

Kodi Lee in online media: How is autism represented?

Catharina Griselda, Wawan Gunawan, Ruswan Dallyono
English Language and Literature
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
dewintafitriani.ayu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study entitled *Kodi Lee in Online Media: How is Autism Represented?* aims to reveal the representation of Kodi Lee, a savant autistic young man, in three different online media, namely Good Housekeeping US, The Wrap, and HuffPost. This study uses Halliday's (1994) Systematic Functional Linguistic (SFL) focuses on Transitivity Analysis (TA) as the main analytical tool. Other theories uses to support the findings are representation (Hall, 1997), media representation (Orgad, 2012) and autism representation which includes savant autism (Prochnow, 2014) and mothering and autism (Stevenson, 2008). The findings show that material processes are dominantly used on the three websites. Material processes are used to describe Kodi's talents. Meanwhile, from the analysis of verbal processes, it is evident that Kodi still cannot voice himself, even though he has some talents to be proud of, which on the same time contradicts with Clarke's (2011) study. This study also finds that representations of Kodi are different on each media. Good Housekeeping US represents Kodi as a talented person with disabilities who stands behind his mother shadow. The Wrap represents Kodi as an extraordinary disabled young man who has a very strong bond with his mother, while HuffPost represents Kodi as a talented human being despite his disabilities. These results show despite Kodi's claim as a savant autistic young man, the media still emphasize his disabilities to represent him.

Keywords: *Autism, representation, savant autism, transitivity analysis*

INTRODUCTION

According to World Health Organization (2019), autism or scientifically known as an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to people with social behavior and communication impairment, and the sufferers usually have a wide variety of unique interests and activities which are done repetitively. Autistic people are part of the social groups within the society. They have many characteristics. However, the media tend only to categorize autistic characters into “four specific and mostly unrealistic categories” (Prochnow, 2014, p. 136). Four categories which are mentioned in Prochnow's (2014) article are magical/savant, different/quirky, undiagnosed/unlabeled and realistic portrayals.

The participant of this study, Kodi Lee, described himself as a blind and autistic musical prodigious savant as is written on his website. According to his website (kodileerocks.com), Kodi is one of only approximately 25 individuals in the world who possesses excellent abilities in music, such as musical expression and audio photographic memory. Kodi's extraordinary abilities manifest that he is in line with Prochnow's definition of savant autistic which is as written below:

The magical/savant category has supernatural abilities, due to their diagnosis, that elevate the autistic person from having a disorder that affects them negatively to having a disorder that makes them special and

more interesting than the average person (Prochnow, 2014, p. 137).

Kodi who performs in America's Got Talent Season Fourteen as one of the contestants, attracts many viewers. However unfortunately, his representation in America's Got Talent (AGT) Season Fourteen gains some critiques. As written by Erin (n.d.), how Kodi portrayed in AGT clips is considered wrong because according to Erin the clips tend to describe him as a talented young man despite his disabilities. Additionally, Ascher (2019) wrote an article on Yahoo! Lifestyle entitled “The Problem with How AGT Portrayed Kodi Lee”. Within this article, Ascher (2019) believes that AGT tends to emphasize Kodi's disability which is terrible until a mere act for normal people, such as playing the piano and singing, becomes inspirational to be watched.

Many previous studies have investigated autistic children in news discourse (e.g., Colson, 2010; Clarke, 2011; Kang, 2012; McKeever, 2012; Bie & Tang, 2014; Holton, Farrell, & Fudge, 2014; Muhamad & Yang, 2017). Those studies focused on what autistic children had in common, such as their family background and the cause of autism. However, none of those mentioned studies focused on a certain specific child with autism. Meanwhile, these studies focused on autistic fictional characters which were mostly taken from television series (Dowdy, 2013; Belcher & Maich, 2014; Ficarrota, 2018). This study involved online media to enable comparison of how online media represent a real-life

savant autistic young man. Additionally, involving online discourses allows this study to uncover the meanings behind the representations and some potential threats to the autistic persons viewed from the linguistic meanings and their representations.

More specifically, this study attempts to uncover how Kodi Lee is linguistically represented in *Good Housekeeping*, *HuffPost* and *The Wrap*. In order to achieve the expected outcome, this study is guided by two research questions: 1) What transitivity is used in describing Kodi in *Good Housekeeping US*, *The Wrap* and *HuffPost*? 2) How does the choice of transitivity in *Good Housekeeping*, *HuffPost* and *the Wrap* represent Kodi Lee? The findings of this study is expected to provide better insight into how to wisely represent autistic people in online media.

Representation has been used in a various contexts. For example, the relation between red light and the word 'stop', or probably the color red with something danger or spicy. "Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people" (Hall, 1997, p. 15). What makes media representation different from other representations is its essence to represent (Orgad, 2012). Media representations are texts which distribute in media space and have some meanings behind such as news articles and their images, advertisements, radio programs and social media and also their pages as well. They center on the analysis of textual, auditory, visual and

discursive properties, to produce meaning (Orgad, 2012).

Media tends to portray autistic people in the circulated discourses in order to give them voice. It happens because autistic people are hard to communicate with (Stevenson, 2008). However, this portrayal is not a hundred percent done correctly because it was done by non-autistic people. According to Murray (2008), savantism in autistic representation is the most fascinating portrayal which attracts many people interests.

Studies related to autism portrayal are popular among Linguistics scholars. For instance, the representation of autistic children in news discourse (Colson, 2010; Clarke, 2011; Kang, 2012; McKeever, 2012; Bie & Tang, 2014; Holton, Farrell, & Fudge, 2014; Muhamad & Yang, 2017) focused on what autism had in common among the distributed news discourse. Studies on fictional characters with autism from television series (Dowdy, 2013; Belcher & Maich, 2014; Ficarrota, 2018) were also being investigated as well.

Representational meaning in clauses realizes "aspects of the physical world and aspects of the mental world" (Fairclough, 2004, p. 96). What is meant by aspects of the physical world refers to "processes, objects, relations, spatial and temporal parameters", while "thoughts, feelings and sensations are the aspects of the mental world (Fairclough, 2004, p. 96). In order to realize the representational meanings, this study used transitivity analysis from the perspective of SFL.

Transitivity talks about “the grammar of the clause as representation” (Eggins, 2005, p.213). Meanwhile, Halliday (1994) says that the transitivity system construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types. There are three semantic categories used to describe the real world as linguistic structures which are circumstances, processes and participants.

There are many studies which use transitivity analysis to realize representational meaning within clauses. Zijiao (2013), for instance, tried to analyze some processes occurred in a short story entitled *A Rose for Emily*, and also explained about each processes' function of constructing the character, Emily. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, Wahyudin (2016) used transitivity analysis to give a better understanding of an author's point of view in writing a piece of news item, while Yujie and Fengjie used the same analyzing tool to seek out the political motivation hidden behind the language used in President Donald Trump's Inaugural Speech. Ong'Onda (2016) and Hampl (2017) applied transitivity analysis to study the representation of some participants in news and some president speeches.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

The data for this study were taken from articles about Kodi Lee which were downloaded from Good Housekeeping US, HuffPost and The Wrap website. From each website, three articles were

selected for this study. Each article which was taken from each website discussed the same subject, namely Kodi Lee.

The first article downloaded from Good Housekeeping US is entitled “‘AGT’ Star Kodi Lee Speaks Out for the First Time Since Getting Gabrielle Union's Golden Buzzer”. This article is about Kodi's first audition in AGT. The next one is about the report of AGT Season 14's final result in which Kodi successfully won the show. The title for the second article is “Kodi Lee Is Who Won ‘America's Got Talent’ 2019 and People Are LOSING It”. The last article entitled “Inside ‘AGT’ Winner Kodi Lee's Inspiring Untold Story” is about what Kodi has done in the last twenty-two years of his life until he could come out as the winner of AGT Season 14.

As for HuffPost, the first article is about Kodi's first performance in live round quarterfinal entitled “‘America's Got Talent’: Kodi Lee Outdoes Himself In Live Round Quarterfinal”. Next, “Kodi Lee Gives ‘America's Got Talent’ Another ‘Reason’ To Love Him” is about Kodi's performance in the semifinal. Finally, another article about the winning moment of Kodi Lee entitled “Kodi Lee Wins ‘America's Got Talent’ Season 14”.

From The Wrap, “‘America's Got Talent’: Gabrielle Union Gives Her First-Ever Golden Buzzer to Blind, Autistic Singer”, “‘AGT’: Blind, Autistic Contestant Kodi Lee Returns to Make You Cry With ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’”, and “‘America's Got Talent’ Season 14 Finale: And the Winner Is...” was downloaded. The

first article from The Wrap is about Kodi’s first audition. Next, Kodi’s first live performance in AGT, and lastly, the third article is about the winner of AGT season 14.

Data analysis

The unit of analysis of this study consisted of three articles about Kodi Lee from three different websites. Three articles are chosen in order to prove the significance of Kodi’s representation on each websites. To analyze the data, each article was parsed into clauses. The clauses which were related to Kodi Lee were analyzed by using Halliday’s (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This study only focused on ideational meaning by exploring the transitivity patterns selected to realize the ideational meaning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis, this study found that material processes were the most frequent processes used in clauses related to Kodi Lee. The frequency of each processes occurred in clauses on three different online media could be seen in table 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1. Frequency of processes used in clauses on Good Housekeeping US website

No	Name of processes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Material	52	39.10 %
2	Behavioural	12	9.00%

3	Mental	18	13.50 %
4	Verbal	16	12.00 %
5	Relational	35	26.30 %
Total	133	100%	

Based on Table 1, material processes were the most frequent processes used in clauses on Good Housekeeping US. From a total of 133 clauses, there were 52 clauses which used material processes. This finding showed that the writers used action verb or the process of doing something more often to report about Kodi Lee. Meanwhile, relational processes happened to be the second most frequent processes used which means that within the articles, Good Housekeeping US would always describe about Kodi’s condition (autistic and blind) and also other conditions which are related with Kodi.

Table 2. Frequency of processes used in clauses on The Wrap website

No	Name of processes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Material	43	50.60%
2	Behavioural	2	2.40%
3	Mental	8	9.40%
4	Verbal	7	8.20%
5	Relational	25	29.40%
Total		85	100%

Based on Table 2, material processes were the most frequent processes used in clauses on *The Wrap*. From a total of 85 clauses, there were 43 clauses which used material processes. Relational processes happened to be on the second most frequent used which indicates that *The Wrap* frequently describes Kodi's conditions as well.

Table 1. Frequency of processes used in clauses on HuffPost website

N o	Name of processes	Frequ ency	Percent age
1	Material	31	52.50%
2	Behavioural	3	5.10%
3	Mental	7	11.90%
4	Verbal	7	11.90%
5	Relational	11	18.60%
Total		59	100%

Based on Table 3, material processes were the most frequent processes used in clauses on HuffPost. From a total of 59 clauses, there were 31 clauses which used material processes. Relational processes happened to be on the second most frequent used. However, in comparison with other two media, HuffPost used the least relational processes which indicated that HuffPost did not describe Kodi as much as *The Wrap* and *Good Housekeeping US*.

In addition, Kodi was mostly positioned as a person who received a sort of action and particularly not as the doer. This phenomenon happened not only in material processes, but also in other

processes as well, such as behavioural, mental and verbal processes.

PROCESSES USED IN KODI'S ARTICLES

Transitivity analysis has been widely used by many scholars to analyze linguistic phenomenon for many years. Some research has been conducted under transitivity analysis to analyze a main character in a short story (Zijiao, 2013), a hidden agenda behind a president speech (Hampl, 2017; Yujie & Fengjie, 2018), a representation of a terrorism organization (Ong'onda, 2016) and a journalist intention when writing a piece of news item (Wahyudin, 2016). To enrich the usage of transitivity analysis, this study has chosen to analyze the representation of Kodi Lee, a savant autistic young man.

There were some similarities in the findings of the previous studies which is also found in this study as well. They (Zijiao, 2013; Ong'onda, 2016; Yujie & Fengjie, 2018) found material processes were dominant within the object of their study. This study also finds material processes frequently used to represent Kodi Lee.

In Zijiao (2013), material process as the process of doing (Halliday, 2004) was found to be used by William Faulkner (the author of short story "A Rose for Emily") as the tool to describe the setting for the short story, same as Wahyudin's (2016) study. Meanwhile, Ong'onda's (2016) paper acknowledged material processes were used by some reporters in Kenya to label the terrorism act with negative images, such as violence, destruction

and damage. Different usage of material process was found in Yujie and Fengjie's (2018) study, in which they found the process used as a tool to persuade people who heard President Donald Trump's inaugural speech to react toward something and also to show Trump's power in front of the Americans. On the other hand, this study finds material processes are used to describe Kodi's talent.

In every clauses which discussed about Kodi's performance, Kodi always put in the Actor position and material processes involved are always 'singing', 'playing' (the piano) and 'listening to' (the music). Circumstances involved in the clauses with material processes are also supported the description of Kodi's talent.

This research paper also acknowledges other processes in Kodi's articles, such as relational, mental, behavioural and verbal processes. There is no existential processes involved in Kodi's articles.

In Yujie and Fengjie's (2018) research, relational process was combined with material process to encourage hearers of the speech to react by adding some additional information about the US situation. Other studies (Zijiao, 2013; Wahyudin, 2016; Ong'onda, 2016) also found relational processes were used to add some information to build people knowledge of the related situation. In line with the previous studies, relational processes in Kodi's articles are also used to give additional information, such as the description of Kodi's condition.

Mental processes in Zijiao (2013), Ong'onda (2016) and Yujie and Fengjie's (2018) were used to describe what people around the object of the study felt. Ong'onda (2016) even found that mental processes were used to describe the vulnerability of Kenya's people which affected by the terrorism force. Meanwhile, Wahyudin (2016) used mental process to analyze the article's writer opinion about a case. Same as Wahyudin's (2016), articles by Good Housekeeping and The Wrap use mental processes to insert their writer opinion on Kodi's performance. In contrast, HuffPost uses mental processes to describe Kodi's own feeling.

Behavioural processes also uses to add writer opinion on Kodi by Huffpost and The Wrap, while Good Housekeeping US uses these processes to describe Kodi's desire which is the projection of verbal processes with Tina as the Sayer. These findings are in contrast with Ong'onda's (2016) and Yujie and Fengjie's (2018) research results. Ong'onda (2016) found behavioural processes were being used to build cruel imagination of the terrorist attack in readers mind. Meanwhile, Yujie and Fengjie's (2018) found Trump included behavioural process in his speech to show his dominancy to the people.

Last process finds in Kodi's articles is verbal processes. Good Housekeeping and The Wrap always put Kodi's mom, Tina Lee as the Sayer, or the one who holds the right to speak. Good Housekeeping quotes Tina's interview, a reliable source, like what Wahyudin (2016) found in his research. Wahyudin (2016) argued that the act of quoting

was to persuade readers that the article they read were trustful. On the other hand, HuffPost uses verbal process to tell their readers about what the judges said about Kodi's performance. HuffPost only uses verbal process once. Different from this study in which Kodi find to be does not voice himself, previous studies by Ong'onda (2016) and Yujie and Fengjie's (2018) found that verbal processes were used to express the terrorist and Donald Trump's voice.

THE REPRESENTATION OF KODI LEE IN THREE DIFFERENT ONLINE MEDIA

Autism representation in news discourse is not a new thing. Many previous studies Colson, 2010; Clarke, 2011; Kang, 2012; McKeever, 2012; Bie & Tang, 2014; Holtol, Farrell, & Fudge, 2014; Muhamad & Yang, 2017) have been conducted in this field. Those previous studies compiled at least a decade amount of news covering children with autism topic and analyzed the data with framing theory and content analysis. They did not analyze any specific participants, instead they tried to seek out how a news agency usually covered autism topic. On the other hand, this study has chosen a specific object of study which is Kodi Lee.

This study also different from previous studies conducted by Dowdy (2013), Belcher and Maich (2014), and also Ficarrotta (2018). Those previous studies chose a specific object of study, but the objects were taken from television series and they were a fictional character. Meanwhile, Kodi

Lee is a real person with a real savant autistic characteristics.

According to Belcher and Maich's (2014) study, almost all autistic characters in television series were tended to portray as a superpower human with a bit quirky condition, such as a loner, having difficulty in speaking, or did not like crowded places. The superpower traits were exaggerated, like an autistic boy who could read people minds or the boy could even fly (Belcher & Maich, 2014). These exaggerated things were inspired by savant traits which also known as the magical traits (Prochnow, 2014). To gain a better insight on how three different online media represent a savant autistic young man in their articles, this study about Kodi Lee was conducted.

KODI'S REPRESENTATION IN GOOD HOUSEKEEPING US

Clarke (2011) investigated autism portrayal in women and general interest magazine. Good Housekeeping US was chosen as one of the data for women magazines and Clarke's (2011) study found that this magazine covered autism as a kind of tragedy for some families. In contrast with this previous study, this study finds that mothering and autism (Stevenson, 2008) issue is more highlighted in Good Housekeeping US articles about Kodi.

Stevenson (2008) argues that a mother figure in an autistic child is the same as advocates who serve their client to gain their rights. One of a mother ways to stand up for her special needs child is by being the mediator when the

child finds it hard to speak (Simmons, 1996; Stevenson, 2008). This study finds Good Housekeeping US used verbal processes to voice Kodi with Tina as his mediator. Tina became the solid speaker in every interview related with Kodi.

Tina as the spokesperson of Kodi is proven to be in contrast with the statement by Bie and Tang (2014). When studying a large data of savant autism in China by using content analysis, Bie and Tang (2014) found that autistic children coverage would be grander if they were about savant autism news. This finding led Bie and Tang (2014) to conclude that savant autistic children have their own voice in news discourse. Unfortunately, in small scale data, like Kodi as the only object of the study and by analyzing the clauses related to him, it is evident that Kodi still cannot voice himself. Tina needs to speak for him.

In Good Housekeeping US also, other processes such as relational and behavioural processes are projected through verbal processes with Tina's position as the Sayer. This finding shows the importance of Tina as more important than Kodi who should be the main topic in each articles.

In addition, material processes are used to describe Kodi's talent by putting Kodi as the Actor when he was performing on stage and when he was practicing at home. To describe how incredible Kodi's performance and ability are, mental processes are used to insert the articles writer's opinion.

KODI'S REPRESENTATION IN HUFFPOST

From the transitivity analysis, it is evident that HuffPost avoids using too much relational processes. Instead, HuffPost used mostly material processes in clauses related to Kodi and always puts him in the Actor place or as the doer of the actions which are mainly singing and playing piano, in order to show their readers that the main point of HuffPost articles is about the amazing performance by Kodi as a singer and pianist, and not about an autistic young man who has some talents.

Different from Good Housekeeping US, HuffPost used verbal process to report on one of the judges' comment on Kodi's performance. By using verbal process, they also wanted to show how well Kodi's performance is. HuffPost also used behavioural process to insert their writer comments on Kodi's performance.

KODI'S REPRESENTATION IN THE WRAP

The Wrap is the only media which refers Kodi with his physical and mental disability and emphasize them with relational processes and some circumstances. In addition, The Wrap focuses more on Kodi's disability. They even used "blind, autistic contestant Kodi Lee" to refer to him. It shows that The Wrap tries to highlight more on savant autism in which according to Murray (2008), a savant has impossible talents beyond average people with the price of having disabilities such as autism. The Wrap mentions about Kodi extraordinary abilities despite his

disabilities which are labelled by this media as an inspirational story.

Not only from the way The Wrap refers to Kodi, the second most frequent processes which is relational processes also prove that this media tries to gain viewers' attention by selling Kodi's condition. When describing about Kodi's disabilities, The Wrap used circumstantial processes which make Kodi's situation seems like a kind of misfortune. On the other hand, to give explanation about Kodi's talents, The Wrap used intensive processes. Intensive processes is usually used to point the relationship of 'x is a' (Oktifati & Damanhuri, 2014). It means that The Wrap tries to highlight Kodi as despite having mental and physical impairment, he still has certain talents which are not found in many other normal people out there.

Meanwhile, The Wrap also discuss a bit about Tina. On one article, The Wrap describes how Tina helped her son to walk onto the AGT stage and on other occasion, this media directly reported Tina as the mediator for the AGT judges to talk with Kodi Lee. In both occasion, Tina within the clause positioned as the Actor and the Sayer. From here, the readers may conclude that The Wrap is a media which try to exploit Kodi's disability to gain more viewers.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to answer the following questions, first to gain knowledge on the transitivity used in describing Kodi and to acknowledge

how the choice of transitivity in Good Housekeeping US, HuffPost and The Wrap represent Kodi Lee in their articles.

To answer the first question, it could be said that Good Housekeeping US, HuffPost and The Wrap, all used material processes frequently to write articles about Kodi Lee. However, Kodi only acts as the Actor or the doer in clauses which are described about his performances, such as singing and playing piano on AGT stages. Readers from three media cannot find Kodi's other activity, for example how he celebrated his winning moment on AGT, which leads the readers to not regard Kodi as a normal young man with normal activity. Instead, readers will be guided to learn more about Kodi's talent via the material processes.

Meanwhile, relational processes are used to describe Kodi's condition. Good Housekeeping US and The Wrap, both use over dramatized relational processes to explain more about Kodi's disabilities. They also chose to include Tina's interview explaining about her son conditions in each one of their articles. In contrast, HuffPost shows a friendlier gesture towards Kodi by also using relational processes to describe Kodi's condition, but with the act of quoting from Kodi's official website. HuffPost also does not mention any interviews with Tina.

In addition, both behavioural and mental processes are used to add the writers' opinion about Kodi's performance. The difference of mental processes usage is shown by HuffPost in which this media tried to express Kodi's personal opinion. Good

Housekeeping US also showed Kodi's own desire by using behavioural processes.

As for the second question, Good Housekeeping US represents Kodi as a talented young man with autism who cannot deliberately act and communicate with others within his mother's help. Meanwhile, The Wrap represents Kodi in a more dramatic way, in which Kodi is a blind autistic young man with a very rare abilities who has a very strong bond with his mother. Lastly, HuffPost represents Kodi as a talented singer and pianist who also happens to be blind and autistic.

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