

**Beyond the Stereotype: Disability, Romance, and Sexuality in *Love on the Spectrum***

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**Abstract**

This dissertation examines the representation of disability in the reality television show *Love on the Spectrum*, focusing on its portrayal of autistic individuals' romantic and sexual desires. By employing the analytical frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analyses the show’s key themes and semiotic resources, including language, sound, and narrative strategies. The findings reveal that while *Love on the Spectrum* challenges misconceptions about autistic individuals' romantic lives, it also reinforces certain harmful stereotypes by focusing on heterosexual relationships, perpetuating the "supercrip" narrative, and infantilising participants. Additionally, the study assesses how these portrayals potentially influence societal attitudes toward disability. Finally, this dissertation contributes to the limited scholarly literature on disability, romance, and sexuality and offers suggestions for future research to further examine reality television’s representation of these topics.

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**Introduction**

Popular media has long played a crucial role in shaping public knowledge and attitudes, influencing how individuals perceive and understand various social issues (McCombs and Valenzuela, 2020). In recent years, reality television (hereafter RTV) has emerged as a particularly powerful medium, not only as a source of entertainment but also as a significant contributor to public discourse. Through its portrayal of real-life scenarios and individuals, RTV has the potential to reinforce or challenge societal norms (McKenna, 2015). Against this backdrop, the present study examines the representation of the intersection of disability, romance, and sexuality within the RTV genre and how these portrayals influence public perceptions. This is researched through a case study analysis of *Love on the Spectrum* (2022-present), a reality dating show aired on Netflix that follows autistic adults living across the United States navigating the complexities of dating and relationships.

This dissertation comprises four subsequent interrelated chapters that collectively build a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The first chapter is the *Literature Review*, which provides a detailed collection and critical overview of the key concepts and theories related to RTV, disability, and their interplay. This chapter examines existing research on how portrayals of disability in the media influence societal attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. The literature review also explores the intersection of disability with sexuality and romance, considering how these aspects are depicted in RTV and what implications they may have for both disabled and non-disabled audiences.

The second chapter is the *Methodology*, which presents the research methods used in this study. This chapter details the critical discourse analysis and multimodal critical discourse analysis approaches used to examine the thematic and semiotic resources in *LOTS.* It also discusses the ethical considerations relevant to the study and the methodological limitations encountered during the research process.

The third chapter is the *Analysis and Discussion* section, which presents a detailed examination of the representation of disability in *LOTS*. This chapter focuses on the key themes identified in the show - romance, sexuality, the “supercrip” narrative, othering, and infantilisation - and considers how these themes are constructed through semiotic elements like language, music, and facial expressions. Examples from various episodes in the show’s first season, transcribed in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2,* are used to illustrate how these elements contribute to the overall portrayal of disability within the show. The analysis of these examples makes links to existing literature, detailed in the literature review, to discuss how the representations in *LOTS* either reinforce or challenge societal norms and attitudes toward disability.

The final chapter is the *Conclusion*, which synthesises the findings from the previous chapters, providing a summary of the study’s key insights into the representation of disability in *LOTS.* This chapter reflects on the limitations of the study, acknowledging areas where further research is needed. It also offers suggestions for future research, particularly in exploring the broader impact of RTV on public perceptions of disability and the potential for RTV to contribute to more inclusive and diverse media representations.

In sum, this dissertation aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how *LOTS* represents disability, particularly in the context of romantic and sexual relationships, and how these representations resonate with or challenge existing societal attitudes. Through a critical analysis of the show’s thematic and semiotic elements, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of media in influencing perceptions of disability and the importance of inclusive and accurate portrayals in fostering greater understanding and acceptance.

**Literature review**

This literature review examines the academic discourse surrounding RTV and the representation of disability in contemporary society, exploring scholarly discussions about the integration of the two. By analysing the complexities of RTV, the conceptualisations of disability, and the societal implications of media representations, this review provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between RTV and disability. Through critical analysis and synthesis of diverse scholarly perspectives, this review also sheds light on the challenges, opportunities, and future directions in studying disability representation in RTV.

**1. Overview of RTV**

*1.1 Definitions and evolution*

The term "reality television" comprises a diverse array of programming, and a unanimous consensus on its precise definition remains elusive within the academic community (Hall, 2006; Holmes and Jermyn, 2004; Cummings, 2002). While some scholars adopt a broad understanding of RTV, encompassing a wide range of entertaining programming featuring non-professional actors (Godlewski and Perse, 2010; Penzhorn and Pitout, 2007), others advocate for a narrower definition. For instance, Holmes and Jermyn (2004) argue that RTV should be strictly defined as unscripted, non-fictional programming featuring ordinary individuals placed in contrived situations with minimal producer intervention. They contend that by narrowing the definition, scholars can better analyse the unique aspects of authentic reality programming and its impact on audiences. Nonetheless, there is a widely accepted understanding that RTV typically involves the portrayal of real-life situations rather than scripted performances (Baker, 2003; Biressi and Nunn, 2005; Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2016).

Scholars also grapple with whether RTV can be classified as a genre owing to its diverse formats and subgenres (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004; Corner, 2007; Kavka, 2012). Holmes and Jermyn (2004) suggest that RTV is better understood as a mode of television production rather than a genre, emphasising its focus on real people and events captured through various stylistic and narrative techniques. Similarly, Corner (2007) posits that RTV encompasses such diverse programming that it defies easy categorisation, challenging traditional genre conventions and boundaries. Kavka (2012) further complicates this discussion by highlighting the fluidity and evolution of RTV over time, suggesting that its definition and classification remain subject to change as new formats and subgenres emerge.

*1.2 Audience engagement*

The audience for RTV is as diverse as the programming, reflecting a broad spectrum of viewership characteristics and behaviours. A prominent discussion among scholars includes the various motivations for watching RTV. Many observe that audiences often seek entertainment, exhibit curiosity about the lives of others, identify with the participants, and even utilise the shows as instructional guides for social behaviour (Godlewski and Perse, 2010). Hill (2002) suggests that audiences are drawn to reality shows not only for entertainment but also for the pursuit of authentic moments within staged environments. This aligns with Pieto and Otter's (2007) observation that viewers seek glimpses of genuine human experiences amid the constructed narratives of RTV.

Conversely, Hill (2002) argues that the appeal of RTV lies in its ability to elicit emotional engagement and provide vicarious experiences that resonate with audiences. Indeed, some scholars have noted that viewers often develop para-social relationships with RTV participants, forming attachments to characters and investing emotionally in their narratives (Pieto and Otter, 2007). This sense of connection fosters a desire for authenticity as audiences seek genuine human experiences amidst the constructed narratives of RTV (Zurbriggen and Morgan, 2006), supporting the arguments posited by Hill (2002) and Pieto and Otter (2007) regarding the audience’s search for authentic moments.

*1.3 RTV’s societal impact*

Scholars from diverse disciplines, including sociology, media studies, and cultural studies, have extensively analysed RTV's societal implications and ideological underpinnings (Vogel, 2012; Piper, 2006; Wayne, 2015). Within this body of literature, there is a recognition of RTV's role in perpetuating or challenging dominant narratives around identity, class, race, and sexuality. Researchers such as Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) have examined how RTV constructs and reinforces stereotypes related to gender roles and relationships, whilst others have considered RTV's reinforcement of existing power structures and cultural hegemony (Hall, 2006; Dowd, 2006; Williams, 2006). Contrastingly, scholars, including Stiernstedt and Jakobsson (2017), highlight how RTV can serve as a platform for challenging dominant narratives and empowering marginalised voices.

The impact that RTV has on societal norms, values, and behaviours, particularly in the realms of relationships, gender roles, and social interactions, has also been thoroughly discussed by academics (Wood and Skeggs, 2008; Haq and Rahman, 2015; Hudíková and Pravdová, 2022). For instance, Baker (2003) highlights how dating shows like *The Bachelor* (2002-present) and *Love Island* (2015-present) construct idealised narratives of romance and courtship, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and heteronormative ideals of love and marriage. Similarly, Biressi and Nunn (2005) argue that RTV perpetuates stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity, leading to the normalisation of certain behaviours and attitudes among viewers.

*1.4 Ethical considerations*

Additionally, scholars have highlighted the potential ethical issues in RTV (Deery, 2015; Montemurro, 2008; Brenton and Cohen, 2003). For instance, Baker (2003) discusses how producers manipulate editing techniques and narrative framing to construct specific character arcs and create dramatic tension within RTV shows like *Survivor.* Similarly, Biressi and Nunn (2005) argue that producers often prioritise sensationalism and conflict over authenticity, leading to the exploitation of participants and the fabrication of narratives for entertainment purposes. Holmes and Jermyn (2004) outline how this raises ethical concerns regarding informed consent, as participants may not fully understand the implications of their involvement or the potential repercussions of their portrayal onscreen.

Moreover, Montemurro (2008) discusses how the power dynamics between producers and participants are inherently asymmetrical, with producers wielding significant control over the editing process and the direction of the narrative. This power imbalance can leave participants vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation as their personal lives and emotions become commodified for ratings and viewer engagement (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017; Mast, 2016; Klein and Coleman, 2022). Hill (2005) and Andrejevic (2004) further examine the psychological impact on participants, noting examples such as increased anxiety, depression, and a sense of betrayal stemming from the manipulation of their portrayed personas and the harsh public scrutiny they endure.

**2. Understanding disability**

*2.1 Definitions and models*

As indicated by the title of Patel and Brown's (2017) article, *An overview of the conceptual framework and definitions of disability*, scholars grapple with concurring on a single definition of disability. Grönvik's (2009) research provides valuable insights into the impact of the different definitions of disability on research outcomes. By comparing administrative, subjective, and functional definitions, Grönvik illustrates variations in demographic factors including age, gender, and education, highlighting the significance of selecting appropriate definitions in disability research to ensure accurate representation and analysis of diverse populations. Scholars also explore the evolving nature of disability definitions in response to societal changes and advancements in understanding. Indeed, Marks (1997) and Smart (2009) adeptly explore the historical context of disability definitions, tracing the shifts from medical perspectives that distinguish disability as an impairment necessitating treatment to socially inclusive frameworks, which attribute disability to societal barriers and advocate for social changes to achieve equality. This historical evolution highlights the dynamic nature of disability discourse and the ongoing efforts to challenge traditional understandings of disability.

These diverging perspectives comprise the two main models of disability frequently distinguished by scholars: the medical model, which perceives disability as a deficiency, and the social model, which considers disability as a result of societal obstacles rather than individual impairments (Retief and Letšosa, 2018; Marks, 1997; Smart, 2009). Most disability policy scholars encourage using the social model, arguing that it provides the most effective understanding of disability (Shakespeare, 2006; Oliver, 2013; Barnes, 2019). Indeed, Retief and Letšosa (2018) argue that the social model provides a more nuanced approach to understanding disability as it acknowledges the diverse experiences and identities within the disability community. Similarly, Oliver (2013) and Barnes (2019) argue for adopting the social model in research because it empowers individuals with disabilities and challenges systemic barriers to inclusion and equality. Nonetheless, some critics argue that the social model continues to frame disability negatively, shifting the problem from the body to society and neglecting the experiences of disabled individuals themselves (Stamou et al., 2016).

*2.2 Disability experiences*

While earlier research has focused on the views and attitudes of non-disabled people (Favazza and Odom, 1997; Sharma et al., 2008), recent scholarship in disability studies has shifted towards amplifying the voices of people with disabilities, recognising their "epistemic privilege" derived from their lived experiences (Stamou et al., 2016; Welsby and Horsfall, 2011). This concept acknowledges their unique insights into the challenges, barriers, and systemic issues affecting their lives, which may not be fully understood by those who do not share these experiences (Friedman and Owen, 2017). It also emphasises prioritising the voices and views of individuals with disabilities in discussions, research, and policymaking on disability issues, recognising their expertise in navigating and advocating within a world that often marginalises or overlooks their needs (Cardona, 2013).

Numerous studies also recognise the importance of examining the perspectives of family members of people with disabilities (Grant and Ramcharan, 2001; Freedman and Fesko, 1996; Bigby et al., 2019; Knox, 2000; Salvatori et al., 2003). For instance, Bosteels et al.’s (2012, p.984) study, based on interviews with Belgian parents of deaf children, argues that “parents can no longer be viewed merely as passive recipients of care” but as active advocates in the disability debate (Kelly, 2005). Consequently, Bosteels et al. (2012) claim that interpretations based solely on professional or moral judgements, which underestimate the parents’ role, need to be disputed (Fisher, 2007; Murray, 2000).

*2.3 Autism Spectrum Disorder*

Although there exists a broad spectrum of disabilities, including both cognitive and physical, this dissertation will focus specifically on individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), also referred to as autism, which is estimated to be prevalent among 1-2% of the world’s population (Schiariti et al., 2018). The International Classification of Diseases (ICD) defines ASD as a pervasive developmental disorder involving difficulties in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviours (World Health Organization, 2018). Whilst Bölte et al. (2014, p.167) argue that this definition “provides a comprehensive, universally accepted framework”, Alschech (2023) highlights how many people within the ASD community have contested this definition, challenging the notion of a singular “normal” way for human brains to work. Instead, they advocate for a broader understanding of “neurodiversity”, which views neurological differences as natural biological and cultural variations rather than deficits (Silberman, 2015; Mirazón Lahr, 2016).

This paradigm shift encourages appreciation of the unique strengths and perspectives that individuals with autism bring to society (Armstrong, 2015). Recent scholarly discourse has increasingly reinforced the concept of neurodiversity, asserting that embracing neurodiversity fosters inclusivity and challenges the stigma associated with ASD, thereby redefining success and confronting ableist standards (Wakefield et al., 2018; Azevedo et al., 2022; Den Houting, 2019).

**3. Disability and Sexuality**

*3.1 Sexuality*

The World Health Organisation (2006) defines sexuality as “a central aspect of being human throughout life [that] encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction.” However, Macleod and McCabe (2020) identify that this internationally accepted definition is seldom cited in articles, noting significant inconsistencies in defining sexuality across studies. Instead, most scholarly articles discussing sexuality employ definitions that include a more comprehensive range of aspects. For example, Grebe and Drea’s (2021) definition of sexuality focuses on the expectations, attributes, and behaviours that are characteristic of human sexual sensation and reproduction.

Sakellarious and Algado (2006) delineate the historical context of sexuality, discussing how it was a taboo subject often deemed sinful or perverse (Tepper, 2000). They note that in the 20th century, society began to normalise sexuality as natural. However, the effects of its history of oppression persist, leading to perspectives that do not acknowledge sexuality as a fundamental aspect of human experiences, particularly for disabled individuals (Sakellarious and Algado, 2006).

Shakespeare et al. (1996) assert that the neglect of disabled people’s sexual and intimate lives arises from these issues being overshadowed by broader fights for civil and public rights, which has led to the marginalisation of sexual politics for individuals with disabilities (Shakespeare, 1999). Historically, research on sexuality and disability was limited, often considered private and unrelated to health and rehabilitation (Esmail et al., 2010; Milligan et al., 2001). Sakellariou (2006) also observes that research on human sexuality primarily adopted a medical perspective, dismissing it as a physical act focused solely on performance.

Esmail et al. (2010) contend that recent research on sexuality and disability typically adopts a social model. Murphy and Elias (2006) corroborate this, arguing that the understanding of sexuality has evolved to recognise fundamental human needs and how they are influenced by societal norms and constructs (Esmail et al., 2010; Siminski, 2003). However, Shildrick (2007) maintains that the social model’s focus on structural and social inequalities can cause it to overlook private issues like romance and sexuality. Instead, Shildrick credits the increased visibility of these personal issues faced by disabled people to disability scholars working within queer and feminist theory (Vertoont, 2018).

*3.2 Non-disabled attitudes and stigma*

Many scholars maintain that understanding societal norms and attitudes towards disability and sexuality is crucial (Sood et al., 2022; Dovidio et al., 2011; Hahn, 1988; Davis, 1995; Kafer, 2013; Rogers and Swadener, 2001; Thomas, 2004). In particular, the effect of non-disabled people’s confining and invalidating attitudes are extensively discussed (Gilmore and Chambers, 2010; Pebdani and Tashjian, 2022), highlighting societal misconceptions as a significant obstacle for individuals with disabilities (Esmail et al., 2010; Neufeld et al., 2002; Mayers et al., 2003). For example, Morris (1991, pp.3-5) listed various prejudices against disabled individuals, including assumptions by non-disabled people that “disabled people feel ugly, inadequate and ashamed of their disability”, and that “if [their] relationships fail, it is because of the disability and for no other reason.” Tepper (2000) asserts that such societal attitudes suppress the sexual and romantic desires of individuals with disabilities (Vertoont, 2018). Indeed, Liddiard’s (2014) study on the sexual experiences of 25 individuals with disabilities found that norms in ableist heteronormative sexual cultures contribute to low sexual self-esteem and body confidence. Esmail et al. (2010) further contend that these oppressive norms often stem from deeply ingrained socio-cultural views, which can be more disabling than the impairments themselves.

A popular stereotype portraying people with disabilities as asexual is frequently cited as damaging to their ability to express their sexuality (Lund and Johnson, 2015; Milligan and Neufeldt, 2001; Kim, 2011). Tremain (2000, p.57) asserts that this belief that “a severe disability precludes both functional sex, and sexual pleasure and desire” is prevalent among non-disabled individuals. Stevens (2010, p.62) argues that “being deemed asexual is the most egregious sexual harm that disabled people contend with because it is a direct assault on [their] personhood”. Addlakha (2007) supports this, maintaining that the denial of disabled people’s sexuality restricts their ability to express themselves sexually, form romantic relationships, and make reproductive choices.

Furthermore, Callen (2022) argues that there is a pervasive assumption of heterosexuality among disabled people, which overlooks the experiences of disabled LGBTQ individuals and further contributes to their marginalisation. Loeser et al. (2018) concur that the intersecting identities of disability and queerness are often disregarded, citing a historical marginalisation of both groups, such as forced sterilisation and eugenic practices during the Nazi era. They also contend that despite significant scholarly shifts in understanding disability and queer experiences, which emphasise recognising non-normative sexual practices and re-evaluating conceptions of sex and gender, there remains a lack of inclusive understanding that respects the diverse realities of all individuals, including disabled people who do not conform to heteronormative sexual norms (Loeser et al., 2018; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009; Pieri, 2019).

Dismissive societal attitudes are also evident in how non-disabled individuals perceive the sexual relationships of disabled people. For instance, the general public group in Esmail et al.’s (2010) study expressed hesitancy about entering relationships with individuals with disabilities, citing concerns about potentially assuming a caregiving role rather than a partner role. The study also found that there was a prevailing societal view among the public group that individuals with disabilities should form relationships with others who have disabilities. These findings are supported by scholars such as Sakellariou and Algado (2006), Hahn (1981) and Milligan and Neufeldt (2001), who argue that society often deems relationships between disabled and non-disabled people inappropriate.

Many scholars link the negative or confining attitudes of non-disabled individuals towards disability and sexuality to inadequate education on these topics (Christian et al., 2022; Barbareschi and Wu, 2022). Indeed, Esmail et al. (2010) found that societal prejudices are shaped by a lack of knowledge, indicating the need for comprehensive educational initiatives to address misconceptions and promote inclusivity. Other scholars have also emphasised this, including Fader Wilkenfeld and Ballan (2011) and de Wit et al. (2022), who underscore the importance of inclusive sex education to challenge societal norms and stereotypes surrounding disability and sexuality.

Scholars have also considered the attitudes of those closely involved in the lives of people with disabilities (Ruble and Dalrymple, 1993; Gilmore and Chambers, 2010; Bazzo et al., 2007). Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale (2015) contend that parents and caregivers often feel uncomfortable discussing the sexuality of disabled individuals, fearing that such discussions will introduce or heighten sexual interest. Furthermore, Ballan (2012) suggests that parents sometimes dismiss the possibility of meaningful intimate relationships for autistic individuals. For example, Nichols and Blakeley-Smith (2009, p.78) found that parents of autistic adolescents with “limited abilities” often underestimate the possibility of intimate relationships, partly owing to concerns about sexual exploitation and abuse. Such concerns are discussed by other disability scholars, including Mackin et al. (2016), Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale (2015), and Franklin et al. (2019).

*3.4 Disabled individuals’ experiences*

Despite facing significant societal stigma, many individuals with disabilities view their sexuality as an integral part of their identity (Esmail et al., 2010; Neufeld et al., 2002). Research indicates that disabled people, including those with autism, still experience the same desires for romantic and sexual relationships as their non-disabled peers, challenging the pervasive stereotype of asexuality (Corona et al., 2016; Stokes et al., 2007; Anderson, 1988). Indeed, Brosnsan and Gavin (2021) found that many autistic individuals use online dating platforms to find romantic relationships. Roth and Gillis’ (2015) study corroborates this, revealing that 53% of autistic adults have participated in online dating, in contrast to only 15% of the general population (Brosnan and Gavin, 2021).

Additionally, Murphy et al. (2007) reported that adults with ASD in relationships report a higher quality of life and a better self-concept than their single counterparts (Exell et al., 2022). Sex therapist Matthew Yau (2013) supports this, maintaining that “disability will not dampen one’s sexual and intimacy need” and most people, “disabled or not, have a basic need to be loved and intimate, as well as express love and affection”. Nonetheless, sex as a source of enjoyment and affection for individuals with disabilities is rarely acknowledged in general society (Esmail et al., 2010; Tepper, 2000).

This oversight is partly because individuals with developmental disabilities, including those with ASD, often experience significant delays in forming intimate relationships (Parchomiuk, 2019; Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale, 2015; Dewinter et al., 2015). Parchomiuk (2019) argues that this may stem from autistic individuals viewing themselves as inexperienced or inadequate in interpersonal settings (Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale, 2015). Intimate physical contact can be particularly challenging for people with ASD due to anxiety, claustrophobia, and discomfort from sensory issues, which can diminish pleasure and lead to negative experiences (Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale, 2015). Additionally, many individuals with ASD may perceive sex as less important, possibly owing to past unsatisfactory experiences, which can sometimes lead to choosing celibacy as a preferred lifestyle (Attwood, 2006; Gradin, 2006).

Nonetheless, Cheak-Zamora et al.’s (2019) individual interviews with adolescents and young adults with autism revealed that most participants expressed interest in romantic relationships. Although few had experienced romantic or sexual relationships, their interest supports the notion that people with autism think about and desire these connections (Dewinter et al., 2015; Sperry and Mesibov, 2005). This study provides valuable insights into the unfiltered perspectives of people with ASD, aiding researchers in understanding their views on sexuality and relationships. However, the qualitative nature of the study limits its generalisability to all individuals with autism. Hence, Cheak-Zamora et al. (2019) emphasise the need for further research to explore the perspectives and experiences of people with disabilities, particularly ASD, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this area.

**4. Disability in media**

*4.1 Introduction*

Media portrayals of disability have long been criticised for perpetuating negative stereotypes and biases. Darke (2004) dismisses it as “clichéd, stereotyped and archetypal”, contending that the representations reduce individuals with disabilities to their impairments, stripping away political significance and ignoring social constructs. Other disability media scholars, such as Cumberbatch and Negrine (2022) and Dolski (2013), have also highlighted the persistent issue of representing individuals with disabilities in a demeaning or pitying light. According to Goggin (2009), these stereotypes persist because media producers often view people with disabilities through a lens of helplessness and dependency, reinforcing the "vulnerability doctrine" that sees disability as a tragedy requiring help or care from the nondisabled. Scholars argue that this stereotypical framing can reinforce audience prejudice and disablism (Müller et al., 2012; Shuttleworth, 2007; Thoreau, 2006). Indeed, research suggests that individuals without personal connections to disability often rely heavily on media portrayals for their understanding, leading to more negative and prejudiced attitudes among these groups (Haller, 2010; Müller et al., 2012; Pruett and Chan, 2006). Thus, Vertoont (2018) maintains that it is crucial for the media to present disability in more nuanced and realistic ways.

*4.2 Disability in television*

There is much focus in disability studies on how disability is portrayed in television. While representations of disability in television are slowly improving, they still frequently depict disabled individuals in limited and one-dimensional roles (Ellis, 2016; Thoreau, 2006; Hartnett, 2000). This lack of nuanced representation is particularly evident in the portrayal of love and romance (Vertoont, 2018). Shakespeare (1996) and Shildrick (2007) contend that the romantic and sexual lives of people with disabilities are often ignored or trivialised, with popular media frequently portraying them as asexual and unattractive, reflecting and reinforcing the general public’s perceptions and assumptions.

Nonetheless, Hartnett (2000) asserts that certain television genres offer opportunities to explore the private lives of disabled individuals more authentically. In particular, Müller et al. (2012) consider RTV a promising medium for showcasing the complexity of disabled people's identities and fostering empathy. They acknowledge that there has been a shift towards producing television shows that aim to present disability in more positive and prejudice-reducing ways. Indeed, Müller et al. found in their examination of a Dutch RTV programme focusing on individuals with physical impairments that the show’s positive depictions of disability can influence the audience's attitudes favourably, although this is often only achieved after repeated viewings. However, Hill (2005) asserts that while she acknowledges the educational potential of RTV, many viewers do not perceive it as a source of valuable information. Hence, it is not always an effective way of presenting disability positively and educationally.

Vertoont (2018) contributes to this discussion by analysing public discourse surrounding *The Undateables* - a UK reality dating show featuring disabled singles - to assess the empowering and disempowering effects of RTV. The study reveals that while such shows can provide visibility and a platform for disabled people to share their experiences (Haller, 2019), they may also reinforce stereotypes and present simplified narratives (Cleary, 2016). Vertoont's (2018) analysis also emphasises the need to further scrutinise how these media representations shape societal attitudes towards disabled individuals and their romantic lives, as supported by other disability scholars (Biressi, 2017; Ellis, 2016; Müller et al, 2012; Johanssen and Garrisi, 2020).

Indeed, whilst conducting this literature review, I noticed a significant gap in recent research concerning the impact of different representations of disability in RTV on audience attitudes and perceptions. This underscores the need for critical analysis of the strategies employed in RTV programming and their effects on viewers so that scholars can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how disability is portrayed and perceived, particularly because RTV is becoming an increasingly popular genre in television (Montemurro, 2008).

Hence, my research seeks to address this gap by contributing to the limited body of literature on the representation of sexuality and romantic desires of people with disabilities in RTV. Furthermore, I aim to provide a deeper insight into how these portrayals in RTV shape the attitudes of both disabled and non-disabled audiences.

**Methodology**

In light of the discussion on the importance of appropriately and effectively representing disability in television media, this research raised three key questions to consider in the RTV show *LOTS:*

*RQ1: How is disability represented and constructed in* LOTS*?*

*RQ2: How does* LOTS *depict the romantic and sexual experiences of its autistic participants?*

*RQ3: How do these representations align with general societal attitudes towards disability, romance, and sexuality?*

By addressing these questions, this research aims to illuminate the social implications of RTV portrayals of disability and its impact on both neurotypical and neurodiverse audiences.

**1. Analytical framework**

*1.1 Critical Discourse Analysis*

This research adopted the analytical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) owing to its comprehensive approach to examining how language in media shapes social identities and power dynamics. Hansen and Machin (2018, p.115) define CDA as offering “the promise of showing exactly what features of language, what language choices, have been used to accomplish particular kinds of communicative aims”. Additionally, Jørgenson and Phillips (2002, p.60) note that CDA facilitates the “empirical study of the relations between discourse and social and cultural developments in different social domains”. Mogashoa (2014, p.105) also emphasises that CDA examines the “detailed relationships between text, talk, society and culture”, enabling it to analyse the long-term causes and effects of social issues. Thus, CDA provides a robust framework for critically analysing RTV representations of disability and assessing their impact on audience perceptions and attitudes.

Machin (2013, p.347) notes that “discourses are communicated through different kinds of semiotic resources, different modes, and realised through different genres”, underscoring the varied methods through which meaning is constructed and conveyed. Consequently, CDA effectively uncovers the underlying identities, actions, and contexts within these discourses and reveals the ideological and political influences embedded in media representations (Fairclough, 2003). Wodak (1989, p.xiv) reinforces this, asserting that the goal of CDA is to “uncover and demystify certain social processes in societies” and to allow people to “interpret and understand how and why reality is structured in a certain way.” Lucke (1996) further corroborates this, observing that CDA can reveal power imbalances and show how texts use specific techniques to influence and position readers.

CDA has been employed in numerous studies to examine how disability is represented in television media. A notable example is Aspler et al.’s (2022) research, which focuses on characters with autism, cerebral palsy, and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder in various television series. By employing CDA, their study examines how narrative techniques, character development, and visual presentation in television storytelling can empower or marginalise disabled characters. Additionally, it scrutinises how these representations either reinforce or challenge stereotypes about disabled individuals, aligning with the objectives of my research questions.

*1.2 Advantages of CDA*

Morgan (2010, p.4) contends that CDA provides valuable insights by uncovering tacit and unrecognised aspects of human behaviour, which sheds light on how marginalised positions are sustained in society. Additionally, Gill (1996, p.156) observes that discursive analysis can “examin[e] the ways in which relations of domination and subordination are reproduced and justified, and highlight… the flexibility of ideological practice.” In this way, CDA is instrumental in revealing and identifying the discourses produced by dominant media platforms, which is crucial for challenging the unequal power relations that influence the representation of disability in RTV.

Furthermore, CDA allows for multiple interpretations and perspectives, making the analysis more relevant and meaningful to specific contexts. Although scholars such as Widdowson (1998), Billig (2003), and Phillips and Oswick (2012) criticise CDA for not producing broad, general findings like traditional research, this method does not aim to identify universal truths. Instead, it recognises that reality is constructed through discourse, meaning there are many ways to understand and represent the same topic (Gill, 2000). This approach acknowledges that different people can have other, yet valid, interpretations of the same issue (van Leeuwen, 2006), which is essential for analysing complex social matters like disability representation.

*1.3 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis*

While CDA traditionally focuses on linguistic analysis, van Dijk (1995, p.18) notes that it has expanded to encompass “other semiotic dimensions… or communicative events”, including pictures, film, and sound. Ledin and Machin (2017) and Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich (2013) argue that this broader approach, known as Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), is increasingly relevant in today's digital era because it allows for a comprehensive examination of how various communicative modes interact to shape media narratives and power dynamics.

Since television incorporates multiple forms of communication, including “camera work, background music… [and] language” (Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich, 2013, p.29), MCDA is particularly well-suited for this research. Applying this ‘multimodal’ application of CDA to study the representation of disability in media facilitates a detailed analysis of how these diverse elements interact, providing a framework to understand how various communicative modes influence audience perceptions and attitudes towards disability (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Thus, MCDA allows for a detailed examination of how non-linguistic elements in television convey identities, attitudes, and ideologies (Eriksson, 2017).

A relevant example of its application is Zollo’s (2022) study, which employed MCDA to examine how non-profit organisations promote diversity and inclusion in public service announcements through verbal and visual techniques. Similar to my research, which aims to evaluate whether RTV combats harmful stereotypes surrounding disability, sexuality, and romance and influences audience attitudes, Zollo’s (2022) study assessed how multimodal argumentation challenges stigma and discrimination and influences public perceptions and behaviour towards cognitive impairments.

**2. Case study analysis: *Love on the Spectrum***

*2.1 Synopsis*

For my analysis of disability representation in RTV, I conducted a case study analysis of the American version of *LOTS*, co-created by Cian O’Clery and Karina Holden and produced by Northern Pictures (2022-present). I accessed the programme on Netflix, where it continues to be available, showcasing its global accessibility, credibility, and visibility.

While *LOTS* defies simple categorisation, possessing traits common in documentaries and docuseries, it is most often described as a reality series (Moore, 2022). The show features neurodivergent individuals, primarily in their early 20s to early 30s, as they navigate the complexities of love, dating, and relationships. It arranges dates between people on the autism spectrum, capturing their preparations, the dates themselves, and the aftermath, including interviews with the participants, their families, and close friends (Alschech, 2023).

The show’s focus on dating and romantic relationships in the context of disability can be regarded as progressive, given that the integration of these topics has historically been overlooked in Western societies, disability movements, and academic disability studies, despite being among the most challenging aspects of daily life for people with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2000; Shildrick, 2007; Vertoont, 2018).

*LOTS* has been praised for its respectful and empathetic representation of neurodiverse individuals, allowing them and their support systems to share their stories authentically (Merinuk, 2022; Wall, 2022). Additionally, the American adaptation of the series has expanded on its original Australian counterpart (2019-2021) by featuring a more diverse cast, including participants with a broader range of dating experiences and varying support needs related to their autism, offering a more inclusive representation.

O’Cleary states that the purpose of *LOTS* is to bust the myth “that people on the spectrum aren’t interested in love and uninterested in relationships and intimacy” (Ifeanyi, 2020). This indicates the series is primarily aimed at neurotypical viewers, who are more likely to hold such misconceptions compared to autistic individuals with epistemic privilege. Indeed, as Milton (2012) notes, autistic people often have a deeper understanding of neurotypical experiences than vice versa, owing to their need to navigate a predominantly non-autistic society, highlighting a general lack of knowledge within society about autistic experiences with romance and dating. However, while *LOTS* aims to improve this understanding for neurotypical audiences, Moore (2022) argues that the show raises concerns regarding how perspectives are presented and the influence of a neurotypical viewpoint, which this research will explore.

*2.2 Relevance*

*LOTS* was selected because it explicitly focuses on autistic individuals and their experiences with dating and relationships, directly aligning with the research questions. Popular culture frequently overlooks the romantic and sexual lives of people with disabilities, often either excluding them or depicting them through limiting stereotypes such as asexuality or helplessness, which fail to reflect their actual experiences (Hartnett, 2000; Shuttleworth, 2007). In contrast, *LOTS* offers a rare and valuable glimpse into the romantic aspirations of individuals with disabilities, making it an insightful case study for this research (Vertoont, 2018).

The show’s format allows for an in-depth analysis of how storytelling techniques, such as editing, narrative structure, and the characterisation of participants, influence perceptions of disability and romance. Moreover, *LOTS’* public reach makes it an ideal subject for examining how media representations influence societal attitudes towards disability and sexuality across a diverse audience. Dyer (1993, p,1) contends that studying representation is crucial, stating that “how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.”

For neurotypical audiences, the series can debunk persistent myths about autistic people's sexuality and dating lives, such as the misconceptions that autistic individuals are asexual or incapable of forming romantic relationships. By showcasing the diverse and nuanced experiences of autistic individuals pursuing love, *LOTS* challenges these stereotypes and promotes a more informed and empathetic understanding of autism (Johanssen and Garrisi, 2020).

For neurodiverse audiences, *LOTS* offers a rare opportunity for many to see their experiences and identities reflected in mainstream media. The authentic portrayal of autistic individuals navigating the complexities of dating and relationships can provide a sense of validation and representation that is often lacking. Stadler (2006) suggests that such visibility fosters a sense of belonging and encourages self-acceptance among neurodiverse viewers, who may recognise their own lives and challenges depicted on screen (Worrell, 2016; Haller, 2019).

**3. Implementation of methods**

*3.1 Justification*

I opted for a case study analysis over a comparative analysis to enable a detailed examination and contextualisation of the narratives as they unfold across episodes. This method also facilitated a close reading, uncovering and understanding subtle and hidden discourses. Gill (1996, p.142) underscores this, contending that “even the most apparently straightforward, neutral-sounding utterance can be involved in a whole range of different activities, depending on the interpretative context”. For this reason, I chose to closely analyse all six episodes from the first season of *LOTS*. This season first aired on May 18, 2022, on Netflix – a highly popular subscription-based streaming service (Reese, 2022). Each episode has a runtime of approximately 45 minutes.

This analytical approach was beneficial for addressing my research as it provided the tools to deconstruct the themes and semiotic elements in *LOTS* and assess whether it reinforced or challenged disability stereotypes.

Additionally, CDA’s aim to “make transparent the discursive aspects of societal disparities and inequalities" was useful for this study as it aligned with ongoing scholarly discussions surrounding the representation of disability in media (Meyers, 2009, p. 30). Indeed, by analysing language choices and usage in the selected RTV show, CDA helped to "draw out the ideology" embedded within the text (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p. 151), revealing meanings that are "implicit, hidden, or otherwise not immediately obvious" (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 18).

Several factors drove the decision to focus solely on the first season. Firstly, the initial season introduces six key participants (four of whom continue as main characters in the second season) and their foundational narratives, providing a clear basis for understanding how the series portrays these autistic individuals from the outset. Secondly, concentrating on one season allows for a more in-depth exploration of themes and discourses, prioritising depth over breadth. As Manganello et al. (2008, p.10) argue, “it often is impractical to content analyse every episode of a program” and that “[f]or this reason, researchers generally select a sample of episodes to include in their analysis”. Thus, by only examining six out of the thirteen episodes across both seasons, this study ensures a thorough and focused analysis.

*3.2 Research design*

After reviewing the literature to build a foundational understanding and watching various related programmes, including *Down for Love* (2022-present) and *The Undateables* (2012-2020), which also explore the dating experiences of individuals with disabilities, I chose *LOTS* as my case study to analyse the representation of disability in RTV.

My analysis started with viewing all six episodes in *Season 1*, during which I recorded initial observations of the show and transcribed dialogues I deemed relevant to the participants’ representations. Following Gill’s (1996, p.145) suggestion that: ‘[a]t the preliminary stage, all instances that seem only vaguely relevant and all borderline cases should be included’, I watched each episode another two times. This iterative process ensured a thorough understanding of the content and facilitated the identification of recurring themes and semiotic patterns.

In the second viewing, I conducted a coding process to determine the themes pertinent to the research questions. The themes identified were:

1. *Romance*
2. *Sexuality*
3. *Heterosexuality*
4. *Supercrip*
5. *Othering*
6. *Infantilisation*

I organised these six themes into a table, along with each of the six participants from *Season 1* (LOTS, 2022) - Abbey, Dani, Kaelynn, James, Subodh, and Steve - and then sorted my observations and transcriptions into the appropriate boxes, labelling the episodes to maintain transparency (see *Figure 1*).

Next, I categorised the most relevant data into key semiotic resources – elements used in communication to convey meaning (Fairclough, 2011) – citing which participants the data relates to and from which episode it is from (see *Figure 2*). These resources were language, music, and facial expressions. During my third viewing, I ensured that all relevant semiotic elements were identified and categorised in relation to the established themes.

Lindlof (2011, p. 266) observes that: “[t]hrough coding and categorization, researchers become familiar with the data at the micro level and begin to build a macro structure that interconnects they key parts of the data.” Indeed, with each viewing, I became more familiar with the content, allowing for a deeper analysis, allowing for a structured examination of how the themes and elements I identified interact to shape the portrayal of disability in the series.

To achieve this, I split my analysis chapter into six sections (excluding the introduction), each dedicated to one of the identified themes. Within these sections, I examined the examples of semiotic elements identified in *Figure 2* and discussed how they contributed to the show’s portrayal of disability and relationships and their alignment with societal attitudes, enabling me to address my research questions comprehensively. This approach is similar to Holden et al.’s (2021), who also employed semiotic and thematic analysis to closely examine the visual and narrative themes within the British medical RTV show *Embarrassing Bodies* (2007-present).

*3.3 Potential limitations and ethical considerations*

Since this research does not use human subjects, the ethical concerns are minimal. Nonetheless, Kress (1990, p.85) contends that it is crucial to recognise that “CDA is an openly political and therefore potentially contentious activity”. Its focus on uncovering power dynamics and ideological structures may introduce biases or assumptions that reflect the researcher's own perspectives rather than providing an objective portrayal of the data. Fowler (2013) notes that such biases in representation can occur because the mechanisms through which ideas are communicated are shaped by social values, potentially distorting how events are depicted. Van Dijk (2015) adds that ideologies influenced by a group’s social values affect how representational discourse is framed, frequently resulting in communication that reflects a particular ideological stance. This is particularly pertinent in media discourse, where social, political, and economic factors - such as societal norms, political agendas, and advertising revenue - can lead to messages being conveyed from specific viewpoints (Fowler, 2013).

Therefore, given that this study is concerned with inequalities between neurotypical and neurodiverse communities, it is necessary to acknowledge my own influence as the researcher (Widdowson, 2004). As a straight, neurotypical female, I occupy a position of privilege compared to the *LOTS* participants analysed within this study. Thus, as outlined by van Dijk (1995, p.24), I approached this study “in solidarity with dominated groups, [...] by discovering and denouncing discursive dominance, and by cooperating in the empowerment of the dominated”. Moreover, I also implemented rigorous methodological practices, including systematic data organisation, as evident in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, to mitigate subjectivity and enhance the reliability of the analysis.

**4. Conclusion**

As outlined above, this research will employ CDA and MCDA to explore disability representation in the RTV show *LOTS.* By analysing key themes and semiotic elements in the first season, the study aims to uncover the social attitudes and ideologies embedded within the show, assess how they align with or challenge prevailing societal views on autism, and consider their impact on both neurotypical and neurodiverse audiences.

**Analysis and Discussion**

As outlined in the methodology, the table in *Figure 1* lists the six participants from *LOTS Season 1* (2022) and the six identified themes. This table reflects my initial observations made during my first viewing of the show, where I transcribed segments of dialogue and sound that I found relevant to the themes being explored in relation to the show's representation of disability and categorised them according to the corresponding participant and theme. During my second viewing, I identified three recurring semiotic elements and created an additional coding table, shown in *Figure Two*. I sorted the most pertinent data from the initial transcripts into this new table, organising it by theme and the associated semiotic element.

This section offers an analysis of the data presented in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2.* Through a critical approach grounded in CDA and MCDA, I will address my research questions by examining how the series constructs disability and its intersection with romance and sexuality through the identified themes and semiotic elements. Additionally, I will evaluate how these thematic and semiotic resources align with and influence societal attitudes toward disability, romance, and sexuality.

**1. Romance**

As discussed in the literature review, the romantic desires and experiences of autistic individuals are typically overlooked or misrepresented in popular culture. Brooks (2018, p.175) underscores this issue, observing that “mainstream media communicates the message that autism and romance are diametrically-opposed concepts”. This prevailing narrative reinforces the stereotype that autistic people are uninterested in or incapable of forming romantic relationships. However, *LOTS* actively confronts these misconceptions by explicitly focusing on the romantic pursuits of autistic individuals.

In the participants’ respective introductory interviews in *Episode 1*, as recorded in *Figure 1*, they each expressed a desire for love and companionship (LOTS, 2022). Their candid discussions about what they seek in a partner illustrate that their romantic desires are similar to those of neurotypical individuals. Abbey, for instance, emphasises the importance of commonality in a relationship, stating that she wants to be with someone who shares her interests, partly “so he can understand [her] autism” (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). Similarly, James expresses a desire for “a woman who is similar to” him and “fairly attractive,” reflecting a blend of emotional connection and physical attraction that is typical in romantic relationships. Dani, on the other hand, prefers “somebody who is motivated and has really great hygiene,” a practical and relatable want (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). These examples collectively debunk the stereotype that autistic individuals are indifferent to or incapable of understanding romantic relationships. Instead, they demonstrate a range of desired traits in a romantic partner that resonate with many viewers, regardless of their neurological makeup.

The participants’ discussions of loneliness further deepen the exploration of their romantic desires. Steve, for example, shares that he gets “really lonely”, fearing that he is “not going to meet anybody and…. [is] just going to be alone” (LOTS, 2022, ep.3). Kaelynn echoes this sentiment, frankly stating that she wants a romantic partner because she does not “want to die alone” (LOTS, 2022, ep.2). Abbey also admits that she doesn’t “want to be single forever… ‘cause [she does not] wanna feel lonely” (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). These expressions of loneliness and the fear of perpetual solitude align with scholarly research, detailed in the literature review, which indicates that many individuals with disabilities who are not in romantic relationships experience heightened feelings of loneliness (Bates et al., 2017; Shpigelman and Vorobioff, 2021). By vocalising these fears, the participants in *LOTS* challenge the stereotype that autistic individuals are content with isolation, instead showcasing their longing for connection and intimacy.

The show also debunks the myth of autistic people lacking romantic attraction to others by featuring participants who openly discuss their past romantic experiences, which is evident in the significant number of transcriptions in the romance sections in both *Figure 1* and *Figure 2.* A specific example is Abbey, who reminisces about being in love with her high school boyfriend and describes the relationship as making her feel “romantic” and “safe” (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). Her emphasis on feeling “safe” in a relationship highlights the emotional depth and vulnerability that often accompanies romantic connections, countering the stereotype that autistic individuals are emotionally detached. James, too, shares that he has “had a few girlfriends in the past,” though they were “very short-term relationships.” He also mentions that he has tried online dating, although admits that he “very sadly… had no luck with” it (LOTS, 2022, ep.2). This narrative not only humanises James by highlighting the common struggle many people face in their quest for love, but it also challenges the stereotype that autistic individuals are neither capable of nor interested in romantic relationships.

**2. Sexuality**

Sexuality, and intimacy are also frequently marginalised aspects of the autistic experience. As outlined in the literature review, those with developmental disabilities, including autism, have historically been prejudicially depicted as either asexual, sexually immature, or hypersexual. This has fostered the harmful belief that sexuality and autism are incompatible, with the former often viewed as a potential threat from which autistic people need protection (Moore, 2022). It is these stereotypes that *LOTS* seeks to dispel by presenting autistic individuals as fully capable and interested in intimate relationships.

This narrative is evident in Dani’s explicit expression of sexual desire in *Episode 1,* as noted in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2.* Dani explains that she had a “practice boyfriend”, which she describes as “somebody that you… use for practicing… kissing”. Her aunt then clarifies that Dani “wanted to learn how to kiss so [they] looked up a YouTube video about how to learn how to kiss, and they used a cupcake to show how to kiss. So then she picked that up and started using that with boys” (LOTS, 2022, ep.1).

Dani’s serious demeanour and factual tone when discussing her “practice boyfriend” and learning how to kiss demonstrate that she takes this topic seriously. Additionally, Dani’s efforts to practice how to kiss indicate her inclination and right to explore and understand her sexuality, which is often overlooked for people with disabilities, particularly in television. Indeed, although there has been a slight incline in recent years, such as Netflix’s *The Queen’s Gambit* (2020), very few television shows represent autistic people with sexual desires (Aspler et al., 2022; Brooks, 2018). Hence, *LOTS*’ portrayal challenges the pervasive stereotype in popular media that individuals with autism or other disabilities are disinterested in or incapable of experiencing sexual desire and helps normalise the idea that autistic individuals, like anyone else, have a valid interest in and yearning for sexual intimacy.

Dani goes on to demonstrate what she learned from the YouTube video, explaining that you “hold up a cupcake, like you’re licking the icing”, and mimics the actions of closing her eyes and licking an imaginary cupcake. At first, her aunt and uncle laugh at this action, and Dani is shown to be fighting a smile as she does this, suggesting that her demonstration is at least partly for comic effect. However, as she seems to get more passionate – opening her mouth wider and using her tongue more – her aunt’s laugh becomes more awkward, and her uncle, clearly uncomfortable, interjects with a hesitant “Uh… No”, indicating their discomfort at the thought of Dani actually engaging in this activity. Dani’s aunt proceeds to say, “Okay, you’re grossing out Uncle,” as the camera pans to him, smiling uncomfortably and glancing awkwardly to the side (LOTS, 2022, ep.1).

Her aunt and uncle’s laughter diminishes the credibility of her interest and invites the audience to laugh too, undermining the seriousness of her exploration of sexuality (Kulick, 2024). Additionally, the shift in her relatives’ reactions from amusement to discomfort reflects a broader societal tendency to infantilise autistic individuals, often dismissing their sexual development as inappropriate or something to be joked about. Moreover, her uncle’s uneasy reaction highlights the awkwardness that can arise when autistic people express their sexuality, subtly reinforcing the idea that their sexual desires are something to be contained or discouraged (Ruble and Dalrymple, 1993; Travers and Tincani, 2010). This portrayal risks perpetuating the stereotype that autistic people’s sexual expressions are inherently problematic or socially unacceptable.

This is exacerbated by the show’s limited engagement with the topic of sexuality, as reflected in the sparse data in the sexuality column in *Figure 1*. While the show makes strides in presenting autistic individuals as capable and wanting of romantic relationships, and exhibits some progressive representations of sexuality within the autistic community as evident in this example of Dani, *LOTS’* general failure to explore its participants’ sexual identities or desires is a missed opportunity to challenge pervasive stereotypes.

**3. Heterosexuality**

Another limitation of *LOTS’* representation of disability is its implicit theme of heterosexuality. The show’s focus on heterosexual relationships suggests that romantic success is measured by traditional, heteronormative standards. By adhering to this heteronormative framework, *LOTS’* risks perpetuating ableist and heterosexist structures, marginalising those who do not conform to these conventional moulds.

Indeed, although Dani identifies as pansexual, the first season of LOTS exclusively features heterosexual dates and relationships (Nico, 2024). As discussed in the literature review, this lack of representation misses an important opportunity to showcase the full spectrum of sexual and gender diversity within the autistic community. Given that research indicates a higher percentage of LGBTQ+ individuals within the autistic population compared to the general population, the show's narrow focus on heterosexual relationships is a notable oversight (Hillier et al., 2020; Sarris, 2024). This exclusion reinforces the notion that heterosexual pairings are the ideal, leaving little room for other identities and experiences.

Furthermore, *LOTS* reinforces conventional, heteronormative gender roles and dynamics in its portrayal of dating. The show sometimes depicts men as taking on more active roles—initiating dates, paying for meals, and making the first moves - while women are cast in more passive roles (Wall, 2022). This dynamic not only upholds outdated societal expectations but also limits the portrayal of diverse gender expressions and relationship models.

This is illustrated in Subodh’s “practice date” with relationship expert Jennifer Cook, orchestrated by his mother in their back garden. The setup mimicked a restaurant setting, including a table, chairs, and menus. As soon as Subodh and Jennifer arrived at the table, Jennifer advised Subodh that a “nice thing to do” would be to “pull the seat out” for his date, subtly instructing him to adhere to conventional gender roles where the man takes on a chivalrous, leading role (LOTS, 2022, ep.3). This moment not only emphasises Subodh's compliance with these traditional norms but also signals to the audience that his role as the male participant is to prioritise the comfort and needs of the female.

Similarly, when Subodh attempts to order his meal first, he is quickly corrected. His mother’s firm “No, no, no” and Jennifer’s gentle prompting for him to allow her to order first underscore the expectation that the man should defer to the woman in this situation (LOTS, 2022, ep.3). This scene reinforces the heteronormative expectation that Subodh should perform these gestures to meet societal expectations of masculinity and proper behaviour on a date (Morr Serewicz and Gale, 2008).

The culmination of this gendered instruction occurs at the end of the simulated date when Subodh asks Jennifer if she “would want to split the bill”, to which she replies, “Absolutely. That would be fine”. However, this is quickly undercut by Subodh’s mother, who intervenes, advising him that, “As a man, you should be paying the bill” (LOTS, 2022, ep.3). This directive not only reinforces the traditional expectation that men should financially provide for women but also perpetuates the notion that financial power and responsibility in a relationship should rest with the man, thereby reinforcing heteronormative and patriarchal norms (Lamont, 2014).

These repeated interventions by Jennifer and Subodh’s mother throughout the practice date highlight the show’s underlying adherence to conventional gender dynamics despite its broader aim of challenging stereotypes surrounding autism and relationships. By displaying these instructions for Subodh to follow traditional gender rules, *LOTS* inadvertently upholds a heteronormative structure in dating, where men are expected to lead and provide. This approach not only limits the portrayal of diverse relationships within the autistic community but also reinforces outdated gender norms. However, as reflected in the minimal data for the heterosexuality section in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, this limitation is not a central aspect of the show.

**4. Supercrip**

An additional harmful theme in the series is the “supercrip” narrative. Kama (2004) defines the "regular supercrip" as the portrayal of disabled individuals being celebrated for accomplishing everyday tasks, which are depicted as significant achievements solely owing to their disability. Schalk (2016) argues that this narrative both normalises and marginalises people with disabilities, as it relies on the ableist assumption that they are inherently incapable of performing these actions. Such portrayals reinforce problematic stereotypes (Harnett, 2000; Müller et al., 2012) and suggest that success in sexuality and romance for people with disabilities is defined by the ability to overcome and conform to societal norms rather than challenging or broadening the understanding of what fulfilling relationships and sexual identities can look like.

In *LOTS*, this narrative is particularly evident in the way the show emphasises the participants' progress in overcoming communication challenges and forming relationships, often at the expense of addressing the broader societal and structural barriers that contribute to these challenges (Moore, 2022). As presented in *Figure 2*, a clear example is when Abbey’s mother, Christine, recalls the lead up to and moment of Abbey’s autism diagnosis, describing it as “really awful” and something she did not want to believe. She then goes on to express her amazement at Abbey, admitting that she “could never have imagined” that Abbey would achieve what she has today (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). While Christine’s sentiment is heartfelt, it is emblematic of the supercrip narrative. Rather than celebrating Abbey’s communicative and behavioural accomplishments as part of her natural growth and development, the narrative positions them as exceptional, emphasising her difference from neurotypical peers rather than her inherent capabilities.

Moreover, in the final episode of the first season, after Abbey and David officially become boyfriend and girlfriend, Christine shares that she is “speechless”, describing their union as “a gift” to her and expressing how “grateful” she feels (LOTS, 2022, ep.6). This portrayal frames Abbey’s romantic success as an extraordinary and unexpected achievement owing to her autism, reinforcing the supercrip narrative. By presenting typical milestones, like forming a relationship, as monumental triumphs for autistic individuals, the show amplifies the perceived difference between autistic and neurotypical experiences. This emphasis suggests that romantic and sexual success is particularly remarkable for people with disabilities, inadvertently reinforcing ableist stereotypes and implying that such achievements are not natural.

**5. Othering**

Furthermore, as illustrated by the multiple examples in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, *LOTS* repeatedly positions autistic individuals as "Other” by emphasising their differences from neurotypical people. This process of othering involves reducing the individuals to an outsider status, often perceived negatively and accorded less respect than the normative "Self." As a result, those who are deemed different are marginalised within social interactions (Canales, 2000).

People with disabilities have long been subjected to significant marginalisation through cultural othering – a process that has created the “disabled Other” (Goodley and Lawthom, 2013). Richards (2008, p. 1719) observes that “people with disabilities or illnesses are often reduced to the status of malfunctioning bodies and viewed as lacking capacity to put forward their point of view”. This reductionist view is shaped by societal norms regarding what constitutes ability and a "normal" body. In the context of *LOTS*, the notion of the “disabled Other” is perpetuated by the show’s portrayal of its autistic participants as fundamentally distinct from neurotypical individuals. The show does this by highlighting their perceived social difficulties, particularly their struggles to meet romantic partners and go on “successful” dates, and their differences, depicting them as abnormal or unusual in comparison to neurotypical people.

This portrayal can be understood through Bourdieu's (2004) concept of *habitus*, where individuals' behaviours and dispositions are shaped by their environment. Within *LOTS*, the neurotypical habitus is positioned as the standard, with any deviation from it framed as a deficiency rather than a natural variation (Moore, 2022). For instance, the show emphasises the participants' hobbies and interests, often depicted as repetitive or narrowly focused, which aligns with the diagnostic criteria for autism (Smith et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2024). This focus not only reinforces the view of autistic individuals as "Other" but also perpetuates a narrative that views their differences as deficiencies rather than recognising them as expressions of diversity.

A case in point is when James gives a tour of his room, showcasing his stone collection, a preserved alligator head, various swords, and his stamp collections, which he describes as “interesting conversation pieces” that “add character to the room.” When Cian asks, “Who comes in here for the conversation pieces?” James candidly replies, “Actually, nobody really… I guess it’s for my own benefit” (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). This scene highlights the show's tendency to focus on the perceived eccentricities of autistic individuals, contributing to their othering. By emphasising James' unique interests and collections, the show inadvertently frames him as different or unusual by neurotypical standards. The emphasis on these collections as "conversation pieces" that do not serve their intended social purpose further reinforces the idea that his interests are peculiar or socially isolating. Moreover, the quirky, staccato background music accompanying the shots of James’ possessions enhances this sense of otherness, adding a somewhat comical tone that accentuates the perceived oddity of his collections. This musical choice almost inadvertently reduces James’ passions to mere idiosyncrasies rather than recognising them as legitimate expressions of his identity and individuality.

Similarly, Dani’s passion for animation is a recurring focus in the show, but it is often framed as an obsession, contributing to her portrayal as "Other." Throughout the first season, Dani frequently discusses her love for animation, as evident in the multiple examples in Dani’s column in *Figure 1*. The show features her showcasing her animation awards in *Episode 1*, which should be moments of pride, yet they are often presented in a way that suggests an excessive preoccupation (LOTS, 2022).

Dani is also shown multiple times to turn her conversations toward her interest in animation, reinforcing the notion that her passion is all-consuming. For instance, when seeing her good friend Devin, she quickly pivots their conversation about the French décor in the bar to the “biggest animation festival in the whole world” in France. Devin’s response, jokingly exclaiming, “You talk about animation nonstop!” before swiftly changing the topic to her dating life, underscores the show’s portrayal of Dani’s interest as socially inappropriate or obsessive (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). This framing contributes to the process of othering by positioning Dani’s enthusiasm for animation as abnormal.

Furthermore, Dani’s experience at a speed dating event in the final two episodes of the first season demonstrates the show’s tendency to emphasise autistic individuals’ perceived social awkwardness and narrow interests. During each of her dates, Dani steers the conversation toward her passion for animation, even when it is unrelated to the topic at hand. For instance, when her first date, John, describes his career as an aerospace engineer, Dani tells him that “animation could work with aerospace stuff” and immediately inquires whether he has ever attended animation conventions or events. When John admits that he has "never been," the camera zooms in on Dani’s disappointed smile, and the background noises grow louder, heightening the silence and awkwardness of the interaction. The show further accentuates this sense of discomfort when John tries to redirect the conversation by asking about Dani's interests outside of work. Dani responds that she enjoys drawing and “research[ing] on Google on anything that is related to animation”, which prompts the camera to focus on John's awkward smile, subtly implying that he is at a loss for how to engage with her (LOTS, 2022, ep.5).

This scene illustrates how the show reinforces Dani’s status as “Other” by focusing on her perceived inability to connect with others outside of her specialised interest in animation. By repeatedly depicting her as socially awkward and fixated on animation, the show implicitly frames her passion as a hindrance rather than a positive aspect of her identity. The emphasis on the silence, awkwardness, and John's discomfort highlights Dani’s difference from neurotypical expectations of social interaction, further marginalising her.

In addition to highlighting the perceived eccentricities of autistic participants, *LOTS* also underscores its reliance on neurotypical norms in its dating scenarios. Many of the dates in the show occur in conventional settings like busy restaurants, which can be overwhelming for autistic individuals owing to sensory sensitivities and the complexities of social interaction in such environments (Park-Cardoso and da Silva, 2021; Beale-Ellis, 2017). By positioning neurotypical dating standards as the benchmark for success, the show implicitly suggests that autistic individuals must adapt to these. This further contributes to the process of othering by reinforcing the idea that normalcy is measured by adherence to neurotypical expectations.

Although some of the dates are more private and tailored to the participant’s interests, such as James’ second date with Emma at a medieval Renaissance fair in *Episode 5*, the show’s use of quirky and playful music frames these settings as unusual and comical. This musical style subtly reinforces the idea that such tailored experiences are eccentric or humorous deviations from the dating norm, perpetuating the sense of otherness by reinforcing the idea that the participants’ preferences are out of the ordinary.

**6. Infantilisation**

The theme of infantilisation in *LOTS* is also pervasive. A frequent example throughout the season, as cited multiple times in *Figure 1*, is how the narrator introduces the participants’ dates by reducing them to a few superficial traits, including two of their likes and two of their dislikes. This reductive portrayal dates excludes their professional and social lives and oversimplifies their personalities, stripping away their complexity by only indicating their childlike traits (Agarwal, 2024).

These introductions are accompanied by exaggerated visuals and whimsical music, further trivialising the participants’ dates. Luterman (2020), an autistic reviewer of *LOTS,* describes this background music as “more appropriate for a documentary about clumsy baby giraffes than for a reality series about adult humans.” Indeed, the whimsical and light-hearted musical score, reminiscent of non-dating RTV shows like *The Great British Bake Off* (2010-present) creates an endearing atmosphere that is inconsistent with the tone expected in a reality dating show. Additionally, unlike *The Great British Bake Off*, which uses its music to complement natural moments, *LOTS* relies heavily on its score to shape the narrative, often to the detriment of its participants (Davis, 2024).

Moreover, the music accompanying scenes with autistic individuals is often staccato and quirky, as illustrated in the examples from the music section of *Figure 2*. Instruments like the oboe and bassoon, typically associated with humour or mockery, are frequently used, reinforcing this effect (Audissino and Huvet, 2023). In contrast, interviews with non-autistic individuals, such as the participants’ family members, feature legato, flowing music with strings and piano, evoking sentimentality or pity (Have, 2008). This disparity in musical treatment suggests a deliberate differentiation between autistic and non-autistic cast members, further othering the autistic individuals featured on the show.

Additionally, the music, coupled with the show’s deliberate editing that accentuates awkward of comical moments, positions the participants as cute or adorable rather than as serious, capable adults navigating romantic relationships. An example of this, outlined in the music column of *Figure 2*, is Abbey and David’s first date. As they meet for the first time, the upbeat and eccentric music that plays in the background transforms their introductory conversation into something more reminiscent of a children’s interaction, trivialising their connection (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). Even in the concluding episode of the season, when David asks Abbey to be his girlfriend – a moment of romantic significance – the show opts for a light, almost saccharine score that frames the scene as charmingly innocent and childlike (LOTS, 2022, ep.6). This musical choice suggests that Abbey and David’s romance is somehow less mature or meaningful, perpetuating the stereotype that autistic individuals are incapable of the same level of romantic depth and seriousness as their neurotypical peers. Certainly, other reality dating shows involving neurotypical participants, such as *Love is Blind* (2020-present) and *Too Hot to Handle* (2020-present), employ more mature and respectful soundtracks when displaying romantic interactions (Richardson, 2024). Thus, the difference in musical treatment underscores a broader tendency to infantilise autistic adults, framing their romantic endeavours as endearing but ultimately trivial.

Infantilisation also manifests in how the show presents the participants' interactions with their support networks. Friends and family members are frequently shown giving unsolicited advice on basic social skills, reinforcing a perception of the participants as needing constant guidance and oversight. For example, James’ brother offers seemingly unsolicited advice on how to conduct a conversation during a date, instructing him to “ask a few different questions” and to “make sure that she’s able to contribute just as much” to their discussion (LOTS, 2022, ep.1). This advice, though ostensibly well-meaning, infantilises James by suggesting that he cannot navigate these basic social interactions on his own.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation explored the representation of individuals with disabilities in the RTV show *LOTS*, particularly in relation to their romantic and sexual desires. Through a critical discourse analysis and multimodal critical discourse analysis of the show’s key themes and semiotic elements, as identified in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2,* this study has presented the ways in which the narratives in *LOTS* contribute to or challenge prevailing societal attitudes toward disability.

One of the central findings of this study is that while *LOTS* makes notable strides in positively portraying the romantic lives of autistic individuals and challenging common misconceptions, it also inadvertently reinforces certain stereotypes and normative expectations. By focusing predominantly on heterosexual relationships, perpetuating the “supercrip” narrative, and presenting autistic participants in an infantilising manner, the show contributes to a limited and occasionally distorted perspective on autism and its romantic and sexual dimensions.

This exposes the limitations inherent in the RTV genre when it comes to fully capturing the diversity and complexity of disabled identities. LOTS’ format, which often relies on simplified storylines and edited narratives to fit within the constraints of entertainment, can reduce complex individuals to more digestible and familiar stereotypes. For example, *LOTS’* “supercrip” narrative prioritises those who conform to societal expectations of romance and sexuality, such as engaging in heterosexual relationships or achieving certain milestones deemed "normal". This overshadows the variety of experiences and identities within the disabled community, reinforcing the notion that there is a "right" way to be disabled and romantic. Consequently, although the show is a step forward in representation, it also highlights the ongoing need for more nuanced and varied portrayals of disability in media.

**Limitations and suggestions for future research**

While this dissertation provides valuable insights into the representation of disability in *LOTS*, it is crucial to recognise its limitations. The study focuses exclusively on the U.S. version of the series, limiting the relevance of the findings to other cultural contexts. Consequently, the findings of this dissertation must be viewed within the context of American culture, and caution should be exercised when attempting to apply these insights to other regions. Future studies could expand the scope by examining the Australian version of *LOTS* and comparing it with the U.S. version to explore how different cultural contexts influence the representation of disability.

Additionally, partly owing to space constraints, this dissertation only focused on *LOTS*. To increase the understanding of disability representation in RTV, it would be valuable to include comparisonswith other reality dating shows featuring participants with disabilities, such as *Down for Love* (2022-present) and *The Undateables* (2010-2020). Such an analysis would provide a more comprehensive view of how different shows shape audience perceptions of disability, romance, and sexuality.

Another limitation is that the interpretation of the *LOTS*’s semiotic elements, including language, music, and facial expressions, is inherently subjective. To address this in future research, quantitative methods such as viewer surveys or focus groups could be incorporated to help minimise individual biases and provide deeper insights into how these semiotic elements are perceived across different audiences.

In conclusion, *LOTS* marks a meaningful advancement in the portrayal of individuals with disabilities, particularly in terms of their romantic and sexual experiences. However, it also underscores the challenges and complexities involved in representing disability in ways that authentically reflect the diverse experiences of individuals with disabilities. Continued critical analysis and research are essential to refining these portrayals, with the aim of advancing media representations of disability, romance, and sexuality. Through such efforts, future media portrayals can progress towards a more accurate and comprehensive representation of disability.

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**Appendices**

**Figures**

*Figure 1:*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Abbey (23)** | **Dani (26)** | **Kaelynn (24)** | **Steve (63)** | **Subodh (32)** | **James (34)** |
| **Romance** | * “I don’t want to be single forever, no. ‘Cause I don’t wanna feel lonely.” **(ep.1)** * “Being in love made me feel romantic, I felt safe, and it meant a lot to me.” **(ep.1)** * [Cian] “So, Abbey, are you looking for love?” [Abbey] “Yes! ‘Cause I want to be like a princess, like Cinderella going to the ball.” **(ep.1)** * “I’d like to go on a date with a boy who has a lot in common with me… [it] is the most important thing. So he can understand my autism, we could do things… maybe we can go on a double date with another autistic couple. Double date!” **(ep.1)** * [Christine] “I saw how Abbey was with her first boyfriend, and it was truly one of the most beautiful things. And I want that for her. And I know she wants it, but she’s a little scared” **(ep.1)** * “So what else do you want to find in a boyfriend?” “He has to understand my autism.” **(ep.1)** * [Cian] “What do you hope for your future, Abbey?” [Abbey] “To have a good, cute boyfriend. We could live near the beach. We could go to water parks. I don’t want to be alone. I want to find someone so I feel safe.” **(ep.1)** | * “Unfortunately, it’s just so hard to find a boyfriend… You could imagine, I have to kiss many frogs to find the right guy. It’s not just about the looks. I’m looking for somebody who is motivated and has really great hygiene, because I don’t like bad breath [wags finger].” **(ep.1)** * “It’s hard for me to find the right person who is so much like me. I’ve been desperate to look for love” **(ep.1)** * “I want someone with good hygiene, good salary, dependable, and financially secure”. **(ep.1)** * “I wanted to find somebody special, somebody who can depend on me. We want to depend on each other and work together to have a sustainable living. My aunt would tell me “There’s many fish in the sea. You’ll eventually catch a big one.”… It's a metaphor” **(ep.1)** * “My ideal partner would be somebody who is running another company. Not only would we see each other like lovers, but also work partners.” [Cian] “So it sounds like you want your love life and your work life to almost be entwined” [Dani] “Into one.” **(ep.1)** | * [Cian] Why do you want to find love?   [Kaelynn – matter of factly] I don’t want to die alone… Being around people is draining but I don’t like to be alone. I like to be with my friends. I like to be with my family. I don’t like to be really alone just day to day. So I think having love, having a boyfriend, would really, I don’t know, be helpful” **(ep.2)** | * [Cian] “Do you ever get lonely?” [Steve] “Oh gosh, do I ever. I get really lonely here at home when I’m alone. To have a lovely lady, oh my goodness, that would be an absolute dream come true.” **(ep.3)** * “I have a fear that I’m not going to meet anybody and I’m just going to be alone, like I have been for quite some time. I think I’m meant to be with a person, with a woman. This loneliness thing is, uh… It’s not for me.” **(ep.3)** | * “I haven’t dated in 33 years.” **(ep.1)** | * [Cian] “Are you looking for love?”   [James] “Uh, yes. Unquestionably so.” **(ep.1)**   * “I am seeking love. I’m seeking to find a partner, you know, a soul mate with whom I can spend my life.” **(ep.1)** * “I’ve made myself accounts on various online dating services. There have been times where I…. match with… with a… with a woman on the site, and none of them have ever agreed to meet me in person, as sad as that is.” **(ep.1)** * “Very sadly I have had no luck with online dating so far” **(ep.1)** * “so relationships have always been a tough spot for me. I’ve had a few girlfriends in the past, but they were very short-term relationships. Didn’t last long, never got very serious. There was one woman of whom I was very fond. I mean, things seemed to be going pretty well between me and her, but it turned out I was ready for it to be really serious and she was not.” **(ep.1)** |
| **Sexuality** |  | * Dani speaks with a factual tone and serious demeanour when discussing wanting to learn how to kiss and practicing using a cupcake and “practice” boyfriends **(ep.1).** * Had a “practice boyfriend” which she describes as “somebody that you… use for practicing… kissing”. She apparently “crushed his heart” **(ep.1)** * [Dani’s aunt] explains that Dani “wanted to learn how to kiss so we looked up a YouTube video about how to learn how to kiss, and they used a cupcake to show how to kiss. So then she picked that up and started using that with boys” **(ep.1)** * [Dani demonstrates how she kisses using an imaginary cupcake] explaining that you “hold up a cupcake, like you’re licking the icing”. [aunt and uncle] Uh… [uncle] No. [aunt and uncle laugh]. [aunt] “Okay, you’re grossing out Uncle.” [camera zooms in on Dani’s uncle awkwardly smiling and glancing to the side]. **(ep.1)** * [Cian] “What are your first impressions?” [Dani] “Solomon. Oh, he is so attractive.” **(ep.1)** * [Dani] [Getting ready for her second date with Soloman] “I better control myself”. [Sandy] “What do you mean by that?”   [Dani] “Try not to get too excited about seeing Soloman again, and, um, well, I just need to get to know him a little bit more before the kiss.” **(ep.2)**   * “I can feel the intimacy. I really like how you hold my hand.” **(ep.2)** |  | * “I do find her attractive.” **(ep.3)** | * [Jennifer] “Okay, so you want to have a special friend.” [Subodh] “Yes.” [Jennifer] “And is that someone you would want to hug or kiss too?” [Subodh] “Oh yes!” **(ep.3)** | * [Cian] “Can you describe your ideal partner?”   [James] “I would like a woman who is similar to me, but not an exact copy, obviously. I wouldn’t expect to find a woman who was a radiant, unearthly beauty, but, obviously, I want a woman who is still fairly attractive. A woman who’s attractive to the point that when I see her, I do not feel a desire to avert my gaze, you know? And a woman who is very big on hygiene and well groomed. I don’t think that’s asking too much, is it? I hope not.” **(ep.1)**   * [Talking about his date recently] “It was really good. The first one in a while, actually, but yes, I... Yes, the woman’s name is Emma and she is attractive, which is good, obviously. I mean it’s not everything, but it is important that, yes, I do care about how she looks.” **(ep.5)** |
| **Heterosexuality** |  |  |  |  | * [Jennifer to Subodh] “when you come to the table, this is just a nice thing to do. If you pull the seat out… And you just say… Go like this [gestures to sit down]”. **(ep.3)** * Subodh goes to order first on his practice date and his mother tells him “No, no, no” and Jennifer points to herself, indicating for him to allow her to order first. **(ep.3)** * [Subodh] “Do you want to split the bill?” [Jennifer] “Absolutely. That would be fine.” [Mum] “Subodh, I think you should not ask for splitting bill on the first date. As a man, you should be paying the bill.” **(ep.3)** |  |
| **Supercrip** | * [Cian] “When was Abbey diagnosed with autism?” [Christine] “She was maybe two, and she was putting everything in her mouth at the time, running around… like, it was a chore. I remember thinking, “God I can’t wait till this stage is over, ‘cause this is really awful.” But then I put her in pre—preschool and four days into it, the preschool called me and said… [whimpers] [crying] “We can’t have your kid in here.” So the journey began. I took her in, I got her diagnosed, and I didn’t want to believe it.” **(ep.1)** * [Christine] “what she’s doing now, I could have never imagined she would have been capable of doing” **(ep.1)** * [Cian] “So Christine how do you feel about Abbey finding love?” [Christine] “Speechless. [Cries]… For me this is like a gift… and I’m grateful.” **(ep.6)** |  |  |  | * [If Subodh found love his mum said] “I’d feel relieved. I truly would. I will feel like I have fulfilled my duties as a mother… because, when we are gone, he will not have anybody else.” **(ep.2)** * [Mum] “We have so many milestones and so many things you have achieved. You went to school, you graduated college…” **(ep.2)** * “Subodh, now he’s 33 years old, and wow, what… what an incredible journey it is. He has really grown from a little child who couldn’t talk at age five to a person who is now living independently, working. So… I’m sorry [laughs]. I’m having a little cry thinking about the whole journey.” **(ep.6)** | * “At the time I was diagnosed society did not have a great understanding of Asperger’s syndrome or autism, so sadly, help -- it was difficult to find help. Mm, as sad as it is, other students mocked me and bullied me. That did have an effect on my self-esteem. I would always be terribly nervous being in large crowds or being outside my house for any significant duration. With practice, though, I overcame that and now I have no problem at all.” **(ep.1)** |
| **Othering** | * “autism makes me feel like not human… I feel like Ariel from Little Mermaidlike when I can’t get my words out, I feel like Ariel. It’s like how I want to be typical, Ariel wants to be a human.” And she becomes human, she can’t talk. That’s how I feel.” **(ep.1)** * [Jennifer] “Abbey’s primary challenge, I think, is going to be staying in the moment. She’s changing topic because her mind is catching so much interest.” **(ep.1)** | * [Dani] “Animation is my greatest passion.” [Cian] “Tell me about your company.” [Dani] “I got the inspiration from Satoshi Tajiri, the creator of Pokémon. And he’s on the autism spectrum, which is amazing. He started his company, Game Freak, when he was 17, so I started my animation company at age 14.” **(ep.1)** * [Dani gives a tour of her office] “Right here is my collection of all kinds of achievements that I’ve, um, earned over these years… Best of all, there’s even Bachelor’s of Fine Arts, Master’s of Business Administration. The more awards I get, I think I need a bigger house.” **(ep.1)** * [Dani] [looks around the bar] “Wow, this place is like… it reminds me of art, of France. But did you know in France, they have the biggest animation festival in the whole world?” [Devin] “You talk about animation nonstop. It’s so funny. I want to hear about your dating life. How has that been going?” **(ep.1)** * [Devin] “What made you decide that you want to start dating again?” [Dani] “… it’s because, um… oh, I felt so lonely. I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place. A lot of people on the autism spectrum think I’m too smart and too motivated, while neurotypicals think I’m too strange” **(ep.1)** * [John] “I’m an aerospace engineer.” [Dani] “Aerospace. That sounds really cool.” [John] “As you can probably tell, I’m a pretty big nerd.” [Dani] “Aerospace engineering is really amazing, and I think animation could work with aerospace stuff. Talking about technology and motion graphics. Have you been to animation conventions or screenings or events to do with animation stuff? Animation’s my life.” [John] “No, I’ve never been.” [Awkward silence and camera zooms in on Dani’s disappointed smile]. **(ep.5)** * [John] “So, aside from that, what do you like to do outside of work?” [Dani] “So what I do outside of work, sometimes I just love to draw and, um, talk about all kinds of… Sometimes I like to research on Google on anything that is related to animation. I love to travel too. I’ve been to Tampa, Florida, because I teach animation there.” **(ep.5)** * [John] “What’s your favourite place and why?” [Dani] “England is one of my favourite places because, um, it’s not just the beautiful… the British port area, but this is where I taught animation at the University of Plymouth.” **(ep.5)** | * “I basically have every learning disability you could have. Um, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, ADHD, and autism. Um, it makes a lot of the different aspects of my life challenging… everything is affected by it.” **(ep.2)** * [Cian] “What does [autism] mean for you?”   [Kaelynn] “It’s hard to know what to say and what to do at the right times, and that’s kind of contributed to my dating life and how it’s so difficult.” **(ep.2)**   * Uses a dating app. Quirky and mocking music when she talks through her profile – making fun of her for having “thumbs down for capitalism” in her profile. **(ep.2)** * When there’s silence awkward during Kaelynn’s speed dates, music plays and the cameras focus closely on both her and her dates’ faces to emphasise the awkwardness. **(ep.2)** * [about speed dating] “I know Gracie said to give ‘em a chance, but, like, that’s hard. I was nice, I was polite, I listened, but I don’t think so.” **(ep.3)** * [Gracie] “Did you tell any of them your diagnosis?” [Kaelynn] “No. It just wasn’t relevant to the conversation and they didn’t, like, ask.” [Gracie] “So you don’t wanna, like, disclose that information?” [Kaelynn] “It’s just… bad things tend to come of it. They tend to make assumptions that are not correct and so it’s, like, easier to just show them what is true, and then explain it later.” **(ep.3)** * Kaelynn tells story of how she went on a first date and brought a service dog and he kept on asking why so eventually she told him that she had autism and “he left, and he blocker [her] number.” Says this is the reason why she doesn’t disclose it early on. **(ep.3)** * [Cian] “For you, what’s the hardest thing about being autistic? [Kaelynn] “Mm. I guess sometimes the isolation that comes with it. Having difficulty making genuine connection with people just because… just the, I don’t know, body language and the facial expression, that you miss that, you know… Maybe you’re talking too much or not talking enough, or not showing an interest, and people make assumptions that, “They’re not interested in me,” or “They don’t like me,” things like that. And so that kind of turns them away from pursuing a relationship with you when you want a relationship with that person. You just don’t know how to pursue it the right way. Um… And just kind of those miscommunications can be very isolating.” **(ep.4)** * Cian] What’s the hardest thing about dating?] [Kaelynn] I really dislike the awkward silences that come about just naturally. Um, trying to find a way to fill them and always trying to make sure you’re dressed nicely and [begins speaking quicker and quicker] you’ve got your hair done, makeup done, and you’re sitting the right way and you’re not making a mess with your food and you’re making polite conversation and looking at them, answering questions, trying to ask them questions, but you don’t know what to ask them ‘cause they’ve already told you all the things that you might ask. So that part’s hard” **(ep.5)** * [getting ready for date with Peter] “I’m very nervous because I’m afraid we’re going to run out of things to talk about. So now I’m googling topics to talk about on a second date.” **(ep.5)** | * [Cian] “What was it like finding out about your neurodiversity? [Steve] “Growing up, I always knew deep, deep down that I didn’t really fit in. Inside of my brain, I knew something was different. I might be a little goofy. I might be a little bit weird, but you know what? The intentions are always good.” **(ep.3)** * [Elaine] “When I first met Steve, no one had ever spoken to him about neurodiversity, ever. When Steve was young, and we’re talking over 50 years ago, we did not have the understanding of autism that we have today. So Steve’s behaviour was looked at as being weird. So my work with him is to help him let go of the guilt, the shame, the feeling bad about himself, that society brought onto him and he internalised.” **(ep.4)** * [asked about fears or reservations] “For me, it’s kind of, um… going into the world of the unknown. And maybe I’m a little different… But I want to share that with somebody. I want to embrace it.” **(ep.4)** * [describing dating] “it’s like a whole new world. I’m nervous, uh, to be honest. I… I have anxiety about it, because I’ve never really gone down that road, and I… I would love to.” **(ep.4)** * Didn’t understand that Connie was asking him on another date. **(ep.6)** | * Quirky music playing when Subodh is showing his incredibly impressive maths skills – downplays his talent. **(ep.2)** * Subodh’s family and Jennifer set up a practice area for his date “to look at those little moments of social interaction that we don’t think about that are so built into just a dinner date” [Jennifer] **(ep.3)** | * “All these stones I have over here are certainly not for any practical use, but they’re interesting conversation pieces. They add character to the room.” **(ep.1)** * [James] “I’m never going to use them. I’m just keeping them there as conversation pieces.” [Cian] “Who comes in here for the conversation pieces?” [James] “Um, actually, nobody really. This is… It’s just… I guess it’s for my own benefit.” **(ep.1)** * Quirky, staccato background music plays during the shots of James’ possessions, creating a somewhat comical tone that emphasises the perceived eccentricity of his collections **(ep.1)**. * [William] “When you’re asking her questions and things like that, make sure it’s not like you’re just going through a checklist, like asking one, asking the next.” [James] “No, certainly not.” [William] “Ask a few different questions, a few follow-up questions, like, you know, so that way it kind of really shows that genuine interest. You know, you do a good amount of talking but at the same time, make sure that she’s able to contribute just as much.” **(ep.1)** * James and Emma’s second date at a medieval Renaissance fair is accompanied by quirky and playful music, suggesting that the date is eccentric and potentially humorous (**ep.5)**. |
| **Infantilisation** | * [narrator] “Abbey is meeting David. He likes lions and being in a car wash. He doesn’t like horror movies or clowns.” **(ep.1)** * During Abbey and David’s first meeting, upbeat and eccentric music plays, which is reminiscent of a children’s interaction **(ep.1).** * When David asks Abbey to be his girlfriend, light-hearted background music plays, framing the scene as charmingly innocent and childlike **(ep.6).** * Camera zooms in on each of Abbey and David’s faces when they are awkwardly kissing after they become officially monogamous – inviting the audience to laugh. **(ep.6)** | * [narrator] “Dani is meeting Soloman. He likes writing poetry and good vibes. He doesn’t like messy eaters or aggressive birds.” **(ep.1)** | * [Gracie] “She’s a little, like, over-the-top, excited, bubbly kind of person and so she needs someone cool, calm, collected, consistent that appreciates her strengths. Sometimes it can be challenging to find someone who doesn’t write her off based off a diagnosis… If she wants a partner, I want her to have one. You know, I want her to have a family if she wants one, have a house if she wants one. But if she decides she doesn’t, I’ll keep her.” **(ep.4)** | * [Steve’s personal assistant] “I feel like I’m sending my son to the prom [laughs]” | * Quirky, up-beat music when it goes back to Subodh on his “first-ever date” (keep reminding audience of this as well) – makes them seem adorable rather than romantic **(ep.3)** * [narrator] Subodh is meeting Rachel. She like’s rubbing a dog’s belly and salsa dancing. She doesn’t like skunks or people losing their temper.” [Whimsical music and exaggerated visuals accompany this narration]. **(ep.3)** * Quirky music and quick flicks between Subodh and his date Rachel when speaking to make it seem more quick-paced and chaotic. **(ep.3)** * When there is a pause in conversation awkward music plays and the camera shot is taken from further back of both of Subodh and Rachel to emphasise the silence and awkwardness. **(ep.3)** * [Subodh’s mum after he asked Rachel to be his girlfriend] Today I’m crying because every little thing has to be celebrated, and this is a huge celebration. Every little thing, I celebrate for him”. **(ep.6)** | * [narrator] “James is meeting Emma. She likes musical theatre and ghost-hunting. She doesn’t like country music or being tickled.” **(ep.3)** * [James] Dad! Stop it, all right? You’re annoying me. [Lawrence chuckles]   [Mum] Oh James, I’m sorry. Why is everyone annoying you?  [James] I told you, there’s too much micromanagement. **(ep.4)** |

*Figure 2*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Language** | **Music** | **Facial Expressions** |
| **Romance** | * “I don’t want to be single forever, no. ‘Cause I don’t wanna feel lonely.” **(Abbey, ep.1)** * “Being in love made me feel romantic, I felt safe, and it meant a lot to me.” **(Abbey, ep.1)** * “I’d like to go on a date with a boy who has a lot in common with me… [it] is the most important thing. So he can understand my autism, we could do things… maybe we can go on a double date with another autistic couple. Double date!” **(Abbey, ep.1)** * [Cian] “Can you describe your ideal partner?” [James] “I would like a woman who is similar to me, but not an exact copy, obviously. I wouldn’t expect to find a woman who was a radiant, unearthly beauty, but, obviously, I want a woman who is still fairly attractive. A woman who’s attractive to the point that when I see her, I do not feel a desire to avert my gaze, you know? And a woman who is very big on hygiene and well groomed. I don’t think that’s asking too much, is it? I hope not.” **(James, ep.1)** * “Very sadly I have had no luck with online dating so far” **(James, ep.1)** * “so relationships have always been a tough spot for me. I’ve had a few girlfriends in the past, but they were very short-term relationships. Didn’t last long, never got very serious. There was one woman of whom I was very fond. I mean, things seemed to be going pretty well between me and her, but it turned out I was ready for it to be really serious and she was not.” **(James, ep.1)** * Unfortunately, it’s just so hard to find a boyfriend… You could imagine, I have to kiss many frogs to find the right guy. It’s not just about the looks. I’m looking for somebody who is motivated and has really great hygiene, because I don’t like bad breath [wags finger].” **(Dani, ep.1)** * [Cian] Why do you want to find love? * [Kaelynn – matter of factly] I don’t want to die alone… Being around people is draining but I don’t like to be alone. I like to be with my friends. I like to be with my family. I don’t like to be really alone just day to day. So I think having love, having a boyfriend, would really, I don’t know, be helpful” **(Kaelynn, ep.2)** * [Cian] “Do you ever get lonely?” [Steve] “Oh gosh, do I ever. I get really lonely here at home when I’m alone. To have a lovely lady, oh my goodness, that would be an absolute dream come true.” **(Steve, ep.3)** * “I have a fear that I’m not going to meet anybody and I’m just going to be alone, like I have been for quite some time. I think I’m meant to be with a person, with a woman. This loneliness thing is, uh… It’s not for me.” **(Steve, ep.3)** |  |  |
| **Sexuality** | * Had a “practice boyfriend” which she describes as “somebody that you… use for practicing… kissing” **(Dani, ep.1)** * [Dani’s aunt] explains that Dani “wanted to learn how to kiss so we looked up a YouTube video about how to learn how to kiss, and they used a cupcake to show how to kiss. So then she picked that up and started using that with boys” **(Dani, ep.1)** |  | * Dani speaks with a factual tone and serious demeanour when discussing wanting to learn how to kiss and practicing using a cupcake and “practice” boyfriends (**Dani, ep.1)**. * [Dani demonstrates how she kisses using an imaginary cupcake] explaining that you “hold up a cupcake, like you’re licking the icing”. [aunt and uncle] Uh… [uncle] No. [aunt and uncle laugh]. [aunt] “Okay, you’re grossing out Uncle.” [camera zooms in on Dani’s uncle awkwardly smiling and glancing to the side]. |
| **Heterosexuality** | * [Jennifer to Subodh] “when you come to the table, this is just a nice thing to do. If you pull the seat out… And you just say… Go like this [gestures to sit down]”. **(Subodh, ep.3)** * [Subodh] “Do you want to split the bill?” [Jennifer] “Absolutely. That would be fine.” [Mum] “Subodh, I think you should not ask for splitting bill on the first date. As a man, you should be paying the bill.” **(Subodh, ep.3)** |  | * Subodh goes to order first on his practice date and both his mother tells him “No, no, no” and Jennifer points to herself, indicating for him to allow her to order first. **(Subodh, ep.3)** |
| **Supercrip** | * [Cian] “When was Abbey diagnosed with autism?” [Christine] “She was maybe two, and she was putting everything in her mouth at the time, running around… like, it was a chore. I remember thinking, “God I can’t wait till this stage is over, ‘cause this is really awful.” But then I put her in pre—preschool and four days into it, the preschool called me and said… [whimpers] [crying] “We can’t have your kid in here.” So the journey began. I took her in, I got her diagnosed, and I didn’t want to believe it.” **(Abbey, ep.1)** * [Christine] “what she’s doing now, I could have never imagined she would have been capable of doing” **(Abbey, ep.1)** * [Cian] “So Christine how do you feel about Abbey finding love?” [Christine] “Speechless. [Cries]… For me this is like a gift… and I’m grateful.” **(Abbey, ep.6)** |  |  |
| **Othering** | * “All these stones I have over here are certainly not for any practical use, but they’re interesting conversation pieces. They add character to the room.” **(James, ep.1)** * [James] “I’m never going to use them. I’m just keeping them there as conversation pieces.” [Cian] “Who comes in here for the conversation pieces?” [James] “Um, actually, nobody really. This is… It’s just… I guess it’s for my own benefit.” **(James, ep.1)** * [Dani] “Animation is my greatest passion.” [Cian] “Tell me about your company.” [Dani] “I got the inspiration from Satoshi Tajiri, the creator of Pokémon. And he’s on the autism spectrum, which is amazing. He started his company, Game Freak, when he was 17, so I started my animation company at age 14.” **(Dani, ep.1)** * [Dani gives a tour of her office] “Right here is my collection of all kinds of achievements that I’ve, um, earned over these years… Best of all, there’s even Bachelor’s of Fine Arts, Master’s of Business Administration. The more awards I get, I think I need a bigger house.” **(Dani, ep.1)** * [Dani] [looks around the bar] “Wow, this place is like… it reminds me of art, of France. But did you know in France, they have the biggest animation festival in the whole world?” [Devin] “You talk about animation nonstop. It’s so funny. I want to hear about your dating life. How has that been going?” **(Dani, ep.1)** | * Quirky, staccato background music plays during the shots of James’ possessions, creating a somewhat comical tone that emphasises the perceived eccentricity of his collections **(James, ep.1)**. | * [John] “I’m an aerospace engineer.” [Dani] “Aerospace. That sounds really cool.” [John] “As you can probably tell, I’m a pretty big nerd.” [Dani] “Aerospace engineering is really amazing, and I think animation could work with aerospace stuff. Talking about technology and motion graphics. Have you been to animation conventions or screenings or events to do with animation stuff? Animation’s my life.” [John] “No, I’ve never been.” [Awkward silence and camera zooms in on Dani’s disappointed smile]. **(Dani, ep.5)** * [John] “So, aside from that, what do you like to do outside of work?” [Dani] “So what I do outside of work, sometimes I just love to draw and, um, talk about all kinds of… Sometimes I like to research on Google on anything that is related to animation. I love to travel too. I’ve been to Tampa, Florida, because I teach animation there.” [John looks uneasy and at a loss for words]. **(Dani, ep.5)** |
| **Infantilisation** | * [William] “When you’re asking her questions and things like that, make sure it’s not like you’re just going through a checklist, like asking one, asking the next.” [James] “No, certainly not.” [William] “Ask a few different questions, a few follow-up questions, like, you know, so that way it kind of really shows that genuine interest. You know, you do a good amount of talking but at the same time, make sure that she’s able to contribute just as much.” **(James, ep.1)** | * James and Emma’s second date at a medieval Renaissance fair is accompanied by quirky and playful music, suggesting that the date is eccentric and potentially humorous **(James, ep.5)**. * [narrator] Subodh is meeting Rachel. She like’s rubbing a dog’s belly and salsa dancing. She doesn’t like skunks or people losing their temper.” The exaggerated visuals and whimsical music that accompanies this trivialises and infantilises these autistic individuals **(Subodh, ep.3)** * During Abbey and David’s first meeting, upbeat and eccentric music plays, which is reminiscent of a children’s interaction **(Abbey, ep.1).** * When David asks Abbey to be his girlfriend, light-hearted background music plays, framing the scene as charmingly innocent and childlike **(Abbey, ep.6).** |  |