

# From Autism to Queerness: The Shifting Politics of Representation in *Atypical* (Netflix, 2017-2021)

Do Autismo à Queerness:  
As Políticas Mutáveis  
da Representação em *Atypical*

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## Abstract

This article examines the evolving politics of representation in the Netflix series *Atypical* (2017–2021). Through qualitative content analysis of the full series and online fan comments on X (Twitter), it explores the show's shift from an autism-centered coming-of-age narrative to one increasingly concerned with queer visibility, a shift amplified by one of the lead actor's offscreen coming out as nonbinary. While the series does not always offer a flawless portrayal and occasionally falls into familiar tropes, it actively attempts to challenge and correct these representations, signaling a commitment to more nuanced depictions of identity. The convergence of on-screen and offscreen narratives demonstrates how authenticity functions simultaneously as cultural and commercial capital, while also revealing the competitive dynamics of representational visibility in contemporary streaming media. Rather than reading this queer turn as problematic, the article advocates for a politics of multiplicity that sustains intersecting narratives of neurodiversity, gender, sexuality, class, and race, instead of privileging a single axis of marginalization. Ultimately, it contributes to current debates on television representation by showing how platform logics, audience discourses, and creative labor co-produce evolving regimes of visibility, empathy, and normalization.

## Keywords

Autism  
Fandom  
Queer representation  
Neurodiversity  
Television series  
*Atypical*

## Resumo

Este artigo examina a política em transformação da representação na série *Atypical* (2017–2021), da Netflix. Por meio de uma análise de conteúdo qualitativa da série completa e de comentários de fãs no X (Twitter), o estudo explora a transição da narrativa, que inicialmente se centrava no autismo e na passagem à vida adulta, para um foco crescente na visibilidade queer – mudança amplificada pela revelação pública de uma das atrizes principais como pessoa não binária. Embora a série nem sempre ofereça uma representação impecável e, por vezes, recaia em estereótipos conhecidos, ela procura ativamente desafiar e corrigir essas representações, demonstrando um compromisso com retratos mais complexos da identidade. A convergência entre as narrativas dentro e fora da tela evidencia como a autenticidade funciona simultaneamente como capital cultural e comercial, ao mesmo tempo em que revela as dinâmicas competitivas da visibilidade representacional na mídia de streaming contemporânea. Em vez de interpretar essa guinada queer como problemática, o artigo defende uma política da multiplicidade que sustente narrativas interseccionais de neurodiversidade, gênero, sexualidade, classe e raça, em vez de privilegiar um único eixo de marginalização. Por fim, o estudo contribui para os debates atuais sobre representação televisiva ao demonstrar como as lógicas das plataformas, os discursos do público e o trabalho criativo coproduzem regimes em evolução de visibilidade, empatia e normalização.

## Palavras-chave

Autismo  
Fandom  
Representação queer  
Neurodiversidade  
Série de televisão  
*Atypical*

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, platforms such as Netflix have positioned themselves as agents of social progress through the rhetoric of inclusion. This is particularly significant considering that “television series create social imaginaries, since as agents of socialization, they shape social standards about what should be considered acceptable in a given time and place” (Simon et al. 2023, p.23). In this sense, as Cascajosa Virino (2016, p. 27) argues, television series not only produce discourses, but also function as legitimizing rituals, reinforcing and naturalizing specific social norms and values. Hence, TV series such as *Atypical* (2017–2021), *Sex Education* (2019–2023), and *Special* (2019–2021) exemplify a new televisual paradigm that foregrounds marginality (García-Ramos, & Villamar-Prevost, 2023, p.5). That said, these elements function not only as a narrative focus but also, at times, as a strategic device aligned with platform branding, occasionally attracting criticism for tokenistic representation. In other words, one of Netflix’s aims is to stand out in an increasingly saturated audiovisual market, rather than just being driven primarily by a commitment to social inclusion. In addition, these same politics of inclusion within these productions are often fraught with

contradiction: while such narratives promise visibility for marginalized identities, they simultaneously risk reinforcing the very normative frameworks they claim to subvert.

In the realm of mental disorders, scholars have noted that portrayals of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have proliferated across U.S. television fiction in recent years (Belcher & Maich, 2014, p. 100; Mastandrea, 2020, p. 159). The TV series *Atypical* (2017–2021) stands as a particularly emblematic example of this ambivalence. The first season’s promotional discourse positioned the show as a coming-of-age narrative centered on an autistic teenager without intellectual disability, pursuing independence, love, and self-definition, an apparent progression from earlier portrayals that often pathologized autistic individuals as incapable of achieving social, economic, or familial fulfillment (Mastandrea, 2020). *Atypical*’s depiction of ASD without intellectual disability appeared to mark a notable advancement in televisual representations of neurodivergence. Through its narrative and aesthetic choices, the series offered a more nuanced and seemingly clinically informed portrayal that moved beyond the limitations of earlier one-dimensional depictions. Narratively, by focusing on therapy sessions, family dynamics, and Sam’s internal monologues, and aesthetically, through the use of repetitive sounds and images that mimic behavioral repetition, *Atypical* presents an individual actively engaged in understanding and navigating his neurodivergence. This perspective invites viewers to apprehend autism as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed or pathologized condition, marking a significant departure from conventional portrayals that have typically rendered autistic characters as static or socially detached.

However, the scholarly reception of *Atypical* (Nordahl-Hansen, 2017) revealed a sharp disjunction between representational intent and authenticity, as the series continued to rely on familiar tropes and faced criticism for its casting decisions, particularly the choice to cast a non-autistic actor in the lead role, thereby perpetuating a long-standing cinematic convention in which disability is “performed” rather than embodied (Higueras-Ruiz & Pérez-Rufí, 2025, p.105).

Sam Gardner’s character (Keir Gilchrist) epitomizes a cisgender, heterosexual male protagonist whose depiction aligns with the *bingo*

card syndrome<sup>1</sup>, particularly the *savant* archetype<sup>2</sup>, reinforcing what Draaisma (2009, p. 1478) identifies as the false cultural illusion that individuals with extraordinary cognitive abilities are uniquely capable of integrating into or succeeding within society. Although the series grounds Sam's diagnosis in medical legitimacy (Lopera-Mármol, et al., 2023), his portrayal often resembles what Morgan (2019) coined as a "medical textbook" for neurotypical audiences, an ostensibly educational but ultimately distancing device that renders the character at times implausible (Wolff, 2018). As Murray (2008) observes, such practices transform disability into a metaphor for difference rather than a lived experience, reaffirming the neurotypical body as the default vehicle for audience empathy.

## 2. Reframing the Spectrum: Gendered Constructions of Autism in Television

Although these televisual representations have helped promote a neurodiverse discourse and destigmatize ASD, they have also often reduced it to being understood only as a disorder without a cognitive deficit. Thus, masking the actual consequences and difficulties that ASD can generate to someone living with it daily (Draaisma, 2009, p.1478). As a result, people with ASD who do not speak or have intellectual disabilities are still significantly underrepresented (Johnson, 2021, p.87), although there are exceptions, e.g., *Jack of the Red Hearts* (Grillo, 2015) or *Sing* (Sia, 2021). In fact, the issue of the characterization of underrepresented characters in television and film fiction is a recurring theme in many fan communities (Jenkins, 2017; Florini, 2019; McInroy et al., 2021). In response to sustained critique, subsequent seasons introduced autistic characters with different levels of disability portrayed by autistic actors, a move that broadened the discourse of neurodiversity to engage with its classed and gendered dimensions, though often within constrained representational frameworks. This shift carried particular significance, since the *savant syndrome* trope and, by extension, autism, has traditionally been inscribed within a masculinized discourse of intelligence, its frequent portrayal without cognitive deficit reinforcing

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1 Binge card syndrome is when a character represents all the symptoms and behaviors in a single character (McMahon-Coleman and Weaver, 2020, p.17).

2 The trope of the "autistic savant" often relies on a reductive metaphor, framing neurodivergent cognition as machine-like rather than uniquely human.

normative and gendered hierarchies of ability (Lopera-Mármol, 2020), e.g. *The Good Doctor* (ABC, 2017–). The integration of ASD consultants (Michelle Dean) and neurodivergent casting reflected an attempt to address prior representational shortcomings and to acknowledge the ethical responsibilities inherent in shaping public understandings of autism through television (McMahon-Coleman & Weaver, 2020, p. 7) and underscored the show’s commitment to ethical representation (Martínez-Lucena & Cambra-Badii, 2020). Yet, as Rajan (2021, p. 67) observes, the multifaceted and heterogeneous nature of ASD continues to challenge attempts at comprehensive representation. Consequently, *Atypical*’s portrayals often unfolded within sanitized, excessively optimistic settings, disconnected from the systemic inequalities that shape access to healthcare and social support in the United States. Hence, in a sense, this integration of diversity operates as aesthetic affirmation rather than political engagement, rendering the narrative detached from social and structural realities.

That said, it did undergo a notable evolution by gradually introducing greater gender diversity among its autistic characters. The inclusion of autistic women sought to challenge the masculinized bias that continues to dominate both televisual representation and diagnostic discourse, as well as the earlier criticism surrounding its male-centered portrayal of autism. This tendency has also been manifested in other contemporary series such as *Everything’s Gonna Be Okay* (Freeform, 2020–2021) and *Young Royals* (Netflix, 2021–2024). However, these depictions are often manifested within what might be termed “positive exceptionalism”: female autistic characters are typically placed in supportive environments, depicted as academically gifted or socially adaptive, rather than reflecting the late diagnoses, structural invisibility, and intersectional struggles many autistic women face because, even if ASD is more prevalent in men, many women are diagnosed with autism later in life because they are more able to imitate adaptive behaviors and camouflage their areas of difficulty, so they are underrepresented (Nordahl-Hansen & Oien, 2018; Lord et al., 2018, p. 2). As McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2020, p. 29) suggest, the “Aspergirl”<sup>3</sup> has become “a subculture within a subculture,” an exception that proves the rule of limited gender diversity in autism

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3 Although the term “Asperger’s” has largely fallen out of use following its removal from clinical classification and its association with hierarchical understandings of autism, we reference it here solely in direct quotations and to reflect its continued recognition in popular discourse.

representation. Consequently, while intersectional diversity encompassing gender, class, and race is beginning to gain increasing attention in both televisual and scholarly contexts, it remains the exception rather than the norm (Lomas Martínez et al., 2024, p.305; Harper, 2009).

## 2.1. Domesticating Difference: Queerness and Autism in *Atypical*

Moreover, as Diedrich (2021, p. 82) observes, such equivalences risk collapsing distinct axes of identity into a generalized discourse of “difference,” thereby diluting their political and experiential specificity. In *Atypical*, this tendency is amplified by normalization strategies voiced through neurotypical characters, such as the refrain “nobody’s normal,” which, while intended to destigmatize, this phrase subtly repositions autism and can later be applied to other narratives along a separate line of legibility: something framed as “ordinary” only by analogy rather than by engaging its particularities. This logic dovetails with what McRuer (2006) conceptualizes as *compulsory able-bodiedness*, the ideological demand that difference be deemed acceptable only insofar as it can be reconciled with neoliberal narratives of success (Han, 2012) and self-management. Within *Atypical*, queerness operates less as a disruptive force than as a developmental milestone: Casey’s relationship is folded into a moral economy of self-acceptance, while Sam’s trajectory toward independence mirrors the ideal of the self-sufficient, employable subject.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Sample

This article employs a qualitative content analysis of all the seasons of the series *Atypical* (Netflix, 2017–2021) and online fan comments to explore how they engaged with the show on Twitter (now, X) during the release of its final season. This analysis focuses on fan discourses surrounding the intersection of queerness and neurodivergence, after the review of the literature proved an inclusionary aim that appeared central to the show’s narrative evolution. Hence, the selected period spans from July to September 2021, coinciding with the premiere and airing of the series’ last season. Hence, it examines how viewers interpreted and negotiated the parallel narratives of autism and queerness. Specifically, it analyzes how online

fan communities responded to, discussed, and reframed these storylines to articulate broader meanings of identity and normalization. By analyzing user-generated comments on X, the research explores how audiences made sense of the co-presence of these two narratives and how their interpretations both reflect and contest dominant cultural understandings of inclusion and difference.

X was chosen as the primary research site because it functions as a digital agora for real-time commentary and discussion around television dramas. Beyond serving as a platform for audience reactions, X also facilitates transmedia engagement, enabling fans to extend the narrative world of the series through hashtags, memes, and fan-generated content (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2022).

### 3.2. Methods

The analytical process of the qualitative content analysis combined an initial comprehensive viewing of *Atypical* with a second, focused viewing aimed at segmenting the series into units of analysis, including sequences, scenes, and dialogues. These units were examined to identify representations of neurodiversity, queerness, gender dynamics, and processes of normalization. The study explores how autism and queer identities are articulated within the series, particularly in relation to their coexistence and shifting narrative prominence within platform-driven logics of representation.

A system of deductive categories was established based on two complementary frameworks: a cultural-political approach centred on representation, authenticity, normalization, and intersectionality (Øien et al., 2018), and an audiovisual approach focused on point of view, framing, and narrative distribution. These categories were subsequently refined through inductive analysis. The study then conducted a narrative and audiovisual examination of dramatic structure, character development, and point of view, paying particular attention to the series' shift from an autism-centred narrative to an increased emphasis on queer visibility.

Regarding the reception of the TV series, the tweets analyzed were written in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. When conducting the fieldwork, a total of 2,542 tweets were analyzed. This multilingual approach was guided by two main considerations. Firstly, the notable presence of fan activity in those languages, and secondly, the authors' proficiency in them, which allowed for a broader and more nuanced linguistic scope.

The research followed a three-step analytical process. First, relevant keywords and hashtags related to the study's central themes were identified. Second, specific accounts associated with the series, such as the official *Atypical* account (@Atypical) and major fan communities, were monitored. Third, the collected tweets were systematically coded using Lumivero NVivo software, following the principles of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006), allowing discursive categories to emerge inductively from the data.

The coding process was conducted collaboratively by the co-authors to enhance neutrality and inter-coder reliability. Coding criteria and operational definitions were refined through joint work sessions, ensuring consistency and validity in the categorization process (Pedrero-Esteban et al., 2021).

The hashtags and terms analyzed included #Izzie, #Casey, #Cazzie, #queer, #bisexual, #lesbian and #Evan, along with other terms related to these themes. Fan discussions were also examined within official and fan-run accounts using the tags #Atypical and @Atypical. From this analysis, the following thematic categories emerged: Clichés and stereotypes related to negative representations of bisexual women; positive representations of bisexual relationships and fans who demand that the series continue to address autism representation. Regarding the handling of data collected from X, the tweets shown in the article have been anonymized in order to avoid disclosing the identity or pseudonym of the fans.

#### 4. Analysis and results

The analysis reveals that *Atypical*'s assumptions of gender still persist. Firstly, regarding care, as Wolff (2018, p. 45) already noted "normality is reproduced through the deployment of gender and conventional family roles to illustrate how autism should be managed primarily by women". As the reception showcases, the series often positions Sam's mother and sister as default caregivers, and their emotional and psychological complexities are overshadowed by their roles of support. For instance, in S1E04, after Casey earns a track scholarship to transfer schools, her parents initially prioritize Sam's school plans. Evan, her boyfriend, steps in and advocates for her; as an outside voice, he pushes them to reconsider, and Casey is ultimately allowed to go. In other words, her interests are protected only after an external agent intervenes. This tendency reinforces essentialist notions of femininity and emotional labor (Hochschild,

2003), and, as Rivkin and Ryan (2016) suggest, perpetuates a cultural silence around the emotional lives of neurotypical siblings. Their own inner lives and adolescent struggles are frequently marginalized (Jack, 2014). Consequently, when a male protagonist occupies the narrative center, female characters such as Elsa and Casey are often reduced to instruments of his development (Davidson and Henderson, 2010). However, by the third and fourth seasons, *Atypical* underwent a noticeable thematic shift, giving Casey a bigger narrative and providing more nuance to her story. While earlier seasons prioritized autism as the core subject, later seasons increasingly centered on the queerness of Casey Gardner as seen by the numerous and increased hashtags in those seasons. Her romantic relationship with Izzie, known by the shipping name *Cazzie* among fans, became one of the show's most emotionally resonant storylines, gaining significant visibility in fan communities as seen by the hashtags.

This narrative evolution coincided with the off-screen coming out of Jack Haven, previously known as Brigitte Lundy-Paine, as nonbinary in 2019 (Kim, 2019; Reynolds, 2018). The convergence between the actor's personal identity and Casey's on-screen journey blurred the lines between representation and reality, exemplifying what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, p.11) describes as the "feedback loop between authenticity and visibility" in contemporary digital culture. Haven's public self-identification enriched the series' credibility and simultaneously strengthened Netflix's brand image as a platform committed to progressive representation and inclusion beyond on-screen.

The queer turn in *Atypical* is not inherently problematic nor does it fall under *tokenism*; rather, it highlights the complex negotiations that occur when multiple marginalized identities coincide. In this case, neurodivergence and queerness coexist and at times compete for narrative prominence. In other words, while the inclusion of a queer storyline expanded *Atypical*'s representational diversity and allowed to extend Casey's character beyond one of the most prominent caregivers, it also contributed to a gradual displacement of autism as the central focus. Sam's narrative, once the emotional anchor of the series, receded into stability, while Casey's coming-of-age arc became the primary engine of character and thematic development.

This shift reflects a broader trend within inclusive television, in which different identity categories are represented sequentially rather than simultaneously, framed as "the intersectional impossibility" phenomenon (Ferguson, 2012). That is, the institutional framework of diversity often flattens difference by highlighting one marginalized identity at a time, rather than engaging with the intersections

between them. In *Atypical*, the move from autism to queerness does not erase the former, but reframes it, even if at times it also displaces it, within a larger discourse of non-normativity and self-discovery. Casey's character deepens this interplay of identity politics. Her struggle with sexuality parallels Sam's negotiation of neurodivergence: both are coming-of-age processes shaped by self-doubt, social anxiety, and the quest for belonging. Through Casey's discomfort with gendered expectations, for example, in S4E04, *Atypical* foregrounds the tension between institutional norms and individual identity expression through its focus on the school uniform, illustrating how gender nonconformity disrupts the rigid binaries embedded within educational and social structures. Ultimately, *Atypical*'s representational evolution exemplifies the ongoing tension within inclusive media. On the one hand, the desire to broaden visibility across marginalized identities while on the other, the grappling difficulty of sustaining intersectional depth. Therefore, the show's shift from autism to queerness should not be read as a failure, but as evidence of an emerging need for multiple, coexisting narratives of different experiences that reflect the complexity of real-world identities rather than isolating them into separate, sequential frameworks of diversity.

Moreover, the results emerging from the analysis of *Atypical* fandom posts on X highlight several key thematic categories: 1) clichés and stereotypes related to the negative representation of bisexual women; 2) positive portrayals of bisexual relationships that emphasize visibility and authenticity; and 3) fans who demand that the series continue to address autism representation. These categories highlight how fans engage critically with the series, both celebrating its advances in inclusive storytelling and pointing out its limitations. The conversations on X, thus, provide valuable insight into how audiences interpret, negotiate, and challenge media representations of bisexuality and queer identity in contemporary television.

According to the first thematic category, the fandom analysis exposes a complex negotiation between progressive and regressive discourses surrounding bisexual representation. On the surface, the series appears to embrace a more fluid understanding of sexuality, particularly through its depiction of Casey's coming out narrative and her resistance to traditional markers of gender and sexual normativity. Her rejection of conventional dress codes, such as the preference for androgynous or sporty clothing, visually articulates a break from binary frameworks of femininity and masculinity. This aesthetic choice, combined with the narrative centering on a young woman's self discovery and same sex desire, positions *Atypical* as part of a

broader televisual trend that seeks to normalize and diversify queer visibility in mainstream media.

However, this apparent inclusivity is undermined by the narrative arc that follows Casey's coming out, particularly the decision to frame her bisexual awakening through the lens of infidelity. By situating her emotional and sexual exploration within an act of cheating, the series inadvertently reproduces one of the most persistent stereotypes associated with bisexuality, that of inherent promiscuity and moral instability. This trope not only aligns bisexuality with deceit and excess but also reaffirms the heteronormative expectation that bisexual desire is unstable or transitional rather than a legitimate sexual identity in its own right.

In fact, some fans viewed negatively that Casey's decision to leave her boyfriend, Evan, in part because he had been portrayed as a caring and stabilizing figure. In contrast, her new romantic interest, Izzie, was initially perceived by many fans as unsympathetic and even dismissive toward Casey (see Figure 1).

não entra na minha cabeça quem assiste atypical e tenta desmerecer o evan por cazzie. ele sempre esteve do lado da família e principalmente da casey e sempre< incentivou ela a seguir o sonho dela enquanto a izzie:



Figure 1. A fan comment about the new Casey's bisexual relationship (in Portuguese)<sup>4</sup>

Source: X.

4 The English translation of the tweet: "I just can't understand how anyone can watch Atypical and try to belittle Evan because of Cazzie. He was always by the family's side, especially Casey's, and he always encouraged her to follow her dream. Meanwhile, Izzie:"

Before the series ended, some fans proposed the theory that Casey’s bisexuality would be temporary and that she would eventually get back together with Evan, as they believed it could be just a rough patch in their relationship rather than a definitive breakup. In fact, some even considered it a mistake to build an LGBTQ+ relationship by breaking up what they saw as an ideal heterosexual couple (see figure 2). This connects to the idea that, for some people, young women are only bisexual because it is a phase in their lives, not a consciously chosen sexual identity. Hence, their reactions illustrate the persistent tension between media platforms’ rhetoric of diversity and the audience’s internalized investment in normative romance at times forming parasocial relationships, exposing the limits of inclusion when queerness is still perceived as narratively disruptive rather than integral to character development.

Pra mim, existem outras maneiras de introduzir personagens lgbt à série, sem mexer com casais já formados. Casey e Evan são perfeitos um pro outro, e só estão passando por uma fase ruim (tudo mil maravilhas não existe e brigas fazem parte) por isso acho que vão voltar ainda

**Figure 2.** A fan wonders whether Casey and Evan could be together again (in Portuguese)<sup>5</sup>

Source: X.

Regarding the second category that emerges from fans’ conversations on X, about Casey and Izzie’s relationship, positive portrayals of bisexual relationships that emphasize visibility and authenticity stand out. In fact, it becomes evident that certain stereotypes are being challenged or eliminated in the media representation of bisexual women’s aesthetics (see figure 3), which is something many fans appreciate. In particular, the figure illustrates how *Atypical* subverts traditional visual tropes by portraying the femme-presenting girl as lesbian and the more masculine-presenting girl as bisexual, thereby reversing conventional expectations of how queerness is visually coded on screen.

5 The English translation of the tweet: “For me, there are other ways to introduce LGBT characters into the series without interfering with couples that are already established. Casey and Evan are perfect for each other, and they’re just going through a rough patch (nothing is perfect, and arguments are part of it), so I think they’ll get back together eventually.”

This inversion not only broadens representational possibilities but also signals a subtle shift toward more diverse and fluid depictions of gender expression and sexual identity within mainstream television.



**Figure 3.** A fan comment about the different roles of lesbian and bisexual women

Source: X.

Furthermore, many fans' discussions focus on the importance of Casey and Izzie's romantic relationship as a normalization of bisexual relationships between young women (see the fan conversation in figure 4). Specifically, the affective attachment of this fan toward the series transcends the screen. Therefore, the mere act of watching the series for engagement purposes (Grandío-Pérez, 2016) demonstrates a genuine involvement and identification with her personal experiences beyond the show.



**Figure 4. A conversation between some fans about their identification with the characters**  
 Source: X.

According to the third category, the data reveals a group of fans who argue that *Atypical*'s narrative has lost its original focus and no longer prioritizes the representation of autism. Although some of these fans express appreciation for the queer relationship between Casey and Izzie (see figure 5), their main concern continues to be the need for a more positive and authentic depiction of autism. Within this category, fans also specifically call for the inclusion of characters with ASD who are not portrayed through stereotypes, unlike Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-2019), as they believe that the introduction of the queer storyline has blurred what they perceive to be the show's initial purpose.

Eu amo Cazzie gente, achei super bacana a série retratar isso junto com o autismo. Só que as pessoas só falam de Cazzie, cazzie, Cazzie até a própria netflix, as páginas da série parecem que esqueceram que a série aborda AUTISMO! Se procura "Atypical" no insta ou aqui mesmo você+

Figure 5. A fan claims that the TV series must continue messages about autism (in Portuguese)<sup>6</sup>  
Source: X.

## Discussion

These gestures toward inclusivity, however idealized, mark an important moment in contemporary representational politics. They suggest a growing awareness of intersectionality as an essential framework for understanding neurodiversity not as a fixed or monolithic condition but as a constellation of overlapping identities. *Atypical*'s trajectory from autism representation to queer visibility encapsulates the contradictions of inclusive television in the streaming era. It reflects the responsiveness of contemporary television to scholar criticism, audience demands, while also revealing how these claims for visibility can sometimes conflict with one another (see Figure 5) and the limitations of representation when it becomes an aesthetic or moral objective rather than a structural shift.

That said, the introduction of consultants, neurodivergent actors and actresses, and collaborations with advocacy organizations significantly enriched *Atypical*'s depiction of autism by bringing a greater authenticity and nuance to later portrayals, signaling a genuine effort to integrate lived experience into the creative process. Yet, both content and fandom analysis reveal that as the series evolved, particularly in its final seasons, the queer narrative surrounding Casey Gardner began to take precedence and even became the main narrative. Hence, *Atypical* underscores the need for a broader representational mode that avoids substituting one axis of difference for another and instead foregrounds their intersections. In this sense, *Atypical* is less

6 The English translation of the tweet: "I love Cazzie, guys. I thought it was super cool that the show portrayed that along with autism. It's just that people only talk about Cazzie, Cazzie, Cazzie, even Netflix itself! The show's pages seem to have forgotten that the series is actually about AUTISM! If you look up "Atypical" on Instagram or even here, you..."

a story exclusively about autism or queerness than a meta-narrative about the evolving politics of visibility and belonging.

That said, rather than functioning as a broad reflection on the boundaries of normative identity, the title *Atypical* marks autism and queerness as a category apart, inadvertently reinforcing an *otherness effect*, previously mentioned. It presents them at times as parallel strands that coexist without fundamentally reconfiguring the norm. In this way, neurological difference, gender, and sexuality remain compartmentalized rather than mutually constitutive, and the boundaries of normativity are domesticated rather than meaningfully undone.

The series title itself functions as more than a clinical reference to ASD, and serves as a wider reflection on the boundaries of normative identity. By integrating neurodiversity and queerness, *Atypical* situates itself within contemporary frameworks of intersectional representation, where neurological disorders, gender, and sexuality operate as interconnected rather than separate dimensions of experience.

## Conclusions

*Atypical* exemplifies the shifting politics of representation in contemporary streaming television, where the pursuit of inclusivity functions both as a creative impulse and as a branding strategy. The show's evolution, from its initial focus on autism to its later emphasis on queerness, illustrates how representational agendas are shaped by overlapping pressures from institutional frameworks, audience expectations, and platform logics. The analysis of *Atypical* fandom on X further reveals that audiences actively participate in these negotiations of meaning. Fan discourses celebrate the increased visibility of bisexuality and gender fluidity. As seen in the results, many viewers praise the show for normalizing same-sex relationships between young women, others criticized their reliance on tropes while simultaneously lamenting the diminished attention to autism as the center theme. Therefore, fandom reactions highlighted the contradictions of inclusive television, in which one identity's visibility may come at the expense of another's. Moreover, some fans interpret Casey's bisexuality as a temporary phase or view her coming out through the lens of infidelity, reproducing heteronormative assumptions, whereas others celebrate the show's attempt to portray bisexuality with authenticity and emotional depth. Thus, the tensions within fan

discourse also underscore the challenge of sustaining intersectional representation in a televisual landscape that often privileges singular, marketable narratives of inclusion. Hence, these reactions attest to the active role of audiences in shaping the meaning of representation, demonstrating that visibility alone does not guarantee social or narrative equity.

Ultimately, *Atypical* encapsulates both the promise and the limits of contemporary inclusion. Its representational strategies gesture toward intersectionality yet remain constrained by the industrial and narrative structures that govern mainstream television. By framing differences as compatible with, rather than disruptive to, the normative order, the series reveals how inclusion can operate as a form of domesticated diversity, in other words, progress that rarely translates into structural transformation.

Nevertheless, *Atypical*'s trajectory also demonstrates the growing cultural centrality of neurodiversity and queerness within popular television series and the evolving role of fandom in holding platforms accountable to their representational claims. The series thus stands as a productive case through which to examine the entanglement of authenticity, visibility, and marketability in the streaming era. Ultimately, this article illustrates how fans and viewers use social media as a site of affective engagement, critical discourse, and identity affirmation, thereby transforming television consumption into an arena of participatory cultural politics.

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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**Authors Contributions** Contribuições dos Autores

Authors 1, 2, and 3 contributed to the conception and design of the study, as well as to the data analysis and the critical revision of the manuscript. Authors 1 and 2 were responsible for data collection and for drafting the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript to be published.

As autoras 1, 2 e 3 contribuíram para a concepção e desenho do estudo, bem como para a análise dos dados e a revisão crítica do manuscrito. As autoras 1 e 2 foram responsáveis pela recolha de dados e pela redação do manuscrito. Todas as autoras aprovaram a versão final do manuscrito a publicar.

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