THE PRODUCTION OF AUTISTIC SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY IN REALITY TELEVISION

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Graduate and Professional School of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August 2023

Major Subject: Communication

ABSTRACT

Most research conducted on autism and media thus far has not included autistic participants and their reception of media about them. This dissertation offers a triangulated analysis of the construction(s) of autistic sexual subjectivity through reality television, social media engagement fostered by reality television, and myriad sources of autistic community. This project consists of two types of analyses. The first type of analysis is an interpretive textual analysis. This analysis is used for the second season of the Australian version of the reality series entitled *Love on the Spectrum.* The second type of analysis is thematic analysis, and this is used on both data obtained from interviews with autistic people as well as Twitter data collected from the hashtag #LoveOnTheSpectrum. In this dissertation I argue reality television has been configured as a crucial tool for the development and understanding of sexual belonging for autistic people, most often in opposition to the exclusionary standards found therein. Examining the use of reality television as a technology of the sexual self for a particular group of people, in this case, autistic people, enables deeply contextualized knowledge that also provides insight into how we understand sexuality, gender, disability, and other social constructs more broadly.

DEDICATION

In honor of my sister, Lauren Rio Landmark, for whom I do everything because she will never

get the chance to.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people without whom I would not have been able to complete this dissertation.

To my advisor, Dr. Cara Wallis. I can never thank you enough for your brilliant guidance, attention to detail, and extensive time and effort you put into me and everything I've pursued. You accepted me as an advisee late in the game, and I'm still reeling in gratitude from that decision. You're the smartest and coolest person I know, and I'm so thankful you've pushed me, even when it was uncomfortable, into the scholar I am today. You've gone above and beyond for me and all of your advisees, and I hope you know you now have us as fans for life.

To my committee: Dr. Antonio La Pastina, affectionately known to me as "LP," I can never thank you enough for your kindness and mentorship. Not only did you support me early in the program by agreeing to do an independent study with me on disability and media over one summer, but you approached it as a learning opportunity for yourself. That is just one example of the role you played in developing my confidence by letting me take the reins. You are one of the only professors from whom I was never afraid to receive feedback because I knew you'd always be encouraging and understanding. Dr. Anna Wiederhold Wolfe, you blow my mind every time we speak because you always have something helpful and enlightening to say. I appreciate your dedication to supporting graduate students in this department generally and myself specifically. Teaching your dialogue class changed my life. I learned through that experience as well as through every time you facilitated a meeting or a class how to make sure everybody was heard, and I will use that skill for the rest of my life. Dr. Laura Stough, it has been an honor to work

with you. I grew up knowing and respecting who you were and your role in supporting my mom through her dissertation; therefore, I jumped at the chance to learn from you. You have supported me in so many ways: you taught me my favorite qualitative methodology, you opened doors for me by letting me assist with the Center on Disability and Development's Directory of Community Resources for People with Disabilities, and you have pushed me to be the best Critical Disability Studies scholar I can be. I am indebted to you. Thank you, dear committee, for your support.

To my parents: To my mom, Dr. Leena Landmark, the first Dr. Landmark, I can never thank you enough. You're my number one fan, and I am yours. You showed me this was possible, you convinced me I was capable, and you introduced me to people who were, and will continue to be, instrumental in my journey as a scholar. Your selfless support–emotionally, financially, intellectually–carried me through this process. You are one of the only people who actually listens to me when I need to talk through something, even if it's not in your area, even if it's not something that interests you, even if your workload is, as it usually is, the size of a mountain, even if I wasn't my most pleasant self to be around, etc. Thank you to my dad, Quinn Landmark, for always being someone I can count on. You showed me what it means to be a hard worker, and I couldn't have made it through this experience without that skill. I'll always be your Peanut. I love you both more than anything else.

To Paige Jennings, my twin flame, my best friend. I feel so lucky to have found someone who is "basically the same person as me" (as I usually describe you to others) in this graduate program. Not everyone gets a PhD *and* a best friend out of this process. Every milestone was made better because we did it together. I could not have finished this PhD without your advice, friendship, consideration, and laughter. You have been like a sister to me.

To Macy Dunklin, your good humor, baking abilities, and appreciation for my special interest fun facts were a bright spot during dark days of dissertation writing. Your consistency in offering to support me, whether that be copy editing tips, getting me a Redbull from the corner store, or walking Bonnie, was extremely appreciated.

To Dr. Rhonda Black, this dissertation wouldn't exist without you. You selflessly poured your time, connections, and sincere interest into me and my work. The idea for this project started in the virtual discussions for the Social and Sexual Concerns Interest Network of AAIDD that you organized. It's been an honor to work with you as a research collaborator, but I now also consider you a friend. I am extremely grateful for you.

To my friends in the department, past and present: Dr. Rebecca Costantini, the first graduate student I looked up to, my guide post, thank you for your unwavering support and friendship. I hope I can be like you when I grow up. Dr. Asha Winfield, thank you for your guidance, commiseration, and inspiring passion. Yael Avnaim, Kelly Jo Eblen, Dr. Luna Wu, Mariana Rodriguez, Kyra Heatly, Jed Chalupa, thank you for the fun memories.

To faculty and leaders in and out of the department: Dr. Kristan Poirot, my first advisor, thank you for letting me cry in your office and for changing my life with your Gender and Black Freedom Movements class that opened my eyes in my first semester. Dr. Srividaya Ramasubramanian, my advisor for the first half of this program, I am so grateful for the opportunities you gave me. Nancy Street, your kindness welcomed me as soon as I stepped on campus. Dr. Dan Humphrey, thank you for believing in me and sharing your queer theory and film studies wisdom.

To my therapist, Mary Dinkel, your support during this journey was priceless. Thank you for giving me the tools to get through this process and for genuinely caring for me.

To my ten participants, this dissertation is because of and for you. Your voices matter. Thank you for trusting me to include them.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Professor(s) Cara Wallis [chair], Antonio La Pastina, and Anna Wiederhold Wolfe of the Department of Communication and Journalism [Home Department] and Professor Emeritus Laura Stough formerly of the Department of Educational Psychology [Outside Department].

All work conducted for the dissertation was completed by the student independently.

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INTRODUCTION

Love on the Spectrum (LOTS) is an extremely popular Australian reality

television show about autistic people dating that aired globally on Netflix on July 22,

2020. Within the first fifteen seconds of the trailer for the second season of *Love on the*

Spectrum, fan-favorite Mark states, "We *all* want our happily ever after, but it's more

complex than that" (Netflix, 2021, emphasis added). Unlike most reality shows found in

the western genre, the producers of *LOTS* do not attempt to foment drama–for example,

by placing the daters in fantastical locations or by introducing arbitrary rules that

eliminate "contestants." Instead, *LOTS* follows several 20-30-somethings as they explore

"the unpredictable world of dating" (Netflix, 2019) in an ostensibly unmanipulated

format. The cast go on dates orchestrated by the producers of *LOTS*, including speed

dating events, dates with other cast members, and blind dates. The autistic cast are most

often partnered with other autistic people; however, they are occasionally, albeit rarely,

partnered with dates who are neurotypical or have other disabilities such as Down

syndrome. Each cast member is first introduced through a one-on-one interview with the

producer. The cast members are shown interacting with their families, friends, and

"relationship coaches" at their homes and in public social settings. They are shown on

their dates, and often these dates are interrupted by the producers for one-on-one "check

in" interviews in which cast members are asked by the producers to reflect on the

progress of their dates. The cast occasionally meet with the relationship coach to discuss their dating journey and get advice.

As Mark's quote makes evident, the show's driving force is the search for "happily ever afters" with their one and only true loves. Just as with other reality television shows about disability, *LOTS* is a show crafted to introduce to mainstream television audiences a population that has previously been sparsely present, and therefore rather than manipulate "reality" into extremes for novelty, the novelty of simply seeing autistic people do something "ordinary" such as date other people is seemingly enough to bypass the fantasy or extraordinary elements often found in the genre (Cleary, 2016).

Love on the Spectrum is currently the only English language reality television show exclusively about autistic people dating. Western (United States, United Kingdom, Australia) entertainment media have seen an uptick in autism representation. However, despite increasing prevalence of representations of autistic people in film and television (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021; Rohr, 2015), representations of autistic people relating to topics of sexuality (including dating) in media are sparse with nonnormative sexualities even sparser (Cleary, 2016; Malinowska, 2018).

Despite receiving overwhelmingly positive reviews in the popular press, the first season of *LOTS* was met with criticism by autistic advocates for its substantial emphasis on heteronormativity (Luterman, 2020). In a western culture of "sex negativity," heteronormativity can be defined as the cultural belief that the only "acceptable" sexuality or erotic behavior is that which is "heterosexual, married, monogamous,

procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, vanilla" (Rubin, 1984, p. 11). Further, normative sex is often defined as between people of the same race (ideally, white), outcome driven (orgasm, marriage, reproduction), and mitigated by the presence of "love" (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Influenced by Foucault (1978), Gayle Rubin (1984) argued these norms are relentlessly "nourished" through media and are part of a social framework of formal and informal controls that repress and produce sexual subjectivity (p. 12). Sexual subjectivity is widely considered to be an essential component of agency and humanity (Martin, 1996; Wilkerson, 2012) and is often assumed to correlate with the subject's "true" or inner self (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Foucault, 1978).

Autistic people are capable of and experience issues related to sexual subjectivity, and previous research suggests autistic people are more likely to identify with nonnormative sexualities and genders (Dewinter, Graaf, & Beeger, 2017; Kimball et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2020). However, both fictional and nonfictional film and television representations of autism are either pathologizing according to the medical model's induced cultural anxieties about autism (Osteen, 2007) or offer narratives of infantilization and/or heteronormativity (Darke, 2004; Malinowska, 2018; Prochnow, 2014; Vertoont, 2018). Specifically, nonfiction film and television media of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) such as reality television, predominantly engage in "hyperpositive" (Prochnow, 2014, p. 147), idealized (Cleary, 2016) and infantilized (Brooks, 2018; Hamilton, 2019) representations of heteronormative romance that do not align with lived experiences of autistic people (Baldys, 2012; Malinowska, 2018;

Schalk, 2016). In both *LOTS* and *The Undateables*—the only other reality television show about disabled people dating—episode and seasonal narrative arcs privilege heteronormative goals such as misogynistic gender roles and the acquisition of a monogamous, lifetime partner of the opposite sex and completely exclude discussions of sexuality (Vertoont, 2018). Faced with these criticisms, the second and most recent season of *Love on the Spectrum* introduced more LGBTQ+ daters. Although this introduction could be seen as an improvement that is more encapsulating of autistic peoples' experiences, it still seemed to prioritize heteronormativity through exalting monogamous, "true love" relationships, predominantly between white autistic people that occupy traditional gender roles. In this way, *LOTS* is possibly perpetuating inaccurate and harmfully normative expectations of sexuality for autistic people while simultaneously being lauded as progressive (Luterman, 2020). Therefore, while the first season could more easily be critiqued by lay audiences for its lack of non-normative sexual representation, a deeper analysis of heteronormative norms produced in the second, and supposedly improved, season is needed.

In this dissertation, I examine contemporary representations of autistic sexuality in the second season of *LOTS* and explicate the social practices and conventions found there that produce expectations for autistic sexual subjectivity. I then put these analyses in conversation with how autistic people themselves engage with shows like this to form their sexual subjectivity. How autistic people engage with and form sexual subjectivity especially in relation to their media reception practices has not been explored in disability studies literature. Therefore, I will seek to understand how autistic people use

these representations, if at all, to conduct themselves as sexual subjects by using *LOTS* as a concrete example. While the findings in this dissertation are not meant to be generalizable, *LOTS* can be used to provide new insight into the formation of autistic sexual subjectivity in relation to media representations that could be applicable to critical analysis of other media texts. Based on interviews with autistic people and analysis of social media posts made in response to *LOTS*, I argue that *LOTS* is operating as a cultural technology (Ouellette & Hay, 2008) that can be used to configure autistic people into sexual subjects.

Autistic people have already begun to respond to, critique, and publicly analyze representations on *LOTS* and other disability reality shows on social media platforms, often through the use of hashtags. Based on preliminary analyses of Tweets made by autistic users in response to *LOTS* season one, these users' responses included expressions of concern for the inauthentic representations that are currently available as well as expressions of approval for narratives found to be empowering (Landmark & Black, 2021; Vertoont, 2018). Social media platforms are ideal sites for these analyses because they give often-geographically distant disabled viewers the space to react to and critique media representations (Haller, 2010; Thoreau, 2006; Vertoont, 2018), to explore and validate expressions of queer and disabled identifies (Miller, 2017; Miller et al., 2020), and to challenge prevailing assumptions of autism (Osteen, 2007). Thus far, however, these analyses have not explicitly engaged with reality television as a cultural technology that attempts to shape autistic sexual subjectivity. This project will add to this literature by further exploring autistic peoples' reactions expressed on the Internet as

well as fill a gap by interviewing autistic people themselves in a field in which perspectives of autistic audiences are completely absent (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021).

In the following, I will elaborate on my theoretical framework, provide historical context on autism as a diagnosis and autism and sexuality, review the literature on film and television representations of autism–specifically on reality television–and review the literature on social media use by autistic people. I will then overview my methodology including data collection and data analysis processes. Finally, I will include chapter outlines.

Theoretical Framework: Technologies of the Autistic Sexual Self

In this section I draw on critical/cultural, feminist, and disability theories of subjectivity and power to theorize what I call "technologies of the autistic sexual self." This theorization describes how autistic subjects utilize technologies such as television, social media, and community engagement to reproduce or restructure their sexual subjectification. Foucault (1982) explicitly states his work on how human beings are made to be subjects is neither theory nor methodology. This framework draws on Foucault's (1988) conceptualization of "technologies of the self," his term for how individuals transform themselves into subjects. In order to better understand the "multiple logics, discourses, and power relations" within the use of reality television as technology by autistic people, this framework is also grounded in critical and cultural studies (Wallis, 2013, p. 13). Therefore, this framework also draws on theorizations of the autistic subject found in Critical Autism Studies literature (CAS), and elements of

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Critical Sexuality Studies (CSS) that specifically focus on how power operates through sex (Woods et al., 2018). This theoretical framework draws on the Foucauldian logic that autistic subjects conduct themselves using technologies of the self, that one of these technologies is the institution of reality television, and that reality television transmits standards of sexuality by which autistic subjects should conduct themselves.

Technologies of the Self

To understand Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self I must first begin with a broader discussion of Foucault's work on sexuality and subjectivity. In his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) interrogates how the rendering of sex and sexuality into discourse meant individuals must infinitely seek to uncover, reveal, and confess their sexuality, and it is this confessing or telling that enables the creation of the sexual subject. Once the sexual subject has been created, it can then be controlled/reformed/disciplined through normalizing systems of domination, e.g., if it is constructed as a "deviant" sexuality. Foucault's (1978) work here reveals the purpose in expanding the discourse of sexuality–or, bringing deviant/pathologized/peripheral sexualities into the public sphere–is to enable their condemnation. Through various techniques of power such as surveillance, normalization, and classification, individuals are disciplined into maintaining social norms (Foucault, 1975). In his later work, Foucault (1988) continues to conceptualize power beyond the disciplinary by saying sexual subjectivity is not just condemned/controlled/disciplined by outside entities–like a medical institution–but individuals modify their own conduct in response to these forces.

In a turning away from a focus on technologies of power and domination (Foucault, 1975), later Foucault (1988) conceptualized technologies of the self as techniques that "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (p. 18). Technologies of the self as part of a theoretical framework is especially relevant for this study as it was originally conceptualized by Foucault to understand technologies related to sexuality. Technologies of the self requires us to not only ask, how does one develop knowledge about themselves as a sexual subject, but also how has one been compelled to "decipher" themselves–or, convert themselves into normality– "in regard to what was [sexually] forbidden" (Foucault, 1988, p. 17)? In other words, what are the techniques, tools, resources, rationalities, etc. one uses in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, immortality, etc.?

Technologies of the self emerged from Foucault's work on governmentality, or "the conduct of conduct." The concept of governmentality entails an understanding of how we are enticed by institutions, rationalities, actors, etc. to conduct ourselves and how we are conducted in order to ensure the prosperity and well-being of the state and our own well-being. In the project of neoliberal capitalism with its focus on the individual, governmentality explains the tactics of how the citizen becomes governable. Not only are citizens subjected to and by powers of domination, but citizens are enticed to transform themselves based on normalizing discourses of power that are diffused

through institutions and market industries such as medical and educational institutions, the prison industrial complex, mass and popular media, etc. Expanding on Foucault's conceptualization, Dean (1999, 2002) described the two dimensions of governmentality operating as a "facilitative" dimension and an authoritarian dimension. The facilitative dimension describes how subjects have been instructed and urged to "think of ourselves as self-managing individuals… enterprising persons, and active citizens" (Dean, 1999, p. 200). The "authoritarian" dimension describes the coercion of citizens assumed not to have the capacity to exercise *responsible* autonomy and "the attempt to 'enfold' the assumed virtues found in civil society" (Dean, 1999, p. 206). As critical cultural scholars like Wallis (2013) have shown, technologies of the self operate both as liberation found in the autonomous actions taken by subjects as well as constraint found in the various enticements and coercions placed upon subjects to exercise or exemplify the virtues of responsible citizenry.

Feminist cultural studies scholarship has theorized television as an institution of cultural technology at length. After analyzing television representations of women since the 1970s, Dow (1996) was instrumental in arguing television operates as a form of cultural production of Western feminism as well as American life in general. In an earlier analysis of the role of television and its emergence as a central feature in the nuclear family home, Spigel (1992) argued television discursively constructed gender norms, but that also these norms were constructed or "negotiated" through critiques by women in women's magazines. Similarly, Brundson (1997) argued the Western female

consumer is produced not only by popular film and television representations but also by feminist critiques of these representations.

Ouellette and Hay (2008) specifically draw on the concept of television as an institution or resource of governmentality to explain how reality television operates as a "cultural technology." They argue reality television is a cultural technology in that it sets normative rules/expectations/standards that subjects must conduct themselves in relation to and in which state power is diffused through places like the self-help industry. Ouelette and Hay (2008) called this "lifestyle instruction" that was intentionally fostered through rationalities of government deregulation and welfare reform (p. 30). In other words, rather than provide public services via the government in order to serve the best interests of the nation-state, the reality television industry in particular became "integral to living, shaping and often improving one's life" without the direct oversight of the government (ibid, p. 29). Television was reinvented to emphasize self-reliance in transforming individuals into ideal citizen-subjects, and this is best understood and exemplified through reality television.

Shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Renovate My Family*, etc. attempt to integrate individuals that were previously considered undesirable citizens into the fold of ideal consumer citizen-subjects that are able to contribute to society. Ouellette and Hay (2008) argue this integration occurs because reality television is a "citizenship game" in which it "presents itself as a resource for establishing the rules and standards (constitutions) of belonging and participation" (p. 174). The "worthiness" of the subjects as citizens is then tested by making them learn, master, and perform

citizenship freely and responsibly. In a textual analysis of "self-transformation" reality television programs, Skeggs (2009) found the positioning of certain groups of people, in their case working class people, as in need of transformation according to neoliberal principles of individualism implied they are inadequate, deficient, etc. unless they "fix" themselves through individual effort. Integral to both Ouellette and Hay's (2008) and Skeggs' (2009) argument here is the fact that these attempts to "fold in" undesirable subjects into citizenship often fail and thereby reinforce dominant notions of ideal citizenship. For example, Katherine Sender's (2005) analysis of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* demonstrated that its representations of gay men served to reform heteronormative masculinity to be accordant with neoliberal ideals such as consumerism rather than primarily challenge stereotypes about gay men or include them as citizens/members of the nation-state. Sadler (2022) argued the recently remade *Queer Eye* continues to "instruct" viewers in the rules and standards of neoliberalism by representing those who do not succeed at being driven, self-managing, "good capitalists" as failures (par. 7).

Although perhaps less explicit than reality makeover shows like *The Biggest Loser*, *LOTS* is folding in autistic people as contributors to society by "making them over" into subjects capable of contributing to the biopolitical project (Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1996), while also representing them as failing to achieve the standards of citizenship. In other words, in the service of neoliberal capitalism, governmentality encompasses the strategies used to coerce or entice individuals to conduct themselves into contributors of society, what Rose (1996) calls "the enterprising self." I argue that

rather than only having the goal of "making over" autistic people into successful, normative sexual subjects in *LOTS*, their status as abject others in biopolitical projects is primarily maintained while they are simultaneously transformed into being capable of serving the nation-state.

Previously, autistic people–and all disabled people–were represented primarily as burdens or parasites on the nation-state's resources. Broderick and Roscigno (2022) describe the recent move away from this type of representation as the Autism Industrial Complex. They argue it is occurring through media in which "autism narratives are being exported for global consumption" (ibid, p. 78). The Autism Industrial Complex draws on Mitchell and Snyder's (2015) concept of "ablenationalism," or the exploitation of disabled people by rhetorically and representationally using them as symbols of the nation-state's "superiority, morality, and exceptionalism" (Schalk, 2016, p. 36). This moral superiority and exceptionalism is elicited through "including" autistic people in the "citizenship game" that is reality television (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 174). Even though the autistic people in *LOTS* may not succeed at freely and responsibly mastering/performing sexuality, a key part of neoliberal citizenship in a biopolitical project, their presence in a show that is a resource of "lifestyle instruction" implies they could or should strive to achieve this standard of ideal citizenship.

According to Broderick and Roscigno (2022), autistic people are now being defined and constructed as capable of contributing to the economy through their commodification in media, and this benefits the nation-state not only by increasing economic prosperity but also by highlighting its moral superiority for including

previously undesirable subjects as potentially capable of achieving ideal citizenship. This "inclusion" of autism in media is likely due to capitalism's need for ever-expanding markets. This Autism Industrial Complex completely fits within understandings of television as intentionally commercial. Cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams (1974) argued television's very "character" is to serve the commercial interests of those in power. Through advertisements and the transmission of cultural norms that are shaped by and dependent on capitalist rationalities, reality television is operating as an institution or cultural technology in its recently increasing commodification of autism.

As autistic people are being represented more often in media–in the service of economic prosperity and advancing dominant cultural norms–they are being represented less as burdens and more often through the use of norms of inclusion that are intended to exemplify the exceptionality and morality of neoliberalism (Schalk, 2016). That is, autistic people are now more often being included in reality television as potentially capable of mastering and performing ideal citizenship. Though they are constructed as failures in this endeavor, as they most often are, the shows, operating as an example of reality television as an institution or cultural technology, are still considered moral for including a previously stigmatized population. This move in media representation has been documented in the case of other marginalized groups. Cornel West (1990) argued the introduction of Black people into mainstream popular culture followed a format of assimilation, i.e., "we're just like you" narratives, homogenization, and "value-laden, socially loaded, and ideologically charged" images that were touted as "positive" and "authentic," with the ostensible goal of countering negative stereotypes (p. 110).

Similarly, Guidotto (2006)–and others such as Hennessy (1994)–described "the commodification of gay identity," also referred to as rainbow capitalism, in which queer people are increasingly represented in mainstream media with maximizing profits rather than liberation as the intended, but less obvious, goal (par. 3).

I argue *LOTS* is the first example of a similar project of exploitation and commodification of autistic people with neurotypical people as the target audience. That is, an autistic identity is increasingly visible in popular culture with the intent by media producers of increasing profits and maintaining cultural norms. This show is focusing on and constructing a specific type of autistic subject that can be configured, at least televisually, into a symbol of "inclusion" that benefits the neoliberal economy. Neurotypical people, as the intended audience, may see this construction of a specific type of autistic subject and adopt the perception that neoliberalism is superior, moral, etc. for its "inclusion" of the abject other, even though this "inclusion" does not include autistic people succeeding at mastering and performing these ideal cultural norms. Neurotypical people are also intended to configure themselves into ideal sexual subjects based on *LOTS*'s transmission and valorization of sexual norms. Audience reception with autistic people is needed to understand how such a reality show operates as a technology of the autistic self if they are not the intended audience and if they are never intended to succeed at adopting these norms.

Autistic people as a population have previously been subjected to eugenics, sterilization, etc. due to the constructions of autistic people as abject others in biopolitical projects of sexuality and reproduction. While reality television about autism

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is primarily transforming autistic subjects into potentially unwilling contributors to the state through their commodification–and exploitation–these reality shows are still maintaining normative, "common sense," discourse about sexuality, such as that ideal sexuality is performed by neurotypical people. The diffusion of technologies of governance into institutions such as reality television absolves the state from the responsibilities associated with transforming people into sexual, and therefore reproductive, subjects. For example, rather than provide comprehensive sexual education through educational systems, it is easier, more cost efficient, and safer to diffuse discourses of normative sexuality through popular cultural institutions such as reality television. It is important here to investigate both how the institution of reality television determines acceptable, possible, and positive conduct for sexuality as well as how/if autistic individuals use this institution to conduct themselves in accordance with sexual normativity despite still being othered as inferior.

Although many scholars critique Foucault's conceptualization of power as "one-sided," reduced to domination, and lacking recognition of "embodied engagement of the agent" (Hughes, 2015, p. 90; Osteen, 2007), it is widely accepted that Foucault's later work, particularly technologies of the self, addresses these critiques. Although some poststructuralists believe–in varying degrees of extremity–that people do not have agency in and of themselves/by default, a theoretical perspective of technologies of the self acknowledges that spaces can open up for agency such as online.

Technologies of the self as an analytical lens has been used to a limited extent to analyze how disabled people conform their sexuality to socio-cultural standards, e.g.,

how physically disabled men subject themselves to certain technologies to "try on" different identities (Sakellariou, 2012); how disabled students govern themselves to conform to expectations of employment (Blackman & Maynard, 2008); and how disabled theatre students subvert ableist discourses by configuring themselves as powerful (Chinyowa, 2020). However, it has not been applied to disability television representation and social media use by autistic people. The use of social media (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2011), reality television (Ouellette & Hay, 2008), and other mobile technologies such as cell phones (Wallis, 2013) as technologies of the self have been explored, but it is important to understand how autistic individuals are affected by discourses of sexual normativity that are spread through media in order to challenge beliefs that autistic subjects must comport themselves in certain ways to be considered valuable human beings worthy of inclusion in society.

A popular concept in disability media studies is that of media as prosthesis, the idea that media augments or supplements an impairment and therefore "fixes" the disability. Extending theorizations of media as cultural technology to be used by the self such as McLuhan's (1964) media as an extension of the self concept, Napolitano et al. (2022) argue media studies as a field is beginning to theorize the blurring line between the disabled self and media/technology–" media" here is broadly considered as any technology that mediates communication. In their review of recent media studies literature, Napolitano et al. (2022) identify arguments by scholars for "dismediation," or the idea that media technologies do not "able" a disabled person as a prosthesis ostensibly would, rather media constitute disability through textual representation,

operations, and institutional policies (Mills & Sterne, 2021). In other words, "media do not fix disability; rather, disability is produced by media in the first place, as they are representational technologies that render abstract human qualities as measurable qualities, setting the very norms through which disability is assessed as such" (Napolitano et al., 2022, p. 1385). This understanding imagines the subject as a socio-material assemblage made of both the material and the abstract, e.g., mediated representations (Sterne, 2021). Here the "self" is impaired at its origin; impairment is considered as an original condition of existence. For example, just as media technologies must be repeatedly updated, improved, maintained, etc., so too do human bodies and minds. Napolitano et al. (2022) argue this concept of "normal impairment" or "impairment phenomenology" (Sterne, 2021) should be adopted in media studies as it accentuates the co-constitutive nature of media and disability in regards to subjectivity. That is, rather than considering technologies as a tool to be used by the self, one would consider the line between "self" and "technology" to be blurred. In other words, there is no complete, abled self without media technology. This study utilizes this concept of "normal impairment" by attempting to understand the construction of the autistic sexual self in relation to reality television as a cultural technology that is also an ever-changing assemblage of the material and the abstract.

Autistic Subjectification

To use technologies of the self as a theoretical framework in this project, I must include a discussion of how the autistic subject or "self" has been conceptualized thus far. To do so, I will engage with Critical Disability Studies literature as well as

theorizations that have emerged from there into Critical Autism Studies. Critical Disability Studies has been defined as a theoretical and methodological approach to studying "the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being" (Siebers, 2008, p. 4). Although there have been many definitions of Critical Autism Studies posed, the shared characteristic from this definition that is evident in Critical Autism Studies is the questioning of systems that attach meaning to autism and autistic individuals. Woods et al. (2018) define Critical Autism Studies as broadly consisting of "the exploration of power structures/relationships/dynamics that construct autism" (Davidson & Orsini, 2013; Waltz, 2014).

Critical Autism Studies has experienced myriad internal debates, one being on the inclusion of the neurodiversity paradigm. Briefly, the neurodiversity paradigm attempts to challenge the existence of biological markers of "normal" neurological functioning. Contrary to these pathologizing (arbitrary) biological markers, the neurodiversity paradigm attempts to delineate markers of functionality as "alternate," and valuable, but still rely on categorization (Runswick-Cole, 2014). Many others, including O'Dell et al. (2016), similarly argue the neurodiversity paradigm focuses on autism as "difference," not as deficit, so it is clear the process of differentiation is still present. Although possibly subverting pathologizing constructions, it is still creating boundaries of who is and who is not considered an autistic subject.

However, critiques of neurodiversity such as those highlighted by O'Dell et al. (2016) and Runswick-Cole (2014) attempt to question the ontological nature of autism itself without citing the autistic scholars that argue for the importance of maintaining the phenomenon. For example, autistic scholars Woods et al. (2018) argued for understanding autism as both a diagnostic category and an identity category with distinguishing characteristics as proposed by autistic self-advocates in the neurodiversity paradigm. Rather than choose an either/or perspective on the ontology of autism–i.e., autism is either a socially constructed identity or a biological, distinguishable neurotype– Woods et al. (2018) argue CAS should incorporate perspectives of autistic people themselves to question power dynamics that operate in both discourses.

While acknowledging the contingent nature of such distinguishing boundaries, Woods et al.'s (2018) inclusive interpretation of CAS allows for the acknowledgement of both perspectives: that autism as an ontological thing exists and means different things for individual stakeholders, and that CAS scholars can critique the power dynamics that give this thing its cultural status that entices autistic subjects to conduct themselves aligned with its norms. Rather than debate the (non)existence of autism by singularly highlighting its discursive construction, this study also acknowledges the existence of an autistic subjectivity and culture that is valuable to many people.

Following the principles of CAS discussed above (exploration of power structures/relationships/dynamics that construct autistic subjectivity), Vakirtzi and Bayliss' (2013) utilize a Foucauldian, poststructuralist conceptualization of autistic subjectivity formed through disciplining socio-historical, cultural, and discursive factors.

Using Foucauldian methodologies of tracing systems of thinking over time (Foucault, 1963, 1965) to systematically analyze the formation of autistic subjectivity, Vakirtzi and Bayliss (2013) offer a method of moving away from the medical and social models that have been predominantly used to understand autistic subjectivity in the past.[1] Vakirtzi and Bayliss (2013) begin by acknowledging the medical model's construction of autism. According to the medical model, through which autism has been historically conceptualized, the fundamental agent shaping a disabled person's experience is "the biological constitution of the body" (Vakirtzi & Bayliss, 2013, p. 366). An alternative model could include this biological constitution together with other discursive factors that contribute to the formation of a disabled or autistic subjectivity. The pathologization of autism therein lies in the belief that this biological factor can theoretically be eradicated. The pathologization of the autistic individual lies in, paradoxically, the filter through which diagnosed individuals are perceived. This filter causes behaviors to be perceived as symptoms rather than as characteristics of autistic individuals' individuality (Molloy & Vasil, 2002). In other words, an autism diagnosis operates as a disciplinary technology by limiting the individual's identity according to their disability, rather than

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[1] The social model distinguishes between "disability" and "impairment" and argues society is responsible for the disablement of individuals rather than impairments themselves (Shakespeare, 2010). This model assumes individuals are excluded or disabled from social environments and activities, and if these disabling factors were removed, the individual would not be considered disabled. This theory has been critiqued for obfuscating the role of impairment in disablement (Thomas, 1999; Crow, 1996) and for downplaying the role of culture and representations which contribute to the constitution of "disability" (Shakespeare, 1994). This model has also been critiqued for not accounting for cognitive disabilities such as autism that are believed by many to be central to embodiment (Shakespeare, 2006).

also considering socio-cultural, discursive factors that shape their identity (Vakirtzi & Bayliss, 2013). For example, a Foucauldian analysis of autism–or tracing the systems of thinking about autism–reveals that the [perceived] impaired use of language by autistic people not only stems from a biological factor but also discursive constructions/processes including linguistic theories that set parameters of acceptability (Vakirtzi & Bayliss, 2013). A Foucauldian analysis also reveals techno-cynicism norms that value "natural" communication over augmented or alternative communication (Alper, 2020). This normative, discursive process can be summed up via the following: "those who do not speak in the way power requires are subjected to minority positions which are devalued" (Vakirtzi & Bayliss, 2013, p. 369).

It is clear the medical model uses disciplining, discursive processes to construct autistic subjectivity, but the social model should not necessarily be heralded as an alternative. As a neurological condition culturally associated with "madness" and irrationality (Rohr, 2015), autism faced challenges in its inclusion in the social model. Autism has historically been considered an individual's biological, naturalized impairment, whereas physical disabilities—physically disabled activists were the originators of the social model of understanding disability (Campell & Oliver, 1996)—were and are more easily conceptualized as resulting from social constructions such as physically limiting spaces. In summary, I acknowledge the contingent nature of autistic subjectivity that is both discursively and biologically impacted rather than attempt to define the boundaries of the autistic subject.

Critical Sexuality Studies and Normate Sex

According to Fahs and McClelland (2016), Critical Sexuality Studies (CSS) pays special attention to bodies that are constructed as abject "Others." CSS prioritizes deeper analyses of bodies and subjectivities that "disrupt and challenge" the following assumptions: that there is "natural" sex, that sex must be outcome driven, that sexual desires are universal, and that sex is enjoyable for everyone (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Heavily inspired by poststructural theorists such as Foucault (1978), Butler (1990), and Haraway (1991), the goal of CSS as a theoretical project is to illuminate how power and sex operate together, and it "insists on an analysis of how subjectivities are created and maintained" in social and political spaces (Fahs & McClelland, 2016, par. 34). Although Fahs and McClelland's (2016) groundbreaking and self-proclaimed interdisciplinarian foray into the development of this subfield of sexuality studies evokes Critical Disability Studies as working in tandem with their methodological practices, at this time, CSS has not been used to study disability and sex at length.

To supplement their guidelines, I will include a discussion of Wilkerson's (2012) conceptualization of "normate sex" that implicitly mirrors the practices of Critical Sexuality Studies in a specific application for disability. Wilkerson (2012) defines normate sex as "a powerful force contributing to social group oppression, and it can help us to understand the norms of sexuality that are spread through institutions such as television. Major social institutions–the state, medicine, popular culture, education, religion–disseminate and enforce its norms" (p. 197). Inspired by Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self that show how we have "indirectly constituted ourselves through the exclusion of some others" (p. 146), the theoretical project of normate sex is to show

how the exclusions of certain others has contributed to the authority given normate sex

and how we conduct ourselves in relation to it.[2] This concept builds on Garland-

Thomson's conceptualization of the "normate," the figure outlined by an array of

deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the norm's boundaries" (Garland-

Thomson, 1997, p. 8).[3] Therefore, it clearly aligns with the Critical Sexuality Studies

injunction to specifically focus on abjected bodies and subjectivities as well as the

obligation to challenge heteronormativity.

Rather than catalog these norms as consistent, Wilkerson (2012) argues the

concept is more useful when used to acknowledge that norms that "draw boundaries

between appropriate and inappropriate desires, behaviors, identities, and spaces" shift

across time and according to context just as dominant ideological forces shift (p. 187).[4]

For example, the commodification of certain LGBTQ+ identities has led to an

increase in mediated visibility, but this visibility is homonormative, meaning it plays

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[2] Wilkerson (2012) is also inspired by Gayle Rubin's (1984) "charmed circle" of

normative sexual behavior/desire, i.e., socio-culturally affirmed norms of sexuality such

as "heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a

relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only…vanilla" (Rubin,

1984, p. 13).

[3] "...the prototypical figure of normalcy" (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 45), a bodily
configuration operating from a position of power, authority, etc.
[4] Wilkerson (2012) does add to the general catalog (based on Rubin's charmed circle)
an assumption of the sex/gender binary and location specifications—i.e., normative sex
is occurring in private, single family homes, not nursing homes or other institutional
facilities.

into and still defines the boundaries of normate sex (Hennessy, 2017). Wilkerson (2012) includes media such as film and television as examples of state and cultural institutions that promote "standard[s] of sexiness, while depicting any departure from narrowly defined notions of normalcy as sexual tragedy, lack, loss, or threat" (p. 187). Inspired by the aspect of normate sex that requires a shielding of one from input from communities/individuals that could challenge the authority of its normativity, sub-research question three in this study asks: in response to reality television about autistic people dating, on social media, what does input from autistic communities in response to these representations on *LOTS* look like, if their input is present at all? In order to understand the establishment of autistic sexual subjectification in the context of contemporary television, this study investigates and describes technologies that suggest/prescribe to autistic individuals how to be a sexual self and how these technologies affect their self-mastery/self-knowledge.

Historical Context of Autism: Diagnosis, Sexuality, Reality Television, and Social Media

In this section I provide an overview of areas of literature in which my dissertation will intervene. I begin with an historical context to diagnoses of autism and their implications including an overview of the most significant and recent autism rights social movement. Following this I review the literature on autism and sexuality, on film and television representations of disability and autism in general and on reality television in particular. Finally, I conclude with an overview of literature on the social media uses by disabled and autistic people and how these uses relate to media representations.

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In order to understand the theoretical construction of autistic sexual subjectivity,

we must also understand how autism as a diagnosis has been constructed and understood

generally in western cultures. Just as with other disabilities, the definition of autism has

shifted over time as cultural contexts have shifted in the West (Carlson, 2015). Broadly,

the perspectives for understanding autism include psychiatric, scientific, biomedical, and

neurodiverse perspectives (Jack, 2014). A psychiatric perspective is that which is

adopted by the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders, or the DSM-V). The DSM-V is the most commonly used diagnostic tool for

mental disorders in the United States and Australia and has significant influence on

manuals used in other western countries such as the International Classification of

Diseases, tenth edition (ICD-10) most commonly used in the United Kingdom.

Therefore, the psychiatric perspective of autism is arguably the most prevalent. Those

adopting this perspective are likely less concerned with the cause(s) of autism and more

concerned with treatments and interventions post-diagnosis. Whereas autism was

formerly defined through multiple disorders–Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder,

etc.–the updated DSM-V in the last decade *only* includes Autism Spectrum Disorders

(ASD), an umbrella term covering the previously thought to be distinct variations of

autism.[5] At this time, the DSM-V indicates an ASD diagnosis requires "'persistent

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[5] It is important here to recognize that the DSM-V and other diagnostic manuals include

distinctions of severity organized into three levels: level 1 "requiring support," level 2

"requiring substantial support," and level 3 "requiring very substantial support." In the

deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by all of the following': deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships" (DSM-V, cited in Hess, 2022, par. 3).

Similarly, yet more concerned with identification, a scientific perspective frames autism as an epidemic that suggests biomarkers such as genes cause autism. Widely accepted by scientific communities in the West, this perspective frames autism as a problem able to be cured as scientific identification and intervention improves (Walsh et al., 2011). As a variation of a scientific perspective, a biomedical perspective assumes

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media texts I am exploring in this dissertation, it can be assumed based on the descriptions of these levels that the autistic people portrayed would most likely be categorized as level 1 and 2 in severity. Both categories include "deficits' in social communication defined as inflexibility of behaviors, hyperfixation, lack of or limited initiation of social interaction, repetitive and restrictive behaviors, and lack of context awareness (DSM-V). It is important to note that these descriptions assume normative communication and interaction patterns, and it is likely shows like Love on the Spectrum cast autistic people who are most able to conform to normative communication patterns. In other words, it is obvious there is a bias towards casting individuals with "less severe" characteristics of autism. Further, there could be implications here for who is allowed to pursue sexuality, i.e., who is considered to have sex/ual agency and therefore "the basic human right to sexual autonomy" (Wilkerson, 2012).

autism can be identified by biomarkers but also that the genesis of these biomarkers is found in anomalies outside of the body/brain such as from vaccines, food allergies, etc.

What all of these perspectives (psychiatric, scientific, biomedical) have in common is the assumption that autism is problematic and each has been culturally accepted in the West often in overlapping ways. At the turn of the 20th century, the psychiatric perspective was predominantly adopted in which children–and rarely, adults– were diagnosed with autism with the understanding that it was a form of schizophrenia or a hallucinatory disorder that resulted from an "infantile" desire to avoid reality (Evans, 2013, par. 1). Early misogynistic theories of autism blamed "refrigerator mothers," described as "cold" mothers that offered insufficient nurturing, transgressed norms of femininity, womanhood, motherhood, etc. (Jack, 2014). At this time in western countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, people diagnosed with autism were institutionalized to be kept away from "normal" society.

With the closure of many mental institutions in the 1960s, theories of autism began to emerge that attributed those diagnosed with a developmental form of mental retardation (Evans, 2013). Carlson (2015) explains this shift by illuminating the always-already contradictory understandings of disability that accompanied institutionalization. For example, mental institutions in the West historically served two functions: (1) constructing disabled people as *qualitatively* different–distinct from "normal" human beings–benefitted institutions by justifying their need to keep society safe from those abnormal beings, and (2) less often, constructing disabled people as *quantitatively* different, e.g., through IQ tests, and therefore able to be "reformed." Further,

contradictions between *static* definitions of disability, e.g., disabled people are permanently defective people and must be institutionalized to protect themselves, their family, and society, and *dynamic* definitions, e.g., the disabled individual can be made to be productive, were utilized in order to construct institutions as necessary.

Once most institutions were closed, people diagnosed with autism were integrated into educational and social settings rather than kept in confinement. This necessitated a shift towards viewing autism as a quantitative difference that is dynamic– in which autism can be improved, cured, minimized, etc. (enter scientific and biomedical perspectives). This shift resulted in therapies such as applied behavioral analysis (ABA), which is the most commonly used therapy to "treat" or "fix" autism, because autism could now be improved, for example, and in order to maintain normative social expectations.[6] Many autistic people consider ABA–in which autistic people, usually children, are punished for "undesirable" behaviors and rewarded for desirable/acceptable behaviors–to be a form of "normative violence." In other words, ABA is an example of cultural violence in that it "makes one intelligible through cultural and social norms of gender, race, sexuality, ability, and so on in ways that render one vulnerable to erasure and exclusion from social, political, and cultural recognition and potentially exposed to physical harm" (Butler, 2004; 2005; 2009; Taylor, 2015, p. 376). Instead, autistic self-advocacy groups advocate for wider acceptance of the neurodiversity paradigm, which is the current and most popular autistic rights social movement, discussed below (Devita-Raeburn, 2016).

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6 ABA is used in Love on the Spectrum by the dating coach.

Neurodiversity

It is important to understand the context of the neurodiversity movement's development occurring parallel to the emergence of television programs like *LOTS*. The neurodiversity movement began as a response to stigmatizing representations of autism in media, harmful therapies like ABA, and pathologizing understandings of autism such as those held in scientific, psychiatric, and biomedical perspectives. The neurodiversity movement originated with and consists of autistic self-advocates, primarily concerned with postmodernist deconstruction of neurological normality (Singer, 2016). In contrast to pathologizing, deficit-based thinking about autism produced and maintained through public discourse such as media (Broderick & Roscigno, 2021), the neurodiversity perspective imagines autism not as deficit but rather as a facet of human neurological diversity with both strengths and difficulties (Robertson, 2010). According to the neurodiversity paradigm, conceptions of neurological normality are culturally fabricated societal standards.

Enabled by the rise of the Internet, the disability rights movement sustained by self-advocates took off, eventually branding into the neurodiversity movement (Kras, 2010). Autistic self-advocates have begun focusing on shifting conceptions of neurological ab/normality in myriad ways in the context of social behaviors, including in pursuit of romantic relationships and sexuality. Not without some controversy, there are self-advocates who have argued for perceptions of "deficits" such as hypersensitivity to be considered strengths, and therefore they encourage autistic people to "unmask" in their social lives, that is, not attempt to behave neurotypically (Nerenberg, 2020).

However, these recommendations fail to account for nuances of race and social class privilege, e.g., that challenge the perceived ease of unmasking. Although the value of unmasking lies in challenging the status quo, there are other self-advocates who advocate for accommodating or "coping" with these characteristics rather than hiding or flaunting them. For example, in their book *Autistics Guide to Dating*, Ramey and Ramey (2008) offer strategies for pursuing romantic relationships including choosing venues for dates that are not overstimulating, etc.

Besides unmasking, another tension emerging from the neurodiversity movement is that of language use for identity. Identity and the language used to express it, on- and offline, are significant, and this has been especially emphasized through the neurodiversity movement. People- or person-first language, e.g., "person with autism" or "person with ASD," is most commonly used by educators, family members, and practitioners such as medical professionals who are neurotypical rather than by autistic people themselves (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). In fact, even the *American Psychological Association's Publication Manual* asserts writers should not use "objectifying" language such as "autistic" when describing "people with disabilities" (2010, p. 76). The manual included this argument in their "Reducing Bias by Topic" section. However, while moving from stigmatizing language such as the r-word towards "intellectual disability" was a monumental step towards reducing bias, autistic self-advocates have and are currently arguing for reclaiming identity-first language as a source of empowerment (Brown, 2011). One can find much discourse arguing people-first language is empowering because it is quite literally placing the person and their worth before and

separate from their disability; in other words, they are to be considered *more than* their disability (Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Lester et al., 2014). However, autistic self-advocates, such as Lydia X. Z. Brown (2011), argued their personhood cannot be separated from their disability, and considering autism as a disease of which the person needs to be cured is less respectful of an autistic person's humanity.

However, there are drawbacks of widespread adoption of an identity-first language/paradigm, and these have been highlighted by the neurodiversity movement. Although the neurodiversity movement advocates for conceptualizing an autistic identity as positive, rather than through a deficit-based approach, some research with autistic people and their families and caregivers has indicated one of the dangers inherent in conceptualizing autism as simply difference rather than deficit is that of losing access to public and medical services. For example, by *not* conceptualizing autism through a deficit-based approach, there is fear of a loss of "economic resources, entitlements to services, and help with behaviours or abnormalities [that] are intrinsically tied to the diagnosis" (Lester et al., 2014). However, whereas autism and other disability labels can be socially disabling in many ways, I recognize that the diagnosis can also be meaningful, valuable, and indelible to a person's identity (Lester et al., 2014; Ojewumi, 2018; Pinchevski & Peters, 2015). Further, identity-first language use reflects that which is occurring in the social media data corpus and in the *LOTS* season under inquiry. For these reasons, I use identity-first language ("autistic") in this project–unless otherwise specified by participants–while still acknowledging the tensions associated with it.

Autism and Sexuality

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Despite evidence that autistic children experience similar sexual development to neurotypical children, and despite evidence that only a small percentage of autistic adults are not interested in romantic relationships, much of the cultural discourse about autistic people supports perceptions of their being asexual (Dewinter et al., 2015; 2017; Ekblad, 2018; Gilmour et al., 2012). These perceptions stem from early research that focused primarily on parents and caregivers who overestimated characteristics of asexuality (Ekblad, 2018); long-held cultural beliefs spread through media of autistic people as "Eternal Children" (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Shakespeare, 1994; Stevenson et al., 2014); lack of cultural discourses in media about disability and sexuality (Kafer, 2017); and neurotypical dating norms that are ostensibly discordant with characteristics of autism spectrum disorders. However, research among people identifying as neurodivergent revealed their rates of having a crush, being in love, or being in a relationship were not significantly different to neurotypical rates (Gilmour et al., 2012). Research also found there are significantly higher levels of infatuation—measured as a dimension of romantic relationships—in neurodivergent people than neurotypicals (Ekblad, 2018).

There does exist some evidence connecting autism and asexuality. The researchers who argued for this connection provided criteria for evaluating the presence of asexuality in neurodivergent people, and the criteria were as follows: self-identification as asexual, lack of romantic attraction, lack of sexual attraction, and lack of romantic and/or sexual experience (George & Stokes, 2018; Ingudomnukul et al., 2007). However, research exploring the connection between neurodivergency and

asexuality is limited (Bush et al., 2012), and these connections fail to account for the nuanced dimensions of reported asexual identity (Chasin, 2017). For example, Ronis et al.'s (2021) research found that very few autistic participants who identified as asexual experienced all of the above criteria. When loose, ambiguous definitions of asexuality, which are often attributed to an inherent deficit or pathology found in autism (Brotto & Yule, 2017), have been used in previous research, rates appear to be higher in autistic populations. However, when narrowed based on the above criteria, rates between autistic and neurotypical populations are not much higher (Dewinter et al., 2015; Ronis et al., 2021), and autistic adults have been found to have satisfactory and diverse sexualities (Byers et al., 2013; Kellaher, 2015).

Interestingly, Ronis et al. (2021) found the most common explanation for the adoption of an asexual identity by autistic participants was an absence of sexual experience, not an absence of desire for romantic and sexual experiences. As the authors speculate, there are likely myriad reasons for this lack of experience, including absence of cultural scripts for appropriate behaviors, lack of sufficient sexual education (Holmes & Himle, 2014), higher rates of sexual abuse (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014), etc. Furthermore, lack of desire should not be universally assumed. While asexuality certainly exists in autistic populations, just as it does in neurotypical populations, and while asexuality should not be equated with abnormality or pathologization (Kim, 2011), overarching, generalizing attribution of asexuality to autistic populations has been debunked (Kellaher, 2015).

Groups that are sexually marginalized are often more broadly socially and politically marginalized, and oppressed groups are likely to share similar judgments of and constraints on their sexual behaviors, desires, and identities (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Wilkerson, 2011). For example, non-heteronormative people and disabled people are similarly sexually pathologized in mainstream discourse as deviant (Sherry, 2004). With an understanding that subjectivity does not denote an essentialized state of being that, in this case, is waiting to be empowered, and an understanding that sexuality is itself an unstable category that involves not only identity but social practices, relationships to gender, political affiliations, etc. (Shildrick, 2009), I also maintain an understanding that the discursive construction of sexual subjectivity is important for autistic people and yet minimally researched. A key aspect of social agency is sexual agency (Martin, 1996; Wilkerson, 2011), and although analyses of popular cultural discursive constructions of disability are increasingly prevalent (Malinowska, 2017), analyses of how autistic-identifying people engage with their own constructions of sexual subjectivity are largely missing from the literature.

Film and Television Representation of Disability

From a critical perspective, representations in mainstream media do not simply reflect society but contribute to its construction (Hall, 1997). Dominant ideological assumptions are reproduced and maintained in media, and as these assumptions are often ableist regarding disability identities, this can contribute to the subordination of disabled people (Hall, 1997; King, 2016). By understanding which themes and patterns occur in representations of autistic people, we are then able to interrogate why these particular

themes and patterns are most salient (Hall, 1997). This kind of approach to understanding and critiquing media recognizes that words and phenomena such as disability, impairment, normality, deviance, etc. are context-specific "empty signifiers" that are defined, manufactured, and spread by ideology in media (Waldschmidt, 2017, p. 24). Many scholars argue mediated representations contribute to constructing disability as an identity, a process, a system, and as a "culturally fabricated narrative" (Ellis, 2018; Garland-Thomson, 2002; p. 5; Shakespeare, 1994). Cultural constructions of disability in media need to be understood in order to enable critique, activism, and to challenge dominant ideological assumptions and narratives that are perceived to be natural and representative of autistic people (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Hall, 1997). Because these empty signifiers are fluid and artificial, they are able to be challenged and changed.

Regarding disability identities, not only do mediated representations reflect contemporary beliefs about disabled people, but also people observing the representations absorb and internalize these often-stigmatizing beliefs (Hall, 1997). Representations of disability as an identity category have both powerfully positive and powerfully negative ideological consequences (Zhang & Haller, 2015). Televisual representations are highly influential in constructing notions of normality and deviance as well as influencing attitudes about disabled people (Rodan et al., 2016; Worrell, 2018). For example, Schwartz et al. (2010) revealed that positive, dynamic portrayals of disabled people as "ordinary" people rather than through stereotypes in television and film can stimulate positive attitudes in viewers about disabled people.

Representing disabled people as "ordinary" in film and television aligns with

Black and Pretes' (2007) "incidentalist" representational strategy that proposes media

present disabled characters as similar to non-disabled characters in all respects without

drawing major plot attention to the impairment. Müller et al. (2012) claim incidentalist

representational strategies correspond with media reception theories that argue for the

beneficial effects of identification with characters. That is, non-disabled viewers may

feel empathy and therefore positive attitudes towards disabled people if they are

represented as similar to non-disabled people in all other ways. However, as Müller et al.

(2012) state, incidentalist representational strategies could contribute to erasure. On the

other hand, non-incidentalist representational strategies correspond with media effects

theories of social learning in which non-disabled viewers are given an opportunity to

vicariously learn about the realities of disability and learn about how to interact with a

population they may perceive to be an out-group.

Regarding disability and sexuality, media studies research conducted so far found

many constructions of disabled sexuality in media perpetuate discourses of asexuality,

hypersexuality, and abnormality (Loeser et al., 2018; McRuer & Mollow, 2012;

Shildrick, 2009). Despite empirical evidence showing capacity to engage in sexual

education and intimacy (Ferrante & Oak, 2020), disabled people are often considered

asexual (Frawley & O'Shea, 2020; Kim, 2011; Shakespeare, 1994) due, in part, to media

representations associating them with child-likeness, and unfitness for reproduction

(Garland-Thomson, 2002; Kafer, 2017; Ruti, 2017). When disabled people are

represented with sexualities, they are often hypersexualized and fetishized in ways that

are dehumanizing. For example, Kafer, (2012) analyzed representations of "devoteeism," or sexual attraction to disability, in devotee communities online and found disabled women to be simultaneously hypersexualized and constructed as disgusting while the devotees, most often nondisabled men, were depicted, and depicted themselves, as pathological in that sexual desire for a disabled woman implied clinical abnormality.

Critical approaches to mediated representations of disability call for critiques that go beyond discerning visibility or inclusion. Although inclusion of disabled people in mainstream television and film is progressive in the sense that a lack of representation is a significant challenge for disabled people (Ellis, 2018), oftentimes even "positive" inclusions of disability still uphold ableist ideological assumptions. Simply including disability in television media is not inherently counter hegemonic or empowering (Garland-Thomson, 2002). For example, even when disabled people are represented as dynamic, as heroes, as "normal," etc., they are often represented through characters that are white, male, and heteronormative (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021; Ellis, 2018) or in infantilizing ways (Stevenson et al., 2014). In regards to autism, because "there are no obvious physical abnormalities…. theories that address visual enfreakment, pictorial representation, and so forth, don't fit well" (Osteen, 2007, p. 5). Disability Studies has primarily focused on physical disabilities, neglecting cognitive and intellectual disabilities (Osteen, 2007). Work such as that by Ellen Samuels (2003) that problematizes the political effectiveness of "proving" one is disabled illuminates how the assumed visibility of disability has contributed to a lack of culturally intelligible

nonverbal signs of disability.

Autism Representation in Film and Television

There is an increasing prevalence of depictions of autism in western cultural media productions such as film and television (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021), and these depictions are therefore currently considered "en vogue" (McDermott, 2021; Rohr, 2015, par. 4). However, autism in film and television has historically been represented in overwhelmingly negative ways (Treweek et al., 2019), e.g., as having a tragic impact on the family (Murray, 2008). In their comprehensive review of the current state of research regarding autism representations in film and television, Dean and Nordahl-Hansen (2021) found there are increasing numbers of autistic characters in contemporary film and television; however, characters were overrepresented in stereotypical ways. These stereotypes involve autistic people who are white/Caucasian, savant-like (Black & Tsumoto, 2018; Prochnow, 2014), young, literal/blunt (Draaisma, 2009), lacking in empathy, emotions, and feelings (Brooks, 2018; Draaisma, 2009), immature, helpless, dependent on others (Brook, 2018; Hamilton, 2019) and heteronormative.

In contemporary fictional film and television, there are four common representational types of autism: "the magical/savant, the "different"/quirky individual, the character with undiagnosed/unlabeled behaviors, and the autistic person whose portrayal is more realistic or even based on a real-life person" (Prochnow, 2014, p. 134). Prochnow (2014) argues all four represent autistic characters as low support needs/highly verbal, which is not the norm. In nonfictional media, rather than frequent "negative" portrayals of autism as expected, Prochnow (2014) found overwhelmingly

"hyperpositive" representations (p. 147) that overemphasize normativity and erase actual lived experiences. Prochnow (2014) attributes this to media producers' fears of being politically incorrect. In their reviews of contemporary cinematic representations of autism, Murray (2008) and Baker (2008) found that most often autism was used as an element for driving a plot, e.g., to heroize a protagonist, rather than as a characteristic of a dynamic person (Osteen, 2007). As Osteen (2007) pointed out in his anthology *Autism and Representation*, these inaccurate, stereotypical, and sensational representations are almost always the work of neurotypical media producers.

The only study published so far—to my knowledge—analyzing autistic audiences' perceptions of media about autism found the less-stereotypical films to be potential vehicles for developing self-advocacy and raising consciousness (Schwarz, 2007). As Osteen (2007) argues, "it is essential and right for autistic people to challenge misrepresentations" (p. 6). Therefore, this study contributes to this imperative endeavor to include autistic people in research about autism in media.

Reality Television

Television in general operates as a medium for bringing social issues to a public forum, or opening issues up for debate (Newcomb & Hisrch, 1983), and research reveals people watch reality television for social learning (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). Reality television has been defined in the following ways: as a genre consisting of "unscripted programs, with nonprofessional actors as participants in a variety of situations that claim to present reality," as programs that record "real people as they live out events in their lives, as these events occur," and a genre in which "audience participation is a central

agent to the shared experience or lived reality of the program" (Godlewski & Perse, 2010, p. 148, 149).

Despite its name, reality television also serves as a site of cultural construction in which "producers control the situation, the environment, and the ground rules" (Godlewski & Perse, 2010, p. 166). Reality television, as a genre, is a hybrid of representational practices and embodied materiality, but it is often interpreted by audiences as "authentic" (Cleary, 2016). However, viewers often recognize—and are suspicious of— "inauthentic" elements of the genre (Hill, 2005) and yet continue to find enjoyment in negotiating this paradox of represented reality and constructed elements/fantasies (Rose & Wood, 2005). Specifically, viewers find pleasure in reality television programs that incorporate fantasy/idealized themes—e.g., happily ever after narratives (Cheyne, 2013)—that they believe are attainable for themselves, even if this does not align with their direct experiences. Part of the reason for this pleasure is the increased mental and emotional involvement in identifying with the participants that these programs foster in audiences (Godlweski & Perse, 2010).

At this time, there is minimal research on reality television representations and disabled people, and even fewer audience reception studies with disabled people. While audiences are skeptical of the authenticity of "ordinary" people doing extraordinary things in reality television (Hill, 2005), because disabled bodies are constructed as extraordinary in the genre (Cleary, 2016), nondisabled viewers perceive their performances to be authentic. Evolving from the freak show's tradition of displaying extraordinary bodies to emphasize their otherness (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Pitcher,

2021), the reality genre's "conjoined discourse of extraordinary normalcy" (Cleary, 2016, par. 2), e.g., "we're just like you" narratives, uphold normativizing logics. For example, this discourse of extraordinary normalcy implies whiteness, affluence, and fulfillment of heteronormative roles are in fact what is "normal." The spectacle of disability in these programs hinges upon their being extraordinary because they are ordinary, to the surprise of many a nondisabled viewer.

Aligned with Couser's (2017) argument that anomalies such as disability require a narrative explanation, the tendency to represent disability that is normative in other ways—white, affluent, heteronormative—means the program does not need to explain anything else besides the disability and therefore can focus on that attribute as the "other." In contrast to the sub-genre of reality television that manufactures "ordinary" celebrities based on displays of talent, shows like *Love on the Spectrum* and *The Undateables* fulfill the no-talent (Kavka, 2012) or "non-incidentalist" (Müller et al., 2012) format of reality television that emphasizes ordinariness and in which the disability *is* the plot. However, as Cleary (2016) problematizes, the no-talent format of reality television that displays extraordinary–disabled–bodies frames their accomplishment of normalcy as a positive thing rather than as something to be disdained (and this reaffirms how non-normal disabled people are). Cleary (2016) states, "Their perceived talent is that they can still be normal even while being marked by (and televised due to) their extraordinary corporealities" (par. 13). Because their bodies are markedly "abnormal" or extraordinary, the narrative arcs simply have to perform acts of normalcy that are unrelated to the plot of a dating show. These irrelevant acts of

normalcy include shots of cast members doing mundane things like cooking, tying their shoes, working out, etc.

These representations of "reality" ostensibly appear as a progressive response to oppressive, often fictional representations of disability in media and social life, and therefore serve to depoliticize disability. However, they operate within and uphold normative discourses. For example, in response to cultural considerations of disabled people as eternally dependent and therefore asexual, reality programs about disability often appeal to normality by emphasizing—often heteronormative—sexuality. As Malinowska (2018) argues, representations of disability and sexuality—a combination that is a source of cultural anxiety (McRuer & Mollow, 2011)—appeal to normativity in order to be easier to digest by nondisabled audiences. Cleary (2016) argues representation of a queer disabled subject would challenge these appeals to normalcy too much, but as queerness becomes commodified and "normalized," these appeals to normalcy can be maintained. In *LOTS* and *The Undateables*, despite increasing representations of queer disabled people, the shows ultimately seem to follow a tradition of prioritizing nuclear monogamy and fulfillment of traditional goals such as marriage or "happily ever after" narratives, e.g., by concluding season two of *LOTS* and season 9 of *The Undateables* with a heterosexual wedding and engagement, respectively. Although ostensibly progressive when considering the lack of disabled romance "happily ever after" narratives and the proliferation of disability-as-tragedy representations (Cheyne, 2013), these narratives uphold normative modes of romantic sociality that are oppressive, limiting, and likely unrealistic (Darke, 2004; Malinowska, 2018).

Reality television is understood as a genre that fosters audience participation through social media (Biressi, 2017; Deery, 2004; Ouellette, 2014). In their study of online discourse (blog posts, Tweets, press reviews) about *The Undateables*, Vertoont (2018) found online users suggested the show "disciplines" (p. 833) its daters into "normal" dating behaviors vis-à-vis compulsory heterosexuality/able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006). Significantly, while some disabled users described feelings of empowerment and self-confidence increase after watching *The Undateables*, most of the data consisted of posts by nondisabled viewers that reiterated prejudicial and normative discourses about disability (Vertoont, 2018). For example, nondisabled online users predominantly found the shows' "marginal dating circuit"–in which disabled daters primarily date other disabled people–to be "natural" (Vertoont, 2018, p. 831). When reflecting on the casts' dating with nondisabled partners, the discourse online aligned with the charity model of disability (Goodley, 2009)–an assumption that nondisabled people would only date disabled people out of charity. This model allows nondisabled people to maintain their heterosexual and ableist norms. The second prejudice found in these social media posts—disabled people should only date within the private sphere—consisted of critiques of the show for increasing the disabled daters' vulnerability by putting them on display—and in fact using the term "freak show" to make this point. This prejudice therefore implies the daters could not have made agential choices to be on the show—a fact repudiated by cast members themselves. For example, users' statements that the daters were exploited implies they are "stupid" (Kitchener, 2016). Interestingly, Vertoont (2018) observed the absence of discussion of sex and sexuality in both the

show itself and in the online data and argued this absence reinforces the sex and disability taboo (McRuer & Mollow, 2011) and naturalizes the association of disability with nonsexuality.

Social Media

Digital technologies such as social media have long been found to be used as tools for counternarratives by socially marginalized people (Fox & Warber, 2015; Ortiz et al., 2019). Specifically, hashtags on Twitter have enabled activism, the advancement of counter narratives, and community building by and for many marginalized groups (Jackson et al., 2020; Mesch, 2012). However, social media platforms in general have both enabled and restricted their use by marginalized groups. Much scholarship exists detailing the barriers of social media use by groups that are not the "intended" user. For example, intended users are often identified as the "normate" (Ellcessor, 2016; Garland-Thomson, 1997; Nakamura, 2008), but overwhelmingly the literature supports the use of social media in constructively challenging marginalization. For example, Internet platforms such as social media give marginalized users in general (Hillier & Harrison, 2007) and disabled viewers in particular the space to react to and critique disempowering media representations (Haller, 2010; Thoreau, 2006; Vertoont, 2018) and discuss and develop sexuality (Hiller & Harrison, 2007; Miller, 2017). Previous research indicates disabled people have used social media to find others who have shared understanding (Cole & Nolan, 2020; Singer, 2016), to provide access to social life (Kent, 2020), and to validate their experiences as queer and disabled when faced with spaces—e.g., college

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campuses—that are primarily ableist and heteronormative (Miller, 2017; Miller et al., 2020).

Critical cultural approaches to reality television representations should prioritize audience reception and agency (King, 2016), and social media platforms are ideal spaces for this endeavor. Specifically, critical cultural disability scholars argue for the valuation of counternarratives by disabled people over mainstream media narratives (Annamma et al., 2013; Parsloe & Holton, 2018). Defined as the stories produced and maintained by marginalized groups that question and fracture hegemonic metanarratives that form foundational beliefs about society (Nelson, 2001; Peters & Lankshear, 1996), counternarratives have often been used by disabled people to resist ableist metanarratives (Harter et al., 2006). There is a long history of disabled counternarratives occurring offline; however, these have increasingly been found to take place on social media (Miller, 2017). For example, Parsloe and Holton (2018) found that hashtags were useful for the creation and dissemination of counternarratives about autism. Specifically, as theorized by Brock (2012) in reference to hashtag use by Black communities on Twitter, the use of hashtags that express an identity–e.g., #ActuallyAutistic–are an invocation of expertise by the user, signal membership to a social group, and communicate a shared worldview. However, as de Kosnik and Feldman (2019) discussed, "hashtagging identity" (p. 12) does not simply imply a reflection of an essentialized, material identity but rather recognizes the use of hashtags in recursively constructing identity through performance.

Given that the Internet and its affordances are well-suited for use by autistic people (Pinchevski & Peters, 2016), and that social media platforms are designed for self-advocacy, opinion sharing, and the co-production of knowledge (Danley, 2021; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020), attention should be paid to the narratives, discussions, and critiques occurring on these platforms often through hashtags. Regarding autistic people, Singer (2016) describes the Internet and social media platforms as "the prosthetic device that binds isolated…autistics into a collective social organism capable of having a public 'voice'" (p. 11). This online "voice" has been found to be used to challenge prevailing, ableist assumptions of autism, e.g., that autistic people are incapable of speaking and advocating for themselves (Osteen, 2007). Social media have already been found to be sites of reaction to nonfictional television media about autism and dating (Biressi, 2017; Vertoont, 2018). For example, Biressi (2017) found disabled viewers "consciously turned to cyberspace to join or build alternative screen-based communities" or to "correct misconceptions" in response to the "questionable framing" of disability in the few reality television examples available (p. 214, 215).

However, although Internet scholarship has lauded social media's ability to give disabled users agency, there still exist constraints to this agency such as constant evaluation of the validity of identity performance through affordances such as likes, comments, etc. (Bitman, 2022). To address the fact that disabled users' agency and use of social media is largely understudied, Bitman (2022) examines their identity performance strategies on Facebook and argues that disabled social media users "perform" their identities to multiple audiences in different ways. Bitman (2022) states,

"…while disabled performers judge authenticity based on lived experience, able-bodied spectators evaluate the performance's authenticity based on popular representations of disability" (Bitman, 2022, par. 4). When shows like *LOTS* target a neurotypical audience, and autistic viewers challenge the representations provided through public social media discussion, there could be implications in which these discussions or "performances" of valid autistic identity are perceived to be invalid or inauthentic because they do not align with the popular representations. In other words, while social media have been lauded as providing a space for disabled people to challenge disablist stereotypes and narratives, if the popular narratives included in reality television do not match these counternarratives, their cultural weight may be devalued.

There exists a gap in both research with autistic participants and with online social media users regarding perspectives on autism in general (Hamilton, 2019) and sexuality specifically in media. Dean and Nordahl-Hansen (2021) argue "it is important for the ASD community to thoroughly examine the authenticity of these [film and television] representations and subsequent messaging" due to their increasingly wide reach as well as to "construct counter messaging" if possible in the face of stereotypical or narrow representations (p. 8). Similarly, Wilde (2010) advocates for more emphasis on audience analyses and interpretations of media texts that feature disability because, while Disability Studies, Critical Autism Studies, and cultural studies scholarship are generally in consensus regarding the fact that disability representation are often "bad," problematic, inadequate, etc., there is little consensus about what the alternative might be and what the most pressing concerns are/should be (Müller et al., 2012). It is possible

social media platforms are spaces in which these examinations and audience interpretations by autistic people can take place. Although not explored in-depth in their consolidation of the latest critical scholarship on reality television, social media have been and continue to be used as a significant method of audience interaction fostered by these programs (Biressi, 2017; Deery, 2003; Ouellette, 2014). In fact, many scholars argue social media platforms enable an obfuscation of the boundaries between reality television production and reception (Andrejevic, 2004; Biressi, 2017).

Significance

Media producers and academic researchers have not yet sufficiently attuned to the perspectives of autistic people as audience members. If the present nonfictional mediated representations of autism and sexuality are primarily affirmed as inauthentic and/or harmful by autistic participants and social media users, findings from this study could serve as a significant intervention into the media production of subsequent narratives. Further, participants may articulate ideal representations of autism and sexuality, and this too can be used by media producers to create media that are more representative and potentially empowering. It is important for autistic people to be involved in the production of representations of their identity, and therefore research that provides space for their perspectives to be heard is significant.

Research Questions

Ableist and heterosexist assumptions broadly inherent in western culture impact and are impacted by mediated representations of autistic people. Therefore, the first research question guiding this study is:

1. How does the reality television program *Love on the Spectrum* represent autism and sexuality?

To answer this question, I conducted a textual analysis of the most recent season of *LOTS*. I investigated what *LOTS* is making conceptually possible/positive regarding autistic sexuality, in other words how the show is suggesting/prescribing to autistic people how to be a sexual self, if at all. I also discussed the discursive implications for this, such as that this series and how it represents autistic sexual subjectivity could influence future media texts on this topic. It is my preliminary interpretation that *LOTS*'s target audience is not autistic people, rather it is neurotypical people, and this echoes the producers' own statements (Persaud, 2022). Although I believe the show is othering autistic people for the pleasure of the neurotypical gaze, it is also true–based on preliminary investigation of social media conversation (Landmark & Black, 2021)–that autistic people are viewing this show and being affected by it. Therefore, my second research question is:

2. How do autistic people talk about how they experience gender and sexuality?

    1. How do autistic people talk about autism and sexuality as represented in *Love on the Spectrum*?

Specifically, I am interested in the role these representations play on the construction of autistic subjects' self-mastery/self-knowledge regarding their gender and sexuality, i.e., how autistic people are conducting themselves as sexual subjects in response to these suggestions/prescriptions. Research conducted thus far on the identity of autistic people fails to include autistic audience reception analyses of mediated representations in

general–only one to my knowledge has done so (Schwarz, 2007)–and there is a further paucity of research investigating how autistic people engage with contemporary genres of television such as reality programs.

I am also interested in the mediums used to engage with these programs such as social media platforms. Autistic individuals often learn how to be a self from outside of their family such as through film, television, and social media. Therefore, audience reception on social media is of particular importance for research with this population as it enables discussion with people who might be geographically dispersed, as is often the case with autistic people whose family members may not share their diagnosis. Therefore, my third and final research questions guiding this study is:

3. On social media, what does public response to these representations on *Love on the Spectrum* look like?

    1. On social media, what does input from autistic communities in response to these representations on *Love on the Spectrum* look like?

This question is guided by the belief that dominant social norms are given authority when nonnormative communities, behaviors, norms, etc. are isolated (Wilkerson, 2012).

This dissertation will fill literature gaps on media representations of autistic people and sexuality as well as audience reception literature that engages the voices of autistic people themselves (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021). Because of the recent increase in media representations of autistic people (Dean and Nordahl-Hansen, 2021; McDermott, 2021), because they have historically been represented negatively by neurotypical media producers (Murray, 2008; Treweek et al., 2019), and because there is

a gap in autistic audience reception literature which is significant because autistic perspectives are not available to media producers, I seek to gain insight into how autistic people perceive mediated representations of nonfictional autistic people in the context of sexuality and the implications these representations have on their sexual subjectification.

In the following chapter I will first describe the methodology and methods guiding the analyses. In the third chapter I conduct a textual analysis of the second season of *LOTS*. In the fourth chapter I include findings from interviews with autistic participants. In the fifth chapter I include findings from and discussion about the social media data collected from the hashtag #LoveOnTheSpectrum on Twitter. Finally, I conclude with a chapter discussing the implications of these analyses.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Research with autistic people and on *Love on the Spectrum* is needed to understand how such a reality show operates as a cultural technology of the autistic self. Representations of autism are currently "en vogue," (Rohr, 2015, par. 4), yet there is a paucity of audience reception research with autistic people about media representations of autism and sexuality. Analysis of *LOTS* itself is also needed to understand and reveal how such texts contribute to the transmission of cultural norms about autism and sexuality. Drawing on critical cultural interpretivist theories, the strategies to conduct this research included textual analysis, interviews with autistic people, and social media data collection.

Textual analysis focuses on viewers' potential perceptions of the text as well as explicating discursive practices/conventions, and this method has been "one of the primary tools" used in media research (Bainbridge, 2011, p. 224; Tracy, 2019). The aim of the textual analysis method was to answer the first research question: how does the reality television program *LOTS* represent autism and sexuality? Because of the lack of audience reception research with autistic people, and in order to better understand the construction of autistic subjects' self-mastery/self-knowledge regarding their gender and sexuality, data were also collected from ten in-depth interviews with individuals who self-identified as autistic. Interviews were thematically analyzed to answer the second research questions: how do autistic people talk about how they experience gender and

sexuality? And, how do autistic people talk about autism and sexuality as represented in *Love on the Spectrum*? Finally, guided by the knowledge that social media is a useful medium for both neurotypical and autistic people to engage with reality television programs (Ouellette, 2014), data from Twitter were collected from Tweets using the show's official hashtag #LoveOnTheSpectrum during the first two weeks of airing. Thematic analysis was conducted on the Tweets to answer the third and final research questions: On social media, what does public response to these representations on *Love on the Spectrum* look like? And, on social media, what does input from autistic communities in response to these representations on *Love on the Spectrum* look like?

Critical Cultural Interpretive Methodology

Critical theories are primarily distinct from other social theories in their emphasis on emancipation. Interpretivism is an epistemology that emphasizes subjectivity and considers research objectivity to be a "myth" (Tracy, 2020). One use of interpretive data by critical theorists is to reveal power structures (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Critical cultural communication research generally consists of inquiries into social formations and are critical of systems of oppression and domination (Rodino-Colocino, 2016).

Cultural studies emerged from critical theory, an umbrella term for diverse theories that understand social realities as being "constructed by symbolic systems and practices" of power (King, 2016, p. 4) and research as being value-laden (Blair et al., 1994). Cultural studies emphasize "the important relationship between ideology, or structures of belief, and the material conditions in which people live" (King, 2016, p. 1).

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Cultural studies scholars focus on social formations, particularly formations of difference, most often through media texts and audience receptions (King, 2016).

Critical cultural approaches are useful for the study of identity and subjectivity because they often understand the role of discourse as a form of power that operates in the production of the self. A critical cultural approach emphasizes discourse as power operating in the self so much so that the self cannot be interpreted without an analysis of discourse (Butler, 1992). This approach can include discourses found in media as well as in other communication processes (Foucault, 1977; King, 2016). For example, King (2016) describes the use of such analyses to investigate how media operates as a social force that not only reflects but also produces subjectivity. Critical cultural analyses ask how and why some constructions of identity become privileged (e.g., the nonsexual disabled person) in cultural and self-representations. These analyses also critique representations that are idealized or that devalue marginalized peoples (e.g., the disabled person as burden). These are analyses of "texts, artifacts, and practices in order to understand how they shape and are shaped by the cultural contexts and social formations from which they emerge" (King, 2016, p. 2).

While critical theorists embrace the "critique" that they are biased towards emancipating the socially oppressed, one of the perceived limitations to interpretivist epistemological approaches is a lack of quality, validity, etc. To this Tracy (2020) proposes interpretivist researchers adopt new benchmarks of quality:

- choice of worthiness of topic, e.g., establishing relevance and timeliness;
- richness of rigor, e.g., conducting systematic procedures;

- sincerity, e.g., conducting self-reflections and maintaining transparency about the research process;

- credibility, e.g., through triangulation of methods and/or participant reflections on research process and interpretations;

- significance of contribution (to the literature, to the participants' community, etc.; and

- ethical standards both procedurally and relationally with participants.

These benchmarks are especially necessary when engaging with an already marginalized population like autistic people that have often been victimized by unethical research done "on" them instead of "with" or "for" them (Stone & Priestley, 1996).

Critical Disability Studies as an interpretive methodology is useful for understanding disability representation in media texts as well as identity formation through participants due to its focus on making visible the (re)production of social constructions. Critical theories emerging from an interpretivist epistemology are useful for studying disability representations and identity formation for many reasons. Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) connect interpretivism to critical theory traditions, such as those used in Critical Disability Studies, that are intended to unfetter marginalized groups from the constraints of power. For example, interpretivist data collection using critical theories aim to reveal power structures that are interpreted as present in phenomena in order to facilitate social justice outcomes. Being critically interpretive about cultural representations of disability and disability identity formations means that the researcher is not only attempting to understand the context and processes of these

phenomena from different interpretations emanating from social interactions, but also

that the researcher accounts for their own interpretations through self-reflexivity and

connects these interpretations to broader issues of power and control (Pozzebon, 2004).

Critical Disability Studies Interpretive Methodology

Drawing from critical cultural theories and an interpretivist epistemology, in this

dissertation I engaged Critical Disability Studies as a methodology. Disability studies,

generally, has been defined as a body of scholarship that "has raised public and

academic consciousness by investigating the historical and cultural contingencies amidst

which 'disability' has been conceptualized and constructed while also improving the

lives of disabled people" (Osteen, 2007, p. 1). Utilizing Critical Disability Studies as

methodology–rather than simply as a field of study–enables analysis of "how (dis)ability

as a social system" works along with other mutually constitutive social systems, e.g.,

sexuality, in ways that impact people, and not only disabled people. Critical Disability

Studies as methodology illuminates how "(dis)ability as a social system...impacts all of

us in a wide variety of systemic and quotidian ways" (Schalk, 2017, p. 3).

Rather than defining what does and does not count as "disability," this

perspective operates from an understanding of (dis)ability as a system (Goodley, 2014).

The use of parenthetical ("dis/ability") indicates a reference to "the overarching social

system of power and privilege that benefits some bodyminds considered to have all or

most socially expected abilities...while marginalizing and oppressing other bodyminds

considered to lack key socially expected abilities" (Schalk, 2020, p. 137). These

bodyminds can include those who are considered lacking in socially expected abilities

but are not typically labeled "disabled." This term enables analysis of oppression based on bodily and mental norms and is "not dependent upon the presence of disabled people, yet is informed by social perspectives, practices, and concerns about disability" (Schalk, 2017, p. 2). A Critical Disability Studies methodology is designed to question and reveal said practices, norms, etc. Critical Disability Studies makes visible and questions:

> the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being (Siebers, 2008, p. 4).

In order to achieve the interpretivist benchmark of quality of methodological credibility through triangulation (Tracy, 2020), this study involved a textual analysis of the second season of *Love On The Spectrum* (2021), interviews with self-identifying autistic individuals who have seen the show, and the collection and analysis of social media data in the form of the official hashtag for the show, #LoveOnTheSpectrum.

Textual Analysis of *Love On The Spectrum* (2021)

Love on the Spectrum is currently the only English language reality television show exclusively about autism and sexuality. *LOTS* is an Australian reality television show about autistic people dating that aired globally on Netflix on July 22, 2020. The show was recommended to me by Netflix's algorithm on the date of its airing, and I "binged" the entire first season in one day. As a disability scholar, I was sensitized to the representations of autism on *LOTS*, but I was curious how both the general public and

autistic people were receiving it. I looked to the most popular social media platforms, and noticed Twitter was trending the hashtag #LoveOnTheSpectrum. The global scale and popularity of *LOTS*'s airing and its accompanying official hashtag, #LoveOnTheSpectrum, led to hundreds of thousands of Tweets using the hashtag to discuss the show. After immersing myself in the Tweet corpus, I decided to conduct a thematic analysis of Tweets from the first week of the show's airing to better understand how viewers were receiving and discussing the representations of autism and sexuality on *LOTS*. In this unpublished analysis of the first season's hashtag–presented at the *American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Annual Conference* (Landmark & Black, 2021)–we found that neurotypical Twitter users predominantly praised *LOTS* and reiterated norms of infantilization for the autistic daters on the show. However, Twitter users who identified as autistic or neurodivergent had opposite reactions. Broadly, Twitter users that self-identified as autistic were significantly more critical of the infantilization they interpreted as present in the show than the neurotypical users, but these critiques were largely dwarfed by neurotypical praise.

After a successful first season in which it received overwhelmingly positive reviews (Nicholson, 2020) exclusively from neurotypical people, the second season of *LOTS* aired globally on May 18, 2021 with six episodes. This season also received positive reviews. The apparent success of the first and second season, combined with the findings from the unpublished thematic analysis of Tweets about the first season, informed my decision to conduct this textual analysis of the second season of *LOTS*.

Textual analysis of the show itself was needed to better understand the mediated

conventions that potentially influence perceptions of autistic subjectivity.

Textual analysis is a qualitative method most often used in critical cultural

studies (King, 2016) and is defined as "the description and interpretation of the content,

structure, purposes, and consequences of existing verbal or visual texts" (Tracy, 2020, p.

80). Textual analyses are widely used in critical cultural research because cultural

studies as a school of thought is "focused on the textual analysis of cultural artifacts,

examining how meaning is multiple, ambiguous, and dependent on its audience and

connection to other texts…[and] typically question[s] how certain texts uphold or resist

dominant ideologies" (p. 81). Textual analyses are often used with critical theories

because of the recognition that, according to Wodak and Meyer's (2016) discussion of

critical discourse methodologies, "texts are often sites of struggle in that they show

traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance"

(p. 12). Besides this chapter's stated methodological underpinnings of Critical Disability

Studies in which practices, conventions, norms, etc. related to disability are revealed,

this chapter is also informed by Hall et al.'s (2013) understanding that textual analyses

are used to decode the meaning of signs from media texts to understand how

representations are produced. Using a background of theoretical knowledge regarding

ideological and cultural assumptions of autism and sexuality, the researcher interprets

the meaning of signs based on the researcher's evaluation of audiences' most likely

interpretations, with a recognition that texts can be interpreted in multiple ways

(Bainbridge, 2011; Hall, 1980). Contemporary textual analyses place more focus on a

viewer's perception of a sign and less focus on the author's intention for the sign. Textual analysis can be done for a primary text (e.g., a film) and/or a secondary text (e.g., popular press review of the film).

According to Bainbridge (2011), the steps to conduct textual analysis are as follows. First, encounter the text and note first impressions. Second, analyze the text by breaking it down into signs and signifieds/potential meanings. Third, interpret if the text is closed or open. In other words, determine if the text is closed if it appears to be attempting to encode certain messages through anchorage such as using a headline/caption, metaphor, or metonym, e.g., using one person to represent all people. If the text is open, it is determined to be intentionally promoting polysemic interpretations. The next steps are to frame the text by asking, for example, "Are there structured or intentional absences? Do hegemonic ideas seem unquestioned/like common sense?" This step also includes framing the text based on context such as time period or type of platform. Finally, the last step involves determining if there are relevant intertexts which are additional texts that create meaning in relation to the primary text, such as a popular press interview with the text's producers.

Extending Bainbridge's (2011) steps of framing, I incorporated Clarke et al.'s (2018) method of textual analysis of visual materials. Although Clarke et al.'s (2018) method was intended to be used as part of their systematic steps of situational analysis, an offshoot method derived from grounded theory methodologies, it is useful for a critical-cultural analysis because it contains many similarities and provides extended guidance on how to frame a text. For example, Clarke et al. (2018) acknowledge that

social situations are mediated in ways that obscure power. Visual materials are made to seem "real;" therefore, "viewers must learn to think reflexively about how images are concretely produced—the very intentional acts of posing, framing, capturing, including and excluding," etc. (emphasis added, p. 272), or, in other words, decoding. Clarke et al.'s (2018) "core issue" is the gaze. Clarke et al. (2018) argue it is the researcher's job to account for production contexts as well as social and historical contexts/expectations of spectatorship, i.e., intended meanings; however, one must recognize multiple gazer/gazee positions/realities are possible (Hall, 1980). For visual data, the levels of analysis are: content (what is given), referents (what it refers to), context/situatedness (where it appears), and how it is used. Researchers use "initial impressionistic interpretations" (p. 278) as well as systematic coding. The steps of analysis are: a) describing how the image fits into the situation of inquiry, where it came from, who produced it, for what audiences, with what goals/intended uses, etc., b) describing first impressions, i.e., "quick and dirty bulleted notes about your main takes and how the image hits you" (p. 281), narrative description of the image, breaking the image into textual segments, and c) analysis of cinematography, use of sound, editing, etc.

Textual analyses are useful for the study of disability representation and identity formation in media because of their emphases on the (re)production of ideology and the ways representations are constructed by signs. However, although textual analyses should take interpretations of audience reception into account (King, 2016), the method is not always used in conjunction with reception methods. Therefore, some have critiqued the method as potentially enabling the researcher to impose their interpretations

onto audiences without empirical evidence (Phillipov, 2008). However, as Phillipov (2008) argued, any notion that empirical methods can "grant access to a lived reality that textual methodologies can only abstractly theorize" assumes there are "true" or "correct" interpretations of the text (par. 12). However, to mitigate the impact of researcher bias, I triangulated this textual analysis with methods that focus on audience reception such as interviews and social media data.

Interviews

Interview Data Collection

For this inquiry, I utilized Tracy's (2020) semi-structured, discursive, responsive interviewing approach. Tracy (2020) argues semi-structured interviews are "flexible and organic in nature," "meant to stimulate discussion rather than dictate it," and are ideal for highly emotional or sensitive issues (p. 158). Entering the inquiry with flexibility enables the researcher to leave space for complexities, adjust the focus as meaningful topics emerge, and allow time for participants to reflect in a non-intimidating environment. Without the constraints of a highly structured questioning route (appendix B), I was able to "tap [into] both content and emotional levels" (Tracy, 2020, p. 158). This flexible approach also enabled me to reword questions using language used by my participants. For example, when probing for follow-ups after an open-ended question such as, "Tell me about your identity as an autistic person," if a participant used "Aspergers" or "Neurodiversity" to describe their identity, I too would adopt that language for the remainder of the interview.

In order to be effective, this type of interview approach requires extensive knowledge and expertise of the issue exemplified through prior engagement with the literature. Drawing from poststructuralism–and aligned with a Critical Disability Studies interpretive methodology–a discursive type of interview process "pays attention to large structures of power that construct and constrain knowledge and truth–and to how interviewees draw upon larger structural discourses in creating their answer" (Tracy, 2020, p. 160). Further, drawing from feminist theories, a responsive interviewing stance acknowledges the power differences inherent in the interviewer/interviewee relationship, recognizes potential emotional effects of the interview on the participants, and requires the researcher to reflect on and openly acknowledge their own biases (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Tracy, 2020).

These interviews were conducted online via Zoom, rather than in-person. The drawbacks to conducting interviews virtually versus in person include a less awareness by the researcher of nonverbal cues, body language, etc. that could add nuance and clarity to the participants' responses. However, mediated interviews are ideal for research with autistic people because some of the barriers inherent in normative communication are eliminated such as the necessity of eye contact. As Pinchevski and Peters (2015) argue, mediated contexts can enable freedom from these barriers while reducing the expectations for shared meaning, especially through nonverbal language of which its polysemantic nature may not be understood by autistic individuals (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Mediated interviews are also better suited for sensitive topics such as sexuality (Illingworth, 2005). While there are currently no studies, to my

knowledge, about the uses of Zoom to interview autistic people, Hassrick et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of information and communication technology use by autistic people and found these technologies provided greater benefits than drawbacks for autistic people, including that these technologies gave autistic people greater control over how they engaged with others and provided a sense of calm during interactions with others.

<p style="text-align:center">Recruitment</p>

I recruited through convenience and snowball sampling; I used my personal connections at the local center for independent living, Texas A&M's Center on Disability Development, and various academic and social programs for students with disabilities at Texas A&M. I also reached out to autism organizations on campus, and because the interviews were mediated, I posted virtual recruitment materials to my relevant social media feeds and groups, including groups specifically for discussions of autism and dating. The informed consent document is included in Appendix A and the interview questioning route is included in Appendix B.

<p style="text-align:center">Issues of Compensation</p>

Despite having extensive personal and social network connections to disability and autism groups, recruitment was challenging. The period I intended to interview participants had to be extended to accommodate these challenges as well as participant schedules. I attribute these difficulties primarily to issues of compensation. I did not initially offer compensation for participation in this study because I did not have specifically dedicated funding and did not foresee it as an issue since I was utilizing

online resources therefore broadening the potential pool of participants. However, when

I asked the first two participants for leads to other participants, they graciously shared

with me their beliefs that the difficulty in recruitment arose from this lack of

compensation as many autistic people are: a) wary of research being conducted "on"

them, and b) as affirmed by a recent report by the National Autism Indicators Report,

they are more likely to live in poverty than non-autistic people (Anderson et al., 2022).

This realization prompted me to submit an IRB amendment in which I offered

participants a $20 Amazon gift card in compensation upon completion of an interview. I

personally paid for these gift cards as I did not have any more funding from outside

resources and believed it to be important to conducting an ethical and successful study.

While this alteration did result in a significantly greater response pool, it also

opened the study up to compensation fraud which presented subsequent difficulties.

Before the amendment, two people scheduled interviews and multiple people contacted

me that I now believe were attempts at fraudulently receiving compensation. Throughout

the interviewing period, I had more than ten compensation fraud attempts. Warning

signs included lack of knowledge of autism, sexuality, and *Love on the Spectrum*, vague

responses, refusal to turn on their camera, hostility during demographic questioning,

repeated inquiries about compensation, similar email structure (e.g., two first names

commonly found in Western countries followed by two to four numbers), and

significantly shorter interview durations.

Based on findings from a literature review conducted by Teitcher et al. (2015),

one trend in Internet-based studies is that of ineligible people participating in studies for

the purpose of compensation. Contributing factors to this increase of fraudulent participation has been speculated to be based on perceptions of anonymity afforded by the Internet (Manzo & Burke, 2012) and economic instability specifically in foreign countries that provide beneficial currency conversion rates (Teitcher et al., 2015). I used a Google Forms survey that does not track IP addresses, and I did not require proof or identity or residential address, discussed further below, which I believe contributed to the study's vulnerability to fraud. Teitcher et al. (2015) noted there has been much discussion of how to conduct ethical online research in order to encourage participant trust of the researcher and research process, but less discussion of how researchers can trust participants in a time when many studies are online. Solutions proposed by Teitcher et al. (2015) include randomized informed consent items, tracking IP addresses, using a compensation lottery to randomly select a small portion of participants, and stating in the informed consent that participants deemed to be fraudulent or ineligible will not receive compensation. Of course, all of these prevention methods contain both potential benefits as well as potential ethical concerns.

Issues of Consent

Besides the barriers of compensation and fraudulent attempts at participation, another barrier to completing the interviews arose from the Institutional Review Board's reviewers' assertions that the study was not viable. I believe the reviewers appeared to have internalized ableist societal beliefs about autistic people, beliefs including that all autistic people would not have the mental capacity to consent to participation, a belief that autistic people who use augmentative and alternative communication devices would

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be more cognitively impaired and therefore unable to consent to participation, and a belief that autism is a diagnosis and therefore cannot be considered an identity.

To the first of these beliefs, I responded with evidence that autism is no longer considered a learning or intellectual disability (Bailey, 2020; Nicolaidis et al., 2019). Although the two diagnoses were previously conflated by the medical establishment, according to the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* the percentage of individuals with co-occurring diagnoses is now considered to be below 30 percent (Baio, 2014; CDC, 2023). The presence of autism does not inherently indicate a lack of mental capacity to consent. The IRB reviewer stated I should require proof of high school diploma or GED equivalent in order to ensure capacity to consent. According to the *Academic-Autistic Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education* guidelines to including autistic adults in research studies, if an individual indicates understanding of the informed consent document, the researcher does not need to verify if the individual has a guardian, high school diploma, or any other source of consent confirmation (Nicolaidis et al., 2020). Participants that I interpreted as likely lacking capacity to provide informed consent were not included in the study. As indicated in the IRB application, recruitment locations such as a center for independent living, social discussion groups, etc. targeted individuals who have the intellectual capacity to consent. These are the ethical guidelines I used to construct inclusion/exclusion criteria for these interviews, but I also referred to my knowledge that the presence of a high school diploma or GED confirmation does not automatically signify capacity to consent nor mean the researcher can skip or reduce informed consent procedures.

To the second belief that autistic people who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices would be more cognitively impaired and therefore unable to consent to participation, there is not any research evidence to support this argument. Further, neither research nor public policy supports cognitive prerequisites for the use of AAC devices (Ourand, 2010).

To the third belief that autism is a diagnosis and therefore cannot be considered an identity, I responded that autism is considered as an identity by many and has been referred to in scholarly literature as such (Lester, Karim, & O'Reilly, 2014; O'Dell et al., 2016; Robertson, 2010). As indicated in my proposal for this study, I intentionally used identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") rather than people/person-first language (e.g., "person with autism") in order to reflect the language choices of autistic self-advocates and to align with the neurodiversity movement. Self-advocates most often prefer to use identity-first language (e.g., Brown, 2011), and the neurodiversity movement includes conceptualizing autism as a positive identity.

Inclusion Criteria

For this study, my primary group of participants were people who self-identified as autistic, had seen at least one episode of *Love on the Spectrum*, spoke English, were at least the age of 18, and resided in the United States. Eighty percent of the participants identified with nonnormative sexualities and seventy percent identified as non-binary (see Table 1 in chapter 3 for further demographic information). Regarding inclusion/exclusion criteria, I did not strictly define "autistic." While obviously distinct/varied, "autistic" as a social category is unstable at present just as all identity

categories are unstable (Couser, 1997; Davis, 2013) and "must remain always open to question" (Shildrick, 2009, p. 4). Therefore, instead of narrowing this inquiry into specific form(s) or type(s) of autism–e.g., Autistic Disorder, Asperger's, broadly neurodivergent, etc.–I intended to recruit participants that self-identified with an autistic identity, regardless of distinct variation or official diagnosis. I chose to privilege self-identification because of the historically vague and shifting diagnostic criteria in general and a lack of clinical guidelines for diagnoses of women and other marginalized groups specifically (Cumin et al., 2021). "Autistic" is not a unified, homogenous, essentialized identity category, but as it is often referred to as such and stigmatized/oppressed in similar ways, I hoped to recruit anyone who found some sense of affiliation with the identity. In other words, I was less interested in perpetuating social constructions of autism and pursuit of participants with an "authentic" autistic identity and experience and more so in the phenomenological experience and social dimensions of occupying/adopting an autistic sexual subjectivity (Shildrick, 2009). At the beginning of the interviews, I asked participants for their language-choice preferences for their identities, and most participants chose "autistic." Some reported not receiving official diagnoses or being in the process of getting diagnoses at the time of interview.

I wanted to interview 10-20 participants and ultimately interviewed ten at which the data reached saturation. Saturation was interpreted as occurring when no new themes were identified after the eighth interview. From meta-analyses of qualitative research using interview data, saturation is usually reached within the first 6-12 interviews (Guest et al., 2006), and this was true for this study. In combination with the other methods used

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in this study, 10-20 interviews provided sufficient data for analysis and interpretation.

Further, several qualitative studies have been published recently that include 8-10

autistic participants with justifications that this is an ideal number for semi-structured

interviews on sensitive topics such as gender dysphoria for transgender autistic people

(Coleman-Smith et al., 2020), autistic women's experiences with menopause (Moseley

et al., 2020), and stereotypical gender expectations for autistic women (Seers & Hogg,

2021). Although I felt like the data reached saturation after ten interviews, I believe

more interviews in future could provide more nuance to the findings.

Social Media Data - Twitter #LoveOnTheSpectrum

Social media engagement has been and continues to be used as a significant

method of audience interaction fostered by reality television programs (Ouellette, 2014).

Given that the Internet and its affordances are well-suited for use by autistic people

(Pinchevski & Peters, 2016), and that social media platforms are designed for self-

advocacy, opinion sharing, and the co-production of knowledge (Danley, 2021;

Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020), attention needed to be paid to the narratives, discussions, and

critiques occurring on these platforms.

Social Media Data Collection

Twitter data were collected using ScrapeHero's Twitter scraper crawler tool.

ScrapeHero is a web scraping service that uses Twitter's API to gather Tweets

(ScrapeHero, 2021). I set the tool's parameters to collect all unique Tweets (i.e., not

reTweets) using the hashtag #LoveOnTheSpectrum during the first two weeks of the

second season of LOTS's airing (May 18, 2021 to June 1, 2021). I chose the first two

weeks as this is the time period when the streaming platform advertised the most using the hashtag and therefore engendered its use on Twitter. The first two weeks were also intentionally chosen because *LOTS* is a "bingeable" series in which audience members are intended to view multiple episodes if not the entire season in a short period of time. ScrapeHero's crawler tool collected the following metadata for each Tweet: user handle, username, Tweet content (text content and links to visuals such as photos or videos), number of replies, number of reTweets, number of favorites, timestamp, date, URL, and other hashtags used. However, only text content, hashtags, and visuals were analyzed in the thematic analysis. Although Twitter data is considered by Texas A&M's Institutional Review Board to be "public" data, many scholars warn it is important to consider user expectations regarding the publicity of their social media activity (Tracy, 2020). For example, Beninger (2017)'s research highlighted social media users' concerns: a) confusion regarding publicity of their online activities, b) desire for anonymity, and c) fears of exploitation. Beninger (2017) therefore proposed researchers consider user expectations and intentions for posts. As the Tweets I collected were using the show's public, official hashtag, I feel that is indication of an expectation or intention to discuss publicly with other users. However, because this topic is considered to be sensitive by some, and because autistic people are marginalized individuals, I did not include user handles/usernames in data representation.

Thematic Analyses - Interview and Social Media Data

Thematic analysis is a widely used method that can vary based on epistemology and is often used unsystematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). With an interpretivist,

poststructural epistemology, thematic analyses are not used to identify "emergent" themes in a data set as this approach would imply themes/structures already exist and are given meaning without co-construction with the researcher. There are many variations to this method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theoretical thematic analysis is driven by research questions and prior engagement with literature, whereas an inductive thematic analysis requires minimal prior engagement. A thematic analysis can take a semantic approach that is descriptive or a latent approach that interprets "underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations…and ideologies" that shape or inform the explicit content in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the steps to conduct a thematic analysis are as follows: a) familiarize yourself with the data, b) generate initial codes, c) search for themes, d) review themes, e) define and name themes, f) produce a report including data extracts that form an "analytic narrative" (p. 25).

When used with critical cultural theories, interpretivist thematic analyses that use a latent approach are useful for the study of disability representation and identity formation because of this approach's aim of making visible assumptions about disability that may be informed by discourses of power that are (re)produced repetitively. Similar to textual analyses, a potential perceived limitation of thematic analyses is the imposition of the researcher's interpretations without engagement with "actual" audiences. However, again, an interpretivist researcher would make explicit their epistemological beliefs about the (co)construction of realities and, hopefully, adequately overview the literature and theoretical framework that informs their interpretations.

Due to constraints inherent in qualitative thematic analysis, such as the significant amount of time it takes to manually and systematically sort through a data corpus of thousands of Tweets, I limited this analysis to Tweets during the first two weeks of the show's second season airing (380 Tweets). With themes defined as "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and [that] represents some level of patterned response or meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10), I coded the Tweets and interview data into theory-driven themes using a latent approach that is theoretically-based in the literature. In other words, instead of coding based on descriptive or explicit meaning in the Tweets, I coded based on my interpretations of the assumptions and ideologies that informed the content of the Tweets. Because of my prior engagement with the theoretical frameworks in the literature regarding autism and sexuality, I was sensitized to identification and interpretation of discursive practices/conventions found therein.

Utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, I began by immersing and familiarizing myself with the Tweets and the interview data. This process involved reading through the entire, respective data sets and making notes of initial patterns observed. Phase two was the first round of coding, and phase three was when codes were sorted into themes. Next, phase four required refining and collapsing the themes into each other when necessary as well as re-reading the initial codes to check if the themes represent the overall "story" of the data. Analyzing and defining each theme was phase five. Themes were organized according to their interpreted salience (Tracy,

2020). Finally, I proceeded to phase six in which I selected representative examples of each theme.

Positionality and Reflexivity Statement

As a person who does not have an official, medical neurodivergent diagnosis and who has invisible disabilities, i.e., can pass as able-bodied, I am sensitive to potential contribution to a history of exploitation and violation of disabled people by nondisabled researchers. I also recognize the inherent power differences between researchers and participants and the inherent power differences between disabled and nondisabled people. To address these concerns, I turn to Stone and Priestley's (1996) principles of emancipatory research with disabled people. First, I adopt a poststructural epistemology in which I understand that contingent discursive processes create disabled subjectivity (Scott, 1991), rather than understanding disability through a positivist, medical model that pathologizes and essentializes impairments. Poststructuralism is not a political/theoretical project with the aim of removing structures of power, e.g., medical institutions, but rather the task is to interrogate why/how structures are attributed/implemented with power, while recognizing that power is implemented even in this critique (Butler, 1992). Similarly, I commit to eschewing objectivity with the critical feminist belief that research is value laden (Blair et al., 1994; Stone & Priestley, 1996).

I do not claim expertise or authority on these issues, and therefore intend to amplify the voices of autistic people in acknowledgement that I cannot "give" voice to them – as their voices already exist. However, there is currently a trend in Disability

Studies of expecting authors confess their [disabled] selves through narrative in order to prove their authenticity. This trend by some Disability Studies scholars is informed by feminist virtues of reflexivity and positionality. Although I do not claim authority in this research process, I echo Rinaldi's (2013) challenge to this trend by adopting a poststructuralist criticism of standpoint theories and demands for reflexivity that prove an authentic identity as these demands are contributing to categorization and essentialism. Proof of identity authenticity causes narratives to be used as "a sorting tool" (par. 20), thereby reifying normative boundaries of disability.

While simultaneously challenging boundaries of disability and experiential authority, I also recognize my potentially perceived outsider positionality may offer strength to this project. Particularly, scholars have argued that outsider positionalities are advantageous when conducting research with marginalized, often-disempowered populations as the participants are afforded the expert status in the interaction and this in turn leads to participants feeling validated and respected (Berger, 2015). Therefore, though I believe insider/outsider boundaries of disability are blurred due to myriad forces, and that these boundaries can shift even within a single interaction itself, I encourage my participants to assume the expert position during the interview process.

CHAPTER III

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS - *LOVE ON THE SPECTRUM* (2021) SETS STANDARDS

FOR AUTISTIC SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY

Love on the Spectrum is co-created by Cian O'Clery for the *ABC TV*. O'Clery is the only producer shown to interact with the cast. He claims he based *LOTS* on another reality program he co-created called *Employable Me*, a show with the premise of proving to nondisabled viewers that disabled people are employable (Persaud, 2022). In *LOTS*, O'Clery aims to prove to neurotypical viewers that autistic people are dateable. In the second season of *LOTS*, nine autistic adults face "unique challenges" as they explore "the unpredictable world of dating" (Netflix, 2021). The cast go on dates orchestrated by the producers of *LOTS,* including speed dating events, dates with other cast members, and blind dates. The autistic cast members are most often partnered with other autistic people; however, they are occasionally, albeit rarely, partnered with dates who are neurotypical or have other disabilities such as Down Syndrome. Each cast member is first introduced through a one-on-one interview with the producer. The cast members are shown interacting with their families, friends, and "relationship coaches" at their homes and in public social settings. They are shown on their dates, and often these dates are interrupted by the producers for one-on-one "check in" interviews in which cast members are asked by the producers to reflect on the progress of their dates. The cast occasionally meet with the relationship coach to discuss their dating journey and get advice.

The show begins with 27-year-old Michael, a returning cast member from season one. Michael lives with his family, and he enjoys dressing formally, spiritualism, and watching *Gilligan's Island.* Michael did not find success in his pursuit of a romantic relationship in season one. Next in order of appearance, 21-year-old Ronan is introduced. Ronan has never dated before, also lives with his family, plays several instruments, and has a special interest in racing cars. After Ronan we meet Kassandra, a 27-year-old woman who also lives with her family. She enjoys cosplaying and collecting plush toys. She has dated before, but she has not been "in love." The next episode begins with Mark, another returning cast member, who is 30 years old, has a special interest in dinosaurs, and also lives with his family. Mark was also not successful in achieving his dating "goals" in season one. In season two Mark does get into a relationship with Chloe, another returning cast member, but their relationship ends when the season ends. Chloe is a 22-year-old florist who also lives with her family. Episode two also introduces Teo, a 22-year-old American expat who lives semi-independently in group housing, enjoys discussing politics, and has never dated before. Episode three begins by introducing Jayden, a 21-year-old who lives with his family, has a special interest in linguistics, and has a limited dating history. Episode three also shows Jimmy and Sharnae, the established couple who got engaged in the season one finale, preparing for their wedding, which is included as the season two finale. They are each 22 years old and live together. Sharnae's special interests are never discussed if she has any, but Jimmy is portrayed as a passionate and talented billiards player. Except for Jimmy and Sharnae, all of the autistic "cast" members are single at the season's outset. Jimmy and

Sharnae were already dating prior to their joining the cast. All of the cast members, except for Ronan, end the season still being single–excluding Jimmy and Sharnae who are married in the finale.

Reality series about dating/romance, such as *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, *Love Island, Love is Blind*, etc., have long been considered one of the major sub-genres of reality television. Some of the common tropes found in reality television dating shows include one-on-one dates, group dates, confessional interviews, elimination ceremonies, framing dating as a competition, jealousy-based conflict, surprise twists, "fairy tale" narratives, and "fantasy suites," that is, a room in which a chosen couple spends the night together with the implication that they will have sex (Murray & Ouellette, 2009). Similarly, reality series about disability, such as *The Undateables*, *Little People, Big World*, *Born This Way*, etc., are also popular. Tropes found in this type of reality television include inspirational narratives of overcoming/transformation, pity and sympathy, and extreme sensationalization and othering that has often been compared to historical "freak shows" (Cleary, 2016; Pitcher, 2021). In a combination of these two popular sub-genres, *LOTS* incorporates many of these tropes such as confessional interviews, fairy tale narratives, inspirational narratives of overcoming/transformation, pity and sympathy, and othering. However, *LOTS* differs from other reality series about dating or disability in that the daters are not competing against one another, the producers do not foster jealousy-based conflict, and there is an absence of sexuality (and therefore an absence of fantasy suites).

The critical cultural theoretical underpinnings of this analysis enable the interpretation of underlying meanings and assumptions found in *LOTS*'s representational choices. Informed by a theoretical framework of Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self and Ouellette and Hay's (2008) conceptualization of reality television as cultural technology, I focus on interpreting when and how *LOTS* is suggesting/prescribing to autistic people how to be a sexual self, if at all, to explicate how technologies of the autistic sexual self operate. I also pay special attention to what I interpret to be "intended meanings" (Clarke et al., 2018) while maintaining an understanding that texts are polysemic; that is, texts can be decoded with myriad meanings (Hall, 1980). I also interpret signs of the text and code those signs into themes based on when/how *LOTS* suggested/prescribed/established rules and standards of participation in romantic sociality, and when/how cast members were positioned as worthy or unworthy of belonging in sexual subjectivity (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Corresponding to the first research question, "How does the reality television program *Love on the Spectrum* represent autism and sexuality?" I present the following themes: a) romantic idealization, b) heteronormativity and neuroconventionality, and c) the neurotypical gaze.

Romantic Idealization

Romantic ideals have been defined as the conceptualization of the perfect partner or relationship (Markey & Markey, 2007), a set of unrealistic, and often dysfunctional, expectations about the operation of a relationship (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982), and a set of ideals that define a perfect love, such as that love overlooks flaws, love is between

two soul mates, love overcomes obstacles, and love at first sight is possible (Bell, 1975; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Specher & Metts, 1989). Romantic ideals always include the existence of a "happily ever after" (Cheyne, 2013). Romantic ideals about love, sex, and relationships are found in abundance in popular media, particularly in media targeted towards young, impressionable audiences (Hefner et al., 2017). Adolescents and young adults have been found to idealize romantic love based on media consumption that prioritizes such narratives (Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Holmes, 2007). Cheyne (2013) argued "happily ever after" (HEA) romance narratives for disabled people are needed in response to society's proliferation of disability-as-tragedy narratives, but Darke (2004) has argued that while "positive," these HEA narratives fortify normative modes of romantic sociality that are oppressive and are therefore considered to be "falsely progressive" (Malinowska, 2018, p. 366).

I interpreted the theme of romantic idealization as consisting of the following sub-themes: a) quest for true love and b) fulfilling life's purpose and heterosynchrony. The quest for true love sub-theme consisted of references to the journeys cast members take, or should take, to achieve happily ever afters. The sub-theme of fulfilling life's purpose and heterosynchrony consisted of assertions that achievement of heteronormative goals within a prescribed timeline would fulfill each dater's life purpose.

Quest for True Love

In the second season of *Love on the Spectrum*, romantic idealization operated discursively and through sound by constructing the daters' developments as magical or

fantastical quests for true love. Daters and producers explicitly used "quest," "magical,"

and "fantasy" language. For example:

PRODUCER: "Why are you back [for the second season]?"

MICHAEL: "I'm continuing my quest for true love" (O'Clery, 2021)

Opening the season with returning-dater Michael constructs this quest as essential in that

it implies Michael and others should continue their pursuit until completion. In the first

season, in which Michael is the first person the show interviews in-depth, the very first

words spoken are as follows:

PRODUCER: "What do you think love is?" (*This is followed by a*

montage of responses by all the daters of this season).

KELVIN: "It'll be like a fairytale" (O'Clery, 2019).

LOTS reinforces this idealized love-as-fairy tale trope by placing this statement as the

very first words the audience hears. In the first in-depth interview, the producers ask

dater Michael what his "greatest dream [is] in life," and Michael responds with "to

become a husband" (O'Clery, 2019). When we consider the second season opening in

which Michael states he is continuing this quest, we can interpret Michael's quest

described as his attempt to achieve an idealized, fairy tale, committed relationship,

ideally a marriage, resulting in or as consequence of true love.

In another example, when the show's relationship specialist asks dater Ronan

how he will secure a relationship with dater Katie after two dates, he says, "Sometimes it

can be a bit nerve-wracking for me to ask the magical question, as in like the relationship

question" (O'Clery, 2021). When Ronan says the word "magical," orchestral music

swells in the background, further emphasizing the show's fantastical construction of romantic relationships. Here is yet another example of the use of "magical" to refer to the autistic cast's understanding of love:

> PRODUCER: "What do you think being in love would be like?"
>
> TEO: "Magical, I've—like, I see it on TV, I see it in my parents. I—like, I see it with my sister and partner, and her partner. I'm like, 'Man, I want that.' I'm like, 'that just seems amazing.' Like, just to have a best friend to have your life with. Like, it's amazing" (O'Clery, 2021).

In another scene, Ronan describes his journey on the show as fulfilling his destiny to find an ideal partner:

> "I've never been in love before. Really like it's just like my own destiny, like [I] really want to find a girl that truly cares about and loves me. My dream girl will be, like, wonderful and splendid" (O'Clery, 2021).

Here dater Ronan is reinforcing this trope of a magical quest by describing it as his destiny. In other words, being in an idealized relationship with a perfect girl is believed by him to be his predetermined fate. The romantic idealization in this quest is the belief in a "dream" girl that is perfect or at the very least "wonderful and splendid." So, not only is the quest a fantasy but also the end result is a fantasy.

This theme of idealizing romance by constructing the pursuit of love as a quest was also demonstrated visually, tonally, and through sound. For example, also in episode one, dater Ronan describes rubbing a replica genie lamp, pictured in Figure 1, from the

fantasy Disney film *Aladdin* (1992) while wishing to obtain a perfect, idealized

girlfriend.

> RONAN: "And then this is like a lamp. It used to be in *Aladdin* the
>
> movie, and sometimes if you rub it, you get to make a wish. Get this, for
>
> instance, I'm rubbing [the lamp], I close my eyes and say, 'I wish to get a
>
> girlfriend of mine, who likes the same interests as much as I do.'"
>
> PRODUCER: "Sounds good, well hopefully it'll work."
>
> RONAN: "Hopefully it will." (*Camera close-up of Ronan placing lamp*
>
> *back on desk, magical, twinkling music plays and fades into the next*
>
> *scene*; O'Clery, 2021).

This scene is significant because not only is Ronan wishing to procure a girlfriend–a

wish expressed by many other cast members–that is, unrealistically, perfectly suitable to

him but also because he is using a magical element made famous from a fantasy film

marketed to children with a plot revolving around the main character's acquisition of a

princess as his true love. The arrangement of the scene and sound here accompanying

Ronan's reference to the fantasy, romantic children's film reinforces the fantastical

elements that carry over into other scenes and support the magical quest trope by fading

the "magic" into the next scene. Magical, twinkling music accompanying a shot of the

lamp further contributes to the construction of the show's aims, i.e., facilitating the

daters' pursuits of love as that which is a fantastical journey, or in other words, a quest.

Figure 1 *Aladdin's* **(1992) Lamp**

This framing of relationships and love as a quest implies love is something one must conquer or achieve at the end of a journey, of which the conclusion is a happily-ever-after. Chiara Pellegrini (2022) conceptualized such journeys or quests as operating on a heteronormative timeline. She argued romance television and film narratives, especially in reality programs, amplify assumed-natural heterosexual temporal steps, and this "anticipating, emphasising, and repeating" of recognizable heterosexual achievements inadvertently or paradoxically expose those steps as "compulsory, coercive, exclusionary, and limiting" (ibid, par. 1). As many scholars have argued before, particularly Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998), heterosexual norms and fantasies that must be continuously reasserted demonstrate their fragility. This scene with Ronan and his lamp exemplifies the iterative amplification of the assumed-natural heterosexual temporal steps Pellegrini (2022) described as prevalent in romance reality

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television genres. Not only is Ronan repeating the romance quest tropes popularized in fantasy films, but also this is being further amplified by the producer's verbal support.

<p style="text-align:center">Fulfilling Life's Purpose and Heterosynchrony</p>

The sub-theme of fulfilling life's purpose and heterosynchrony consisted of daters and the show's narrative mechanisms framing the achievement of finding true love as that which will solve problems in the daters' lives or fulfill an essential purpose of their life. This sub-theme also engages and affirms heterosynchrony; that is, the prioritizing of heteronormative milestones that are expected to be achieved on a conventional, linear timeline with an end resolution or outcome such as marriage and children (Schoonover & Galt, 2016). As many feminist and queer scholars have argued, notably Sara Ahmed (2010) and Jack Halberstam (2005), the non-normative alternative to heterosynchrony is "queer time," i.e., "to divert from straight lines" and embrace anti-linearity rather than advocate for the assimilation of non-normative people to heteronormative timelines (Schoonover & Galt, 2016, p. 268). As Fahs and McClelland (2016) argue in their conceptualization of Critical Sexuality Studies, some of the cultural assumptions that exist about romantic relationships are that they must be outcome-driven, that they are enjoyable and desirable for everyone, and that a person's age and development must occur simultaneously with linear hetereonormative milestone achievement. These three assumptions are fulfilled within this sub-theme.

Happily-ever-after narratives that are deployed on a heterosynchronous timeline may seem beneficial for a population that has been excluded, denied reproductive futurism, and represented stereotypically in romance genre television and film (Cheyne,

2013), as these narratives may reduce stigmatization (Ramasubramanian & Yadlin-Segal, 2017) and be strategically political (Spivak, 1988). However, these appeals to normality are also exclusionary and serve to reify dominant and oppressive modes of romantic sociality (Darke, 2004; Malinowska, 2018). Rather than responding to this denial of reproductive futurity by advocating for assimilation and acknowledgment of reproductive capabilities, rights, and timelines, it should be possible to instead align oneself with the belief that reproductive futurity, and other facets of heteronormativity, are not inherently desirable for all (Bersani, 1995). In other words, the future of the unknown and unattainable Child (Edelman, 2004), i.e., an allegory for heterosynchronous achievements such as heterosexual marriage and reproduction of children, is not inherently more important than the present well-being of disabled and queer adults who are often denied this futurity in real life and in media. Mainstream television and film media have attempted to combat this historical denial with inspirational narratives of overcoming such as can be found in *LOTS* (Grue, 2016). Pellegrini (2022) argued further that "narrative overdetermination of the correct steps, their proper temporal order, and their inevitable end-goal" excludes those who do not conform to these heterosynchronous structures (par. 3).

Another prominent feature of heterosynchrony is that it operates "against all odds" (Schoonover & Galt, 2016, p. 268). A narrative of overcoming disability to achieve a heteronormative romantic relationship follows a classical Hollywood model of organizing meaning. Overcoming narratives are also a popular reality television method of introducing novelty, a staple in the genre, by portraying a population that is not often

represented as pursuers of romantic relationships. A narrative of overcoming operates throughout season two of *LOTS* as daters describe the lengths they have taken to pursue romantic relationships--such as using online dating sites and apps for months without success.

In many cases in *Love on the Spectrum*, this demonstration of the "correct steps" of heterosynchrony were referred to as if there were a box to be checked for the fulfillment of expectations for a happy, successful adult life. For example, during a one-on-one interview with dater Mark, the producer asked:

PRODUCER: "Is there anything missing in your life?"

MARK: "The one thing that's missing is the girl of my dreams. And I've

been waiting very patiently for her to come along" (O'Clery, 2021).

This question is significant in that it was made to Mark, a person who is portrayed as being fulfilled in most other ways. For example, Mark has a semi-independent living situation, an active social life including close friendships, and a deep passion for his hobby of learning about dinosaurs. Until Mark is asked this question, a viewer could interpret him as being satisfied with his life based on his positive, happy demeanor. This amplification of heterosynchronous expectations is demonstrated further when the producers explicitly draw attention to Mark's "advanced" age:

PRODUCER: "So you're 30." (*This is said as a statement, not a

question*).

MARK: "Yep." (*Mark still has a positive tone of voice at this point*)

PRODUCER: "But you haven't found that special person yet."

MARK: "Yeah. Unfortunately. It's-- it hasn't been easy, you know? I just

can't help but feel a bit of a sense of failure that I haven't... that I'm 30,

and I thought I would have a girlfriend by now. You know, just be

married and stuff like that. I don't know." (*This statement is made with*

Mark scrunching his face as if he wanted to cry, an intensely sad

expression, pictured in Figure 2, and using a sad tone of voice, sharply

contrasted with his earlier, happier expression and tone; O'Clery, 2021).

Even when Mark seems happy and fulfilled in other ways, he is prompted to address or

answer for his age and lack of a romantic partner; that is, the producers are pointing out

the abnormality of being 30 without being married.
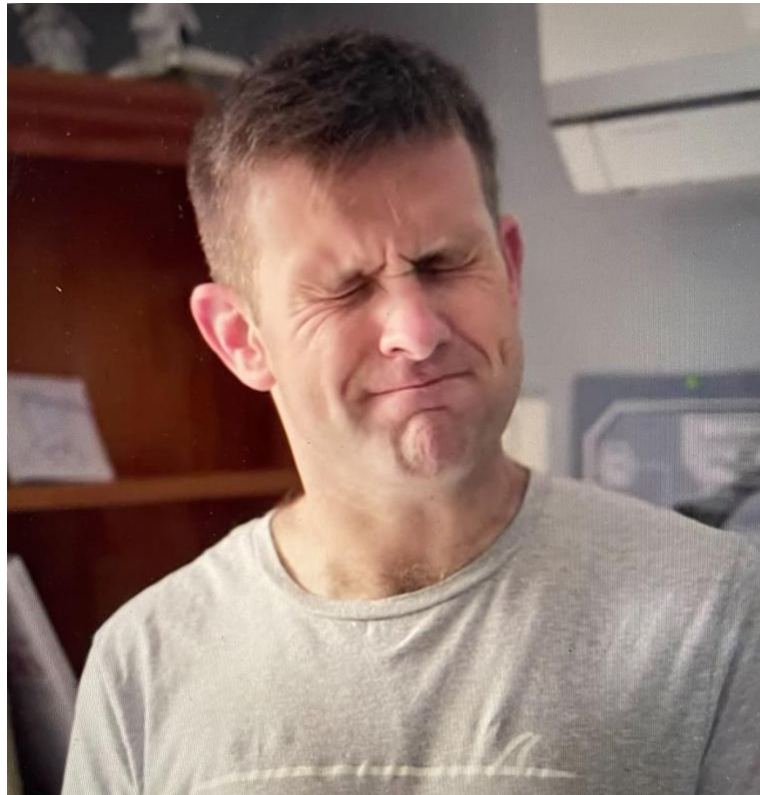
Figure 2 Mark's Sad Expression

Another example of checking the appropriate boxes occurs during a conversation with Ronan's mom in a one-on-one interview:

PRODUCER: "So what do you think about Ronan's desire to meet
someone?"

RONAN'S MOTHER: "I think it's great. I think this is the next phase in
his life, really. I mean, we've got through school and now found some
employment, and I think this is something that, you know, is really
important to him" (O'Clery, 2021).

Ronan is asked a similar question in his one-on-one interview and responds by saying:

"So, I've never been on a date before but, but really this is like something
for me to achieve on, like a relationship as boyfriend and girlfriend"
(O'Clery, 2021).

As in other interviews with family members on the show, their addition of "meeting someone" with the expectation of future success at obtaining a romantic relationship to a list of other normative achievements constructs this endeavor as another box to be checked on the list of requirements for a successful, fulfilled life. As Ouellette and Hay (2008) argue in their conceptualization of reality television as cultural technology, *LOTS* is establishing rules, standards, expectations, etc. for how subjects must participate in social life. In this case, the expectation is that ideal subjects must achieve success in finding romantic partnership by a certain age/stage of life. This sub-theme was further reinforced in the following example:

MICHAEL: "I just can't bear the thought of being single my entire life

because it's lonely, it's boring, and it's also unfulfilling, and it makes you

feel like you lack a purpose. I can't see myself without a wife. There's no

other way for me." (*During this last sentence, the camera focuses on*

Michael's frowning/serious face as orchestral music climaxes; O'Clery,

2021).

Michael's insistence here demonstrates the compulsory nature of

heterosynchronous standards in that he cannot bear or even imagine a life

without accomplishment of the prescribed steps. In another example, Teo

described being terrified of going on dates yet feeling like she has to, to which

the relationship specialist responded:

RELATIONSHIP SPECIALIST: "So, why do you want a partner?"

TEO: "I want a partner. I want a best friend. I want life" (O'Clery, 2021).

Finding love and a romantic relationship is not only framed as the assumed or expected

next steps for the daters to obtain a fulfilled or purposeful life, but it also is constructed

as dire enough that life would not be bearable or possible without being in a relationship.

Having a relationship is equated to having life itself, even when the prospect is

terrifying. Rather than the relationship specialist affirming that one's life can be

fulfilling without having a romantic relationship, especially when it causes fear and

distress in daters like Teo, the relationship specialist persists in "helping" Teo fulfill that

expectation.

This theme of romantic idealization contributes to my theorization of technologies of the autistic self because it demonstrates how idealized romantic norms are established as standards or expectations to which everyone must conform. This theme also contributes to this theorization because it illuminates how autistic people are constructed as able to *attempt* to conform to norms, even if they do not succeed. In other words, *LOTS* portrays autistic people as subjects who are influenced by normative expectations for sexuality and who attempt to use these expectations and standards to conform themselves into ideal sexual subjectivity.

Heteronormativity and Neuroconventionality

Many scholars have argued norms of gender, sexuality, and disability co-construct one another, with some venturing far enough to say all disabled sexuality is queer sexuality because it is inherently non-normative (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; McRuer, 2011). The second theme I interpreted as prevalent in season two of *LOTS* was that of the frequent affirmation of heteronormativity and neuroconventional dating norms that are often operating together. These norms constitute what Wilkerson (2012) refers to as "normate sex." These norms were present generally when discussions of romantic sociality included descriptions of expected gender role performance as well as specifically during frequent examples of male entitlement to a romantic partner--the latter of which will be discussed below as a sub-theme. Heteronormativity is a concept used to describe socio-culturally affirmed norms of sexuality such as that romantic relationships should be between two people who are heterosexual, cisgendered, married, monogamous, etc. (Rubin, 1984). First defined by McDermott (2022),

neuroconventionality in dating refers to similarly socio-culturally affirmed dating norms often found in representations of neurotypical romance rituals such as the requirement of making eye contact, not oversharing personal information on a first date, the expectation that a couple must define the status of their relationship after the third date, etc. McDermott (2022) argues that in film and television "a person or character's legibility depends on their adherence to [these] normative social conventions" (p. 5).

In every season of *LOTS*, including the second season under analysis, heteronormative and neuroconventional expectations are affirmed through the relationship specialists, the producers, the daters' families and friends, and the daters themselves. In a poignant one-on-one interview with the producers, dater Jayden describes his dislike for arbitrary neuroconventional dating norms. After this scene, he is shown discussing this further with his friend in the following exchange:

FRIEND: "So do you think you're ready to start dating?"

JAYDEN: "Probably not, but I've been reading a lot online, and I feel people have their own notions as to what they should be doing [regarding dating norms]. And they do not coincide with my notions."

FRIEND: "What do you mean?"

JAYDEN: "You're not meant to be too honest about yourself initially. You're not to reveal too much about yourself."

FRIEND: "Oh, initially. Okay, yeah." [*smiling and nodding to show understanding*]

JAYDEN: "But I'm a chronic oversharer…."

FRIEND: [*laughing at this comment*] "Yeah, okay. Have you thought

about making a list of things you would like to work on [regarding

dating]?.... Like a 'do's' and 'don'ts' list."

What is significant about this scene is that, rather than acknowledge and accept that

Jayden understands neuroconventional dating norms yet still does not wish to use them

as a tool to construct his ideal sexual subjectivity, his friend suggests he make a list of

dating "rules." This list, created by Jayden's friend, contained rules that Jayden agreed

with such as "*do* use open questions…because people like to talk about themselves."

There were also rules that he did not agree with, such as "offer them a glass of water" to

be "courteous" because he believes it would undermine his date's "own sense of

autonomy." This exchange is interesting because, as an autistic person, Jayden described

experiencing infantilization and low expectations from others. If he were to date other

autistic people, it makes sense that he would be sensitive to not potentially infantilizing

them. It would make sense that he does not want to use this cultural expectation to shape

his sexual subjectivity. Further, if he were to go on a date with another autistic person,

that person might understand his hesitancy as an expression of "love" or affectionate

sentiment. However, Jayden's neurotypical friend demanded he adhere to these

neuroconventional expectations and said, "You're thinking too much into it" in a blithe

tone. Later in their conversation Jayden says, "I try as much as possible *not* to abide by

the norms unless those norms seem sensible to me," and his friend again dismisses him

and his convictions by saying "you just have to practice." Despite Jayden's justifications

for his convictions, it is likely the case for Jayden's friend that challenging

neuroconventional dating norms is unthinkable and therefore unacceptable. As scholars Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2021) argue, an alternative to assumptions of heteronormativity and neuroconventionality that induce cognitive dissonance could be to use analysis of autism to reveal the arbitrary nature of these norms.

In another example of the legitimation of neuroconventionality, dater Kassandra explicitly described her dismay and difficulties with adhering to neuroconventional norms. In a one-on-one interview with the producers, she said:

> "One of the biggest things I've had to learn is what people call 'masking.' Pretending and hiding the parts of me that don't fit neurotypical society. In a perfect world, no, I wouldn't have to learn how to word things so a neurotypical person doesn't find offense where there is none to be had. But we don't live in a perfect world."

Rather than appreciating and supporting the unique ways many autistic people engage with others, valuing their neurodiversity as another valid way to "be," the producers end the scene with this statement and move on to the next, which is irrelevant to Kassandra's lament, thereby implying agreement that Kassandra and others like her should learn to mask their autism in order to fit in to neurotypical society and date like neurotypical people.

The expected inability of autistic people to be successful daters, an expectation informed by neuroconventional norms, is affirmed when dater Sharnae tells a tour guide (during a vacation with her fiancé) that she is engaged, and he responds with tones of awe and shock, saying, "That's nice that you were able to find someone." This statement

implies Sharnae is fortunate she found someone to marry *despite* having autism, and she deftly responds with, "Everyone can find love, doesn't matter what disability you have, everyone can find love." Sharnae spends the rest of the tour with a facial expression of anger and annoyance, pictured in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Sharnae's Angry/Annoyed Expression

While there were instances of non-heteronormative dating in season two, heteronormativity was overwhelmingly upheld as the ideal form of romantic sociality. Most importantly, the season finale depicts the marriage between heterosexual couple Jimmy and Sharnae. Placing a marriage between two white and white-passing, opposite sex people follows the traditional and assumed-natural heterosexual temporal steps Pellegrini (2022) described as prevalent in romance television. Throughout the season, the marriage is anticipated as the climactic event. The season concludes with the socio-

culturally most desired and recognizable heteronormative achievement: marriage, complete with the genre-stereotypical romantic piano music and slow-motion shots of the couple kissing with soft lighting and rose petals floating around them.

Less obviously, heteronormativity was upheld through the frequent evocation and support for traditionally recognized gender roles. While there were several instances of this evocation and support, I will demonstrate this theme of heteronormativity with a few examples. In one scene, dater Teo (who identifies as bisexual) is experiencing her first date with a man. His shoe comes untied, and as he has motor skill impairment, Teo offers to tie it for him. To her date's embarrassment, Teo adopts a giddy, high-pitched, childlike voice, as clown-like music plays in the background, and says "Look at me, tying a boy's shoe." Then she laughs and says "Okay, cute," referring to her actions as cute, not to the tied shoe. While seemingly inconsequential, this scene demonstrates that heteronormative expectations, such as that the man takes care of the woman on the date, are upheld even above accommodations for disability. The man here is infantilized by Teo for not assuming the proper gendered role. There are several similar examples throughout the series, including admonition that the man on the date should pay for dinner, pull out the chair for the woman to sit at the table, be the lead when dancing, etc.

As gendered expectations are explored in the show, it is made clear that autistic people do not or cannot neatly fit these expectations. For example, when dater Michael seeks confirmation that he is an "A+" example of a man ready to go on a date, the camerawork highlights his parents laughing at him, thereby undermining his attempts to be a "normal" dater. In another scene, Michael describes not wanting to date an autistic

woman because she would not be a "girl next door type." This statement is met with nods of agreement, and implies a "normal," ideal, and dateable girl would not have autism. In another example, Michael describes his interpretation of appropriate gender role expectations for romantic relationships:

> MICHAEL: "Women don't like to be married to men who still live with their parents, because it's kind of embarrassing. I'm four years away from turning 30. For a while, I've been feeling like I'm still a boy. Because a boy needs his parents for company, a man needs a spouse."

This statement demonstrates a lot of overlapping themes: a) heterosynchrony is shown when Michael implies a man should be married by the age of 30, b) a gender role expectation that a man who is eligible for dating should live independently, and c) the gender role expectation that a man is entitled to a spouse because it is a necessity. It is clear here that Michael has also internalized infantilizing beliefs by referring to himself as a "boy." It is also significant that Michael implies a woman's justification for wanting to date a man who lives independently would be because "it's kind of embarrassing" to date a man who does not live alone (O'Clery, 2021). This justification implies not that there are practical reasons for this desire but that women would be judged by others for that choice of partner.

Male Entitlement

Expanding on this last theme, male entitlement to a romantic partner is supported frequently in this season. In one scene, dater Ronan says:

When I see my brother hanging out with *his* girlfriend, it made me feel

jealous, like thinking, 'why does he get a girlfriend and not me?'"

(*Ronan's face here is very sad with eyebrows turned down at the ends*

and frowning. He is also using a sad tone of voice; O'Clery, 2021*).*

The producers responded to Ronan by saying "Well, I'm sure you'll have a girlfriend

one day" (O'Clery, 2021). Again, the producers had an opportunity to challenge this

heteronormative, sexist belief that just because one brother "gets" a girlfriend, that does

not automatically mean the other deserves to "get" a girlfriend himself. The assumption

of male entitlement here also features objectification of women in that they are able to be

possessed by a man. Another opportunity to challenge these beliefs was presented when

Ronan described going on a third date with Katie; a date that was previously discussed

with the relationship specialist as the relationship-defining date. Ronan described the

success of this date as a "hat trick," i.e., a term used in sports such as hockey and soccer

to describe three successive, unlikely achievements. In other words, Ronan believes this

important third date is something he has successfully achieved. He defined the date as a

success within the first couple of minutes of their date, before he even asked her to be in

a relationship with him. As he waited for Katie to arrive, he said, "Can't wait 'till Katie

loves my rose," and patted himself on the shoulders, portraying an assumption that

romantic gestures will automatically result in success, regardless of the woman's consent

or involvement.

Despite the overwhelming heteronormative representations, there were some

instances of non-heteronormative dating. For example, dater Jayden casually revealed he

is attracted to people of different genders, including women who are decades older than him, while using a dating app with a friend. While explicitly supported by his friend–"that's broadening your horizons"–the friend also implies this is abnormal or unusual by communicating her shock at this revelation. In the only other example of non-heterosexual dating, the producers referred to Teo's date with a woman named Rosie as a "girl date" rather than simply "a date." This language supports oppressive and exclusionary heteronormative expectations because it implies "normal" dates are with people of the opposite gender; otherwise, the qualifier "girl" would not precede the word "date."

Later in the same scene, as the "girl" date progresses, Teo asks Rosie about her sexuality and when she knew she was attracted to women. Rosie says she always knew she wanted to date women. Teo responds by describing her previous, and only other, date with a man, saying, "And that [date] went very well, we went to the Opera Bar, and so that was very nice." As she said this, the camera zooms into Rosie's face as she looks away from Teo and purses her lips in a disappointed or annoyed expression, pictured in Figure 4.
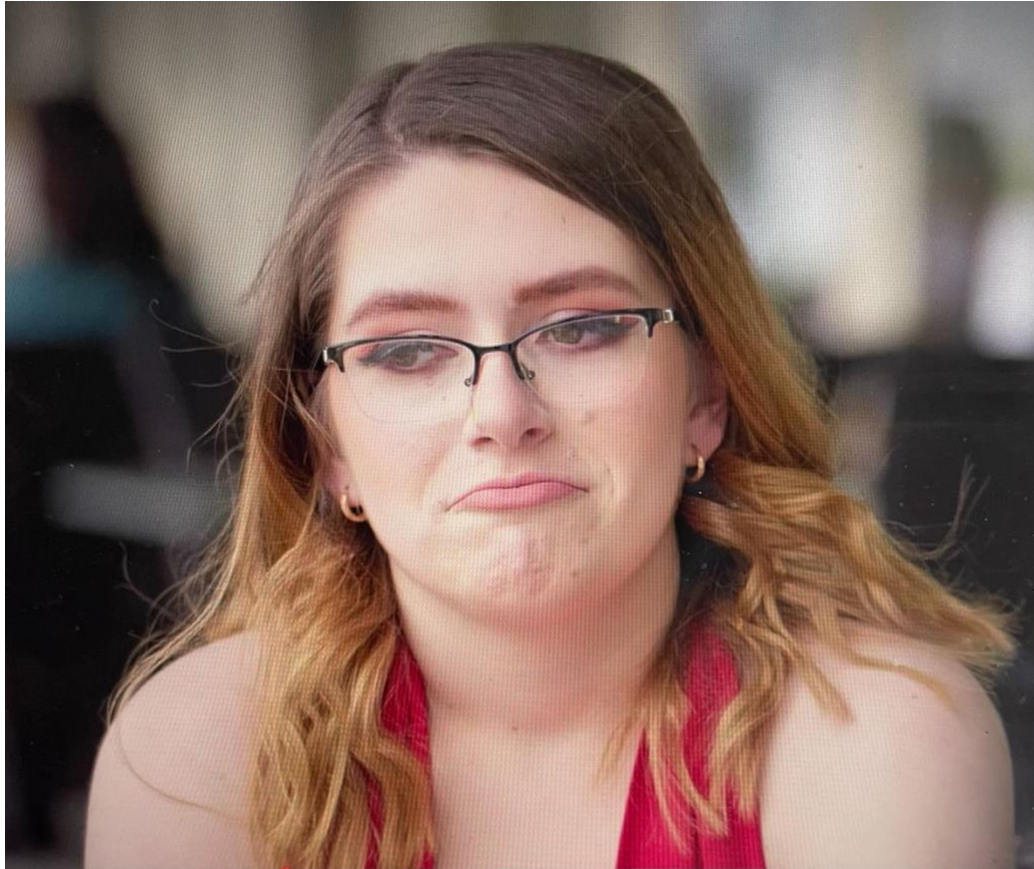
Figure 4 Rosie's Disappointed/Annoyed Expression

There is an awkward silence as Rosie does not respond, and both of their faces frown.

The romantic background music cuts out to emphasize this awkward silence further.

After some time, Teo excitedly says, "And now I'm trying out you!" Again, Rosie is

silent and looks away. Teo fumbles for what to say, "Um, so… I don't know. But I think

I-- I think I'm liking this more" with a smile. This causes Rosie to scoff, purse her lips

again, and say with a sarcastic tone, "Well, I'm glad" while shrugging her shoulders and

looking down at her lap. It is my contention that this scene exemplifies a perhaps

unintended result of socio-culturally affirmed heteronormativity in that queer romantic

relationships, especially between lesbian and bisexual women (how Rosie and Teo identify their sexualities, respectively) are often considered temporary and experimental on the part of the bisexual person. The statement of "And now I'm trying out you!" after describing a successful date with a man seems to imply Rosie could be nothing more than an experimental step towards Teo's eventual heterosexual relationship success. At the end of the date, Teo thanks Rosie by saying "Thank you for being my first girl date." Again, Rosie frowns and looks away.

Heteronormative and neuroconventional expectations are often unspoken, and *LOTS* provides a distinct opportunity in which these expectations are able to be revealed. For example, appropriate attire for a date is something that many of the daters find challenging to implicitly ascertain. In one scene, dater Michael prepares for a date by asking the producers for their opinion on a suit. Rather than give an opinion, the producers direct Michael to ask his mother. Michael's mother tells him to wear whatever he is comfortable wearing. While this interaction could be positive in that it could defy expected neuroconventional norms, Michael confirms with his mother that a suit is what an "A+" man would wear, and she agrees while laughing. This scene therefore supports heteronormative and neuroconventional dating norms that imply romantic dates should be formal, an expectation that many of the daters on the show find intimidating and uncomfortable. Rather than defy the conventional expectations, these expectations are affirmed while simultaneously framing the autistic person as inept at dating by making him an object of ridicule because the only humor in this scene is derived from Michael's attempts to be successful at fulfilling these expectations. Even when he is successful, the

shots of his mother laughing combined with the quirky, hesitant music in the background serve to imply he is still unable to properly or completely achieve normality.

Neurotypical Gaze

Catherine McDermott's (2021) theorization of the neurotypical gaze is based on Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze, i.e., that male viewers derive pleasure from viewing women constructed as objectified Others. Mulvey's (1975) theory argued these objectified Others are made to be passive, and the target audience is meant to view these Others with an active, dominant gaze. This conceptualization of the neurotypical gaze highlights the tendency of film and television to do the following: a) facilitate neurotypical pleasure from viewing an objectified autistic subject, b) "fix" the autistic subject as that which is socially undesirable, and c) only see itself, i.e., neurotypicality, despite "looking at" autism. This "only seeing itself" operates through cinematography and visual and verbal language that "actively construct [the autistic subject] as a figure outside the bounds of normative social engagement" (p. 4). I will provide examples of each of these maneuvers.

First, I argue *LOTS* facilitates neurotypical pleasure by constructing an objectified autistic subject. McDermott (2021) describes scenes in other texts that include autistic people that are "rife with invitation for the (neurotypical) spectator to enjoy the comedic pleasure of watching [an autistic subject] transgress social etiquette" (p. 3). These "invitations" imply an intended neurotypical audience because "social transgression, then, is designed to generate affective pleasure for a neurotypical viewership, not an autistic one" (ibid, p. 3). For example, using the scene described

above in which Jayden challenges his neurotypical friend's "rules" for dating, one could assume that an autistic audience would understand Jayden's defiance. Rather than depict this defiance as valid difference or diversity in how to engage in romance rituals, the show objectifies Jayden as an other by only allowing for culturally legible, neuroconventional expressions of love. To Jayden, respecting his date's autonomy is perhaps an expression of love, but because that is not socially acceptable, he is reprimanded by his neurotypical friend.

Second, McDermott (2021) argues "the dominant gaze has the power to 'fix' a person within a subordinated identity category" by highlighting their otherness (p. 3). Editing choices such as the inclusion of awkward silences, zooming in on uncomfortable faces reacting to something an autistic dater said, etc. fix "aloneness" or abnormality as the primary mode of autistic subjectivity. Even when the autistic subjects abide by neuroconventional social rules and behaviors, the cinematography highlights their otherness. We can see this "fixing" occur when Michael seeks confirmation that his suit is acceptable attire for a date and his family continues to laugh at him. Even when he does everything "right," he is still an objectified other.

Lastly, rather than facilitating a greater understanding of autistic subjectivity, the neurotypical gaze reasserts itself as the norm by "examining and preserving [its] boundaries of normalcy" (McDermott, 2021, p. 4). This is achieved through camera angles in which glances and facial expressions made by neurotypical family members in the show give permission for the neurotypical spectator to laugh and objectify the autistic cast. In other words, the emphasis on the neurotypical spectator's reactions in the

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show make the audience's gaze synonymous with theirs. For example, in a scene where we meet dater Jayden's family in his home, there is a moment when Jayden tells his mother that he is distressed because she moved something in the house that he did not expect to be moved. As is common with many autistic people, Jayden describes not coping well when unplanned changes occur. This scene is light-hearted; Jayden is not significantly upset. However, the producers use this scene to lead into a one-on-one interview with Jayden's mother in which she says this kind of behavior frustrates and amuses her. After Jayden moves the object back to its original location and tells his mother how he would prefer changes in the house to be planned in advance, the cameras cut to his mother and brother cringing and laughing. In another representative scene, after dater Ronan states, "I'll do whatever it takes to find a girlfriend," the cameras immediately transition focus from Ronan to his mother laughing in the background, pictured in Figure 5, despite Ronan's tone and face indicating seriousness rather than humor.
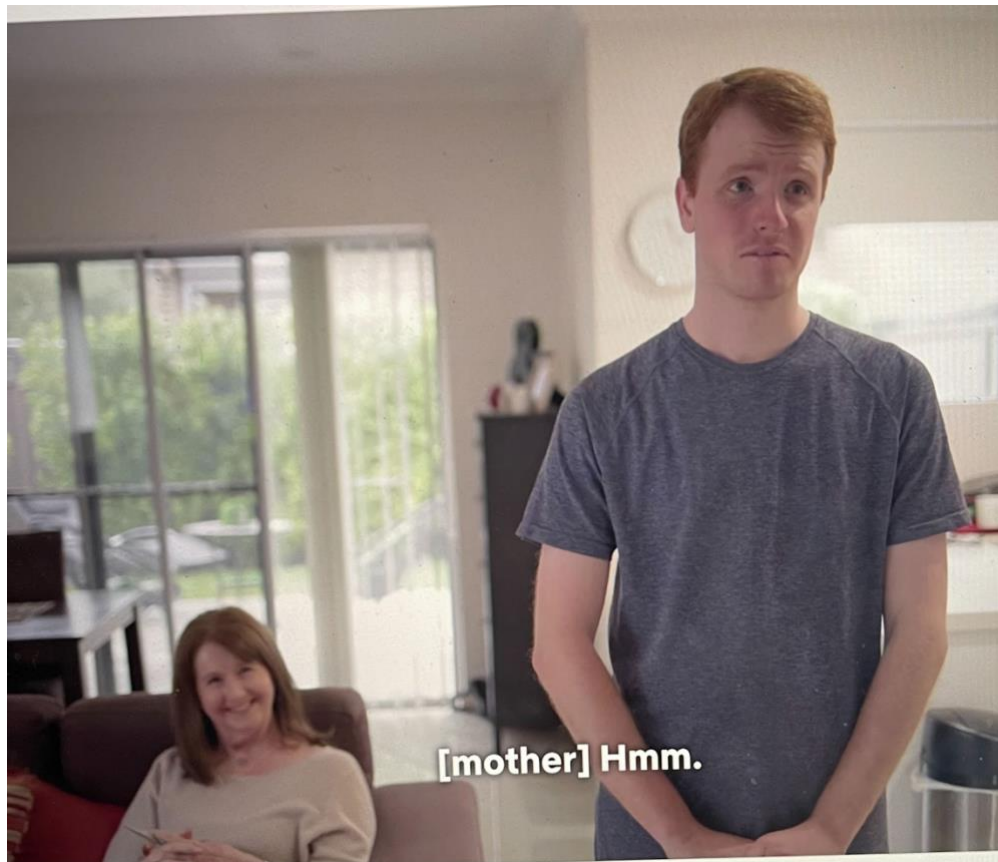
Figure 5 Ronan's Mother Laughing Behind His Back

There are other scenes that exemplify how *LOTS* emphasizes neurotypical spectator's reactions to give the targeted neurotypical audience permission to objectify the autistic cast. In a scene in which dater Michael is preparing for a date, Michael's mother is shown to be laughing after every statement he makes, statements in which he is seeking confirmation that he is preparing "correctly." As he gets ready, he does things such as plucking his unibrow hairs, and these actions are implied to be inappropriate for displaying on television. Despite Western, white supremacist cultural norms that include often-unspoken expectations for the removal of body hair in order to be presentable in

formal situations, it is framed as something one does privately. The *LOTS* cameras at once emphasize Michael's inappropriateness and also betray this privacy by constructing shots that are intended to make an audience feel as if they are dissociated spectators who are spying on him. For example, as Michael conducts his grooming activities in the bathroom, the camera "peeks" several times from behind the door frame and disappears right before Michael can catch them, see in Figure 6. After this shot, Michael's mother is again shown to be intensely laughing, so much so that she cannot even speak to the producers, and Michael is shown covering his face with his palms in embarrassment when he realizes what happened.

Figure 6 Camera Spying on Michael from Behind the Door Frame

Scenes like these communicate the autistic subjects' "otherness" more than the actions and words of the autistic daters themselves. We can determine that *LOTS* intended for its target audience to be neurotypical based on the above. When the autistic

daters are othered, ridiculed, objectified, etc. in every episode, it is easy to conclude that an autistic audience is not the intended audience despite the show's primary subjects being autistic. However, scenes like these do not have to be inevitable. McDermott (2021) argues it is possible to depict difference without stigmatizing the autistic subject by including neurotypical others who respond to them with respect and care rather than with ridicule and infantilization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research question one, "How does the reality television program *Love on the Spectrum* represent autism and sexuality?" can be answered with the following: season two of *LOTS* represented autism and the sexuality/romantic sociality of its autistic participants through a) romantic idealization, b) heteronormativity and neuroconventionality, and c) the neurotypical gaze. The theme of romantic idealization consisted of the following sub-themes: a) quests for true love and b) fulfilling life's purpose and heterosynchrony. The theme of heteronormativity and neuroconventionality contained discussion of gender roles, social etiquette, and the specific sub-theme of male entitlement to romantic partnership. The final theme, the neurotypical gaze, consisted of the three facets of this concept as developed by McDermott (2021): a) the facilitated neurotypical pleasure from viewing an objectified autistic subject, b) fixation of the autistic subject as that which is socially undesirable, and c) the examination and upholding of neuroconventionality rather than attempting to understand autistic subjectivity, despite depicting autism.

It is important to acknowledge that having idealized notions of romantic sociality is not inherently negative on an individual level. However, I have attempted in this chapter to draw attention to how the combination of the autistic daters' possibly authentic contributions to the narrative with the emphasis and construction of certain elements and themes by the producers of the show serve to (re)affirm sometimes problematic and exclusionary expectations for romantic sociality. These expectations may have significant impacts on both autistic and neurotypical viewers' beliefs about autistic people and dating, romance, sexuality, etc.

This analysis contributes to my theorization of "technologies of the autistic self" by drawing attention to the myriad ways *LOTS* establishes standards/expectations/rules of conduct for romantic sociality. While autistic people do not appear to be *LOTS*'s intended audience, shown through the theme of the neurotypical gaze, it is clear through the cast member's statements that they are attempting to conduct themselves in accordance with what they think is expected of sexual subjects. The cast members did not always illuminate what sources of technologies they used to transform themselves accordingly, barring Disney movies and instructions from parents, but *LOTS* is now available to be used by autistic people to "learn" how to be sexual subjects. Unfortunately, *LOTS* is operating as the type of reality show described by Ouellette and Hay (2008) that places populations that were previously considered undesirable as sexual subjects into a "citizenship game" designed to ultimately prove their inability to conform (p. 174). I do not believe this to be the producer's intent; in fact, based on interviews with the producers, *LOTS* is based on another reality program designed to

prove to nondisabled audiences that disabled people are employable (Persaud, 2022). I

believe the producers intended to prove to neurotypical audiences that autistic people *are*

dateable. However, due to the profit-driven nature of television, the recent

commodification of autism for exploitative purposes (Broderick and Roscigno, 2022),

and deeply-ingrained ableist prejudices, the producers are bound to construct a reality

show that is pleasurable for the masses, and objectifying autistic people is pleasurable to

neurotypical audiences (McDermott, 2021). Despite the producers' possible "good" or

moral intentions, *LOTS* is inclusive only to the extent that it includes autistic people as

an identity group that is capable of participating in the romantic citizenship game

(Ouellette & Hay, 2008). This ostensible "capability" could not only impart to

neurotypical viewers that the producers of *LOTS* are moral for their inclusivity, but also

impart to viewers neoliberal ideals that *anyone* is capable of achieving their romantic

dreams. When the autistic cast inevitably "fail" to conform to the heteronormative,

neuroconventional, etc. standards for romantic sociality that are established on *LOTS,*

viewers' ableist beliefs that autistic people are "unworthy" of belonging in sexual

subjectivity are confirmed.

It is also important to recognize that some autistic people thrive when given clear

expectations for social etiquette and expectations, so it is not surprising that socio-

culturally affirmed norms of romantic sociality are so predominantly included in the

series. However, as has been demonstrated in the literature, autistic people are more

likely to identify with non-normative sexualities and identities, and therefore I believe

fostering acceptance for different ways to engage romantically, e.g., not always

expecting heterosynchrony, heteronormativity, and idealization, should be done in a show with this size of platform and done without inviting neurotypical spectatorship that ridicules them.

Just as a textual analysis should interpret significance from what is presented in a text, it is also important to consider things that have been left out (Bainbridge, 2011). *LOTS* is a show about autistic adults dating; while there are many autistic people who identify as asexual (George & Stokes, 2018; Ingudomnukul et al., 2007), the majority of research with this population indicate little if any difference in sexual development and interest (Gilmour et al., 2012). In fact, there are significantly higher levels of infatuation—measured as a dimension of romantic relationships—in neurodivergent people than neurotypicals (Ekblad, 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to point out the absence of sexuality in the series in general and this season specifically.

Despite being a show about adults, there are not any discussions of sexual activity in this season under analysis. In season one, the producers ask Jimmy and Sharnae, an engaged couple that returns for this second season, if they have consummated their relationship. Jimmy is visibly annoyed at this question, and responds with sarcasm and indicates that it is obvious they have. Jimmy and Sharnae are adults who have been in a committed relationship for years, have become engaged, and live together. While none of these things automatically indicate a presence of sexual activity in their relationship, it is unlikely a neurotypical couple would be asked such a question, and Jimmy makes it clear to the producers that their assumptions are misplaced. The only other explicit conversation about sex occurred also in season one. Michael

described having difficulties finding a romantic partner because women his age are "only interested in intercourse." As this conversation is met with agreement, laughter, and positive responses from his family and the producers, one can assume that *Love on the Spectrum* feels this comment is appropriate. Of course, the show is ostensibly unscripted, and we cannot expect the producers to know what the daters will say. However, this scene is combined with three seasons almost entirely lacking in conversations of sexual activity.

Compared to reality television shows about neurotypical adults dating that are available on streaming services like *Netflix,* such as *The Bachelor*, *Love Island, Too Hot to Handle*, etc., *Love on the Spectrum* majorly strays from the genre by not including sexuality. In one recent review of the most popular dating reality shows on *Netflix*, *Love on the Spectrum* was described as follows, "Unlike a lot of dating shows that primarily focus on just the sexual part of dating… *Love On The Spectrum* is truly about love" (Ramos, 2022). With the only uncommon denominator being the fact that *LOTS* is about autistic people, this divergence from expected sexual elements of the genre contributes to the rampant infantilization of autistic people in mainstream media.

What *Love on the Spectrum* does well, however, is stray from the stigmatizing belief that autistic people and their families experience autism as tragedy as well as the belief that autistic people are cold, unfeeling, etc. McDermott (2021) describes this belief thus, "In relation to autistic people, love is more often culturally imagined as a coldness, absence or lack of feeling" (p. 8). The fact *LOTS* has the platform and popularity it does means it is defying this stereotype which is significant, especially

compared to the overwhelming number of media representing autistic people as unemotional, self-centered, robotic loners. However, as argued above, our neuroconventional and heteronormative social context contributes to *LOTS* constructing autistic people as abnormal or incapable daters whose expressions of "love" are intelligible to their neurotypical audience and who must "overcome" their disability if they want to be successful in romance.

As with all overcoming narratives of disability, especially popularized through stories of inspiration (Grue, 2016), these narratives imply autism is in fact a negative thing and a barrier to successful, correct involvement/participation in social life. This implication is troubling because most of the daters on the show do not speak negatively about their autism; rather, they describe it as an experience that is unique and different, but not necessarily negative. In fact, one participant described it thus:

> PRODUCERS: "How did you feel when you got diagnosed [with autism]?"
>
> KASSANDRA: "I was happy. Having someone tell me that 'No, this is what it is, and there are thousands of other people like you,' it made me feel human again. I didn't feel completely outcast anymore. I still think it's probably one of the best days of my life."

LOTS had an opportunity here to highlight this joy of receiving a diagnosis in order to combat autism-as-tragedy narratives that are popular, Instead, the producers craft overcoming narratives that are ostensibly positive but are sprinkled with dehumanization by othering the daters, confirming their illegibility, constraining their diversity in how

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they engage in romantic sociality, etc. If *LOTS* were able to transition to a show that

engages joy like Kassandra's, as well as consider neurodivergent people as part of their

target audience by eliminating use of the neurotypical gaze that objectifies the daters, I

believe the show could have a positive impact on neurotypical people who have their

hegemonic assumptions challenged. Most importantly, however, I believe it could have a

positive impact on autistic people who might find relatability with daters like Kassandra,

just as she did when she realized she was not alone.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS – TECHNOLOGIES OF THE AUTISTIC SEXUAL

SELF

This chapter includes findings from a thematic analysis of ten interviews with autistic people. The purpose of this analysis is to better understand how autistic people talk about their experiences with gender and sexuality in general and in relation to the reality television series *Love on the Spectrum* specifically. In the previous chapter, I argued that Love *on the Spectrum* set standards of sexual subjectivity that included idealized norms of romantic sociality and constructs autistic people as incapable of fully belonging in sexual subjectivity. I also argued *LOTS* constructed autistic people ultimately as unworthy of belonging in sexual subjectivity despite their ostensibly inclusive motives. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct interviews with autistic viewers of the show to better understand how autistic people use reality television as a technology of the self when they are clearly not the intended audience and when the "prescriptions" for sexual subjectivity found in *LOTS* do not seem to be for autistic people.

This study corresponds with the second research question: "How do autistic people talk about how they experience gender and sexuality?" and the following sub-question: "How do autistic people talk about autism and sexuality as represented in *Love on the Spectrum*?" These questions are guided by the need to better understand how representations of autism and sexuality in *LOTS* influence the construction of autistic

subjects' self-mastery/self-knowledge regarding their sexuality, i.e., how autistic people are conducting themselves as sexual subjects in response to suggestions/prescriptions found in *LOTS*. Research conducted thus far on the identity of autistic people fails to include autistic audience reception analyses of mediated representations in general and there is a further paucity of research investigating how autistic people engage with contemporary genres of television such as reality programs. This study also fills a gap in the literature on the role of autism in how individuals understand gender and sexuality.

The insights in this chapter are not intended to be generalizable as that would imply the existence of a unified, essentialized autistic community. I understand that identity categories and experiences such as autism, gender, and sexuality are unstable categories that involve social practices, relationships to intersecting identities, political affiliations, etc. (Shildrick, 2009). However, I maintain an understanding that the discursive construction of sexual subjectivity is important for autistic people and yet minimally researched. The participants in this study are not representative of every autistic subject, but their insights are valuable to filling a gap in the literature about autism, gender, and sexuality.

As with the previous chapter, to analyze this data set, I conducted a theoretically-driven thematic analysis with a latent approach to interpreting themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, rather than simply relay the semantic content found in the interview data, I constructed themes based on my interpretation of the "underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations…and ideologies" that shaped or informed the explicit content in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). After conducting and

analyzing the semi-structured, discursive, responsive interviews with the ten participants, I interpreted the following categories of themes: a) autistic identity, b) LOTS as [Mis]Education, c) neurotypical gaze, and d) recommended media.

The participants in this study identified several institutions, rationalities, actors, etc., including autistic communities on- and offline, that attempt to compel subjects to convert themselves into normality. Most significantly, these participants added *LOTS* to their list of entities attempting to diffuse rationales of sexual normativity, and these participants used *LOTS* as a technology of the autistic sexual self in opposition to the norms found therein.

The demographic table (Table 1) shows that the participants included seven people who identified their gender as non-binary (within those seven people, four participants also identified as trans, one as genderqueer, one as agender, and one as Two-Spirit), one person who identified as female, and two people who identified as male. Participants also included eight people who identified their sexuality as non-normative (four as queer, two as polyamorous, four as pan/bisexual, and one as hetero-flexible), and two people who identified as heterosexual or straight. Participant ages ranged from 18-42. Participants included five people who identified their race and ethnicity as white or caucasian, one person who identified their race and ethnicity as Eastern Asian, one person who identified their race as Latinx, one person who identified their race and ethnicity as Native American, and participants who identified their race as white and their respective ethnicities as Jewish and Brazilian/Jewish.

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Participant Demographics

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Gender	Sexuality	Race and/or Ethn	Age
Mercury	he/they/ze	Non-binary Genderqueer Trans	Queer	White	26
Harry	he/him	Male	Heterosexual	White	18
Loki	they/them	Non-binary Trans	Queer	Latinx White Jewish Brazilian	22
Rin	he/them	Non-binary Trans-masculine	Pansexual Bisexual Polyamorous	White and Jewish	22
Chad	he/him	Male	Straight	White	37
Suki	she/her	Female	Hetero-	Eastern Asian	25

			Flexible		

Table 1 Participant Demographics Continued

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Gender	Sexuality	Race and/or Ethnicity	Age
Lux	they/them he/his she/hers	Non-binary	Pansexual	White and Asian	24
Liska	they/them	Non-binary Agender	Pansexual Asexual	Caucasian	42
Pax	they/them/theirs	Non-binary	Queer Pansexual	White	29
Silver	them/them	Non-binary Two-Spirit Transgender	Queer Polyamorous	Native American	25

Autistic Identity

The questioning route for this study began with asking the participants to talk about their identity as an autistic person. This does not mean that "autistic" is a unified, homogenous, essentialized identity category, rather I was interested in the phenomenological experiences and social dimensions of occupying/adopting an autistic sexual subjectivity (Shildrick, 2009). Participants were asked in the interviews to "Tell me about your identity as an autistic person," and they sometimes asked for clarification. I followed-up with questions like, "What does it mean for you to identify as autistic?" and "When someone asks, 'Who is [their name]?' how do you respond?" If further clarification was needed, I asked if identifying as autistic was important to them. Further clarification was not needed after this third follow-up. Most often the participant's responses began with a history of their diagnosis or self-awareness as autistic people and how their identity is understood by them currently. The participant's responses were coded into the themes of a) negative and neutral, b) positive [after finding community], and c) gender variance.

Negative and Neutral

The majority of responses indicated a neutral or positive perception of their autistic identity, but two participants indicated negative feelings towards their identity currently. The following representative examples were coded as negative because the participants endeavored to portray themselves as autistic people with limited deficits or as "normal." Despite agreeing that autism is an important part of his identity, Chad, a 37-year-old white male, said, "I identify as a person... I am autistic on the higher end of the spectrum. Yeah, a higher end of the spectrum, and [I] pretty much identify as the

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autistic. I'm an individual autistic; I have that diagnosis." In another example, Harry, an 18-year-old white male, said,

> I cannot believe it's going to last forever, because I hate that. I hate being
> different. So, when I was three years old the doctor told my parents that, 'Your
> son has [been] diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders.' [There are] autism
> people [who] can't understand what they [do]... If someone has severe [autism],
> they can't understand [or have] their own knowledge [of] things. They do [things]
> like... they hit their heads…. That's horrible to do, and I'm not the same. I love
> being normal like other people because I'm glad I don't have severe autism.

When probed further, Harry stated this negative perception of autism was because other children at his schools bullied him by calling him "Autism-Harry," a nickname that marked Harry as different from his peers. Harry said he really hated that name because, "I want to be normal, okay? I'm not different." I asked Harry if he felt anything positive about his diagnosis, and he described many benefits such as his ability to focus on academic topics that interest him without much effort as well as his ability to deeply express his emotions. Similarly, Chad described his autistic identity as contributing to his disability advocacy work in his local community that brings him feelings of pride. Through their juxtapositions of themselves with autistic people who have higher support needs it is clear here that Harry, and possibly Chad, have been exposed to cultural stigmatization of autism and are therefore negotiating their identities in response to these stigmatizing forces. This exposure is contributing to their lack of positive sense of identity regarding their autism diagnoses despite saying it is an important part of their identity and that it is also beneficial in myriad ways.

Although Harry and Chad were the only participants in this study who I interpreted to currently have a negative sense of identity as autistic people, most participants described occupying a negative perception of autism when they were initially diagnosed. Diagnoses ranged from formal, early childhood diagnoses to self-identification and realization as an adult sometimes without a formal diagnosis. In other words, participants did not feel positively towards their identities as autistic people at first. However, many described adopting a positive or neutral sense of their identity after finding and engaging with other autistic communities both online and in person.

While a positive sense of self was expressed frequently, for example Mercury, a 26-year-old, white-passing, non-binary person, said "I really like that I'm autistic," most often participants expressed neutrality in their sense of identity by describing autism as simply another facet of neurodiversity. For example, Loki, a 22-year-old, Latinx, non-binary person, described autism as less of an identity category and more of a "neurotype" or "neurological context" that describes how they "perceive and do things." While this comment reflects a cultural assumption that autism is *not* an identity but a diagnosable disorder–this belief was found in the IRB reviewer's comments for this study, discussed in the methodology chapter–Loki clarified that it is essential to how they exist, think, and behave. Similarly, Suki, a 25-year-old East Asian woman, said:

> It's a part of who I am. But also, if someone's going to ask me for a fun fact about myself, I think there are other things to say other than that…. Yes, I have autism and I have autism like other people who have autism….I'm also an Asian person, so I identify as an Asian person. Do I share that in common with other Asian

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people? Yes. But my whole identity as a person is not wrapped around being

autistic…. I'm not going to be getting a puzzle tattoo.

Both Loki and Suki are attributing autism as an essential part of their identities, but they do not

attach strong, positive sentiment to it. While it is an important part of who Suki is, she compares

it to identifying as Asian in that that identity does not warrant automatic identification with

every other Asian person. Important here is that autism is not a unified, homogeneous identity,

and these participants are expressing their mulit-facetedness.

In another example of neutral sentiment towards an autistic identity, Liska, a 42-year-old

white, non-binary person, compared their identity-first language choice to a cheeseburger to

clarify that it is not necessarily politically motivated:

I go by 'autistic' because it's like you don't go to a store [or] a restaurant and say

that you want a 'hamburger with cheese.' I know I'm a cheeseburger. I don't need

a bunch of descriptors going all the way around [the issue]. I know that it is a

quintessential part of how I view the world.

These statements from Loki, Suki, and Liska all indicate their identities as autistic people are

essential to how they experience the world without attributing positive or negative sentiment to

that experience. Each of these participants recognized their subjectivity is distinct from

neurotypical subjectivity. This perspective is aligned with tenets of the neurodiversity

movement that imagine autism not as a deficiency but rather as a distinct, yet equally valuable,

neurotype (Robertson, 2010). This perspective is a moving away from the historically prevalent

construction of autism as deviant, and even though these participants are rendering their identity

into public discourse through their "telling," the refusal to construct their subjectivity as a

deviant one is indicative of their autonomy to develop knowledge about themselves as subjects that is affirming. While a flaw in tenets of neurodiversity like these is that they imply autism has an essential nature, critiqued by many including Timimi (2011) who argued any identification with autism exists under an oppressive medicalized framework, its usefulness can be found in eradicating the stigma of autism. This appears to be happening in these participants' statements of transforming their perspectives from a negative one informed by stigmatization to a neutral or positive perspective.

This transformation of perceiving of autism as a neutral facet of neurodiversity can be understood better in Mercury's statement relating it to how autism affects romantic and sexual sociality:

What I want to see more of [is] just leaning into that the difference [between dating as an autistic person versus a neurotypical person] is a neutral difference, and not an oddity or something…my dating experience is very different than any friends I have who are neurotypical. I just think that we have a different way of going about it, and it's not bad or good. It's just a way.

Mercury's description reveals this neutrality in identity by arguing that their dating experiences *are* different from the neurotypical norms, but these differences do not inherently constitute a "bad" way of dating. Again, a description like this could be implying that autistic experiences of dating and sexuality are essentially and knowably different rather than affirming its socially constructed nature; however, it is not surprising that this kind of essentialist perspective is happening as autism is still largely affected by stigma in Western society (Kourti, 2021).

Positive [After Finding Community]

Autism is often portrayed and understood as an isolating disorder. However, this study found that autistic community was important in understanding and substantiating autistic, gender, and sexual identity. In other words, autistic community was used as a "technology" for the autistic people in this study to learn about and develop their ideal subjectivities. Mercury's experience of the development of their autistic identity, like many other participants, consisted of a difficult childhood and educational experiences that negatively affected their sense of self. While many participants indicated neutral sentiments towards their autistic identities at the current time, many also described positive feelings towards their identity. Most frequently and significantly, they attributed the transformation of sentiment to finding supportive autistic communities in college, online, etc. Mercury said, "[having a positive sense of self] has helped me meet other autistic people and understand that my experiences [are] just part of how I'm a human, and I really like that I'm autistic." While some participants came to positively identify as autistic because of family members who shared their diagnosis and served as role models and sources of guidance (Lux, Liska), some transformed their perspective to one of positive sentiment because they joined collegiate support or research groups (Mercury, Pax, Suki). Many also found support from autistic communities online (Chad, Loki, Mercury, Pax, Liska, Silver). In one representational example, Mercury said:

It took me a long time to connect with being an autistic person…nobody really

told me [when I was younger] why [I was experiencing things differently] ... I

didn't have anyone who helped me form a sense of community around that. So, I

really don't feel like I came into being an autistic person until college...through

this student organization I was part of… Feeling myself as connected to a

disability movement… helped me [feel] connected to myself in a positive way.

[Before college] I kind of just…viewed [autism] as a deficit in myself, and I

didn't know that I was autistic [*because they had been misdiagnosed with bipolar*

disorder]. But being able to learn more about [autism] in college helped me

connect the pieces, and now I have a very positive sense of self.

Significant here is that having a supportive autistic community not only helped Mercury

transition from a deficit-based perspective to a positive sense of self but was in fact integral to

their "being." In other words, their subjectivity was and is contingent on being connected to

other autistic people. This too aligns with Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self as it is clear

these participants were able to develop knowledge about themselves and conduct themselves as

"normal" autistic subjects that are at least neutral if not positive towards that subjectivity.

Autistic community is being used here as a technology of the autistic self. In further examples,

Silver, a 25-year-old Native American non-binary person, said they did not accept autism as a

positive identity until college:

At that point when I started meeting more people who were autistic and just

generally liked me and weren't trying to fix me, I really began to see it as

something that was somewhere between neutral and positive. And it took getting

away from the high school industrial complex and clinicians that really want to

mold you into a neurotypical person [as] I think what really made the difference.

And just realizing that people liked me for who I am, and that includes autism

and everything else.

For Pax, a 29-year-old white, non-binary person, their "community" was found in a support group they attended after college. They said their attendance at the support group was the first time they felt comfortable in their identity: "It was the first time that I was like, 'Holy shit, I'm comfortable. People understand me. Like, we understand each other. I just feel normal here.'" It is important here to recognize that these participants are still using normalizing and essentializing logics to find acceptance within themselves and others. However, this contributes to an expanded understanding of technologies of the autistic sexual self in that while this logic may still attempt to regulate or "discipline" subjects into conformity, and construct autism as a defined identity which could potentially be exclusionary, the conformity here is one of positive acceptance of the autistic self rather than attempts to make autistic people fit more into neurotypical standards like the high school educators and clinicians Silver mentioned.

The importance of autistic community support groups was also demonstrated in participant discussions of "paying it forward," that is, offering support in the form of positive normalizing logics and educational content for younger and/or newly diagnosed autistic people. Liska, aged 42, described adopting a role of providing sexual education to other autistic people:

I'm one of the admins actually in a sex and autism spectrum group where people

can just ask their questions, look for support, that kind of thing… We will find

you answers because I know that my experience was very closeted… and that

actually led to me getting abused because I didn't know better.

Liska talked a lot about their transformation from a young, vulnerable autistic person to the more experienced person they are today and how they wished they had someone like themselves from which to get advice when they were younger. Now Liska takes their role as an admin in their online support group very seriously as a way to give back to their community as well as support other autistic people in developing a sense of self relating to sexuality and autism.

Regarding positive normalization/assimilation, Pax described helping someone in their support group realize they were non-binary:

It wouldn't have been safe for someone who looked like him [*Pax described this person's masculine features and large size*] to speak about that in another context, or to even begin to even reflect on that with other [neurotypical] people.

Pax described this experience of helping another autistic person develop or understand their gender identity as occurring in a support group that was mostly non-binary and queer identifying autistic people. That consistently being the demographic of support groups they had attended caused Pax to realize that a common "standard" of being autistic is a disillusionment with stereotypical gender and sexuality norms.

Gender Variance

Gender variance, or gender nonconformity, encompasses forms of gender expression that do not align with traditionally-recognized masculine or feminine binary roles. Because autistic people are more likely to closely examine social cues, behaviors, expectations, etc. than neurotypical people, who tend to implicitly and unintentionally understand these, analysis of autism and gender can illuminate how we understand sexuality, gender, and other social constructs more broadly (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist &

Jackson-Perry, 2021). Further, autistic people have been found to be three to six times more likely than neurotypical people to identify as non-binary (Warrier et al., 2020). As Pax said in this study, "the Venn diagram, at least of my friends, of people who are autistic and queer is very nearly a circle. All different shapes and shades and genders and things."

"Autigender" and Queer Sexualities

Despite the co-occurrence of autism and gender diversity that is supported by existing literature and this study, in their review of the literature in this area, Toft (2023) found that autistic sexuality and gender narratives are not often accepted as valid in the public consciousness due to the following assumptions: a) autistic people lack the capacity to understand sexuality and gender, b) LGBTQ+ identification is an indication of impairment, and c) autism is a negative, medical disorder affecting the individual. Toft (2023) states "autigender" has been discussed online by autistic people since at least 2014 yet does not have a "legitimate" presence in academic research as of their publication and of this study.

Autigender has been described not *as* a gender, rather as an explanation for some autistic person's relationship to gender that entails a person's experience of autism fundamentally altering how they understand gender. Neurodivergent activist and author Ryan Boren (2022) describes it in the following way, "The primary deficit of autism includes difficulties interpreting and understanding social constructions. This means that we have a disability that inherently makes understanding gender part of our disability" (par. 2). This is confirmed in this study by Liska who described it when they said "autism makes me experience gender in a

totally different way." While not explicitly referencing the term "autigender," Pax alluded to this concept by describing how a lot of their "brain space [was] taken up by performing certain [gender] norms and stuff. I didn't realize how much of this [gender performativity] could be connected to my autism." Further, Lux, a 24-year-old, Asian and white nonbinary person, said:

> I think that [a term like "autigender"] makes sense, considering we [autistic people] tend to not really fall into social norms or really understand the social cue thing and all that. So, I think it makes sense that a lot of people with autism don't really fall into the cisgender heteronormative narrative.

Another participant, Loki, echoed this sentiment by saying they were aware of "a very high correlation between being autistic and being trans or non-binary, especially being nonbinary." Loki followed this statement by saying, "I think that me being autistic probably affects my perception of gender conceptually and personally." Pax, Lux, and Loki clearly indicate here that they believe experiences of gender to be deeply entwined with their autism.

As has been made evident, not only are these participants indicating their gender, or lack thereof, as well as their sexuality to be fundamentally entwined with their autistic identity, but some have also described how their experiences and expressions of romantic sociality are entwined with their autistic identity. Lux provided a very specific example of this entwinement when describing how after they obtained access to autistic community members on Twitter, they learned about "neurodivergent love languages" including a) "info dumping" or the enthusiastic and sometimes overwhelming sharing of special interests, b) a love language called "I found this random object and it reminded me of you, here's a gift," and c) "squish my soul back into my body," referring to the application of pressure in the form of laying on top of somebody or using

a weighted blanket. While Lux talked about these neurodivergent love languages in a tongue-in-cheek manner, they were serious about not being able to relate at all with "traditional" love languages such as physical touch, quality time, etc. The significance here lies in the explication of how autistic people's experiences of gender, sexuality, and romantic sociality are often fundamentally distinct from those of a neurotypical person's and that autistic communities are explicating this experience together in places like support groups and social media platforms. These places where community is found are being used as places to develop knowledge about themselves as sexual subjects and where they are being enticed to conduct themselves into "normality," a normality that is of course constructed by other autistic people rather than neurotypical influences.

While not identifying as autigender themself, Liska, a former social worker, talked about reevaluating how they identified their gender when they no longer had to perform expected gender norms:

A couple of years ago, I finally stopped working because of medical issues, and I'm like, 'Wow, I have time to reevaluate a few things. I did my research into my gender and sexual issues. And I'm like, 'Wow, there's all of this stuff out here.' Because I grew up in a very Evangelical household and this stuff did not exist… So, until I got out from under the church's thumb, I didn't learn anything and then I was working… You do it [perform gender] because that's what you've been taught to do. And that's what I did for a long time. When I go to work, I have to dress professionally. So sometimes I have to put on the skirt, 'Oh, hey, I'm going to court. I have to wear the skirt because some judges, that's what they want. I

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have to dress professionally,' etc. I dated guys because that's what was expected

of me, but you know, if I had to be honest with myself, I'm like, 'Both are very

pleasing to look at.' So that was confusing as hell. But, you know, when I wasn't

working anymore, I had time to sit down and think it through and [realize] all of

these things have words now. We didn't have them, you know, even 20 years

ago.

Liska's experience of reevaluating their relationship to their gender and sexuality occurred once

a) they were forced to remove themselves from a work environment after a debilitating medical

issue, b) they moved out of an oppressive Christian household, and c) they had access to support

groups and educational information on the Internet. This combination of experiences led to

Liska's becoming disconnected from and ultimately rejecting expectations of gender

performance such as that people who are assigned female at birth must identify as women, must

wear skirts especially in order to please men in positions of superiority, must be sexually

attracted to men, etc. This rejection was also engendered by their access to the Internet in which

they learned of terms like "autigender" that felt applicable to their experiences of gender. Liska

realized their understanding of and identification with gender had been influenced by

rationalities, assumptions, etc. that they were able to reevaluate when they stopped working full

time and were no longer forced to conduct themselves accordingly. Again, the role of autistic

communities concretizing *together* the distinct ways they experience gender and autism is

revealed.

Socialization of Autistic People Assigned Male at Birth

In sharp contrast to the experiences outlined above, the autistic people in this study who were assigned male gender at birth (AMAB) identified much more strongly with their assigned gender than did the people who were assigned female gender at birth (AFAB) and who almost exclusively identified as non-binary and queer (only one AFAB participant identified as female, Suki, and even she identified her sexuality as "hetero-flexible"). When asked to describe their gender, the first AMAB participant, Harry, stated he identified as "Male. XY chromosome, of course." The other participant, Chad, said "I'm a male," and when asked for his pronouns he said, "*the* 'he/him.' I don't do all that stuff" (emphasis added to reflect Chad's tone). Harry is not obviously deriding gender expression beyond the binary in his response; however, his reference to biological determinants of sex such as chromosomes, combined with a statement ("of course") reflecting commonly-held assumptions regarding the neutrality, passivity, essentialized, and pre-determined nature of the body's sex, affirm socio-cultural understandings that biological sex is natural. That is, Harry's assumption of his gender is that "of course" his gender is caused by his chromosomes, even though biological determinants of sex have also been found to be socially constructed.[7] Chad's response is more clearly exemplifying contempt for gender variance beyond the gender binary of male/female, man/woman.

One non-binary participant, Pax, described knowing autistic people like Chad and Harry that are "rigid" in their understanding of gender so much so that they would rather be "red

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[7] These assumptions were critiqued by scholars such as Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) in *Sexing the Body*.

pilled" (a reference to the film *The Matrix* meaning a person would prefer to stay in "wonderland" than learn an unsettling fact about reality):

> If you've ever been on Autistic Twitter, you know [people ask] are you a queer, fluid, 'gender doesn't exist' autistic? Or are you a rigid, 'There are only two genders, I'm this close to being red pilled' autistic? Especially in the south, I've had guy friends that are some of those guys, and you just feel so bad for them because you can tell how much of their identity actually just comes from feeling threatened.

When asked to expand on this statement, Pax said this "threatening" is from societal forces of power that construct concepts such as white supremacy and heteronormativity as the norm and aim to discipline subjects into alignment. They described how they believe these forces causing this prevalence of beliefs by AMAB autistic men come from various societal entities such as parents, teachers, and diagnosticians who enforce these "white supremacist, super heteronormative" norms. Specifically, Pax's experience as a teacher illuminated how these rationalities operate for and within autistic people AMAB:

> White men are still unfortunately taken to be [the epitome of autism]. I mean, all the autism criteria are predicated on research on them. Society kind of looks at them as the norm and when that's the case, like [during] my experience as a teacher, I had to frequently remind both parents and other teachers 'No, this is a boy thing, [not an autism thing]. And it's not because boys will be boys, it's because this is permissive in other places. He's not doing it because he's autistic, he's doing it because this is an asshole behavior that no one has checked him on.'

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And it's because white boys are allowed to get away with it. That's how our

society is built. And when you are a white boy who is autistic, that piece of your

identity gets put out front and center. Do you know what diagnostic

overshadowing is? It's the same thing where it's like, 'No, actually, some of the

stuff that's happening is like power dynamics in our society playing out because

you're growing up and learning them.' But everyone around them says, 'Oh,

that's his autism.' No, it's not. No, it's not.

As mentioned above, the majority of participants (70%) who identified as non-binary and with

non-normative sexualities described being AFAB. This is supported in the literature in that

higher rates of gender variance have been found in people AFAB (Cooper et al., 2018).

As Pax described, autism spectrum disorders have historically been and continue to be

diagnosed using a largely "male" profile of diagnostic criteria. For example, in what has been

called the "extreme male brain theory of autism," some have argued that autism is often missed

or misdiagnosed in young girls because of essentialized beliefs that girls tend to express greater

levels of empathy than boys (Baron-Cohen, 2002). Several AFAB participants described facing

difficulties in receiving diagnoses (despite family history, doing their own research online and

in the DSM-5). Liska described doctors and other diagnostic professionals being unwilling to

provide a formal diagnosis because Liska did not have "gender stereotypical interests" despite

telling Liska they knew Liska had autism.

Not only are people AFAB less likely to be diagnosed as autistic because of the

privileging of "male" diagnostic criteria, but when they are diagnosed, they are less likely to

identify with their assigned gender. Cooper et al. (2018) attribute this lack of identification to

socio-cultural stigmatization of the female gender resulting in less identification with associated gender performances. Contrastingly, it is possible that socio-cultural norms that praise male-affiliated gender norms such as overt expressions of masculinity, misogyny, etc., and the overall belief that men are the superior gender, contribute to more positive affiliations with a male gender. These norms could also be contributing to more concretized understandings of male gender performance. This was demonstrated in Harry's and Chad's responses of confidence in their understanding of their male gender. Cooper et al. (2018) also speculate that AFAB autistic people feel less affiliation with their assigned gender because of the above-described "extreme male brain theory" that has contributed to associations of autism with maleness.

Based on the above speculations as well as the fact that the people AMAB in this study identified much more strongly with their assigned gender than did the people AFAB who almost exclusively identified as non-binary, I argue people AMAB are socialized as "men" more than they are socialized to be neurotypical. Most of the participants in this study, both AMAB and AFAB, described attempts by institutions, rationalities, actors, etc. to enforce norms of neurotypicality upon them. They also discussed how they themselves were enticed to conduct themselves as close to "normal," i.e., neurotypical, as possible. However, the responses in this study support that people AMAB are socialized to place more emphasis on occupying a male subjectivity rather than a neurotypical subjectivity. This emphasis is evidenced in Pax's description of their students who were enabled to continue practicing heteronormative, masculine "asshole behavior" without apology because these behaviors are constructed as traits of autism. Pax elaborated by defining these behaviors:

Autistic men are socialized to be very… forthright, assertive, too aggressive,

inconsiderate of emotions, kinds of behavior, and I don't think all of that is

necessarily [because someone is autistic] …. Like, I think often autistic men have

that assigned wholesale to their autism when actually there's a lot of socialization

going on there that promotes those behaviors. And there are lots of autistic men

who have the kind of incel thing going on, even if it's light or, you know, not

dangerous."

While disabled women, including autistic women, are often assumed to be asexual (e.g., Kafer, 2017), much cultural discourse constructs sexuality as a basic right for disabled men rather than for women (McRuer, 2010; Sauder, 2017). Participants Pax and Silver identified this entitlement, or "light" "incel thing" as Pax called it, as operating in *LOTS* when the show started both of the Australian seasons with Michael, a cast member known for his misogynistic comments. Pax said:

[Michael's idea of] being a good man in the world seemed really tied up in being

a husband and [with] his idea of a wife as more of an object than a person. You

[can] really connect [that] with… how media contributes to our notions of these

kinds of things, and then the show ends up reinforcing it by centering that… The

way he would talk about having 'a wife' made me so uncomfortable because… it

was like it [a wife] was a Barbie or something. It's not about who you are as a

person, but what you represent.

Here Pax is drawing attention to how autistic people AMAB are socialized into norms of masculinity including that "good men" objectify and possess women as if they are dolls without

personhood. Significant is that Pax acknowledged the other institutions, rationalities, actors, etc. that attempt to compel subjects to convert themselves into normality, but Pax also added *LOTS* to that list of entities. Silver also attributed these attempts to compel AMAB autistic people to convert themselves into norms of masculinity by choosing to start each season with Michael:

> They started out with a basement chud [*slang for a gross, unappealing person*] who was super entitled about women and definitely a misogynist going on and on about how his goals were to find a wife. And there's plenty of neurotypical guys on Reddit saying the exact same stuff. So, it's not unique to autism. It's just another gross guy being gross about his entitlement to women, to what women look like, entitlement to the servitude of women. It did feel like his whole goal was to find a wife, not a girlfriend. And that's not just being socially awkward. That's what you have been taught by your own family. That's what you've been taught by society. That's your own preconceptions. Because I know plenty of autistic people [and] I've dated plenty of autistic people, too, and we were not all that way. So, to showcase someone who is exactly like that as the first taste of the show especially felt like that's how they were setting things up. It definitely felt gross and disappointing.

These responses again demonstrate how people AMAB, like Michael on *LOTS*, are excused when they share oppressive and sexist beliefs such as that men are entitled to a wife, women are merely objects to be obtained by men, etc.

These responses to *Love on the Spectrum*'s not only inclusion of but also centering of sexist comments by one of their cast members also directly supports Ouellette and Hay's (2008)

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conceptualization of how reality television as an institution operates as a "cultural technology," or a resource of governmentality. These participants recognized that *LOTS* sets normative rules/expectations/standards that subjects are intended to conduct themselves in relation to and in which state power is diffused through. Michael's comments and behaviors could have been edited out or challenged by the producers, but as many participants tried to reconcile this recognition with their beliefs about conventions of reality television, it is possible to partially excuse their role in this diffusion of oppressive normalization due to it being the genre of reality television in which manipulation by producers is perceived to be minimal. However, as many media scholars have argued, reality television is not unmanipulated, and even if it were, the producers made an intentional choice to showcase Michael as one of if not the most important cast member by beginning each season with his interviews, "as the first taste of the show," thereby "setting things up" to not only excuse those oppressive normative expectations/standards but also ultimately to reaffirm these as the ideal.

Using autistic men to reaffirm gender norms under the guise of benevolently challenging stereotypes is insidious because while those norms would be heavily critiqued if expressed and affirmed by neurotypical men on similar shows in the dating genre, the autistic men are absolved from responsibility by attributing their dogmatic beliefs to their autism rather than to heteronormativity and toxic masculinity. Further, the producers of *LOTS* are absolved by branding their show as a compassionate challenging of stereotypes. This argument is also supported by Mitchell and Snyder's (2015) concept of ablenationalism, expanded on by Broderick and Roscigno's (2022) concept of the autism industrial complex, in which they argue autistic people are being put into the service of the nation-state, it's economy in particular, by

autism's commodification in media.[8] As Ouellette and Hay (2008) discussed as occurring on makeover reality shows like *The Biggest Loser*, these are attempts by entities of power, in this case, *LOTS*, to entice individuals who were previously considered undesirable citizens, i.e., autistic individuals, to transform themselves into ideal consumer subjects that are able to contribute to society rather than representing them as burdens or parasites on the state's resources as they have historically been represented. This is a clear example of how "autism narratives are being exported for global consumption…by 'philanthropic' media behemoth[s]" (Broderick and Roscigno, 2022, p. 78).

Love on the Spectrum as [Mis]Education

I have thus far discussed the myriad cultural influences that the participants in this study described as contributing to the development of knowledge about themselves and autism in general as it relates to the construction of autistic sexual subjectivity. I will now elaborate on the above references to *LOTS* as an entity that sets standards of conduct for autistic sexual subjectivity by discussing the theme of *LOTS* as [Mis]Education that illustrates how the participants in this study engaged with the show as a potential tool for education about autism and sexuality.

The participants were asked to discuss how they consumed and engaged with *LOTS*, and their responses indicated they viewed or desired to view *LOTS* with an awareness that most media about autism is problematic and unrepresentative. They described seeking community input prior to, during, and after viewing *LOTS* for myriad

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[8] Ablenationalism is defined by Mitchell and Snyder (2015) as a form of nationalism characterized by the belief that a nation's strength and success is dependent on its citizens abilities and productivity.

reasons, including to prepare themselves for the likely problematic representation, to share their critiques, etc. The participants were hopeful that *LOTS* could stray from the trend of representing autism inaccurately and offer a sort of "education" to autistic viewers on how to engage in romantic sociality and education to neurotypical viewers by representing the "reality" of autism. However, they were disappointed to find *LOTS* emphasized the awkwardness and uncomfortability of its cast's endeavors rather than offer productive advice to its cast or viewers. One critique levied was that *LOTS* more often focused on emphasizing the failures of its cast without offering moments for reflection to actually help the cast succeed. Another major critique in this theme was that *LOTS* represented and perpetuated stereotypical assumptions about autism including that it primarily affects white, cisgendered, heterosexual, monogamous couples. In their responses, these participants understood their sexual subjectivity to be in opposition to the representations of autistic sexuality in *LOTS*. This theme of *LOTS* as [Mis]education was coded into the sub-themes of a) seeking community input, b) viewing out of "morbid curiosity," c) "more cringey than productive" and "more reactive than reflective," and d) critiques of hetero- and cisnormativity. The first sub-theme, seeking community input, consisted of participant's descriptions of using various autistic communities to gain or provide knowledge about *LOTS*'s choices of representation. The second sub-theme, viewing out of "morbid curiosity," consisted of participant's descriptions of their curiosity about *LOTS* that existed simultaneously with apprehension about *LOTS*. The third sub-theme, "more cringey than productive" and "more reactive than reflective," contained participant laments that *LOTS* could have been used as a

technology to demonstrate to autistic people how to be sexual subjects by exemplifying ideal *autistic* sexual subjectivity; however, the participants described *LOTS* as failing to do so. The final sub-theme consisted of critiques of *LOTS* predominant use of cis- and hetero-normative cast and rationales.

Seeking Community Input

The autistic participants in this study described consuming television media in general and *Love on the Spectrum* in particular as part of an autistic community social activity. For *Love on the Spectrum* in particular, this meant a) attending a "viewing party" to watch the show simultaneously, either in person or virtually, b) seeking input from autistic family members, friends, or members of support groups, and/or c) seeking input from autistic community members online. Regarding seeking community input, the participants in this study indicated seeking both "warnings" or reviews prior to viewing and/or as part of a deciding factor of whether or not to view the show (the results of this are discussed below in the theme of "morbid curiosity"). For example, prior to viewing *Love on the Spectrum*, Silver sought trusted autistic community judgment and found it to consist of warnings that the show was infantilizing:

> I saw a little bit of chatter from the broader autistic community when it first hit U.S. audiences a few years ago… I watched one episode and then was like, 'I'm done. You guys were right, it's kind of infantilizing. It's kind of bad.'

Seeking community input also involved seeking validation for their own evaluations of the show. For example, Pax said:

Unfortunately… a big part of being autistic and being part of the community is

so many of us have been kind of alienated from ourselves and gaslit by society

and told 'Your feelings aren't real' or 'You should ignore them' for so long. But

we have this way of checking in with each other and being like, 'Is this a thing?'

Like, 'Am I crazy or am I seeing this?'

Here the autistic community is affirmed as important to autistic people because they not only

protect each other by warning not to consume hurtful, in this case infantilizing, media, but also

because they offer validation that *LOTS* is problematic. This is significant because it belies the

overwhelmingly positive reviews shared about the show by neurotypical people (discussed in

the previous chapter). Just as previously discussed in this chapter, autistic community was again

being used as a "technology" for the autistic people in this study to develop their ideal

subjectivities in opposition to the representations found in *LOTS* by challenging the

representations together or even refusing to engage with them.

Viewing Out of "Morbid Curiosity"

In the sub-theme viewing out of "morbid curiosity," the primary significance is

that it demonstrates the deeply taboo and stigmatized nature of autism and sexuality as

well as autistic people's acute awareness of the problematic ways autism is represented

in media most often. Representations of autism in film and television have historically

been overwhelmingly negative and prejudicial (Treweek et al., 2019) and almost always

the work of neurotypical media producers (Osteen, 2007). The responses in this study

indicate an awareness of these facts, and this awareness led to most participant's

increased curiosity and concern regarding how *LOTS* would choose to represent autism.

These participants stated they would have liked for *LOTS* to provide education about the "reality" of autism, but this hope was mitigated by their awareness of the trends of representing autism in media.

Specifically, the participants in this study emphasized their concerns about the representations because the show involved issues of dating and sexuality. These concerns likely stem from the participants' awareness of cultural considerations of disabled people in general and autistic people in particular as eternally dependent, associated with children, and asexual (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Shakespeare, 1994; Stevenson et al., 2014). Although many did not consume reality television regularly, the ones who did revealed they were knowledgeable about the conventions found in neurotypical dating reality shows. This awareness combined with the awareness of the associations of autism with children led to their cautious optimism that was quickly dismantled. Silver said:

> I first watched it because I thought it was going to be a train wreck, and it was just morbid curiosity…. [I watched it] very intentionally because this is about autistic people dating, and I just want to see what the lens they were going to use would be for that.

This "lens" was also addressed in Pax's response:

> It's very interesting to see how different the framing and stuff is [in other reality shows] when disability is not [the premise]. I don't want to say that everybody on those shows are neurotypical; statistically, that's not realistic. But when disability isn't part of the premise… It was interesting to be exposed to shows like that

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pretty much at the same time I was watching *Love on the Spectrum* because I was

like, 'Oh, this is another dating show, and they feel real[ly] different."

Because participants like Silver and Pax were literate in reality media conventions and

autism and sexuality stigmatization, they were cautiously inspired to view *LOTS*, and

they were expertly able to identify the problematic differences in this show compared to

other reality dating shows that do not feature disability as its premise. These participants

were autism media savvy, so while they hoped the genre of reality television would

cause *LOTS* to be a different type of representation, they were ultimately disappointed.

While *LOTS* incorporates many of the tropes commonly found in reality television about

dating such as confessional interviews, fairy tale narratives, etc., Pax here draws

attention to how *LOTS* also strays from this genre by including tropes commonly found

in reality television about disability such as the fostering of pity/sympathy by viewers

and othering mechanisms.

"More Cringey than Productive" and "More Reactive than Reflective"

One of the major problems in *Love on the Spectrum* identified by the participants

in this study was that its representation of autism was "more cringey than productive"

because it a) was "more reactive than reflective;" that is, it did not provide opportunities

for reflection, b) primarily offered neuroconventional dating advice, and c) did not offer

dating advice that would benefit both autistic and neurotypical people. Liska said:

When it came out, I was in a [support] group and people ask[ed] for my opinion.

I'm like, 'I did not particularly like it because I thought it was more cringy than it

was productive.' And some people are saying, 'But we get representation!' It's

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like, 'Yeah, but is it a good representation?' I mean, yeah, I want to see

representation where we're all not portrayed as loser-y. And that's what the

feeling was: that these poor kids will never catch a break, even the ones in

relationships they're struggling.

The most frequent and significant critique was that *LOTS* could have been used as an informal

educational tool for autistic people to learn how to engage in romantic sociality by offering

opportunities for reflection and offering dating advice beyond how to date according to

neurotypical dating conventions. This critique often came in the form of acknowledging the lack

of formal and adequate sexual education for autistic people. However, the participants argued

LOTS seemed to primarily endeavor to exemplify and glorify how to date according to

neurotypical norms and emphasize the daters' failures rather than how to have a successful,

affirming experience dating as an autistic person.

First, the participants would have liked to see reflective opportunities built into the show.

Disabled people are less likely to receive adequate sexual education from formal networks than

are non-disabled people ((Löfgren-Mårtenson and Ouis 2018) and are more likely to use the

Internet and other forms of digital media to acquire sexual knowledge (Kaur, 2019).

Infantilizing and asexualizing conceptions of autism have contributed to a lack of sexual

educational materials directed at autistic young adults from myriad sources including parents,

doctors, psychiatrists, therapists, and in schools (Lo Bosco, 2023). While many participants, like

Liska, "did appreciate that at least they had therapists of some sort," they described the

"disappointing" "missed opportunity" to provide dating advice and opportunities for deeper

reflection to both the cast members on the show and to autistic viewers. Liska described the use

of social stories, the Internet, and other educational techniques they had used in their job working with autistic youth as possibilities available to *LOTS*'s relationship coach that were not utilized. Liska even suggested having cast members watch *The Bachelor* and reflect on, "Well, what did this guy do wrong? What did she do wrong? How could he have made her feel happier? What are some ways to show you care?" rather than having its cast venture into dating without experience or support. Another participant, Suki, said she thought *LOTS*:

> felt more reactive than reflective. I just felt like people would either feel very strong[ly] into someone or they wouldn't, and it was a very binary… there wasn't a lot of support to kind of go deeper into what's going on… I get the producer probably not wanting to interfere with someone's personal experience of how they're perceiving a date or how they're feeling post-date, but I just wish it was again more thoughtful and less like 'Aw, this poor guy' or like they don't set them up to succeed.

Here Suki is addressing her previously stated beliefs that *LOTS* has a responsibility to "educate" viewers accurately about autistic people dating by offering moments of reflection post-dates. Suki did not like the way *LOTS* offered one-on-one interviews with cast members, but these interviews only consisted of binary reactions to the dates, either positively or negatively, rather than supporting the cast members in analyzing the dates.

Another "cringe"-inducing moment described was regarding the relationship coaches on both the Australian and U.S. series. Pax said they were "disappointed in the relationship coaches," despite being excited that the coach in the U.S. season (released after season two of the Australian season) was autistic, because rather than "talk to them a lot deeper about what they want and why they want a relationship and how they feel… and healthy relationship

dynamics," Pax felt the focus was primarily on coaxing the cast to conform to

neuroconventional dating norms such as "look them in the eyes, pull out their chair, talk about

things that [indicate] you're looking for shared interests," etc. Not only was Pax concerned about

the privileging of neuroconventional dating norms, but they also felt that teaching autistic

people who are more likely to hyperfixate on "rules" of social etiquette would be confused when

the execution or performance of those rules does not automatically guarantee success. Rather

than emphasize the daters' failures, discussed below in the sub-theme of intentionally amplified

otherness for a neurotypical audience, many of the participants like Pax, Liska, and Suki were

hoping *LOTS* might demonstrate to autistic viewers both how to practice healthy romantic

relationship dynamics as well as how to productively reflect on their dating experiences through

things like debriefing sessions. Instead, the participants critiqued the neuroconventional norms

they felt were emphasized in *LOTS*, Mercury said:

> That was also a part that I didn't like because it just felt very much like 'We'll
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> make you be not autistic' or something… I don't know if this would be helpful to
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> teach an autistic person how to date like a non-autistic person because in my
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> experience, my dating experience is very different than any friends I have who
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> are neurotypical…. When people were trying to teach people too much, it felt
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> more like 'I'm teaching you how to be a person' and less like, 'How do you
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> experience this? How can we make it less stressful for you?' There seemed to be
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> like a trying to get you to do this the normal way, and not like 'What could you
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> do to experience this thing you want to experience in your own way?'"

Here Mercury is not only critiquing *LOTS* for encouraging its autistic cast to conform to neuroconventional dating norms, but they are also saying *LOTS* is operating as a technology for teaching viewers how to "be" sexual subjects, and this sexual subjectivity is inherently neurotypical. The implication in this statement is that neurotypical expectations for dating could make engaging in romantic sociality "stressful" for autistic viewers who may be influenced by the dating "advice" offered in *LOTS*.

Rin, a 22-year-old, white non-binary person, also critiqued *LOTS*'s substantiation of neuroconventional dating norms such as cutting one's hair to look "appropriate." Rin and Mercury both acknowledge that some of the standards of conduct *LOTS* establishes could be potentially useful to autistic viewers; however, they both point out how others appear to privilege neuroconventional dating norms that autistic people are unlikely to be able to conform to. *LOTS* is branded as a benevolent, autism-affirming show; however, these participants interpreted *LOTS* as substantiating neuroconventional dating norms that are not only arbitrary but also difficult for autistic people to conform to and potentially make their dating experiences more stressful and less successful. As I argued in the textual analysis chapter, *LOTS* is inclusive only to the extent that it includes autistic people as an identity group that is capable of participating in the romantic citizenship game (Ouellette & Hay, 2008) but not capable of winning at this game. The autistic cast inevitably "fail" to conform to the heteronormative, neuroconventional, etc. standards for romantic sociality that are established on *LOTS*. This could affirm viewers' ableist beliefs that autistic people are "unworthy" of belonging in sexual subjectivity. The autistic participants in this study are seeing, and critiquing, this unworthiness

fostered on *LOTS* and using *LOTS* as a technology of the autistic self in that they are understanding their sexual subjectivity in opposition to the advice found in *LOTS*.

Besides critiquing the overwhelming emphasis of neuroconventional dating norms as unproductive for autistic viewers who could have used *LOTS* as an educational tool, participants also stated they believed the show to be unproductive by not offering dating advice that could benefit both autistic *and* neurotypical people. For example, Suki said she felt like *LOTS* could have "used this opportunity to teach the people on the show skills that would have helped everybody" such as how to have a conversation about consent:

> That's an area that I think both neurotypical people and neurodiverse people struggle with, which is just like, how do you go about kissing someone for the first time? Like, how do you initiate that? When do you ask, when do you not ask?... It's this idea that if people are neurodiverse, then they're less sensitive to cues a lot of the time. They're less good at them and there needs to be more of a concrete way [of] going about it… When people have a TV platform, they have the opportunity to bring good into the world. How many people would benefit from learning how to check in [with their date/partner]? I wish they had made an effort to share that knowledge, because those are life skills that nourish people and nourish the community and also nourish the world that we're in right now.

Suki argued here that a show specifically about a population that is less sensitive to social cues could have been used as an opportunity to very clearly explicate and demonstrate how to engage in consent in romantic and sexual sociality. Suki's argument is similar to Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry's (2021) argument that close analysis of autism can illuminate how we

understand sexuality, gender, and other social constructs more broadly. This argument also aligns with principles of Universal Design that illustrate accessibility for one group of people benefits everyone.

Miseducation of Neurotypical Viewers About Autism

Another way the participants in this study critiqued *Love on the Spectrum* for being "more cringey than productive" was by illuminating that not only are they miseducating autistic viewers, but they are not actually educating neurotypical audiences "accurately" because they are not providing context for or education about autism. Suki provided an example:

> There was this one date… I think they were both gaming [on the date] and it kind of felt like…him trying to engage with her and her being like, 'I want to do this game situation.' And she was just not interested [in anything except the video game]. And I thought that was a very interesting moment because I almost wish that there was debriefing post-dates with these people so we could understand what their experience was. Because if you're just looking at it from an outsider in and you're not aware of it [autism] like this… like she seemed weird and rude and disconnected, and I feel like unless like the audience has context for her behavior and for him not taking the social cues and her not taking them either, and them both kind of being offbeat in their own way… I wish that had been framed in a way for the [neurotypical] viewer that gave context.

The producers of *LOTS* not providing context for behavior that is typical of autistic people, such as the tendency to engage in parallel play without that being an indicator of disinterest or lack of

focus, is concerning in that it might lead to neurotypical viewers affirming already existing

stigmatizing beliefs about autistic people such as that they are "weird and rude and

disconnected." Explored further below, the participants in this study also critiqued *LOTS* for

miseducating neurotypical viewers in a way that suggested autistic people are

cisheteronormative, naive, awkward, etc. While this sub-theme primarily illuminates how

autistic people feel *LOTS* is constructing autism for neurotypical viewers, it was clear from their

responses that the participants felt the need to challenge these misrepresentations as a method of

deciphering their autistic subjectivity.

Usefulness of Representations of Autism and Dating

Despite holding many critiques for *Love on the Spectrum*'s representation of

autism and dating, the participants in this study maintained beliefs that a reality show

about autistic people dating could still be useful to autistic audiences by modeling

romantic social behaviors as well as to both autistic and neurotypical audiences by

offering diverse representations that defy problematic assumptions about autistic people.

First, many participants discussed the usefulness of a show like this modeling successful

romantic social behaviors. Mercury stated "seeing fellow autistic people [on *LOTS*] go

through all kinds of different dating situations" was helpful for better understanding how

they "engage with others in romantic spaces." Similarly, Pax said they "like learning

from other autistic people how to use my interests as an avenue to connect with people

and meet new people." While Suki did not feel she learned anything useful from

watching other autistic people date on *LOTS*, she recognized the influence reality

television has on autistic people with less dating experience:

You can't blame someone who's never been on a real date before to not to think

that things are not the way they are on TV, if that's all that's ever been modeled

for them. But at the same time, I think the show has the responsibility of showing

the spectrum.

While the producers of *LOTS* may not feel like they have the responsibility of educating autistic

people about dating and sexuality, and while audiences are active and retain the ability to reject

interpretations of mediated representations (Hall, 1980), modeling behaviors through things like

social stories and mediated examples have long been recognized as successful techniques for

helping autistic people understand and engage in social interaction (Karal & Wolfe, 2018).

While many students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders are exposed to social story

interventionist strategies from a young age, many are not exposed to social stories related to

romantic and sexual behaviors likely owing to the overall paucity of available sexual education

for disabled people (Schmidt, Brown, & Darragh, 2020; Rodan, Schmidt, & Holland-Hall,

2020). Therefore, as Suki indicated above, *LOTS,* as the only reality television series about

autism and romantic sociality, should feel the responsibility to model useful dating and romantic

behaviors.

Lastly, the participants in this study argued *Love on the Spectrum* could still be useful to

both neurodiverse and neurotypical audiences by offering diverse representations that defy

problematic assumptions about autistic people such as that they are all white, heteronormative

men interested in monogamous, long-term relationships. Pax said:

It would be so much more interesting and helpful to the narrative around autism,

to the community, to other autistic people, to see like, 'Whoa, check out this

really cool queer platonic couple,' or like, 'Check out this poly[amorous] autistic

family and how they make it work…I think that it has so much potential if they

involve more autistic people in its production and in its framing… It would be so

much more empowering for autistic people and our families."

However, the participants in this study largely critiqued *LOTS* for doing the opposite.

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Critiques of Hetero- and Cisnormativity

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Love on the Spectrum could have been used as a technology to educate autistic

people on how to be sexual subjects by exemplifying idealized and normative sexual

subjectivity. However, this study reveals that autistic people affirm and understand their

sexual subjectivity *in opposition to* "inaccurate" representations found in *LOTS*. The

primary criticisms levied by the participants were that *LOTS* represented and perpetuated

stereotypical assumptions about autism, including that it primarily affects white,

cisgendered, heterosexual, monogamous couples. Liska said:

> There was very little diversity. I think there was maybe one or two LGBTQ
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> people… I just was hoping that they would make it less about the stereotypical
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> white people because everybody gets autism. I've worked with a lot of autistic
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> people. Black people get autism. You know, Asian people can get it. Everybody
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> can get autism. I mean, we're down to what, one in sixty now, I think? But we
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> only see it as a white people problem and mostly male problem. Still, we're
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> perpetuating that stereotype [on the show] ... I think they need a little bit more
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> explanation about how diverse just autism can be, period. You have people of
>
> every walk of life, every sexual orientation, every age, gender diversity.

Not only is Liska critiquing the show for its lack of racial, age, sexual, and gender diversity in its cast members because it is unrepresentative, but they also indicate they believe the show has a responsibility to counter stereotypes of autism by providing explicit explanations that challenge those prevailing beliefs. This is significant as many participants struggled with negotiating their feelings about the producers' involvement in the show; many described feeling disappointed that the representations did not feel "accurate" because they were not diverse, but they were reticent to outright critique the producers because they maintained contradictory beliefs that reality television is an unmanipulated, unscripted, etc. genre. However, these assumptions about the genre of reality television were dissonant with beliefs that *LOTS* must surely be manipulated because it did not reflect the *reality* of autism in that it affects people "of every walk of life."

Participants in this study specifically referenced the higher likelihood of autistic people identifying as gender and sexually diverse (Warrier et al., 2020) as evidence that *LOTS* was perhaps unintentionally yet inaccurately, representing the reality of autistic people's sexualities. For example, Loki said, "Because there's such a high correlation between gender nonconformity and autism, I would've hoped that at least one person [on the show] would fall under that category." Many participants pointed out that most of the cast as well as their parents were cisgendered, heterosexual people and couples, and again, some critiqued not only the lack of representation but also the lack of explicit challenges to hegemonic assumptions. For example, Rin said, "They didn't label anyone's sexuality specifically…I thought it might have been cool to see some, you know, explicitly LGBTQ+ subjects in there." Rin here drew attention to the fact that by not explicitly labeling the cast members' sexualities and gender identities they

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allowed for audiences to make assumptions, often based on prevalent stereotypes, about what their sexualities might be. In other words, *LOTS* primarily represented cisgendered people engaging in romantic social behaviors such as going on dates. While this does not inherently mean the two people attending that date are heterosexual, for example they could be pan- or bisexual, without explicitly saying the contrary, audiences may interpret the couples to be heterosexual and thereby contribute to the overwhelming number of mediated representations of disabled people as heterosexual (if they are allowed a sexuality at all).

Another specific criticism provided by the participants was that the representations on *Love on the Spectrum* were not "relatable" because they only represented monogamous couples or people who were only interested in finding a monogamous, long term partner of which the goal is to assimilate to and perform a "heteronormative life script situation," as Silver called it For example, Rin, who identifies as polyamorous, said they were "looking for something different" than "one long term partner" like the cast of *LOTS* seemed to be looking for. Rin questioned whether they were "at a point in my life [where] I don't know if I'm in [a] place to settle down." Silver similarly asked, "Why do people have to necessarily couple up and marry and push out kids and repeat the process over and over again forever? Just so we can have more workers? It felt very assimilationist in some of those regards." Pax also addressed the lack of polyamory by stating:

> I know a lot of autistic people who have [multiple] partners. I know one autistic
> person who has five partners. And I think that was also another thing that I was a
> little bit surprised by like, okay, lots of reality shows have this premise where
> everybody here is looking for love and stuff, but at the same time, to me, a title

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like *Love on the Spectrum*, it follows to me… I thought that it was going to be

kind of just how there's all different types of autistic people, there's all kinds of

different types of love and relationships and stuff.

Again, the participants in this study are using *LOTS* as a technology of the autistic sexual self to illustrate their autistic sexual subjectivity by juxtaposing the two. These are examples of autistic people constructing their sexual subjectivity not in accordance with how *LOTS* suggests sexual subjectivity should be; rather, autistic people are constructing themselves in opposition to these suggestions/prescriptions.

Many of the participants identified polyamory as part of their sexuality or discussed knowing many other autistic people who are polyamorous. This fact combined with comments made by some of the younger participants like Rin that indicate a lack of desire to "settle down," "marry and push out kids," etc. and were more interested in dating lots of people and "hooking up," are in direct contrast to neoliberal capitalist discourse that encourages citizen subjects to participate in biopolitical projects of reproduction for the benefit of the nation state (Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1996). Autistic people have historically been treated as abject others in biopolitical projects through eugenics, sterilization, cultural erasure of their sexuality, etc., and it is possible *LOTS* as an institutional entity is attempting to entice autistic individuals to transform themselves into normative sexual subjects in order to contribute to the nation state. Again, the insidiousness of attempting to entice previously abject subjects into normativity is that the producers of *LOTS* are being praised for their benevolence of "challenging stereotypes" of asexuality as a characteristic of autism and for including autistic people as potentially capable of conforming to ideal sexual subjectivity. However, what is significant is that autistic viewers

of *LOTS* are refusing to assimilate and transform themselves into "perfect" sexual subjects and are instead defining an oppositional sexual subjectivity.

It is important to qualify that not every participant in this study challenged these attempts to coerce autistic people into ideal sexual subjects. The AMAB participants in this study, specifically Chad, actually critiqued *LOTS* for its (albeit limited) queer representation. Chad said he did not like dater Teo, a bisexual, cisgendered woman who dates both men and women on the show, because he did not "believe" in people of the same gender dating ("I only believe in a man and a woman"). When probed further, Chad stated he believed all representations of autism and romantic relationships should only be "between a man and a woman" because "that's how [he] was raised." The effect of normative discourses on Chad has caused hetero- and cisnormative beliefs to become ingrained in him so much so that despite *LOTS* overwhelmingly representing heteronormativity and exclusively representing cisnormativity, the show's minimal inclusion of a queer person caused him to overtly express his opposition and defend his "ideal" sexuality and gender assimilation.

Neurotypical Gaze

The diffusion of cis- and heteronormative discourse was not the only element the autistic participants in this study used to construct their sexual subjectivity in opposition of. These participants also identified the use of the neurotypical gaze as constructing autistic people as unworthy of sexual subjectivity because they are unable to measure up to established standards of conduct. Many participants in this study argued *LOTS* utilized a neurotypical or "abled" gaze for the benefit of a neurotypical intended audience. For

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example, Suki said, "It felt like it wasn't a show that was designed for the autistic community." The primary reason given for this interpretation was the inclusion of perceived intentional amplification of otherness and infantilization of the autistic cast members on the show. Therefore, this theme consists of the following sub-themes: a) intentionally amplified otherness for a neurotypical audience and b) infantilization. The first sub-theme, intentionally amplified otherness for a neurotypical audience, illuminates maneuvers used by the producers of *LOTS* to objectify and other autistic people. The second sub-theme, infantilization, specifically examines how *LOTS* constructs autistic people as children who are innocent, pure, naive, etc.

Intentionally Amplified Otherness for a Neurotypical Audience

The neurotypical gaze can be understood as the tendency in film and television to do the following: a) facilitate neurotypical pleasure from viewing an objectified autistic subject, b) "fix" the autistic subject as that which is socially undesirable, and c) only see itself, i.e., neurotypicality, despite "looking at" autism by using cinematography, visual and verbal language "to actively construct [the autistic subject] as a figure outside the bounds of normative social engagement" (McDermott, 2021, p. 4). The participants in this study felt *LOTS* amplified the abject otherness of autistic people by a) emphasizing their social transgressions, b) emphasizing their dating failures and inherent "undateableness," c) selectively choosing the "weirdest possible" cast, and d) describing that cast in ways that emphasized their "quirky" abnormality.

Emphasizing Social Transgressions

The participants in this study believed *Love on the Spectrum* emphasized the social transgressions of its cast members to highlight their otherness. For example, they argued the producers did not edit out the cast's transgressions such as announcing the need to go to the bathroom or blowing their nose, and in fact intentionally highlighted these through sound editing choices. Liska said:

> I swear there were times where they [cast members] did things that normal people would consider goofy or weird, and I was waiting for a laugh track or, you know, a 'womp, womp' sound. They were kind of pointing it out like, 'Oh my god, you just farted on a date.' And I'm just like. Yeah, so? But you're playing it up, you're making it this big deal. I mean, you don't see them [reality TV producers] pointing out when a guy farts in the tub on *The Bachelor*. They cut that shit out, right? You know, I'm sure [*sarcastically*] no one's made a mistake ever on *The Bachelor*. Nobody's ever dropped a glass or made a big mess or slipped, or tripped or whatever else. But all of these tiny mistakes were amplified in this show. Every little mistake seemed like it was glorified. And every time they did good, it was like, 'Oh, well, you're supposed to do that.'

Silver also said they felt like *LOTS* was intentionally including awkward moments:

> In the editing process, like a lot of sexy dating programs like *Love Island*, [the producers] try to make people… They don't show someone blowing their nose, they don't show someone coming out of the bathroom… And that felt really disrespectful because the way that they framed it, it underscored how socially awkward that was, and that's just unfair.

Here Liska and Silver compare *LOTS* to reality dating shows like *The Bachelor* that primarily include neurotypical cast members to argue the producers of *LOTS* intentionally include and "glorify" "socially awkward" mistakes or transgressions in order to emphasize that autistic people are not the same as neurotypical people and not worthy of the same dignity. As Liska clarified, the producers amplify these embarrassing moments yet minimize moments when the cast succeed at being "normal" daters. These maneuvers by the producers of *LOTS* construct autistic people as unworthy of sexual subjectivity because they are unable to measure up to established standards of conduct. Sexuality is an important aspect of full personhood. Liska's comparison of *LOTS* highlighting its cast's social transgressions to other popular reality dating shows reveals how *LOTS* constructing autistic people as unable to achieve sexual normality also constructs them as unworthy of full personhood.

Emphasizing Dating Failures and "Undateableness"

The participants in this study also argued that *Love on the Spectrum* attempts to "fix" the autistic subjects as undesirable and unable to successfully date. Silver said, "It felt like it was filmed for an allistic [i.e., not autistic] audience to kind of showcase autistic people as weirdos who are undateable." The participants argued this fixation of autistic people as undesirable and unable to date occurred through editing choices such as lingering on the disappointed face of a cast member who was rejected after asking for a second date and by not including any daters who achieved success by the end of the season. Pax provided an example:

> I keep thinking about the image of the blond guy who went to the Renaissance
> fair, and how long they lingered on him looking bummed after Emma [his date]

was like, 'I just want to be friends.' That was one of the moments where I was like, this is the abled gaze. This is how abled people see us, as weird losers who everybody is going to not like if we show them our real selves and what we're really into. Someone will think it's too weird. And that was a bummer.

Here Pax focused on *LOTS*'s emphasis of one of the cast member's failures in dating, but Loki also described *LOTS*'s casting choices as constructing autistic people as undateable:

The way that certain things were described or shown I thought maybe I was concerned that many people who saw this… that [it] would affect their perception negatively, either of autism or a potential autistic partner or things like that… There wasn't a single person on the show who ended up in a successful relationship. Everyone who wasn't already in a relationship [wasn't successful] ... Everyone who started as single ended up single. No one had success in forming new relationships. Obviously, they [the producers] couldn't have manipulated the outcomes for the people and stuff, but it was just kind of disappointing, and I thought that maybe it might give people an idea that that's how it is…. that doesn't mean they should have manipulated the results, but if someone just watches that season they would see there wasn't one successful person on the show."

As Pax and Loki allude to in the above representational examples, by emphasizing the casts' dating failures and choosing cast members that are inevitably unsuccessful at dating, some of the participants worried about the potential effects on neurotypical audiences. For example, Suki

had the unique experience of auditioning to be on *LOTS*. She believed she was not chosen because at that time in her life she was going through a phase of only dating men of a specific "type," and that would have made it difficult for the producers to set her up on dates. However, she told a story of how her current neurotypical partner perceived the cast members who were chosen to be on the show:

> I was talking with my boyfriend about this experience, and he's neurotypical, and he said 'I'm really glad you weren't on that show because I would have lumped you in with all of those people and I wouldn't have wanted to date you.' Like, by default, if he had recognized me from the show, he would not [have wanted to date me] because they are so…Struggling? And to be fair, if everybody on the show is like that for X amount of seasons, that's the vibe.

This experience provides anecdotal evidence that *LOTS*'s emphasis on its autistic casts' dating failures and its lack of representations of dating success can influence neurotypical viewers to believe autistic people are undesirable as romantic partners.

Suki's experience substantiates already existing assumptions such as "autistic people can't date," in the words of Pax, which have negative effects on autistic people themselves despite many autistic people experiencing the contrary. Pax provided further anecdotal evidence of the effect these narratives that autistic people are unworthy of belonging in sexual subjectivity have on autistic people:

> My husband is autistic… My husband and I eloped and his mother insisted on coming because she was one of those [people who are] like, "I never thought my son would get married" types. But I also know that hearing that all the time had a

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huge impact on my husband and was part of the reason that we dated for eight

years before we got married because he was like, "I can't [get married],

everybody around me thinks [I can't]."

Suki's boyfriend's experience lumps *LOTS* into a plethora of cultural influences that affect

people like Pax's husband's mother and Pax's husband himself by constructing autistic people

as undateable. Research that demonstrates how autistic people actualize their sexual subjectivity

in opposition to asexualizing and normative cultural influences is necessary to provide autistic

people with alternative tools for developing their subjectivity.

Choosing "Weirdest" Possible Cast

Many of the participants believed *Love on the Spectrum* to be intentionally

amplifying the otherness of autistic people, or actively constructing the autistic subject

"as a figure outside the bounds of normative social engagement" (McDermott, 2021, p.

4), by choosing the "weirdest," "most awkward, undateable," and sexually inexperienced

as possible cast members that neurotypical audience members would find unrelatable.

Silver said these casting choices were intentionally "infantilizing and meant to be

othering," and that these choices "felt very alienating" because a show like *LOTS* was

"not meant to highlight people like me." Lux said they felt like the casting choices were

intended for neurotypical viewers to adopt the takeaway that "they're definitely not

normies." The participants described the "weirdness" as coming from the fact that most

of the cast still lived with their families, they talked differently than "normies" or used

different mannerisms, dressed differently, etc. However, the participants did not just

attribute these differences to the cast members. Many, including Lux, felt as if *LOTS* was emphasizing these abnormalities:

> It was just really kind of showy… I found it really odd, [for example] all the mannerisms of all [the cast] seemed very done up, like it seemed almost like an act. They didn't want these people to be seen as something that non-autistic people could identify with because 'they're different, they're autistic' [*said with air-quotes*]. It just seemed, I don't know, it seemed really alienating that they didn't want the normies to relate to them because they're so different. I felt like that's really stigmatizing. I'm all for shows and media and stuff from a neurodivergent viewpoint, but I felt like that wasn't a true viewpoint. I feel like it was really a forced one just playing on the stereotypes of what people think autism is.

Pax also felt like the producers of *LOTS* were "playing that up," "that" being the "allistic gaze" inherent in choosing a cast that neurotypical people would find unrelatable. They said:

> After a while I realized that there's a formula and that means there is still a very heavy editing and narrative agenda happening. And it made me wonder how many autistic people actually helped make the show because it just seemed very one dimensional.

The significance in these excerpts is that these participants are not only saying the cast members are themselves unrelatable but also arguing that they believe the producers of the show to be responsible for these casting choices and responsible for "playing up" or emphasizing their

differences from neurotypical people. In another example, Pax described a cast member saying "'I just want to find a partner so I can have a family and all that. Do the traditional keep my name going thing,'" to which the producers said something to the effect of, "'That's a little odd, don't you think?'" Pax felt this response to an autistic person attempting to conform to heteronormative standards of sexual subjectivity was unfair because "didn't you [the producers] put him on here because [he] is unusual and odd?" In other words, Pax felt as if the producers chose cast members that were never intended to actually succeed at conducting themselves successfully.

While many of these participants indicated awareness that some autistic people *are* "weirder" than others or less able to "mask," i.e., perform neurotypicality, as autism is a spectrum, they also felt that *LOTS* intentionally did not actually represent a spectrum of autism. The negative impact of choosing to represent a "narrow view" of autism, in this case that autistic people are extremely abnormal, is that people like Suki who describe themselves as having lower support needs are more likely to be misdiagnosed and less likely to be believed when they disclose their diagnosis in dating situations:

> They'd tell me I am not autistic. Like with their understanding of autism being based on shows like *Love on the Spectrum*, it's one thing if someone's like knowledge is based on whatever they saw on *Community* or *Atypical* [*scripted, fictionalized shows with autistic-coded characters*] and it's like a nerdy guy, but it's another [thing] when they see these women who are just… I don't know… it's like, are we just all perpetual virgins in everyone's mind unless we find each other?... It's showing in my mind a pretty narrow version of the spectrum. Then

it's hard not to be a little annoyed because I feel like when a show is choosing to

work with a population or focus on a population like autistic people who are

already vulnerable and marginalized, then I feel like they owe them the basic

decency of doing a portrayal that is that is *of* [*emphasis original*] the spectrum,

and not like, 'Hey, let's go talk to a bunch of people who are virgins over the age

of 20-something and who are still living with their parents. And that's okay that

people are like that. But that's not representative of everybody."

Here Suki addresses how the responsibility of representing a "vulnerable and marginalized"

population on a reality television show is distinctly urgent versus representing autism in a

scripted, fictionalized format like *Atypical*. This urgency is because the "reality" nature could

cause neurotypical people to interpret the representations on *LOTS* as authentic. This kind of

interpretation is aligned with Cleary's (2016) argument that nondisabled audiences interpret

reality television depictions of disability to be authentic, despite awareness that "producers

control the situation, the environment, and the ground rules" (Godlewski & Perse, 2010, p. 166)

in the reality genre, because representations of disabled people dating are "extraordinary." In

other words, audiences have been found to be aware that reality television must have an

"extraordinary" element and are therefore skeptical of the authenticity of "ordinary" people

existing in these elements of fantasy. However, disabled people dating is considered by

neurotypical viewers as extraordinary or abnormal enough. This extraordinariness is

compounded by the producers' amplifying their otherness, and this could cause neurotypical

viewers to be more likely to ignore their awareness that reality television is manipulated and not

"authentic." By reiterating how abnormal and incapable autistic people are in the context of

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dating, *LOTS* at once highlights their otherness as well as frames their few and far between achievements of normalcy as extraordinary.

Emphasizing Abnormality in Introductions

The participants in this study not only critiqued *Love on the Spectrum* for emphasizing the otherness or abnormality of autistic people by intentionally featuring cast members that fulfilled that stereotype, but they also critiqued the show for emphasizing abnormality in the way the producers described and introduced the cast members. Silver described these descriptions as fulfilling expectations for a "modern day freak show" or framing the cast members as "monkeys at a circus," and these descriptions caused Silver to describe *LOTS* as being "more akin to [reality shows like] *Extraordinary People* [a reality series about people with rare medical conditions or disabilities]." Other participants provided similar sentiments.

The format of *Love on the Spectrum* is such that cast members are introduced initially via a narrator telling the audience two things the person loves and two things the person hates. The descriptions used for the autistic cast members emphasize their otherness because they are not related to important aspects of the cast members' lives such as occupation, relationship goals, etc.; rather they often focus on sensory preferences and intolerances. For example, dater Katie was introduced by the narrator as someone who likes the touch of her mother's hand on her face. This is obviously infantilizing, irrelevant to romantic sociality, and contains negligible information about who Katie is, but it is also in sharp contrast to how nondisabled date partners (not cast members) are introduced. For example, one nondisabled date was introduced by the narrator as being someone who hates the effects of climate change. This introduction tells the

audience that he is a person who cares about the environment; it is substantive information. After the problematic introductions, Pax said:

> It's not realistic. Because if that was the case, then they could have just introduced them by saying, like, 'This is Dani, and she's an animator, and she gives back to her community by also teaching autistic kids. And she's funny.' And that's it. And then you get to know her throughout the thing, but they don't do that. I did not love that because it starts it out… the way that frames it is every time you meet a person, they're like, 'This person's an alien, look how weird they are.' It was more the abled gaze thing… Even some of the music that they play when they're introducing people or something is awkward. It's like they just play it up.

These narrator introductions set up the neurotypical audience to perceive the cast member as abnormal immediately upon meeting them, and this could cause viewers who likely already have ableist biases to be biased against that individual. Not only is that potentially perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices in the audience, but it is also detracting from the autonomy of the cast members to introduce themselves in a natural, preferable way. In other words, rather than asking the cast members to describe themselves in their own words, Silver described the narrator as intending to make jokes at the participants' expenses "without them knowing."

Love on the Spectrum emphasizes its cast members as abnormal, abject others in a way that felt significant to these participants by removing their agency to define themselves. *LOTS* is choosing to make autism an incidental premise of their show. Black and Pretes (2007) argued "incidentalist" strategies of representational media, rather than media that displays disability but

does not explicitly draw attention to it, could be beneficial by increasing positive attitudes and feelings of empathy and relatability in nondisabled audiences. However, incidentalist strategies are only effective in doing so if the disabled people being featured are represented as similar to nondisabled people (Black & Pretes, 2007). The producers can defend *LOTS* by arguing they are bringing autism to the "mainstream," but this defense is worthless if they are doing so in a way that detracts from any potential relatability between autistic and neurotypical people and constructs autistic people as incapable of belonging in the sphere of ideal citizenship that is sexual subjectivity. In other words, *LOTS* may be including autistic people in a category of people capable of *trying* to achieve ideal citizenship through sexual subjectivity, but *LOTS* is ultimately proving autistic people are incapable of succeeding in this endeavor.

Infantilization

Finally, *Love on the Spectrum* is utilizing a neurotypical gaze by infantilizing autistic people. This infantilization operates through the cast members' parents as well as by the narrative and editing choices of the producers. The participants in this study frequently said they believed infantilization to be happening in the show as well as to be reaffirming these assumptions in neurotypical audiences. Autism's cultural depictions and understandings as a pediatric condition have contributed to infantilizing stigmatizations of autistic sexuality (Lo Bosco, 2023). Infantilization can be described as "changing speech patterns, such as using baby-talk or dumbing down vocabulary or not speaking directly to them but instead directing comments and questions to a parent or caregiver" (Lo Bosco, 2023, par. 19). Suki said she recognized that "part of the function of reality television is you derive pleasure from watching it," but she felt as if this

pleasure was intended to be provided only for neurotypical viewers who, if surveyed, would say the show was "wholesome and feel-good… cute, heartwarming, etc., like, how you describe a bunch of puppies." Comparing people who are interested in pursuing romance, dating, sexuality, etc. as "puppies" implies they are not adults.

Infantilizing Parents

Several participants in this study identified moments of infantilization occurring by or with the neurotypical parents or caregivers of the cast members. For example, Loki and Mercury noted infantilizing statements were made by parents but also noted the role of the producers in enabling these statements by giving "more of the narrative ability" to the parents, allowing them to "play" to the camera, and enabling the parents to utilize a "caregiver focus" that felt "overbearing." Loki said they felt it was possible the parents were not actually like this in real life, but that the producers could have made the parents seem that way. Expanding on this perception of the parents' controlling the narrative, Pax said they felt like the parents "tremendously" amplified the "abled gaze:"

> It did feel like we heard a little bit more from parents than the actual folks themselves. And it made it so that the whole thing was through their eyes and through their expectations instead of [the autistic people's] ... That was sad, honestly… I hated how much the moms talked… I wish they would make it so that actually autistic people can have more time on *Love on the Spectrum* to themselves without parents."

Pax echoed this sentiment when they said *LOTS* "was way too many parents." The narrative control given to parents more than to the autistic cast themselves is problematic in that parent

and guardian "advocacy" on behalf of autistic people has often diverged from needs expressed by autistic self-advocates (Rottier & Gernsbacher, 2020). It is important to note that many of the participants criticized the infantilization of the autistic cast through the use of the casts' parents not to say they felt that the cast should not live with their parents; many recognized the diverse support needs many autistic people have including living with parents and family members. Instead, the participants in this study believed the producers' focus on the parents was inappropriate.

Many participants also described feeling like the show was infantilizing autistic people by not including a wider variety of independent cast members. When asked to share if they found any of the cast relatable, the only person mentioned was Kaelynn, a young woman who lives with a friend, is enrolled in college, has a dog, and other responsibilities. Her parents are not involved nor are any caregivers. Pax said they felt like Kaelynn's time on screen was "the one time that we didn't have to do the full abled gaze thing," and Liska felt as if Kaelynn was the only cast member who had a lifestyle "success story:"

> Everybody else was either like a group home person, which is fine. There are [autistic] people in group homes, that's fine if you need that type of support. But there are a lot of autistic people who hold down jobs, who go to college. You know, and it does frustrate me that, you know, can you show some of us who are successful?

Lux also said Kaelynn was the only cast member they could relate to, and one reason provided for this relatability was that Kaelynn did not seem to act or be constructed as a child.

Many participants noted the stark contrast between Kaelynn and the other cast members for her level of independence. The participants in this study described having a wide range of support needs, and they critiqued *LOTS*'s choices to represent most autistic people as having lower support needs. This choice to represent autistic people narrowly is not only significant because the participants in this study believed this to be inauthentic/unrepresentative (most acknowledged that many autistic people do need more involvement from their caregivers); rather, the significance lies in the participant's beliefs that the producers are intentionally misrepresenting autistic communities in order to maintain stigmas of infantilization that will produce a "feel good" effect for neurotypical audiences without fostering relatability.

Infantilizing Producers

Finally, the participants in this study believed the neurotypical gaze to be operating through the producers' editing choices. Some of the primary examples they provided were the emphasis on fantastical, overtly romantic dates and desires as well as the lack of discussion about sex. First, the participants believed the producers intentionally infantilized the cast by crafting date environments that were overtly romantic and formal, which Suki described as "nothing that anyone normal would do" for a first date." Suki said this unnatural choice for date location was likely intentionally infantilizing because of the producer's assumptions that the autistic people would naively appreciate the formal dates for their association with romantic movies. In other words, Suki here implied the producers are infantilizing the cast by expecting them to *want* an overtly romantic, formal date like something from a movie. It is infantilizing because that would be "nothing that anyone normal would do," yet the producers do not

expect the cast to know any better. Pax described this naivety as portrayed with "an undercurrent of desperation" by the producers.

The participants also implied the producers infantilized the cast by repeatedly noting the lack of discussion about or representations of sexual activity. For example, Silver said:

> When I was rewatching it [with] my partner, I turned to her and I started
> counting how many people that I've had sex with and that I've dated and I'm like,
> 'These people are all in their mid-20s, and they've never been with anyone?'...
> Instead of trying to make it seem sexier, even just fun, it did seem like much
> more of a family program which felt unfair… There was like no sexuality, there
> was no steaminess in the show, like there couldn't have been with parents there
> half the time, but that was just starkly different from other reality and dating
> shows.

Participants like Silver attested that *LOTS* is distinct from other shows in the reality dating genre because there is "no sexuality… no steaminess." This absence of "steaminess" is significant because the repeated absence of sexuality in representations of disabled people reinforces the taboo of sex and disability (McRuer & Mollow, 2011). Silver describes this lack of sexuality as impossible to rectify if the parents continue to be included so frequently and given so much narrative control in the series.

Besides the obvious absence of sex alluded to here, many participants described a particular scene that caused them to feel the producers were exhibiting infantilizing assumptions about autistic people. The scene referenced was an interview in season two of the Australian version in which the producer asked Sharnae and Jimmy, a long term engaged couple who lives

together, if they have "consummated" their relationship. Pax's response to this question by the producers was: "Huh?! They sleep in the same bed! They moved in together! Like, what do you think?" Many participants pointed out the irrationality of assuming a couple that is engaged, living together, and been dating for years would not be having sex. Suki felt like this question came from an assumption that autistic people do not have sex:

> I feel like that was just indicative as well of the culture of these interviewers
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> going in and being like, 'Hey, let's look at the freaks and let's see if they have
>
> sex…' They don't talk about sex with anybody [else]. There wasn't even probing
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> like, 'Is this something you're curious about? Is it something that when in a
>
> relationship you see yourself doing this with someone?' and just getting
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> temperature checks… It's interesting to think about because how do we think so
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> much autism and neurodiversity made it this far in the gene pool? Like, the
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> people were getting fucked. We're fucking and getting fucked like, that's how
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> that happens.

Suki also speculated that it may have been "benevolent ableism" for the producers to ask if they have sex because they were attempting to dispel the myth that disabled people are not sexual. However, this seemingly inappropriate question combined with the fact that the producers "don't talk about sex with anybody [else]" could actually be reinforcing the myth and revealing the producers' internalized assumptions. After reflecting that this was one of the only times the producers explicitly referenced sexuality, Pax said,

> The way they said it, it was the same way that [when] I would tell people I'm
>
> non-binary and they're like, 'Well what's in your pants?' That's like morbid

curiosity. That's telling me way more about you and your preconceptions or stereotypes than anything my answer can tell you about what it's really like to be me.

Here Pax astutely interprets that questions like that are not asked by people who are actually interested in getting to know autistic people because it objectifies and others them.

Recommended Media

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study did not like or approve of how *LOTS* represented autistic people and their sexualities. They generously offered solutions for improving *LOTS*, as shown in this study, such as not simply representing hetero- and cisnormative, assimilationist people and relationships and utilizing actually autistic people in the production. Pax said:

I [recognize] it's a reality show; it's cheap to make and gets lots of views. There's probably going to be more. It feels kind of naive to think the folks making the show wouldn't be at least somewhat paying attention to the conversation online, and I hope that they take autistic people's credit or criticism and viewpoints in good faith and let the show evolve a little bit.

While Pax maintains hope that *Love on the Spectrum* can improve, many participants also provided alternative media texts that they believed represented autistic people appropriately and with dignity. Suki recommended *Gilmore Girls* for its autistically-coded character Paris who "had a positive growing arc, and she gets a lot of that growth because people are patient and compassionate with her and also not patronizing" as well as Amy Schumer's docu-series

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Expecting Amy for its representation of her relationship with husband Chris Fischer who is a late-diagnosed autistic person. Suki described it as:

> a really, really beautiful example of a couple that's like having sex, that loves each other, that's super flirtatious. They just relentlessly flirt all show long. And it's really sweet because he's clearly quirky and unique, but he's also well-respected in his field. She is well respected in her field, and they love the shit out of each other. So, I wish there was more of that in media."

Liska recommended *She-Ra* for the autistic character Entrapta who is successful and intelligent. Silver recommended an independent film titled *Firstness* for its representation of gender diversity in autistic people with a non-binary main character. Similarly, Lux recommended a cartoon series called *Dead End Paranormal Park* for its character Norma who is autistic and queer:

> And I really like how she's coded because it's like, yeah, she's a little off. She's a little quirky, but she's not, you know, no one's looking at her like she's some monkey at a circus, right? She's just a person with her own set of difficulties, you know, and never put in a way where it's like, 'Oh, she's bad for doing this' or anything."

Many participants recommended the series *Everything is Going to be Okay*, particularly Pax and Loki because according to Loki, this show "more than any other show I can think of explored sexuality in a way that is very pertinent to the autistic experience, and at least my opinion is quite relatable."

The participants in this study also recommended several books. Mercury recommended *Hell Followed with Us* by Andrew Joseph White for including autistic non-binary characters. Rin recommended books by K. J. Charles such as *An Unseen Attraction* because it features autistically-coded characters that engage in romantic sociality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research question two, "How do autistic people talk about how they experience gender and sexuality?" can be answered in the theme of autistic gender with the following: autistic people in this study credited input from supportive autistic community members with helping them feel positive sentiment towards identifying as autistic, and this input helped many of them realize their experiences of autism fundamentally alter how they understand gender and sexual subjectivity.

This chapter contributes to my conceptualization of technologies of the autistic self in several ways. Reality television representation of autism and sexuality in *LOTS* operates as a resource of governmentality in which normalizing discourses of hetero- and cisnormativity are diffused to and through autistic viewers. The participants in this study identified several institutions, rationalities, actors, etc. that attempt to compel subjects to convert themselves into normality, but they also added *LOTS* to that list of entities. There were stark differences between the realizations described above, made by people AFAB, and the responses of the people AMAB in this study. The responses from the people AMAB support that they are socialized to place more emphasis on occupying a male, heteronormatively-compliant subjectivity rather than a neurotypical subjectivity. Based on these responses, reflections by the people AFAB in this study on this phenomenon, plus the textual analysis of *Love on the Spectrum* from chapter three,

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I made the argument that autistic men are used in reality television to reaffirm gender norms under the guise of the producers' benevolently challenging stereotypes. This reaffirmation of dogmatic norms is absolved of public critique because they are attributed to stereotypical characteristics of autism rather than to toxic masculinity. This supports theorizations of the autism industrial complex by placing autistic men into the service of the nation-state's biopolitical projects (Broderick & Roscigno, 2022).

The sub-question to research question two, "How do autistic people talk about autism and sexuality as represented in *Love on the Spectrum*?" can be answered in the categories of a) *LOTS* as [Mis]Education and b) neurotypical gaze. The first of these categories revealed autistic people view shows like this as a social activity in which they seek validation and input from autistic community members before, during, and after viewing. The participants in this study engaged with the show and with their autistic community members as tools for constructing autistic sexual subjectivity. This category also revealed autistic people had a "morbid curiosity" to see how *Love on the Spectrum* would represent autism and sexuality as they recognized the lack of representation anywhere else. The participants in this study critiqued the representations of autism and sexuality in this series for failing to provide useful sexual and romantic sociality education to autistic viewers as well as for miseducating neurotypical viewers about what autistic dating experiences are like. Lastly, this category included strong critiques of the series' predominantly hetero- and cisnormative representations. The participants in this study indicated they hoped *Love on the Spectrum* could have been used as a technology to demonstrate to autistic people how to be sexual subjects by exemplifying ideal *autistic* sexual subjectivity. However, this study reveals that autistic people affirm and understand their sexual subjectivity

in opposition to "inaccurate" representations found in *Love on the Spectrum*. Stuart Hall's (1980) landmark work on audience's "oppositional readings" of media texts is exemplified here when the participants in this study used their agency to make meaning from LOTS in opposition to the intended meanings encoded therein.

The autistic people in this study also critiqued the representations of autism and sexuality in *Love on the Spectrum* for utilizing a neurotypical gaze. They defined this gaze as intentionally amplifying the otherness of its autistic cast by emphasizing their social transgressions, dating failures, and their unrelatability to neurotypical people. Because LOTS uses narratives of romantic idealization, e.g., happily-ever-after narrative arcs, that are widespread in neurotypical cultural representations as well, these "failure" moments reveal how prescriptions of sexual normativity are not foolproof. That is, not only does this analysis reveal the damaging effects of "testing" sexual worthiness on autistic people, but it also has implications for neurotypical people in that following all of the rules does not always result in achieving normality, thereby shaking the foundation of the assumed reliability of these rules. Lastly, they defined the neurotypical gaze used to represent autism and sexuality as infantilizing both the autistic cast and autistic people as an identity group. The participants argued this was done through giving narrative control to the casts' parents more so than to the cast themselves, by implying autistic people are romantically naive with childlike fantasies, and asexualizing the cast and the larger autistic population. These maneuvers by the producers of *LOTS* construct autistic people as unworthy of sexual subjectivity because they are unable to measure up to established standards of conduct.

More research that demonstrates how autistic people actualize their sexual subjectivity in opposition to cultural influences is necessary to provide autistic people with alternative tools for developing their subjectivity. However, I offer the category of *recommended media* because every participant in this study heavily critiqued *Love on the Spectrum*. Despite some of them maintaining hope that a show as successful and with as large a global reach as this would listen to autistic people's critiques, many of them offered alternative film, television, and literary texts that represent autism, and sometimes non-normative genders and sexualities, in better ways.

CHAPTER V

SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS – NEUROTYPICAL TWITTER USERS REITERATE

LOVE ON THE SPECTRUM'S (2021) CONSTRUCTIONS OF AUTISM

Social media platforms such as Twitter are designed for self-advocacy, opinion

sharing, and the co-production of knowledge (Danley, 2021; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020),

and these platforms have already been found to be sites of reaction to nonfictional

television media about autism and dating (Biressi, 2017; Vertoont, 2018). The use of

social media platforms as sites of reaction by viewers of reality television is due to the

genre's emphasis on fostering audience participation through social media (Biressi,

2017; Deery, 2004; Ouellette, 2014). In the textual analysis chapter, I revealed how

LOTS represented autism and sexuality. I argued *LOTS* set standards of sexual

subjectivity that included idealized norms of romantic sociality including true love

quests, hypersynchronous romantic achievements, heteronormativity, and

neuroconventionality. I also argued *LOTS* constructed autistic people ultimately as

unworthy of belonging in sexual subjectivity despite their ostensibly inclusive motives.

In the previous chapter, I revealed how autistic participants used *LOTS* as a technology

of the autistic self, in addition to other technologies, to construct autistic sexual

subjectivity often in opposition to standards, expectations, etc. for romantic sociality

established in *LOTS* and other sources of cultural influence.

The aim of this chapter is to interpret how the standards, expectations, etc. for

romantic sociality that are established in *LOTS* are received by viewers. This chapter

presents a thematic analysis of a data set collected from Twitter. The purpose of this chapter is to better understand audience reception of the second season of *LOTS*. This chapter answers the third research question: "On Twitter, what does public perception in response to these representations look like?" and the following sub-question: "On Twitter, what does input from autistic communities in response to these representations look like?"

I originally intended to exclusively analyze data from autistic Twitter users to better understand how they received this season of LOTS; however, after analyzing the data, it became clear that people explicitly identifying as autistic in their Tweets, bios, handles, etc. did not significantly participate in discussions of the second season on Twitter during the first two weeks of its airing (May 18, 2021 to June 1, 2021). This data collection resulted in 380 Tweets total with only four Tweets made by users explicitly identifying as autistic. In a previous, unpublished study, I collected Tweets from the first week of the first season airing (July 22, 2020 to July 29, 2020), resulting in 850 Tweets and found significantly more Tweets (110) from people identifying themselves as autistic (Landmark & Black, 2022). Based on a) the critiques constituting the majority of these Tweets by autistic people responding to the first season's representations, b) the four Tweets from autistic people in this data set about the second season, and c) based on the interviews I conducted with autistic viewers of the show, I believe this discrepancy is because autistic people mostly stopped viewing Love on the Spectrum after their disappointments with the first season.

To analyze this data set, I conducted a theoretically-driven thematic analysis with a latent approach to interpreting themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, rather than simply relay the semantic content found in the data, I constructed themes based on my interpretation of the "underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations…and ideologies" that shaped or informed the explicit content in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). Corresponding to the overarching research question, "On Twitter, what does public perception in response to these representations look like?" I present the following themes: a) *Tweets from autistic users*, b) *praise*, c) *romantic idealization*, d) *infantilization*, and e) *"#TrueRealityTV."* These themes substantiate that *LOTS* constructs autistic people as incapable of fully belonging in sexual subjectivity, and this construction is supported by its neurotypical viewers. These findings confirm that there are pervasive discourses, rationales, etc., upheld by neurotypical people, that autistic people are dealing with as they attempt to shape and transform themselves through/with technologies of the autistic sexual self.

Tweets from Autistic Users

Corresponding with the sub-research question: "On Twitter, what does input from autistic communities in response to these representations look like?" from this albeit limited data set I interpreted this input to consist of the expression of misgivings about *Love on the Spectrum*'s representations of autism and sexuality as well as inquiries for autistic community input as to the representations found in the second season.

While there were only four Tweets from users who explicitly identified themselves as autistic, I believe it is important to start this project with their voices, not

only because I want to center the voices of autistic people in these studies, but also because most of these Tweets were attempts to seek community input on how *Love on the Spectrum* represents autistic people. Unfortunately, the concerns expressed in these Tweets were confirmed in the themes discussed below. The Tweets in this theme used community-specific hashtags such as #ActuallyAutistic, #DisabilityTwitter, and #neurotwitter. Interestingly, none of the Tweets included explicit critique of *Love on the Spectrum*'s second season. Rather, the users described their apprehensions developed after viewing the first season and inquired if other members of the community could confirm these to be true for the second season. For example, one user stated, "I've never seen a full episode of #LoveOnTheSpectrum is it worth a watch or over sensational inspiration? The few clips I've seen have lent towards the latter in my opinion but also heard some good things? #DisabilityTwitter." Another user Tweeted:

> I've been in #LoveOnTheSpectrum with my Mister for 2yrs so have
>
> avoided watching this show cos I assumed it'd be a steaming pile of
>
> schmalzy inspo porn. I'd be keen to hear what Australian #neurotwitter
>
> thinks of it. Should I watch or will it just piss me off?

This Tweet is interesting because this user has obviously been made aware of feedback from other autistic people critiquing *Love on the Spectrum*'s representations of autism, specifically those referring to it as "inspo porn;" that is, inspiration porn. Inspiration porn is a concept first coined by Australian comedian Stella Young and defined further by Jan Grue (2016) as media representing disabled people participating in ordinary, quotidian actions or behaviors in ways that construct these actions or behaviors as

extraordinary simply because they are being performed by a disabled person. The audience for this kind of representation is always non-disabled people who are expected to be inspired by seeing the disabled, i.e., burdened, incompetent, depressed, etc., person doing something successfully *despite* their disability. Aligned with McDermott's (2021) theorization of the neurotypical gaze, these kinds of representations "actively construct [the disabled subject] as a figure outside the bounds of normative social engagement" (p. 4). This user further critiques *Love on the Spectrum* by assuming these inspiration porn representations are "schmalzy," i.e., sickeningly sentimental, overly emotional, self-pitying, etc. Based on the textual analysis conducted previously in this project and the unpublished analysis I conducted of autistic Twitter users' reception of the first season of *Love on the Spectrum*, this user is correct in their interpretation of the representations in the second season.

Contrastingly, one user speculated that the second season might "have actually taken on feedback from the community & is doing better so far." Therefore, they stated they are "still mildly sceptical (sic) but I may have to eat my words!" While the second season appears to have improved its representations of autistic sexuality, discussed below, the "schmalzy inspo porn" factor seems to have been amplified. As discussed above, I believe the lack of autistic users in the Tweets reviewing the second season is due to the abundant critiques leveled for these reasons, and therefore autistic people largely chose not to view the second season. However, it is significant here that the users that are present in this data set are seeking feedback from other, trusted community members.

Praise

Overwhelmingly, the content of the data set most frequently consisted of praise for the second season of *Love on the Spectrum*, yet none of the users posting this content explicitly identified themselves as autistic in the Tweet content, their bios, handles, etc. Tweets praising the show were most often very brief, for example, most exclusively consisted of short declarations such as "Loved it!" or "GREAT!!" The Tweets that were slightly longer included approval for the show itself, approval for the producers' work, and requests for more seasons. For example, many Tweets simply stated how much they loved the show, such as "We need more shows like this," "the best tv show bar none," "love on the spectrum is a television masterpiece," and "This show is the best I don't want it to end."

Tweets that expounded on these favorable reviews often included justifications that the show is "feel good," "uplifting," "heartwarming," etc., and represents autistic people favorably. For example, one user stated *Love on the Spectrum* is "Absolute feel-good tv with positive messages about neurodiversity." The fact that many users interpreted the show as representing autistic people unproblematically is striking in comparison to critiques of the first season leveled by explicitly-identified autistic users (Landmark & Black, 2022). Therefore, it is unfortunate yet unsurprising that autistic users disengaged with the subsequent season of Love *on the Spectrum* and its efforts to foster audience feedback on social media platforms.

The textual analysis in the previous chapter illuminates why neurotypical viewers were so enthusiastic about this season of *LOTS*. As discussed, McDermott's (2021)

conceptualization of the use of the neurotypical gaze throughout the season argues that it facilitates pleasure from neurotypical viewers. For example, I argued *LOTS* invites "the (neurotypical) spectator to enjoy the comedic pleasure of watching [an autistic subject] transgress social etiquette" (McDermott, 2021, p. 3) by emphasizing the autistic cast members' social transgressions and failed attempts to succeed at romance. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of Tweets in this data set, albeit mostly brief in content, were expressions of praise for the show.

Romantic Idealization

Romantic ideals have been defined as the conceptualization of the perfect partner or relationship (Markey & Markey, 2007), a set of unrealistic expectations about the operation of a relationship (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982), and a set of ideals that define a perfect love such as that love overlooks flaws, love is between two soul mates, love overcomes obstacles, and love at first sight is possible (Bell, 1975; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Specher & Metts, 1989). In the textual analysis chapter, a theme also labeled "Romantic Idealization" demonstrated how *LOTS* established expectations for ideal sexual subjectivity including portraying the pursuit of romance as a magical quest and achieving heteronormative timelines in order to feel fulfillment. From the social media data, this theme of romantic idealization consisted of the following four sub-themes: a) simplified love, b) entitled to love, c) concretizing neuroconventional dating norms, and d) heteronormativity. Each of these sub-themes demonstrate a norm or standard of romantic sociality that is affirmed by the neurotypical viewers of *LOTS*.

Simplified Love

Romantic idealization occurs in the sub-theme of simplified love in that users praise the daters on *Love on the Spectrum* for their uncomplicated portrayals of romantic relationships and love. Users used adjectives such as "simple" and "pure" to describe this love, thereby implying it is straightforward, sincere, easy to understand and achieve. In other words, the "love" portrayed in this season has been distilled from the complicated, disingenuous love that has been popularized in mainstream media and portrayed as reflective of the "decline" of society away from traditional "family values" centered around a heteronormative, monogamous, nuclear family with a couple in "true love."[9] For example, users stated some of the couples on the show depicted "Love in its purest form," and another stated, "I wish my dating life was this rich and pure." In a more in-depth representational example, one user said, "Sharnae and Jimmy [the couple whose wedding was the season finale] are the real deal - such a brilliant couple who love each other for who they are, that's it. Simple really."

These statements also serve to reify cultural norms that this "perfect" type of love should be the most important achievement in a person's life. These Tweets imply that even the most disabled among us can achieve love and should therefore strive for it. This makes romantic relationships, within the confines of how *Love on the Spectrum* constructs a relationship, as essential to "normal" functioning within society. Combined with other prevalent stigmas about autistic people such as that they are abnormal, "not

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[9] In season one of *Love on the Spectrum*, dater Michael famously derided "modern" relationships by saying "A lot of people our age are not interested in commitment — they are only interested in intercourse."

like us," etc., as discussed below, this simplification and idealization of love implies autistic people may not be capable of "fitting in" to other aspects of normal society, but at least they can still achieve love/manage a relationship.

The other implication in this sub-theme of *simplified love* is that autistic people are simple themselves, that is, they are less complex than neurotypical people so their love and relationships are less complex. This lack of complexity here is constructed as the ideal. This was reified when users compared *Love on the Spectrum* and its daters to other popular reality shows about dating that feature neurotypical couples. Users derided both the classical representation of the genre that is *The Bachelor* franchise as well as the *Married at First Sight* series that documents couples finding "true love" in a scientific experiment. For example, "#mafs [*Married at First Sight*] needs to hire Jody from #LoveOnTheSpectrum as a relationship expert" and "Ronin and Katie mate. Better than that batchelor (sic) crap." These two shows, of which *LOTS* was juxtaposed, each fulfill more of the expected tropes of reality shows about dating, including the presence of elimination ceremonies, jealousy-based conflict, surprise twists, and the framing of dating as a competition, etc. The absence of these usual elements could indicate the producers of *LOTS* believed autistic people would need simpler dynamics, and viewers seemed to interpret that simplicity as well. This affirmation that autistic people are not able to handle the expected fantasy elements of the genre is supported by Cleary's (2016) argument that disabled people are extraordinary, i.e., abnormal, enough for reality television without the inclusion of these tropes.

Entitled to Love

In the theme of romantic idealization, the second sub-theme entitled to love consisted of Tweets implying everyone is entitled to love (an idealized notion), men are especially entitled to love (especially when they complete the correct steps of romance), autistic people are especially deserving of love because they are pitiable, and, paradoxically, neurotypical people are especially entitled to love when compared to autistic people finding love. First, statements that everyone is entitled to love looked like the following, "May everyone find the love of their life ♡ Everyone deserves acceptance and unconditional love." These Tweets substantiate cultural norms that indicate romantic, idealized love is an achievement of utmost importance, and in this case, a tenacious necessity in a person's life.

Second, users in this data set emphasized that men in particular are entitled to love especially when they successfully abide by normative expectations of romantic sociality. For example, dater Michael is frequently referred to as a "perfect gentleman" whose successful romantic behaviors include formal attire, polite conversation, and the presentation of gifts to the women he dates such as flowers, a corsage, etc. When Michael is not successful at achieving the consent of dating partners to further their relationships, despite his romantic efforts, users expressed anger and dismay towards those women. For example, one user stated, "Heather [one of Michael's dates] is freezing Michael out. She's an ice queen. Brutal." In another example, a user said they felt "a little sad that one of the best people to grace this earth, Michael has yet to find his

soul mate. He deserves the best!" These types of Tweets are striking when one considers

Michael's tendency to make misogynistic comments that are "reminiscent of incel

forums" (Birch, 2022, par. 16); the prevalence of these types of comments has been

frequently pointed out by autistic women in popular press, blogs, and other social media

platforms (ibid., 2022).[10]

In the last facet of this sub-theme of entitled to love, users implied: a) autistic

people are especially entitled to love because they are pitiable, and b) neurotypical

people are especially entitled to love when compared to autistic people because

neurotypical people are more worthy of love. In other words, pitiable autistic people

deserve to find love, and if they (the abject other) find love, then neurotypical people

should have no problems finding love. Examples of this first belief, that autistic people

are entitled to or deserving of love because they are pitiable are as follows: "If anyone's

(sic) deserves to find love, it is these gorgeous souls," "I cannot handle the cuteness of

all the couples on #LoveOnTheSpectrum I haven't smiled this much in a long time! I

want them all to find love!" and "Ronan & Katie [a "successful" couple]. Good. Well

done guys! (Phew... couldn't deal if that went sideways)." This last Tweet substantiates

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[10] In the first season of *Love on the Spectrum*, Michael stated he wanted to date a
woman who was not too "gothic," "tomboyish," too pretty, or too ugly. These
comments were met with laughter and without challenge from the producers. In a similar
example from season one, dater Maddi described her ideal partner as "rich, tall, and
muscular," and this comment was met with vehement judgment and recommendations
that she lower her standards. These two examples with starkly contrasted responses not
only highlight the acceptability of the objectification of women, but also imply autistic
women should settle for romantic partners even if they do not match the women's
fantasies (Birch, 2022). In other words, autistic men may be allowed to idealize or
fantasize about their future partners, but autistic women should be grateful to "get"
what/who they can.

this entitlement by emphasizing the intense feelings of expectation that the autistic

people are successful on their dates, when in reality, most first dates are unsuccessful.

The second assumption of this last facet of the sub-theme *entitled to love*, that

neurotypical people are especially entitled to love when compared to autistic people

finding love, can be demonstrated in the following examples: "Maybe I'd get more dates

if I referred to myself as a contrarian. Hah, as if" and "Mark, I'm older than 30 and still

searching. You're doing great and have the biggest heart. Things will turn out OK ❤"

This first example is at once mocking the way one dater describes himself (as a

contrarian) and simultaneously (and mockingly) implying if they, a neurotypical person,

were to describe themselves similarly, they would not find success. This affirms the

entitlement-to-love belief by expressing shock that someone could be successful in

romantic pursuits while describing themselves in an unconventional way. In other words,

if that contrarian person could achieve a romantic relationship, then why does the

conventional neurotypical Twitter user have difficulty with the same pursuits?

The second example–" Mark, I'm older than 30 and still searching. You're doing

great and have the biggest heart. Things will turn out OK ❤"–implies dater Mark is

entitled to love because he has a "big heart" and is correctly pursuing romance while

simultaneously implying they (the Twitter user) themselves are automatically entitled

even though they are over 30 years old. This neurotypical entitlement is further

emphasized in the following: "These dates are all so delightful…Real thought has gone

into each setting and activity. I now feel ripped off about all the trash dates I've been

subjected to." This user feels so entitled to romantic and successful dates that they feel "ripped off" when viewing the autistic people having their desired experience.

Concretizing Neuroconventional Dating Norms

In the theme of romantic idealization, the third sub-theme of concretizing neuroconventional dating norms consisted of Tweets giving form to idealized norms of romantic sociality. These Tweets described generalized and specific "lessons" to be learned by neurotypical people in particular that reify how one is expected to date. For example, vague idealized norms were expressed in the following, **"So many lessons in respectful relationships and love"** and "We can learn a lot about respect, love, compassion, tolerance and acceptance from #LoveOnTheSpectrum." Specifically, norms such as presenting flowers as gifts, looking at each other romantically/making eye contact, and wearing appropriate attire were emphasized. The norm of presenting gifts, most often flowers, to one's date was addressed in the following Tweets: "Michael is more interesting than most dates I went on. I love him. Plus a corsage as a romantic gesture. Brilliant! Pay attention boys," and "I love how the people on #LOTSAU bring a little gift to their dates. This has never happened on a date that I've been on! We neurotypicals could learn a thing or two 💐." These users not only praised the gift-giving, but they also directly addressed other neurotypical viewers by instructing them to "pay attention" and learn something by also conforming to this norm. Norms of looking at one's date romantically by making eye contact were addressed in the following Tweets: "Can my husband please look at me like that ffs?!!," and "Katie is SO into Ronan! SO much eye contact!" Again, these norms of romantic sociality were not only

praised, but neurotypical people were explicitly "called out" for needing to learn from the autistic daters. Through users' admonishments such as "Pay attention boys" after describing uninteresting neurotypical dates and "We neurotypicals could learn a thing or two," it is clear the audience for these Tweets emphasizing traditionally neuroconventional dating norms is not autistic people.

Despite the majority of the Tweets in this theme consisting of the concretization of arbitrary, neuroconventional, and subsequently exclusionary dating norms (norms that will be difficult if not impossible for many autistic people to abide by, e.g., making eye contact), there were behaviors pointed out and praised that are not harmful. For example, users praised daters for incorporating respect and consent in the following representational examples, "Michael…'do I have your permission to hug you?' That's respect and consent right there!" and "Michael politely and respectfully checking in for Heather's consent at regular intervals is better than any milkshake ad." This reference to a "milkshake ad" could refer to idealized notions of the perfect date in popular culture representations of a couple sharing a milkshake with two straws. In other words, Michael's repeated confirmation of consent exemplified ideal romance better than other popular representations. Normalizing and idealizing frequent and enthusiastic consent as an expectation for romantic sociality is not exclusionary to any group of people. Normalizing consent, and incorporating it as an individual practice for shaping one's sexuality, is especially important for autistic people considering the entitlement to romance/relationships discussed above. I argued in the previous chapter that *LOTS* is operating as a cultural technology that establishes standards of conduct for romantic

sociality. Idealizing a standard of consent is more useful to constructing autistic sexual subjectivity than the other standards and norms that are upheld in *LOTS* and by its neurotypical viewers.

<div align="center">*Heteronormativity*</div>

The last sub-theme of romantic idealization is heteronormativity, and this sub-theme consisted of idealization of romantic, heteronormative "milestones" such as weddings (e.g., after a *first* date a user Tweeted "Cassandra and that guy is a happily ever after just waiting to happen"), especially frequent praise for the season finale wedding, and sexist gender role expectations. For example, the daters who identified as men, particularly Michael, were frequently praised for their "chivalrous" behaviors and beliefs ("Michael's the gentleman so many should aspire to be!" and "Chivalry is not frequently seen in such large supply on a racing simulator").

Twitter users also praised comments, again particularly coming from Michael, in which women were essentialized (e.g., "'Women don't like to be married to men who still live with their parents.' WORD, Michael. WORD"). There were many Tweets sharing press content from interviews with male-identifying daters such as Michael and Mark in which they offered "dating advice" including sexist advice that men should protect women, romantic men are "traditional and old-fashioned," men should act aloof and not too "keen" to portray their interests in women, and men should find something about a woman's physical appearance on which to compliment. In one of the interviews that was frequently shared on Twitter, after advising others to do this latter piece of advice, Michael paradoxically says the most attractive part of a woman is what is inside

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rather than her appearance. This comment causes the male-identifying interviewer to refer to Michael as a "stud" who is "dominating" dates because the interviewers were praising Michael's conformity to romantic expectations. Although Michael expressed the "proper" way to be successful on dates is not to objectify women, the majority of his comments as well as the Tweets sharing these comments illustrate the prevalence of heteronormative expectations for gendered behaviors in dating.

Infantilization

The fourth theme, infantilization, consisted of the following sub-themes: a) associations with children/innocence/purity, b) paternalism, and c) limited discussion of sexuality. Infantilization is a concept described as narrative, visual, and discursive mechanisms that include/portray condescension and perceptions of superiority (Balter, 1999; Michaels & McTiernan, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2014). Infantilizing narratives can be identified by the representation of certain groups as the following: incompetent, inferior, victims, in need of help or rescue by non-disabled characters/people, dependent on non-disabled characters/people, objects of sympathy/pity, submissive, unintelligent, and/or as not instrumental in decision-making (Stevenson et al., 2014; Tuchman, 1978). Infantilizing narratives are often found in mediated depictions of disabled people in general and autistic people specifically. Th frequent use of these narratives has been attributed to the cultural construction of autistic people as "eternal children," so much so that people claiming to be advocates for autistic people have argued previously that autistic adults do not even exist because they must grow out of it (Kirby, 2005; Riley, 2005; Shakespeare, 1994; Stevenson et al., 2014; Wright, 2008). Despite receiving

praise for representing a marginalized group such as disabled people, and rather than challenging stigmatizing and ableist beliefs, infantilizing narratives sooth non-disabled audiences into complacency because these narratives enable them to feel superior and provide them with emotional pleasure (Shakespeare, 1994).

<p align="center">*Associations with Children/Innocence/Purity*</p>

In the theme of infantilization, the first sub-theme of associations with children/innocence/purity consisted of descriptions of the autistic *adult* daters as "young adults," "wholesome," "adorable," "beautiful," "sweet," "cute," "heartwarming," "pure," "darling," etc. Individuals, couples, and the show itself were described with these adjectives that are associated with children and innocence. The innocence and purity of children was emphasized in statements like "I just love these adorable people the goodness in them is uplifting." While these adjectives have occasionally, though more rarely, been used to describe neurotypical couples, the historical context of associating autistic people with children contributes to their infantilization.

Besides obviously using adjectives associated with children, Twitter users also implicitly associated the daters with innocence. For example, one user simply stated, "Mark is just filling my heart. #neverbeenkissed." By "filling my heart" in reference to Mark's lack of kissing experience, this user is condescendingly implying they feel sympathy or pity for him. If Mark did not have autism, and was a neurotypical man who was almost 30 years old, it is unlikely a neurotypical audience would describe (even implicitly) his lack of dating and sexual experience as precious or cute. For example, the experience of a sexually inexperienced neurotypical man over the age of thirty might be

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similar to that which is dramatized in a film like *40-Year-Old Virgin* in which the main character is ridiculed for his lack of experience and is constructed as socially awkward and unattractive.

There were also many Tweets praising the daters' parents (e.g., "if I was ronan's mum I would be bursting with pride, what a stunning beautiful young man he is. And Katie, my gosh, a sweetheart"). Of all the Tweets including discussion of the parents, only one Tweet was a critique of their involvement. Unsurprisingly, this critique was from a user who explicitly identified as autistic: "Hate micheals (sic) mother. Feel sorry for micheal still." This autistic user seemed to empathize with how Michael is infantilized by his family.

The daters' innocence was not only emphasized by associating them with children but also with other reality shows that do not feature autistic cast members. In one Tweet, a user compared *Love on the Spectrum* to another Australian reality series called *Old People's Home*. This series has been described as "A unique social experiment that brings together elderly people in a retirement community with a group of 4-year-olds" (ABC, 2023). This user compared the two by saying "#OldPeoplesHomeAU and #LoveOnTheSpectrum are the very best of us. :)." Further, many users contrasted *Love on the Spectrum* with multiple neurotypical reality series as well as governmental parties/political decision-makers to emphasize the "goodness," i.e., innocence/purity, of autistic people. For example: "Can we have more love on the spectrum than MAFS [*Married at First Sight*]? God this show is so cute & sweet" juxtaposes *LOTS* with the American series *Married at First Sight* of which the premise

involves orchestrating marriages between two people who meet for the first time at their wedding. In another reference to *MAFS*, one user Tweeted "#LoveOnTheSpectrum vs #MAFSAustralia. Compare the pair. Watch one to see some of the best aspects of humans (sic) nature on display. Watch the other for some of our worst." The first of these Tweets infantilizes the cast on *LOTS* by describing the show as "cute & sweet," and the second juxtaposes this innocence with a show that, in their implication, represents the worst aspects of humanity.

The inherent "goodness" in autistic people is further affirmed when users imply society would be improved if more people watched *LOTS* or behaved like the cast of *LOTS*. For example, "If all world leaders could watch live (sic) on the spectrum the world would change," "The world needs more people this honest and forthcoming!" and "If only the world could be as kind as the participants of #LoveOnTheSpectrum." There were also several Tweets that claimed *LOTS* renewed those users' "faith in humanity." These statements reflect the many found in popular press articles recommending *LOTS* for "renewing faith in humanity" because the show focuses on "love" instead of on negative elements such as physical appearance, jealousy, etc. (Ramos, 2022). This goodness or purity is further clarified in the following Tweet: "Does anyone else think the young people on #LoveOnTheSpectrum speak with more intelligence than the #LNP government?" The juxtaposition of the autistic people featured on *LOTS* with dramatized, highly-criticized reality series and a government party, i.e., a group of people charged with making difficult decisions for entire countries, further emphasizes their innocence–this last Tweet even explicitly refers to the cast as "young people"–and

incapability to be responsible for complex decision making or complex romantic feelings/behaviors.

Lastly in this sub-theme of *associations with children/innocence/purity*, the autistic daters were further infantilized by juxtaposing their idealized purity and simplicity with the tarnished complexity of humanity and modern society. For example, "PSA: if you seek temporary relief from the existential dread that is defining our current era, watch the first episode of #LoveOnTheSpectrum Season 2…for an immediate boost of joy" and "#LoveOnTheSpectrum is the tonic we need right now. Pure truth and love." These examples emphasize that there is a pure, distilled humanity found in autistic people that is a "tonic" for the "dread" felt by neurotypical people when they reflect on humanity. While ostensibly a compliment, these statements are still ableist because they imply autistic people are not intelligent or socially aware enough to adopt the existential dread felt by neurotypical people.

Paternalism

In the theme of infantilization, the second sub-theme of *paternalism* further emphasized autistic people's inability to be responsible for or capable of their own autonomy. Paternalism is defined as the limitation of a person's liberty or autonomy with the justification that it is for their own best interest. This sub-theme consisted of encroachment on the dating experiences of the daters in order to protect them as well as further demonstrations that autistic people are incompetent at dating. In two representative examples, users said, "I love Michael so much, he's an angel and must be protected at all costs" and "If anyone comes between Rowan [Ronan] and Katie on

#LoveOnTheSpectrum I will GUT THEM." Again, the purity of autistic people is expressed here by referring to Michael as an angel, but paternalism is also operating when users argue that an adult man "must be protected at all costs." The implication here is that despite Michael's age, he is incapable of autonomy. The user who posted the second Tweet also expressed this paternalism by claiming they would physically do violence on anyone who tried to negatively influence Ronan and Katie's relationship. In a less explicit example of paternalism, one user said, "Katie and Ronan both concentrating - it's adorable?!" The description of daters Ronan and Katie as adorable for concentrating on doing well on their date implies their efforts are because they are incompetent at or naive of dating. If autistic people are constructed as incompetent at dating, it could be easy for some to believe in the importance of parents or other guardians chaperoning their dates, a situation not often found in neurotypical dating yet frequently found in *Love on the Spectrum*.

As Ouellette and Hay (2008) argued, the "worthiness" of subjects is demonstrated in reality television when individuals learn, master, and perform citizenship freely and responsibly. In the previous chapter I argued *LOTS* represents autistic people as incapable or unworthy of belonging in sexual subjectivity by predominantly portraying their romantic failures. These Tweets exemplify that neurotypical viewers accept these portrayals and reiterate that autistic people are incapable of freely and responsibly conducting themselves in accordance with cultural norms.

Limited Discussion of Sexuality

Lastly in the theme of *infantilization*, the third sub-theme of *limited discussion of sexuality* further emphasized the autistic daters' association with innocence and lack of sexual awareness. In the entire data set, there were only three other Tweets referencing sexuality. First, "Seeing these 2 beautiful Men on a date and so open about themselves will change lives." This Tweet refers to the daters as "beautiful," an adjective correlated with purity, innocence, etc. Second, "I think old mate wanted more than a hug then, Jayden 😅." This second Tweet implies that dater Jayden is incompetent at dating because he is not aware of his date's sexuality-related social cues. In a final example, one user said, "Everyone is calling #loveonthespectrum inspiring, moving, etc but why is noone (sic) calling out all the hot autistic people? I mean come on people, are you made of stone?" This third Tweet implies the daters *are* sexually attractive (the only Tweet in the data set to do so) while still implying viewers must be sentimental to be attracted to them. The autistic dater's infantilization not only operated through the limited frequency of Tweets referencing sexuality (which mirrors the lack of sexuality referenced in the season itself), but also implicitly in these highlighted Tweets.

While discussions of sexuality were more prevalent on Twitter after this season's airing than in Tweets reviewing the first season of *Love on the Spectrum* (Landmark & Black, 2022), only one Tweet discussing sexuality did not infantilize the daters: "Seriously love that #LoveOnTheSpectrum also explores their sexuality openly and with a matter of fact ease that we don't typically see. More of it and some ethnic diversity, I say. 🫂🙏🤚."

This user echoes critiques of *LOTS* leveled by autistic users in popular press that argued *LOTS* is unrepresentative because of its infantilizing constructions of autistic people and its use of a predominantly white cast (Luterman, 2020).

<p align="center">**"#TrueRealityTV"**</p>

In the final theme interpreted as present in the data set analyzing #LoveOnTheSpectrum, the Tweets supported Cleary's (2016) argument that nondisabled viewers perceive disabled performances in reality television to be authentic. Despite a long-held acknowledgment that viewers are suspicious of reality television's "inauthenticity" (Hill, 2005), Cleary (2016) argued nondisabled viewers perceive portrayals of disabled people in reality television to be authentic because the spectacle of seeing disability, in a society that has often taken great lengths to hide disabled people, hinges upon their being extraordinary *because* they are unexpectedly performing "ordinary" behaviors. When the cast members on *LOTS* inevitably "fail" at performing the cultural standards for romantic sociality that are upheld on the show, neurotypical users interpreted these failures to be authentic because they likely already believed autistic people to be incapable. This theme consisted of the following sub-themes: a) "authentic" autism and b) emphasizing otherness.

"Authentic" Autism

Reality television, as a genre, is understood to be a hybrid of representational practices and embodied materiality–that is, a hybrid of entertainment elements and authentic or "true" information–and most viewers are skeptical of the authenticity of "ordinary" people doing extraordinary things in these types of shows (Hill, 2005). This

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skepticism has been attributed to the widespread understanding that "producers control the situation, the environment, and the ground rules" (Godlewski & Perse, 2010, p. 166). However, because disabled bodies are constructed as extraordinary, in and outside of the genre (Cleary, 2016), nondisabled viewers perceive their performances to be authentic. Rather than the exigent "spectacle" found in the genre through the introduction of fantastical elements combined with "ordinary" cast members, the spectacle of disability in these programs hinges upon their being extraordinary because they are ordinary, to the surprise of many a nondisabled viewer. In other words, *Love on the Spectrum* does not need to introduce elements to induce fantasy such as tropical locations, marriage social experiments, etc. because disabled people participating in the "ordinary" experiences of romantic sociality is a sufficiently unexpected spectacle for a neurotypical audience.

This theme can be exemplified when users referred to *LOTS* as "#Truerealitytv, "a "documentary, "a true and decent show," that is a "hands-off, understated production." Further, users also praised the show for its portrayal of "authentic" autistic people. It is clear the users creating these Tweets believe *Love on the Spectrum* to be "reality" by referring to it as a "true," "authentic," "genuine," "informative," "hands-off" "documentary." This belief is a problem because *LOTS* is just like any other reality series in which the producers manipulate the situations, environment, rules, outcomes, etc. As Cleary (2016) problematized, this type of reality television that displays extraordinary (i.e., disabled) bodies frames their attempts of normalcy (in this case, romantic sociality) as a positive thing rather than as something to be ridiculed (and this reaffirms how non-normal disabled people are).

This construction and perception of authenticity contributes to stigmatizing

beliefs that autistic people are abnormal, and the producers are praised for their altruistic

representation of "authentic" autistic experiences. Users thanked the producers for this in

the following examples, "I repeatedly said 'stop making me cry stupid documentary!'

Utmost respect and real affection for participants by filmmakers," "I literally LOVE

#LoveontheSpectrum. It is uplifting, interesting, informative… Thank you to these

brilliant #Youngpeople for sharing your lives with us and @ABCTV for enhancing all

our understanding of #neurodiversity 🙏," "Dear @ABCTV, thank you so much for

#LoveOnTheSpectrum. I laughed, I cried, I learnt and it warmed my heart. More

please," and "Bravo to @cianoclery for an absolute masterpiece and well done ABC and

Netflix for helping to bring autism into the mainstream." Rather than recognizing and

valuing autistic people's contributions to and presence in "mainstream" society, these

users believe the neurotypical producers of *LOTS* are altruistically representing the

reality of autistic experiences. Based on the textual analysis in the previous chapter, this

"reality" is that autistic people do not fully belong in romantic sociality.

Emphasizing Otherness

The examples above not only highlight the lack of critical assessment of the

authenticity of *Love on the Spectrum* by neurotypical audiences, but they also emphasize

the marginalized status of autistic people left out of the "mainstream." In the following

examples, even though the autistic daters are explicitly complimented, their otherness is

emphasized and deemed to be authentic. These Tweets referred to the autistic cast as

"refreshingly unique" and "brave" for attempting to perform behaviors from which they

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have historically been excluded. For example, "it's hard enough for those of us without autism to conquer #love #kudos to those on this show, such bravery and bravery of @ABCaustralia to show this." Not only is engaging in romantic sociality framed here as an achievement that one should try to "conquer," but this user is emphasizing the otherness of autistic people by framing their attempts to do so as extraordinary. In another construction of autistic people's abject otherness, a user Tweeted *LOTS* was, "proof definitively that we can love and want love in all its forms." This statement implies that even the most abject among us are capable of desiring to conform to cultural standards.

The daters' "otherness" was also emphasized by the interpretation by neurotypical viewers that *Love on the Spectrum* and/or its daters are comedic. For example, "I smile and lol the whole show at the wonderful people, ""My partner laughing out loud to #loveonthespectrum in the next room is the best sound ever," and "Laughing out loud!!! Such gorgeous people." While these users clearly enjoyed these comedic elements, another felt confusion: "My only issue with #LoveOnTheSpectrum is that they use similar music to @ChrisLilley tv shows. Which is only an issue cause I don't know whether to take these things seriously 😂😂😂." This last Tweet in particular is significant in that this user is comparing *Love on the Spectrum*, a show not marketed as a comedy, to television shows created by Chris Lilley, an Australian comedian. Similarly to Lilley's shows, this user noticed *Love on the Spectrum*'s confusing use of music and cinematography to emphasize the daters' quirkiness/abnormality that gives viewers permission to laugh. Finally, the autistic daters

were othered in the following Tweet, "#LoveOnTheSpectrum if people aren't overdiagnosed, as time goes, perhaps, they will become more normal. Their behaviour will. And vice versa. They are overdiagnosed on an awful scale in oz [Australia]." This Tweet deserves special attention as it at once expresses awareness that *Love on the Spectrum* is portraying abnormality while simultaneously eschewing the belief that an autism diagnosis gives people like those represented on this show permission to emphasize their otherness rather than assimilate into "normal," i.e., neuroconventional society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research question three, "On Twitter, what does public perception in response to these representations [from season two of *Love on the Spectrum*] look like?" can be answered with the following: Twitter users used the hashtag #LoveOnTheSpectrum to respond to season two of *LOTS* through a) seeking autistic community input, b) praise for the season, c) romantic idealization, d) infantilization, and e) interpreting the season as "#TrueRealityTV.*"* Although their presence in the data set was infrequent, explicitly-identified autistic Twitter users specifically used the hashtag #LoveOnTheSpectrum to express apprehension at potentially viewing the second season and to seek autistic community input to determine if they should view this season.

Twitter users that I interpreted to be neurotypical used #LoveOnTheSpectrum to respond to the second season of *LOTS* with praise for the show itself, the producers, and to request subsequent seasons. These users requested subsequent seasons based on how

much they enjoyed the second season. These users indicated they believed *Love on the Spectrum* represented autistic people favorably, and these Tweets were striking in comparison to critiques of the first season by autistic Twitter users (Landmark & Black, 2022).

Next, Twitter users responded to the second season of *Love on the Spectrum* with Tweets referencing romantic idealization. This theme consisted of the following sub-themes: a) simplified love, b) entitled to love, c) concretizing neuroconventional dating norms, and d) heteronormativity. First, Twitter users described the autistic daters on the show as exemplifying an idealized, simplified love that implied they are less capable of emotional and relational complexity than neurotypical people. These Tweets argued love and romantic social behaviors should ideally be simple. Besides implying autistic people are incapable of complexity, these Tweets also framed the achievement of romantic relationships as of great importance to a person's life. This framing also implied autistic people may not be capable of other aspects of socially normative expectations, but they at the least can be capable of achieving love.

Next, in the *romantic idealization* sub-theme of *entitled to love*, Twitter users emphasized that everyone is entitled to love, but men, autistic people, and neurotypical people are especially entitled in distinct ways. Aligned with traditional socio-cultural norms of sexism, men were framed as especially entitled to love. Autistic people were framed as entitled to love because they were pitied, and neurotypical people were framed as entitled to love because they are superior to autistic people and therefore are assumed to be able to do everything, including find love, better than autistic people.

Also in the theme of romantic idealization, Twitter users concretized

neuroconventional dating norms. The norms elucidated here included exclusionary and

ableist norms such as the importance of eye contact on a date and the expectation that

the man should present gifts such as flowers to his date. While primarily exclusionary,

e.g., requiring eye contact to constitute a successful date would be difficult or impossible

for many autistic people, some of the norms concretized were universally useful and

possibly transgressive. For example, many users emphasized the importance of obtaining

consent while on a date.

Lastly in the theme of *romantic idealization*, Twitter users emphasized the role of

heteronormativity in idealized romantic pursuits. This included a prioritizing of

heterosynchronous milestones such as weddings and engagements. This sub-theme also

involved the reiteration of sexist gender role expectations such as that men should be

chivalrous and that it is acceptable, and ideal, for men to objectify women. In other

words, Twitter users responded positively to representations of autistic men in particular

performing heteronormativity. This theme of romantic idealization contributes to

understanding reality television as a cultural technology (Ouellette & Hay, 2008)

because it demonstrates th= These Twitter users interpreted that autistic people are

capable of desiring to achieve romantic normality but are only capable of performing a

distilled, simplified version of romantic relationships.

The next theme of *infantilization* illustrated the pervasive stigma that autistic

people are child-like, naive, etc. This theme consisted of the following sub-themes: a)

explicit and implicit associations with children/innocence,/purity, b) paternalism, and

this infantilization was further emphasized through c) limited discussion of sexuality.

First, Twitter users explicitly associated the adult autistic daters with an amalgamation of

verbiage reserved for describing children such as referring to them as "pure," "cute,"

"adorable," etc. The daters were also implicitly associated with children, innocence, and

purity by pitying their lack of dating experiences, praising the involvement of their

parents in their dating pursuits, and juxtaposing the daters with "corrupt" neurotypical

dating shows and government entities. This juxtaposition framed the autistic people on

Love on the Spectrum as representing purity of and "renewed faith" in humanity, thereby

implying they are less complex than neurotypical people. Distinctly, the theme of

infantilization also operated through Tweets of *paternalism*, that is Tweets specifically

infantilizing the autistic daters by arguing for their protection and therefore limiting their

autonomy and liberty in regards to dating. Again, this theme supports theorization of

reality television as a cultural technology in which individuals are determined to be

"worthy" of belonging to sexual subjectivity only if they are freely and responsibly able

to conform to social norms. Reflective of how *LOTS* portrays autistic people as romantic

failures, these Twitter users reiterated the belief that autistic people do not have the

autonomy to be able to perform sexual subjectivity fully.

While interpretive thematic analysis methods must pay attention to what is

present in the data, it is also important to acknowledge what may have been left out. For

example, autistic people on *Love on the Spectrum* were infantilized by the limited

discussion of their sexuality in both the show and the Tweets. Most Twitter users in this

data set did not refer to their sexuality likely because it is not discussed in-depth in the

show itself. Only four Tweets in the entire data set referenced their sexuality, and three of these were still implicitly infantilizing, e.g., implying the daters were not capable of interpreting sexual social cues.

Through the last theme of *"#TrueRealityTV,"* we can interpret that the Twitter users in this data set responded to the second season of *Love on the Spectrum* by praising the show for representing a) *"authentic"* autism and by b) emphasizing the otherness of autistic people in general and the people specifically in the show. First, neurotypical Twitter users believed the representations of autism in the show were authentic. This is significant because most viewers of reality television are aware of its inauthenticity due to the incorporated fantastical or extraordinary elements introduced by the producers. However, as Cleary (2016) argued, viewers of reality television including representations of disability interpret these representations to be authentic because they perceive disability in itself to be a fantastical or extraordinary element. Through their responses, it is clear this is happening in Twitter users' responses to the second season. These Tweets affirm the extraordinary abnormality of autistic people.

This chapter extends Cleary's (2016) findings by also revealing how neurotypical viewers of this type of reality television also praise its producers for their "altruistic" allyship. As one user said, the producers should be praised "for enhancing all our understanding of #neurodiversity" because they believe these representations are authentic. Another user said, "Bravo… for helping to bring autism into the mainstream." Based on these beliefs, one must ask: what kind of autism is *Love on the Spectrum* bringing into the mainstream (assuming autistic people are not *already* part of

mainstream society, which is an ableist belief in itself)? Based on the other studies in this project, they are still promoting a stigmatized perception of autism that constructs autistic people as infantilized, othered, heteronormative, simplified, etc.

This othering and stigmatizing occurs further in these Tweets as illuminated in the final sub-theme of *"#TrueRealityTV."* Twitter users responded to the second season of *Love on the Spectrum* by emphasizing the otherness of autistic people. This analysis revealed how neurotypical Twitter users can explicitly compliment autistic people while still othering them. For example, many users argued that *Love on the Spectrum* proved that even the most abject among "us" can still be a part of "us" because they too can find love and romantic relationships. However, the stigmatizing implication here is that autistic people are *not* inherently "just like us." Lastly, users emphasized the otherness of autistic people by using #LoveOnTheSpectrum to laugh at the autistic daters and emphasize their quirkiness, i.e., otherness, just as the show itself highlights the daters' quirks and differences through the neurotypical gaze.

It is clear from these findings that neurotypical viewers of *LOTS* are reiterating the construction of autistic people on *LOTS* as incapable of fully belonging in sexual subjectivity. Therefore, it was necessary to collect subsequent data, in this case through interviews analyzed in the previous chapter, with autistic viewers of the show to better understand and document their critiques as well as to better understand how autistic people use reality television as a technology of the self. Future research using Twitter data should expand the data corpus through inclusion of more disability community-specific hashtags such as #DisabilityTwitter, #AskingAutistics, and #neurotwitter.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Grounded in a theoretical framework of Foucault's (1988) "technologies of the self," this study has offered a triangulated analysis of the construction(s) of autistic sexual subjectivity through resources, tools, rationalities, discourses, etc. found in reality television, social media engagement fostered by reality television, and myriad sources of autistic community. This project consisted of two types of analyses. The first type of analysis was an interpretive textual analysis. This analysis was used for the second season of the Australian version of *Love on the Spectrum.* The second type of analysis was thematic analysis, and this was used on both the interview data set and this social media data set.

Reality television has been configured as a crucial tool for the development and understanding of sexual belonging for autistic people, most often in opposition to the exclusionary standards found therein. As critical cultural scholars like Wallis (2013) have shown, technologies of the self operate both as liberation found in the autonomous actions taken by subjects as well as constraint found in the various enticements and coercions placed upon subjects to exercise or exemplify the virtues of responsible citizenry. This study revealed how autistic people undertake autonomous actions such as using social media and various sources of autistic community to transform themselves into sexual subjects in opposition to normalizing discourses diffused through the cultural institution of reality television.

Autistic people have not often been considered as a population able to freely and responsible exercise management of themselves in accordance with standards of citizenship, and in fact, this study argued *LOTS* constructs autistic people in this way. The participants in this study experienced the coercion and enticements diffused through reality television because *LOTS* included them as capable of *attempting* to achieve and belong in ideal sexual citizenry, defined as heteronormative, neuroconventional, etc., although they were never portrayed as succeeding in doing so. Rather than challenge this representation of autistic people as failing to "win" at the sexual "citizenship game" portrayed in *LOTS* (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 174), or, in other words, rather than argue for their inclusion as subjects worthy of conforming to "normate sex" (Wilkerson, 2012), the autistic people in this study used the rationalities and discourses found therein to construct their sexual subjectivity in opposition to them. This contributes to the understandings of technologies of the self in that it is an example of how conducting oneself in response to power can also be liberating (Wallis, 2013).

Most research conducted on autism and media thus far has not included autistic participants and their reception of media about them. The only study published so far—to my knowledge—analyzing autistic audiences' perceptions of media about autism found the less-stereotypical films to be potential vehicles for developing self-knowledge about having an autistic identity (Schwarz, 2007). However, most research thus far has not focused on autism and sexuality, likely because autistic people have primarily been represented as non-sexual in media, and has not focused on autism in reality television. This study fills these gaps in the literature by centering autistic perspectives on reality

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television about autism and sexuality. While Schwarz's (2007) study did allude to the use of films as a tool for self-knowledge/self-mastery for autistic people, this study is the first consideration of the constitutive nature of reality television as technology, a tool for the diffusion of power, and a tool for the development of an autistic sexual self. To address these gaps and contribute to a growing body of research on autism and media, this study explored how reality television texts, social media engagement with these texts, and community engagement around these texts assemble together as technologies to be used for developing knowledge about oneself as a sexual subject for a population that has not had their sexual subjectivity explored at length. Through examining how reality television is used to actualize autistic sexual subjectivity, I have assembled a collection of practices, both by and about autistic people, that constitute technologies of the autistic sexual self. Examining the use of reality television as a technology of the sexual self for a particular group of people enables deeply contextualized knowledge that also provides insight into how we understand sexuality, gender, disability, and other social constructs more broadly (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021).

Standards of Autistic Sexual Subjectivity Established in *Love on the Spectrum*

In this study I argued *Love on the Spectrum* sets standards of sexual subjectivity that include idealized norms of romantic sociality including true love quests, heterosynchronous romantic achievements, heteronormativity, and neuroconventionality. I also argued *LOTS* constructed autistic people ultimately as unworthy of belonging in sexual subjectivity despite their ostensibly inclusive motives. *LOTS* suggested/prescribed/established rules and standards of participation in romantic

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sociality and positioned autistic people as worthy of attempting to conform to these standards yet ultimately unworthy of fully belonging in sexual subjectivity. This analysis revealed how *LOTS* transmitted standards of ideal romantic conduct, how it placed autistic people on "trial" to test their worthiness as sexual subjects (Ouellette & Hay, 2008), and constructed autistic people as unworthy of freely and responsibly conducting themselves in accordance with sexual norms. This also contributes to Critical Sexuality Studies (Fahs & McClelland, 2016) literature by explicating how autistic people are made to be sexually abject others. Despite attempting to exclude autistic people as capable of belonging in ideal sexual subjectivity, *LOTS* is exploiting narratives of autism in a way that makes the producers seem "inclusive," and ultimately commodifies autistic people as contributors to the economy of the nation-state (Broderick and Roscigno's, 2022).

The Use of Social Media to Engage with These Standards of Sexual Subjectivity

Autistic people used the official hashtag #LoveOnTheSpectrum to express misgivings about *Love on the Spectrum*'s representations of autism and sexuality as well as seek out autistic community input as to the representations found in the second season. Rather than use this hashtag to outright critique *Love on the Spectrum*'s second season, the users described their apprehensions developed after viewing the first season and inquired if other members of the community could confirm these to be true for the second season. These findings contribute to an understanding of technologies of the autistic sexual self because they reveal that autistic people use social media as a means to transform themselves in opposition to the subjectification found in *LOTS* and in

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neurotypical user's responses to *LOTS* as well as to use the means of others, that is, input

from autistic communities on Twitter, to transform their sexual subjectivity. This use of

community input as a resource for developing or defining knowledge about oneself was

also found in the interview data in which the participants referred to autistic support

groups, both on- and offline, as resources to learn about and construct their subjectivity.

As with the data from the interviews in this study, autistic Twitter users were

hopeful the producers of *LOTS* would have listened to critiques of the first season by

autistic people. While the textual analysis in this study revealed the producers likely did

not incorporate critiques by autistic people into their show, social media platforms like

Twitter could contain wellsprings of feedback from autistic people including feedback

that contributes to a better understanding of how autistic people wish to have their sexual

subjectivity represented in media. Because the data from self-identifying autistic people

were scarce in this data set, future research should focus on other disability community

related hashtags, forums, virtual support groups, etc.

Neurotypical viewers of *LOTS* accepted and reiterated the standards of sexual

subjectivity described in the textual analysis in this study. Neurotypical Twitter users

positively reviewed *LOTS* for using autistic people to support norms that love should

ideally be simple, that everyone deserves love, and that ideal romance involves

heteronormativity and neuroconventionality. These viewers also reiterated *LOTS*'s

infantilization of autistic people and thereby also reiterate that autistic people are not

ideal sexual subjects by associating them with children and innocence, patronizing them,

and asexualizing them. Finally, I argued in the previous chapter that neurotypical

viewers believed *LOTS* to be an authentic portrayal of autism, supporting Cleary's (2016) argument that disabled people are constructed as abnormal in reality television by attempting to "include" them in pursuits of romantic normality in which they inevitably fail, confirming the ableist beliefs neurotypical viewers likely already hold and causing these viewers to believe the representations are true and authentic.

Reality Television as a Technology of the Autistic Sexual Self

This study substantiates that *LOTS* constructs autistic people as incapable of fully belonging in sexual subjectivity, and this construction is supported by its neurotypical viewers. Therefore, it was therefore necessary to conduct interviews with autistic viewers of the show to better understand how autistic people use reality television as a technology of the self when they are clearly not the intended audience and when the "prescriptions" for sexual subjectivity found in *LOTS* do not seem to be for autistic people.

Representations of autism and sexuality in *LOTS* influenced the construction of autistic subjects' self-mastery/self-knowledge regarding their sexuality, i.e., how autistic people are conducting themselves as sexual subjects in response to suggestions/prescriptions found in *LOTS*. Representation of autism and sexuality in *LOTS* operated as a resource of governmentality in which normalizing discourses of hetero- and cisnormativity were diffused to and through autistic viewers. The participants in this study identified several institutions, rationalities, actors, etc. that attempt to compel or entice the participants to convert themselves into normality. Most significantly, the autistic participants in this study added *LOTS* to that list of entities. The

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participants identified various maneuvers by the producers to privilege certain norms of sexuality. These maneuvers included the prioritizing of cis- and heteronormative narratives, neuroconventional dating "advice" that the participants indicated felt as if they were trying to make autistic people date neurotypically, the amplification of the otherness of autistic people, and the use of the neurotypical gaze.

While these maneuvers contributed to the participants' sense that neurotypical people were the intended audience, a sense substantiated in the textual analysis in this study, the participants used the representations found in *LOTS* to construct their sexual subjectivity in opposition to the prescriptions found therein. In other words, the participants in this study did not passively absorb or accept the meanings of autistic sexual subjectivity encoded within *LOTS*. The participants acknowledged that *LOTS* did not portray autistic people as capable of conforming to sexual and romantic standards, but rather than dispute the implications of this portrayal, they used the representations to autonomously construct sexual subjectivity with its own standards. For example, many of the participant's responses included recognition that a "norm" of autism sexual subjectivity is that gender and sexuality can only be understood through their experiences of autism. While the implications for these findings are not necessarily that autistic people should only understand or develop their sexual subjectivity in this way, these participant responses highlight that autistic sexual subjectivity does exist, and there are discourses and rationalities available to enable autistic people to conduct themselves accordingly that are distinct from the heteronormative, neuroconventional, infantilizing narratives available in *LOTS*.

A major part of the responses from the participants in this study consisted of their insistence that reality television *could be* a useful tool for autistic sexual "lifestyle instruction" (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 30). That is, while they recognized *LOTS*'s construction of autistic people as unworthy of belonging in ideal sexual subjectivity, these participants were hopeful that reality television could still be used as a form of sexual education for autistic people in the future if producers offered examples of how to have conversations about consent, how to reflect on the self's desires and behaviors on a date in a productive way, etc. Reality television producers that wish to include narratives of autism and sexuality should incorporate these opportunities for education if they truly wish to be inclusive.

Other Technologies of the Autistic Sexual Self

Reality television itself and the social media engagement fostered through it were not the only technologies of the autistic sexual self identified in this study. The participants in this study, and the Twitter users, identified myriad forms of autistic community as important to the development of their self-knowledge as autistic sexual subjects. The participants in this study indicated seeking trusted "warnings" or reviews prior to viewing *LOTS* and/or as part of a deciding factor of whether or not to view the show as well as seeking validation for their reception and critiques of *LOTS*. Autistic communities via social media groups, in-person support groups, etc. were being used as a "technology" for the autistic people in this study to develop their ideal subjectivities in opposition to the representations found in *LOTS* by challenging the representations together or even refusing to engage with them. These communities also offered

alternative discourses of sexual subjectivity of which these participants were able to use to transform themselves into their ideal sexual selves.

Significance

This study's theoretical significance lies in its illustration of how a certain media text and other resources such as social media, on- and offline supportive communities, etc. can be utilized by autistic people as a technology of the sexual self. This study is methodologically significant in that it provides three examples of how to conduct research using a Critical Disability Studies interpretive methodology. This study is also significant in that while it is specifically looking at the production of an autistic sexual self, how this subjectivity is produced and constrained could potentially be applied to other marginalized groups of people.

This study is not intended to be generalizable as that would imply the existence of a unified, essentialized autistic community. I understand that identity categories and experiences such as autism, gender, and sexuality are unstable categories that involve social practices, relationships to intersecting identities, political affiliations, etc. (Shildrick, 2009). The participants in this study even emphasized there are myriad ways to "be" a sexual autistic subject. For example, this study makes certain assumptions about the participants, such as that autistic people who responded to the recruitment materials and indicated they understood the consent procedures, likely also had a "level" of autism, i.e., level of support needs, similar to that of the cast of Love on the Spectrum and would therefore be able to relate to said cast. However, as noted by several of the participants in this study, autism is indeed a spectrum in which there exist myriad levels of support needs, intellectual and communicative capacity, etc.

While there is not a singular way to "be" an autistic sexual subject, and this study does not intend to define those boundaries, I maintain that the discursive construction of sexual subjectivity is important for autistic people; however, it has been minimally researched. The participants in this study are not representative of every autistic subject, but their insights are valuable to filling a gap in the literature about autism, gender, sexuality, and media.

While the discussions in this study are not findings that can be generalized, they can be extrapolated to other contexts. Constructing autistic people as abject sexual others in a television genre that ostensibly portrays reality on a show that is framed as inclusive gives insight into the nefarious ways marginalized groups can be represented in media. This has implications not just for autistic and disabled people; rather, these methods of representation could affect anyone within a context of cultural citizenship. Anyone who exists within systems of power, which is everyone, could be subjected to trials of sexual citizenship. Awareness of how these trials are conducted is important for everyone, not just autistic people.

Future Research

Future research on this topic should include greater inclusion of autistic people. Following the well-known disability activism slogan, "Nothing about us without us," future research could incorporate participatory methods that include autistic stakeholders in every step of the research process. Other social media platforms such as Reddit could be examined in order to find more online autistic communities and their reception of *LOTS*. Future research using Twitter data should expand the data corpus through

inclusion of more disability community-specific hashtags such as #DisabilityTwitter,

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INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Research Study: The Production of Autistic Sexual Subjectivity in Reality Television

Investigator: Shelby Landmark

Funded/Supported By: This research is funded/supported by <u>Texas A&M University</u>.

Why are you being invited to take part in a research study?

You are being asked to participate in this study because we are trying to learn more about: How autistic people talk about autism and sexuality in relation to the show *Love on the Spectrum* and their own sexuality.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you self-identify as autistic, have seen at least one episode of *Love On The Spectrum*, speak English, have conversational speaking ability (verbally or with AAC), reside in the United States, and are at least the age of 18.

What should you know about a research study?

·   Someone will explain this research study to you.

·   Whether or not you take part is up to you.

·   You can choose not to take part.

·   You can agree to take part and later change your mind.

·   Your decision will not be held against you.

·   You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at shelbylandmark@tamu.edu or 979-587-0901.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Texas A&M Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may talk to them at at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at irb@tamu.edu., if

·   You cannot reach the research team.

·   Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.

·   You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

·   You have questions about your rights as a research participant.

·   You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to learn more about: How autistic people talk about autism and sexuality in relation to the show *Love on the Spectrum* and their own sexuality.

At this time, research involving autistic people about media representations of autism and sexuality in reality television does not exist.

It is the researcher's belief that the opinions of autistic people themselves should be included in media research about representations of autism in order to improve future media production.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for 30-120 minutes.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about __25___ people in this research study.

What happens if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research"?

You will participate in a 30-120 minute virtual interview.

You will interact with Shelby Landmark in the interview.

·   ***The interview will be done at your convenience.***

If you give permission, the interview will be recorded.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

What happens if I say "Yes", but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator (Shelby Landmark) so that the investigator can remove your interview from data analysis. Your data will be destroyed upon withdrawal from the study. You will not be required to explain the extent of your withdrawal.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

There are no risks or discomforts associated with this study.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

You will be provided with a $20 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview.

It is the researcher's belief that data collected from this research could increase understanding of how autistic people engage with media about autism and improve future media production of representations of autism.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and other records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete privacy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the TAMU HRPP/IRB and other representatives of this institution.

Optional Elements:

The following research activities are optional, meaning that you do not have to agree to them in order to participate in the research study. Please indicate your willingness to participate in these optional activities by placing your initials next to each activity.

Consent for Participation:

I *agree*	*I* *disagree*	*To participate in this study, the researcher may audio or video record me to aid with data analysis. The researcher will not share these recordings with anyone outside of the immediate study team or TAMU Compliance. Please verbally indicate your willingness to participate in this study.*

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONING ROUTE

1. What is your name?

    1. As you know, all participant information will be kept confidential. For
       example, I will not be using your real names in the publication of the
       study.

    2. Do you have a pseudonym in mind?

2. How old are you?

3. How would you describe your gender?

    1. What are your pronouns?

4. How would you describe your race and/or ethnicity?

5. Tell me about your identity as an autistic person.

    1. What does that mean to you to identify as autistic?

    2. What are your other salient (important) identities?

6. Tell me about your sexual identity.

7. Tell me about your TV watching habits.

8. Tell me about your social media habits.

    1. As it relates to your salient identities.

9. As you know, I'm curious about autistic people's impressions of the show Love
   on the Spectrum. What were your initial impressions of Love on the Spectrum?

1. Tell me about any characters, relationships, scenes, high points, low

   points, etc. that stood out for you.

2. Or: Tell me about a scene you really connected with.

10. How do you feel about the representations of autism and sexuality in Love on the

Spectrum?

11. Did Love on the Spectrum prompt you to think about your own sexual identity?

If so, how?

12. Did you use social media to react to Love on the Spectrum?

1. If so, how? What were your intentions?

2. Who were you intending to communicate with by posting on social media

   about the show?

3. If not, did you go anywhere else to have conversations about your

   reactions to the show? If so, where?

13. Have you seen other representations of autism and sexuality that you thought

were good or positive?

14. Is there anything else you'd like to say?