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Research Result Summaries

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### Members of the Disability Community and their Perceptions of Disability Representation in the Media

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Research has shown that the media generally underrepresents disabled individuals and that many media representations of disabled characters use various tropes and stereotypes, which can negatively impact the perceptions of viewers. Furthermore, there has been a lack of studies that focus on the views of disabled individuals on how disabilities are represented in the media. This study worked to address this gap by facilitating online focus groups of disabled individuals to view and discuss media representations of their disability that have been perceived as controversial within disability communities to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the perspectives about controversial portrayals of various disabilities in the media by individuals who have been diagnosed with those disabilities? 2) How could these portrayals impact perceptions of stigma regarding disabilities? and 3) How can disabled characters be portrayed to be more diverse and nuanced and to reduce stigmatizing beliefs towards disabilities?

In total, 34 disabled individuals participated across seven focus groups: three focus groups were conducted for individuals diagnosed with Turner Syndrome ( $n=11$ ) (including pilot test), two focus groups were conducted for autistic individuals ( $n=11$ ), and two focus groups were conducted for individuals with mobility impairments requiring use of a wheelchair ( $n=12$ ). The media portrayal that was the focus of the Turner Syndrome focus groups was the episode 'Clock' from *Law and Order: SVU*. The media portrayal that was the focus of the autism focus groups was the episode 'Antarctica' from *Atypical*, and the media portrayal that was the focus of the mobility impairment focus groups was the episode 'Dream On' from *Glee*.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to identify themes and subthemes from the focus group transcripts. Assessing participant perspectives of controversial media portrayals resulted in two main themes: "I liked that" and "That doesn't sit right with me", which indicated that participants valued relatable and respectful disability representations and had more

critical views of disability representations that were unrelatable, unrealistic, or used disability tropes and stereotypes. Evaluating participant perspectives of how various portrayals could impact stigma in viewers resulted in two main themes: “That’s harmful” and “That’s helpful”, which indicated that participants felt that various disability portrayals could have a negative impact through reinforcing ableism and stereotypes and could have a positive impact by subverting stereotypes and educating viewers. Evaluating participant perspectives on how disabled characters could be portrayed to be more diverse and nuanced and stigma could be reduced resulted in five main themes: “Address the barriers”, “Celebrate diversity”, “Do your research”, “Give us the stage”, and “Be positive”. Overall, participants expressed wanting to see disability barriers in the industry removed, wider diversity of disabled characters, increased disability research and consultation by individuals in the media, more disabled individuals hired in front of and behind the scenes, and a greater number of positive and nuanced disability storylines. A Canadian Psychological Association Scientific Affairs Committee Student Research Grant and departmental research funds from the University of Windsor funded research expenses for this project.