikTok and YouTube, noting that it was filmed at Auckland University of

Technology – something she recognised from the background architecture. However, she described the advertisement as generic, featuring actors delivering lines such as "what are you gonna do tonight?" followed by "go home and watch *The Rookie*" and "our flat is watching *Love Island*." Isla argued that this approach fails to communicate the value or distinctiveness of New Zealand–made content, which she suggested should be central to TVNZ's role as a public-facing national platform. Instead, the marketing appears to mimic the strategies of global platforms such as Netflix and Disney+, foregrounding international content in an attempt to gain traction – ultimately making local content easier to overlook.

Although the advertisement was filmed in a recognisable location in Tāmaki Makaurau, Isla observed that it promoted the platform itself – while foregrounding its international content – rather than highlighting local programming. She argued that when a platform is already undervalued or underused, marketing efforts would be more effective if they showcased the content available, rather than simply encouraging audiences to "go home and watch TVNZ+." She added that audiences need to see what is on the platform, not just that it exists – particularly given that the catalogue extends well beyond international imports. Isla further reflected on the irony that TVNZ+ is free and offers genuinely high-quality New Zealand programming yet remains widely overlooked.

The rest of the neurotypical group broadly agreed with Isla's points, locating responsibility in the lack of advertising and promotion for TVNZ+ content. Expanding on this, Isla added that, even as an active user of the platform, she does not fully engage with what is available because she is simply unaware of much of the catalogue. She pointed to the extensive library of high-quality content – including British series and the full catalogue of Taskmaster – which she believes is not marketed effectively enough for audiences to realise it exists. Eliza echoed this sentiment, suggesting that with greater investment in marketing – particularly on social media – New Zealanders would likely engage far more with local content.

Harriet contributed to this discussion by noting that TVNZ+ features a "Coming Soon" section within the app, where she has noticed several impressive upcoming shows that are, in fact, New Zealand–made. However, she emphasised that she would not have known about these releases unless she had actively opened the app and navigated to that specific category. This foregrounds an additional layer of the visibility problem: audiences only encounter upcoming local content if they are already active users who know where to look, rather than through external promotion that might attract new viewers.

### The Desire for Authentic, Everyday Representations of Neurodivergent Lives

Participants were also asked to reflect on what they do want to see in future portrayals of neurodivergence, particularly within local contexts, drawing on their negative experiences of global representations. Based on this, they expressed concern that local media development risks reproducing similar character patterns – especially through marketing practices that prioritise international content and, by extension, international forms of representation. Neurotypical participants, in particular, addressed the irony that local streaming platforms frequently prioritise the promotion of American and British programmes that reproduce many of the representational issues they find problematic, rather than investing in – or more actively promoting – locally grounded alternatives.

This was widely viewed as a missed opportunity, particularly given the significant potential within Aotearoa to further develop accurate and nuanced representations of neurodivergence across both fictional and non-fictional formats, while consciously avoiding the replication of harmful patterns prevalent in international media. Isla reflected on what she would like to see represented in future media in Aotearoa to support a deeper understanding of neurodivergence. She expressed a desire for more storylines that focus on characters discovering their neurodivergence, rather than only encountering characters who already know their diagnosis and announce it from the outset. She explained that many shows introduce neurodivergent characters as "the autistic friend," or position their diagnosis as the character's defining trait, which can feel reductive and one-dimensional.

Instead, Isla expressed a preference for coming-of-age or self-discovery narratives that reflect how many people come to understand their neurodivergence later in life, rather than presenting it as a fixed identity from the beginning. She illustrated this through an example drawn from Australian comedian Josh Thomas's television work. She explained that his earlier series *Please Like Me* centred on a character coming to terms with his sexuality, while his later show *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* focuses on caring for his sisters, one of whom is autistic. Notably, Thomas himself was diagnosed as autistic during the first season of *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*, and this realisation was subsequently written into the narrative of the following season. Isla found this portrayal compelling because it did not feel commercialised or stereotyped; instead, the exploration of neurodivergence unfolded organically, including moments where characters discussed similarities and differences in their traits. She suggested that this type of narrative – where a character comes to understand their neurodivergence over time and explores its complexity – would represent a more meaningful and authentic direction for future media.

The wider group agreed with Isla's perspective, with another participant, Harriet, offering a similar example of what she hoped to see in future portrayals. She referenced the Australian series *Austin*, which stars Michael Theo, previously featured in *Love on the Spectrum (Australia)*. Following Theo's popularity in the reality series, *Austin* was developed as a fictional comedy in which he portrays a character inspired by himself. Drawing on clips she had seen, Harriet described the series as offering a grounded portrayal of everyday experiences and interactions. She felt that this approach raised awareness of autism in a respectful and relatable way, allowing Theo's character to navigate everyday life without making his neurodivergence the central spectacle. For Harriet, the series illustrated the potential for fictional representations to incorporate authentic neurodivergent experiences without relying on exaggerated traits or stereotypes.

For the neurodivergent group, this became an especially significant discussion point. Participants expressed frustration with the ways neurodivergence is commonly portrayed in international media, alongside a strong desire to see New Zealand media continue developing more authentic alternatives. Although they recognised that Aotearoa is in a comparatively positive position in terms of representation, participants felt there remains substantial room for improvement – particularly in ways that could support both neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences in developing deeper understanding and empathy.

One key issue raised was the lack of clearly neurodivergent fictional characters within New Zealand media. As a result, participants reported forming stronger emotional connections with overseas characters or with public figures in non-fiction contexts instead. For example, Nadia reflected on New Zealand public figures such as Guy Williams, noting that aspects of his public persona and openness about ADHD felt more recognisable and relatable than many fictional portrayals. She suggested that in New Zealand, representation may emerge more through personality and performance than through explicit fictional labelling. She expanded on this by referencing television personalities such as Jono Pryor and Ben Boyce, while also carefully acknowledging the importance of not diagnosing real people.

Sophie added that she relies far more on social media than traditional television for representation and connection. She expressed particular interest in seeing neurodivergence discussed openly by journalists and media professionals, given her aspiration to pursue journalism. She suggested that visibility in professional, real-world contexts is both meaningful and normalising. One example she offered was Chlöe Swarbrick, who has publicly spoken about having ADHD and has engaged in advocacy around ADHD-related issues, including participation in media coverage with 1 News. Participants also acknowledged public figures such as Jazz Thornton, who has spoken openly about ADHD.

In relation to fictional representation, the neurodivergent group agreed that, when handled thoughtfully, it is often more impactful to watch a character gradually come to understand their neurodivergence rather than having it stated explicitly from the outset – echoing the neurotypical group's reflections. Theo and Leila both expressed a preference for this gradual narrative development, suggesting that it feels more meaningful and avoids labels appearing forced or superficial. When asked whether any characters came to mind who experience this kind of development, Nadia referenced the protagonist Joe Goldberg from *You*. Although not an example of neurodivergence or New Zealand media, she felt the series demonstrates how a character's backstory, environment, and experiences are used to explain who they become over time. She argued that seeing how a character is shaped by their history allows audiences to better understand behaviour and motivation.

Extending this argument, I reflected that such representation would need to portray not only the positive or inspirational aspects of neurodivergence, but also the uncomfortable and emotionally complex realities of everyday neurodivergent life. Maya added that media often focuses on listing symptoms rather than showing the real-life repercussions of neurodivergence. Leila and Nadia agreed, noting that representation frequently stops at surface-level behaviours instead of exploring how neurodivergence affects relationships, emotional wellbeing, identity, and long-term life experiences. Leila clarified that participants were not seeking overly negative portrayals, nor "inspiration porn," but rather honest depictions of the full complexity of everyday neurodivergent life. Nadia echoed this, advocating for more normalised, spectrum-based representations that avoid extreme or overly medicalised portrayals and instead reflect the diversity of lived experience.

### The Role of Lived Experience in Creative Control

For Aotearoa to continue developing content in a meaningful and ethical direction, both focus groups framed the involvement of neurodivergent actors, writers, consultants, and creators not as symbolic inclusion, but as a form of structural authorship – shaping narrative tone, boundaries, and meaning from within the production process. Within the neurodivergent focus group, an especially important point was raised by Nadia, who drew on her own experience working in television and film. She observed that a significant proportion of people working across creative industries are neurodivergent. Many of the writers, crew members, and creatives she has worked alongside identify as neurodivergent, which led her to question who is actually shaping these stereotypical on-screen portrayals of neurodivergence. Are these characters being written by neurodivergent creators who may unintentionally exaggerate traits they recognise in themselves? Or are these portrayals more often shaped by neurotypical writers constructing imagined versions of what neurodivergence is "supposed" to look like? From this, Nadia

presented a key tension. If neurodivergent people are statistically more likely to gravitate toward creative fields, one might expect their perspectives to be strongly reflected in media output. Yet the characters that reach the screen still frequently fall into flattened, comedic, or exaggerated tropes.

From this insight, the conversation shifted toward what participants framed as one of the most important forms of neurodivergent empowerment in creative control: the significance of casting neurodivergent actors in neurodivergent roles. Participants discussed the character of Quinni Gallagher-Jones from *Heartbreak High*, played by Chloe Hayden, who is herself autistic. This example prompted a rich discussion about authenticity in performance. Leila reflected that, while they are not autistic themselves (identifying as dyslexic), Quinni's portrayal felt noticeably more realistic and less overdramatised than characters such as Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory*. They suggested that the actor's lived experience likely contributed to the authenticity and nuance of the performance, making it feel grounded and respectful rather than performative. Leila also suggested that casting neurodivergent actors, where possible, can meaningfully enhance authenticity. They shared their own experience of casting an actor with a similar learning disability to portray dyslexia in a film project, noting that shared lived experience mattered more than an exact diagnostic match.

Another example came from Nadia, who recalled the significant backlash surrounding *Music*, a musical drama in which neurotypical actor Maddie Ziegler portrayed an autistic character. Although she had not watched the film herself, Nadia recalled the widespread controversy surrounding its release, identifying it as a prominent example of concerns about casting and representation. Sophie contributed to this discussion by referencing *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, in which Leonardo DiCaprio portrayed a character with an intellectual disability. She reflected that casting actors without lived experience of the disabilities they portray can feel uncomfortable or even mocking when the characterisation lacks sensitivity or respect. However, Sophie also emphasised that the impact of such portrayals depends on how the role is approached. She suggested that these performances could still be meaningful when actors treat the role seriously and use their public platforms to promote greater understanding through interviews and wider discussions. Conversely, portrayals perceived as insensitive or trivialising risk reinforcing stereotypes rather than challenging them.

Participants acknowledged that this issue is not straightforward. Given the breadth of the neurodivergent spectrum, the discussion shifted toward a more nuanced understanding of what it means for neurodivergent people to be meaningfully involved in production – not only on screen, but also behind the scenes in writing, directing, consulting, and decision-making roles. Hannah introduced a contrasting view, suggesting that some narratives seek to portray

different stages of a disability journey, and that not every actor with lived experience may be able to embody every stage. She referenced *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* as an example, explaining that the creator based the father's degenerative illness on his own real-life experience. This, she argued, lent emotional authenticity to the storyline, even though the actor portraying the role was able-bodied. Hannah suggested that this depth of lived-informed authorship allowed the character to be represented with nuance and complexity, rather than reduced to a single defining trait.

Maya agreed with Hannah, further expanding on how the perceived "severity" of disability can influence casting decisions, particularly when entertainment industries prioritise marketability and star power. She offered a hypothetical example of Henry Cavill portraying a character with ADHD and dyslexia to illustrate how a high-profile actor could bring significant visibility to neurodivergent experiences. The group agreed that this creates a double-edged sword: while star power can increase awareness, it does not automatically resolve concerns around authenticity. Each case, therefore, needs to be considered individually. Leila added that many actors may choose not to disclose their neurodivergence due to fear of stigma, exclusion, or reduced opportunities – something they related to through their own experiences in job interviews. For actors, this pressure may be even greater when a disability affects learning scripts or meeting performance expectations. Maya extended this point by discussing cultural contexts, noting that in some countries (such as South Korea) there may be limited visibility or acceptance of openly neurodivergent, queer, or transgender actors within the industry.

The neurotypical group expressed a largely similar perspective, offering slightly different but equally valuable insights into why neurodivergent people may or may not be hired in creative production. Eliza raised a particularly important point, suggesting that neurotypical actors are often preferred because they are perceived as "easier" to work with. She reflected that this is deeply hypocritical within an industry that claims to value "authentic representation," noting that neurotypical actors may be selected because they are seen as easier to direct or "manipulate," particularly when directors seek to elicit specific emotional responses. In her view, it may be "much easier for a neurotypical person" to perform emotion on cue, making them a more comfortable choice for production teams. Eliza also suggested that casting decisions often reflect what feels most familiar within the industry, especially when financial incentives and efficiency are prioritised over authenticity. This reinforces the idea that representation is frequently shaped by industry convenience rather than ethical commitment.

Harriet also introduced the idea that productions should include sensitivity readers or consultants within the creative process, suggesting that someone should be present to challenge portrayals and offer corrective insight, such as: "this isn't what it's like." Eliza expanded on

this, suggesting that some writers may actively avoid explicitly labelling a character as autistic because doing so would require hiring specialists or consultants – an additional layer of work, responsibility, and cost. Instead, characters are often left vaguely coded, allowing writers to draw on neurodivergent traits while avoiding accountability. These reflections point to a broader industry issue: whether representation appears in fictional or non-fictional contexts, authenticity is shaped by who is involved in creating it. Eliza summarised this by suggesting that representation feels most genuine when either (1) the actor is neurodivergent, or (2) a neurodivergent consultant meaningfully guides the portrayal. She further questioned whether audiences might be more inclined to engage with content if neurodivergent actors were also involved in its promotion – for example, through platforms like TikTok – allowing lived experience to inform both the performance and its public communication.

A particularly valuable contribution then came from Isla, who identified a recurring industry pattern: when neurodivergent characters are played by neurotypical actors, the role can become what she described as a "straight white male acting challenge." She argued that the industry frequently frames marginalised roles – such as cis actors playing trans characters, or straight actors playing gay characters – as prestigious performance opportunities. Similarly, some neurotypical actors approach autistic roles as dramatic challenges rather than responsibilities grounded in lived experience. Eliza strongly agreed, adding that male actors in particular are often permitted to engage in more extreme or shocking behaviour on screen because it is more socially acceptable or "easier to digest" for audiences. Isla suggested that this framing shifts the incentive away from authentic representation and toward attention-grabbing performance, resulting in exaggerated portrayals that reinforce stereotypes rather than offering meaningful insight. Her analysis returns directly to Nadia's earlier question from the neurodivergent group: if neurodivergent people are already present behind the scenes, why does representation still fall short? This perspective provides a compelling explanation – the industry continues to reward the performance of marginalised identities rather than the inclusion of those who embody them.

### Platform Accessibility and Streaming Practices

A striking contrast in media consumption habits also emerged throughout the discussions, evidenced by clear discrepancies in the volume of local versus global characters referenced across both focus groups. This sub-theme therefore explores how participants understood the limited visibility of local neurodivergent representation, particularly in relation to marketing, discoverability, and their own viewing habits. As noted, neurodivergent participants struggled to identify examples of New Zealand–based neurodivergent representation just as much as the neurotypical group. Maya suggested that one reason for this may be that few young people now watch New Zealand television at all, meaning that even if representation were to improve, its

reach and impact might remain limited. The group broadly agreed that traditional New Zealand television is no longer the preferred viewing platform for younger audiences, with global streaming services such as Netflix dominating their media consumption.

The core issue shaping the visibility of New Zealand representation appears to be the broader shift toward global streaming platforms rather than traditional television. Participants supported this view, with Nadia and Leila noting that they now rely more heavily on streaming services or overseas platforms such as BBC iPlayer, rather than local broadcasters. However, this raises a further question: even if audiences are no longer engaging with New Zealand television in its traditional form, why are locally available streaming – such as TVNZ+ – not being used more frequently, given their accessibility? Nadia explained that she rarely uses TVNZ+ for scripted content, instead associating the platform primarily with reality television – a perception shared by Leila. This prompted a deeper discussion regarding the relative performance of local fiction versus non-fiction, with participants suggesting that New Zealand non-fiction tends to resonate more strongly than locally produced scripted drama.

Two interconnected points emerged from this. First, participants linked this back to marketing and discoverability, arguing that New Zealand platforms often prioritise advertising international content rather than promoting local shows. As a result, audiences are frequently unaware of what local content exists and may default to global streaming platforms. Second, and more significantly, participants identified a disconnect between format preferences and audience expectations. For example, Maya explained that she is more likely to engage with New Zealand film than television, largely due to funding and budget limitations placed on local TV productions. She noted that she tends to watch more American, British, and international series because higher budgets often translate into stronger production quality and acting.

Nadia reinforced that production quality makes a significant difference in how New Zealand content is received. She referenced *Heavenly Creatures* as an example of high-quality local cinema, suggesting its characters could be read as neurodivergent-coded and demonstrating that strong storytelling has long existed when budget, craft, and reach align. She also cited *The Piano* as another example of New Zealand cinema that achieved international recognition through high production value and critical acclaim. Maya added that when media is high-budget and well-produced, audiences are more willing to engage with characters who are quirky or neurodivergent-coded, suggesting that strong craft would also enhance both the enjoyment and credibility of representation. These reflections indicate that the issue is not necessarily the existence of local media, but rather its perceived quality and reception. Participants suggested that local scripted television is often avoided because it can feel difficult to take seriously when compared with high-budget international productions, whereas local non-fiction is preferred

because it feels more authentic and less performative. This reveals a quality-versus-quantity tension: rather than producing large volumes of "adequate" content, participants felt that greater investment should be directed toward fewer, higher-quality productions that audiences can genuinely engage with, thereby better showcasing New Zealand's creative potential.

An unexpected yet significant issue that emerged during this discussion was the role of the New Zealand accent. Participants across both neurodivergent and neurotypical groups identified the Kiwi accent as a barrier to engaging with both local fictional television and some international portrayals of New Zealand characters. Several participants noted that scripted performances in a Kiwi accent can feel difficult to take seriously, while inaccurate accents in global productions feel distracting and inauthentic. As a result, participants often preferred local non-fiction, which feels more natural and grounded. Nadia expressed a clear preference for local stories and noted that she feels proud when New Zealanders succeed internationally while retaining their authentic identity rather than being reduced to stereotypes. Theo reinforced this by joking that they particularly disliked seeing New Zealand characters played by actors who "can't do the damn accent," while Sophie agreed that inaccurate portrayals of the accent undermine both authenticity and audience engagement.

The neurotypical focus group revealed concerns that closely paralleled those of the neurodivergent group, particularly in relation to where New Zealand content is visible and whether it is taken seriously by audiences. Mirroring Maya's earlier perspective, Eliza identified the decline of traditional New Zealand television as a key barrier to improving neurodivergent representation, noting that "no one really watches TV anymore." She suggested that for neurodivergent stories to gain meaningful traction, they should be positioned within global streaming environments, where contemporary audiences are most actively engaged.

As the discussion developed, Eliza further suggested that the presence of New Zealand productions on international platforms can evoke a strong sense of national pride, describing it as "patriotic." She likened this to the widespread pride associated with *The Lord of the Rings* being filmed in New Zealand. Her reflection indicates that audiences may be more inclined to engage with local stories – including those featuring neurodivergent representation – when they are situated within high-visibility, global contexts. Harriet echoed this sentiment, noting that she feels a sense of pride when New Zealand shows gain international recognition. She referenced *After the Party* as a recent example, explaining that although she had not personally watched the series due to its subject matter, she still valued its global success.

Georgia also argued that, beyond the pursuit of global visibility for local representation, TVNZ+ should avoid attempting to replicate international streaming services such as Netflix and

Disney+ in an effort to mimic their scale and visibility. Instead, she suggested that the platform would benefit from capitalising on its distinct value as a hub for uniquely New Zealand content – a conclusion that closely aligns with insights from the neurodivergent group. She further identified a disconnect in current advertising strategies, observing that local content is predominantly promoted through traditional television channels, which are more likely to reach older audiences. In contrast, younger audiences – who primarily engage with streaming platforms such as TVNZ+ – are more frequently exposed to the promotion of international content. From her perspective, this creates a misalignment in targeting, whereby the audiences most likely to engage with local content are not being effectively reached through the platforms they use.

While she acknowledged the appeal of hosting internationally recognised series such as *The Last of Us*, she explained that this should not come at the expense of promoting local productions. Notably, she admitted that even as a user of the platform, she remained unaware of a significant portion of the shows available, reinforcing broader concerns around the discoverability and visibility of New Zealand content. This perspective was widely shared across the neurotypical focus group, indicating a strong level of consensus around these concerns.

To link these insights back to the focus of the study – and to ground conclusions in participant perspectives – I asked whether all participants across focus groups would engage with, or struggle to take seriously, a New Zealand–made fictional series featuring a neurodivergent character on a local streaming platform. Participants consistently indicated that their response would depend largely on the quality of the writing and acting. Isla noted that strong character development would outweigh any accent-related concerns, while Harriet similarly emphasised that authenticity and quality of portrayal are the most critical factors. Eliza added that she would be receptive to such representations provided they avoid exaggeration or stereotype, and that neurodivergence does not dominate the narrative unless it is contextually relevant and supported by strong acting and production values. Overall, participants suggested that respectful, grounded representation can function effectively within New Zealand fiction. The issue, therefore, does not lie with neurodivergent identity itself, but with how it is written, funded, performed, and framed within the broader production context.

### Industry-Level Potential for Better Neurodivergent Representation

Drawing on the breadth of insights gathered across this theme, this final sub-theme turns to potential next steps for the media industry in Aotearoa, grounded entirely in participant perspectives. Informed directly by the focus group discussions, it moves beyond improving

representation alone, instead considering how neurodivergent stories can be made more discoverable, resonant, and accessible to wider audiences – thereby supporting a more expansive public understanding of neurodivergence as a diverse spectrum. Across both groups, participants clearly identified where responsibility for this shift should lie. Key stakeholders included streaming and broadcasting platforms such as TVNZ, funding bodies such as NZ On Air, and the broader production systems that shape media output – namely casting, writing, commissioning, and producing. Within these spaces, participants foregrounded the need to prioritise neurodivergent voices and lived expertise, rather than relying on neurotypical interpretation to construct these narratives.

The neurotypical group offered a range of perspectives on how the industry might move forward, addressing both sides of the challenge: strengthening neurodivergent representation within production processes, while also improving the external discoverability of New Zealand screen media through more effective advertising strategies – particularly for emerging generations. As discussed earlier, participants expressed a clear preference for global streaming platforms, largely due to their accessibility, expansive content libraries, and higher production budgets. These factors contributed to the perception that such platforms offer greater value for money than local alternatives such as TVNZ+.

This preference was further reinforced by the view that TVNZ+ often prioritises the promotion of international content over local productions, which risks overshadowing its unique strengths and diminishing its distinctiveness as a platform. In response, participants proposed several strategies to better position New Zealand content. Eliza, for instance, suggested that exclusivity could be more effectively leveraged as a marketing tool. She noted that global platforms such as Netflix and Hulu retain subscribers by clearly branding content as platform-specific (e.g., “only on Netflix”). Applying a similar strategy to local productions – particularly a smaller number of higher-budget, quality-driven programmes – could encourage audiences to engage with platforms like TVNZ+ for targeted, high-value content. From this perspective, exclusivity operates not only as a distribution model but as a key mechanism for audience attraction and retention, which New Zealand media has yet to fully capitalise on. Harriet supported this idea by reflecting on a past TV3 promotional campaign that featured short preview clips of upcoming programmes, including locally produced content. She described this approach as effective in drawing her onto the platform, suggesting that curated promotional strategies – particularly those that highlight a selective slate of high-quality content – can generate anticipation and guide audience engagement.

Building on these perspectives, Marcus further suggested that New Zealand media could more effectively reach audiences like his through strategic placement of advertising during major live

sporting events, such as cricket. He described securing advertising space within widely watched broadcasts as a "massive marketing coup," particularly for engaging older demographics who continue to rely on traditional television – contrasting with younger audiences who are more likely to be reached through social media channels. Marcus succinctly framed this challenge through the lens of change-management principles – awareness, desire, and knowledge. He argued that audience engagement depends on a staged process: first, building awareness of available content through more visible and strategic advertising; second, fostering desire to watch through investment in higher-budget, high-quality productions; and third, ensuring audiences understand where and how to access this content, for instance through clearly communicated platform exclusivity (e.g., "only on TVNZ+"). His reflection captures a central issue identified throughout the focus groups: audience engagement is fundamentally contingent on visibility. Without sufficient awareness, even well-produced and meaningful content risks remaining unseen – ultimately limiting its reach, impact, and contribution to broader cultural understanding.

To explicitly connect these insights back to neurodivergent representation, participants were asked what should come next for local New Zealand media in a way that would feel authentic from a neurotypical perspective. Eliza raised a particularly nuanced concern, suggesting that a sudden shift from minimal neurodivergent representation to multiple fictional narratives centred on neurodivergent characters would feel disjointed. She noted that this would be especially incongruous given the ongoing scarcity of fictional Kiwi productions meaningfully representing Māori and other marginalised identities. Framing this as "jumping the diversity step," Eliza argued that New Zealand media has yet to establish a sufficiently strong foundation of inclusive storytelling more broadly. As such, introducing neurodivergent characters in isolation – without addressing wider representational gaps – risks appearing performative or tokenistic rather than earned. Participants instead emphasised that meaningful progress requires a recalibration of industry frameworks. They suggested prioritising a smaller number of higher-budget productions over a large volume of lower-budget content, alongside ensuring that neurodivergent voices are not only included but actively centred and empowered within creative and decision-making processes. The group also discussed the importance of aligning these production shifts with more strategic and organic marketing practices. By reducing inefficiencies in promotional spending, a greater proportion of funding could be redirected toward the development of high-quality, culturally resonant narratives.

The neurodivergent focus group expressed perspectives that closely aligned with those of the neurotypical group – particularly in relation to issues of visibility and access – but placed a stronger emphasis on emotional authenticity and representational accuracy, reflecting their lived

proximity to the subject matter. For instance, Leila considered the importance of more accurate neurodivergent representation shaped through direct neurodivergent input behind the scenes. They noted that public understandings of neurodivergence remain limited, in part due to the continued dominance of neurotypical perspectives within media production. Building on strategies raised by the neurotypical group – such as prioritising higher-budget productions and adopting more organic marketing approaches – Leila suggested that greater narrative depth and increased visibility in storytelling are essential for fostering more meaningful and informed public understanding.

Given that both focus groups consistently identified non-fiction as more relatable than fiction, neurodivergent participants proposed that a more effective initial step toward broader public engagement would be to foreground neurodivergent public figures, rather than immediately investing in fictional narratives or long-form documentary series. Within the context of Aotearoa as a small nation characterised by social proximity and familiarity, participants argued that centring recognisable figures in meaningful, non-exaggerated ways could provide a more accessible and authentic entry point before directing resources toward higher-budget screen productions. This approach was understood as a way to leverage existing public visibility to bring more authentically neurodivergent voices on screen, gradually "warming up" public understanding over time. In doing so, participants suggested that audiences may become more prepared and receptive to deeper fictional and non-fictional storytelling, enabling future representations to be both more nuanced and more effectively received.

Taken together, these themes highlight the interconnected challenges of representation, impact, and industry structure in shaping how neurodivergence is portrayed and understood within screen media. While participants identified clear opportunities for more authentic and accessible storytelling, their reflections also point to deeper structural constraints within the industry that shape what is produced, promoted, and ultimately seen. The following chapter builds on these findings by situating them within existing literature and theoretical frameworks, exploring how these patterns reflect broader dynamics within the media industry and the socio-cultural construction of neurodivergence.

# Chapter Five: Discussion

## Introduction

Based on the in-depth discussions generated across both focus groups, this research provides a substantial body of material to interpret and translate into real-world application, with the aim of identifying new pathways for the media industry toward more effective and authentic approaches to neurodivergent representation. The preceding chapters – the literature review and the findings – addressed the first component of this study's research question: how on-screen portrayals of neurodivergence shape the ways neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals in Aotearoa perceive themselves and each other. Together, these chapters established the theoretical and empirical grounding necessary to understand how representation operates and is experienced across different audiences. Building on this, the subsequent discussion chapter shifts focus toward the second, more forward-looking component of the research question: what might come next for neurodivergent representation in Aotearoa and the wider media industry to support more authentic and inclusive portrayals? Rather than simply restating findings, the discussion chapter interprets them at a systems level, examining what the data reveals about industry possibilities, structural limitations, and opportunities for meaningful change.

To achieve this, the discussion synthesises insights from the focus group findings with existing scholarship and relevant theoretical frameworks. It is structured around the three key thematic strands identified in the analysis – representation, impact, and industry practice – enabling comparative interpretation between neurodivergent and neurotypical perspectives, while situating these insights within broader academic debates. The structure also mirrors the subthemes identified within each overarching theme, ensuring that each point is systematically unpacked and critically examined. Particular emphasis is placed on the local context of Aotearoa. The discussion foregrounds New Zealand–specific implications for media policy, funding, and production, with attention to the roles of institutions such as NZ On Air and streaming platforms like TVNZ, which play a central role in shaping production opportunities, diversity frameworks, and content discoverability. By anchoring the analysis locally, this chapter aims to generate insights that are both theoretically grounded and practically relevant.

Ultimately, this chapter considers what the findings suggest about the future of neurodivergent representation – why these shifts matter, how they might be implemented, and where further research is needed. In doing so, it contributes to neurodivergent media scholarship while engaging with ongoing industry conversations around representation, access, and cultural

responsibility across screen media and related creative fields. These findings extend existing research by situating neurodivergent representation within the specific constraints and dynamics of the Aotearoa New Zealand media context. By examining both neurodivergent and neurotypical perspectives, this study advances scholarship that often prioritises a single audience group, offering instead a more relational and comparative understanding of representational impact.

## Interpreting Representation: What Current Portrayals Reveal About the Future of Neurodivergent Media

### The Standardisation of Neurodivergent Characters

This first section of the discussion, reflecting the first theme of analysis, examines how neurodivergent representation is constructed through recurring tropes and character framings, and what the findings suggest about broader representational patterns. In doing so, it considers the dominant forms of representation referenced by participants and the recurring patterns that emerged across these portrayals. Across both focus groups, participants frequently drew upon a relatively small set of highly visible media examples, with their interpretations consistently anchored in predominantly "classic" American portrayals. Rather than reflecting a diverse range of lived experiences, many of these representations emphasised exaggerated or stereotypical traits, favouring entertainment value and recognisability over representational nuance.

Similar patterns of repetitive characterisation, such as the "genius savant" and "eternal child" tropes, have been identified in previous scholarship and are also reflected in the findings of the present study (Boisvert et al., 2024; Gibson et al., 2025; Hetrick, 2026; Jones et al., 2023; Stevenson et al., 2011). However, the present study extends this scholarship through the "savant vs. stupid" framework, conceptualised specifically for this research to examine how neurodivergence is represented through opposing extremes of perceived capability. Rather than considering these characterisations in isolation, the framework offers a way of examining how their repeated prominence may reinforce narrow perceptions of neurodivergence, making exaggerated traits more recognisable to audiences than nuanced representations of lived experience. Participants' discussions supported the relevance of this framework, with these opposing characterisations emerging as recognisable patterns across the portrayals they described. Notably, even when participants recognised these portrayals as unrealistic or inaccurate, they continued to reference them as the most readily recalled examples, particularly in the absence of identifiable local alternatives.

This finding is particularly significant when considered alongside existing critiques of stereotypical neurodivergent characterisation and its use for entertainment. Scholars have previously examined the prominence of the "savant" archetype within portrayals of autism (Happé, 2018; Jones et al., 2023; Treffert, 1999). Similarly, Wolff (2025) criticised the protagonist of *Atypical* as a "collection of stereotypes" ("Atypical" section, para. 1), highlighting concerns surrounding the reliance on reductive characterisations in fictional representations. The recurrence of characters such as Shaun Murphy (*The Good Doctor*) and Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*), both frequently referenced by participants in this study, further illustrates the prominence of recognisable neurodivergent archetypes within audience discussions. As Babar (2023) argues, such portrayals flatten neurodiversity into recognisable tropes, reducing complexity in favour of narrative legibility. Together, these perspectives suggest that simplified neurodivergent characterisations may remain prominent in audience interpretations even when their authenticity is questioned.

Building on these critiques, the findings also highlight the importance of examining the comparatively underexplored "stupid" trope, characterised by diminished perceptions of neurodivergent competence. Importantly, participants' interpretations extended beyond autism to include portrayals of ADHD and dyslexia, where characters were perceived as chaotic, disruptive or intellectually inferior. Considered together, these characterisations reinforce the polarity identified through the "savant vs. stupid" binary, in which neurodivergence is positioned at opposing extremes rather than represented as a nuanced spectrum of lived experiences. This framework therefore extends existing critiques by examining how the exaggeration and diminishment of perceived capability operate alongside one another across the broader neurodivergent spectrum. The significance of this lies in identifying a broader representational pattern that extends beyond individual stereotypes, positioning neurodivergent identities at extremes of capability while leaving comparatively little room for the diversity of experiences that exist between them.

Beyond these opposing characterisations, participants' differing interpretations of canonical and coded representation further complicate how neurodivergence is recognised and understood. This distinction reflects tensions between visibility and authenticity explored in previous scholarship (Babar, 2023; Jones et al., 2023; Mullis, 2019; Shafee, 2021). However, the present study extends these discussions by highlighting how neurodivergent participants' preference for certain coded portrayals challenges the assumption that explicit identification necessarily translates into meaningful representation. This is particularly relevant when canonical characters are heavily defined by diagnostic labels or exaggerated traits. Their responses suggest that authenticity may depend less on whether neurodivergence is explicitly acknowledged and more

on how naturally it is integrated into a character's broader identity. This highlights the importance of subtlety, relational depth and multidimensional characterisation, suggesting that greater diagnostic visibility alone does not necessarily produce more authentic representation.

However, coded representation also presents limitations, particularly for neurotypical audiences. As discussed in previous scholarship (Mullis, 2019; Shafee, 2021), without explicit acknowledgement, more subtle portrayals may be overlooked or interpreted differently, especially when audiences are more familiar with stereotypical markers of neurodivergence. This highlights a tension between making neurodivergence recognisable and representing it with nuance, although these approaches need not be mutually exclusive. Building on these discussions, the present study offers further insight by directly comparing neurodivergent and neurotypical perspectives, illustrating how audiences may interpret and value canonical and coded representation differently. Importantly, this suggests that representational authenticity cannot be determined by diagnostic acknowledgement alone, but must also consider how characters are developed and understood by different audiences.

Taken together, these insights complicate the assumption that exaggerated characterisations are necessary to engage audiences. Participants across both focus groups expressed a preference for more balanced and contextually grounded portrayals, suggesting a potential disconnect between familiar media conventions and the representations these audiences valued. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, this carries particular significance. Participants' reliance on international examples, alongside their limited familiarity with local portrayals, highlights the importance of making culturally grounded neurodivergent narratives more visible and accessible. Rather than positioning canonical acknowledgement and coded characterisation as competing approaches, the findings suggest value in combining explicit recognition with nuanced character development, allowing neurodivergence to be represented as one aspect of a broader and more complex identity.

### Who Is Missing? Intersectionality and Representational Absence

Extending beyond the limitations identified through the “savant vs. stupid” framework, the findings also highlight the intersectional dimensions of neurodivergent representation. Participants' reference points were consistently drawn from a narrow selection of characters, reflecting broader patterns of exclusion identified within existing scholarship. Previous research has critiqued the disproportionate visibility of young, heterosexual, white autistic men within media portrayals (Atkinson et al., 2024; Gaus et al., 2025; Goodman, 2023). These concerns are further contextualised by empirical research from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which analysed 1,800 popular films released between 2007 and 2024 and identified persistent

disparities in disability representation across gender and race (Smith, 2025). Among disabled characters, 61% were male and 70.8% were white, while considerably smaller proportions were Black (12.5%), Asian (11.5%) or multiracial (5.2%). Although these figures concern disability representation more broadly rather than neurodivergence specifically, they provide useful context for understanding the wider inequalities within which neurodivergent portrayals are produced and circulated. Considered alongside the present findings, this scholarship suggests that representational limitations extend beyond stereotypical characterisation to encompass the demographic identities most readily associated with neurodivergence.

In contrast, participants' calls for greater representation of female, gender-diverse and older neurodivergent individuals demonstrate an awareness of these inequalities and a desire for more inclusive portrayals. This aligns with intersectional scholarship emphasising that neurodivergent experiences cannot be understood independently of other aspects of identity, including gender, race, sexuality and age (Aspler et al., 2022; Goodman, 2023; Kumari, 2025; Le, 2024). However, the present study contributes an audience-centred perspective by demonstrating how these representational limitations are recognised and questioned by viewers themselves. Participants' responses suggest that meaningful representation involves more than increasing the visibility of neurodivergence; it also requires consideration of how intersecting identities shape the experiences depicted and the assumptions audiences may form.

Gender emerged as a particularly significant dimension of these discussions, reflecting longstanding concerns about the male-centred recognition and representation of neurodivergence. For example, Davidson (2007) examines how understandings and representations of autism have historically been shaped by masculine associations, contributing to the perception of autistic traits as predominantly male. This provides a useful foundation for interpreting participants' concerns about the limited visibility of neurodivergent women and gender-diverse individuals. Importantly, these concerns were evident across both focus groups, suggesting that gendered limitations in representation were recognisable to audiences with differing relationships to neurodivergence. The findings therefore build upon existing scholarship by illustrating how historically masculine understandings of autism remain relevant to contemporary audience interpretations, while highlighting the potential for more diverse portrayals to challenge these established associations.

Age emerged as another important dimension, particularly regarding the tendency for neurodivergence to be associated with childhood and adolescence. Existing scholarship has identified the prevalence of infantilising stereotypes and portrayals centred on childhood (Akhtar et al., 2022; Atherton et al., 2023; Stevenson et al., 2011), raising further questions about how neurodivergence is represented across the lifespan. The present findings provide

insight into this issue, as participants' reference points were largely confined to childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, with relatively few recognisable examples of neurodivergent individuals in later life. Participants consequently expressed a desire for portrayals that acknowledge neurodivergence as a lifelong identity, particularly in light of increasing awareness and diagnostic recognition in adulthood. This suggests that the emphasis on younger characters may contribute to a broader representational imbalance, whereby neurodivergent adulthood remains comparatively less visible.

Beyond this limited age diversity, participants also identified recurring patterns of infantilisation, whereby neurodivergent characters were portrayed as childlike, dependent or lacking agency. These observations suggest that age influences representation not only through the life stages depicted but also through the behaviours and capabilities attributed to neurodivergent individuals. Participants frequently associated such portrayals with assumptions of immaturity or reduced independence, including descriptions of adult characters as "acting younger than their age." In this sense, infantilisation may reinforce the diminished perceptions of competence identified through the "savant vs. stupid" framework, positioning neurodivergent individuals as less capable of autonomy regardless of their actual age. This illustrates how age-related stereotypes can intersect with broader assumptions about neurodivergent capability, potentially restricting the range of adult identities and experiences audiences recognise.

Considered together, these findings highlight how intersecting dimensions of gender and age may influence which neurodivergent identities are most readily recognised by audiences. Participants' associations of neurodivergence with childhood, alongside the historical dominance of masculine representations of autism (Davidson, 2007), suggest that familiar portrayals may privilege particular demographic identities while overlooking those who fall outside these expectations. This is particularly relevant to neurodivergent women and older individuals, whose experiences may differ from the dominant characterisations encountered on screen. Building upon intersectional scholarship, the present study therefore highlights how representational inequalities extend beyond the absence of diverse characters to encompass the ways audiences recognise and interpret neurodivergence across different identities and life stages. Greater diversity in representation is therefore important not simply for increasing visibility, but for challenging narrow assumptions about who can be neurodivergent and ensuring that a broader range of lived experiences is recognised on screen.

### When Representation Becomes Content: Platform Logics and Meme Culture

When portrayals are reduced to trait-based and non-intersectional characterisations, the findings suggest that representations of neurodivergence risk prioritising consumable content over

authentic reflections of lived experience. These limitations warrant consideration of the commercial and technological conditions sustaining such representations. Existing scholarship examines how media industries and platform infrastructures, including algorithms aimed at maximising engagement and monetisation, influence content circulation (Adam et al., 2025; Andersson Schwarz, 2017; Lee & Umback, 2026). Considered alongside participants' criticisms, this suggests that exaggerated portrayals may persist within mainstream screen media because of their recognisability and entertainment appeal.

From this perspective, highly visible characters such as Dr. Shaun Murphy in *The Good Doctor* can be understood through platform logics. His portrayal relies on exaggerated traits that align with dominant audience expectations, making neurodivergence more legible to a presumed neurotypical viewer. As Andersson Schwarz (2017) argues, platform logics are inherently political, influencing media at both the point of production and throughout its circulation. Such conditions may help explain why familiar representational patterns persist, even when audiences recognise their limitations. An emphasis on platform performance may therefore come at the expense of character depth and authenticity, perpetuating ableist assumptions through portrayals designed to appeal to broader audiences.

Although scholarship has examined platform logics and neurodivergent representation separately, limited research explicitly considers how commercial incentives contribute to stereotypical portrayals in screen media. This study proposes that such representations are not sustained solely through established stereotypes, but may also be influenced by the structural conditions governing media production and distribution. Participants across both focus groups expressed frustration with the prioritisation of entertainment over authenticity, suggesting awareness of the commercial considerations underpinning sensationalised portrayals. Their responses demonstrate how audiences can critically engage with wider systems shaping representation rather than viewing problematic portrayals as isolated creative decisions.

These influences extend beyond traditional screen media to social media, where representations are promoted, discussed and reinterpreted. However, these environments also allow neurodivergent individuals to challenge mainstream portrayals by sharing experiences and developing communities. Within spaces such as #ADHDtok and #AutismTok, alongside the contested label #Neurospicy, users engage with representations through personal narratives (Steiner-Hofbauer et al., 2025). Algorithmic curation may support these communities by connecting individuals with similar experiences, although it can also privilege particular narratives. Thus, mechanisms facilitating connection may influence which expressions of neurodivergence become most visible.

This selective circulation also affects how mainstream portrayals are encountered by broader audiences. Short clips can become detached from their original contexts and acquire meanings shaped by online humour or trends. For example, Dr. Shaun Murphy's "I am a surgeon" moment may circulate independently of its storyline, encouraging interpretations centred on its comedic qualities rather than its narrative significance. Such reinterpretations demonstrate how social media can transform complex characterisations into isolated entertainment, potentially reinforcing stereotypes that nuanced storytelling might otherwise challenge.

Similar processes are evident in social media discussions associating everyday experiences with neurodivergent conditions. Participants referenced viral posts attributing minor inconveniences or personality traits to neurodivergence, raising concerns about trivialisation. One example involved a 2022 post on X joking that "we don't talk enough about how stressful Halloween costumes are for the ADHD community", which prompted the dismissive response, "Omg you people can't do anything". According to Genualdo (2026), the response accumulated over 120,000 likes before circulating as a reaction image and internet meme. Its use to mock everyday difficulties illustrates how individual exchanges can develop into broader expressions of dismissive attitudes towards neurodivergence. Participants suggested that such interactions may undermine the legitimacy of neurodivergent experiences, positioning humour as both a means of engagement and a source of trivialisation.

These concerns also extend to social media's growing role as a source of information about neurodivergence. Within algorithmically curated environments, engaging content may gain exposure regardless of accuracy. Carter et al. (2026), through a systematic review of 27 studies examining 5,057 social media posts, identified significant variation in the reliability of information concerning mental health and neurodivergence. Misinformation was more prevalent in neurodivergence-related content than in material addressing mental health topics, with TikTok demonstrating higher rates than YouTube. These findings raise concerns about how complex neurological differences are communicated through short-form content, particularly when simplified explanations are more readily consumed and shared. Consequently, accessible information is not necessarily reliable, creating challenges for public understanding.

Together, these processes may contribute to neurodivergence being understood less as a complex neurological difference and more as a collection of personality traits. Participants expressed concern that simplified, "checklist"-style understandings could undermine the legitimacy of neurodivergent experiences. Individuals identifying with widely circulated traits may be dismissed as performative or "trendy", while those whose experiences fall outside dominant expectations may remain misunderstood. This reflects broader practices identified by Wilson and Stephenson (2021), who argue that minority representation can resemble a "tick-box

exercise", offering symbolic inclusion without meaningful engagement. Although their argument concerns media production, similar simplification may emerge through online circulation.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that challenges surrounding neurodivergent representation extend beyond individual portrayals to the environments in which they are produced and interpreted. While social media offers opportunities for self-representation and community-building, participants' concerns demonstrate how stereotypes can be reproduced or recontextualised through online trends and meme culture. This study contributes to scholarship by highlighting the relationship between mainstream screen representations and their reinterpretation across digital platforms. Improving authenticity may therefore require attention not only to how neurodivergent characters are constructed on screen, but also to how their portrayals are encountered and understood within interconnected media environments.

## Producing Understanding: The Social Impacts of Neurodivergent Representation

### How Media Influences Public Knowledge of Neurodivergence

The next section of this discussion shifts from how audiences interpret and receive neurodivergent representations to their potential implications for public understanding and informal education. Existing scholarship suggests that media representations can provide reference points through which audiences understand unfamiliar or marginalised communities, particularly those positioned as the "other" (Fürsich, 2010; Kozma, 1991; Saleem, 2025). Building on these perspectives, the present study conceptualises "stereotype spillover" as the process through which repeated stereotypical portrayals may extend beyond media texts and inform broader social expectations of neurodivergence. This draws upon Gerbner and Gross's (1976) cultivation theory, which proposes that prolonged media exposure can influence perceptions of social reality. However, "stereotype spillover" focuses more specifically on how familiar neurodivergent stereotypes may become reference points for interpreting real individuals. Rather than proposing a direct relationship between exposure and belief, this framework considers how recurring representations may interact with audiences' existing knowledge, experiences and assumptions. The framework considers two interconnected perspectives: how neurotypical audiences may develop expectations through media portrayals, and how neurodivergent individuals may anticipate or internalise these expectations, potentially influencing their identity and self-understanding.

As outlined in the findings, this finding is particularly significant given that many neurotypical participants described limited direct exposure to neurodivergent experiences beyond formal educational settings. When media was introduced as an additional source of understanding, familiar portrayals appeared to reinforce pre-existing assumptions, particularly when behaviours were framed as excuses for disruption or social difficulty. This can be understood through confirmation bias, whereby individuals may interpret information in ways that reinforce established beliefs (Saleem, 2025; Vijayendra & Chandrappa, 2019). However, participants also described instances where real-life encounters challenged exaggerated screen portrayals, revealing discrepancies between media representations and lived experiences that prompted them to reconsider their assumptions. This contrast is important because it suggests that the relationship between media and public understanding is neither fixed nor uniform. Instead, participants' interpretations appeared to depend partly on whether their personal experiences supported or contradicted familiar representations.

Importantly, neurotypical participants also demonstrated awareness of these representational limitations, complicating the assumption that audiences uncritically accept stereotypes. Several expressed frustration that exaggerated portrayals encountered during childhood had limited their opportunities to develop a nuanced understanding of neurodivergence, suggesting that earlier exposure to authentic representations might have been beneficial. These reflections suggest that "stereotype spillover" may occur even when audiences recognise portrayals as inaccurate. This aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which positions audiences as active participants in interpreting and negotiating media messages. Participants' ability to question stereotypes while continuing to reference them illustrates how familiar portrayals may remain influential without necessarily being accepted as accurate. This adds nuance to "stereotype spillover" by suggesting that recognising a stereotype does not necessarily prevent it from informing subsequent interpretations.

Neurodivergent participants' reflections offer further insight into the interpersonal implications of "stereotype spillover", particularly when lived experiences do not align with established expectations of neurodivergence. Several participants described having their neurodivergence questioned or dismissed by those around them, reflecting concerns identified in existing scholarship about identity invalidation when individuals do not conform to dominant assumptions (Meldrum et al., 2026; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025; Turnock et al., 2022). Considered alongside the "savant vs. stupid" framework, these experiences suggest that exaggerated characterisations may contribute to narrow expectations against which neurodivergent individuals are evaluated. Importantly, this suggests that the significance of representational limitations may extend beyond questions of accuracy to the interpersonal pressures experienced

by individuals whose identities differ from familiar screen portrayals. In this context, "stereotype spillover" provides a framework for understanding how recurring media stereotypes may intersect with experiences of identity invalidation, without assuming that representation is their direct cause.

These dynamics may be further complicated by social media, where simplified "checklist" frameworks and memeified content encourage recognition through a limited selection of traits. Emerging research on the accuracy of neurodivergence-related TikTok content provides additional context for these concerns (Alvares et al., 2025; Steiner-Hofbauer et al., 2025). By comparing neurodivergent and neurotypical perspectives, the present study highlights two interconnected dimensions of "stereotype spillover": the expectations neurotypical audiences may develop through familiar portrayals, and the potential consequences for neurodivergent individuals whose experiences differ from those expectations. Although these findings cannot establish that media directly caused participants' experiences of invalidation, they suggest that familiar stereotypes may contribute to the social contexts in which such interactions occur.

Nevertheless, participants acknowledged improvements in some contemporary portrayals, particularly within non-fiction media, suggesting that more authentic representations may challenge established assumptions. This provides an important counterpoint, highlighting that media can potentially broaden public understanding rather than simply reinforce stereotypes. Such reflections also suggest that the significance of representation lies not only in whether neurodivergence is visible, but in the range of experiences audiences are given opportunities to recognise and understand. Collectively, these findings emphasise the importance of nuanced, varied and experience-led portrayals that reflect neurodivergent experiences more authentically, both within Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally.

## The Visibility of Neurodivergence and Delayed Diagnosis

Building on the previous discussion of how media representations may shape public understandings of neurodivergence, this section considers their potential implications for neurodivergent individuals' own perceptions of identity and self-recognition. Beyond experiences of being misunderstood by others, the findings suggest that stereotypical portrayals may also influence how neurodivergent individuals recognise and interpret their own experiences. Within the neurodivergent focus group, the majority of participants reported struggling to recognise themselves in screen media, particularly in exaggerated portrayals associated with the "savant vs. stupid" framework. This lack of resonance can be considered alongside existing scholarship examining the relationship between neurodivergent media representation, identity and self-understanding (Jones et al., 2023; Ugli, 2026; Webber, 2024).

The present study builds upon this scholarship by suggesting that when dominant portrayals repeatedly present neurodivergence through a narrow selection of traits, individuals whose experiences differ from these characterisations may struggle to recognise their own neurodivergence, potentially contributing to delayed self-identification or diagnosis. In this sense, representation may influence not only how neurodivergence is understood by others, but also which experiences individuals recognise as legitimate expressions of their own identities.

This concern is particularly relevant for women and individuals who engage in masking behaviours, whose experiences may be less readily recognised when they do not conform to familiar stereotypes, as reflected in participants' accounts. Considered alongside scholarship examining gendered understandings of neurodivergence (Medina-Vicent & Garcia-Molina, 2022), these findings highlight the importance of an intersectional perspective, particularly in understanding how dominant portrayals may privilege certain expressions of neurodivergence while overlooking others. Building upon existing research on representation and neurodivergent understanding (Huang-Horowitz et al., 2025; Jones et al., 2023), the present study highlights a temporal dimension of self-recognition, suggesting that representation may relate not only to whether individuals recognise their neurodivergence, but also when that recognition occurs.

Similar relationships between representation and identity have been explored within scholarship on queer representation, where authentic portrayals have been associated with validation, belonging and self-recognition among LGBTQ+ audiences (Berry, 2025; Myers, 2025; Randev, 2022). Although comparatively less attention has been given to these relationships within neurodivergent representation, academic research (Jones et al., 2023; Mittmann et al., 2024) and broader commentary (Friedman & Kahn, 2025; Reed, 2022) have explored related concerns. The present findings build upon these discussions by illustrating how relatable and multidimensional characters may provide meaningful reference points for understanding one's own experiences, while their absence may complicate self-recognition. Considered alongside participants' reflections, this suggests that representational diversity matters not only for challenging public stereotypes but also for providing neurodivergent individuals with opportunities to recognise and understand their identities earlier in life. The availability of authentic portrayals from childhood or adolescence may therefore be particularly significant, as earlier exposure could support self-recognition at formative stages of identity development rather than leaving individuals to make sense of their experiences later in life.

Interestingly, neurodivergent participants expressed mixed feelings on the rare occasions when they recognised aspects of themselves in media characters. Rather than providing validation, this recognition sometimes generated self-consciousness, particularly when participants worried that others might associate them with the same exaggerated traits. These reflections align with

existing scholarship on stigma among neurodivergent individuals, which examines how negative social perceptions can influence self-understanding and feelings of shame (Čolić, 2026; Dubreucq et al., 2021; Riebel et al., 2025). The present findings extend this discussion by suggesting that stereotypical media portrayals may contribute to these concerns, even when individuals recognise them as inaccurate. For participants reflecting on their diagnoses, seeing familiar traits portrayed as socially awkward, robotic or comedic raised concerns about how others might perceive their own neurodivergence. This suggests that the implications of stereotypical representation may persist even when audiences are critically aware of its limitations. In this sense, media representation may shape not only how individuals recognise themselves, but also how they anticipate being understood by others.

Considered alongside participants' concerns about the absence of relatable portrayals, these findings highlight a potential “representation paradox”. On one hand, limited access to authentic characters may restrict opportunities for self-recognition, potentially complicating how individuals understand their experiences in relation to a diagnosis. On the other hand, recognising oneself within stereotypical portrayals may generate discomfort about the assumptions associated with that diagnosis. Together, these experiences highlight the importance of foregrounding neurodivergent perspectives when evaluating representational authenticity. Rather than assuming that visibility necessarily produces validation, the findings suggest that the significance of representation also depends on how individuals interpret portrayals in relation to their own identities and diagnoses. This reinforces the importance of considering representation not simply in terms of who appears on screen, but how those portrayals are experienced by the individuals they seek to represent.

### Rethinking Media Knowledge: Neurodivergence Through a Mental Health Lens

At the core of the findings discussed throughout this section lies a broader issue: the extent to which neurodivergence is accurately understood within public discourse. As established in the introduction, neurodivergence has gained greater visibility in recent years, particularly through workplace initiatives and disability awareness movements such as the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Scheme (Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, n.d.). Existing scholarship has examined how media representations contribute to the construction of meaning and public understanding (Hall, 1997; Wheatley, 2024). However, the findings reinforce that increased visibility does not necessarily translate into greater understanding of neurodivergence, aligning with concerns raised by Jones et al. (2023). While documentaries and news media can contribute to public awareness by foregrounding lived experiences, fictional portrayals may attract broader audiences through emotional engagement and escapism (Hajidamji, 2025). Public

understandings of neurodivergence may therefore be shaped as much by familiar narrative conventions as by educational or factual representations.

Within this context, a key tension concerns how neurodivergence is positioned in relation to mental health within fictional media, an area comparatively underexplored in representation scholarship. Existing literature acknowledges how neurodivergent experiences may intersect with mental health challenges and co-occurring conditions (Montague-Cardoso et al., 2025; Te Pou et al., 2023). However, less attention has been given to how these categories may become conflated through media representation. The present study extends these discussions by highlighting how participants interpreted portrayals that blurred distinctions between neurological differences, mental health conditions and behavioural characteristics.

This ambiguity was particularly evident among neurotypical participants, who frequently expressed uncertainty about the distinction between neurodivergence and mental health or behavioural difficulties, at times requiring clarification. Their discussions suggested that neurodivergence was neither consistently recognised as a disability nor clearly distinguished from mental health conditions. One example concerned ADHD medication, where participants associated media narratives about stimulant use with perceptions of ADHD as primarily a mental health or medication-related issue rather than a neurodevelopmental difference. Participants also raised concerns about portrayals emphasising misuse or addiction rather than medication as a legitimate treatment. These interpretations suggest that familiar media narratives may influence how audiences categorise and understand neurodivergent conditions.

Similar conceptual overlap can be observed in existing scholarship. McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2020), for example, examine autism alongside various mental health conditions in *Mental Health Disorders on Television: Representation Versus Reality*. While their analysis offers valuable insight into television portrayals of autism, its inclusion within a broader discussion of mental health disorders illustrates how neurodevelopmental conditions and mental illness may be considered together academically. Although this does not imply equivalence, it raises questions about how such categorisations might be interpreted when distinctions are already unclear to audiences. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between related but conceptually different experiences when examining neurodivergent representation.

These distinctions become clearer when considering neurodivergent participants' lived experiences, particularly regarding medication and coping strategies. While prescribed medication can be a routine aspect of managing certain neurodivergent conditions, participants also described navigating environments where their experiences were misunderstood or stigmatised. Alongside masking behaviours, some discussed using substances, including

alcohol, to manage stress, emotional overwhelm or social expectations. This aligns with Green (2025), who identifies alcohol as a potential masking tool for autistic individuals, particularly when navigating neurotypical environments. Similarly, the New Zealand Drug Foundation (2024) highlights self-medication, stigma and limited access to appropriate support as factors that may contribute to substance use among neurodivergent individuals. Importantly, these behaviours were not framed by participants as inherent to neurodivergence, but rather as coping strategies shaped by their social environments and personal experiences. Compared with neurotypical participants' interpretations, these accounts demonstrate how neurodivergent behaviours may be misunderstood when their underlying motivations are overlooked. This distinction reinforces the importance of contextualising lived experiences rather than reducing neurodivergent individuals to observable behaviours or stereotypical characteristics.

Considered together, these findings offer a further example of how “stereotype spillover” may operate across neurotypical and neurodivergent experiences. Fictional portrayals emphasising addiction or behavioural difficulties may reinforce assumptions through which neurotypical audiences interpret neurodivergent individuals. These expectations may contribute to environments characterised by misunderstanding or stigma, increasing the pressures neurodivergent individuals navigate through coping strategies. From the neurodivergent perspective, participants' accounts suggest how social expectations may intersect with their responses to others' perceptions. Rather than establishing causality, the contrasting accounts illustrate how representation, public understanding and lived experience may interact to reinforce misunderstandings. “Stereotype spillover” therefore provides a framework for considering how media characterisations may become embedded within everyday social expectations.

Ultimately, the findings extend existing discussions by highlighting the significance of representation not only for public awareness but also for how neurodivergence is categorised within everyday social contexts. The contrast between neurotypical assumptions and neurodivergent lived experiences suggests that representational accuracy requires more than recognisable behaviours; it also requires attention to their surrounding circumstances and meanings. This positions media as an important site through which understandings of neurodivergence are constructed, potentially influencing how neurodivergent identities are recognised and responded to beyond the screen.

# From Representation to Reform: Industry Potentials and Future Directions in Aotearoa Media

## Who Sees What? Platform Power and Algorithmic Visibility

In the final stage of this discussion, attention shifts to the broader implications of these findings for the media industry, particularly the future of neurodivergent representation in Aotearoa New Zealand. While the preceding sections examined representational patterns and their potential social implications, this section considers the structural conditions that may influence the persistence of familiar portrayals and the visibility of more authentic alternatives. Drawing upon scholarship examining local–global media dynamics and their implications for marginalised communities (Ben Moussa, 2009; Srinivas & Jha, 2025), it explores how Aotearoa's media landscape may create both challenges and opportunities for more inclusive representation.

As reflected in the thematic analysis, participants generally regarded Aotearoa New Zealand as comparatively progressive in its efforts to support authentic neurodivergent representation, particularly through publicly funded initiatives such as NZ On Air. Such initiatives were perceived as demonstrating an institutional commitment to representing local experiences in more accurate and culturally grounded ways. However, despite expressing a strong desire for authentic representation, many participants were unfamiliar with locally produced examples prior to the focus groups. This suggests that the challenges facing neurodivergent representation in Aotearoa may extend beyond production to encompass how content is promoted and recognised by audiences.

NZ On Air (2025c), in its *Public Awareness and Attitudes Survey 2025*, highlights the continued importance New Zealanders place on publicly funded media, with 89% of respondents considering it important to have publicly funded content that is free to consume, an increase from 81% in 2023. However, the increasing prominence of international streaming platforms presents broader questions regarding the visibility and consumption of locally produced content. The present findings offer an audience-level perspective on these concerns, as participants repeatedly referenced internationally produced characters and storylines while struggling to identify New Zealand examples. Considered alongside Srinivas and Jha's (2025) discussion of the importance of inclusive representation of marginalised groups within global media, these findings highlight a further consideration: while international productions offer opportunities for meaningful visibility among marginalised communities, their prominence may also overshadow locally produced narratives reflecting distinct cultural experiences.

Participants partly attributed this imbalance to differences in promotion and distribution, perceiving local productions as less visible than those originating from dominant international media industries. However, NZ On Air (2025b), in its *Our Year in Review 2024–2025*, complicates the suggestion that local content simply lacks reach. The report indicates that NZ On Air-funded productions achieved approximately 24 million on-demand streams across 23 primary platforms and reached 61% of people aged 15 and over, representing an increase from the previous year. Furthermore, 43 discoverability campaigns were implemented, with more than half targeting younger audiences and all reportedly meeting or exceeding their objectives. These figures demonstrate substantial distribution and promotional activity, suggesting that the relationship between content availability and audience recognition may be more complex than participants initially perceived.

Importantly, NZ On Air's reported reach concerns funded content broadly rather than neurodivergent representation specifically, meaning it cannot establish how frequently audiences encountered relevant local portrayals. Nevertheless, considered alongside participants' limited recall, these figures highlight a distinction between measurable audience reach and the cultural recognition of particular representations. Local content may therefore be accessible without necessarily becoming a familiar reference point through which audiences understand neurodivergence. Participants' reflections on TVNZ+ provide further insight into this distinction. Several suggested that the platform's promotional strategies often foreground its overall identity or internationally recognised programmes rather than individual New Zealand productions. They perceived this approach as resembling global streaming services such as Netflix and Disney+, where familiar international titles attract audience attention. Although these observations reflect participants' perceptions rather than an independent analysis of TVNZ+'s marketing strategies, they raise questions about how local content is positioned within an increasingly competitive media environment.

From an industry perspective, prioritising recognisable programmes may be understandable given the importance of audience acquisition and engagement. Internationally established titles can provide familiar entry points to streaming platforms, potentially introducing viewers to local productions they might not otherwise encounter. However, participants' limited awareness suggests that this pathway cannot be assumed to occur consistently. Even where platform engagement is successful, individual programmes may struggle to achieve comparable recognition. The present findings therefore suggest that discoverability should be considered not only in terms of content accessibility or promotion, but also whether audiences become sufficiently familiar with particular representations to recall and discuss them.

This distinction has implications for neurodivergent representation, as the availability of authentic local portrayals may not be sufficient to challenge established international stereotypes. For neurodivergent audiences seeking relatable experiences, limited awareness of such content may restrict opportunities for meaningful self-recognition. For neurotypical audiences, it may similarly limit exposure to portrayals that challenge existing assumptions. The present study therefore extends broader industry discussions of discoverability by highlighting its relevance to the social and cultural value of representation, rather than viewing it solely as a measure of audience engagement.

In response, more targeted promotion of individual local programmes may help strengthen the visibility of neurodivergent narratives within Aotearoa. Foregrounding distinctive New Zealand stories, rather than relying primarily on general platform promotion, could provide audiences with clearer opportunities to discover representations relevant to their experiences. Although this would not guarantee greater engagement or recognition, it may help address the disconnect between participants' desire for authentic representation and their familiarity with existing productions.

Ultimately, the present study contributes to existing discussions of local–global media dynamics by highlighting a dimension of discoverability that extends beyond distribution and audience reach. While industry reporting provides valuable measures of content circulation, participants' interpretations illustrate the importance of considering which representations become recognisable and meaningful within everyday understandings of neurodivergence. In the context of Aotearoa, this suggests that strengthening authentic representation requires attention not only to the diversity of stories being produced, but also to the opportunities audiences have to encounter, remember and engage with them.

### The Importance of Lived Experience in Neurodivergent Storytelling

Another key insight concerns the role of lived experience in shaping authentic neurodivergent representation. While the preceding discussion highlighted the importance of making local portrayals more visible, participants also emphasised the authenticity of the content itself, particularly canonical neurodivergent characters. Across both focus groups, participants identified meaningful neurodivergent involvement in the creative process as important, suggesting that limitations of international portrayals may reflect the absence of neurodivergent perspectives in their development. These reflections raise questions about whose experiences inform media narratives and the extent to which neurodivergent individuals can influence how their identities are represented.

Participants frequently referenced *Love on the Spectrum* as a positive example, associating its inclusion of neurodivergent individuals with greater authenticity. However, some raised concerns about selective editing and portrayals appearing overly curated or voyeuristic, particularly where participants might have limited awareness of how their experiences would be presented. This contrast suggests that the presence of neurodivergent individuals on screen does not necessarily guarantee authentic or ethical representation. Rather, participants' interpretations highlight the importance of how lived experiences are selected, framed and communicated throughout production.

These concerns align with scholarship emphasising the value of neurodivergent consultation and participation in media production (Gibson et al., 2025; Wolff, 2025). Babar (2023), for example, advocates engaging directly with neurodivergent communities when developing canonical characters. Considered alongside participants' criticisms, this suggests that consultation may help challenge portrayals constructed through neurotypical assumptions or familiar narrative conventions. However, the findings also distinguish between consulting individuals with lived experience and enabling them to shape creative decisions. While consultation may inform character development, involvement in writing, directing and other decision-making roles could provide further opportunities to influence representation.

This distinction is relevant to the differences participants identified between scripted and non-fiction media. Although international productions dominated discussions of fictional neurodivergent characters, participants expressed greater appreciation for locally produced non-fiction content featuring neurodivergent individuals sharing their experiences. Their responses suggest that lived experience within factual programming may contribute to perceptions of authenticity, even where editorial decisions shape the final portrayal. Extending this consideration to scripted media raises the possibility that greater neurodivergent participation in creative roles could support more multidimensional canonical characters within Aotearoa's screen industry. Importantly, this does not imply that non-fiction is inherently more authentic than fiction, but rather that participants valued opportunities for neurodivergent perspectives to inform storytelling.

The potential benefits of greater creative participation must also be considered alongside barriers to entering and progressing within the media industry. Rephun (2025) identifies the employment of neurodivergent professionals both on screen and behind the camera as a pathway towards improving representation, while highlighting challenges associated with ableism, unconscious bias and inaccessible career opportunities. Improving representation therefore requires more than encouraging individual productions to seek neurodivergent input. It also involves examining the institutional conditions that influence access to creative careers and

positions of authority. In this context, authentic representation becomes connected to broader questions of workforce inclusion and decision-making power.

Industry data from Aotearoa provides further context for these concerns. NZ On Air (2025a), in its *Diversity Report 2024*, highlights the limited representation of disabled individuals in key creative roles. Among producers and writers involved in NZ On Air-funded productions, 97% reported having no disability, 1.6% identified as disabled and 1.2% did not disclose their disability status. These figures remained relatively consistent with those reported in 2023, suggesting limited measurable progress. When considered alongside Stats NZ (2025) estimates indicating that approximately 17% of New Zealanders live with a disability, this disparity raises questions about the accessibility and inclusivity of creative employment pathways. However, these datasets represent different populations and measures and should not be interpreted as directly comparable. Furthermore, the industry figures do not distinguish neurodivergence from other disabilities, limiting conclusions about neurodivergent participation specifically.

This limitation is relevant to the present discussion. While NZ On Air's reporting provides insight into disability representation within the creative workforce, the absence of neurodivergence-specific data makes it difficult to assess participation in writing, production and other influential roles. More detailed workforce data could therefore help identify gaps that broader disability categories may obscure. Alongside accessible recruitment and career development initiatives, such information may support targeted efforts to strengthen neurodivergent participation. The findings consequently suggest that improving representation involves not only evaluating portrayals but also considering opportunities available to those whose experiences they seek to communicate.

The importance of lived experience is also reflected in public discussions of inclusive media. NZ On Air's *Public Awareness and Attitudes Survey 2025* includes an illustrative survey response emphasising that “disabled New Zealanders deserve to see themselves in media not just as inspiration but as full, complex people. Content created by and for disabled people promotes inclusion and challenges stereotypes” (NZ On Air, 2025c, p. 19). Although this represents an individual perspective rather than an institutional position, it aligns with participants' desire for portrayals that extend beyond familiar stereotypes. It also reinforces the distinction between including disabled individuals within media narratives and enabling them to contribute meaningfully to their construction.

Taken together, these findings suggest that neurodivergent participation in media production is an important component of authentic representation. While lived experience cannot eliminate editorial influence or guarantee positive audience interpretations, it may create opportunities to

challenge assumptions shaping canonical characters and familiar portrayals. By connecting participants' preferences with existing scholarship and industry workforce data, the present study highlights the relationship between representational authenticity and creative participation. For Aotearoa's media industry, future progress may depend not only on increasing the visibility of neurodivergent stories, but also on expanding opportunities for neurodivergent individuals to influence how those stories are developed and told.

### Structural Constraints and the Barriers to Industry Change

The final part of this discussion considers why locally produced content may struggle to achieve the same recognition among audiences in Aotearoa as international media. Building on the preceding analysis of discoverability and creative participation, the findings suggest that platform accessibility and changing viewing habits may present further challenges. Across both focus groups, participants described traditional New Zealand television as increasingly peripheral to their everyday media consumption, with global streaming services such as Netflix occupying a more prominent role. This was particularly relevant among neurodivergent participants, who expressed interest in local representation but struggled to identify existing examples. Their responses suggest a potential mismatch between where locally produced content is distributed and the platforms younger audiences regularly use.

NZ On Air's audience research provides broader context for these observations. According to its *Our Year in Review 2025–2026* (NZ On Air, 2026b), approximately 69% of New Zealanders watched NZ On Air-funded content on linear television, with long-running programmes such as *Country Calendar* continuing to attract substantial audiences. However, its earlier *Where Are the Audiences? 2024* report (NZ On Air, 2024b) identifies a broader shift towards digital viewing, with global video-sharing platforms reaching 64% of New Zealanders daily. The report also documents declining linear television reach and the stabilisation of local broadcaster video-on-demand services following earlier growth. Younger audiences, particularly those aged 15–39, demonstrate increasingly digital viewing habits, presenting challenges for traditional broadcasters seeking to reach them. Considered alongside the focus-group findings, these trends suggest that participants' limited recall of local neurodivergent representation may partly reflect changing patterns of media consumption rather than a lack of interest in such content.

However, platform accessibility was not the only consideration raised by participants. Across both groups, international productions were frequently associated with higher budgets, stronger production values and more engaging storytelling. Participants suggested that these qualities influenced their willingness to engage with complex or unconventional characters, including neurodivergent characters. Conversely, some perceived locally produced scripted television as

less polished or compelling than international alternatives. These perceptions are significant because they suggest that the reception of neurodivergent representation may be influenced not only by the authenticity of individual portrayals, but also by the broader production contexts in which they appear.

Interestingly, participants were generally more favourable towards locally produced non-fiction programming, which they associated with greater authenticity and less performative storytelling. This contrast complicates the assumption that international productions are inherently preferred. Rather, participants appeared to evaluate scripted and non-fiction content according to different expectations, valuing production quality and narrative engagement in the former while placing greater emphasis on lived experience in the latter. The findings therefore suggest that improving local neurodivergent representation may require different approaches depending on the format and intended audience.

For non-fiction programming, the findings point towards opportunities to strengthen digital promotion and distribution, particularly where authentic portrayals already exist but remain unfamiliar to younger viewers. Scripted content presents a somewhat different challenge. Participants' preferences suggest that greater investment in production quality and storytelling could improve the perceived appeal of local fictional portrayals. Given the financial constraints of Aotearoa's screen industry, this raises questions about whether concentrating resources on selected productions might offer advantages over distributing funding across a larger number of projects. However, the present study cannot establish which funding model would be most effective. Instead, participants' responses highlight the importance of considering production quality alongside representational authenticity when evaluating future investment priorities.

Platform distribution offers another potential consideration. Participants suggested that New Zealand productions might achieve greater visibility through established international streaming services rather than relying predominantly on local platforms such as TVNZ+. Such distribution could place local narratives within viewing environments already familiar to younger audiences, potentially increasing opportunities for discovery. Participants also associated major international platforms with greater production legitimacy, suggesting that platform placement may influence expectations of content quality. Nevertheless, wider distribution would not necessarily guarantee engagement, particularly where local productions compete with extensive international catalogues. These reflections therefore reinforce the importance of considering platform accessibility alongside promotional strategies and audience preferences.

The commercial success of New Zealand films provides a useful comparison when considering the potential appeal of locally grounded storytelling. The 2024 film *Tīnā*, for example, achieved

substantial domestic success despite its emphasis on local casting and culturally specific narratives. As discussed by Fenwick (2025), director Miki Magasiva described early pressure from investors to include a recognised Hollywood actor to strengthen the film's commercial prospects. The production's subsequent success challenges assumptions that internationally recognisable talent is necessary for local stories to attract audiences. However, its success should not be interpreted as evidence that authenticity alone determines commercial performance. Rather, it illustrates how culturally grounded storytelling can achieve significant audience engagement within Aotearoa.

Earlier New Zealand films such as *Boy* and *Whale Rider* similarly demonstrate the potential for distinctly local narratives to resonate beyond national audiences. Although these productions differ in their contexts and distribution pathways, they offer examples of New Zealand storytelling achieving recognition without abandoning its cultural specificity. Considered alongside participants' preferences, these cases suggest that local identity and international appeal need not be competing priorities. For future scripted portrayals of neurodivergence, this raises the possibility of developing narratives grounded in Aotearoa's experiences while remaining accessible and engaging to wider audiences.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that participants' limited engagement with local representation should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in New Zealand stories. Rather, their responses highlight how viewing habits, perceptions of production quality and platform accessibility may influence which portrayals audiences encounter and value. Building on the preceding discussions of discoverability and creative participation, this reinforces the importance of approaching authentic neurodivergent representation as both a creative and an industry consideration. For Aotearoa's media sector, strengthening future portrayals may therefore involve not only supporting neurodivergent perspectives in production, but also ensuring that the resulting content is developed and distributed in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences.

## Summary

To conclude this discussion, an important question remains: what should happen next? If representations of neurodivergence follow identifiable patterns (Theme 1), and those patterns produce tangible social impacts (Theme 2), then the media industry must be understood as the system through which these patterns are produced, reinforced, and sustained (Theme 3). In this sense, the New Zealand media industry holds significant potential to ensure that authentic and inclusive representations are not only created but also made visible to the audiences they are

intended to reach. The findings of this study therefore point toward a series of practical implications for improving neurodivergent representation within Aotearoa's media landscape.

First, marketing and discoverability strategies may require adjustment. Participants repeatedly noted that locally produced content – often supported by NZ On Air to reflect local cultures and communities – frequently remains invisible to younger audiences, including those represented in this study's focus groups, despite the presence of strong storytelling. This suggests that platforms such as TVNZ+ may benefit from prioritising the promotion of New Zealand-made content, rather than relying heavily on international programmes as the primary audience draw. Participants also indicated that clearer, more targeted calls-to-action – particularly those aimed at specific audiences, such as neurodivergent viewers – could strengthen engagement with programmes intended to shape cultural understanding. In addition, platform-native promotional strategies, especially short-form social media content created organically by actors, creators, and contributors, were viewed as potentially more effective in reaching younger audiences than traditional advertising campaigns.

More broadly, these findings may also point toward the potential value of incorporating stronger audience engagement and discoverability requirements into funding processes. For example, NZ On Air funding applications could place greater emphasis on realistic marketing strategies tailored to the intended audience of a production, particularly for younger viewers who primarily consume content through social media and global streaming platforms rather than traditional television. This could include stronger consideration of platform-specific promotional plans, short-form digital content strategies, and audience outreach approaches designed to meet viewers within the online spaces they already engage with, particularly given the growing influence of social media platforms in shaping contemporary viewing habits and content discovery. In doing so, local productions may be better positioned not only to create authentic representation, but also to ensure those representations are actually seen by the communities they are intended to reflect.

Second, greater emphasis should be placed on lived experience within the creative process when developing neurodivergent-focused works. Both focus groups stressed that authentic representation requires meaningful involvement of neurodivergent individuals in creative leadership roles, including writing, producing, and consulting. Participants also addressed the importance of situating neurodivergence within the broader context of disability inclusion across the media industry. This may involve more comprehensive consideration of disability within industry reporting, policies, and hiring practices, helping to ensure that neurodivergent and disabled creatives are not overlooked and are supported in articulating their experiences and identities within media environments. Increasing the participation of neurodivergent creatives

behind the camera may therefore strengthen both the authenticity and depth of on-screen representation – particularly within fictional storytelling, where portraying neurodivergent experiences convincingly can be more complex than in non-fiction formats.

Third, participants suggested that adopting a more targeted approach to promoting locally produced non-fiction content may provide an effective entry point for strengthening public understanding of neurodivergence, before investing more heavily in fictional narratives. Across both focus groups, non-fiction media was consistently perceived as more authentic and relatable than scripted fiction within the local context. Examples such as the well-received documentary *ADHD and Me*, featuring Guy Williams discussing his ADHD diagnosis, were highlighted as particularly effective in communicating neurodivergent experiences in accessible ways. As a result, foregrounding neurodivergent public figures and lived experiences through documentary or reality-based formats may help build broader awareness and audience engagement, creating a foundation for more nuanced and widely received representation within fictional storytelling. Importantly, this approach appears to align with demonstrated audience interest. Beyond engagement within the focus groups themselves, participants continued to share reflections, examples, and discussions following the research process, indicating sustained curiosity and investment in the topic. This suggests that there is not only clear room for improvement in current representations, but also a genuine appetite for neurodivergent content across both neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences.

Finally, participants identified production quality as a key factor shaping audience engagement with local media, particularly in fictional formats. This suggests that strategic funding approaches may require reconsideration. Rather than distributing limited resources across a large number of lower-budget productions, concentrating funding on fewer high-quality scripted projects that thoughtfully explore different aspects of New Zealand culture – including disability – may allow local media to compete more effectively with international productions and achieve greater cultural impact. Producing content at a higher production value may also increase the likelihood that New Zealand stories travel beyond domestic audiences, as such productions are more likely to secure international distribution, festival recognition, or placement on global streaming platforms. In this way, investing in fewer but stronger projects may not only strengthen local engagement, but also enhance the international visibility and accessibility of New Zealand storytelling. Successful examples of locally grounded storytelling, such as the 2024 film *Tinā*, demonstrate that audiences are willing to engage with New Zealand narratives when they are produced with strong craft and authentic cultural storytelling.

Collectively, these insights indicate that improving representation more broadly requires coordinated attention to production, authorship, marketing, and platform accessibility.

Addressing these structural factors may enable authentic representations of neurodivergence not only to be created, but also to reach the audiences most likely to benefit from them – beginning within Aotearoa and extending outward to wider international contexts. In doing so, such efforts may contribute to broader initiatives aimed at strengthening the representation of marginalised communities across the media landscape.

# Chapter Six: Conclusion

Overall, this study set out to examine how on-screen portrayals of neurodivergence influence the ways neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive both themselves and one another. In doing so, the research explored portrayals of neurodivergence through intersectional factors such as gender, age, and ethnicity, identifying patterns across both local and global media contexts. The analysis drew on examples from both fiction and non-fiction formats, including characters who were canonically neurodivergent as well as those who appeared neurodivergent-coded. This approach enabled the study to examine how patterns of representation operate across different media forms and narrative contexts, and how these patterns shape audience understanding across both neurodivergent and neurotypical groups – from both internal (self-perception) and external (social perception) perspectives. Building on these insights, the study also addressed its second research question by considering what comes next for neurodivergent representation, drawing on participants' reflections alongside relevant industry data. In doing so, it explored future directions across both local and global media contexts, identifying opportunities for the media industry to support more authentic and inclusive portrayals with tangible real-world impact.

To effectively investigate these research questions, the study adopted a qualitative research design combining pre-emptive survey responses with two 90-minute online focus groups: one composed of neurodivergent participants and the other of neurotypical participants. Each group consisted of eight participants and was intentionally assembled to reflect a range of intersectional identities, including different ages, ethnicities, genders, and neurodivergent diagnoses. This structure enabled direct comparison between the two groups, providing clearer insight into how neurodivergent portrayals are interpreted by different audiences. In doing so, the project offers a comparative approach that remains relatively underexplored within this field. Reflexive thematic analysis was then used to identify recurring patterns across the discussions, resulting in three narrative-driven themes that structured the findings: representation, impact, and industry. Through critically examining both patterns within media portrayals and the ways audiences interpret them, the study addressed its central research question: how portrayals of neurodivergence shape perceptions between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals.

Building on this foundation, the research extends toward future-oriented considerations, examining what these findings suggest for the direction of neurodivergent representation within the media industry. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's positionality. As

an autistic researcher, this study adopts a reflexive perspective that recognises the value of lived experience when analysing discussions surrounding neurodivergent representation, particularly within the ongoing development of critical disability studies. In contributing to the limited body of New Zealand-focused scholarship in this area, the research aims not only to deepen local understanding, but also to offer insights that may inform broader conversations about representation within global media systems, including potential implications for funding bodies such as NZ On Air. This concluding chapter therefore synthesises the key findings of the study, considers their wider implications, and outlines potential directions for future research and industry practice.

## Key Findings

### Representation Patterns in Neurodivergent Media Portrayals

Across both focus groups, participants consistently identified recurring stereotypes within media portrayals of neurodivergence, particularly the dominance of young, white, heterosexual male characters whose experiences were often reduced to the "savant vs. stupid" binary. These patterns highlighted the limited diversity of neurodivergent representation and the tendency for stereotypical characterisations to become more recognisable than others. Participants also expressed differing perspectives on canonical and coded representation. While coded portrayals were sometimes appreciated for their subtlety and relatability, explicit acknowledgement was generally considered important for public recognition and understanding. These discussions were further complicated by the role of social media, where algorithmic circulation and simplified content were perceived as reinforcing familiar stereotypes.

### Social Impacts of These Representation Patterns

The findings suggest that media portrayals influence not only how neurodivergence is understood by wider audiences, but also how neurodivergent individuals recognise and interpret their own experiences. This relationship is captured through the concept of "stereotype spillover", which describes how familiar media characterisations may extend into everyday expectations and social interactions. For some participants, the absence of relatable portrayals complicated processes of self-recognition, while others described feeling uncomfortable when they recognised themselves in characters defined by exaggerated traits. Participants also raised concerns about the tendency for media to conflate neurodivergence with mental illness or pharmaceutical treatment, further complicating public understanding.

### Industry Structures and the Future of Representation

The findings also highlighted a disconnect between the availability of neurodivergent representation and its visibility to audiences, particularly within Aotearoa New Zealand. Although participants struggled to recall local examples, their responses to New Zealand portrayals were generally positive when these were introduced during discussions. This suggests that improving representation involves more than producing new content, particularly when existing stories remain difficult for audiences to discover. Participants also emphasised the importance of involving neurodivergent individuals in the creative process, suggesting that more authentic portrayals could be supported through greater participation in writing, performance and production. For New Zealand's screen industry, these findings point towards opportunities to strengthen the visibility of local storytelling while developing portrayals that better reflect the diversity of neurodivergent experiences.

## Industry Implications

The findings suggest that improving neurodivergent representation requires greater attention to how portrayals are developed and made accessible to audiences. Although participants identified stereotypes within both fictional and non-fictional representations, each format was valued for different reasons. Fiction offered familiarity and relatability, while non-fiction was generally appreciated for its connection to lived experience. Similarly, canonical and coded representation served different purposes, with explicit identification supporting public recognition and more subtle portrayals offering opportunities for nuanced characterisation. Rather than prioritising one approach, the findings highlight the importance of using these formats thoughtfully to reflect the diversity of neurodivergent experiences.

Within Aotearoa New Zealand, participants' reliance on predominantly international examples, despite responding positively to local content, suggests that both the availability and discoverability of New Zealand portrayals require greater attention. One potential strategy would be to initially prioritise the promotion and development of local non-fiction content, providing audiences with more accessible and authentic reference points for understanding neurodivergence. Building upon this foundation, the industry could progressively invest in locally grounded fictional narratives that move beyond established stereotypes. Funding bodies such as NZ On Air could support this approach through more targeted commissioning, stronger promotional strategies and opportunities for distribution across domestic and international platforms.

Central to these efforts is the involvement of neurodivergent individuals throughout the creative process. Greater participation from neurodivergent writers, actors, consultants and creators could support more authentic character development and inform decisions about the appropriate use of canonical and coded representation. Industry diversity frameworks could also place greater explicit emphasis on neurodivergence alongside physical and other disabilities, ensuring that a wider range of neurodivergent identities and experiences are considered within funding and production decisions.

Ultimately, these findings present an opportunity for Aotearoa New Zealand to develop alternative cultural reference points to the predominantly American portrayals familiar to participants. By improving the visibility of existing non-fiction content while gradually expanding local fictional storytelling, New Zealand could contribute to more nuanced public understandings of neurodivergence. With appropriate creative involvement and international distribution, this approach could also position Aotearoa as a contributor to more inclusive representational practices beyond its own screen industry.

## Contributions of This Research

Drawing together the key conclusions and implications of this research, this thesis makes several contributions to scholarship on neurodivergence and media representation. Most significantly, it addresses a gap in existing literature by examining how audiences in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret neurodivergent portrayals across both local and international media. While previous scholarship has explored neurodivergence within global media and specific international contexts, comparatively limited attention has been given to audience interpretations within New Zealand's cultural landscape. By situating these perspectives within Aotearoa, the study contributes a locally grounded understanding of neurodivergent representation while incorporating intersectional considerations of whose identities and experiences are made visible.

A further contribution lies in the study's comparative examination of fictional and non-fictional portrayals, alongside canonical and coded representation. Rather than evaluating these approaches independently, the research considers how they are interpreted and valued by neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences. In particular, the contrast between participants' familiarity with international fiction and their positive responses to local non-fiction highlights the importance of considering both representational form and cultural context. Similarly, differing interpretations of canonical and coded portrayals demonstrate that authenticity and recognisability are not necessarily experienced in the same way across audience groups. These

findings extend existing discussions by suggesting that the effectiveness of neurodivergent representation cannot be determined by format or explicit diagnostic acknowledgement alone, but must also account for character development, audience interpretation and cultural relevance.

The study also offers methodological insight through its combination of preliminary survey responses, focus group discussions and reflexive thematic analysis. The pre-focus group surveys provided an initial understanding of participants' existing perceptions, while the focus groups enabled deeper discussion and collective reflection on specific media examples. This approach allowed participants to engage with one another's interpretations, generating insights into how meaning was articulated and negotiated through group discussion. Importantly, the purposeful separation of neurodivergent and neurotypical participants provided an opportunity to examine differences in recognition, interpretation and emotional response. By posing consistent questions across both groups, the study enabled direct comparison while preserving space for participants to discuss their experiences within distinct social contexts. This design demonstrates the value of incorporating both neurodivergent and neurotypical perspectives when examining how media representations are understood.

Finally, the research contributes to theoretical discussions at the intersection of critical disability theory, representation and social understandings of neurodivergence. Through the previously established “savant vs. stupid” framework, the study examines how opposing extremes of perceived capability can operate together to constrain the range of neurodivergent identities made recognisable through media. It also develops the concept of “stereotype spillover” to interpret how familiar media characterisations may extend into broader understandings and expectations of neurodivergence, even when audiences recognise their limitations. Alongside these contributions, the findings identify a representation paradox in which the absence of relatable portrayals may limit self-recognition, while identification with stereotypical characters can generate discomfort rather than validation. Together, these concepts offer complementary ways of understanding how representation relates to audience interpretation, social recognition and neurodivergent identity. By foregrounding these relationships within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the study provides a foundation for further research into the cultural and interpersonal implications of neurodivergent representation.

## Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. The research involved a relatively small sample size, consisting of two focus groups with eight participants each. While this aligns with qualitative research practices that prioritise depth of

discussion, the findings are not intended to be generalisable to all neurodivergent or neurotypical individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand, but rather to provide meaningful insight into a specific set of perspectives. The scope of the analysis also focused primarily on portrayals of autism and autism-coded characters, reflecting their prominence within the media. While other forms of neurodivergence, such as ADHD and dyslexia, were referenced by participants, these identities were not explored in equal depth and therefore represent an area for further research.

The research also relied in part on self-reported survey responses collected prior to the focus groups. As with all self-report methods, there is potential for response bias, including the possibility that participants may have unintentionally shaped their responses according to personal assumptions, memory recall, social desirability, or existing attitudes toward neurodivergent representation. However, the combination of surveys and focus groups allowed participants to expand upon and clarify their perspectives, strengthening the depth and reliability of the data. Finally, the positionality of the researcher represents an important consideration. As an autistic researcher examining neurodivergent representation, the study incorporates an insider perspective. While this offered valuable insight, reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process to support balanced and critical interpretation of the findings.

## Directions for Future Research

Future research may build on this study by examining forms of neurodivergence that have received comparatively limited attention within media scholarship. While this study focused primarily on portrayals of autism and autistic-coded characters due to their prevalence in media, participants also shared their perspectives on other forms of neurodivergence, particularly dyslexia and Tourette's syndrome, expressing concerns about their limited representation. Despite their increasing visibility in public discourse, these forms of neurodivergence remain comparatively underrepresented in media. Dedicated research into their portrayal may therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of how neurodivergence is represented across contemporary media environments.

Future studies may also benefit from examining intersectional representation in greater depth. The findings of this research identify significant gender and age imbalances within current portrayals of neurodivergence. Further research could explore how neurodivergence intersects with ethnicity and cultural identity within the specific context of Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly in relation to Māori and Pasifika representation within media narratives. In addition, larger-scale audience studies may provide further insight into how New Zealand audiences interpret neurodivergent representation across different media platforms. While this study

included a diverse and representative participant group within Tāmaki Makaurau, future research could extend this scope by incorporating participants from different regions of Aotearoa New Zealand. This may help identify how interpretations of neurodivergence vary across geographical, cultural, and community contexts.

Future research could also explore audience engagement across specific digital platforms, examining how different social media environments shape the interpretation and circulation of neurodivergent representation. This may provide deeper insight into how perceptions of neurodivergence are influenced by both platform design and user interaction. Beyond this, further work could investigate how emerging online communities contribute to contemporary understandings of neurodivergence. As social media continues to shape how content is shared and discussed, analysing how neurodivergent identities are negotiated within these spaces may offer valuable insight into evolving forms of representation and audience engagement, including how neurodivergence is interpreted by neurotypical audiences, whose perspectives remain comparatively underexplored.

## Final Closing Reflection

As an autistic researcher examining the representation of neurodivergence within the media, this study reflects both an academic inquiry and a personal investment in fostering a more inclusive and responsible media industry. While patterns of misrepresentation remain present within media portrayals, the findings also highlight meaningful potential for change. Aotearoa's relatively small and interconnected creative industry presents a unique opportunity to develop more authentic and ethically grounded storytelling.

By centring lived experience and supporting more thoughtful approaches to storytelling, the New Zealand media industry has the potential to reshape how neurodivergence is represented and understood. Ultimately, this research suggests that representation is not simply about increasing the number of characters we see, but about creating portrayals that feel authentic, nuanced, and meaningful to the communities they depict. When supported and developed with care, media representation can move beyond stereotypes and contribute to positive social change. It is hoped that this research contributes, in some small way, to advancing these outcomes for the neurodivergent community.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Glossary of Māori Terms

**Aotearoa**

Māori name for New Zealand.

**Mana**

A Māori concept encompassing dignity, authority, influence and spiritual power.

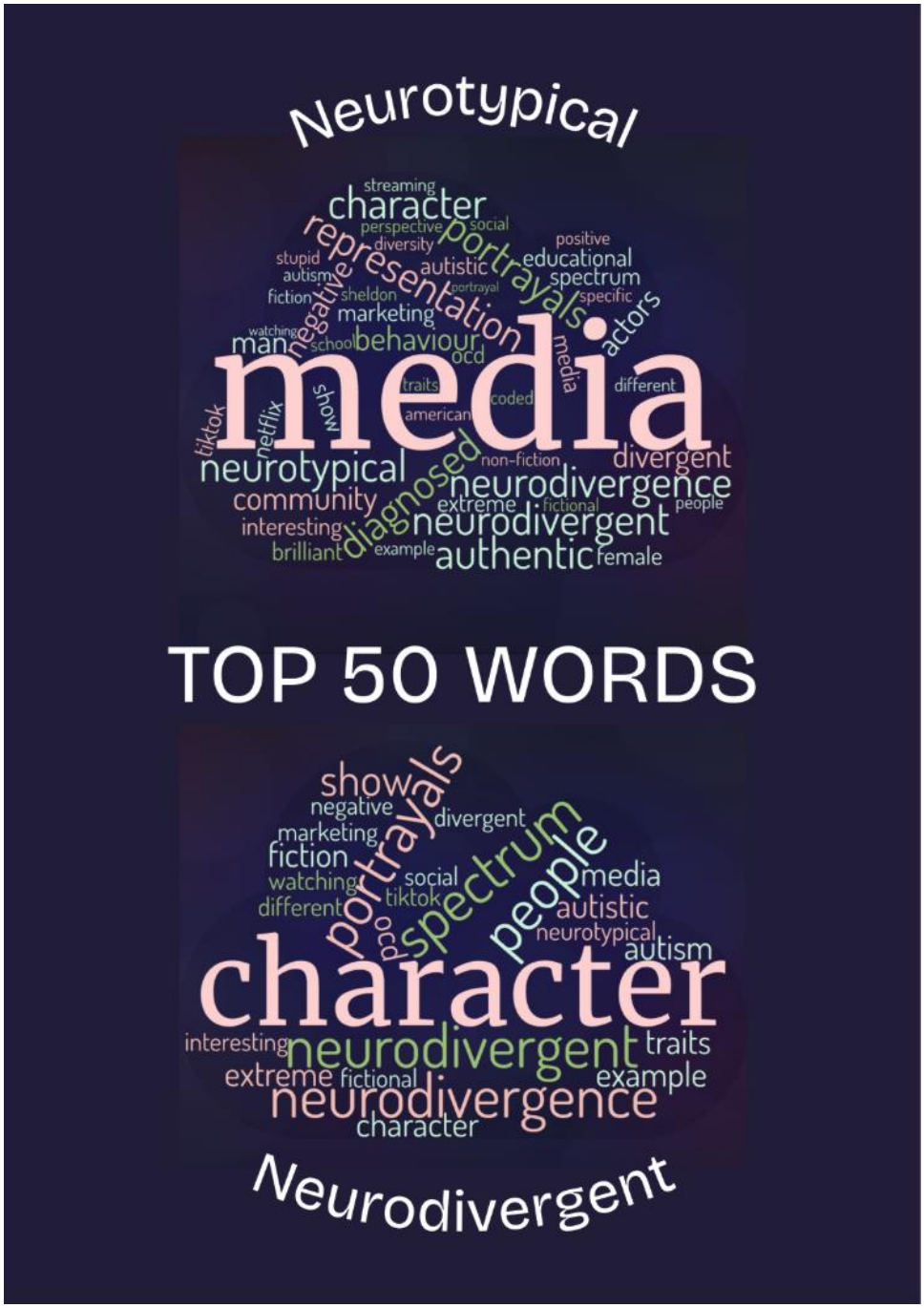
**Pākehā**

A New Zealander of European descent; commonly used to refer to non-Māori people in Aotearoa.

**Tāmaki Makaurau**

Māori name for Auckland.

## Appendix B: Word Clouds



# Appendix C: Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee
(AUTEC)

18 September 2025

Matt Mollgaard
Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

Dear Matt

Re Ethics Application: **25/258 Neurodiversity, Gender, and Identity: An Analysis of On-Screen Representation**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 18 September 2028.

**Standard Conditions of Approval**

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics

For any enquiries, please contact the Secretariat at ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee**

Cc: rds0693@autuni.ac.nz;rose.scott@aut.ac.nz

Auckland University of Technology, D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand.
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316: E: ethics@aut.ac.nz: www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

## Appendix D: Advertisement Poster



# Appendix E: Participant Documents

## Appendix E.1: Neurodivergent Participant Information Sheet




**Participant Information Sheet:** Neurodivergent Focus Group

**Date that data collection will start:** 20/10/25

**Project Title:** Neurodiversity, Gender, and Identity: An Analysis of On-Screen Representation

**Kia ora, my name is Rose Scott,** and I'm an Autistic researcher inviting you to take part in my research study on media representations of neurodivergence. This study is part of my Master of Communication Studies thesis at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). I'm being supervised by Dr. Matt Mollgaard, Head of the Department of Screen, Audio, and Journalism at AUT.

**What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of my research is to explore how neurodivergence is represented on screen. I'm interested in better understanding how these portrayals are received – and how they might influence both public perceptions and the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand.

As the primary method for this project, I will be conducting two focus groups – one with neurodivergent participants and one with neurotypical participants – with up to eight participants in each group. These discussions will form the basis of my analysis. The findings may be used in academic publications, including as part of my Master of Communication Studies thesis. This research is supported by a New Zealand On Air postgraduate scholarship.

**How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

You have been identified to participate in this research because you expressed interest after seeing a recruitment poster, finding the study on AUT's research participation webpage, or hearing about it through word of mouth.

You are being invited to take part in the **neurodivergent focus group** if you meet the following criteria:

- You are 18 years of age or older;
- You are currently based in Aotearoa New Zealand;
- You identify as neurodivergent (for example, ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome, OCD, or other cognitive differences).

Your reflections, perspectives, and lived experiences are incredibly valuable in helping us better understand how neurodivergence is portrayed in media – and how these portrayals may influence personal identity or shape public perceptions in Aotearoa.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

If you'd like to take part in this study, you'll need to complete a consent form and online survey before the focus group session. This will be emailed to you directly and will only be accessible to myself and my supervisor.

Participation is completely voluntary – it's your choice, and whether you decide to take part or not won't have any impact on you. You're also free to withdraw from the study at any time by letting me know. If you do choose to withdraw, you can ask for any information collected up to that point to be deleted. The only exception is if withdrawal happens after the data analysis has been completed – in that case, your responses may still be included to ensure the integrity of the findings.

**Token of Appreciation**

As a thank-you for taking part, you will receive a small token of appreciation after the focus group. Your contact details will only be used to send the thank-you gift and will not be linked to your focus group responses.

**What will my participation involve?**

If you choose to take part, you'll be invited to join one focus group session with other neurodivergent participants lasting around 60 to 90 minutes. The session will be held either in person on the AUT City Campus or online via Teams – whichever works best for the group. We'll be discussing your thoughts and experiences around how neurodivergence is represented in media. This could include things like:

- The kind of portrayals you've seen on screen (fiction or non-fiction, canon or coded)
- What you liked or disliked about those portrayals
- How these portrayals may influence how neurodivergent people see themselves
- How they might shape how neurotypical people understand or see neurodivergent individuals

Before the session commences, you'll also be asked to complete a short survey online. This will collect some basic demographic details (such as age range and gender identity), your preferred neurodivergent terminology, and a few questions about your media exposure. The purpose is to help me better understand your background and ensure the focus group is well-prepared and representative of a range of perspectives.

As mentioned, you'll be asked to complete a consent form before the session. With your permission, the focus group will be audio-recorded so I can transcribe it for analysis. Your name and any identifying details will not appear in the final research. This is a one-off kōrero with no follow-up sessions are required.

**What are the benefits?**

While there may not be a direct benefit to you personally, your involvement will offer valuable insights into how neurodivergence is represented in media and how that affects both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals in Aotearoa. Your contribution could help shape future academic research, influence media practices, and improve public understanding of neurodivergent experiences and how they're portrayed on screen.

**What are the costs?**

The main cost to you is your time. Participation involves completing a 5-10 minute online survey and attending one focus group session, which will take about 60–90 minutes. If you're joining in person and based outside the city, you may also need to travel to the AUT City Campus, which could take time and might involve transport or parking costs.

**Will the results of the study be published?**

The results of this research will be published in my Master's thesis, which will be publicly available through the AUT Library. I may also share the findings through academic journals, conferences, or seminars. You won't be personally identifiable in any publication – all data will be anonymised to protect your privacy.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

Some participants may feel uncomfortable when talking about personal experiences related to neurodivergence and identity. While the focus group isn't expected to cause significant distress, I understand that some topics can feel emotionally vulnerable.

If you do feel uncomfortable during or after the session, support is available. As an adult participant, you're eligible for free support through AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health Services if anything comes up as a result of participating in this research.

To access support, you can:

- Visit the centre at WB203, City Campus
- Email: counselling@aut.ac.nz
- Call: (09) 921 9292

Please let the receptionist know that you're a research participant and mention the title of this project, along with my name and contact details (as listed in this Information Sheet).

You can also find more information here:
https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health

**What will happen to information about me?**

After the focus group is complete, your contact details will be used to send you, if you have opted in, a summary of the research findings. The information you share during the focus group will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Transcription will be completed using AUTGPT, AUT's in-house secure AI tool, due to its high trust and data security standards. During transcription, you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity. The document linking real names to pseudonyms will be stored separately and destroyed once the research is complete.

All raw identifiable data – including contact details, recordings, and survey responses – will be securely stored on AUT's SharePoint and deleted once transcription and analysis are complete. A de-identified version of the data will be retained on secure, password-protected SharePoint for up to six years, in accordance with AUT's Research Data Management Policy.

I will not access any personal data such as health or education records, and your information will not be linked to other sources or stored in open databases. It will only be used for this project. If I wish to use your data for future research, I will contact you to obtain additional consent.

While every effort will be made to protect your privacy, confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed in a group setting. All participants will be reminded to respect each other's privacy and not share anything discussed outside the session – but this relies on the cooperation of everyone involved.

You have the right to request a copy of your information and to correct it if needed. By signing the consent form, you agree to the use of your information as described above. Identifiable information will not be shared beyond the research team unless you give explicit permission or it is required by law.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor:

Dr. Matt Mollgaard
Email: matt.mollgaard@aut.ac.nz
Phone: (+64 9) 921 9999 ext 6363

**Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC:**
Email: ethics@aut.ac.nz
Phone: (+64 9) 921 9999 ext 6038

**Who do I contact for further information about this research?**
Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**Researcher Contact Details:**
Rose Scott
Email: rds0693@autuni.ac.nz

**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**
Dr. Matt Mollgaard
Email: matt.mollgaard@aut.ac.nz
Phone: (+64 9) 921 9999 ext 6363

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee 18/09/25, AUTEC Reference number 25/258**

## Appendix E.2: Neurotypical Participant Information Sheet




**Participant Information Sheet:** Neurotypical Focus Group

**Date that data collection will start:** 20/10/25

**Project Title**: Neurodiversity, Gender, and Identity: An Analysis of On-Screen Representation

**Kia ora, my name is Rose Scott,** and I'm an Autistic researcher inviting you to take part in my research study on media representations of neurodivergence. This study is part of my Master of Communication Studies thesis at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). I'm being supervised by Dr. Matt Mollgaard, Head of the Department of Screen, Audio, and Journalism at AUT.

**What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of my research is to explore how neurodivergence is represented on screen. I'm interested in better understanding whether these portrayals are received – and how they might influence both public perceptions and the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand.

As the primary method for this project, I will be conducting two focus groups – one with neurodivergent participants and one with neurotypical participants – with up to eight participants in each group. These discussions will form the basis of my analysis. The findings may be used in academic publications, including as part of my Master of Communication Studies thesis. This research is supported by a New Zealand On Air postgraduate scholarship.

**How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

You have been identified to participate in this research because you expressed interest after seeing a recruitment poster, finding the study on AUT's research participation webpage, or hearing about it through word of mouth.

You are being invited to take part in the **neurotypical focus group** if you meet the following criteria:

- You are 18 years of age or older;
- You are currently based in Aotearoa New Zealand;
- You identify as neurotypical (that is, you do not identify with any neurodivergent condition such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome, OCD, or other cognitive differences).

Your reflections, perspectives, and experiences are incredibly valuable in helping us better understand how neurodivergence is portrayed in media – and how these portrayals may shape public perceptions in Aotearoa.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

If you'd like to take part in this study, you'll need to complete a short consent form and online survey before the focus group session. This will be emailed to you directly and will only be accessible to myself and my supervisor.

Participation is completely voluntary – it's your choice, and whether you decide to take part or not won't have any impact on you. You're also free to withdraw from the study at any time by letting me know. If you do choose to withdraw, you can ask for any information collected up to that point to be deleted. The only exception is if withdrawal happens after the data analysis has been completed – in that case, your responses may still be included to ensure the integrity of the findings.

**Token of Appreciation**

As a thank-you for taking part, you will receive a small token of appreciation after the focus group. Your contact details will only be used to send the thank-you gift and will not be linked to your focus group responses.

**What will my participation involve?**

If you choose to take part, you'll be invited to join one focus group session with other neurotypical participants, lasting around 60 to 90 minutes. The session will be held either in person at the AUT City Campus or online via Teams – whichever works best for the group.

We'll be discussing your thoughts and perspectives on how neurodivergence is represented in media. This could include things like:

- The kinds of portrayals you've seen on screen (fiction or non-fiction, canon or coded)
- What you thought was accurate, stereotypical, or missing
- What you liked or disliked about those portrayals
- How you think these portrayals influence public understanding or reinforce certain ideas about neurodivergent people

Before the session, you'll be asked to complete a short survey online. This will collect some basic demographic details (such as age range and gender identity), your familiarity with neurodivergent-related terms, and a few questions about your media exposure. The purpose is to help me understand your perspective and ensure the focus group is thoughtful, inclusive, and represents a range of views on how neurodivergence is portrayed in media.

As mentioned, you'll be asked to complete a consent form before the session. With your permission, the focus group will be audio-recorded so I can transcribe it for analysis. Your name and any identifying details will not appear in the final research. This is a one-off kōrero with no follow-up sessions are required.

**What are the benefits?**

While there may not be a direct benefit to you personally, your involvement will offer valuable insights into how neurodivergence is represented in media and how that affects both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals in Aotearoa. Your contribution could help shape future academic research, influence media practices, and improve public understanding of neurodivergent experiences and how they're portrayed on screen.

**What are the costs?**

The main cost to you is your time. Participation involves completing a 5-10 minute online survey and attending one focus group session, which will take about 60–90 minutes. If you're joining in person and based outside the city, you may also need to travel to the AUT City Campus, which could take time and might involve transport or parking costs.

**Will the results of the study be published?**

The results of this research will be published in my Master's thesis, which will be publicly available through the AUT Library. I may also share the findings through academic journals, conferences, or seminars. You won't be personally identifiable in any publication – all data will be anonymised to protect your privacy.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

Some participants may feel uncomfortable discussing personal experiences related to neurodivergence and identity. While the focus group isn't expected to cause significant distress, I understand that these topics can sometimes feel emotionally vulnerable – and your comfort and wellbeing will always come first.

If you do feel uncomfortable during or after the session, support is available. As an adult participant, you're eligible for free support through AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health Services if anything comes up as a result of participating in this research.

**To access support, you can:**

- Visit the centre at WB203, City Campus
- Email: counselling@aut.ac.nz
- Call: (09) 921 9292

Please let the receptionist know that you're a research participant and mention the title of this project, along with my name and contact details (as listed in this Information Sheet).

You can also find more information here:
https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health

**What will happen to information about me?**

After the focus group is complete, your contact details will be used to send you, if you have opted in, a summary of the research findings. The information you share during the focus group will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Transcription will be completed using AUTGPT, AUT's in-house secure AI tool, due to its high trust and data security standards. During transcription, you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity. The document linking real names to pseudonyms will be stored separately and destroyed once the research is complete.

All raw identifiable data – including contact details, recordings, and survey responses – will be securely stored on AUT's SharePoint and deleted once transcription and analysis are complete. A de-identified version of the data will be retained on secure, password-protected SharePoint for up to six years, in accordance with AUT's Research Data Management Policy.

I will not access any personal data such as health or education records, and your information will not be linked to other sources or stored in open databases. It will only be used for this project. If I wish to use your data for future research, I will contact you to obtain additional consent.

While every effort will be made to protect your privacy, confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed in a group setting. All participants will be reminded to respect each other's privacy and not share anything discussed outside the session – but this relies on the cooperation of everyone involved.

You have the right to request a copy of your information and to correct it if needed. By signing the consent form, you agree to the use of your information as described above. Identifiable information will not be shared beyond the research team unless you give explicit permission or it is required by law.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor:

**Dr. Matt Mollgaard**
**Email: matt.mollgaard@aut.ac.nz**
**Phone: (+64 9) 921 9999 ext 6363**

**Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC:**
Email: ethics@aut.ac.nz
Phone: (+64 9) 921 9999 ext 6038

**Who do I contact for further information about this research?**
Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**Researcher Contact Details:**
Rose Scott
Email: rds0693@autuni.ac.nz

**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**
Dr. Matt Mollgaard
Email: matt.mollgaard@aut.ac.nz
Phone: (+64 9) 921 9999 ext 6363

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee 18/09/25, AUTEC Reference number 25/258**

## Appendix E.3: Consent Form




### Consent Form

*Project title:* **Neurodiversity, Gender and Identity: An Analysis of On-Screen Representation**

*Project Supervisor:* ***Matt Mollgaard***

*Researcher:* ***Rose Scott***

- ○ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated dd mmmm yyyy.
- ○ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ○ I understand that identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group, and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- ○ I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ○ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ○ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then, while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ○ I agree to take part in this research.
- ○ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date:

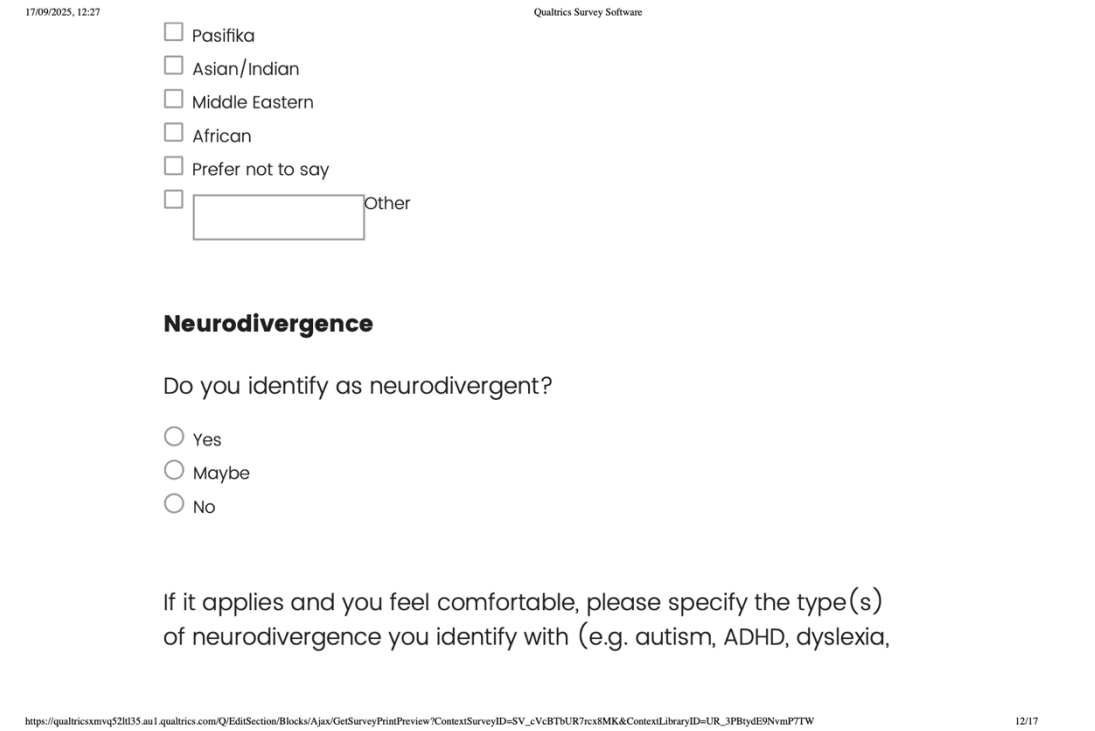
***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 18/09/25, AUTEC Reference #25/258***

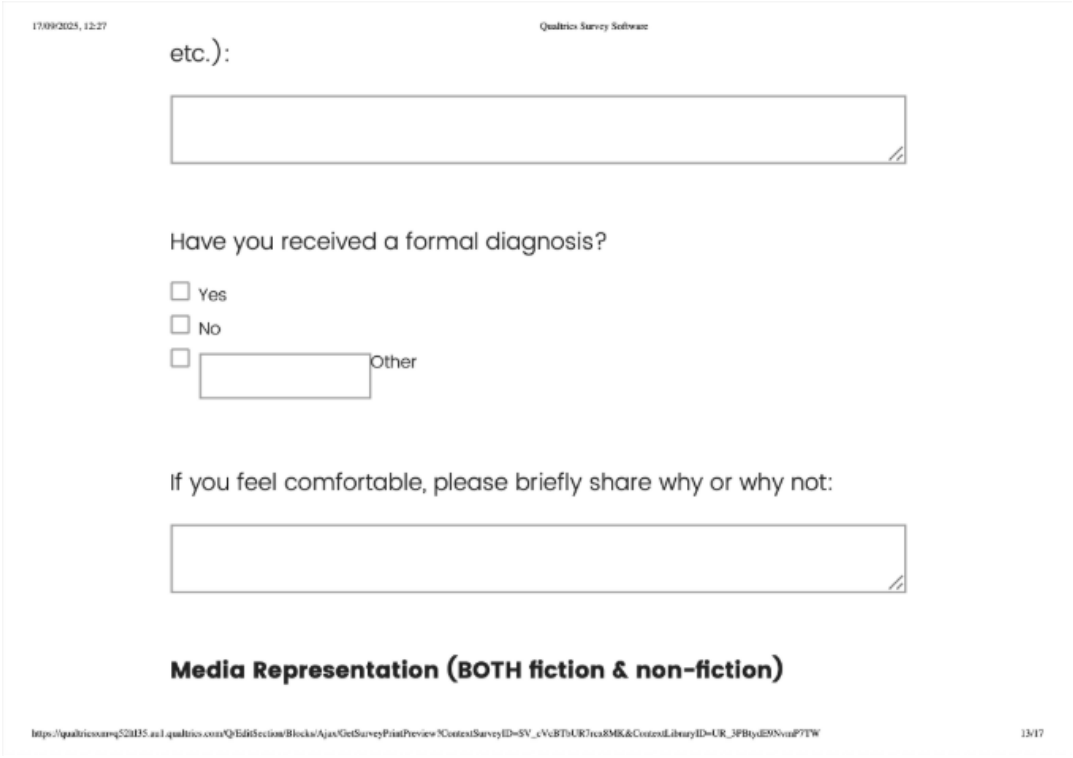
*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

# Appendix F: Survey Questions

## Appendix F.1: Neurodivergent Questions





17/09/2025, 12:27 Qualtrics Survey Software

etc.):

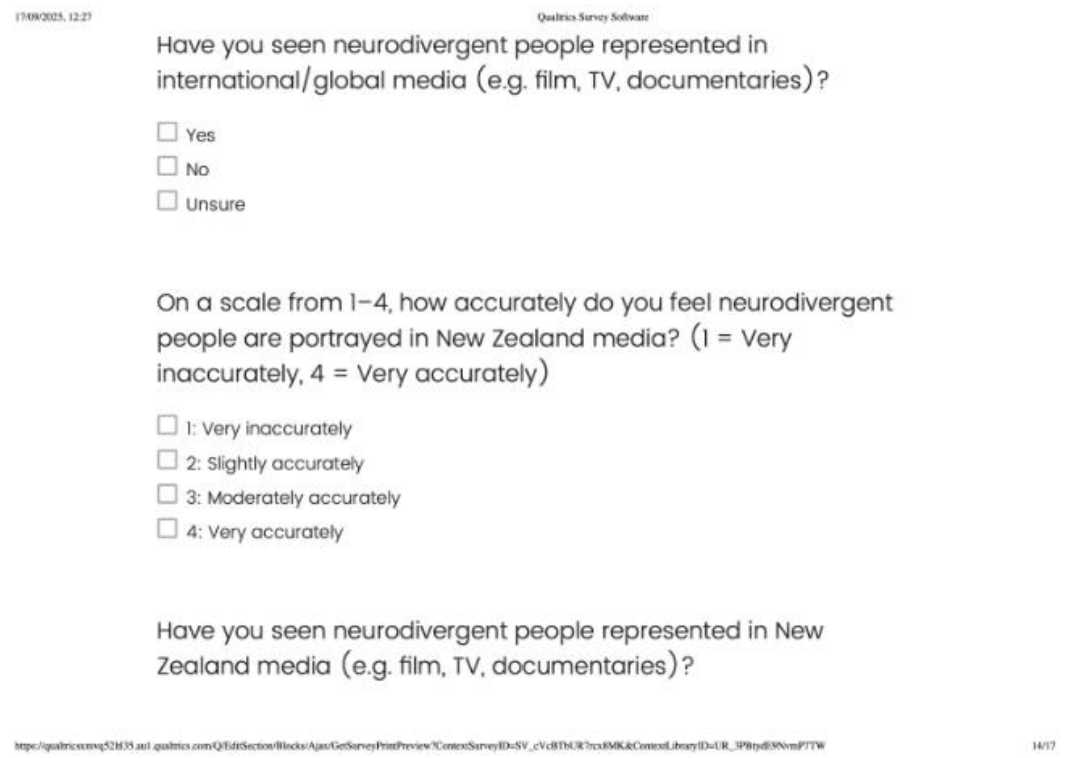
Have you received a formal diagnosis?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other

If you feel comfortable, please briefly share why or why not:

**Media Representation (BOTH fiction & non-fiction)**

https://qualtricsxmvq52tl35.au1.qualtrics.com/Q/EditSection/Blocks/Ajax/GetSurveyPrintPreview?ContextSurveyID=SV_cVcBTbUR7rcxRMK&ContextLibraryID=UR_3PBtydE9NvmP7TW 13/17



17/09/2025, 12:27 Qualtrics Survey Software

Have you seen neurodivergent people represented in international/global media (e.g. film, TV, documentaries)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

On a scale from 1–4, how accurately do you feel neurodivergent people are portrayed in New Zealand media? (1 = Very inaccurately, 4 = Very accurately)

- ☐ 1: Very inaccurately
- ☐ 2: Slightly accurately
- ☐ 3: Moderately accurately
- ☐ 4: Very accurately

Have you seen neurodivergent people represented in New Zealand media (e.g. film, TV, documentaries)?

https://qualtricsxmvq52tl35.au1.qualtrics.com/Q/EditSection/Blocks/Ajax/GetSurveyPrintPreview?ContextSurveyID=SV_cVcBTbUR7rcxRMK&ContextLibraryID=UR_3PBtydE9NvmP7TW 14/17

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Unsure

On a scale from 1–4, how accurately do you feel neurodivergent people are portrayed in New Zealand media? (1 = Very inaccurately, 4 = Very accurately)

- [ ] 1: Very inaccurately
- [ ] 2: Slightly accurately
- [ ] 3: Moderately accurately
- [ ] 4: Very accurately

If applicable, please share any neurodivergent representations that have particularly stood out to you – whether in a positive or negative way. What made them memorable?





Do you feel you see your own experiences reflected in neurodivergent media portrayals?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Unsure
- [ ] Why/Why not?

Do you think media portrayals of neurodivergent people have influenced how the public understands neurodivergence?

- [ ] Yes, positively
- [ ] Yes, negatively
- [ ] Yes, both positively and negatively
- [ ] No


17/09/2025, 12:27 Qualtrics Survey Software

☐ Unsure

What do you think media creators should keep in mind when portraying neurodivergent people or experiences?

Is there anything else you'd like to add about how neurodivergence is represented (or not represented) in media (both globally and across NZ)?

Powered by Qualtrics

https://qualtricsxmvq52tl35.au1.qualtrics.com/Q/EditSection/Blocks/Ajax/GetSurveyPrintPreview?ContextSurveyID=SV_cVclITbUR7rcx8M&ContextLibraryID=UR_3PBtydE89VvmP7TW 17/17

**Appendix F.2: Neurotypical Questions**


17/09/2025, 12:25 Qualtrics Survey Software

**Demographic**

What best describes your age group

○ 18-24
○ 25-34
○ 35-44
○ Prefer not to say

What best describes your gender identity?

☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Non-binary / third gender
☐ Prefer not to say

Which ethnic group(s) do you belong to?

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- ☐ Māori
- ☐ Pākehā / NZ European
- ☐ Pasifika
- ☐ Asian / Indian
- ☐ Middle Eastern
- ☐ African
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other

**Cognitive Identification**

Are you familiar with the term "neurodivergent"?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe



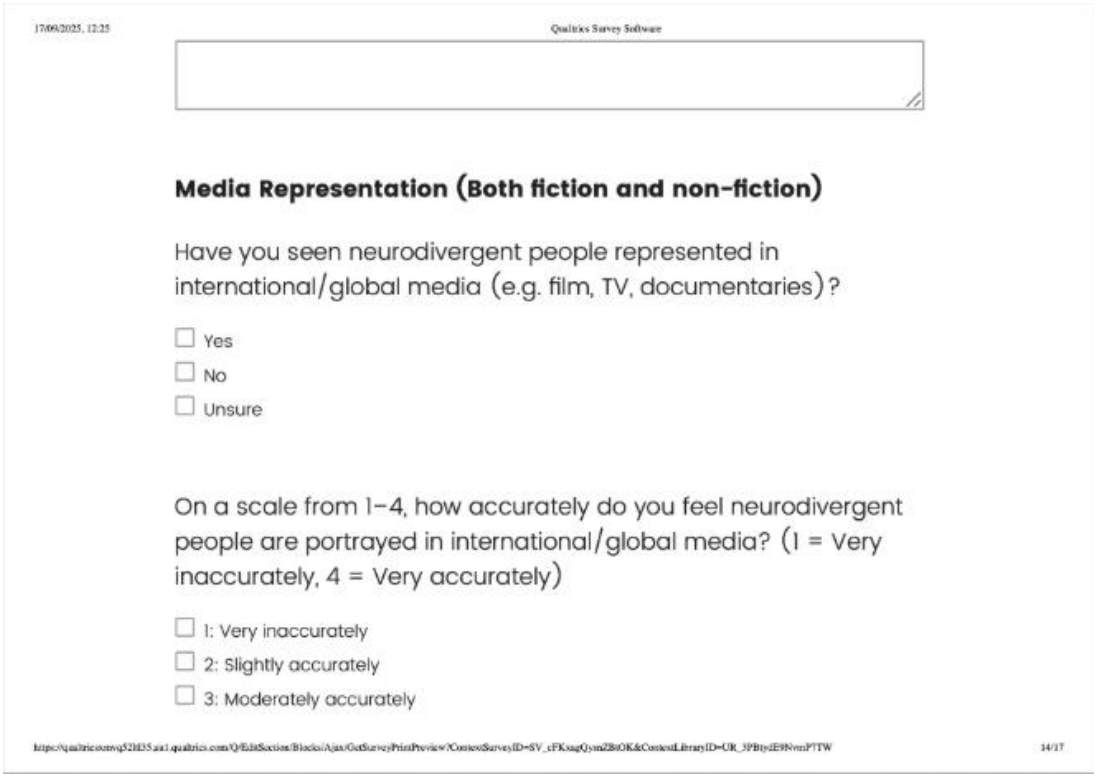


How would you describe your understanding of neurodivergence?

Do you have any personal relationships or close connections with neurodivergent individuals?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Prefer not to say

If you feel comfortable, please briefly describe how this relationship (if any) has shaped your understanding of neurodivergence:





**Media Representation (Both fiction and non-fiction)**

Have you seen neurodivergent people represented in international/global media (e.g. film, TV, documentaries)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

On a scale from 1–4, how accurately do you feel neurodivergent people are portrayed in international/global media? (1 = Very inaccurately, 4 = Very accurately)

- ☐ 1: Very inaccurately
- ☐ 2: Slightly accurately
- ☐ 3: Moderately accurately





- ☐ 4: Very accurately

Have you seen neurodivergent people represented in New Zealand media (e.g. film, TV, documentaries)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

On a scale from 1–4, how accurately do you feel neurodivergent people are portrayed in New Zealand media? (1 = Very inaccurately, 4 = Very accurately)

- ☐ 1: Very inaccurately
- ☐ 2: Slightly accurately
- ☐ 3: Moderately accurately
- ☐ 4: Very accurately

If applicable, please share any neurodivergent character(s) that have particularly stood out to you – whether in a positive or negative way. What made them memorable?

In your opinion, do media portrayals of neurodivergent people influence how the public understands neurodivergence?

- ☐ Yes, positively
- ☐ Yes, negatively
- ☐ Yes, both positively and negatively
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

In your experience, how have portrayals of neurodivergent people in media shaped your understanding of neurodivergence?





Is there anything else you'd like to add about how neurodivergence is represented (or not represented) in media (both globally and across NZ)?

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# Appendix G: Focus Group Guides

## Appendix G.1: Neurodivergent Focus Group Guide

*Representation*

Have you come across any notable on-screen portrayals – whether in local or global media – that you felt represented neurodivergence? Who were they, and what was the context behind their portrayal?

Why did those examples come to mind first? What stood out to you about them?

What behaviours or traits made you think they were neurodivergent – whether this was explicitly stated or implied through how the character was written, performed, or framed within the story?

Did more fictional or non-fictional neurodivergent portrayals come to mind? Why do you think that is?

Did more local or global neurodivergent portrayals come to mind? Why do you think that is?

Did more positive or negative neurodivergent portrayals come to mind? Why do you think that is?

*Stereotypes and Authenticity*

Have you encountered any portrayals that felt off, exaggerated, or even harmful? What about them gave that impression?

Why do you think the creators chose to portray them in that way? How do you think those portrayals came about?

On the other hand, have you seen portrayals that felt authentic or empowering? What made those stand out in a positive way?

*Personal Connection*

Have any portrayals you've seen felt relatable to your own experiences as a neurodivergent person? Why or why not?

How do you think these representations influence how neurodivergent people see themselves or feel about sharing their identities?

*Public Perception*

What impact do you think certain portrayals have on how neurotypical people understand neurodivergence?

Have you ever experienced judgments, assumptions, or misunderstandings that you think were influenced by how media represents neurodivergent people?

*Looking Ahead*

What kinds of neurodivergent stories or characters would you like to see more of in the future?

What do you think could help create more authentic neurodivergent portrayals? For example, would you prefer to see neurodivergent roles played by neurodivergent actors, or at least developed with consultation from neurodivergent voices?

What do you wish media creators better understood when telling stories about or for neurodivergent people?

*Final Thoughts*

Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't covered today?

## Appendix G.2: Neurotypical Focus Group Guide

*Understanding Neurodivergence*

When you hear the term "neurodivergent," how would you describe your understanding of it?

Have you had any personal experiences that have shaped how you understand neurodivergence and what it means – such as through relationships, education, or media you've consumed?

*Media Representation*

Have you come across any on-screen characters you felt were representing neurodivergence – whether in local or global media? (fictional/nonfictional)

Beyond what was explicitly stated, what made you think they were neurodivergent? Which signs, traits, or behaviors gave you that impression?

How did those portrayals come across to you – did anything stand out as particularly positive or negative?

Were there moments that felt especially accurate or authentic? What contributed to that sense of realism?

Conversely, were there portrayals that felt stereotyped or exaggerated? What aspects made them seem that way?

*Impact and Understanding*

Do you think the media you consume influences how you (and other neurotypical people) understand or imagine the experiences of neurodivergent people?

Have any portrayals helped you better understand or empathise with neurodivergent perspectives? In what context?

Have any portrayals made it harder to understand or empathise with neurodivergent experiences? In what context?

When it comes to learning about communities like neurodivergent people, what helps you understand best – is it through media, personal experience, or something else?

*Looking Ahead*

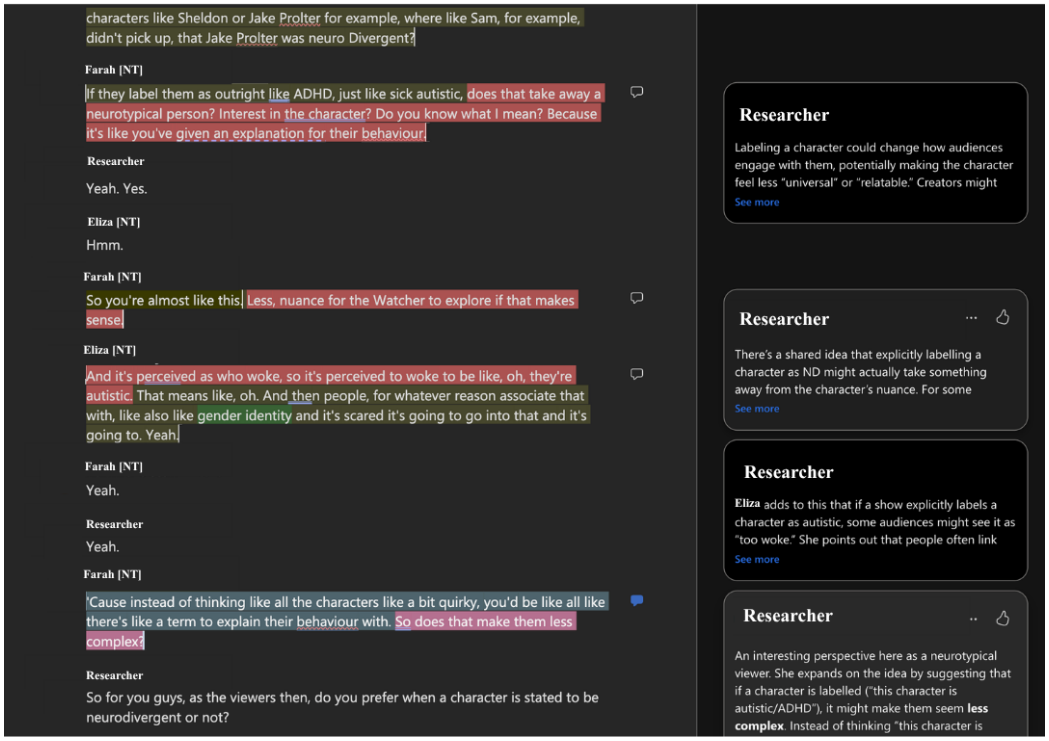
What kinds of stories or representations do you think would help neurotypical people better understand neurodivergence in future media?

Do you think there are any gaps in how these stories are told – for example, perspectives or experiences that are missing when it comes to representing neurodivergence? (neurotypical actors, neurodivergent consultations etc.)

*Final Thoughts*

Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't touched on tonight?

# Appendix H: Thematic Analysis Coding Example




Red = semantic coding (explicit descriptions of representation & impact)

Yellow = latent coding (interpretation of the underlying meanings of representation & impact)