**The Representation of Mental and Physical Disabilities in the Media:**

**A Literature Review**

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes inaccurate representations of disabilities in the media and understands the importance of creating accurate portrayals in films and television shows. Media is the biggest resource for learning and teaching, and the information given within the media must be accurate. A literature review on this topic was conducted to gather as much research and data as possible during the time allotted. Research topics consisted of inaccurate depictions of both mental and physical disabilities portrayed in the media and accurate representations of both mental and physical disabilities in the media. Twenty-three articles, journals, and books were analyzed for this thesis. Research gathered concluded that many films and television shows with disabilities are not created with actors and actresses that have these disabilities. Despite the different films and television shows that have characters with disabilities, many tend to use stereotypes and inaccurate depictions of these different disabilities.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Professor Blais and Professor Howe for all the help they provided during this thesis. Not only did they give suggestions, but they helped me prove to myself that I can work hard and see great outcomes.

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**Table of Contents**

I.      INTRODUCTION

Representation of specific groups of individuals in the media has consistently been a major topic of conversation. Over the years, characters in the media have gone from white, straight men and women to people of diverse backgrounds, sexualities, races, and ethnicities. When discussing identity groups needing representation, these are often the identities that come to mind. However, one group of people consistently left out of these conversations is people with disabilities and yet mental and physical disabilities are a part of many individual's identities. Approximately 46.4% of Americans will experience some kind of mental illness at one point in their life **("By the Numbers" 2013)**, and around 12% of Americans are living with an apparent disability (TNS 2011). One in four people in America have a disability, yet 3.1% of characters seen in the media are disabled. The number becomes even less in children's television and movies, with only 1% of characters on screen having an apparent disability (Brevig 2021).

There are very few individuals with disabilities portrayed in the media and when they are included, the representation is often inaccurate. Representation of all groups, including disabilities, is important because many individuals are left feeling invisible without it. Without representation, there is no way for others to learn, reflect, and understand individuals who are different from themselves. The self-esteem of adolescents can be impacted by the measures of representation that they see in the media; if they are exposed to a character with the same disability they have, this can have a positive effect on the child. Without representation, individuals can feel inferior to those around them (Krentz, C., & Sanchez, R. 2021).

**Overview of study**

This study will contain information from academic journals, articles, and books to examine and understand the importance of representation of individuals with disabilities in the media. This study will describe the depictions of mental and physical disabilities across television shows and movies, with a focus on the impact these negative depictions have on individuals living with disabilities. Examples of accurate portrayals of disabilities have also been researched to draw conclusions about the importance of correct information about disabilities and their representation in the media.

**Purpose of Study**

This thesis aims to provide examples and discussions of inaccurate representations of individuals with disabilities. This is done to educate those unfamiliar with disabilities about what true representation should be, as the media is one of the biggest ways individuals learn about the world around them. Not only is it important for children and adolescents to understand this diverse group of individuals and how individuals differ from each other, but it is important for everyone to learn about individuals who are not like them. There are many different generalizations for people with disabilities, that often lead to discrimination and oppression (Ellis & Goggin 2015). Learning about these individualistic differences can lead to more acceptance towards these groups of people. Treatment of disabled people is influenced by societal norms and public opinion, fed by the stereotypes that the media presents, which is exactly why more representation is needed and deserved.

Individuals not properly educated on disabilities view television shows and movies that include characters with disabilities and assume it is an accurate portrayal. This can lead to hurtful stigmatizations and stereotypes used against real life individuals with disabilities. Stereotypes and stigmas created by inaccurate depictions of individuals with disabilities are harmful to these individuals because they will continue to be seen in that way. An example of this is being seen as helpless due to their disability. Many people feel that people with disabilities need someone to do everything for them and that they are unable to do anything for themselves. This is an extremely harmful stereotype that was created because of inaccurate depictions in the media. With accurate representations, including characters with disabilities played by actors with disabilities or written by producers with knowledge about disability, it can help diminish these schemas and make a more diverse scene within the media.

**Research Question:** What are the false representations of individuals with disabilities in the media?

**Definitions**

*Disability:* A disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them (*Disability and Health Overview*, 2020). Disability is individualized, meaning that different individuals with a disability want to be presented in diverse ways.

*Media:* television shows or movies.

*Neurotypical:* Neurotypical is a descriptor that refers to someone who has brain functions, behaviors, and processing considered standard or typical (Resnick, 2022).

*Autism/Autism Spectrum Disorder/ASD:* "a neurodevelopmental condition of variable severity with lifelong effects that can be recognized from early childhood, chiefly characterized by difficulties with social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior" (Oxford Languages 2023).

*Depression:* "...A common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act" (APA 2020).

*Anxiety:* "...A feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness" (Medline Plus 2023).

*World Health Organization/WHO:* The United Nations agency working to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable. (WHO n.d.).

**Limitations**

The limited amount of data accessible through the databases provided made it difficult to conduct an accurate and fruitful study, as little to no articles were available through the interlibrary loan. Another limitation is the time constraint, as there was only one semester to complete this thesis. This thesis also completely depends on secondary sources, as no study was conducted. Another limitation that was revealed during this study was creating a set of keywords that gave enough information needed. In a set of three words or phrases, one had to be changed to get an article, journal, or book that would be beneficial to the study. This made it difficult to ensure that the essential terms remained comparable.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Information to create this thesis was found in databases provided by Anna Maria College. These databases were Academic OneFile, Gale PowerSearch, and Google Scholar. Key terms for different core topics were used to obtain accurate and reliable information. One combination of key terms was "disability," "representation," and "media." The second combination of key terms was "mental health," "portrayal," and "media." There was no specific physical disability or mental illness that was searched for to instead get a broader idea of what is and is not represented.

Specific criteria were used to get the most accurate information on these topics. No sources were used if they were published before 2005 to gather the most data from the last twenty years. Articles that provided full text instead of solely the abstract were used to gain the most information from the source. Lastly, articles were only used if they were peer-reviewed. Any articles that were not peer-reviewed, published before 2005, and did not provide the full text were excluded.

One of the main successes of this methodology is the amount of informative and relevant articles gathered due to the inclusive and exclusive criteria. Articles with full text were acquired that were peer reviewed and as recent as 2005. A limitation, however, was due to the substantial number of articles remaining after excluding those that did not fit the criteria, numerous articles that could have relevant information were potentially looked over. Another limitation was the limited number of articles available due to the databases granted by Anna Maria.

III.    RESULTS

Over the last decade or so there has been an immense change regarding representation in the media. Despite the growth of characters with disabilities being presented in the media, these depictions are not always the most educational or true. Many viewers create biases about certain groups of individuals based on what they see in the media. If there is an incorrect representation of people with mental or physical disabilities, viewers will continue to project what they see outwardly into the real world. Not only should there be representation for education purposes, but individuals with disabilities may use individuals portrayed in the media as role models. This is why it is important to have accurate depictions of individuals with disabilities in the media.

Many people work on developing a film or television show. Collaboration is necessary to ensure that they are putting out the best possible work that they can. With this said, many companies put out harmful shows and movies and create false narratives about individuals with disabilities. Inaccurate depictions of mental illnesses and disabilities are seen in shows like *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Atypical,* and movies like *Music*. Inaccurate depictions of physical disabilities are seen in films like *Me Before You, Million Dollar Baby,* and *The Fault in Our Stars*. Taking the time to research and understand how to positively represent a group of individuals helps educate the audience on real-life characteristics instead of stereotypical ones. It also creates a more diverse cast that others can relate to. This is seen in movies like *Eternals,* created by Marvel starring a deaf actress. It is not a triumphant feat for a disabled person to play a role in a movie or a television series, although many different producers and creators say otherwise. It is

crucial to cast disabled actors as disabled characters in television shows or movies to get

an accurate representation of the disability. Companies producing movies and television

shows should take more time to meticulously create characters who accurately represent

mental and physical disabilities.

**Inaccurate Depictions of Mental Illness and Disabilities**

Discussions and understanding of mental health have changed with society

becoming more accepting and supportive of individuals with mental health disorders.

Advocating for mental health needs and the importance of talking about mental health

concerns has been one of the biggest reasons why representation of mental health has

continued to grow in the media and has become a mainstream topic for popular shows

and movies. Shows like *13 Reasons Why* and *Atypical* have been under a microscope due

to stigmatizing language (Carter 2020) and the negative effects this show could have on

its viewers. *Atypical* is a show centered around a character who is autistic. Within the

show, there are various times when the word "*retarded"* is used, and they continuously

call the character with autism *"weird."* This can be a harmful rhetoric that conditions

neurotypical individuals into thinking that speaking poorly to an autistic person is

acceptable. Another show that uses stigmatizing language is *13 Reasons Why.* In this

show, the words "*weirdo," "unstable,"* and "*retarded"* are used against the main

character Hannah Baker, who has depression and later commits suicide in the show

(Carter, 2020). This again creates a negative connotation about those who are not

neurotypical. Using words or phrases that stereotype a group of individuals normalizes

the language, thus creating a bigger issue. If everyone thinks that it is normal to say

derogatory terms to someone who has a disability or a mental illness, it will be integrated with their everyday life and language, later causing harm to those who are struggling.

*13 Reasons Why it* has shown to have harmful effects on its viewers. Studies like Albert Bandura's Bobo Doll have shown the effects of observation on viewer behaviors (Carcea & Froemke, 2018). Research also shows that when observational learning is being filmed, it is more likely to be learned than if seen in real life (Wang & Parris 2021). It is important to take note that viewers who watch *13 Reasons Why* are more likely to be subjected to copycat behavior. Copycat behavior is when a viewer sees something being done and repeats it in real life. For example, *13 Reasons Why* shows a very graphic scene of Hannah Baker committing suicide. This scene shows the way she commits suicide, which the World Health Organization says writers should refrain from including (Wang & Parris 2021). This potentially gives viewers ideas of how to commit suicide that they might not have known before. WHO further states that a television show or movie should never show the location, what was used to commit suicide, or how they write their note. In addition to this, 12% of the scenes in *13 Reasons Why* include language that could potentially normalize suicide or make suicide seem like an accurate solution to a problem (Wang & Parris 2021). Hannah and the supporting characters use derogatory and stigmatizing words when discussing Hannah's suicide and her feelings before (Carter 2020). When Hannah is attempting to get help from her school's guidance counselor after she had gotten sexually assaulted, he says to her "Look something happened that day Hannah and I believe you, but if you will not confront him then the only other choice is to move on" (Asher (2017). This also creates negative connotations surrounding getting

treatment for a mental illness. It is important for a television show or movie to understand these taboo topics and advocate for them correctly, or they may have detrimental consequences.

Creating a television show or movie that revolves around a character with a disability means that the creator of the television show or movie should do enough research to accurately represent it. If the creator is basing the movie or television show on a disability that they do not have knowledge of, it is beneficial to involve someone in the production to maintain an acceptable depiction. In Sia's movie titled *Music*, the main character is a nonverbal autistic girl. This movie is not an accurate or appropriate depiction of someone who is autistic and nonverbal. On three separate occasions in the film, the main character is put into a restraint due to a meltdown that many autistic people experience. The restraint depicted in the movie has proven to be fatal for autistic people, and it is triggering for autistic people to watch. This film inaccurately and distastefully portrays autistic people and continues to put them in a narrative that they have been trying to break out of for a long time (Jeffress 2021). The movie also faced a lot of backlash due to the main character being played by Maddie Ziegler, a neurotypical woman. Many people within the autistic community criticized and gave feedback online. Sia was not willing to take the feedback and instead said that others were missing the point (Johnson 2021). This is extremely harmful because not only was the movie an inaccurate creation of an autistic person, but the director of the movie was also unwilling to learn and understand the damage this would do to the community.

Many people who experience disability feel as if they are invisible with no representation. When there is representation, it is done poorly or done with people who do not have that disability. This leads to stereotypes and discrimination of individuals who live with that disability. Creators who think movies and TV shows about individuals with disabilities are about advocating and inclusion miss the understanding about the impact of inaccurate representation has on individuals who live with the disability depicted. They are inadvertently harming the community and all the work advocates and individuals with disabilities have done to combat stereotypes.

**Inaccurate Depictions of Physical Disabilities**

Not often does disability come up when people talk about normalcy. Despite this, disabled persons consider their impairment to be normal because it affects them daily. In the film *Me Before You,* the story follows a man named Will falling in love with his caretaker, Louisa. While it may seem that the film's intention was to show a love story between characters not often seen in movies, the hidden message was to show how disabled people are not deemed normal in our society (Mendez 2019). In the movie, Will is seen as a successful man who is seen as peak masculinity. He has a decent job, a beautiful girlfriend, a big house, and what seems like the 'perfect life.' Unfortunately, Will gets into a tragic accident that leaves him paralyzed. Due to this accident, he loses everything. He can no longer do anything himself and needs a caretaker to live. He feels that because he is disabled, there is nothing left of him. He feels that he is unable to be loved and would rather commit suicide than be a disabled man. This movie portrays a man who lost his sense of masculinity due to his disability. The everyday expectation for

men is to be powerful, and this movie shows that men cannot be powerful if they are

disabled, which leaves Will alienated and casted out from society (Mendez 2019). This

creates a narrative that disabled people are not like typical people, and they could never

live up to the typical person. This film shows the viewers that Will was better off dead

than disabled (Mendez 2019) and that being disabled prohibits one from having a "good"

life.

Pity is often seen in movies surrounding those with disabilities. Many stories

about disability discuss both its accomplishments and failures. Despite this, many films

that are made tend to concentrate more on the challenges faced by those who are disabled

because they are unable to perform tasks that people without disabilities can. Much like

the movie *Me Before You,* the movie *Million Dollar Baby* follows a character who was

not disabled her whole life but became disabled in a tragic accident. Due to the accident,

the character Maggie is heartbroken over the fact that she will now have to rely on the

help of others for the rest of her life (Dolmage & DeGenaro 2005). Maggie was a boxer

who had a spinal injury that ended her career. This injury causes her to become depressed

and Maggie ends up choosing to be euthanized. This again creates the narrative that

disabled people struggle so much that they want to end their lives. Being disabled, like

being a typical person, has its challenges but it does not garner any reason to give up.

This overused movie trope does nothing but negatively impact a group of individuals

who already must constantly prove their worth to people every day.

Those who are disabled are often looked at when those who are typical need inspiration. Disabled individuals are often exploited when they do something that is deemed as inspirational when it would not be as impressive when a typical person would complete the same task (Dunn & Moore 2017). In this case, the movie *The Fault in Our Stars* follows two characters who fall in love despite both having cancer. This story's intention is to teach its viewers about morality and how fragile life is. It shows that two people can fall in love regardless of the possibility of death. Even with this intention in mind, it does not come across as being a well-thought-out story of love, but rather a way to prove to its viewers that two people who are disabled can be happy. This is a harmful narrative because of the stigma that people who are sick cannot be happy because they need to continuously be worried about what will happen to them. The characters in this movie all seem to have personalities and qualities that overcompensate for the disability that they have (Dunn & Moore 2017). An example of this would be one of the characters named Issac, who is blind. In the movie, his character is mostly seen making jokes, which can make people believe that his character is only there for comedic relief. He does not have any developmental storylines, which can lead to the assumption that he was only added to have another disabled person in the movie. This evidence, along with the actors themselves not being disabled, and the characters in the movie all being white and middle class, proves that it creates a story that would not be seen in real life. It mimics a story that people only see in films, which diminishes the real-life scenarios that people with these disabilities' experiences. Disabled people are more than just a story; they are

capable of love not because it inspires others, but simply because they themselves are still people.

**Accurate Representation of Disabilities in the Media**

Unlike *13 Reasons Why,* which consisted of many mature and triggering themes, there are shows that take a more lighthearted approach to mental health. The show *Bojack Horseman* is an animated television series for adults. It consists of a talking horse that is battling substance abuse and depression (Barranco 2020). Regardless of the blithesome jokes and otherwise childlike appearance, it accurately displays the tribulations of a mental health disorder. The show explores the trauma that Bojack and the other characters have experienced in greater detail while retaining its amusing moments and easy-to-follow narrative (Barranco 2020). *Bojack Horseman* is an example of depicting mental health issues lightly without going as far as to ridicule or mock. It remains accurate, showing humanity as its true form.

Movies about individuals with disabilities do not have to be a tragedy or over-inspirational to prove a point. The movie *Crip Camp* successfully portrays disabilities with actors who have these disabilities in real life. This movie does an excellent job of proving that movies about disability do not have to be inspirational to make an impact. Showing daily life of individuals with disabilities can make an impact as well (Jeffress 2021). Many non-disabled individuals see a disabled person doing something normal, like painting or running, and view it as inspirational despite it being a basic task. They look at disabled people and think to themselves that their life could be worse because

they could be disabled (McAskill 2016). This way of thinking and viewing individuals with disabilities, called inspiration porn, is harmful to people with disabilities, and continues to promote demeaning stereotypes. *Crip Camp* shows teenagers being teenagers instead of focusing on this idea of being inspirational and unbelievable. It is simply a good movie about disabled people.

Many times, children will learn about separate groups of individuals through the media they consume. As mentioned prior, it is a great way to instruct children due to the attention-grabbing videography and the helpful and empathetic narratives displayed in movies and television shows for adolescents. Marvel is known for being one of the biggest and most successful media and entertainment companies in the world. They hold their image to a high standard and do what they can to ensure that many communities are portrayed in their movies, shows, and comics. In 2021, Marvel released the movie *Eternals* starring Lauren Ridloff, a deaf actress. In the movie, her character Makkari is also deaf, and it ties into her as a superhero. Instead of making it an obstacle, she uses it to her advantage, and it is a big part of her character. Having a character in a franchise that is popular among kids and adults is necessary when discussing representation. This is not a side character put in to have a side plot in a movie; she is a huge part of the Eternals and has a developing storyline. She uses sign language in the movie, and others communicate with her through sign language in the movie. Not only is she deaf, but she is a woman of color as well. This character is important for children who are deaf and can finally see representation in a monumental and influential franchise.

IV. DISCUSSION

Representation is important to educate those who do not understand or know about disability. Without accurate representation, false stereotypes about many different mental illnesses, mental disabilities, and physical disabilities will continuously come to fruition. These stereotypes can lead to harm to many of these individuals, like wrongful treatment to those with disabilities, low expectations of someone who has a mental illness or an apparent disability, or a lack of support from those around the individual because someone with a disability is seen as someone who requires a copious amount of attention. With representation, many individuals with disability could finally be able to see someone like them on TV and can normalize a true portrayal of a person with a disability. Expectations and stereotypes can be proven false with more representation and education on these individuals.

For this thesis, an accumulation of twenty-five articles, peer-reviewed journals, and books were analyzed to gather as much information as possible about representation of disabilities in the media. After the research was done with the key words provided prior, data was collected for inaccurate representations on mental illnesses and disabilities, physical disabilities, and positive depictions of mental and physical disabilities in the media.

**CONCLUSION**

There have been multiple ways that movies and television shows have been able to accurately represent a mental or physical disability. Research done beforehand on what an accurate portrayal looks like for a disabled character not only creates a strong validity

for the piece of media, but it creates an expectation for other writers and producers. Not only does adding writers with knowledge of different disabilities lead to more accurate portrayals, but it leads to more accurate storylines that do not always involve inspiration or defeat. They should continue to research the disability they are wanting to present on screen, and have people with that disability be a part of the project to ensure that proper representation is happening.

It has been demonstrated that accurate portrayal of people with disabilities is crucial for their advocacy and for educating individuals who do not have a disability. To guarantee a precise portrayal of an individual with a disability, casting an actor in the part of the character with the disability can help. As previously mentioned, movies like *Crip Camp* and *Eternals* casted real-life people who have the same disabilities their characters had, making the movies more successful in portraying these characters. Actor Gaten Matarazzo, who has cleidocranial dysplasia, a genetic condition that affects the individual's teeth and bones (Micknow 2023), was cast in the show *Stranger Things* (Alvi 2019). This is a rare condition that few individuals are aware of; it was mentioned on the show in passing but was not his primary characteristic. Rather, he was portrayed as a courageous and intelligent youth who would stop at nothing to save his friends in need. Television series and films should feature characters who are important despite their disability, instead of utilizing the character's disability to forward the plot of the piece of media. Individuals with disabilities need to see this recognition; knowing that there are other people that have the same condition, or any disability at all, rewrites the script in

the sense that society is not made up of perfect people. It is instead made up of individuals that are never exactly alike.

**LIMITATIONS**

One of the largest limitations of this study was the lack of time to conduct it. With more time, a more thorough and concise exploration of articles and subtopics could have been done. Due to the lack of time, a deep dive into different illnesses and disabilities could not have been done. When doing research, there were more articles that covered one disability or illness as opposed to any others. This made some of the processes more difficult due to the limited amount of coverage for other disabilities. An example of this would be the amount of representation on a character with depression as opposed to a character with autism spectrum disorder. Depression is seen as a more prevalent disorder included in television shows and motion pictures, whereas ASD is a less common illness.

A further limitation that became apparent was that, although representation in television shows and movies was studied, social media was not. Nowadays, social media plays a key role in the lives of many adolescents. It is how numerous people obtain their news, important updates, and lifestyle choices. With social media comes new ways of representing disabilities in the media. TikTok has become a large part of many individuals' everyday routines. Even with representation on an app like TikTok, there are still negative depictions of disabilities and expectations of people with disabilities. While there are professionals, advocators, and creators with disabilities giving beneficial advice on TikTok, there are still negative depictions being perceived. Even with individuals

creating this educational content, those who are medical professionals are seeing less numbers on their posts than people with no credentials (McCashin 2023).
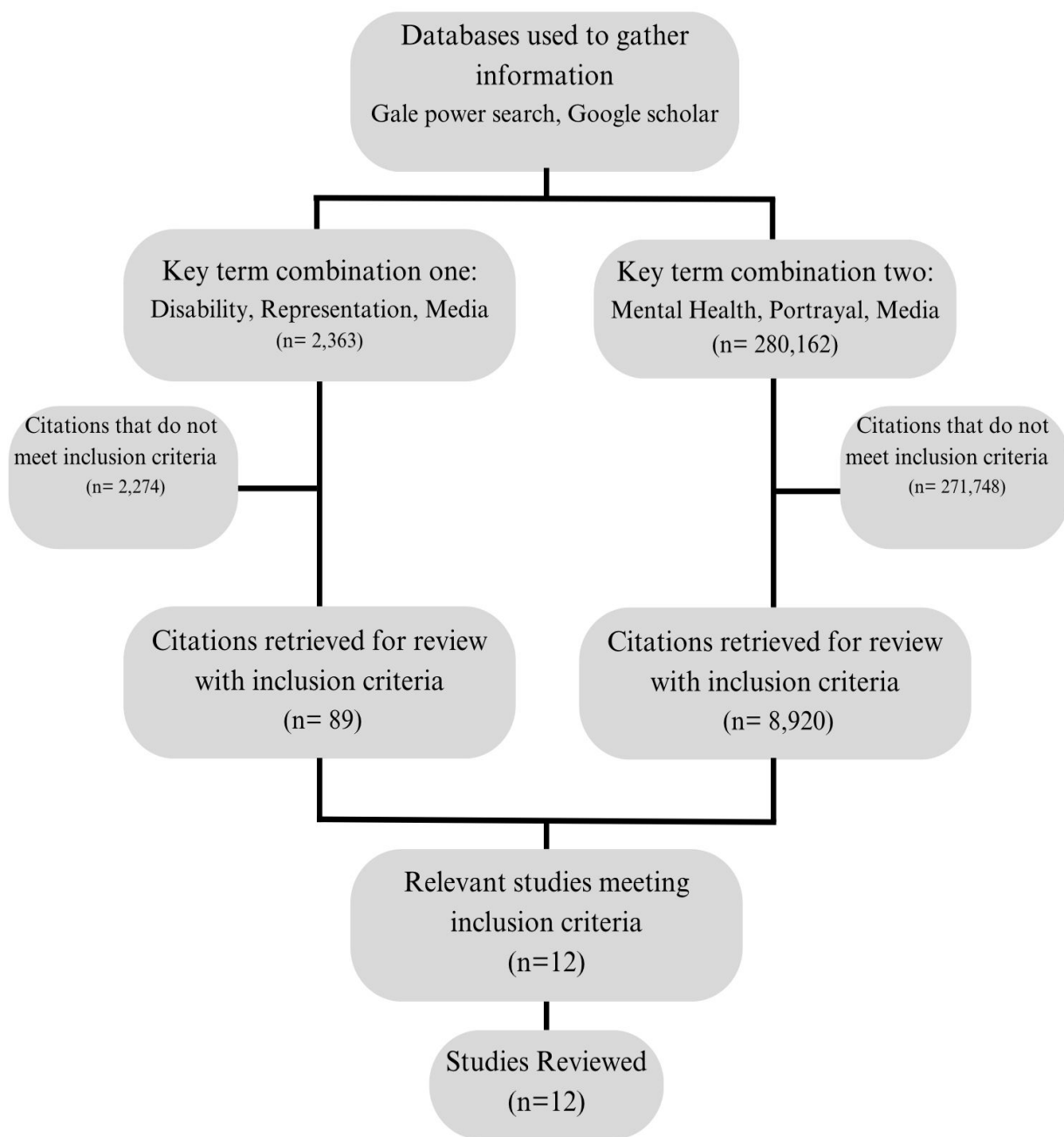
**FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research on this topic could be beneficial for producers and creators of television shows and movies. If there is more research done on what disabilities are represented the least in the media, producers and creators could take the time to educate themselves on these disabilities and incorporate them into their own productions. Even though work is still being done to ensure that the disabilities that are currently on screen are accurate, it would be a remarkable advancement for others to witness a progression of these other disabilities and for the actors with these disabilities to be casted in various films and television series. Individuals with disabilities are not mythical; they are individuals that have different road blocks just like any other person. It should no longer be a courageous act to add characters with disabilities, it should be a standard that writers and producers hold themselves to.

It could also be beneficial to expand from just television shows and movies to different media outlets like social media. Representation on social media looks a lot different than representation in television shows and movies, with more individuals with real life disabilities advocating through their own platforms. With an application like TikTok being the largest growing social media application right now, it is still significantly under researched on its impacts and relation to both psychiatry and psychology (McCashin 2022). Understanding the significance of an application like TikTok to its viewers can help researchers understand its correlation to psychology and

more specifically, the harm and good it is doing to its young viewers. TikTok is a person-based application; it needs a constant stream of different creators to function and maintain its popularity. This can and does include people with disabilities. To create data on this, future research must be done on what representation looks like on TikTok and if it is hosting accurate portrayals or not. Social media has continued to be the future generations' main source of information, so ensuring that what they are consuming is accurate leads to the decline of harmful stigmas of individuals with mental or physical disabilities.

V. APPENDIX

Databases used to gather
information
Gale power search, Google scholar

Key term combination one:
Disability, Representation, Media
(n= 2,363)

Key term combination two:
Mental Health, Portrayal, Media
(n= 280,162)

Citations that do not
meet inclusion criteria
(n= 2,274)

Citations that do not
meet inclusion criteria
(n= 271,748)

Citations retrieved for review
with inclusion criteria
(n= 89)

Citations retrieved for review
with inclusion criteria
(n= 8,920)

Relevant studies meeting
inclusion criteria
(n=12)

Studies Reviewed
(n=12)

Inclusion Criteria: Must be dated after 2005, Peer-Reviewed, Full Text

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