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THE PICTURE OF THE AUTISM SPECTRUM IN TELEVISION PROGRAMMES FOR CHILDREN ON THE EXAMPLE OF “SESAME STREET”

OBRAZ SPEKTRUM AUTYZMU W PROGRAMACH TELEWIZYJNYCH DLA DZIECI NA PRZYKŁADZIE „ULICY SEZAMKOWEJ”

Streszczenie: „Ulica Sezamkowa” jest jednym z najbardziej udanych programów edukacyjnych na świecie. Jego powstanie w 1969 r. poprzedziły szerokie konsultacje nie tylko z zakresu produkcji telewizyjnej, ale również z psychologii i pedagogiki. Powstał program, który nie tylko ma niwelować różnice w szansach edukacyjnych przedszkolaków, ale także kształtować ich postawy. Stąd w programie podejmowano również tematy takie jak zamachy z 11 września czy huragan Katrina. W 2017 r. do programu trafiła lalka, która ma przedstawiać czteroletnią dziewczynkę z autyzmem. W założeniu twórców programu jej obecność miała pozwolić wytłumaczyć dzieciom na czym polega autyzm i wykształcić postawę szacunku wobec osób z tym zaburzeniem. Niniejszy artykuł odpowiada na pytanie: jaki obraz spektrum autyzmu zaprezentowali twórcy „Ulicy Sezamkowej” na przykładzie Julii? Zastosowano metodę analizy zawartości przekazu telewizyjnego. Pozwoliła ona na przeanalizowanie 18 epizodów „Ulicy Sezamkowej” i jednego odcinka specjalnego. Ich analiza pokazała, że epizody z Julią nie dają pełnego spektrum objawów autyzmu, ale akcentują te, które mogą być najłatwiej rozpoznawalne przez dzieci. Drugim ważnym elementem przekazu jest budowanie szacunku dla dzieci z autyzmem. W pewnych sytuacjach reagują inaczej, ale są godne poszanowania i nie można ich marginalizować. Epizody z Julią adresowane do dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym miały zrealizować przede wszystkim ten drugi cel co wydaje się, że zostało osiągnięte przez twórców programu.

Słowa kluczowe: „Ulica Sezamkowa”, autyzm, pedagogika medialna, telewizja edukacyjna

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Abstract: “Sesame Street” is one of the most successful educational programmes in the world. Its creation in 1969 was preceded by extensive consultations not only in the field of television production, but also in psychology and pedagogy. A show was created which is not only supposed to eliminate differences in educational opportunities for preschoolers, but also to shape their attitudes. Hence, the show also covered topics such as the September 11 attacks or Hurricane Katrina. In 2017, a puppet was added to the show, which is supposed to represent a four-year-old girl with autism. The creators of the show intended her presence to explain to children what autism is all about and to develop an attitude of respect towards people with this disorder. This paper answers the question: what picture of the autism spectrum was presented by the creators of “Sesame Street” on the example of Julia? The method of analysing the content of the television broadcast was used. It allowed to analyse 18 episodes of “Sesame Street” and one special episode. Their analysis showed that the episodes with Julia do not cover the full spectrum of autism symptoms, but accentuate those that can be most easily recognised by children. The second important element of the message is building respect for children with autism. They react differently in certain situations, but they are respectable and cannot be marginalised. Episodes with Julia, addressed to preschool children, were primarily intended to achieve the latter goal, which seems to have been achieved by the creators of the show.

Keywords: “Sesame Street”, autism, media pedagogy, educational television

Introduction

Television portrayals of people with autism tend to emphasize one personality trait, which makes it easier to achieve a dramatic effect in television productions, which, however, may be misleading in the portrayal of people on the autism spectrum (Winston, 2016; Rourke, & McGloin, 2019).

The image of autism in the media is distorted by the over-representation of savantism among the people presented, and it is usually associated with a group of white men aged 20-30. This does not reflect the complexity of the prevalence of autism in society and may be incomprehensible to recipients from different cultural circles. It creates a false image of people with autism and may lead to the creation of stereotypes (Howlin et al., 2009; Draaisma, 2009). Most media representations of autism also overrepresent automatic behaviours and underrepresent social communication deficits. There is also a lack of attempts to provide nuanced models of autism (Kelly et al., 2018).

Children with autism in television programmes have often been portrayed as a burden on the family and contributing to negative experiences for parents, especially mothers (Allen, 2017).

From an educational point of view, the way autism is presented on television has a positive or negative impact on the lives of people with autism and on the viewers’ true or false perceptions. The educational effectiveness of such performances largely depends on the knowledge of the educators (Nordahl-Hansen, Tøndevold, & Fletcher-Watson 2017).

Television depictions of autism, however, are socially decent. Many people, especially children, have never had contact with autistic people. However, the point is to build a relatively realistic picture of the autism spectrum. Instead, a fragmented image is created, which often creates prejudices or perpetuates stereotypes (Nordhal-Hansen, Oien, & Fletcher-Watson 2018).

Problems of social life in the message of “Sesame Street”

From the beginning, “Sesame Street” was treated primarily as an educational programme. It was supposed to equalise educational opportunities and help children reach school maturity. It was primarily about families in a worse financial situation and immigrant families. From the very beginning, a positive correlation between the programme and educational outcomes was noticeable (Morrow, 2006; Lemish, 2008; Mares & Pan, 2013; Kearney & Levine, 2015). Five-year-olds watching “Sesame Street” were able to recognise letters and numbers more easily, and achieved better results in understanding concepts. Undoubtedly, “Sesame Street” owes its success to the fact that it convinced the children’s parents. The effects may have been enhanced by parental involvement. In their opinion, it was an “educational” programme as opposed to commercial proposals. Parents found the show appropriate to support their own efforts (Morrow, 2006).

In the United States, the belief in the need for educational television programmes for children found its expression in legislation. After nearly two decades of campaigning, the *Children’s Television Act* was passed in 1990, requiring broadcasters to broadcast such programmes for children. Its fulfilment could be taken into account, for example, in the case of considering an application for licence renewal (Linebarger & Piotrowski, 2010). The discussion of the social usefulness of television has a long history. Although some (e.g. Khan & Paracha) consider “Sesame Street” to be the first educational programme for children, such productions have appeared before. One of the most successful was *Ding Dong School* – a show from the early 1950s (Wakin, 2001).

In addition to cognitive values, the show was also focused on social values, shaping attitudes and supporting children’s development. There were a number of challenges here that forced to go beyond just educational goals. Although producers, when introducing new goal to the show, usually did research early, they did not avoid failures. This was the case with the episode of 10 February 1976, in which M. Hamilton, playing the role of a witch, scared many children and the show provoked protests from parents (Borgenicht, 1998; Tempesta, 2022).

As the series progressed, more and more difficult topics began to emerge, which required more preparation to tell children about. This is how the 1988/1989 season covered the topics of love, marriage and pregnancy. The situation was used that one of the actresses – S. Manzano – got married and became pregnant. Prior to the airing of the series, 60 preschoolers were interviewed to find out how children

of this age understood the word “pregnancy”. It was decided to explain its meaning in the show and present the child’s development. The presentation of the heartbeat of S. Manzano’s unborn child in the show proved to be significant. However, it was decided not to translate the word “womb” because the children had difficulty distinguishing it from the word “room”. Sensitive to the concerns of many parents, the scriptwriters did not attempt any sex education in the show (The New York Times, 1989).

The show also had to deal with the challenges of well-known emergencies, especially the September 11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina. Particularly in the first case, children may have felt fearful and traumatised. To counteract this, an episode of the show was prepared, the main characters of which were firefighters. On the set of the show, a fire breaks out, which becomes an opportunity to showcase their strength, skills and caring. One of the main characters of “Sesame Street” Elmo is terrified. But a visit to the fire station and meeting the firefighters calms him down. The episode aired on 4 February 2002 (Owen, 2021).

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, it was easier to prepare the right material. The producers already had a series of episodes to be used to prepare material preparing people for the frequent hurricane threat in the southeastern US (Buis, 2012). *Sesame Workshop*, the producer of the show, not only prepared a five-part block as part of “Sesame Street”, but also other tools. On the website www.sesameworkshop.org, there were tips on how to deal with fear and anxiety, suggestions for workshops, and information materials. It was assumed that help was needed not only by children directly affected by the disaster in Mississippi and Louisiana, but also in other parts of the country due to the wide coverage of the disaster in the media (DeMott, 2005).

Sesame Workshop, when preparing to include an autistic muppet in the show, already had a lot of experience with how to talk about difficult things to children (Godman, 2020). Before Julia made her “Sesame Street” debut in 2015, she appeared in the *Sesame Street and Autism* initiative as a character in short cartoon films to help understand the essence of autism. Positive feedback from this experiment undoubtedly encouraged the producers to take further action. The idea of placing a four-year-old girl with autism in the most popular show for children was primarily to counteract the stigmatisation of children struggling with this disorder. The hidden nature of autism often leads to misunderstandings and sometimes even criticism and isolation of the child (Porter, 2018).

In addition to the experience in tackling difficult topics, an additional advantage was the employment of a puppeteer – S. Gordon – who herself has an autistic child. So not only did she know autism from her own family experience, but she also communicated with the autistic community to assess whether Julia’s character was an authentic portrait of an autistic child. This is how Rose, a Julia’s companion dog, also appeared on the show. Companion dogs are common in the autistic community (Rowe, 2019).

The autism spectrum has been present in film productions before. Since the late 1960s, film characters with autistic features have appeared. The 1969 film “Run Wild, Run Free” features Oliver, a ten-year-old boy with communication problems and spending time alone. In turn, in the film “Change of Habit” from the same year, an autistic girl appears (Wilson, 2020). However, the most popular film with an autistic theme was “Rain Man” from 1988. However, not all productions were so successful. TV series that touched on this topic, such as “The Good Doctor” (NBC) or “The Big Bang Theory” (CBS), are accused of treating the topic superficially and presenting about 10 percent. the autism spectrum (Gambacurta, 2020). At the same time, when the episodes with Julia in “Sesame Street” were being prepared, the British were working on a series with a similar theme. In 2017, the premiere of “Pablo” took place on CBeebies channel. The series tells the story of the adventures of a five-year-old boy with autism and his friends – animals (Baldock, 2017). In the same year, Julia appeared in “Sesame Street”. It was the 4715th episode of the series, which originally aired on 2 April 2017, i.e. on World Autism Awareness Day (Matthews, 2017).

Autism spectrum disorders

The latest DSM-5 and ICD-11 classifications have changed the approach to autistic behaviour. For example, they do not mention childhood autism, but use the broad category of autism spectrum disorders (DSM-5, 2022; ICD-11, 2022). Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder and its diagnosis is justified when the first symptoms appear within the first three years of a child’s life. An autism spectrum disorder is described in both classifications as a set of persistent deficits, exhibited by both children and adults. It primarily includes deficits in social communication, interaction, and repetitive inflexible behaviours, interests, or activities (Rosen et al., 2021; Chapman & Veit, 2021; Pellicano & Houting, 2022).

The aetiology of autism spectrum disorder is complex and multifactorial. In an attempt to explain them, various theses were put forward, some of which were quickly withdrawn, as in the case of the suggestion that the measles, mumps or rubella vaccine could be the cause of autism. The causes of autism are most likely a combination of several factors: genetic, developmental, infections, and those related to pregnancy and childbirth (DeStefano & Shimabukuro, 2019).

We observe the symptoms of autism in three basic dimensions:

- social communication,
- interaction,
- repetitive, stereotypical behaviour (NICE, 2021).

In the case of the first area, children on the autism spectrum may have problems with speaking and replace it with other forms of communication. They avoid eye contact. Facial expressions are also not legible and adequate to the messages (a similar situation may apply to oral statements). Echolalia may occur. Children

may have trouble expressing their needs and lack a sense of humour and the ability to decode metaphors (Frye, 2018).

Problems with communication also affect the level of interaction. Children do not look at objects that others point to. They may not be aware of other people's presence at all. They do not fit well in the group. They avoid initiating contact and have great difficulty with social play. They can not imitate, which is a particularly big loss at this developmental stage. They do not understand or talk about emotions (Vicker, 2009; Keating & Cook, 2020).

An autistic child is attached to routine behaviour and finds it difficult to adapt to novelties (e.g. changing school or furnishing the house). They become attached to unusual objects (e.g. keys) and show interest in narrow fields of knowledge (e.g. trains). They can spend a lot of time arranging toys in a specific way or watching moving objects. Stereotype movement disorders (e.g. spinning around one's own axis) are also part of the autistic spectrum (Johnson & Myers, 2007).

According to the assumption of the "Sesame Street" producers, a muppet with autism – Julia – is a girl aged four. For the preschool age, the following basic symptoms of autism can be distinguished for individual areas:

In the area of communication:

1. statements inappropriate to the situation,
2. speaking in an unusual tone of voice,
3. avoiding eye contact,
4. echolalia,
5. lack of sense of humour and irony,
6. lack of ability to communicate own needs.

In the area of interaction:

1. lack of interest in people,
2. lack of ability to initiate contact,
3. hypersensitivity to stimuli,
4. lack of involvement in group games,
5. difficulties showing and understanding emotions.

In the area of repetitive and stereotypical behaviour:

1. reluctance to change,
2. attachment to selected objects,
3. interest in narrow fields of knowledge,
4. stereotype movement disorders.

Method

The analysis of the content of the television broadcast has been an important method in the study of this medium since the beginning of its intensive development. In particular, many studies based on this method focused on harmful content that

could have a negative impact on children's development (Singer & Singer, 2001; Fisherkeller, 2002; Pecora et al., 2007; Fisch, 2008; Evra, 2009; Strasburger et al., 2009; Livingstone, 2009; Kompatsiaris et al., 2012).

The material for the analysis should be selected in a proper way so that it is not cursory, fragmentary or accidental. In the case of the analysis of the content of the television broadcast, the basic problem is often the collection of the right material, which is usually more difficult than in the case of analysing the content of the press or Internet portals. When analysing the content of the television broadcast, it is about identifying its formal or content-related elements and estimating their occurrence (Pisarek, 1983). The research procedure should be systematic and unified, both in terms of analysis and organisation of the research material (Riffe et al., 2005).

The primary aim of the research is to analyse the autism spectrum presented on „Sesame Street” and answer how complete it is and corresponds to reality. Hence, the basic research problem is to answer the question: what elements of autism can be found in the attitudes of a muppet with autism – Julia – introduced by the creators into the programme for this purpose? In this context, it is important to answer the question: how do the programme creators want to build respect and understanding for children on the autism spectrum?

The research conducted so far on the media image of autism allows us to hypothesise that this image will be incomplete and fragmentary. On the other hand, in a positive sense, one can hypothesise that programmes will want to build respect for children on the autism spectrum.

The material for the analysis are the episodes with Julia available on the official website of the producer of “Sesame Street” devoted to the problems of autism among children: www.sesamestreetincommunities.org. 18 film episodes were selected for analysis (see Annex). Each has its own title and the full list is available in the Annex. The first film episode with Julia – “Meet Julia”, requires a separate treatment. It is an introduction to the whole series, introduces a new character and is longer than the other episodes (10.8 minutes). The videos were analysed several times in terms of Julia's autistic behaviours. They are currently available on a special YouTube channel – „Sesame Street and Autism Playlist”.

Picture of Julia's autism spectrum

The character of Julia was introduced to “Sesame Street” in April 2017 via the episode “Meet Julia”. Julia is met by the main characters of the show – Elmo, Big Bird and Abby. In the third minute of the show, the word “autism” appears, as well as Big Bird's question: “What's autism?” The questions to the host were provoked by behaviours that are incomprehensible to the characters of the show, which are elements of the autism spectrum, e.g. lack of interest in others (she did

not respond to greetings), unusual voice, avoidance of eye contact and, above all, hypersensitivity.

This last element has been particularly emphasised. Julia, unable to bear the loud siren of a passing car, left her friends, which allowed them to exchange comments and understand Julia's behaviour. The host – A. Muraoka – gives a general answer that people are different and other characters add that Julia is funny, likes to be with friends and have fun. The term “autism”, apart from the introductory episode, does not explicitly appear in any of the episodes related to Julia, except for one – “Starfish Hug”.

Eighteen episodes with Julia available on the official website of the show: <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/autism>, vary in length, from 1.17 minutes to 3.48 minutes. The vast majority of episodes (16) contain various elements of the autism spectrum in Julia's behaviour with the exception of two “Each Family Is Amazing” and “I Love My Family” (which is entirely a song). Individual elements of the autism spectrum in sixteen episodes occurred with the frequency as in Table 1.

Tab.1. Number of elements of the autism spectrum in 16 episodes of “Sesame Street” featuring Julia

	Elements of the autism spectrum	Number in 16 episodes
1.	Statements inappropriate to the situation	0
2.	Speaking in an unusual tone of voice	0
3.	Avoiding eye contact	3
4.	Echolalia	10
5.	Lack of sense of humour and irony	0
6.	Lack of ability to communicate own needs	0
7.	Lack of interest in people	4
8.	Lack of ability to initiate contact	0
9.	Hypersensitivity to stimuli	3
10.	Lack of involvement in group games	1
11.	Difficulties showing and understanding emotions	0
12.	Reluctance to change	2
13.	Attachment to selected objects	7
14.	Interest in narrow fields of knowledge	2
15.	Stereotype movement disorders	8

Diagram 1 shows that three elements of Julia's autism spectrum clearly dominate: echolalia, attachment to selected elements and stereotype movement disorders. Of these, one comes from the area of communication and two from the area of repetitive and stereotypical behaviour. Diagram 2 shows how three areas of disorders are represented in the picture of Julia's autism spectrum.

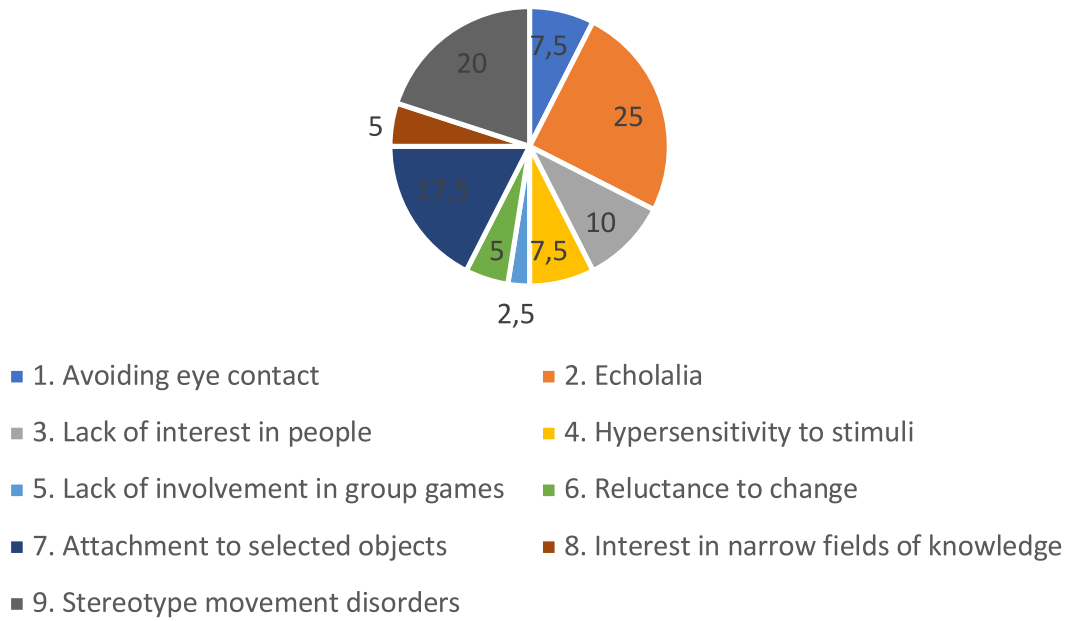


Diagram 1. Global distribution of autism spectrum symptoms in 16 episodes

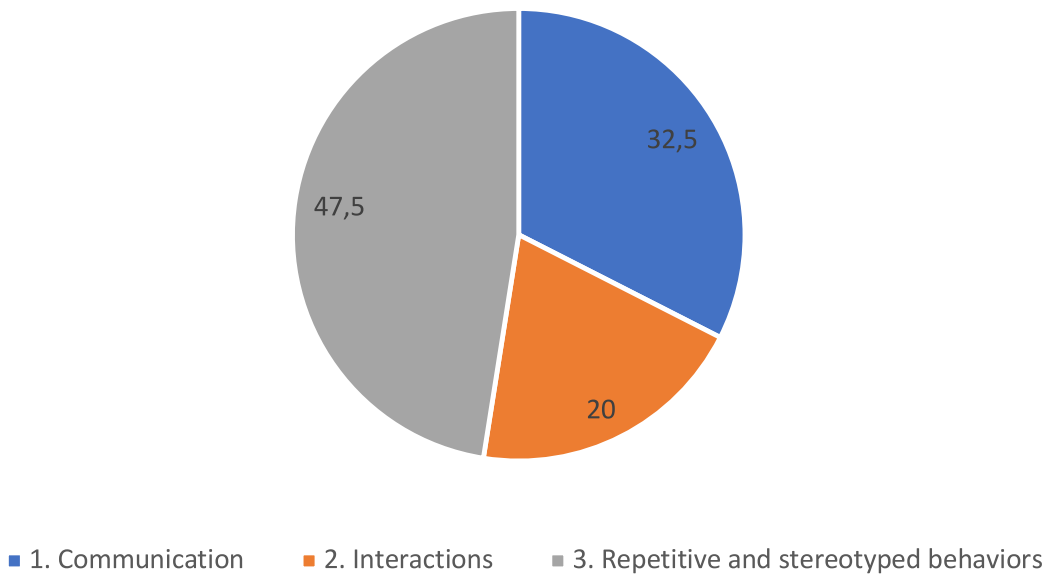


Diagram 2. Distribution of autism spectrum symptoms within three disorder areas

It is clear that Julia’s autism spectrum is dominated by repetitive and stereotypical behaviours, which are almost twice as many as elements from the other two areas. At the same time, each area has its own dynamics.

Echolalia definitely dominates as a symptom of the autism spectrum in the area of communication. It appears very often in episodes with Julia. However, in general, few symptoms appear in this area. On the contrary, in several episodes Julia is shown to be eager to show emotions (“Julia’s Bunny”), she hugs and cuddles Abby (“Blowing Bubbles”).

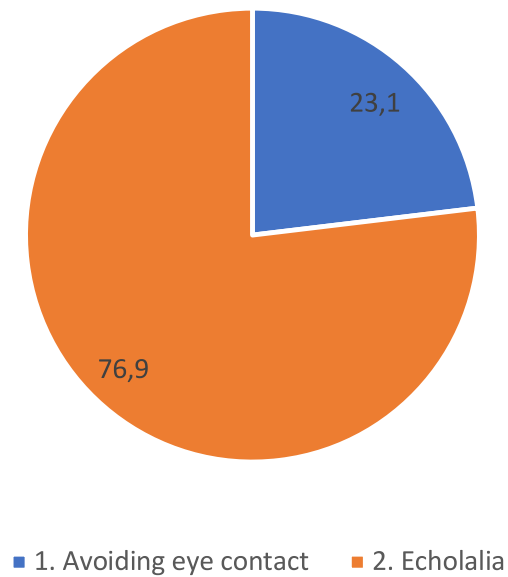


Diagram 3. Distribution of autism spectrum symptoms in the area of communication

In the case of autism symptoms from the area of interaction, the picture is more varied (Diagram 4.)

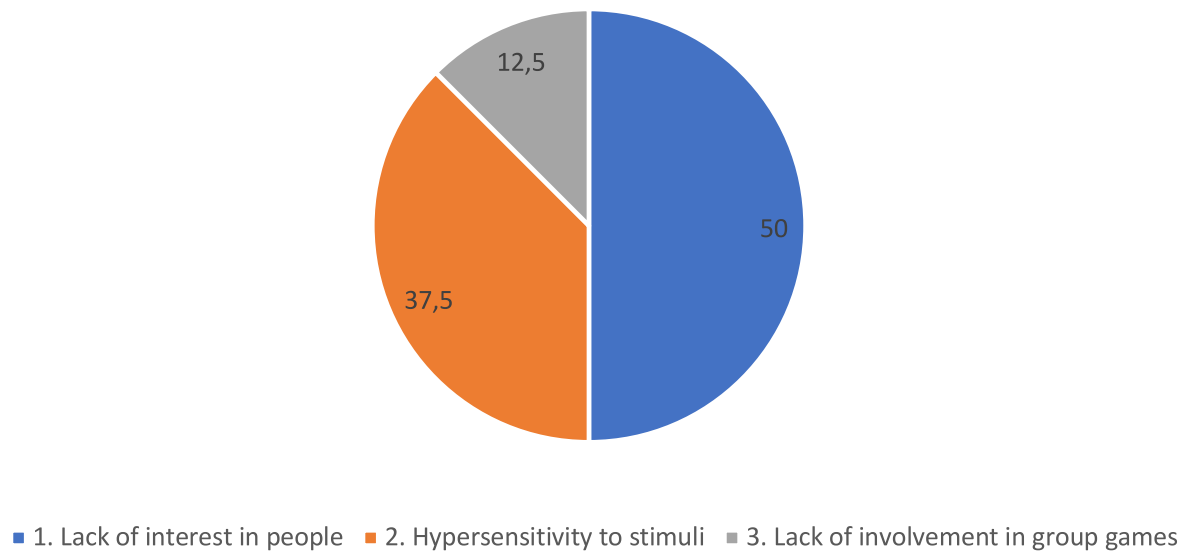


Diagram 4. Distribution of autism spectrum symptoms in the area of interaction

As in the case of the area related to communication, one symptom dominates here – lack of interest in people. It is not, however, that it is absolute. We meet Julia who plays with Elmo (“Julia’s Bunny”), sings with a friend (“Sunny Days”) and can tell Sam she loves him (“Starfish Art”).

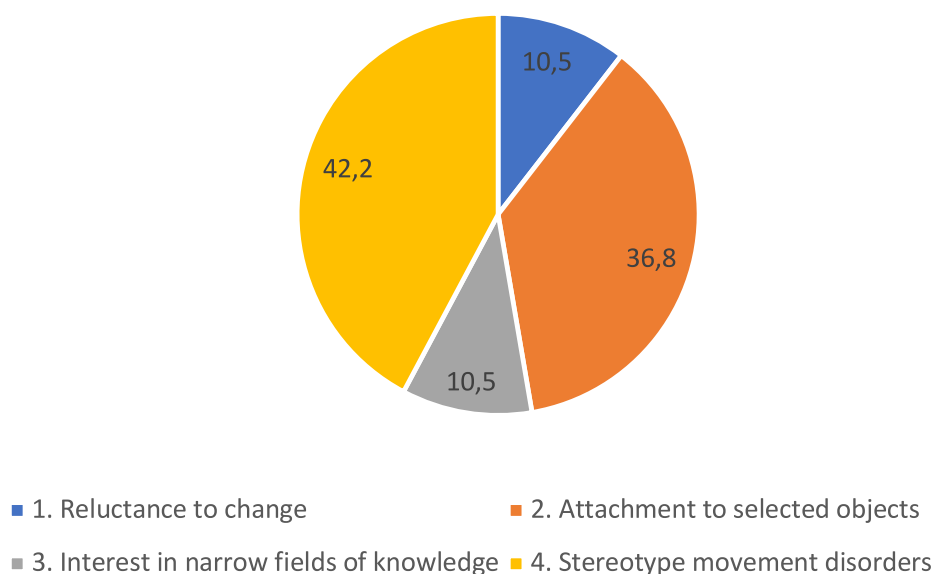


Diagram 5. Distribution of autism spectrum symptoms in the area of repetitive and stereotypical behaviour

The most extensive representation of symptoms is in the area of repetitive and stereotypical behaviour. All of them are taken into account. Two predominate: attachment to selected objects and stereotype movement disorders. At the same time, the level of intensity of the occurring symptoms is often higher than the others. We have to do with some symptoms in the area of repetitive and stereotypical behaviour pretty much the entire episode, so even for a few minutes. This is the case in the episode “The Indoor Picnic” (3:42 minutes) when Julia cannot accept the cancellation of the picnic due to changes in the weather, or in the episode “A Pizza Problem” (3:47 minutes) in which Julia keeps asking for pizza, which was originally ordered and does not want another.

Conclusion and discussion

The image of the autism spectrum that emerges from “Sesame Street” episodes is selective, simplified and fragmented. It focuses on the more easily noticeable symptoms of repetitive behaviours. This way, children can more easily notice that Julia is a little “different” and thinks “a little differently”, which was expressed directly in the introductory episode “Meet Julia”.

Some symptoms of autism spectrum disorder are more prominent, others less visible, and others are absent altogether. However, it seems that this was the intention of the series’ creators. They did not want to give a full picture of the disorder, but only to show the possibility of encountering other children with somewhat incomprehensible behaviour and thinking style. All this to achieve the most important aspect of the message – to build respect and understanding for a child

with autism spectrum disorder. Despite sometimes “different” behaviour and a “different” style of thinking, Julia is likable.

An attempt to explain to children what the autism spectrum is all about is commendable for the authors of the programme, but it has certain limitations. It cannot remain a lasting formula for understanding the disorder in adult life. In adults, the media often contribute to perpetuating stereotypes about autism and two extremely different images of autistic children. On the one hand, as a burden and, on the other hand, as an uncritical link between autism and savantism (Howlin et al., 2009; Draaisma, 2009; Kelly et al., 2018). Since 2000, we have seen a significant increase in the number of autism cases. This also resulted in an increase in the representation of autism in the media and even its perception as an element of pop culture. However, this is a double-edged sword (Rohr, 2015; Lord et al., 2020). However, there is no single perfect autism model. Each case is very individual and different diagnostic elements dominate it. Therefore, it seems that the media portrayal of autism still leaves much to be desired (Barrio et al. 2021). The media tend to simplify a lot. In the case of a child audience, such simplifications are necessary. Due to the significant increase in the number of media characters on the autism spectrum, research on the structure of the message and its social reception is necessary. It is necessary to recreate the image of autism that children build under the influence of media messages at different levels of their development and under the influence of various television programmes. In this context, it is probably worth paying attention to other sources of media messages, above all social media.

Annex

Episodes of “Sesame Street” with Julia available on the website <https://sesame-streetincommunities.org/topics/autism>:

1. Meet Julia
2. The „We Belong” Song
3. Julia’s Bunny
4. Boing Tag
5. Julia Meets Wes
6. Sunny Days
7. Starfish Art.
8. Each Familiy Is Amazaing
9. Julia’s Family Gets Ready
10. Saying Hello
11. Blowing Bubbles
12. Starfish Hug
13. Butterfly Flapping
14. I Love Family
15. Let’s Play Together

16. Patern Hunt
17. Sibling Playdates
18. The Indoor Picnic
19. A Pizza Problem

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