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## Perceived Influence of Autism Portrayal in Nollywood on Academic Staff of LASUCOM and Trinity University

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### Abstract

This study investigates how media portrayals of autism in Nollywood films perceived influence on the academic staff of Lagos State University College of Medicine (LASUCOM), and Trinity University, Yaba. Focusing on prevalent stereotypes and societal attitudes toward Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the study explores whether cinematic depictions has helped shaping understandings of autism. The study provides a theoretical foundation, examining ASD in the Nigerian context, media portrayals of autism, and the role of film as a cultural medium. Framing theory was employed to analyse how media constructs perceptions of autism, supported by a review of eleven scholarly works on autism representation and Nigerian perspectives. Methodologically, the study employed qualitative semi-structured interviews with LASUCOM and Trinity University academic staff, selected through purposive sampling with assistance from the faculty's sub-Dean of Paediatrics and Child Health. Data analysis revealed that respondents' awareness of ASD varied with understanding primarily derived from medical training rather than media exposure. While films strengthened existing beliefs, their influence on perceptions was minimal compared to professional expertise. The findings suggest that film-based interventions would be ineffective in altering academic staff's perceptions, as their views are predominantly shaped by clinical experience. The study concludes with recommendations for further research on media's role in shaping autism awareness among different demographic groups, particularly in non-Western contexts like Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Nollywood films, framing, Perceived influence, Portrayal.

### Introduction

People are vastly different, yet we all share common characteristics. In the past, these differences were commonly treated as strange and therefore abhorrent, and the people deemed as outcasts in the society. It was rare to find a society which embraced these differences and adjusted to accommodate them.



Unfortunately, this is still the case in many parts of the world today. These groups, referred to today as minority groups, suffered prejudice for their skin tone, their physiology, the language they spoke, their behavioural patterns; their general world view and lifestyle (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Among these minorities are people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

In recent years the way autism and autistic people are depicted in the media has undergone a series of transformations, progressing in accuracy and relatability to an autistic audience, yet also retaining a lot of the overdone clichés and stereotypes associated with autistic people (Budowski, 2017, Stephanie, 2021).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder affecting individuals to varying degrees, majorly characterised by differences in communication and social interaction. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These portrayals have the power to influence societal attitudes towards autism, but the impact on different segments of the population, particularly academic staff in Africa, remains under-researched.

This study aims to investigate how the depiction of autism as seen in film and television influence the perceptions of academic staff. The focus on academic staff is critical because they are often involved in the educational and social inclusion of students with autism. The portrayal of autism in popular media may shape their attitudes and knowledge, potentially influencing their approach toward students (and fellow staff) on the autism spectrum.

Several studies have explored autism in the media, suggesting that popular representations can impact public understanding, although the effects are mixed. Some studies suggest that films and television shows that depict autism can increase empathy and awareness, while others point to the dangers of reinforcing stereotypes or overgeneralizing experiences of people with autism. (Eastwood et al., 2022, Mittmann et al., 2023, Gong, 2024, Sarrett, 2011, Draaisma, 2009).

This study will contribute to the growing body of literature on autism representation in the media and its impact on societal attitudes, specifically focusing on the perspectives of academic staff. By examining how autism is portrayed in film and television and how these portrayals influence the perceptions of academic staff, this study aims to shed light on the role of media in shaping attitudes toward autism in educational settings and contribute to future strategies for improving awareness, understanding, and support for individuals on the autism spectrum in universities and professional settings.

Formerly known as Asperger Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental condition mainly characterised by difficulty adapting to social norms of communication and interaction and limited, recurring patterns of behaviour, interests or activities. ASD may occur with a number of comorbidities, including but not limited to epilepsy, sleep disorders, intellectual disability, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It occurs in one out of every hundred children globally. (Zeidan et al. 2022).

Autism is a spectrum, which means it affects individuals differently to varying degrees. Some autistic people require constant support in their daily lives, while others may be able to function in society with less difficulty. Problems autistic people frequently encounter in the process of socialisation include social isolation, bullying, discrimination in academic and employment sectors, and they are prone to other complications such as anxiety, stress and depression (Bonati et al. 2022).

Autism is typically stereotyped in film with the characters possessing savant syndrome or mentally retarded, having a compass of moral superiority by virtue of blunt honesty and incapacity for fantasies of lies, and lacking empathy or emotional depth (Draaisma, 2014). While this is not a full list of characteristics of autism, they are the ones most commonly exhibited in film.



In the last few decades more effort has been made to feature a wider variety of autistic and neurodivergent main characters in film, with varying degrees of accuracy and empathy. Some notable films and series featuring autistic main characters include:

- Temple Grandin (2010), directed by Mick Jackson, screenplay written by Christopher Monger and William M. Johnson.
- A Tune Away (2022), directed and written by Stanlee Ohikhuare.
- Black Dove (2021), written and directed by Biodun Stephen
- Ordinary People (2022), directed by Judith Audu
- Finding Baami (2020), written and directed by Biodun Stephen
- The Good Doctor (2017 - 2024), based on the Korean Series Good Doctor (Park Jae-Beom), developed by David Shore.

With the increasing representation of autism in films and television, the public's understanding and perceptions of the condition are likely influenced by these portrayals. While some attention has been given to how the media shapes public knowledge of autism, limited research has focused on how such portrayals impact academic staff. The question of how academic staff, who directly interact with students with autism, are influenced by these portrayals has remained underexplored.

Understanding the impact of film portrayals of autism on academic staff is critical, as these individuals' perceptions and attitudes can directly affect their professional behaviour, teaching strategies, and support systems for students on the autism spectrum. Previous studies have primarily focused on general public perceptions or the broader cultural effects of autism representation.

This gap in the literature highlights the need for research to explore the influence of autism portrayals in film on academic staff. It is essential to understand whether these portrayals foster empathy, reinforce stereotypes, or lead to misconceptions that could affect the educational experience of students on the autism spectrum. Furthermore, this research will help inform strategies to improve autism-related training and awareness among educators, thereby contributing to better educational outcomes for students with ASD.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of autism awareness among academic staff of selected universities?
2. What is the relationship between the representation of autism in film and the perception of autistic people among academic staff of selected universities?
3. To what extent is the frequency of media consumption featuring autistic characters influence the perception of academic staff of selected universities?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Framing Theory**

Framing theory, or framing analysis, was broadly introduced as a concept in the work of American sociologist Erving Goffman. In his book *Frame Analysis: An Essay On the Organization of Experience*, he defined frames as a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives that organize experiences and guide the actions of individuals. In essence, frames help the individual to understand and organise, analyse and interpret their everyday experiences.

Goffman (1974) introduced the concept of a primary framework, an interpretive schema that allows people to make sense of objects and events in their environment. A given person interprets everything that is going on in their immediate environment through a primary framework, which is taken for granted by said person. He further classified primary framework into natural and social. Natural frameworks include



phenomena like dreams, while social frameworks involve interactions with other people. Goffman also discussed ‘keyings’, which are changes to the way we perceive a situation or event based on a shift in the primary framework.

By providing a framework for the interpretation and reconstruction of reality, frames help to reduce the complexity of information that individuals process on a daily basis (Volkmer, 2009). Framing theory in the mass media age, particularly in the United States, emerged during the 1970s.

Framing theory is particularly relevant in the field of journalism and political communication. During the 1970s, media research shifted from a one dimensional media-effects model and started to address specific forms of media influence on audiences (Scheufele, D. A. 1999, pp 103-122). Due to continuous audience exposure to information flows, it became more obvious that the media influences audiences not only with political discourse, as seen during election campaigns, but also creates world perceptions as an agent of socialisation.

Framing Theory goes straight to the core of how Nollywood influences people’s perceptions of autism. The way these movies present their narratives, whether they depict autism as a tragedy, a spiritual matter, or something that should be accepted, directly shapes how audiences interpret the condition. Academic staff at LASUCOM and Trinity University notice these trends. When Nollywood treats autism as a medical or social concern that deserves understanding, staff are more likely to see its impact as beneficial and even instructive. However, when films rely on superstition or make autism the subject of ridicule, that impact is seen as damaging or deceptive. In this way, Framing Theory is more than just academic terminology, it truly explains how Nollywood’s storytelling methods affect the way viewers perceive and respond to autism.

Frames can be structured in a way that enhances understanding, or cognitive structures that link smaller stories to a bigger picture. Framing places emphasis on how the media draws public attention to a subject, and then goes further to create a ‘frame’ through which they process the information (Arowolo, 2017).

Framing Theory is relevant here because it reveals how Nollywood’s portrayal of autism actually influences how people perceive the condition. The media does not simply reflect reality, it decides which aspects to highlight, what language to use, and which narratives to present. In this way, it shapes public opinion, often without audiences realizing it.

Consider how Nollywood frames autism. It might be depicted as a tragedy, a spiritual challenge, or merely a medical issue. These choices aren’t accidental; they influence how academic staff at LASUCOM and Trinity University view autism. If films depict autism as deserving of empathy and support, staff are more likely to view Nollywood’s impact positively. However, if movies misrepresent autism or portray it negatively, these same viewers may see the film industry as a source of stigma or misinformation.

Therefore, Framing Theory is not just a theoretical concept, it helps explain why different portrayals provoke different responses among educated audiences. It addresses how the media shapes what people in Nigeria, particularly in academic circles, truly understand about developmental disorders.

## **Method**

This study adopted a mixed-method approach with a strong emphasis on qualitative research. It combined content analysis of Nollywood films featuring autism with survey and interview data collected from academic staff at LASUCOM and Trinity University. This method allowed the study to examine both the ways films depict autism and how educated professionals perceive these portrayals.



The study population consisted of all 242 academic staff members from both institutions, 180 from LASUCOM and 62 from Trinity University. From this pool, the study purposively selected ten academic staff who have regular interactions with autistic individuals. The aim was to gather insights from those with direct, relevant experience. The sampling was both purposive and proportionate, ensuring participants represented both universities and had perspectives directly related to the study's focus. By using a combination of homogeneous and typical case sampling, the study was able to identify participants whose experiences closely aligned with what the study wanted to explore.

For data collection, the study used three instruments: a semi-structured questionnaire, an in-depth interview guide, and a film coding sheet. The questionnaire provided quantitative data on participants' perceptions of autism in film. The interviews offered deeper insights, allowing participants to share detailed experiences and opinions. The coding sheet enabled the study to systematically analyse how Nollywood films frame autistic characters, whether medically, socially, spiritually, or emotionally.

### Selected Films for Analysis

| Film Title             | Year | Director       | Autism Portrayal Summary                                        |
|------------------------|------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Black Dove</b>      | 2021 | Biodun Stephen | Features a young boy diagnosed with autism who is non-verbal.   |
| <b>Ordinary People</b> | 2022 | Judith Audu    | Chronicles the struggles of an autistic child and his mother.   |
| <b>Finding Baami</b>   | 2020 | Biodun Stephen | Peripheral mention of a child with behavioural symptoms of ASD. |

### Content Analysis Framework

Based on **Berelson's (1952)** method and **Krippendorff's (2004)** model.

### Coding Categories

| Category                  | Description                                                                |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Representation Accuracy   | Does the portrayal align with clinical features of autism (DSM-5)?         |
| Stereotyping              | Is the character reduced to autistic traits only?                          |
| Social Interaction        | How does the character interact with family/society?                       |
| Emotional Framing         | Are the portrayals sympathetic, tragic, inspirational, or sensationalized? |
| Advocacy Potential        | Does the narrative challenge stigma or promote understanding?              |
| Narrative Centrality      | Is autism central to the plot or a secondary characteristic?               |
| Support Systems Portrayed | Presence of therapists, educators, healthcare, or inclusive settings.      |

The study conducted one-on-one interviews, mainly via Zoom and WhatsApp, based on each participant's availability. Every interview was recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis.

For data analysis, the combined thematic and descriptive techniques. Thematic analysis helped the study to identify key themes and patterns in both the films and interview transcripts regarding how autism is represented in Nollywood. It summarised the quantitative survey responses using basic statistics, frequencies and percentages, to complement the qualitative findings.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout. All participants were informed of the research purpose, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was strictly observed.



This approach enabled the study to thoroughly investigate how Nollywood's depiction of autism influences academic staff perceptions and how these portrayals may affect broader societal attitudes toward autism.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

### 1. The level of autism awareness among academic staff of selected universities?

Table 1: Awareness level of ASD

| Respondent | Excerpt                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Awareness of ASD                      |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| R1         | "...neurodevelopmental condition... characterised by repetitive and inflexible patterns of behaviour, ... they may also have some trouble with social interaction and communication...because it is a spectrum, that means that the way one person that is autistic will act can be very different from the way another one will behave, although there are similarities." | Expert level awareness of ASD         |
| R2         | "...disorder characterised by impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and non-verbal communication and restricted and repetitive behaviour."                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Expert level awareness of ASD         |
| R3         | "...a spectrum, that autistic people usually have issues with communication and expression; I also know that it can be obvious or difficult to diagnose."                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Basic medical awareness of ASD        |
| R4         | "autism occurs in children as a psycho-mental disorder."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Basic medical awareness of ASD        |
| R5         | "...spectrum... a developmental disorder that presents in children, with symptoms such as difficulty with social interactions and communicating with people."                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Intermediate medical awareness of ASD |
| R6         | "...spectrum of disorders that are characterised by challenges with expression and emotion."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Intermediate medical awareness of ASD |
| R7         | "...group of disorders characterised by poor social interaction and difficulty with communication."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Intermediate medical awareness of ASD |
| R8         | "...congenital disorder, not a contractual disease."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Basic medical awareness of ASD        |
| R9         | "...neurodevelopmental disorder that affects...children and adults,                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Expert level                          |

|     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                     |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|     | characterised by difficulty with social interaction... a spectrum, they may be high-functioning, nonverbal, some are even diagnosed as adults, they may have repetitive behaviour and an attachment or fixation on some things or people.” | awareness of ASD                    |
| R10 | “a disorder of mainly cognition, not movement, and social relationships, so someone who has autism is deficient in communication and social relationships, issues with eye contact, speech may not be regarded as sociable...”             | Intermediate level awareness of ASD |

Table 1 shows the respondents’ degree of understanding of ASD. From the data above:

- 3 respondents have a basic level of awareness of ASD.
- 4 respondents have an intermediate level of awareness of ASD.
- 3 respondents have an expert level of awareness of ASD.

All the respondents understand what autism is.

## 2. What is the relationship between the representation of autism in film and the perception of autistic people among academic staff of selected universities?

Table 2: Perception of Autistic People

| Respondent | Perception of Autistic People                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Code                                                                                                                   |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| R1         | “ASD is a spectrum, so all autistic people don’t act the same way, even though there are similarities in their behaviour. Contrary to the general belief, they are not mentally retarded and can live fulfilling lives and contribute to society provided they have an adequate support system.” | Capable of living fulfilling lives if provided adequate support.                                                       |
| R2         | “ASD is a spectrum, so it presents differently across the board. With autism there tends to be a higher rate of comorbidities, and on the extreme end of the spectrum you can have savants; people that are highly intelligent or extremely talented, but it is a rare occurrence.”              | Different presentations of ASD in different people.                                                                    |
| R3         | “I see them as people with behaviour that can be difficult for [Neurotypicals] to understand and relate with. They can be misunderstood and misunderstand other people.”                                                                                                                         | Misunderstood.                                                                                                         |
| R4         | “ASD is burdensome (on the family), it is a sad condition that is difficult to handle. If autistic children are placed in an environment where they can thrive, with caretakers who are dedicated to them they will be alright.”                                                                 | Difficult condition to live with and care for.<br><br>Capable of living fulfilling lives if provided adequate support. |
| R5         | “Growing up, I thought they were handicapped, but with the benefit of education I learned that they are simply wired differently, and capable of some things that [Neurotypicals] might not be.”                                                                                                 | Different from NTs.                                                                                                    |

|     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| R6  | “Depends on where they are on the spectrum, but generally I have a neutral to positive perception.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Neutral to positive perception.                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| R7  | “I see them as special people who need support on all levels, and with the right support they can lead regular, fulfilling lives.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Capable of living fulfilling lives if provided adequate support.                                                                                                                                                              |
| R8  | “as children/people that may not behave in a typical way, try to decode them, try to find out what kind of thing they can do and what they need assistance with.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Capable of living fulfilling lives if provided adequate support.                                                                                                                                                              |
| R9  | “Everybody is different, I have nothing personal against them, it doesn't make you worse or better because of your differences. I may be a little biased because I have done a lot of research on ASD; I used to attend the GTCO conference on autism every year for a while. Nigeria is a hard place to be neurodivergent, and it's very hard for parents, because most of the neurodevelopmental disorders just get lumped together, and there is very little by way of facilities and resources to help autistic people; most of what is available was created by parents who had to fight and struggle to understand their autistic children and create a space for them. They [autistic people] have the right to lead their own lives. Prevalence for autism seems to be on the rise, maybe because people are becoming more exposed to autism.” | <p>Capable of living fulfilling lives if provided adequate support.</p> <p>Different from NTs.</p> <p>Difficulty accessing resources to accommodate ASD in Nigeria.</p> <p>Difficult condition to live with and care for.</p> |
| R10 | “I feel compassion for the individual and their families, parents struggling to understand their child. It's a long term, a lifetime disorder, not one you can put a treatable time to. Many of them are on medication, and medication has side effects, which can have negative long term effects, so they go through a lot. I would say that I feel a lot of compassion for them.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p>Compassion for people with ASD and their families.</p> <p>Long term effects of medication prescribed to them.</p> <p>Parents struggling to understand their autistic child.</p>                                            |

Table 2 shows the respondents' understanding of autistic people. From the data above, the respondents' perceptions of autistic people are as follows:

- Belief that autistic people are *capable of living fulfilling lives if provided adequate support*.
- Belief that ASD *presents differently in different people*.
- Belief that autistic people are *misunderstood*.
- Belief that ASD is a *difficult condition to live with and care for*.
- Belief that autistic people are *different from Neurotypicals*.



- Belief that there is *difficulty accessing resources to accommodate ASD in Nigeria.*
- Belief that *parents struggle to understand their autistic child.*

Table 3: **Frequency of Film Viewing & Exposure to Autism Representation in Film**

| Respondent | Frequency of Film Viewing                                                                | Exposure to Autism Representation in Film | Film                |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| R1         | "I watch films every once in a while."                                                   | No                                        | N/A                 |
| R2         | "... I rarely watch films nowadays, but I used to watch them often."                     | Yes                                       | The Accountant      |
| R3         | "I watch movies a lot, maybe three times a week."                                        | Yes                                       | Mercury Rising      |
| R4         | "I watch movies every week."                                                             | Yes                                       | Aapki Antara        |
| R5         | "Not frequently, but when I do watch films I tend to binge them."                        | No                                        | N/A                 |
| R6         | "I watch movies regularly, maybe once or twice a week."                                  | Yes                                       | Forrest Gump        |
| R7         | "I rarely watch films."                                                                  | No                                        | N/A                 |
| R8         | "I watch films once or twice a month, maybe once a week."                                | Yes                                       | The Good Doctor     |
| R9         | "Every week, maybe one movie or a TV show."                                              | Yes                                       | i am sam            |
| R10        | "I'm not a movie person, I watch very rarely, or when my children take me to watch one." | Maybe                                     | Like Stars On Earth |

Table 3 shows that:

- 5 respondents frequently watch films; 5 respondents rarely watch films.
- Out of the 5 respondents that frequently watch films, 5 had seen a film with an autistic character.
- Out of the 5 respondents that rarely watch films, 1 had seen a film with an autistic character, 1 had seen a film with a character that may be autistic, and 3 had never seen a film with an autistic character.

This shows that there may be a link between frequent watching of films and exposure to autistic representation in film. However, due to the limited sample size, this link is not firmly established.



**Table 4: Film Portrayal of Autistic Character and Common Themes Between Character and Real Autistic Person (s)**

| Respondent | Portrayal of Character in Film                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Common Themes                                                                                                                    | Code                                                                                                                                             |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| R1         | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | N/A                                                                                                                              | N/A                                                                                                                                              |
| R2         | “It provided a good portrayal of an autistic person with savant syndrome.”                                                                                                                                                                  | “gap in social communication, and repetitive behaviour.”                                                                         | Autistic with savant syndrome<br><br>Issues with communication<br><br>Repetitive behaviour                                                       |
| R3         | “portrayed the character as a high functioning savant with ASD who had frequent mood swings and “anger”; he had to be constantly monitored by his mother and private tutors, and he had a lot of difficulty understanding [Neurotypicals.]” | “issues with communication, and a difficult temperament.”                                                                        | High functioning autistic with savant syndrome<br><br>Issues with communication<br><br>Difficult temperament<br><br>Required constant monitoring |
| R4         | “challenges that come with raising an autistic child”                                                                                                                                                                                       | “hyperactivity and inactivity, a lack of response to social cues, and the way they require constant monitoring and supervision.” | Required constant monitoring<br><br>Hyperactive<br><br>Unresponsive to social cues<br><br>Challenging to raise an autistic child                 |
| R5         | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | N/A                                                                                                                              | N/A                                                                                                                                              |
| R6         | “challenges faced by an autistic person”                                                                                                                                                                                                    | “behavioural pattern, the way they express themselves without inhibition”                                                        | Expression without inhibition<br><br>Challenges of being autistic                                                                                |
| R7         | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | N/A                                                                                                                              | N/A                                                                                                                                              |

|     |                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                             |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| R8  | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                         | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | N/A                                                         |
| R9  | “He had a lot of love for his daughter; I remember thinking that he just needs some help and he would be able to care for his daughter.”                                                                    | “The people I know in real life and the character were on different levels of the spectrum, so I wouldn't really say that there were a lot of similarities.”                                                                           | Differences in places on the spectrum, so nil similarity.   |
| R10 | “He daydreamed a lot, I mean, most people do, but he was basically drunk off his visions, and he got into a lot of trouble with his teachers and parents, but that was because they didn't understand him.” | “It's difficult to say, but he had some motor skills, his main problems were dyslexia and academics. Autism is a difficult condition to diagnose because it's such a wide spectrum, the symptoms are different from person to person.” | Uncoordinated motor skills<br><br>Difficulty with academics |

Table 4 examines the similarities between the autistic people that the respondents knew and the characters in film. This data shows the recurring themes in the portrayals of autistics in film:

- Autistic with savant syndrome.
- Issues with communication.
- Repetitive behaviour.
- Difficult temperament.
- Required constant monitoring.
- Hyperactive.
- Unresponsive to social cues.
- Challenges of being autistic.
- Challenges of raising an autistic child.

It also shows some similarities between the autistic people the respondents know in real life and the characters in the films, such as issues with communication, repetitive behaviour, difficult temperament, uncoordinated motor skills, difficulty with academics, required constant monitoring, hyperactivity, challenges of being autistic, the challenges of raising an autistic child, and expression without inhibition.

## Discussion

### Key Findings (Preliminary Themes)

#### Content Analysis of Films

- **Representation Accuracy:** Inconsistent. *Black Dove* features recognizable ASD traits but lacks diagnostic clarity.
- **Stereotyping:** Characters are often depicted as either burdens or ‘miracle savants’.
- **Emotional Framing:** Emotionalism dominates, portrayals veer toward pity and martyrdom of caregivers.
- **Support Systems:** Rarely depicted; public school, health institutions, or inclusive programs are absent.



### Academic Staff Perception (Survey + Interviews)

- **Awareness:** Over 70% of respondents had seen at least one film with an autistic character.
- **Accuracy Concerns:** Over 60% noted inaccuracies in representation; common concerns included lack of medical depth, dramatization, and absence of professional diagnosis in scripts.
- **Professional Influence:**
  - **LASUCOM staff:** Critical of medical inaccuracies; suggested films perpetuate myths (e.g., autism as spiritual punishment).
  - **T.U staff:** Films are regarded as viable to begin discussion with students, not minding the dramatized features.
- **Advocacy Impact:** Mixed. While many noted increased public interest, they also worried about misinformation becoming normalized.

### Comparative Analysis o LASUCOM and Trinity University

| Variable                       | LASUCOM                          | Trinity University                          |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Dominant Faculty               | Medicine, Public Health          | Nursing, Social Sciences                    |
| View on Film Accuracy          | Highly critical                  | Moderately critical                         |
| Tendency to Use Films in Class | Rare                             | Occasionally for general discussion         |
| Perceived Impact on Advocacy   | Potentially harmful if unchecked | Potentially useful with guided conversation |
| Suggestions for Nollywood      | Hire medical consultants         | Embrace more autism-centred storytelling    |

Findings for RQ1: What is the level of autism awareness among academic staff in LASUCOM and Trinity University?

All the respondents of the interviews conducted were aware of what Autism Spectrum Disorder is. To be more specific, 3 had a basic understanding, 4 had an intermediate level of understanding, and 3 had an expert level of understanding. As the data collected in table 1 shows, this knowledge comes mainly from their medical and professional background, and some personal experience. The academic staff who had backgrounds in psychiatry and mental health had more knowledge of ASD compared to their colleagues who had backgrounds in non-related fields. This is similar to the results of the study done by Omolayo, Auta, Akinyemi, and Dennis (2020), who found that prior training on ASD had significant influence on teachers' (in Ekiti state) knowledge of ASD.

Findings for RQ2: What is the relationship between the representation of autism in film and the perception of autistic people among academic staff in LASUCOM and Trinity University?

As table 2 shows, the perception of autistic people among academic staff can be summarised in four main themes:

- It is easy to misunderstand ASD.
- It is difficult to accommodate ASD.
- It is important to have a support system for individuals with ASD.
- There is limited access to resources for ASD in Nigeria.

Adams (2024) emphasised that there is little access to support (in terms of getting an official diagnosis, education and care for individuals on the more severe end of the spectrum) for neurodivergent individuals, not just for them but for their families as well. Also, a study by Robertson (2021) suggests that more exposure to autism and symptoms associated with it can lead to easier acceptance and adjustment to the condition and people diagnosed with it within the society.



Table 3 shows the portrayal of autistic people in film, which can be categorised into four groups:

- High functioning savant.
- Display of common medical symptoms (e.g. issues with communication, hyperactivity, difficult temperament, etc.).
- Burden on family members.
- Challenges of being an autistic person (e.g. Forrest Gump, i am sam, etc.).

This corroborates with the findings of Sarrett (2011), who found that autistic people are characterised in media as being burdensome to their families, and incapable of living independently and functioning mentally; and Draaisma (2009), who stated that autistic people are often misrepresented in two broad directions: 'freak savant' and 'in a sense we're all autistic'.

Also, the perception of the film portrayed the character, as rated by the respondents. All respondents (7) who watched a film with an autistic character had a positive reception to the film, and they gave their reasons for the reception, which have been summarised below:

- It generated sympathy/empathy.
- It had (medically) factual information/representation.
- It showed the progress of the autistic character.

Based on the patterns shown in this dataset, it can be said that the films watched by the respondent served to reinforce their previously existing beliefs about autism and people with ASD.

As some of the respondents pointed out, films in mainstream media tend to feature an autistic character as a person to be pitied (e.g. i am sam) or marvelled at (e.g., Mercury Rising, The Accountant). Mittmann, Schrank, and Steiner-Hofbauer (2024), found that media representation of autism tends to be more positive in literature, and more stigmatising or exaggerated in films and television, which lends credit to the observation by some respondents that a lot of their understanding of autistic people came from reading about the real experiences of autistic people and the families that raised them, while in comparison the films they watched featuring an autistic character tended to rely on certain stereotypes of autism without actually showing the perspective of the autistic character in person, which is reflective of the way people with ASD are treated in large parts of society world over, i.e., as if they are incapable of having their own desires and thoughts and living their own lives.

Findings for RQ3: To what extent does the frequency of media consumption featuring autistic characters influence the perception of academic staff in LASUCOM and Trinity University?

It shows that:

- 5 of the respondents were frequent film watchers, and the other 5 rarely watched film.
- 6 respondents had seen a film with an autistic character, 1 had seen a film with a character that might be on the spectrum, and 3 had never seen a film with an autistic character.

The study shows that academic staff at LASUCOM and Trinity University form their views about autistic people mainly from their medical education and direct experience, rather than from watching Nollywood films featuring autistic characters. This fits with Framing Theory, which examines how media influences public understanding of social issues.

Framing Theory suggests that films highlight certain aspects of reality while downplaying others, guiding viewers to interpret things in specific ways. In Nollywood, autism is often portrayed through emotional, cultural, or spiritual lenses rather than as a medical or developmental condition. However, for these academics, their extensive training and professional background have already established a solid scientific perspective on autism. So, when films offer a different portrayal, it doesn't have much impact, they rely on what they have learned through research and actual cases.



Their approach to autism, based on evidence and neurodevelopmental science, outweighs any dramatic or symbolic presentations found in movies. Framing Theory supports this: people with strong, expert knowledge tend to disregard media frames that conflict with their existing understanding. The theory helps clarify why these academics are not easily influenced by media depictions, they already have a well-established framework.

There is also little research connecting how frequently someone watches films to their beliefs about autism, which is logical in this context. Nollywood rarely depicts autism, and when it does, the portrayals are inconsistent. This means there isn't enough repetition or uniformity in framing to significantly affect what these academics already know.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

All interviewed respondents at LASUCOM and Trinity University were aware of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), with varying levels of understanding primarily shaped by their medical or professional backgrounds, and some personal experience. Staff with psychiatry or mental health training demonstrated greater ASD knowledge.

While media representations of autism (films, TV) often rely on stereotypes (e.g., pitiable or "savant" tropes), respondents' perceptions were largely informed by professional exposure rather than fictional portrayals. Films reinforced their existing beliefs but had minimal influence on their overall understanding. This study aligns with (Garner, 2014) findings that stigmatizing media depictions impact those with limited prior ASD knowledge, whereas LASUCOM and Trinity University staff, with foundational ASD awareness, were less swayed by such portrayals.

Thus, film-based interventions would likely be ineffective in altering LASUCOM and Trinity University academic staff's perceptions of autism, as their views are predominantly shaped by professional expertise rather than media exposure. Further research is needed on the relationship between film consumption and ASD perceptions.

Treatment for autism in Nigeria is so far an underdeveloped and neglected area, and there is much to be done to create easier access to a formal diagnosis and subsequent treatment, in order to ease the life of autistic children and adults, regardless of their place on the spectrum, or socio-economic background.

Also, the findings reveal a dichotomy between the emotional power of Nollywood and the factual expectations of academia. While Nollywood's intentions may be socially responsible, the lack of technical guidance (e.g., consultation with mental health experts) undermines the realism of its portrayals. Academics, particularly in medical faculties, are concerned about the spread of misinformation through dramatization, even while acknowledging the medium's vast reach and educative potential.

In line with the findings, the following recommendations were put forward:

1. **Enhancing Autism Awareness:** Universities need to do more to boost autism awareness among their academic staff. Hosting regular seminars, workshops, and advocacy programs, with the help of autism organizations, can make a real difference. Do not just stick to lectures; film-based learning works too. Watching and analysing how autism shows up in movies helps staff spot the difference between honest portrayals and lazy stereotypes. This way, people learn from both experts and the media they see every day.

2. **Improving Film Representation and Shaping Perception:** Nollywood filmmakers, producers, directors, and writers, should team up with medical, educational, and psychological professionals when creating autistic characters. Accurate, thoughtful stories matter. Universities can help by setting up advisory panels



to consult on these projects. When movies get it right, they chip away at stigma, encourage empathy, and move public perception closer to what science and experience actually say.

3. Media Exposure and Frequency of Portrayal: Right now, Nollywood does not show autistic characters often or consistently. Institutions should push for more realistic and frequent depictions, think curated film screenings, group discussions, and awareness campaigns. If people keep seeing positive, factual representations (and Framing Theory backs this up), their understanding grows, and attitudes shift for the better over time.

4. Theoretical Implications: Framing Theory points out that how autism gets portrayed in media matters just as much as how often we see it. Filmmakers and academics need to focus on building and reinforcing stories that show inclusion, humanity, and what science actually says. Academic staff play a key role here too, they can challenge tired stereotypes and help students see through inaccurate media portrayals, both in class and beyond.

### **Limitations Suggestions for Further Study**

This study has a few key limitations.

1. Academic staff may have responded in a way that aligns with their professional roles, rather than expressing their true thoughts or feelings. Conducting interviews online did not help either, as it is difficult to observe body language or subtle cues over a screen. 2. There is also the issue of limited prior research directly linking how films portray autism with how audiences perceive the condition, which made theoretical comparisons difficult. Despite these challenges, the study offers insight into how Nollywood depicts autism and how academic professionals understand those portrayals.

The researcher suggests that further studies should examine the influence of autistic representation in film on audience that is less exposed to autism, such as:

1. Residents of a certain local government area.
2. Youth of a certain local government area.
3. Academic staff in a non-medical federal or private university.
4. Academic staff in a secondary or primary school.
5. Non-academic staff in any of the aforementioned institutions.
6. University students in a federal or private university.
7. Secondary school students in a federal or private school.

The researcher also suggests studies that examine the influence of autistic representation in other forms of media, such as literature or radio, on the perception of autistic people by people of various backgrounds.

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