



Autistic Perceived Character Representation in Sitcoms

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ABSTRACT

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In recent decades, autism has received attention in mainstream media via depictions of characters in sitcoms, movies, TV series, and other mediums. However, due to the lack of knowledge, existing representations have yet to tell the whole story of autistic people.

The purpose of the current thesis was to discuss the representation of autism in sitcoms. There were three case studies of autistic-coded characters in sitcoms and two honorable mentions to determine a list of considerations for creating autistic characters. The case studies include *The Big Bang Theory*, *The IT Crowd*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and two honorable mentions from *Legally Blonde* and *The Queen's Gambits*. The thesis analyzed studies about representation and autism. The research methods were theoretical framework and semiotics content analysis. The narrative analysis relied on Robert Mckee's character design theory and Henri Bergson's Laughter theories.

From these findings, a summary of what to remember when writing autistic or autistic-coded characters was made. This list of considerations aided the process of producing the project. The project is to create an autistic-coded character by writing a synopsis and a scene for a sitcom.

Key words: autism spectrum, autistic representation, character, sitcom.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
AS	Asperger's Syndrome
Neurodivergent	differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal (frequently used with reference to autistic spectrum disorders)
Neurotypical	not displaying or characterized by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behavior.
Autistic masking	suppression of elements of a person's autistic experience or identity
SUD	Substance Use Disorder

1 INTRODUCTION

As time progresses, the mainstream media is giving more attention to representation to cultivate diversity. Representation benefits both minorities and majorities as it boosts awareness in the general public and shines a new light on marginalized groups.

The autistic community has always been viewed negatively in mainstream media. Narratives often generalize autism as being unusual and socially awkward. Ever since *Rain Man* first came into theaters in 1988, a number of autistic-coded characters have appeared in TV shows and films, which gave more insight into autism to the public.

This thesis discusses how autistic perceived characters appear in sitcoms. There are four sections elaborating on representation, autism spectrum disorder, autistic-coded characters in sitcoms, and narrative theories. First, the writer will examine 5 case studies of characters with narratives that represent traits of autism. These study cases will summarize the image of autism in the media and its many nuances.

Next, the thesis will include a list of considerations to keep in mind when writing an autistic perceived character. This list can assist scriptwriters or people interested in creating neurodivergent characters.

2 REPRESENTATION

2.1 Why does representation matter?

The external value of representation is the awareness of the mass audience. Research showed that exposure to positive representation of minorities is beneficial for the perception of the mass audience of these groups. Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel (2018) conducted research on how people viewed the LGBT community before and after watching narratives with protagonists who are part of the LGBT community. The results showed that fictional characters in mass media could positively influence a person's impression.

The internal value of representation is how minorities view themselves. Minority individuals usually benefit from seeing a representation of themselves in the media. They can identify themselves with the narrative and relate more to the story.

According to an article published by WHO in March 2022, an estimated 1 in 100 children has autism. There are about 80 million autistic people worldwide as of 2022. Hence, the autistic community is 1% of the world's population. However, the knowledge about autism and its diagnosis criteria is still limited.

TABLE 1. Identified Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder. ADDM Network 2000-2018 Combining Data from All Sites.

Surveillance Year	Birth Year	Number of ADDM Sites Reporting	This is about 1 in X children...
2000	1992	6	1 in 150
2004	1996	8	1 in 125
2008	2000	14	1 in 88
2012	2004	11	1 in 69
2016	2008	11	1 in 54
2018	2010	11	1 in 44

2.2 Underrepresentation and misrepresentation

Under-representation in the media is also a hindrance to groups of minorities. Fewer representations mean less awareness about disabilities and minorities. In recent decades, there have been more TV programs and documentaries about disabilities. However, there are more negative representations than positive ones.

According to Samsel and Perepa (2013), most documentaries about disabilities tend to sensationalize and stereotype these conditions. They focus on odd and extreme behaviors that would pique the audience's interest instead of providing information about these disabilities. For example, the image that people have about autistic kids in documentaries might be a screaming and unruly child or a loner that struggles with social interaction, most of whom are little boys. These programs are more about entertainment instead of promoting awareness. Misrepresentation is also detrimental to the public perception of disabilities.

Samsel and Perepa (2013) suggest that TV shows should include more disabled characters without sensationalizing or negatively portraying their disabilities. Disabled characters can serve as relatable role models and depict their struggles without generalizing the entire community and transforming audience perceptions.

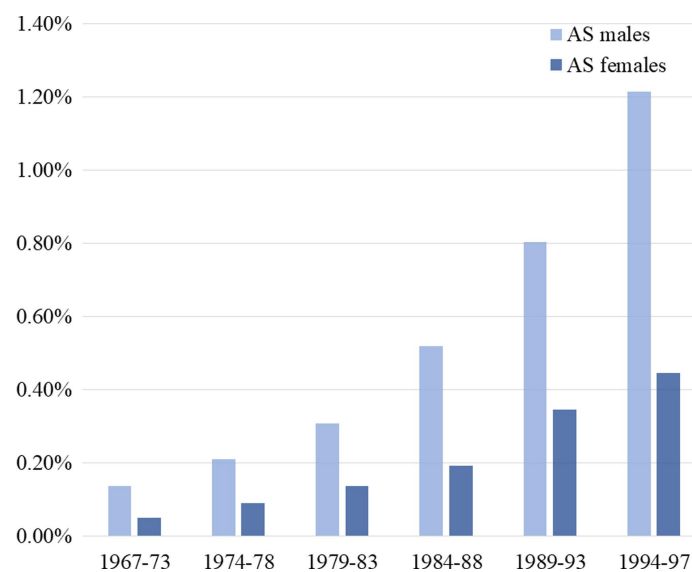


FIGURE 1. Population occurrence of Asperger's syndrome(AS) in males and females by birth year (Posserud, Solberg, Engeland, Haavik, Klungsøyr, 2021)

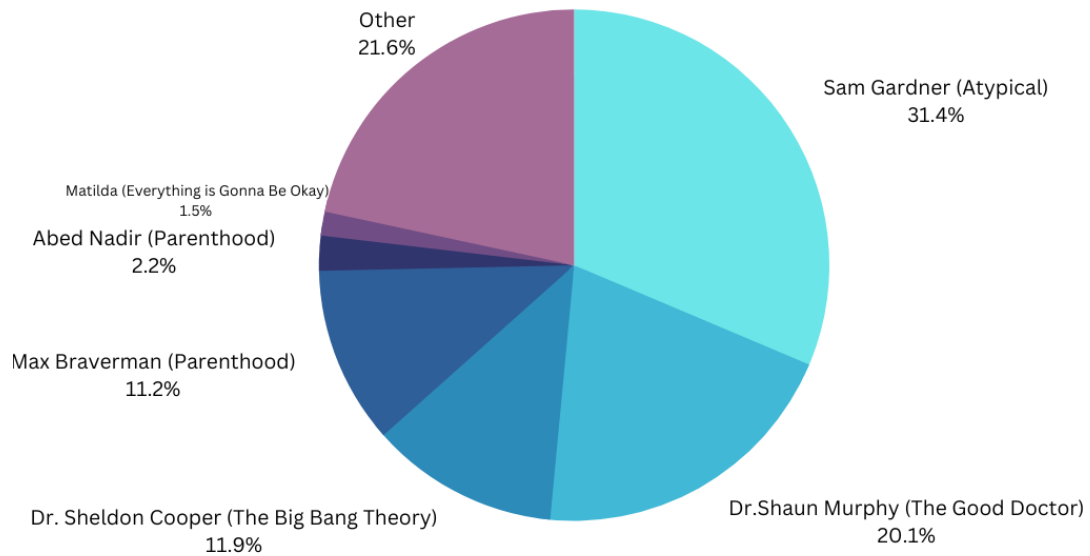


FIGURE 2. Television characters identified by survey respondents (Audley, 2020, edited)

According to Figure 1, the number of Asperger's Syndrome (AS) diagnoses in males is much higher than in females, which may result from unawareness of how autism exhibits in women since there is still little research about this topic. As a result, a majority of autistic-coded characters are men and rarely females. Figure 2 shows the characters that the audience identifies as autistic. There is only one female character in this list, and the percentage of people that voted for her is smaller than the male characters. Even if considering the other characters, the ratio between males and females autistically coded characters is still drastically different.

3 AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

3.1 Definitions & Terms

3.1.1 Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is a disorder that entails a wide range of behavioral and psychological indicators. A definition quoted from the scholarly journal “Autism” (2009). Levy, Mandell, and Schultz stated that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is “a neurodevelopmental disorder in the category of pervasive developmental disorders, and is characterized by severe and pervasive impairment in reciprocal socialization, qualitative impairment in communication, and repetitive or unusual behavior.” Autism consists of a spectrum of signals, such as a lack of social skills, repetitive speech or behaviors, and sensory issues.

3.1.2 Other terms

In this thesis, terms like “autistic perceived” or “autistic-coded” characters refer to examples of fictional autistic representation in films and TV series. Since most of these case studies are not confirmed or implied to be autistic, these phrases like “perceived” or “coded” are more relevant when describing them. These phrases imply having autistic characteristics and tendencies instead of assigning the person to have autism. Autism can not be determined by any specific visual indicators but rather by the collective behaviors of the individual.

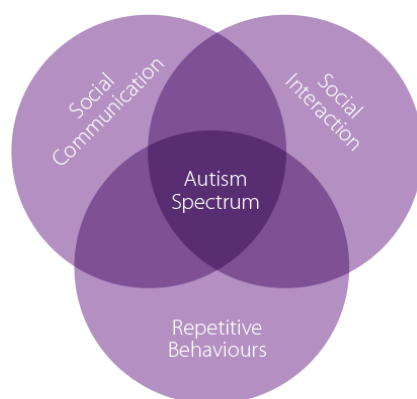
Autistic masking is a phenomenon that generally happens in the autistic community. 94% of autistic people have experienced masking at some point (Sedgewick et al., 2022). According to Watts (2022), autistic masking is “the suppression of elements of a person’s autistic experience or identity.” Pearson & Rose (2021) believe that autistic individuals mask as a reaction to stigma and trauma. Autistic people use masking as a coping mechanism when navigating interactions with people; one of its main goals is to fit in and get accepted by neurotypicals. The term “masking” will be referred to when describing characters that have to act in a more socially acceptable manner to

accommodate other neurotypical people. However, research has shown that masking can harm the mental wellness of autistic people and will result in meltdowns (Bradley et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2019).

Special interest is an intensive fixation on particular subjects or hobbies (Jordan & Caldwell-Harris, 2012). It is also one of the criteria in the DSM-5 that falls into the category of repeated behaviors and interests. An estimated 75-90% of people with ASD develop special interests from the early stages of life (Klin, Danovitch, Merz, & Volkmar, 2007). Special interests in ASD can range from intense investment in specific subjects or items, collecting factual information, playing games alone, and sensory-stimulating activities to more unique hobbies such as deep-fryers and toilet brushes (Klin et al., 2007; Winter-Messiers, 2007). These interests can be solid motivations for autistic people in their professional life. Autistic adults with occupations that align with their special interest lead to success in work life (Krieger et al., 2012).

3.2 Autistic traits

In their 'Autism' article, according to Levy, Mandell, and Schultz (2009), the numerous traits of autism can be divided into 3 subgroups of symptoms: social, behavioral, and communicative. Each autistic person displays different levels of a few to all of these traits, which make up the autistic spectrum. To quote Szalavitz (2016): "if you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism."

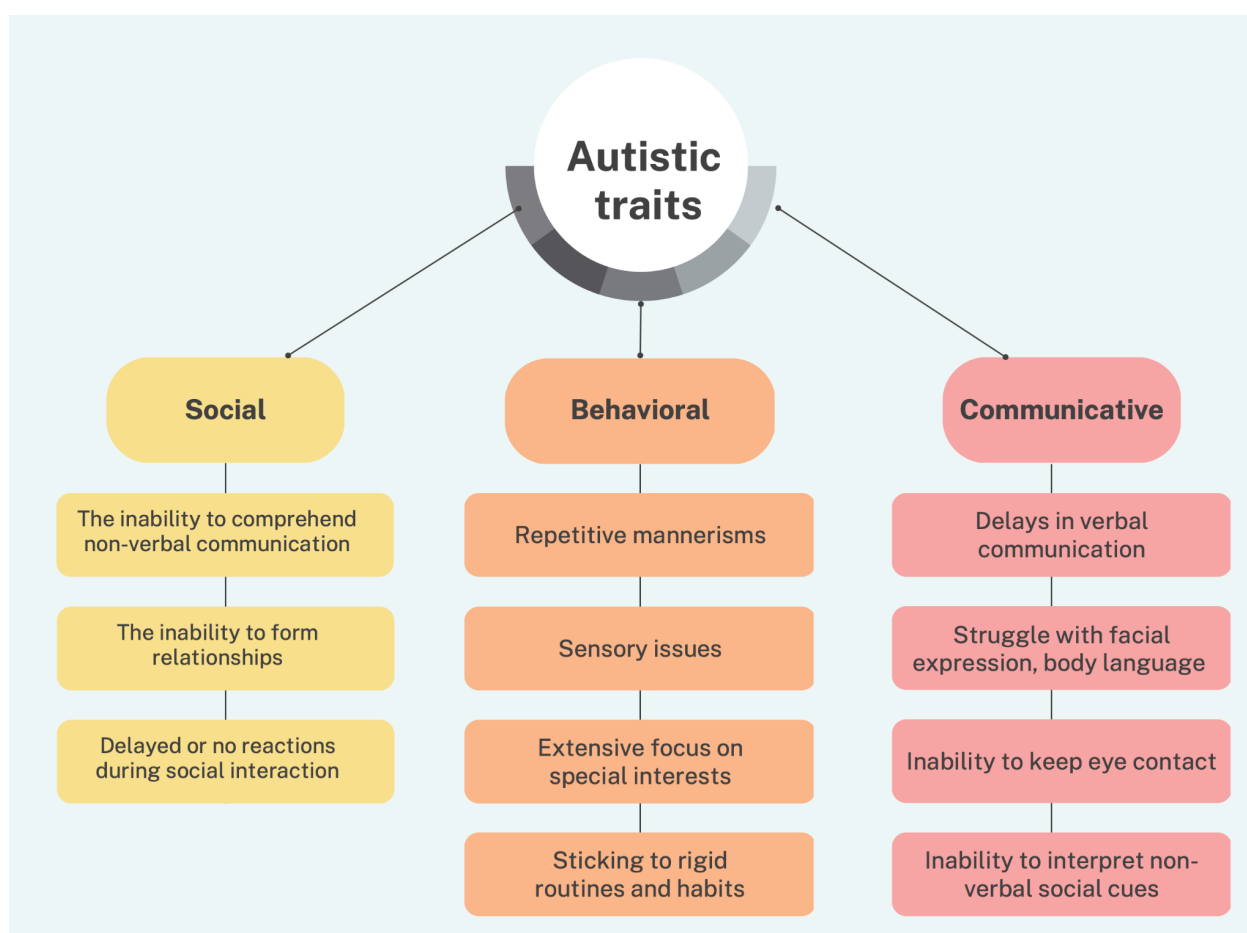


PICTURE 1. Three categories of core features, also known as 'Triad of impairment' (clinical-partners.co.uk).

Social symptoms include the inability to comprehend non-verbal communication during interactions, the inability to form relationships or have few relationships with others, and delayed or no reactions during social interaction.

Behavioral symptoms of autism consist of repetitive mannerisms for self-stimulation or regulating emotions (nail biting, echolalia, picking skin, stimming), sensory issues, extensive focus on special interests and hobbies, anxiety about small environmental changes, sticking to rigid routines and habits, fascination with exploring atypical visuals.

Communicative symptoms entail delays in verbal communication, struggle with facial expression, body language, and pronunciation, inability to keep eye contact, and inability to interpret non-verbal social cues and rules.



PICTURE 2. Three categories of autistic traits chart. Based on 'Autism' (Levy, Mandell, and Schultz, 2009)

4 CHARACTER CASE STUDIES

This section discusses case studies about autistic-coded characters to demonstrate how these characters come across in the media. Scene analysis based on scripts from TV series or films will identify these characters with autistic traits and how they portray these traits.

4.1 In Sitcoms

Rain Man (1988) and Forrest Gump (1994) were one of the first films featuring an autistic main character and the start of the rise of autism representation in the media. According to Table 1, during the 2000s, autism diagnosis has increased considerably compared to prior decades. As a result, audiences recognized more fictional autistic portrayals in their favorite films. Some of the case studies in this section depict the stereotype that creators have about autism during this era. However, despite being stereotypes, these characters play essential roles in familiarizing the general public with autism.

4.1.1 Sheldon Cooper from The Big Bang Theory

The Big Bang Theory is an American sitcom aired from 2007 to 2019 about a woman who moves into an apartment across the hall from two brilliant but socially awkward physicists. She teaches them about the realities of life outside of the laboratory. The series revolves around five friends in that apartment.



PICTURE 3. The BigBang Theory. 2009-2019.

Sheldon Cooper is a theoretical physicist with an IQ of 187. He was a child prodigy with photographic memory that started college at a young age and went on to specialize in physics theories. Despite his expertise in science, he struggles with social situations with others.



PICTURE 4. Sheldon Cooper. The Bigbang Theory.

INT. IN THE LIVING ROOM

Leonard, Penny and her friends are watching a football game in the living. Sheldon stands at the open door and knocks on it.

SHELDON
(Knock, knock, knock) Penny.
(Knock, knock, knock) Penny.
(Knock, knock, knock) Penny.

PENNY
Sheldon, come in.

SHELDON
Thank you. I'd like to make a sandwich, but I'm out of bread.

PENNY
There's some in the fridge.

SHELDON
You shouldn't keep your bread in the refrigerator. Staleness is caused by crystallization of the starch molecules, which occurs faster at cool temperatures.

PENNY
On Earth, we say thank you.

SHELDON
So Leonard, how goes the mimesis?

LEONARD
Mimesis?

SHELDON
You know. Mimesis. An action in which the mimic takes on the properties of a specific object or organism. Mimesis.

SHELDON
So Leonard, how goes the mimesis?

LEONARD
Mimesis?

SHELDON
You know. Mimesis. An action in which the mimic takes on the properties of a specific object or organism. Mimesis.

LEONARD
What the hell are you talking about?

SHELDON
I'm attempting to communicate with you without my meaning becoming apparent to those around you. Let me try again. Have the indigenous fauna accepted you as one of their own? Nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

LEONARD
Oh, I guess so.

SHELDON
Good. Oh, FYI. After I eat my sandwich, I'm taking Koothrappali's Patang kite out for a test run. Would you like to get your delta-wing raptor and join me?

LEONARD
I don't want to fly kites, Sheldon. We're watching football here.

SHELDON
I can see that. I was providing you with an alternative. A courtesy I was never offered in similar circumstances.

PICTURE 5. The Big Bang Theory Script. Season 3 Episode 6. 2009. Transcribed.

In this scene, Sheldon uses a lot of technical terms in his conversation with Leonard and Penny. For example, when they talk about keeping bread in the fridge, Sheldon describes why it is not good to keep bread there with scientific terms instead of saying that the bread will go stale. He delivers every line with at least two words that no one often uses in their daily conversation.

The highlight of Sheldon's conversation with Leonard is his asking about 'mimesis.' In this episode, Leonard is trying to fit in with Penny's friends by liking what they like, football. Sheldon asks Leonard how he is doing by referring to mimesis, the act of mimicking or imitation. Sheldon thinks he is doing his friend a favor by using a word that people might not understand instantly. However, even Leonard is confused about what mimesis is. Sheldon explains the term to his friend with more academic words and says, "Nudge nudge wink wink" out loud. He was trying to ask Leonard discreetly but caused confusion by not understanding social cues.

Sheldon often communicates with little facial expressions. He keeps a straight face most of the time, which is a trait often seen in autistic people. Other characters in the series see how he expresses himself as awkward or weird.

Sheldon Cooper is one of the stereotypical autistic-coded characters on television. He is a gifted individual who is immensely skilled at his job but struggles with daily situations outside his special interest. His occupation is also his special interest which aligns with research about how autistic people can gain success in work life if their special interest is part of their job (Krieger et al., 2012). Researching physics is Sheldon's special interest.

Having sensory issues and repetitive behaviors are also traits he has that occur in autism. He is particular about organizing and little things. Sheldon keeps his routine consistent, like sleeping at precisely 9 PM.

Sheldon is one of the more well-known characters that is autistic-coded as he fits into an archetype: geniuses who can not communicate normally. Audiences can easily understand the characters as this is a contradiction often used for intelligent characters to give them dimensions and relatability.

Amy Farrah Fowler is also another worth mentioned autistic-coded character in The Big Bang Theory alongside Sheldon. Amy is a neuroscientist and Sheldon's love interest and eventual partner in the series. She is distant, analytical, socially awkward, and sometimes condescending when first introduced. However, as the show progresses, Amy shows her feminine and loving sides more to her friends. She is an example of how autism can exhibit in women.

1. INT. INSIDE A COFFEE SHOP

Sheldon, Howard and Raj enter the coffee shop.

SHELDON
In a few minutes, when I gloat over the failure of this enterprise, how would you prefer I do it? The standard I told you so? The classic neener-neener? Or just my normal look of haughty derision?

RAJ
You don't know we're wrong yet.

SHELDON
Haughty derision it is.

AMY approaches Sheldon from behind.

AMY
Excuse me. I'm Amy Farrah Fowler. You're Sheldon Cooper.

SHELDON
Hello, Amy Farrah Fowler. I'm sorry to inform you that you have been taken in by unsupportable mathematics designed to prey on the gullible and the lonely. Additionally, I'm being blackmailed with a hidden dirty sock.

AMY
If that was slang, I'm unfamiliar with it. If it was literal, I share your aversion to soiled hosiery. In any case, I'm here because my mother and I have agreed that I will date at least once a year.

SHELDON
Interesting. My mother and I have the same agreement about church.

AMY
I don't object to the concept of a deity, but I'm baffled by the notion of one that takes attendance.

SHELDON
Well, then you might want to avoid East Texas.

AMY
Noted. Now, before this goes any further, you should know that all forms of physical contact up to and including coitus are off the table.

SHELDON
May I buy you a beverage?

AMY
Tepid water, please.

Amy and Sheldon go to the cashier to order drinks.

HOWARD
Good God, what have we done?

PICTURE 6. The Big Bang Theory. Season 3 Episode 23: The Lunar Excitation. 2009. Transcribed.

Amy first debuted in the series in this coffee shop scene. Amy also uses academic terms in casual conversations like Sheldon. Their conversation illustrates that Amy and Sheldon are on the same wavelength. Amy is another brilliant individual who struggles with social situations. The moment she replies with "Tepid water," there is no doubt that this is the one for Sheldon. Amy is particular about the water temperature, indicating that she has sensory issues. Previous studies (Dunn, Myles, et al., 2002) reveal that children with Asperger's Syndrome have more sensory processing complications than their neurotypical peers. Having sensory processing issues is one of the indicators in the DSM-5 to diagnose autism.

Sheldon and Amy are great comedic characters because they are brilliant and not well-versed in social situations. The viewers can laugh at the seriousness in their manners and gestures when discussing casual topics like buying the other a drink. What makes these behaviors funnier is that they are innate and natural to the characters. These manners are their default reactions, and they can not act otherwise. The scripts show how Sheldon and Amy are funny just by being themselves. The contradiction between their intelligence and inability to socialize is one of the selling points of their characters.

4.1.2 Maurice Moss from The IT Crowd

The IT Crowd is a UK sitcom aired from 2006 to 2013 featuring two tech geeks from the IT (Information Technology) department of Reynholm Industries. They are Maurice Moss and Roy Trenneman, alongside Jen Barber, the new head of the department. The series revolves around their problems of working with higher-up people and life in general.

Maurice Moss is a staff member of the IT department. Moss is intelligent, hard-working, and knows a lot about computers. Moss is the most experienced and capable staff member in the department. However, he is considered a “tech geek” who is looked down on by other departments that work on the upper floors.



PICTURE 7. Maurice Moss at his desk. The IT Crowd (2006-2013).

Moss is the intelligent but socially awkward archetype often seen in geek or nerd characters. These individuals appear in storylines as comedic reliefs as they are

overly knowledgeable while clueless during social interaction. This contradiction makes great absurd comedy.

1. INT. AT THE GERMAN TEACHER'S HOUSE - EVENING

Johan playing the cello. The doorbell rings. Johan rushes to the door to greet Moss.

JOHAN
Ah, Guten tag, I mean, hello.

MOSS
Hello. I'm Moss.

JOHAN
Yes, yes, yes. I'm Johan. Come in, come in.

Moss walks into the living room.

MOSS
Oh. Nice TV.

JOHAN
Ah.

MOSS
Good distance from the sofa.

JOHAN
Would you... Would you like a drink?

MOSS
Ah yeah, white Russian, please.

JOHAN
I don't know that. How'd you make that?

MOSS
I don't know. We might as well get to it.

JOHAN
Really? Gosh. So eager, so brave.

MOSS
Well, you know, once I've made up my mind to do something, that's it.

JOHAN
Oh, that's very admirable.

MOSS
So just do whatever you want with me. I'm ready for anything.

JOHAN
(happy, clapping his hands)
Ah! Well, right, I will I suppose, um... Take your clothes off and we'll get started.

Moss takes off his jacket and tie. Johan rushes to the kitchen to get some knives.

MOSS
Right. So how long does this course last?

JOHAN
Oh, sorry?

MOSS
So how long does this course last?

JOHAN
Course, what course?

MOSS
Hang on, take my clothes off?

JOHAN
Yes.

MOSS
Sorry, I'm confused.

JOHAN
Well, so am I.

MOSS
What did you think this was?

JOHAN
Well, I was going to eat you.

MOSS
(pause)
I may have misheard you there. Did you just say that you were going to eat me?

JOHAN
Yes.

MOSS
Right, you did say that. Yeah, no. I'm here for the cookery.

JOHAN
No, no, no, this is the cookery.

Moss shows Johan the advertisement.

MOSS
Look, I've got your advert here.

JOHAN
Yes.

MOSS
I printed it out.

JOHAN
Yes.

MOSS
"I want to cook with you."

JOHAN
Ah no, no, my English is not so good, um...

MOSS
Ohhhh! You want to cook with me, using me, you mean.

JOHAN
Ah yes! Yes. You see.

MOSS
Oh, yes, yes. I see where the confusion was. I thought this was a cookery course.

JOHAN
Hahaha. No, no.

MOSS
But you wanted someone who would agree to let you kill and eat them.

JOHAN
Ja, ja. You see?

MOSS
That is funny.

JOHAN
Ehh. So you're not interested?

MOSS
Oh, no, thanks, it's not for me.

Johan sits on the couch and sighs.

JOHAN
How disappointing.

MOSS
I'm sorry, Johan, this must be such a let down.

Had my tonsils out last month, I could have kept them.

JOHAN
Ahh.

MOSS
I feel like such a turnip.

JOHAN
Do you want to watch a film?

MOSS
OK.

JOHAN
I have Ocean Eleven.

MOSS
Original or remake?

PICTURE 8. Moss and the German, season 2, episode 3. The IT Crowd's Script. 2007. Transcribed.

In this episode, Moss signed up for a cooking class taught by a German, Johan. However, in reality, Johan is a cannibal looking for someone who would agree to be cooked and eaten. Moss steps into the apartment, assuming they will have a culinary class. However, Johan just wanted to eat him. Even after being asked to remove his clothes, Moss does not realize Johan's intention. The absurdity of the situation is that no cannibal would have the patience to ask for consent like Johan. After Johan makes

his point clear about wanting to eat Moss, Moss does not understand that in this situation, a reasonable person would freak out and try to escape. What Moss did was politely decline and even feel sorry for Johan.



PICTURE 9. Episode 3 season 2. Moss and the German. The IT Crowd (2007).

Moss does not understand the absurdity of his situation and does not recognize that he might be in danger. As a result, his reactions are slow. This cluelessness during social interaction is one of his charms as a comedic character.

Moss is knowledgeable as he is very experienced in IT and always knows how to fix technical problems that other departments might have. Moreover, he understands almost every technical issue since computer science is his special interest. Since people with ASD invest deeply in their special interests, proficiency in these areas can lead to employment (Attwood, 2003).

Only a few people are well-versed in IT at the time, and Moss being an expert on the subject is rare. Hence, many people underestimate what Moss does for a living as they probably do not understand what he does in the IT department. Also, being a tech geek, Moss does not have the best social skills. He often speaks monotonously with factual statements and little emotions involved. Speaking in a monotone is a trait often seen in autistic people as they tend not to engage in expressive language (Levy, Mandell & Schultz, 2009). Additionally, he often understands the context in

black-and-white thinking as factual concepts have more straightforward rules for him to comprehend.

His character's elasticity is what makes Maurice Moss a splendid sitcom character. Moss' behaviors and thinking processes are consistent and predictable but unpredictable. When Moss does something outrageous, the audience can understand that this is what Moss would do even though nobody else would. His thought process often makes sense in a unique way while making zero sense in reality, creating absurd situations. However, while not following some common senses, Moss still sticks to other common senses like politeness and empathy. According to Bergson (2014), unconventional concepts expressed through familiar phrasing can often be amusing.

4.1.3 Raymond Holt from Brooklyn Nine-Nine



PICTURE 10. Brooklyn Nine-Nine. (2013-2021).

Brooklyn Nine-Nine is an American comedy series that aired from 2013 to 2021. The show revolves around the detectives of the fictional 99th precinct of the New York City Police Department (NYPD). The pilot episode introduces the new commanding officer of the 99th precinct, Captain Raymond Holt.

Captain Holt is the first openly gay African American police captain in the series. He is a severe and stern leader. However, he has little to no emotions on his face to the

point of giving his subordinates and colleagues a hard time reading his body language. As a result, Captain Holt delivers incredible deadpan humor in Brooklyn Nine-Nine.



PICTURE 11. Captain Raymond Holt. Brooklyn Nine-Nine (2013-2021). Netflix.

1. 9 INT. BULLPEN - NEAR HOLT'S OFFICE - LATER (D2)
Amy approaches Holt, who stares at his official PHOTO.
AMY
It's a great picture, sir.
HOLT
I hate it.
He removes it from the wall and throws it in a trash can.
AMY
Me, too. It's a bad picture of a good man!
He stares at her. She smiles nervously.
AMY (CONT'D)
So! I have an eyewitness in the purse-snatcher case. Only problem is the sketch artist is out sick. How do you want me to proceed?
HOLT
Figure it out, Santiago. It's your case.
AMY
(taken aback)
Yes. I'll do that. Thank you.
She doesn't know what to do, so she bows a little.
HOLT
Are you bowing?
AMY
No. This is how I walk.
She walks off, still hunched in mid-bow.
2. 10 INT. BULLPEN - CONTINUOUS (D2)
Amy, mid-bow, walks up to Rosa, who's packing up to leave.
ROSA
What do you want, Quasimodo? I gotta go meet Boyle and Peralta.
AMY
Is there something wrong with the captain? Seems like he's in a bad mood.
ROSA
I don't know. Who can tell?
- 11 INT. HOLT'S OFFICE - FLASHBACK - TWO WEEKS AGO (FBD)
Rosa walks up to Holt, who looks dejected.
ROSA
You okay, Captain? Tough weekend?
HOLT
I went to Barbados with my husband. It was glorious. We wove hats out of palm fronds. I've never been happier.
Off Rosa's confused look...
3. 12 INT. BULLPEN - BACK TO SCENE (D2) 12
ROSA
Guy's impossible to read. Don't even try.
Amy looks out the door and sees Holt on his cellphone.
HOLT
(into phone, totally deadpan)
That is, without question, the funniest story I've ever heard.
4. 15 INT. HOLT'S OFFICE - FLASHBACK - ONE WEEK AGO (FBD) TERRY WALKS UP TO HOLT.
TERRY
You look chipper, Captain -- you have a fun weekend?
HOLT
There was a small fire in my house. I lost many photo albums of treasured memories. I'm devastated.
Off Terry's confused look...

PICTURE 12. Brooklyn Nine-Nine Script. Season 1 Episode 4, written by Gil Ozeri, directed by Troy Miller. 2013.

In episode 4 of season 1, Amy Santiago, one of Holt's detectives, tries her best to read Holt's facial expressions and non-verbal language, which Amy fails miserably. Holt can describe the most heartfelt and happy moment of his life with his husband,

describing that he "has never been happier" while keeping the most stoic face ever. He can deliver the most outrageous or happy lines with little to no feelings in his voice or emotions on his face. At least three detectives in this episode admit to being unable to interpret Holt's expressions, including Amy, Rose, and Terry. Jake Peralta specifically refers to Holt as a "human robot" or "robot captain" on many occasions.

Holt's colleagues care about him and do their best to understand him. Later in the series, some of them managed to catch on to Holt's little indications of feelings. For example, Jake can read Holt's slight twitch in his eyebrows or lips, his language when he is lying. Autistic individuals tend not to communicate in an expressive manner (Levy, Mandell & Schultz, 2009).

Captain Holt's deadpan humor is one of the biggest charms of the series, as it contrasts amazingly with the detectives' eccentric and animated personalities. In addition, his visual comedy adds absurdities to every scene. The setting is mainly a police precinct, so their conversations can be intense. However, every time without fail, Holt delivers all his lines without emotion, making the situation more absurd.

Raymond Holt is a multi-dimensional character. His cold and hard exterior contradicts his warm and loving interior. Holt is a prim and proper leader in his characterization. Everything about how he talks, dresses, and walks lets the audience know he is serious about following rules. However, inside, Holt cares deeply about his detectives and subordinates. Frequently, he makes strict orders to his detectives.

In episode 2, season 1, Jake Peralta, one of Holt's detectives, got disciplined by Holt due to the detective's tardiness and disorganization at work. When it comes to this particular arrest, Jake is hesitant since the perpetrator is the NYPD deputy commissioner's son. Holt gently nudges Jake to follow through with arresting the kid despite his influential background, as this is the morale Holt wants his subordinates to follow. Jake is conflicted as this decision can endanger his career.

Jake tried to make the arrest but got denied by the Deputy Commissioner. Holt approves of Jake's action and talks about how a father should care for his kid by not letting the kid get away with anything. This sentence describes the relationship between the Deputy Commissioner with his son and Captain Holt with Jake. Holt

disciplines and guides Jake, and how the Commissioner covers up for his son displays the contrast between the two relationships. Holt is a father figure to Jake and other detectives of the 99th precinct. At the end of this scene, as Jake decides to arrest the kid, Holt gladly supports him in his endeavors.



PICTURE 13. Jake arresting the Commissioner's son with Captain Holt. (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Netflix. 2013.)

Captain Raymond Holt is the first openly gay African police captain in Brooklyn Nine-Nine. He and his husband, Kevin, live together with their corgi Cheddar. Holt represents a large number of people on the spectrum and is also part of the LGBTQ community. Autistic people are more likely to be part of the LGBTQ community (Dewinter et al., 2017). According to research by The Trevor Project (2022), 5% of LGBTQ youth have been diagnosed with ASD, and 35% question being autistic. Hence, many autistic and queer individuals can relate to his character as the two groups overlap significantly.

In terms of story-telling and character design, Holt is an intriguing and dynamic character. The contradiction in his character is written and applied effectively in storylines. Holt has a stern exterior and a soft and caring interior. His presence challenges other detectives to better themselves professionally. At the same time, Holt cares for everyone around him. There is always a reason behind the guidelines he set out: for the detectives to excel in their expertise. The writers demonstrate other sides of Holt outside of being a strict boss. He is also a fair leader, a loving husband, a supportive colleague, and a dedicated superior.

The interaction between characters in Brooklyn99 is inclusive and understanding. They all accept each other's differences and strive to support each other's quirks. Naturally, this inclusive energy translates fully to the humor style of Brooklyn99. The humor in this series is often about laughing with the characters. The characters make fun of each other in a loving, wholesome way. The chemistry between these eccentric personalities with the setting of investigating a murder case is the contrast that brings good laughs to the audience.

4.2 Honorable Mentions

These honorable mentions illustrate well-written characters that display autistic traits and are autistic-coded but do not necessarily belong to a comedic TV series. However, it is crucial to bring more awareness to these examples as they represent autistic-coded characters in unique ways that have yet to be explored thoroughly in the entertainment media.

4.2.1 Elle Woods from Legally Blonde

Of all of the examples in this section, Elle Woods is an exception to the typical neurotic, socially inept male type character. She is one of the rare feminine depictions of autistic people. Since most autistic-coded characters are male characters, audiences could not quickly identify her as having autistic traits.

Elle Woods is the protagonist of the 2001 film Legally Blonde, based on Amanda Brown's novel of the same name. She is a blonde girl who comes from a privileged family and is studying at Harvard law school. The film follows her journey of becoming a lawyer and struggling with being underestimated as a blonde girl.



PICTURE 14. Elle Woods in Legally Blonde. (2001).

Elle color-codes everything she owns pink. When she moves into the dorm, the first thing she does is precisely organize her room, turning it into her safe zone. She also has to carry her dog for emotional support.

In the first film, Elle is invited to a costume party by Vivian, the new girlfriend of Elle's ex-boyfriend. Vivian has a bad first impression of Elle because she is blonde and oblivious. Vivian did not mention the costume party's theme to Elle to humiliate her. Elle appears in a Playboy bunny costume at the party, looking out of place when she steps in. Nevertheless, Elle grabs the attention of everyone. Vivian and Sarah make fun of Elle's costume for not being on theme and ridiculous considering the settings. Elle does not care for the sarcasm and even has a reason to justify her outfit.

2. INT. OFF-CAMPUS HOUSE - NIGHT

A party filled with people who are no fun to party with. NAMETAGS denote which famous defendant everyone is dressed as. Menendez's, Tonya Harding's, and Buttafuco's pepper the room.

Elle, decked out in a Playboy Bunny costume -- looking sexy as hell -- strides in. People roll their eyes and ignore her. Elle continues on.

NEARBY -- Enid, dressed as Lizzie Borden, axe in hand/ is in the midst of a tirade against some guy dressed like William Kennedy Smith.

ENID
The English language is all about subliminal domination. Take the word "semester". It's a perfect example of this school's discriminatory preference of semen to ovaries. That's why I ' m petitioning to have next term be referred to as Winter Ovester.

The guy backs up in fright. As Elle passes, Enid looks over.

ENID (CONT'S)
Hey , Elle-- I've been meaning to ask you (re her boobs) -- are those real?

Elle snorts.

ELLE
Enid, please -- silicone is so 90's.

She keeps waling.

3. INT. INTO THE LIVING ROOM - AT THE BAR -CONTINUOUS

Sa rah -- dressed as Hester Prynne -- and Claire --as Joan of Arc -- sip wine.

ELLE
(continuing; sarcastic)
Thanks for inviting me, girls. This party is super fun.

They roll their eyes, checking out her Bunny costume.

SARAH
You're supposed to be dressed as a famous defendant.

Elle smiles at Sarah.

ELLE
I am. Didn't you hear about the Playboy Bunny who slit her ex-boyfriend's new fiancee's throat with a broken wine glass? It was tragic.

She grabs a glass of wine and moves on.

PICTURE 15. Legally Blonde. Shooting draft. 2001. Lutz, K. M., Smith, K. (Screenwriters). 2000, July 31.

Even when they are glaring and scoffing at her, Elle sees nothing wrong with the situation. In her mind, dressing in a Playboy bunny costume suits the event. Elle is on a different wavelength than everyone. Since she has much self-confidence, she does not let any of this get to her. Elle is unable to understand social cues, as seen often in autistic people.



PICTURE 16. Elle is studying for the LSAT. Legally Blonde (2001).

As a central plot point of Legally Blonde, Elle decided to attend Harvard Law University to pursue her love interest. During the application, Elle had achieved most of the requirements from Harvard, such as a 4.0 GPA, extra-curricular activities, and a high score on the LSAT test. She is already an intelligent and disciplined student at her college. In addition, she is the president of a sorority, so her leadership skills look good on her application.

Elle is a rare female representation of autistic-coded characters. She portrays autistic behaviors in a unique way that few people would recognize as being autistic. The characterization of Elle is dynamic, as she has many contradicting traits. She is an outgoing and bubbly person who can be highly intelligent and analytical in her expertise, which surprises many people. These contrasting sides of her are the primary exploration of Legally Blonde. Elle's humor stems from looking at problems differently from social norms.

4.2.2 Beth Harmon from The Queen's Gambit



PICTURE 17. The Queen's Gambit. Netflix. 2021.

Beth Harmon from The Queen's Gambit (2021) is a character with much autistic coding in her behaviors. She won herself the grandmaster title in chess during the 50s-60s. Beth was known as the chess prodigy at the time. She has the standard model of a genius who is only fixated on their craft and sometimes lacks social awareness. Beth has a dynamic story arc with her character development, battling addictions and self-destructive behaviors.



PICTURE 18. The fictional drug Xanzolam in The Queen's Gambit (Image from Netflix). Beth is trying to get more pills in the orphanage.

Throughout her life, Beth has struggled with several addiction problems, which is common in neurodivergent and autistic individuals (Szalavitz, 2016). In the early 60s, American orphanages would give the children sedatives and tranquilizers to calm children so they would become more "obedient." At the age of nine, she became

addicted to sedatives (the green pills in Picture 12) and relied heavily on the pills. These pills triggered hallucinations where she vividly saw the whole chessboard on the ceiling and visualized chess moves to practice. During her teenage years, she discovered alcohol and began her life-long addiction. Later on, after the traumatic events of losing her friends and adoptive mother, Beth would turn to alcohol to escape from the harsh reality.

Palmer and Kunreuther (2018) stated in their book 'Drinking, drug use and Addiction in the autism community' that substance addiction usually begins from 12 to 14 years old to soothe oneself during social situations and gain approval from others. These needs are highly prevalent for autistic people as socializing and blending in are challenging. As Beth moves up in the chess world, the audience can see her socializing more, and alcohol is always in the scenes.

Beth has an obsessive personality, shown by her love for chess and winning. Chess is her special interest, as she can repeatedly play chess moves and become entirely engrossed in the game. Autistic individuals often have special interests. The hyperfocus turns them into experts in their respective fields, like Beth with chess.

The genius sometimes felt lonely even though she had supporters around her. She did not have anyone who understood her emotionally and intellectually. Beth resolves her difference with the world by 'masking,' which is putting on a facade and imitating others' demeanor.

Anya Taylor-Joy, the actress of Beth Harmon, shared in *Creating the Queen's Gambit* (2021): "She puts on all of these different personas. It is incredibly sad because it's basically just saying that she just doesn't feel like she's enough without them." Beth has masking tendencies and cannot unmask due to feeling inadequate when facing those around her.

INT. MARGARET'S HOUSE. THE PLEDGE PARTY - NIGHT

GIRL 1
It was really something to see you
in the newspaper all those times.
All those places you've been,
which was your favorite?

BETH
I liked Houston.

All the girls sigh and chuckle disappointingly.

BETH (CONT'D)
But now that my rating's up to 1800,
I hope to go to Las Vegas to play in
the US Open next month.

MARGARET
But what about boys? Are they good
looking? Do you date any of them?

BETH
There's not really much time for that.

MARGARET
But if you had the time...Is there
anyone you've met that you'd like
to... Trade rooks with, or whatever?

BETH
I mean, I trade rooks all the time,
but it's not...

The girls start laughing.

MARGARET
I bet you do.

MAN ON TV
Now, ladies and gentlemen,
Hullabaloo proudly presents
your favorite band from Turtle Creek...

MARGARET
Thank you, Dora. Who wants a cupcake?

GIRLS
Yes, please.

"You're the One" by the Vogues plays on TV.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
I love this song. Turn it up.

The girls sing along to the band on TV and sway to the music.
Beth looks at the girls with confusion while sitting still.
Beth stands up and walks away from the group.

BETH
I'm gonna use the bathroom.

Beth sees the wine table near the entrance. She takes one
bottle and leaves the house. She go back home with the
bottle.

PICTURE 19. The Queen's Gambit Script. Episode 3: Doubled Pawns. 2019. Netflix.

After winning multiple tournaments, Beth catches the attention of her peers at high school. Margaret invites Beth to a party; this is the first time she interacts with her peers outside of school. Beth picks out a fitting black dress for the party. However, the black dress creates a stark contrast between Beth and the other girls in the scenes. The girls wear white, a color associated with innocence and youthfulness, while Beth looks sophisticated, mature, and out of place.



PICTURE 20. Beth at a party with the girls from her school (The Queen's Gambit - Netflix).

The girls asked Beth about her experiences in different cities. Beth replied and received bored reactions. Next, Margaret asked Beth whether she had any relationships with the boys. Beth disregarded the notion, but Margaret pushed the question, phrasing it as “trading rooks.” Beth said she traded rooks all the time, which made the girls burst into laughter. Beth does not understand the double entendre and why the girls are laughing. A song began to play on the TV, and the girls sang along and swayed to the music. Beth was dumbfounded at the scene and left the party.

Her reactions and demeanors at the party showed how socially inept she was. She does not understand what the others are thinking and how to react to their remarks. She is an intellect who fumbles with social cues, similar to many other fictional geniuses or real-life people.

Later in life, Beth became more charismatic as she learned to interact with people during her many tournaments. She can understand others’ intentions but chooses to act in whichever way serves her ego the best. Beth’s growth involves her developing masking skills.

5 NARRATIVE IMPERATIVE

5.1 What makes a good character?

In McKee's book (1999) on the principles of screenwriting, he discusses the two core parts of character design. Every character has two facets to consider: Characterization and True Character. Characterization refers to all combinations of visual indications that can be viewed from an outside perspective and determine the uniqueness of that character. These visual indicators can include appearance, behaviors, speaking habits, personality, occupation, age, and sexuality. True Character lies within the character, what drives them at heart, and what is the core behind their Characterization. True Character is illustrated explicitly by choices under pressure since only under pressure can characters show their core values. In short, the two aspects of character design McKee mentions in his book are the outer observable traits and inner core values.

Dimensions in character design is another concept McKee explains in his principles. An interesting character can have multiple aspects of their character that contradicts each other, creating dynamic and interest in the storyline. The contradiction can be deep within the character, such as something the character struggles with internally. The contrast between the outer and inner depiction can also be an exquisite quality.

5.2 Comedic theories and comedic characters

The comic theories discussed in this section refer to Bergson's theories on Laughter (2014). Bergson's view on laughter consists of three primary concepts. Firstly, anything that is not considered humane is not comical. Landscapes can be sublime or mediocre but never hilarious. Animals are funny to people when they exhibit human manners or attributes. Inanimate objects are made fun of because of the shape humans give them instead of what they are. Secondly, emotions are not present in laughter. An emotionally detached environment is the best place to enjoy humor. One can not simply feel deep empathy for their surroundings and understand laughter. Thirdly, laughter serves a purpose in social situations. One can laugh if one

understands the context and subtexts of the joke or feels included in the laughter. Laughter spread with more people and a bigger audience.

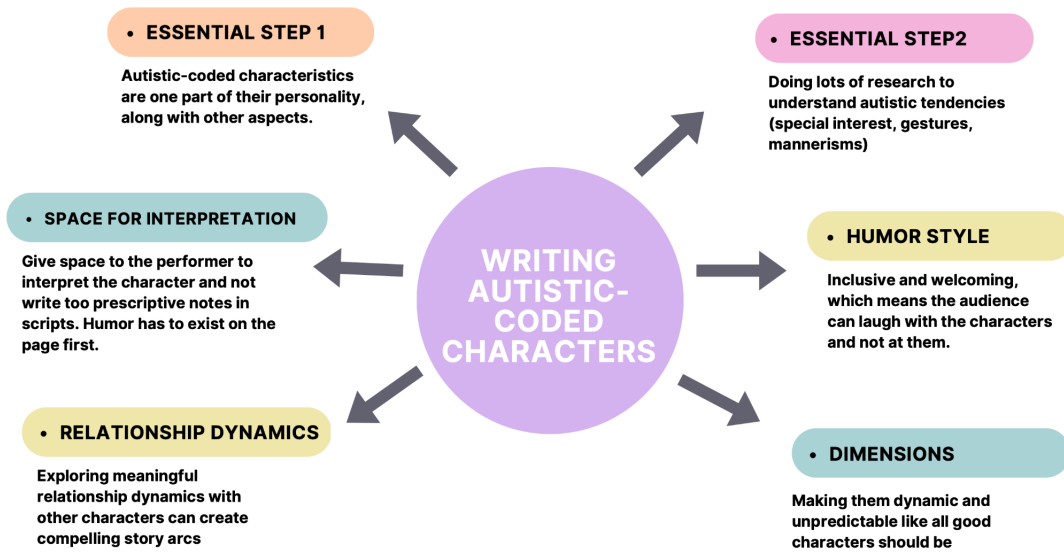
In the third chapter of his book, Bergson addresses comedic characters in theater. Comedy requires the absence of sympathy; thus, the writer must avoid any potential empathy toward the characters. There are three elements to a comedic character: a laughable line or trait, gestures that communicate the trait, and automatism of the laughable behavior. In Bergson's essay on Laughter (1900), he writes about how expressing absurdity through familiar phrasing can often be amusing.

5.3 List of consideration for autistic-coded characters

Based on the case studies and theories discussed in previous sections, the deliverable of this thesis is a list of considerations to keep in mind when it comes to writing autistic-coded characters. The list of considerations includes the following:

- Autistic-coded characteristics are one part of their personality along with other aspects.
- Doing lots of research to understand autistic tendencies (special interest, gestures, mannerisms)
- While the character can be autistic-coded, try to give space to the performer to interpret the character and not write too prescriptive notes in scripts. Humor has to exist on the page first.
- Making them dynamic and unpredictable like all good characters should be
- The humor style can be inclusive and welcoming, which means the audience can laugh with the characters and not at them.
- Exploring meaningful relationship dynamics with other characters can create compelling story arcs

Out of these considerations, the first two points are essential as they refer to the essence of a character and help avoid misinterpreting autism. The other points are suggestions for writing compelling autistic-coded characters effectively.



PICTURE 21. Mind map of the list of considerations when writing autistic-coded characters.

6 PROJECT

This project assesses the theories and study cases to produce a scene from a sitcom that features an autistic-coded character. The list of considerations aids the ideation and writing process.

Synopsis

The story revolves around the coffee shop Yesterday and the daily lives of its workers and regulars. Olivia, a reserved and hard-working owner, struggles to keep the shop alive and in its best form. Noah, a friendly baker down the street, delivers pastries to the shop every morning. Unfortunately, he is unlucky with women. May is a regular who comes by often to work on her laptop and chat with other regulars. She is having second thoughts about her career choices.

1. INT. YESTERDAY COFFEE SHOP - MORNING

MAY enters the cafe and sets up her laptop at her usual table. NOAH and OLIVIA walk out of the kitchen to the cashier.

NOAH
Right? Right? You would do that, too, right?

OLIVIA
(seriously thinking)
Absolutely, it is only reasonable.

NOAH
But she got so upset that she didn't even text back.

Noah shows Olivia his phone. May stands up from table and walks to the cashier, rest her elbows on the counter.

MAY
Hi, good morning!

OLIVIA
Morning, May.

NOAH
The weather looks lovely this morning, doesn't it?

MAY
Yeah, sure, sure. What were you two talking about?

NOAH
So there was a girl at the bar last night. We had a few drinks, and she gave me her number and asked if we could return to my house to bake bread.

MAY
Ooooooh, juicy, then what did you say?

NOAH
Well, I had an early morning delivery, so I said we could do that another day.

MAY
WHAT?

NOAH
Those pastries aren't gonna bake and pack themselves.
(MORE)

NOAH (CONT'D)
Liv would be upset if I didn't make it on time for her delivery, too. She needs to open the shop on time.

OLIVIA
Yes, I would be.

MAY
That's beside the point. Noah, you didn't go home with that girl?

NOAH
I said she could come by another day. But she kinda ghosted me.

Noah sighs. May looks frustrated.

MAY
Obviously. Who on earth would 'reschedule' that?

NOAH
Liv said she would.

OLIVIA
Yes, he had plans in the morning. If I had plans, I would have asked for the earliest available date.

NOAH
See? Liv gets me. I'm just bummed out that I couldn't call the girl. She was charming.

OLIVIA
Yes, that is quite confusing. You two seemed to get on well.

MAY
Noah, why are you asking Liv for dating advice?

NOAH
Why not? She is wise and a good listener.

MAY
Of course, Liv is wonderful and we all love her. But she is not the best person to get advice for dating. Or social interaction in general, at that. She didn't even notice that flourist flirted with her hard last week.

2.

3. 4.

OLIVIA

I genuinely thought she just loved the coffee here that she wanted to compliment my hardwork.

MAY

My point exactly.

NOAH

Liv is still the almighty force of knowledge to me.

MAY

Do you not know that "baking bread" means something else?

NOAH

Something else?

MAY

Yes, something else. What do normal people do after a night out at a bar to look for someone to hook up with?

NOAH

They would... Oh! Hook-up!

MAY

And she obviously wanted to do that with you.

OLIVIA

Oh, I get it now.

MAY

Why are you like this?

NOAH

I feel personally attacked right now.

OLIVIA

I dont't.

Olivia proceeds to wipe to counter top and prepare the cashier. Noah shakes Olivia's arm like a lost puppy.

NOAH

Liv! Don't do me like that...

OLIVIA

I feel for you, dude. I would have done the same. But I see May's point.

MAY

What was her name anyway?

NOAH

Stephanie.

MAY

Do we know a Stephanie?

OLIVIA

We also have a regular named Stephanie here.

NOAH

Wait...?

OLIVIA

She always comes by to get a cup of coffee and a croissant at the same time every day during the week.

NOAH

What time?

The doorbell rings. A customer walks in.

OLIVIA

Oh, hi, Stephanie. The usual?

NOAH

Oh, damn.

MAY

Oh, damn.

PICTURE 22. The script of one scene of the project.

The character Olivia is autistic-coded. She is a reserved coffee shop owner who is well-liked by regulars. However, Olivia is very particular about how she organizes and runs the coffee shop. In the script, her aloofness and inability to read between the lines illustrate her autistic-coded traits. In addition, Olivia gets on well with May and Noah, as they do not mind her quietness and accept her as who she is.

Based on the essential steps, the ideation process focuses on writing a dynamic character instead of paying too much attention to the autistic-coded aspect of the character. In addition, analyzing the characters' relationships assist in tailoring the humor style to fit the dynamics between the characters.

7 DISCUSSION

The thesis explores research on autism and autistic representation. Public awareness of autism is still limited due to inaccurate or lack of representation in mainstream media. However, the research mentioned in this thesis shows increased awareness about autism in recent decades.

McKee's book on character writing and Bergson's theories on Laughter assisted the narrative analysis of the case studies of autistic-coded characters in *The Big Bang Theory*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *The IT Crowd*, and honorable mentions like *Legally Blonde* and *The Queen's Gambit*. These characters illustrate the uniqueness and diversity of autistic-coded characters. By inspecting the theories and using the case studies as examples, the case analysis results in valuable points to add to the list of considerations.

The thesis has composed a list of considerations for writing autistic-coded characters. The list consists of two focal points and four recommendations for writing compelling autistic-coded characters. These points are doing in-depth research about autism and treating autistic-coded traits as one part of the character instead of their entire personality. The list aided the writing process of the thesis project by identifying key points to focus on and helping avoid inaccuracy while creating an autistic-coded character.

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