The Representation of Autistic Characters in the Fanfictions of "The Owl House"

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Abstract. Autistic characters in current TV series and films are not a realistic representation of autism. Thus, autistic people seek to see themselves reflected in alternative media, such as fanfiction. Hence, the main objective of this research is to analyze the representation of autistic characters in fanfiction. The technique of content analysis was used in 14 fanfictions of The Owl House on the Archive of Our Own platform. The categories of analysis are the representation of autism, fanfiction as an alternative space of representation and character development. The results show that the analyzed fanfic-tions include realistic representations of autism as most of their authors are autistic people and draw inspiration from their experiences. Realistic representations of autism are necessary to understand the autistic experience in fiction and to empathize with autistic people in real life.

Keywords: Autism; fanfiction; The Owl House; autism representation, media representation.

1 Introduction

The most well-known characters with autistic traits within television do not represent the autistic experience realistically [1]. These characters tend to be stereotypical savant figures. Nevertheless, it is popular in autistic online communities to declare that a character similar to them is autistic. This is known as "autistic headcanon" [2]. In some instances, autistic audiences identify more with these headcanons as their repre-sentation more closely resembles their experience [3]. The construction of autistic figures closer to reality is necessary, since their representation in film and television can change the way in which individuals with autism are perceived. The purpose of this research is to analyze the representation of autism in fanfiction spaces according to the construction of characters.

The main objective is to analyze the representation of autistic characters in fanfic-tions of the series "The Owl House". Fourteen fanfictions of "The Owl House" about autistic headcanons were collected. Through an interpretative paradigm with a qualita-

tive approach, a content analysis will be undertaken. The categories of analysis are the representation of autism, fanfiction as an alternative space of representation and the development of characters. The first specific aim is to identify the behaviors exhibited by the autistic individuals in the selected fanfictions. The second objective is to analyze how autistic characters are described, inasmuch as some autistic authors base their fanfiction on their experiences, so that fanfiction spaces provide a perspective that is distinct from stories about autism [4]. Finally, the purpose is to identify whether these characters are associated with any of the autistic stereotypes established by Prochnow [5]. Thereby, it will be determined whether the construction of autistic characters in these fanfictions is realistic.

1.1 Literature Review (Theoretical Framework)

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction and repetitive, restricted patterns of behavior and interests [6]. There are autistic individuals who require constant attention and lifelong support; as well as others who are able to lead an independent life as anyone else [7]. Despite this, the way autistic characters are often portrayed does not provide the audience with a realistic image of the autism spectrum [8].

Prochnow [5] establishes three stereotypes into which an autistic character can be categorized: the magical/savant, the "different"/ quirky and the undiagnosed/unlabeled. Most films and television series about autistic characters depict them with the savant stereotype [8].

The savant syndrome occurs when a person with autism or a psychosocial disability features characteristics of genius in a specific area [9]. This condition exists, but it appears in only one in ten autistic persons [10]. Therefore, the autistic savant is an exception, not the rule. As there is a greater representation of autistic savants, viewers may come to believe that there is a direct relationship between savantism and autism [11]. The autistic savant stereotype causes the public to doubt the ability of autistic individuals to develop in a neurotypical environment and their ability to relate to others [12].

One of the reasons why the representation of people with autism in current series is not realistic is that the creators and actors of these programs are not autistic [13]. Since they do not see themselves represented realistically, the autistic audience generates their own representation through headcanons [3]. Headcanons are ideas that exist only within the minds of the fans who created them [2]. The autistic individuals tend to identify more with these representations of their own creation as they see similar experiences to their own reflected in these characters. This is when fanfiction platforms become an alternative space of representation for the autistic. Fan culture allows audiences to question hegemonic forms of representation [2]. Fanfiction spaces appeal to marginalized groups as it allows them to move away from the hegemonic forms of representation of the original narratives [14].

Lugo, Melon and Castillo [15] analyzed the fanfiction "Different, Not Defective" (related to the Harry Potter universe) and 863 comments pertaining to the text. In this fanfic, Harry Potter is portrayed as a person with autism. The fanfic not only shows Harry's conflicts, but also the questioning of Severus Snape, one of the professors, about the environment they are in and how their educational system is not designed with persons such as Harry in mind. Lugo, et al. [15] also pointed out that Harry's character does not fall into the category of the savant stereotype, he is an autistic person with average characteristics. Reviews on the platform show readers pleasantly surprised that there are no autistic stereotypes found in the story [15].

The conclusion of Lugo, et al [15] is that digital platforms may function as alternative forms of representation for therapists, family members, and individuals within the autism spectrum. They suggest further exploration of the ways in which fanfiction might contribute to the representation of inadequately represented groups.

2   Methodology

2.1   Data collection technique

Content analysis technique was used for 14 fanfics of "The Owl house" with the tag of "autistic Amity" and "autistic Hunter" on the "Archive of Our Own" platform. This label includes stories in which the characters of Amity and Hunter are characterized as autistic individuals, based on the headcanon created by fans. Although content analysis previously included only research with quantitative analysis, it is now recognized that it can be used for qualitative as well as quantitative analysis [17].The instrument used was a content analysis guide, observed in Table 2, with categories to analyze character development.

2.2   Sample

The material that was analyzed were fanfics of "The Owl House" with the tags of "autistic Amity" and "autistic Hunter" in the "Archive of Our Own" platform. The criteria for selecting the characters was their popularity on the platform. When search-ing for characters from the series with the "Autistic" tag, Amity and Hunter obtained more results. When searching for other personalities, fewer results were found, with the exception of the search for Luz, the protagonist. It was decided not to include the figure of Luz in the analysis since in the series she has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and the analysis concentrates on characters who only have autism.

The platform allows published stories to span numerous chapters without a word limit. Fanfics were chosen that had only one chapter and would range from 1,000 to 9,000 words to streamline the collection process. The fanfics were organized with a

data sheet with categories of title, publication date, word count, author, characters, tags, and synopsis. All of these can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected fanfics.

Fanfic name	Author	Word count	Publication date
Expressions of Joy	axolotlLT	4,669	February 24, 2021
You're so cute when you exist!	ZeGreatCamicazi	1,858	March 19, 2021
unmasking	clovariia	8,775	July 10, 2022
Like A Moment Before	Zero_Writing_Skills	1,078	July 19, 2022
Stimming/Fidgeting	KaztielCS118	1,275	July 19, 2022
Autistic Hunter Week 2	TJSaoirse25	1,212	July 24, 2022
perfume and patience	clovariia	2,268	August 17, 2022
Cause I Hear Too Much	redrasberries	2,061	March 29, 2023
Biting Off More Than You Can Chew	dakotasgonesouth	1,597	April 16, 2023
Special Ears	Oracle_2011	1,009	August 1, 2023
Never Let Go Of Me	Oracle_2012	1,222	August 19, 2023
The reason I run	agruingwithmyleftbigtoe	2,222	October 29, 2023
prove yourself	siloueta	5,676	March 22, 2024

The construction of the autistic characters in those fanfics was analyzed by using a content analysis guide evidenced in table 2. The categories of character construction, actions and representation models were included and certain modifications were made by the evaluator.

Table 2. Content analysis guide.

Categories	Subcategories	Qualitative indicators		Answers
Character development	Social dimension	Family relationships		
		Friendly relationships		
		Romantic relationships		
		Academic degree		
		Perceived intelligence		
		External group conflicts		
		External conflicts by situation		
	Psychological dimension	Personality associated with stereotypes according to Prochnow (2014): The magical/savant or the "different'/ quirky character		
		Temperament (e.g. exhibits violent episodes or is too permissive)		
		Objectives of the storyline		
		Motivation		
		Internal conflict	Fight against fear	
			Fight against lack of confidence	
			Fight against self-efficacy	
Actions		Behaviors associated and not associated with autistic savant stereotype (e.g.: no science skills, no association with autistic savant)		
		Dialogues associated and not associated with the autistic savant stereotype (e.g.: bragging about knowing more about a subject than their peers)		
Representation models	Autistic stereotypes according to Prochnow (2014)	The magical/savant		
		The "different'/ quirky one		
		The undiagnosed/unlabeled one		
	Do the characters have their own objectives and/or are they intended to serve as a support for other characters' stories?			

3   Results

The way in which the authors describe autistic traits in the characters depends on whether the protagonists are aware of their autism. This is because not in all fanfics the protagonists knew they were autistic. In some of the fanfics, the characters do "stims", which are repetitive behaviors such as moving hands or fingers, rocking, jumping, spinning, among others [18]. They are performed for various reasons, including emotional regulation [19]. In the past, health professionals made autistic people minimize or hide their stims, especially if it was a socially stigmatizing behavior [18]. Some of the stories describe that Amity and Hunter were forced to repress their stims by parental pressure. In addition, in some of the fanfics, the characters are comforted during or after having an autistic meltdown. According to the National Autistic Society [20], autistic meltdowns or "meltdowns" are intense responses to an overwhelming situation. The characters' autistic meltdowns are handled in a calm and boundary-respecting manner, which is the appropriate way to react to it [20].

Some autistic users state in the reviews that the scenarios that the authors narrate in these stories also reflect their own experiences. There is evidence that the representation of the autistic experience in the fanfics was similar to that of the autistic readers. The realistic representation in these stories may be due to the fact that most of the authors claimed to be autistic. Nine out of the twelve authors expressed being autistic in the tags or the notes of the fanfics. These authors expressed that their fanfic was a way of talking about their experiences or projecting themselves onto the characters. In the notes of the fanfic "Maybe I'm not broken" ("Autistic!" Amity Blight and Luz Noceda), the author writes that he wrote the story projecting what he would want his partner to do to help him with an autistic meltdown.

Regarding character building, the authors built on elements already present in the series and added a background to the characters by describing them as autistic. Amity's character in the series is a 14-year-old witch who lives with her dad, mom and siblings. Her family is upper class and they uphold the reputation of being powerful and successful witches. Some of the authors use her background to make Amity feel pressured to mask her autism in order to maintain her family's reputation. Autism masking is a strategy by which autistic persons consciously or unconsciously hide their autistic traits in order to be socially accepted [21]. Some of the stories begin with Amity repressing stims because her mother or both parents did not consider it appropriate behavior for a member of their prominent family. Although, in two fanfics, different perspectives of a late diagnosis are told. In the fanfic "Expressions of Joy," Amity is grateful to learn that she is autistic as she now has an articulate explanation of what she is. For some late-diagnosed autistic individuals, getting an official diagnosis brings understanding and acceptance [22]. Nevertheless, not all individuals are relieved to learn about their autism. In "The reason I run", when Luz mentions that she reckons Amity might be autistic, because of the traits she is exhibiting, Amity becomes upset and starts to cry. This type of reaction is a product of the internalized prejudice of autistic people [23]. According to Autistic Parents UK [23], the way to overcome this is for autistic people

to allow themselves to live authentically without fear of claiming their autistic identity. This is exactly what Amity does in the story. Both fanfics described the experience of an autistic person learning about their autism, from different but realistic perspectives. Both stories were written by autistic authors.

In Hunter's case, the stories varied between canon, pre-canon and post-canon events. In the series, Hunter is a 16-year-old teenager, nephew of Emperor Belos, the authority of the Boiling Isles. Hunter is the emperor's right-hand man and is considered a prodigy for having reached such a high position at his young age. He was educated in the palace, so there is no way to measure his academic success or compare him to characters his age. His relationship with his uncle is abusive, using his powers to control Hunter through physical and psychological punishment. Hunter's story becomes more complex as the series progresses. Because of this, Hunter's fanfics differ from Amity's in dealing with issues such as identity problems or child abuse.

Hunter's stories include a repression of stims and masking of his autism due to pressure from his guardian, as do Amity's fanfics. For Hunter that fear comes from interactions with his uncle. In the fanfic "Stimming/Fidgeting" his uncle inflicts pain on him to get him to stop stims. In "Like A Moment Before," Hunter mentions that the specialist who diagnosed him would force him to maintain eye contact to demonstrate that he wasn't distracted, although this made things more difficult. Maintaining eye contact could be detrimental to autistic people as this is a form of masking autism [21].

3.1. Stereotypes in fanfics

Within the three stereotypes of autistic characters established by Prochnow [5], Amity presents some savant character attributes. Amity achieves academic success by being one of the most powerful witches in her class in the type of magic she specializes in. Excelling academically, even if it is not a science-related skill, could associate Amity with the stereotype of the autistic savant. Savant autistic characters are depicted with supernatural intelligence [9], however, Amity's autistic characterization does not completely fit this description. In both the series and fanfics, it is stated that Amity struggles to excel in school due to pressure from her parents. The fanfics do not present Amity's academic success as an innate ability, but rather as the result of her parents' demand. Therefore, Amity has not been written as the stereotypical savant in fanfics.

In Hunter's case, he is called a prodigy in the series. He possesses enough knowledge to have graduated from a magic school before the age of 16. Nevertheless, Hunter was educated in the palace. While it is recognized, both in the series and in the fanfics, that he is a person with advanced knowledge for his age, this is not something innate. His ability is the result of special training at the palace. As with Amity, as much as he exhibits characteristics of the stereotypical autistic savant, he has not been written that way in the fanfics. He could also be associated with the "different"/quirky stereotype because of his difficulty in socializing. In some fanfics, Hunter lacks social skills and mentions that people have called him strange. Notwithstanding this, in the fanfics, it is

always attributed to the reclusion and mistreatment he experienced as a young boy. He had no friends his own age until he was 16, so he is sometimes labeled as strange. So, despite presenting difficulties socializing like other stereotypical "different"/quirky autistic characters, Hunter is not written with that intention in fanfics.

3.2. Discussion

A recurring theme in stories about people with autism is to represent the autism of the characters as a burden to the people around them [24]. Nevertheless, in the analyzed fanfics, no examples of this are seen. Hunter's character is mentioned as having trouble socializing and the concern of his caregiver, Darius, is shown. Notwithstanding, the readers manage to empathize with both characters and Hunter's problems are not presented as an obstacle for Darius.

Another recurring theme is to use autistic people as a tool for the plot by minimizing their emotions and not focusing on their personal obstacles such as sensory overload [4]. In two of Amity's fanfics, the evolution of her sensory overload is narrated so that the reader can understand what triggers it and why it is so difficult to calm down. "The reason I run" opens with Amity getting up late for school. Although this change may not seem like such a disruptive event, sticking to routines is important for autistic people because it provides security [25]. The respondent, who has autism, confirms that habituation is important for autistic people. The author describes Amity's sensory overload upon arrival at school, but also how this affects her emotionally. In the notes, the author mentions that the story has been inspired by his experience with this situation.

A third recurring theme, mostly with autistic savant characters, is to show autism as a debt to pay to the surrounding people [26]. In the analyzed fanfics, Amity and Hunter are depicted as successful students, however, their ability does not satisfy the caregivers who demand such greatness from them. Therefore, as mentioned before, the academic success of both characters is not an innate ability in the fanfics, but the result of the high standards of their caregivers.

4   Conclusions

This research paper sought to analyze the representation of autistic characters in the fanfictions of "The Owl House". In all of the fanfictions, it was determined that the characters had a goal and motivation in their story. Some even featured character arcs about accepting their autistic traits.

Also, we sought to dissect the description of the autistic characters. In all the selected fanfics, the personages exhibit traits of their autism, either making stims or showing discomfort with some stimuli. The fanfics show these characteristics of autism as something that should not be changed. The characters' autism is portrayed as something that makes them function differently but does not make them less valuable as a person.

In addition, we sought to identify the stereotypes featured by the autistic characters in these fanfics. Both Amity and Hunter exhibited similarities to the savant stereotype. Nevertheless, their intelligence was not an innate ability. Their academic success stemmed from the high expectations of their guardians. Hunter, moreover, also exhibited the lack of social skills associated with the "different" / quirky stereotype. His difficulty in socializing was due to growing up in seclusion in a palace and not knowing people his own age. Therefore, the fanfics analyzed do not present autistic stereotypes seen in series and movies. In addition, it provides the reader with a more realistic look at what it is like to be autistic since most of the authors are indeed autistic themselves.

All in all, the construction of autistic characters in the analyzed fanfictions of "The Owl House" is not based on stereotypes. The representation of autistic characters in the fanfictions can become realistic and offer a new point of view to their readers. This research highlights the importance of the presence of autistic voices when telling stories about autism. It is relevant to look beyond the entertainment function of fanfictions and delve into the importance they have for the representation, acceptance and understanding of autistic people.

5   Acknowledgements

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