

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLOMOUCI

Filozofická fakulta

Katedra asijských studií

BAKALÁŘSKÁ DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

**Disabilities in South Korea as portrayed in Korean movies**

**Focusing on the portrayal of autism spectrum disorder**

Invalidita v Jižní Koreji portrétována v korejském filmu

Se zaměřením na poruchu autistického spektra

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## **Prohlášení**

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla veškeré použité prameny a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne 29.6.

Podpis: .....

## **Abstract**

<b>Title:</b>	Disabilities in South Korea as portrayed in Korean movies focusing on the portrayal of autism spectrum disorder
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<b>Number of pages and characters:</b>	33
<b>Number of used sources:</b>	18
<b>Keywords:</b>	Disability, Autism Spectrum Disability, Korean film, Korean media, Autism Spectrum Disability in cinema, representation of autism and disability

This bachelor's thesis examines the representation of disabilities in Korean media, with a specific focus on Autism Spectrum Disability. Through the analysis of Korean cinema and relevant articles, the study aims to understand the perceptions of disabilities among the Korean public and their impact on societal attitudes. By exploring the themes, narratives, and character portrayals associated with disability, the research identifies both positive and negative aspects of the portrayal of disabilities in Korean media. Additionally, this study reviews academic sources to gain insights into the public's view of disabilities and its influence on inclusivity. The findings contribute to improving accurate and respectful representations, challenging stereotypes, and promoting inclusivity in Korean media. The research aims to raise awareness, foster empathy, and contribute to a more inclusive society that understands and embraces individuals with disabilities.

## **Anotace**

<b>Název:</b>	Invalidita v Jižní Koreji portrétována v korejské filmografii se zaměřením na poruchu autistického spektra
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<b>Vedoucí práce:</b>	Dr. Andreas Schirmer
<b>Jazyk:</b>	angličtina
<b>Počet stran:</b>	33
<b>Počet zdrojů:</b>	18
<b>Klíčová slova:</b>	Invalidita, porucha autistického spektra, korejský film, korejská média, porucha autistického spektra ve filmografii, reprezentace autismu a invalidity

Bakalářská práce na téma invalidita v Jižní Koreji portrétovaná v korejském filmu se zaměřením na poruchu autistického spektra. Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá reprezentací invalidity v korejských médiích se zvláštním zaměřením na poruchu autistického spektra. Prostřednictvím analýzy korejské kinematografie a relevantních článků si tato práce klade za cíl porozumět vnímání invalidity mezi korejskou veřejností a jeho dopadu na společenské postoje. Na základě zkoumání témat a zobrazení postav spojených s postižením výzkum identifikuje pozitivní i negativní aspekty zobrazování invalidity v korejských médiích. Kromě toho tato studie zkoumá akademické zdroje, aby získala vhled do pohledu veřejnosti na invaliditu a jeho vliv na inkluzivitu. Tato fakta přispívají ke zlepšení přesného a respektujícího zobrazování, zpochybnění stereotypů a podpoře inkluzivity v korejských médiích. Cílem výzkumu je zvýšit informovanost, podpořit empatii a přispět k inkluzivnější společnosti, která chápe a přijímá invalidní osoby.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor for his advice and guidance throughout this process. Also, many thanks to the people close to me that supported me during the studies.

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## **Transcription**

This thesis uses the McCune-Reischauer romanization system, except for names with an internationally established different transcription.

## **Introduction**

Disability can be described as a diverse range of conditions that affect individuals' physical, cognitive, sensory, or emotional functioning, impacting their daily lives and social participation. Depending on the environment in which the individual lives, people will have different views on this topic. Autism Spectrum Disability is a neurodevelopmental condition typically observed around early childhood. It is characterized by challenges in social communication and restrictive or repetitive behaviours. Throughout the world, cultural and societal perspectives on disability may differ, but common to all is the existence of stigma. Autism Spectrum Disability is often unjustly associated with genetic abnormalities or supernatural forces, reinforcing negative societal perceptions.

The first chapter of this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of neurodevelopmental disabilities, particularly Autism Spectrum Disability. It encompasses an exploration of the history of research in this field, the process of diagnosis, and the treatment and rehabilitation approaches available. By delving into these subchapters, readers will gain valuable insights into the nature of this disability as a spectrum disability, the diagnosis, and the potential interventions that can support autistic individuals. This chapter serves as a foundation for further exploration, offering a closer introduction to the topic and laying the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding Autism Spectrum Disability.

Chapter two of this thesis examines the societal perspective on disability and the treatment of individuals with impairments. It delves into the concept of stigma surrounding disabilities and explores the emerging neurodiversity movement that is important for future understanding of disability, promoting acceptance, and fostering inclusive attitudes towards individuals with diverse neurocognitive profiles.

Chapter three of this thesis focuses on South Korea and its perspective on disabled individuals. The chapter explores relevant research providing insights into the challenges and issues faced by disabled individuals in the country. Additionally, it examines the governmental initiatives aimed at supporting disabled individuals, highlighting their objectives and efforts.

The practical part of this thesis focuses on the examination of South Korean cinema to explore the portrayal and perception of disability within the cultural context. Specifically, the television show "*Isanghan Pyŏnhosa U Yŏng-U*" is analysed, which



depicts the life of an autistic individual striving to pursue a career as an attorney. The show highlights the challenges she faces in her everyday life due to her autism, as well as the impact it has on the people around her. Through this analysis, the study aims to identify and understand the autistic traits exhibited by the character, shedding light on how disability is portrayed and understood in South Korean cinema.

## **1. Neurodevelopmental disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disability**

The term disability can be defined in many ways, but depending on the environment and geographic area that we grow up in, we define this term very differently. Affiliation of many factors such as social and familial assessments and patterns can reshape the definition in many ways. Culture, however, can be reconstructed variously, essentially determined by how the family precedes its introduction. Furthermore, cultural stigmas can influence the development of any individual. Therefore, the diagnostic determination might be complicated due to the factor of different sociocultural norms (American Psychiatric Association 2013:14). For this thesis, I chose a definition from The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5).

“A mental disorder is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities. An expectable or culturally approved response to a common stressor or loss, such as the death of a loved one, is not a mental disorder. Socially deviant behaviour (e.g., political, religious, or sexual) and conflicts that are primarily between the individual and society are not mental disorders unless the deviance or conflict results from a dysfunction in the individual, as described above.” (American Psychiatric Association 2013:20)

Autism spectre disorder is included in the group of neurodevelopmental disabilities. Neurodevelopmental disabilities influence the development of the nervous system. These disabilities become apparent early onset around five years of age and are oftentimes accompanied by other neurodevelopmental disabilities. Autism spectrum disorder is characterized by a deficit of developmental standards as specific as the management of decision-making functions and a lack of skills associated with forming, sustaining, and understanding relationships. These factors have a significant effect on social, personal, and career functioning (American Psychiatric Association 2013:31).

### **1.1. History of research on Autism Spectrum Disability**

Autism spectrum disorder was vastly recognized in 1943 by German scientist Leo Kanner. His diagnosis criteria of poorly managing change, defined interests, and lonesomeness are used even now in the diagnosis manual. Although, the diagnosis done by him was missing consistency and raised misleading assumptions about autism that it was cohort with schizophrenia and unsuitable parenting. In the 1970s the view on autism vastly changed since there was a lot more research done to support that autism is a conclusive diagnostic concept. Initially it has been discovered autism is a disability that is brain-based. Secondly, as a result of the twins' study, autism is correlating with genetics. And thirdly, diagnosed children were reported to have better results with organized and supervised teaching compared to disorganized psychotherapy. By the 70s there was vast development around the psychiatric diagnostic concept therefore autism was later recognised in the DSM-3 as a sole category. With the forthcoming of DSM-4, there were problems with the definition of the diagnosis. International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) by the World Health Organization also needed a broader diagnostic flexibility therefore an international field trial was held. It included around 1000 cases and 100 evaluators from 20 stations worldwide. As a result, there were three fields of difficulty and research about this problem started to be broader. With the publishing of the fifth manual, disabilities that were recognized in the fourth edition, such as Asperger's disability, were merged into one category called Autism Spectrum Disorder. This could potentially lead to controversy for the different opinions on merging different diagnoses and limiting the criteria which are used during the diagnostic process. And created a developing concern that individuals would lose support and services (Volkmar F. R. 2022:1-4).

The term spectrum comes from the fact that every diagnosed person has a unique diagnosis from other people with the same diagnosis. Individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder can have diverse developmental levels, chronological age of diagnosis and severity of the condition. Early infantile autism, childhood autism, Kanner's autism, high-functioning autism, atypical autism, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified, childhood disintegrative disorder and Asperger's disability are all included in the category of Autism Spectrum Disability (American Psychiatric Association 2013:53).

## **1.2. Diagnosis**

The symptoms of ASD should present themselves around early childhood and have impact on the everyday life of the diagnosed individual and people close to them. Parents notice a lack of child's development around the age of twelve to twenty-four months of age. People diagnosed with autism have a deficiency in understanding and leading social communication, attention, cognitive organization, and adaptive skills. Communication issues exist and persist even in children with higher cognitive abilities who are deficient in verbal and nonverbal communication skills such as gestures, eye contact and facial expressions. Even if these children do speak, they struggle with a variety of language skills including echolalia, misuse of pronouns and atypical prosody (Drmic et al. 2018:237–238). Moreover, they often have problems connected to specific sensory and motor sensitiveness. By nature of every case, the diagnosis age will differ depending on the environment, culture, and the child's temperament. These factors can affect personal life, cause miscommunication, and have an influence on the people close to an individual diagnosed with ASD and also on public perception of disability (Rim et al. 2019:213).

The diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder differs from one person to another and in many instances, it is accompanied by another neurodevelopmental disability. In the case of autism, it can coincide with Intellectual developmental disability. Around 35% of diagnosed autistic people also have a diagnosis of intellectual disability (Saban-Bezalel, Zachor, and Ben-Itzhak 2022:1). According to the DSM–5, diagnosis is made exclusively if the characteristic deficits of social communication are abetted by repetitive demeanour, defined interests, and persistence on the predictability of actions (American Psychiatric Association 2013:31). The diagnostic process could be long; this depends on the public amenities accessible to the autistic patient and the qualification of the professional (Ribas et al. 2023:1–2). Due to many factors, not all individuals are diagnosed around the age of five. Sociodemographic factors and ethnicity can influence diagnosis. Nevertheless, these factors can later make a greater impact on the autistic person since they will not have the same opportunities for managing the severity of the disability at such young age. Some researchers say that the higher age of parents at childbirth and their education can reduce the diagnosis age. Also, the presence of siblings already diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder has an influence on this (Saban-Bezalel, Zachor, and Ben-Itzhak 2022:1). Naturally not all studies will support these claims and will state the opposite.

The DSM-5 manual includes the severity level as an essential component for accurately diagnosing ASD. Assessing the level of severity is crucial in determining the impact of ASD symptoms on individual's daily functioning and overall well-being. This inclusion allows clinicians to provide a more comprehensive evaluation and tailor appropriate interventions and support based on the specific needs of each individual. There are three levels of severity according to the DSM-5. Considering that the severity level could change during their life course, these levels are not utilized to assess for eligibility and availability of services. Instead, they are discussed with professionals with the emphasis on personal goals and preferences.

Mild ASD requires support, and individuals have difficulty in social communication and repetitive behaviour limiting normal life, although they function independently. An example of these communication problems could be: initiating and maintaining interactions, possible lack of interest in social interactions and understanding social cues. Regarding repetitive and restrictive behaviours, a disposition to planning and organizing can occur. Moderate ASD requires substantial support and guidance to navigate social situations and daily activities. Many of these individuals have more prominent issues with verbal and nonverbal communication and its initiation. Considerable number of these people also might have limited interests, and atypical responses to communication partners. Furthermore, these individuals struggle with repetitive and restrictive behaviour that may interfere with daily functioning and could possibly have hard time with changes and focus. Severe ASD requires very substantial support for the individual. These individuals may have experienced significant challenges that affect personal functioning. They may have minimally or no speech, rarely initiate communication and respond very minimal to it (American Psychiatric Association 2013:51–53).

### **1.3. Treatment and rehabilitation**

With any type of disability also comes forms of psychological, physical, and economical struggles. These problems may affect not only the personal life of autistic people but also the people that are closest to them. And as for the cost of care in the United States for one individual ranges from around \$50000 to \$100000 per year and it is noted to be still growing (Lotufo Denucci et al. 2021:83). Treatment to completely reverse autism spectrum disorder is yet not possible. Scientific advancements support the use of the technology in treatment and diagnosis, not only of ASD but other mental disabilities as well. This makes it more efficient for the scientist to do the diagnosis swiftly and more

accurately in the future. Furthermore, scientists have now more data about this topic than ever before, so it makes adapting the technology to the process the diagnosis easier. The most prominent technologies used in diagnosis or treatment in recent years are functional magnetic resonance imaging, electroencephalogram and neurofeedback (Ribas et al. 2023:1).

A variety of environmental circumstances and genetic predispositions contribute to the etiology of ASD. Genes that contribute to that are similar to genes involved in intellectual disability and neuropsychiatric disorder. We know of 400-1000 genes that could lead to ASD, but we have yet to discover more about this problem. According to estimates, some uncommon genetic factors could cause ASD by around 20%. There are other risk factors that contribute to the prevalence such as exposure to chemicals during pregnancy (alcohol, toxic metals, drugs), foetal and maternal inflammation, oxidative stress, and diseases (diabetes mellitus) (Lotufo Denucci et al. 2021:82–83).

## **2. World view on disability and Autism Spectrum Disability**

Views on autism spectrum disorder varies globally due to cultural and societal differences. Despite an increase in public awareness and understanding of ASD in recent years, significant stigma and false beliefs persist. Misunderstanding and lack of awareness are common stigmas associated with autism. Research indicates that cultures emphasizing collectivistic values and group well-being tend to exhibit higher levels of stigma towards autistic individuals, whereas more multicultural, individualistic cultures like the United States tend to display lower levels of stigma (Kim et al., 2021:460–461). In the United States and Lebanon, individuals with disruptive autistic behaviours have been perceived as “dangerous”, highlighting the impact of cultural attitudes on stigma. It is worth noting that countries with different cultures, such as the United States and Japan, hold less stigma compared to Lebanon due to their higher knowledge about autism. Individual encounters with disability also contribute to knowledge and understanding of autism (Turnock et al., 2022:80–81). Reducing stigma and increasing awareness requires addressing misunderstandings and providing education. Public education campaigns and accessible information can help combat false beliefs and promote understanding of autism spectrum disorder. By fostering a greater understanding of the condition, societies can work towards creating inclusive environments that support and accept individuals with ASD.

Lack of education plays a crucial role in reducing misunderstandings, misconceptions, and stigmatizing attitudes towards autism. Autistic individuals

frequently encounter discrimination in their daily lives, being labelled as “strange,” “abnormal,” or other terms that highlight their atypical behaviour, often by neurotypical individuals (Rim et al., 2019:216–217). Such discrimination can lead to social exclusion and difficulties in various areas, including education, relationships, and employment.

In certain cultures, the influence of parental blame can be observed due to limited knowledge about autism. People in these cultures tend to associate autism with genetics and permanency, leading to blame being placed on parents. Some parents of children with autism may even reject the autism label due to fears regarding its hereditary nature and concerns about the potential impact on other students’ academic performance and marriage prospects (Kim et al., 2021:461). Studies conducted in Kenya have also highlighted religious and spiritual attributions, where the cause of autism is attributed to supernatural forces (Park et al., 2018:634). Similarly, in Vietnam, disability is often associated with karmic punishment and is seen as a family problem (Turnock et al., 2022:81).

Additionally, we must take into account the existence of institutional and systemic barriers. Depending on the civil accessibility circumstances of the patients may differ. Accessing appropriate healthcare is crucial for early diagnosis and taking measures to educate patients and their families to prevent future complications. With correct education and wide publicly accessible information, school and employment opportunities should be more accessible to disabled individuals and stigmatization of disabilities could lower (Turnock et al. 2022:77–78). It is important to note that there are concerted efforts by individuals and organizations to promote acceptance, inclusivity, and understanding of autism. These efforts aim to combat the barriers and biases that autistic individuals face in various aspects of their lives, fostering a more inclusive society.

## **2.1. Neurodiversity movement and Autism Spectrum Disability**

The concept of neurodiversity encompasses a broader understanding and acceptance of the range of neurological differences and disabilities that exist within the human population. It seeks to shift the focus from perceiving these differences as deficits to recognizing them as natural variations in the human experience. Neurodiversity consists of two key components that are important to consider.

Firstly, neurodiversity emphasizes that there is significant natural variation in conditions such as ASD and other neurological disorders. Rather than viewing these conditions solely through a medical or pathological lens, neurodiversity acknowledges

that these differences are a result of the natural neurological variation. This perspective challenges the notion that being neurotypical is the only desirable or acceptable way of functioning.

Secondly, neurodiversity advocates for the rights of individuals with neurodivergent traits and aims to promote their acknowledgement and acceptance within society. It recognizes the intrinsic value of neurodivergent individuals and highlights the importance of accommodating their unique strengths, challenges, and perspectives. By emphasizing acceptance and inclusion, the neurodiversity movement encourages a shift away from a deficit-based approach to disabilities and towards a more inclusive and supportive society. DSM–5, is a widely used clinical manual that provides criteria for diagnosing various mental health conditions, including ASD. While the DSM–5 serves as a valuable tool for clinicians, it is important to acknowledge that its focus is primarily on interpreting behaviours and identifying deficiencies associated with specific disabilities. This clinical perspective often prioritizes finding cures, addressing deficits, and correcting difficulties to enable individuals to lead what is considered a “normal” life in society.

However, this narrow focus on deficits can be problematic, particularly when it comes to autism. It can perpetuate a negative view of autism and create barriers for individuals seeking support and understanding. Additionally, the inclusion of multiple disabilities under the umbrella diagnosis of ASD can be seen by some diagnosed individuals as a stigmatization of their specific disability by the diagnostic system. This can further contribute to a sense of marginalization and erasure of their unique experiences. In contrast, the neurodiversity perspective challenges the traditional medical model by emphasizing the inherent value and strengths of neurodivergent individuals. It seeks to reframe the discourse surrounding autism and other neurodevelopmental differences, promoting the understanding that these differences do not diminish an individual’s worth or capabilities. Instead, the neurodiversity movement encourages open discussions and recognition of the diverse strengths, talents, and contributions that neurodivergent individuals bring to society.

By embracing neurodiversity, society can move towards a more inclusive and accepting approach, creating environments that value and support the full spectrum of human neurodivergence. This paradigm shift not only benefits individuals with neurological differences but also fosters a more compassionate and diverse society that celebrates the richness of human variation (Jaarsma et al. 2011:20–25).

### **3. South Korea, disability, and Autism Spectrum Disability**

South Korea, deeply rooted in its strong sense of community and societal values, places a great emphasis on collective identity and the cohesion of its members. This cultural backdrop creates a homogeneous environment where adherence to established norms is highly valued, while deviations from these norms are often met with scepticism and are seen as unfamiliar or unacceptable. ASD, for instance, is widely perceived in South Korea as a genetically caused disease. The distinctive behaviours and social challenges experienced by individuals with autism often lead to their exclusion and avoidance in social settings. Unfortunately, this pervasive stigma surrounding autism can significantly limit the opportunities available to autistic individuals, particularly when compared to countries with more inclusive attitudes and diverse cultures. Stigma, as a complex process, encompasses the devaluation of certain characteristics, but it differs from prejudice in that it primarily focuses on disability rather than racial issues (Kim et al., 2021:1–3).

The magnitude of stigmatization associated with autism in South Korea is notably higher than in the United States. This disparity can be attributed to various factors, including the sociodemographic environment and cultural distinctions. Western cultures tend to be more accepting of individual differences, leading to greater compassion and understanding toward atypical behaviours. In contrast, the cultural variations prevalent in South Korea and other Eastern societies contribute to a more rigid perception of autism, resulting in heightened stigmatization.

According to a comprehensive study conducted in South Korea, the prevalence of ASD among the general population is estimated to be 2.64%. Notably, a significant majority of this percentage is represented by boys, accounting for 80%, while girls make up only 20%. The study focused on children aged between seven and twelve years, encompassing a range that allows for the inclusion of cases that may be diagnosed at a later stage. The participants in the study consisted of children attending both regular and special education schools, providing a comprehensive overview of ASD prevalence across different educational settings. Surprisingly, the results of the study revealed that the majority of children with ASD identified were from public schools and had not been previously diagnosed. This finding suggests a potential lack of awareness and knowledge about autism within the community. It highlights the need to raise awareness about this complex disorder, as increased awareness can lead to earlier diagnosis and intervention, providing children with the necessary support and resources for their development.



However, the cultural variations present in South Korea play a significant role in shaping the perception of autism. In Korean culture, autism is often viewed as an inherited disability, casting doubt not only on the affected child but also on the lineage and even the marriage prospects of unaffected relatives. The fear of social stigma and negative societal judgments can lead parents to hesitate in seeking a formal diagnosis for their child, perpetuating a cycle of limited understanding and support for individuals with autism (Kim et al. 2011:904–910).

These cultural factors underline the importance of addressing the societal perceptions and misconceptions surrounding autism. By fostering an environment of acceptance, understanding, and support, it is possible to alleviate the fears and concerns that hinder parents from seeking early diagnosis and intervention for their children. This can be achieved through educational initiatives, targeted awareness campaigns, and providing accessible resources for parents, professionals, and the public.

Mothers, in particular, often bear the weight of blame for causing autism, with a belief that they are somehow responsible for their child's disability due to its perceived hereditary nature. Furthermore, mental health literacy in South Korea remains limited, as highlighted by a study conducted in 2019. The research revealed that only a quarter of the participants were able to correctly recognize an individual with autism from a photograph. Interestingly, participants who personally knew someone diagnosed with autism were less likely to attribute the disorder primarily to genetic factors. Women, in general, exhibited greater awareness and understanding of the etiology of autism, possibly due to their involvement in the childbearing process and heightened engagement with health-related issues. It is worth noting that not only autism spectrum disorder, but also conditions such as schizophrenia and obsessive-compulsive disorder, face significant stigmatization and a lack of recognition within Korean society. While the degree of disability recognition may vary across Asian countries, South Korea lags behind nations like Japan and China in this regard. These findings underline the necessity for further research and increased public awareness to enhance understanding and acceptance of disabilities (Rim et al. 2019:216–219).

### **3.1. Governmental initiatives related to disability**

The welfare and inclusion of individuals with disabilities, including autism, have been a priority for the South Korean government. Over the years, the government has implemented various initiatives and policies aimed at promoting equal rights,

opportunities, and support for individuals with disabilities. This chapter explores the governmental initiatives related to disability in South Korea, highlighting key milestones and significant actions taken by the government.

Before the implementation of the Act on Special Education for Disabled People in 1977 and the Act on Welfare of People with Disabilities in 1981, South Korea did not have any official disability policies in place. During this period, there were no support services available for disabled individuals, and the focus of welfare policy revolved around institutional “housing” with an emphasis on social control. The absence of a comprehensive welfare system meant that many disabled individuals were unaware of their rights to attain a reasonable standard of living. Additionally, due to negative social and cultural attitudes towards disability, the primary option for care and support for disabled individuals was to rely on their family or relatives (You et al. 2018:1260–1262). However, South Korea embarked on a journey of implementing comprehensive welfare policies for individuals with disabilities, when the Welfare Act for the Mentally and Physically Disabled was enacted in 1981. This legislation was later amended in 1989 and is now known as the Act on Welfare of Persons with Disabilities. The earlier law was more symbolic in nature and did not adequately address the actual needs of disabled individuals. However, the current law has undergone amendments to safeguard the human rights and promote the independence of people with disabilities. In 1989, the Korean National Disability Registration System (KNDRS) was introduced. It serves as a basis for prioritizing welfare projects and determining eligibility by assessing the type and severity of disability (Kim et al. 2023:3–4).

Although the disability rights movement in South Korea has a relatively brief history, it has achieved some notable successes in improving the rights of disabled individuals. Similar to disability movements around the world, the Korean Disabled People’s Movement has played a role in gradually shifting societal perceptions of disabled individuals from being seen as outsiders, to being recognized as fellow human beings. An illustration of the progress of disability rights movement is the introduction of “Disabled Persons’ Day” in 1991, aimed at increasing public awareness about disability, and advocating for the rights of disabled individuals. Despite some progress, disability in South Korea is still predominantly understood and addressed within the framework of conservative culture and medical perspectives (You and Hwang 2018:1260–1262).

The 12th of September 2018 holds significant importance for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families, as President Moon Jae-in<sup>1</sup> made an important announcement. He introduced the Comprehensive Plan for Lifelong Care for People with Developmental Disabilities, accompanied by representatives from relevant government branches, such as the Ministry of Health and Welfare, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Employment and Labor. The comprehensive plan aims to address the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities throughout their lives by providing essential services in areas like health, medical care, rehabilitation, special education, and social welfare. The plan's objectives also include alleviating parental pressures, facilitating social interventions, and fostering community participation to establish a harmonious "welfare society." This announcement signifies a commitment to enhance the overall well-being and support for individuals with developmental disabilities, their families, and the broader community (Lee et al. 2019:200–201).

Furthermore, South Korea has implemented a range of disability welfare policies and support systems in recent years, reflecting the commitment to improve the lives of disabled individuals. Some notable initiatives include the introduction of disability pensions in 2009, personal assistance services in 2008, and adult guardianship in 2014. The disability pension program, established in 2009, aims to provide financial support to individuals with disabilities who face challenges in obtaining regular employment due to their impairments. This initiative recognizes the need for economic stability and security for disabled individuals and their families. In 2008, the introduction of personal assistance services marked a significant milestone in promoting on living independently on their own for disabled individuals. These services offer support in daily activities, such as personal care, household tasks, and mobility assistance. By enabling individuals to receive assistance based on their specific needs, personal assistance services empower disabled individuals to lead more autonomous and fulfilling lives. Additionally, the implementation of adult guardianship in 2014 addressed the legal protection and decision-making rights of disabled adults who may require assistance in managing their personal affairs (You et al. 2018:1272–1275). This system ensures that vulnerable individuals receive appropriate support and representation to safeguard their rights and well-being. These initiatives highlight the ongoing efforts of the South Korean government to

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<sup>1</sup> 문재인: Former president of South Korea.

enhance disability welfare and support mechanisms, promoting inclusivity and improving the quality of life for all disabled individuals across the country.

#### **4. Analysis of portrayals of disability in Korean cinema**

The cinematic medium has long been a powerful platform for exploring diverse narratives and shedding light on societal issues. Within the realm of South Korean cinema, the portrayal of disability has emerged as a compelling subject that captivates audiences and sparks meaningful conversations. This section of the thesis aims to critically analyse the representation of disability in South Korean cinema, examining the nuanced depictions, cultural context, and cinematic techniques employed. By delving into these cinematic pieces, we can gain valuable insights into how disability is portrayed, the underlying themes explored, and the potential impact on perceptions and understanding of disability within South Korean society.

##### **4.1. *Isanghan Pyŏnhosa U Yŏng-U*, Yu In-Sik, 2022**

*Extraordinary Attorney Woo* in English, also known just as *U Yŏng U*, is a popular South Korean series, that has captivated global audiences and offers an intriguing subject for exploration. Despite not being a Netflix original and initially airing on a local Korean satellite channel, it quickly gained immense popularity, ranking sixth on Netflix's all-time popularity list. Unlike other dystopic action thrillers, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* follows traditional K-drama conventions, focusing on a rookie lawyer with ASD as she handles courtroom cases and tackles discrimination. The show combines elements of romance, humour, melodrama, heart-warming community, and character redemption, all tied together by its sentimental portrayal of human relationships. *Isanghan Pyŏnhosa U Yŏng-U* was released in 2022 and is available on the popular streaming platform Netflix, being accessible to the world audience and making the topic of disability more visible to worldwide audiences (Yuan 2023).

The show revolves around the compelling narrative of U Yŏng-U, a remarkable autistic woman who embarks on her journey as a lawyer. Raised by her devoted single father who runs a small restaurant, U Yŏng-U has faced the challenges of societal stigma and isolation due to her disability since her early childhood. However, her life takes an unexpected turn when she witnesses her father being assaulted by their neighbour's husband. In a remarkable display of her hidden abilities, she astounds everyone by reciting the legal definition of an assault from memory, igniting a passion for the law within her. Driven by her extraordinary memory and genuine interest in legal matters, U

Yöng-U emerges as an academic standout, graduating with honours and securing the top spot in her class. Despite her outstanding qualifications, the road to employment proves arduous due to the prejudices and misconceptions surrounding neurodivergent individuals. To help her overcome these barriers, U Yöng-U's father leverages his connections, enabling her to secure a coveted position at one of Seoul's most prestigious law firms. While U Yöng-U's photographic memory proves invaluable in solving complex cases, her journey is not without its challenges. Interacting with others and navigating social dynamics proves to be an intricate task, as her unique communication style is often misunderstood or judged by those who are unfamiliar with neurodiversity. U Yöng-U's story serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of acceptance and understanding for individuals who think and perceive the world differently.

*Isanghan Pyönhosa U Yöng-U* beautifully captures the complexities and triumphs of U Yöng-U's life as she strives to overcome societal barriers and make her mark in the legal field. It sheds light on the struggles faced by neurodivergent individuals and challenges viewers to reconsider their preconceived notions about disabilities. Through its heartfelt storytelling and compelling characters, the series invites us to embrace diversity and recognize the unique strengths that each individual possesses, regardless of their neurotype.

One intriguing aspect of *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* is its incorporation of the whale as a significant element within the narrative. The show cleverly utilizes the whale, both as a special interest for the protagonist, and as a visual representation of her inner world. The production costs for the visual effects (VFX) that required to bring the whale to life are notably high, ranging from 15 to 20 billion won, surpassing the average budget for non-Netflix-funded K-dramas. Surprising as it may be, the use of elaborate special effects by the same production company responsible for VFX in Netflix Original thrillers like *Sweet Home* and *The Silent Sea* adds an unexpected layer of spectacle to *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, a show primarily grounded in the realm of the everyday life (Yuan 2023).

The introduction of the computer-generated whale in the first episode creates a captivating and uncanny effect. As the camera focuses on Yöng-U, we witness the awe-inspiring sight of a majestic sea creature emerging from the subway car window. The whale becomes Yöng-U's imaginative source of solace, alleviating her anxiety while trapped during the chaotic morning rush-hour commute. The inclusion of the whale in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* serves as a captivating visual metaphor, offering viewers a

glimpse into Yǒng-U's rich inner life and the power of her imagination. It also adds a touch of cinematic grandeur to a series primarily focused on legal proceedings and everyday challenges. The contact of the extraordinary and the ordinary aspects in the show's visual storytelling invites us to contemplate the profound impact of personal interests and imaginative realms on individuals' experiences. Particularly those who are neurodivergent like U Yǒng-U.

The choice of the whale as a symbol in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* reflects the aspirations of Global Korea. The word “korae” (고래), meaning whale in Korean, also phonetically resembles “Koryŏ” (고려), the premodern Korean dynasty from which the country's modern name, Korea, is derived. This clever wordplay connects the show to Korea's historical legacy while hinting at its contemporary ambitions. Additionally, the whale carries a symbolic weight by invoking the well-known Korean adage that “when whales battle, the shrimp's back breaks.” This proverb traditionally represented Korea's precarious position as a small peninsula caught between more powerful nations like China, the US, Japan, and Russia. However, in the context of *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, the use of the whale ironically reverses this adage. It suggests that the surge of Korean popular culture, exemplified by the tidal wave of Hallyu, has transformed Korea from a vulnerable shrimp into a formidable whale. This rhetorical shift can also be seen in BTS's song “Whalien 52,” where they sing, “Even if I sleep a shrimp's sleep, my dreams are like that of a whale's.” Here, BTS, as cultural ambassadors, align themselves with the transformative power and influence of the whale, emphasizing that even those who may seem insignificant can possess dreams and ambitions that rival those of the largest creatures in the ocean.

*Extraordinary Attorney Woo* skilfully demonstrates the interplay between global and local elements by presenting seemingly sensational cases that are actually rooted in everyday concerns. The show utilizes computer-generated whales as visual representations of the protagonist's discovery process, offering a meta-commentary on the global spectacle of the whale's special effects and its hidden implications. The whale symbol in the series holds significance beyond its representation of Autism Spectrum Disability. It taps into local issues such as the Sewol Ferry disaster and cetacean captivity in South Korea, as well as the connection to the late Seoul mayor Pak Wŏn-Sun's campaign for dolphin release. These domestic references sparked controversy among

viewers and highlight the show's incorporation of local concerns within its global aspirations.

Moreover, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* goes beyond portraying systemic forces and delves into how these forces shape individuals' experiences. Episode 12 focuses on gender discrimination in the workplace, influenced by neoliberal policies imposed during the Financial Crisis. Despite the plaintiffs losing their case, the episode explores their ongoing efforts to challenge oppressive power structures through personal and political acts of solidarity. A pivotal moment occurs during the plaintiffs' gathering, where poetry is recited and shared. The accompanying visual effects of a dolphin floating in the air embody the concept of "ordinary effects," capturing the resonance and interconnectedness among individuals in everyday life. This scene opens new possibilities and alliances, leading the protagonist, U Yŏng-U, to contemplate her future and potential collaboration with Attorney Ryu.<sup>2</sup>

In episode 9 of *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, the exploration of South Korea's private after-school education system and its neoliberal underpinnings leads us to the captivating case of "Mr. Fart." This enigmatic character, who assumes the role of the Children's Liberation Army commander-in-chief, takes control of a hakwŏn<sup>3</sup> bus and redirects its course towards the mountains, offering the children a chance to play freely. While Mr. Fart's actions are undoubtedly illegal and warrant indictment for the kidnapping of minors, the courtroom scene takes an emotionally charged turn. As the children gather in the courtroom, their unwavering support for Mr. Fart and their collective recitation of the liberation army's proclamation reverberate with a profound resonance. The proclamation's simple yet powerful principles of immediate play, health, and happiness strike a chord among those present. Through the clever use of dynamic camera cuts, strategic zoom-ins, and a stirring piano soundtrack, the infectious joy of the children spreads like wildfire, permeating the atmosphere and penetrating the hearts of judges, bailiffs, attorneys, and jurors alike. In this extraordinary moment, the courtroom becomes a transformative space, momentarily liberated from the rigid confines of legal proceedings. The pervasive sense of joy and liberation challenges the established order, disrupting the very foundations of the legal apparatus that had been upheld and reinforced

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<sup>2</sup> 류재숙: Activist attorney specializing in gender inequality cases.

<sup>3</sup> Special buses in South Korea, hakwŏn buses transport children to and from private after-school academies called hakwŏns that provide additional instruction and extracurricular activities beyond regular school hours.

throughout the trial. The contagious enthusiasm of the children reterritorializes the preconceived notions of justice and paves the way for new, unforeseen possibilities to emerge.

During this significant moment, a computer-generated whale, taking the form of a captive orca with a bent dorsal fin, materializes before U Yǒng-U. The whale symbolizes liberation as it swims out of the courtroom, implying its escape from captivity in an aquarium. Unlike a conventional legal drama, the show neither fully justifies nor outright condemns Mr. Fart's actions, and the ultimate verdict of the court remains undisclosed. Instead, the whale's trajectory represents the possibility of freedom, transcending the constraints of the legal system. This transformative event disrupts the established power dynamics and disciplinary structures of both the legal and educational realms, fostering an emerging sense of alternative potentialities and reshaping the connections among those present in the courtroom.

The presence of the animated whale serves to highlight moments when oppressive systems intersect with ordinary lives, while also revealing the emergence of alternative possibilities. The show explores the conflict between personal experiences and institutional structures by depicting the everyday as a continuous spectrum of existence. This emphasis on the everyday is not exclusive to *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, as there is a broader trend in K-drama towards exploring everyday life as a site for both sociohistorical oppression and creative resistance (Yuan 2023).

This drama offers further insights into the protagonist experiences by highlighting the use of her noise-cancelling headphones as a coping mechanism in public spaces. In episode 1, as U Yǒng-U finds herself on a subway, she wears her headphones and envisions a comforting whale, showcasing her reliance on this tool to navigate in overwhelming social settings. Throughout the series, the recurring theme of her frequent use of headphones underscores the importance of managing triggers and creating a sense of calm amidst potentially distressing environments. The portrayal of her reliance on noise-cancelling headphones is a significant aspect of her character development. By incorporating this recurring element, the series sheds light on the sensory challenges faced by individuals with autism in bustling public spaces. The headphones serve as a practical tool to minimize auditory stimuli, allowing U Yǒng-U to navigate her surroundings with greater ease. This depiction not only provides a glimpse into the unique experiences of individuals with autism but also prompts viewers to consider the various strategies employed to cope with sensory overload. Moreover, the symbolic representation of a



comforting whale in U's imagination showcases the transformative power of imagination and personal symbolism in self-soothing.

Her consistent use of headphones throughout the series also serves as a visual reminder of her journey towards self-acceptance and self-care. This portrayal challenges stereotypes and showcases a character who takes agency in seeking solutions and creating a sense of well-being for herself. The inclusion of the headphones and her reliance on them also raises broader societal awareness about the diverse ways in which individuals with autism navigate the world. By incorporating this recurring element, the series provides viewers with an opportunity to reflect on their interactions with individuals on the autism spectrum and consider ways in which they can contribute to creating more inclusive environments.

In several episodes, U Yöng-U's character reveals a distinct pattern in her self-introduction and interaction with her environment, further deepening our understanding of her unique traits. When introducing herself, she places emphasis on the remarkable quality of her name, highlighting that it can be read the same even when reversed. This deliberate emphasis on her name showcases her desire to assert her identity and individuality, an important aspect of her character that resonates with her autistic traits. Also, as U Yöng-U approaches a room, she follows a specific ritual of knocking three times and patiently waiting for a welcome and before entering the room, counting to five.

One aspect of U Yöng-U's everyday routines can be seen in her approach to breakfast. As her father owns a kimbap restaurant, she consistently turns to kimbap<sup>4</sup> as her regular morning meal. This familiarity brings her a sense of comfort and predictability, as she can easily see the ingredients and is never surprised. However, in episode 8, during a sleepover, her best friend prepares a different kind of kimbap for them to enjoy for breakfast. To her pleasant surprise, she discovers that even with different ingredients, the taste is still enjoyable. This small deviation from her usual breakfast routine highlights U Yöng-U's ability to adapt and appreciate new experiences. It showcases her openness to trying new things and challenges the notion that individuals with autism are rigid or resistant to change. This moment in the series emphasizes the importance of flexibility and the potential for positive discoveries when stepping outside of established routines.

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<sup>4</sup> 김밥: Kimbap is a popular Korean dish consisting of rice, vegetables, meat, and pickled radish rolled in seaweed sheets. It is similar to sushi rolls and is known for its convenience and variety of fillings. Kimbap is widely enjoyed in Korea as a quick snack or meal option.

This consistent and ritualistic behaviour sheds light on her adherence to patterns and routines, which play a significant role in her daily life. The repetition of these behaviours not only reflects her autistic characteristics but also highlights the importance of consistency and predictability for individuals on the autism spectrum. By portraying U Yöng-U's adherence to these patterns and routines, the series provides valuable insight into the significance of consistency and stability in her life. Furthermore, the depiction of her adherence to these routines contributes to a broader understanding of autism and its impact on daily life, emphasizing the need for understanding and acceptance of diverse ways of experiencing and interacting with the world.

Overall, the portrayal of U Yöng-U's self-introduction and her ritualistic behaviour in approaching rooms not only adds depth to her character but also underscores the importance of patterns, routines, and predictability for individuals with autism. It offers viewers a glimpse into the intricacies of autistic traits and the significance of consistency in fostering a sense of stability and well-being. Through U Yöng-U's character, the series promotes empathy, understanding, and appreciation for the diverse experiences and behaviours exhibited by individuals on the autism spectrum.

Through its focus on quotidian practices and emotional connections, K-drama prompts self-reflexivity among its audience, inviting them to reflect on their own lives and ways of navigating a world shaped by societal norms and structures. This engagement fosters a sense of resonance and connection, where viewers can emotionally align with the characters on screen. Ultimately, K-drama's global appeal lies not only in its universal themes, but also in its ability to magnify the complexities and potentials of everyday existence. As K-drama continues to develop its global-local grammar, it holds the potential to further illuminate the shimmering possibilities inherent in ordinary life.

## **5. The influence of movie portrayals on perception and attitudes**

### **5.1. Portrayals of Autism Spectrum Disability in the television series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo***

This chapter explores the influence of movie portrayals on perceptions and attitudes, specifically focusing on the impact of the series "*Extraordinary Attorney Woo*" and its portrayal of autism spectrum disorder. The chapter examines the popularity and reception of the show, analysing both the praise it has received for its positive representation and the criticisms regarding its realism and potential effects on societal perceptions of autism.

The television series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* has achieved unprecedented success in terms of viewership ratings, captivating Korean audiences from its premiere on the newly founded cable channel ENA. The drama's ratings soared from a 0.9-percent viewership rate for its first episode to an impressive 9.6 percent for its sixth episode. Furthermore, the show has gained international acclaim, becoming the most-watched program on Netflix Korea, and topping the weekly Global Top 10 chart for non-English TV series. The immense popularity of *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* demonstrates the significant interest in its portrayal of autism and the unique character of U Yōng-U.

The main character is portrayed as a highly talented lawyer who graduated from Seoul National University, one of Korea's most prestigious educational institutions. As a high-functioning individual with an IQ of 164, her exceptional memory and attention to detail contribute to her success as a lawyer. The character's journey unfolds as she faces initial struggles in finding employment before joining the renowned law firm after six months of unemployment. According to statistics in Korea, only 22% of autistic individuals are employed. Each episode revolves around different cases and the people U Yōng-U encounters, showcasing her distinct thought process and challenging societal prejudices against autism (Bunting 2022).

The series has received widespread acclaim for its portrayal of a protagonist with a developmental disability, avoiding the common pitfall of presenting disabled individuals through a sympathetic lens. Viewers appreciate the opportunity to experience the world through U Yōng-U's perspective as she narrates the show. The drama neither condescends to non-disabled individuals nor portrays people with disabilities as perpetually dependent on others. However, criticism has emerged regarding the character's relatively mild symptoms of autism, her exceptional abilities, and the casting of a conventionally attractive actor. Some argue that this portrayal may set unrealistic standards and potentially reinforce negative stereotypes about autism.

Despite the fictional nature of U Yōng-U's character and her exceptional achievements, experts, and family members of individuals with autism express hope that the drama can serve as a catalyst for raising awareness and fostering understanding in Korean society. While the portrayal may not accurately represent the experiences of most individuals with autism, it generates interest and curiosity about the condition. The show's accurate terminology and consultations with experts in the field contribute to making autism more familiar and less stigmatized (Kim et al. 2022). Despite the intention of the creators to raise awareness about autism in Korea through the show, there are underlying

ableist elements present, starting with the original title *Isanghan Pyönhosa U Yöng-U*.<sup>5</sup> The title, which is considered pejorative by autistic Koreans, perpetuates a sense of otherness rather than promoting meaningful support for autistic individuals. The introduction of a U Yöng-U NFT<sup>6</sup> collection further undermines the show's altruistic motivations. To counter the ingrained ableism, it is important to involve disabled individuals in the production process and hire disabled actors to provide authentic experiences for their characters. While the writer may have consulted with an early childhood special education professor, the portrayal of U Yöng-U as a genius savant aligns with stereotypical depictions of autism that persist and fail to challenge stereotypes effectively.

The supportive and accepting environment depicted at the law firm, while seen by some as unrealistic, prompts viewers to reflect on society's treatment of individuals with autism. Through Yöng-U's experiences, the series offers a glimpse into the struggles of navigating a hostile world with autism. Some autistic individuals feel a strong sense of representation, relating to Yöng-U mannerism and journey. However, some critics find the supportive nature of her colleagues too idealistic, emphasizing that many disabled individuals face resentment and challenges when requesting services (Bunting 2022). Colleagues of Yöng-U demonstrate understanding, respect, and treat her as an equal. While experts acknowledge the unrealistic aspects of the show, they emphasize the importance of creating support networks and systems within society that empower autistic individuals to thrive independently. The drama sparks hope for a future where such acceptance and support become a reality (Kim et al. 2022).

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<sup>5</sup> 이상한 변호사 우영우: Original name of the drama would be translated as odd or weird lawyer U Yöng-U.

<sup>6</sup> NFT (Non-Fungible Token): A type of digital asset that represents ownership or proof of authenticity of a unique item or piece of content. Unlike cryptocurrencies, NFTs are indivisible, and each has a distinct value, making it unique and scarce. They have gained popularity in the art world and entertainment industry for verifying ownership and creating a digital market for digital creations.

## **Conclusion**

The primary objective of this thesis was to investigate the representation of disability, with a specific focus on Autism Spectrum Disability in Korean cinema. Through a thorough review of relevant articles and books dedicated to the intersection of autism, disability, and Korean cinema, as well as the analysis of works of Korean screen culture, the following findings emerged.

The prevalent theme in the reviewed articles is the pervasive stigmatization of disability, particularly ASD, and its significant impact on individuals with diverse diagnoses. Due to the wide spectrum of the disability, each autistic individual's experience and abilities vary significantly, leading to misunderstandings, and unfair judgments from society. Consequently, autistic individuals face negative experiences and unjust scrutiny, hindering their personal growth and perpetuating exclusion and discrimination. Cultural and social contexts, coupled with a lack of education and awareness, further compound the challenges faced by disabled individuals. Disabilities are often wrongly attributed to genetic factors or even seen as acts influenced by supernatural forces in certain cultural settings. To address these issues, it is crucial to challenge preconceived notions and promote a nuanced understanding of disabilities, including autism. This requires raising awareness about the diverse nature of autism, educating the public about the unique challenges and strengths of individuals on the spectrum, and fostering a supportive and inclusive environment that celebrates neurodiversity. By advocating for acceptance, understanding, and combating stigma, we can create a society that values and embraces the individuality and contributions of all disabled individuals, providing them with the opportunities and support they deserve for a more inclusive and equitable future.

Despite prevailing social stigma, the South Korean government is committed to supporting individuals with disabilities. Over the years, they have implemented initiatives such as the Welfare Act for the Mentally and Physically Disabled, amendments to safeguard rights and promote independence, and the Korean National Disability Registration System. Additional welfare policies include disability pensions, personal assistance services, and adult guardianship. President Moon Jae-In's Comprehensive Plan for Lifelong Care for People with Developmental Disabilities further demonstrates the government's commitment to enhancing support services. Though challenges remain,

efforts are being made to challenge negative perceptions, promote inclusivity, and improve the lives of disabled individuals in South Korea.

With the release of the television series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, the perception of disability is gradually shifting from being seen as a threat to society to being recognized as something normal and acceptable. This initiative, supported by the government, has had a significant impact not only in Korea but also worldwide, as people gain more knowledge and develop new perspectives on individuals with autism. While the majority of viewers hold a positive opinion of the show, it is important to acknowledge that there are also differing viewpoints. One aspect that sparked a discussion around ableism is the title of the show in its original Korean version. The translation “weird attorney” carries a potentially negative connotation, contrasting with the more positive “extraordinary” used in the English version. This discrepancy in translation has raised concerns about the underlying ableist undertones present in the show. It highlights the importance of using language that is respectful and inclusive, avoiding terms that perpetuate stereotypes or stigmatize individuals with disabilities. Despite the controversy surrounding the show’s title, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* has played a significant role in increasing awareness and understanding of autism. By portraying the experiences and challenges faced by the main character, the series has brought attention to the unique perspectives and strengths of individuals with autism. It has prompted discussions about inclusivity, representation, and the importance of creating opportunities for disabled individuals in the entertainment industry.

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