

**Term Paper:**  
**Love On The Spectrum**

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COMM/EDUC 486-010:

Multimedia Literacy

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05/05/2025

## **Abstract**

This essay explores the representation of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in contemporary media, specifically through the dating reality TV series *Love On The Spectrum*. By examining the show's structure, labeling, and presentation, it highlights critical concerns surrounding the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes such as Element of Spectacle and Infantilization. The analysis suggests that while the program attempts to showcase the romantic lives of autistic individuals, it inadvertently reinforces ableist perspectives by framing their everyday experiences as extraordinary or comedic. Choices in production like music, childlike narration, and emphasis on neurotypical perspectives further contribute to an infantilizing portrayal. Ultimately, the essay argues that despite its positive intentions, *Love On The Spectrum* potentially serves as a negative representation of autism spectrum disorder in romance, emphasizing the need for more authentic and respectful portrayals created by or in collaboration with autistic individuals.

## **Introduction**

As a society, we are coming to better understand those with disabilities and how to properly represent them in all forms of media, like animation, fiction, non-fiction, and now reality TV. This progression applies to invisible disabilities as well, like the autism spectrum disorder, and how the disorder affects their daily lives. The form of media I'd like to focus on today will be a new & upcoming show, *Love On The Spectrum*. It's described on Netflix as "In this romantic documentary series, people on the autism spectrum look for love and navigate the changing world of dating and relationships." (Love on the Spectrum, 2022) In addition, it's tagged as a Romance Reality and a Documentary Series. Google has a more in-depth look at the show, saying "Seven adults with autism dive headlong into a dating group to explore the unpredictable world of romance, tackling misconceptions about both themselves and how they want to live" and categorizing it as a Reality show. It was formed in 2022 but has gained a lot of

attention this year due to the audience's adoration for its newest season's cast. During *Love On the Spectrum*, they follow a cast member as they go through their day-to-day, trying to find love, but they interview the participant and their close relationships to understand the type of person they are and the type of individual they're looking for romantically, so in turn, they can arrange dates for them. Let's take a deep look into the meaning of the show and each portion of their presentation of their autistic participants.

### **Presentation**

To start, let's compare it by looks alone, essentially judge a book by its cover, and measure the differences shown by its reality show counterparts. The first thing I noticed that differed from other dating reality shows on Netflix was its tags. Before its description, it has a content warning rating of TV-14, which seems quite abnormal for the type of show it is, since all other dating reality shows on Netflix have a TV-MA rating for mature audiences only, making it a tier above *Love On The Spectrum*. Next, when it's described, the tags in order are Humorous, Intimate, Reality, Dating, Heartfelt, Human Interest, and Documentary Series. In the majority of other reality dating shows offered on Netflix, humorous was absent from the tags, but in every other one on Netflix, it is the final tag. This is troubling, as it suggests the interactions, behaviors, and traits of those on the spectrum are perceived — or deliberately framed— as inherently more humorous, quirky, or entertaining than those depicted in comparable shows of their nature.

In addition, both the description for *Love On The Spectrum* and a multitude of comments made by the directors of the show categorize it as a documentary series rather than a reality show. This is noteworthy because I believe the use of the reality TV genre is a tool they've used to deny expectations of accurate presentation and avoid accountability for inaccurate or harmful perpetuation of stereotypes. It's known as Genre Misrepresentation, with applicable subterms being Fact and Fiction Blur and Constructed Authenticity. Genre Misrepresentation is

defined when a show strategically shifts or adopts a genre label to avoid the ethical and factual expectations that come with genres like journalism or documentary filmmaking; Both of which Love On The Spectrum has claimed to be, even stated by the director Cian O'Clery (Kurchak, 2024). We also see the use of fact and fiction blur in context, where a documentary slips into entertainment tropes and loses factual integrity, followed by constructed authenticity, where a show profits from selling the illusion of authenticity while manipulating the content for entertainment purposes. For example, Many critics of the show have pointed out how the editing constantly up-plays the awkwardness of the autistic person's social interactions, especially on the first dates (Luse, 2024).

### **Stereotypes & Their Influence**

To appropriately analyze the portrayal of autistic individuals in this show, we must understand the stereotypes that influence the portrayal of autism in the media and the depictions we commonly see. We could address the portrayals of Savants, Different/" Quirky", Inspirational Porn, Infantilization, and Cold-Hearted as they relate to our focus, but we'll only be elaborating on a few stereotypes (Jones et al., 2023).

Let's focus on Inspirational Porn, coined by a late disability activist, is described as the objectification of disabled individuals for inspiration to both the disabled and able-bodied (Trombka, n.d.). This has also been called the "glorified supercrip" narrative as it presents disabled people doing tasks that are seemingly taken for granted or extraordinary with their condition, like dating or finding a romantic relationship (Ryalls, 2023). This narrative both normalizes and others people with disabilities because the portrayal of a disabled person doing something similar to what nondisabled individuals do is only inspirational in that it relies on ableist notions that people with disabilities cannot perform these mundane actions (Ryalls, 2023). The autistic people in Love On The Spectrum can be framed within this narrative due to the premise of the show relying on the disability of its participants.

Starting with the basis of the show, it relies on our cast having autism. In contrast, the producers and writers of the show are not neurodivergent, or autistic led which in itself may play into the “Element of Spectacle” stereotype of autism in media, where one's disability is represented in an exaggerated or emphasized way that often comes at the person's expense (Ellis, 2024). The fact that a person being autistic and seeking love in itself is a new twist or shock to constitute a dating show so it then begs the question is the a documentary to support autistic individuals or is it meant to be a gimmick to show how different autistic people are from their neurotypical peers, especially when it comes to such complex challenges like intimate relationships.

Next, Infantilization is the prolonged treatment and perception of a person as if they are a child, in this case, due to their disability and autistic traits. This can include changing speech patterns while talking to or about an individual with autism, like talking slowly and loudly. Or how it's portrayed in Love On The Spectrum through constantly using wildly silly and whimsical music in the background, at times babying or taunting the adults about their sexual desires, having most of the interviews clips we see be of the than focusing on the parents or friends of the autistic individual rather than our actual cast member, passively dismissing or even disrespecting the boundaries of the participants, and having a very peppy and childlike narrator throughout the episodes.

### **Media Criticism & Audience Perception**

People love this show. Each time a new season rolls around, Love On The Spectrum is consistently featured on Netflix's weekly Top 10 most watched and beloved series. Additionally, its views exceed 3.5, and its tag on TikTok features well beyond 35 thousand posts. Why could this be? A combination of bias and socially developed stereotypes, and a decline in media literacy. Media criticism, more commonly known as media literacy, essentially means being able to look at what we're watching with a critical eye, understanding not just what is being shown,

but how and why it's being shown that way. When we watch a show that's labeled a documentary, we might assume everything is untouched, real, accurate, and truthful. But that's not always the case, and without media literacy, we risk accepting inaccurate or even harmful portrayals as authentic and adopting unhealthy mentalities as our own.

For *Love On The Spectrum*, it's crucial to recognize how its editing, music, narration, and overall production choices shape our perception of the autistic cast, especially as possibly allistic (non-autistic) viewers. Even if the actions are unintentional, these aren't random or unbiased decisions, they guide the viewer to feel a certain way about the people on screen and their disability, feelings that live beyond binge-watching. Feelings that form one's real-life interaction and perceptions of the autistic people they come across. When the music is overly whimsical or when narration is overly cheerful and childlike, it can paint the cast in a certain light that might not reflect who they actually are. Even interview choices, like focusing more on the family members than the autistic participants themselves, send messages about who we should be listening to or empathizing with.

Without proper media literacy, viewers may not notice these choices at all. They may continue to view the cast as "cute," "wholesome," "awkward," or "quirky", words often used to describe autistic people through a lens of infantilization or inspiration porn. These kinds of reactions aren't just harmless; they can reinforce stereotypes, even if the show didn't mean to. In fact, our current Secretary of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., has said that those with autism spectrum disorder destroy families and those diagnosed will grow up to never have the ability to do many things, including dating (Braun-Silva, 2025). In a way, this show proves this wrong based on its existence, but it still displays those with ASD being "different" from "normal" dating. This is exactly why it's so important to think critically about the media we consume.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I do not feel that Love On The Spectrum has been an appropriate representation of relationships with or between autistic people due to the stereotypes influencing its creation, editing, presentation, audience, and choice of participation. This does not mean the behaviors and traits of those in the show are inaccurate or cannot be relatable to both autistic and allistic individuals. Though it does mean ableism is present in both the portrayal and interpretation by the producers, along with the parts of the audience. Whether intentionally or not, this show could be considered a negative form of representation for those with autism spectrum disorder. This is simply a surface-level analysis of autistic representation in media and how Love On The Spectrum plays a role. However, this requires a more in-depth examination to truly be understood in an informed and comprehensive manner.

Finally, being media literate doesn't mean we can't enjoy shows or appreciate moments of connection on-screen. It just means we must always watch with caution and awareness, no matter the form of media. We must question the narrative, consider who is telling the story, and think about whose voice is centered or left out. Especially for media that claims to represent marginalized or misunderstood communities, that awareness makes all the difference. It's not only what helps us separate authentic representation from something that might just be entertainment wrapped in good intentions, but it's a skill that can even help us spot misinformation or propaganda from those speaking for us.

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