

Framing Autism in Iraqi Media: An Integrated Stigma and critical Discourse Analysis Approach

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Abstract: *This study aims to examine the construction of the linguistic stigma of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the discourse of the Iraqi media in the period from 2020 to 2025. The theoretical framework used in this study is qualitative research, which involves the use of three theories, namely: Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963); Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995); and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Based on a focused study of authentic media texts in Iraq, the analysis highlights three important qualitative trends: clinical medicalization (e.g., “مرضى التوحّد”), victimization and burden framing (e.g., “مكسورة مادياً وصحياً”), and evaluative sensationalism (e.g., “رقم خطير”). The results show that media choice is an additive process and unveils the stigmatizing aspects of the deficits as a public spectacle. The paper ends with some suggestions for media reporting and future corpus-based research that takes into account context.*

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, stigma theory, autism spectrum disorder, Iraqi media, discursive framing.

INTRODUCTION

Media discourse plays an important role in shaping public understandings of disability and autism. News reports, television programs, and digital platforms do more than transmit information: they select labels, frames, and descriptions that can influence how audiences interpret social groups. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is particularly relevant to this issue because public understandings of autism are shaped by medical, educational, family, and cultural narratives.

This study examines Iraqi media discourse on ASD from a pragmatic and discourse-analytic perspective. It focuses on how lexical choices and contextual framing may contribute to stigmatizing representations. The study draws primarily on Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma and Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The study deliberately distinguishes between linguistic description and causal claims. A stigmatizing expression may contribute to a negative representation, but the present theoretical study does not measure audience responses and therefore cannot establish a direct causal relationship between a particular media expression and discriminatory behavior.

Problem Statement

Although awareness of autism has increased, media discourse may still rely on medicalized, deficit-oriented, burden-oriented, or alarm-oriented language. Such wording can frame autistic people primarily in terms of disease, dependency, and social difference. The problem addressed in this study is therefore not the mere use of medical terminology, but the broader discourse patterns through which particular lexical choices may construct social difference and stigma.

In media communication, clinical and medical terminology often shifts from specialized healthcare contexts into public discourse without appropriate contextualization. Rather than assuming that every clinical label constitutes an automatic pragmatic violation, this study investigates how such lexical choices, when decontextualized, operate within public media to frame autism around dependency, deficit and social difference. A pragmatic violation should not be assigned automatically to a lexical item without evidence concerning the speaker's communicative intention, context, and resulting implicature.

The problem addressed in this study is therefore not the mere use of clinical or medical terminology in healthcare settings, but the unjustified transference of medicalized language into public media discourse, where it constructs social difference, dependency and stigma.

Research Objectives

1. To identify theoretically relevant lexical and discourse patterns used in selected Iraqi media materials to represent ASD.
2. To analyze these patterns using Goffman's stigma theory and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis.
3. To develop a theoretical model explaining how media framing may contribute to the construction of linguistic stigma.
4. To formulate practical recommendations for more inclusive and context-sensitive media reporting on autism.

Research Questions

- 1.What lexical and discourse patterns are employed in the selected media materials in order to represent ASD?
- 2.How can these patterns be explained using stigma theory and Critical Discourse Analysis?
- 3.How do you explain the theoretical link between media framing and the creation of linguistic stigmatization?
4. How to make recommendations for more inclusive reporting of autism in Iraq?

Significance of the Study

1-Theoretical Significance in the study, pragmatics, stigma theory and Critical Discourse Analysis are put in dialogue in an Iraqi media context. It also highlights the importance of the pragmatic violation from the ordinary lexical selection and the importance of understanding media language in context.

2-Practical Significance The study offers a preliminary model which could help journalism educators and journalism institutions to be aware of and recognize representations that are deficit-oriented or alarm-oriented, and to foster more inclusive reporting practices.

Research Gap

Researchers from around the world have extensively discussed how the media depicts disability but there is a lack of systematic research that has been conducted to integrate the use of Critical Discourse Analysis and Stigma in analyzing Iraqi media representations of autism. Local literature often does not explicitly have a theory or validated empirical literature of media. To address this issue, this study offers a grounded, qualitative analysis of verified materials published in Arabic language media in Iraq from 2020 to 2025.

METHODOLOGY

The study takes a qualitative and discourse analysis perspective to analyze a purposive sample of Arabic-language Iraqi media materials on ASD published in the period 2020-2025. Targeted keyword searches were made on major Iraqi media platforms and digital platforms using the keywords: “توحد” (autism), “مرضى التوحد” (autism patients), “أطفال التوحد” (autistic children), and “العراق” (Iraq). Unlike statistical generalizing, the study uses purposive illustrative qualitative sampling to ensure that the analysis is rich, fully verified and based on typical examples of the discourse pattern that recurs throughout Iraqi media.

The analysis is purposive and illustrative, not exhaustive focusing on key discursively rich reports. The analytical frameworks used draw upon two theories: Goffman's (1963) stigma theory and Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis, which is used to analyse how lexical choices constitute social representations. In this study, all media examples that have been analyzed are thoroughly documented and verified from the original published media sources. Qualitative CDA is a deep contextual evaluation, but corpus-based approaches can be used in conjunction with it to reveal statistical trends and patterns in larger collections of data (Baker, 2006).

Scope and Limitations

1. Scope: The study is limited to selected Arabic-language Iraqi online news media published between 2020 and 2025.
2. Qualitative Sampling: The study employs a purposive, illustrative qualitative sampling approach rather than seeking statistical generalization, the analysis focuses on rich, fully verified focal examples that represent recurring discourse patterns in Iraqi media.
3. Linguistic Scope: Kurdish, Turkmen and English language media operating in Iraq are outside the scope of this study.

Definition of Key Terms

1. **Linguistic stigma:** The use of language to mark a person or group through socially discrediting attributes or categories (Goffman, 1963).

2. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): A neurodevelopmental condition involving persistent differences in social communication and interaction together with restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior or interests (DSM-5-TR).

3. Discourse Framing: The process by which media select and highlight certain aspects of reality to promote a particular interpretation or evaluation of a topic (Fairclough, 1995).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section reviews the theoretical foundations relevant to linguistic stigma, disability framing, conceptual metaphor and media discourse in relation to ASD. It establishes the analytical tools used to evaluate how Iraqi media materials frame autism, while clarifying the scope and application of each theoretical model.

Media Discourse and Autism Construction

Pragmatics in discourse analysis concerns how speakers and media writers use language in specific contexts, including the interpretation of indirect meanings, conversational intentions, figurative language, and social interaction. Research on autism has shown that pragmatic abilities are heterogeneous rather than uniformly impaired. Contemporary work increasingly emphasizes individual differences, contextual factors, and the interaction between communicative partners rather than treating autistic communication as a single global pragmatic deficit (Marocchini, 2023).

In a crucial way, this study no longer places the blame on a "pragmatic deficit" with media practitioners. Instead, it looks at the "pragmatic framing" by journalists, deliberate or inadvertent contextual decisions that affect public perceptions. The transfer of clinical terms to public space without context, when media language, changes the communicative frame that moves the emphasis from neurodiversity to medical pathogen. Repeatedly, lexical preferences and language styles are linked to psychological focus and social evaluative orientations (Pennebaker & King, 1999).

Goffman and the Sociology of Stigma

Goffman (1963) defined stigma as "a deeply discrediting attribute" that turns the bearer from a "whole person" into a "tainted discounted person. The stigma is not a property of the person, but a social category and language. Goffman's approach to media analysis highlights the role of the reoccurring labels and descriptions in making certain features salient in the social sense. Media framing can afflict autistic persons as being sick, burdened, vulnerable, or socially different. Today's research on stigma related to autism further supports the idea that media representation and social framing have a strong impact on public stigma (Turnock et al., 2022). Link and Phelan (2001) define stigma as the simultaneous presence of the four components of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination in a power relationship.

CDA and Power Relations

For this study, Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as a main analysis tool. CDA examines the link between textual decisions, discourse practices and the wider social structures. It offers the means to consider how certain choices of repeated language (e.g. patients, burden and victims) render particular representations as normal and help to reinforce unequal power relations. One of the main domains in which the reproduction of social power and ideology takes place is discourse; where dominant institutions construct public knowledge in strategic ways of language (van Dijk, 1998, 2008). The purpose of critical discourse studies is to make the structures of power and discrimination visible by systematically analysing the text (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). This study analyzes the medicalization of language in the Iraqi media and its ways of affirming medical control over the autistic person, often casting him/her as an inactive recipient of care, an approach that is considered a process of medically legitimizing the authority of the medical profession over the autistic person.

Cognitive Linguistics and Conceptual Metaphor

Metaphors shape the human conception of reality, as Lakoff and Johnson (2003) claim. Metaphor is often used to frame conditions in media reports about health and disability, and these often involve a triad of war, danger, or social crisis. Media reports that use sensationalist or alarmist language create emotional salience and institutionalize or institutionalize society as a threat. This study is able to decipher public understanding through the study of conceptual metaphors. In addition, media framing is a process in which certain elements of communicated reality are selected and accentuated to convey a specific problem definition and causal explanation (Entman, 1993).

A Comparative Overview of Previous Studies

Although there is an abundance of literature on disability representations in different media contexts, there has been little qualitative study on disability's discourse in Middle Eastern and specifically Iraqi contexts. The existing literature on the region has mainly given attention to the clinical diagnosis or general public awareness of the stigma, which is lacking of having an integrated approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) along with sociological theories of stigma. Moreover, the local scholarship neglects a detailed analysis of decisions and framing processes in the actual media products.

The objective of this study is to fill this theoretical and analytical void by synthesizing important dimensions from the key literature on discourse and stigma. Table 2.6 presents a comparative overview of the lexical choices, critical discourse levels, theoretical frameworks and discursively produced stigma effects which are identified within the chosen media texts.

CDA Analytical Table: Lexical Choices and Stigma Effects

Example / Textual Data	Source & Date	Analytical Level (CDA)	Theoretical Frame	Discursive Function & Stigma Effect
“مرضى التوحد”	Iraqi News Agency (2022)	Lexical Choice / Clinical Labeling	Medicalization & Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963)	Pathologizes ASD by reducing autistic identity to a clinical condition rather than a neurodivergent variation.
“مكسورة ماديا وصحيا”	Shafaq News (2024)	Metaphorical Framing / Affective Representation	Conceptual Metaphor & Burden Framing (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003)	Frames autistic individuals and their families as structural, financial, and emotional burdens on society.
“رقم خطير”	Shafaq News (2024)	Evaluative Modifier / Alarmist Framing	Critical Discourse Analysis & Media Framing (Fairclough, 1995)	Generates public anxiety and heightens negative visibility using sensationalist and crisis- oriented language.

Theoretical Analysis and Discussion

The theoretical framework employed in this section is the stigma theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA) which were selected with verification of materials published in the Iraqi media from 2020 to 2025. The study is not concerned with statistical generalization, but rather rich, fully verified focal examples are used that represent recurring discourse patterns in the Iraqi media; and the analysis does not aim to find the generalizable statistics, but rather the recurrent examples. Moreover, while lexical selection is typically seen as a mistake in pragmatics, it is not treated as such, but as a discursive tool that molds public representations of autism.

Pattern One: Medicalization and Pathology Framing

The medicalization of autism is the use of disease language, treatment, diagnosis, and patient categories. An Iraqi News Agency report dated 14/11/2022 documents an Iraqi case. The headline states: “افتتاح معاهد حكومية وخاصة لتأهيل ورعاية مرضى التوحد في بغداد والمحافظات” Public and private institutions were opened in Baghdad and other governorates to rehabilitate and care for patients suffering from autism. Based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the phrase “رعاية مرضى التوحد” was used to embed ASD from a neurodevelopmental condition to a strict medical one. The syntactic pairing of “تأهيل ورعاية” (rehabilitation and care) and “مرضى” (patients) places autistic patients in a passive role of recipients of treatment, instead of placing them in an active social role. Such a move

from the clinical to public media ensures that a diagnostic label is more salient of a social identity than is personal agency and social inclusion (Goffman, 1963). In this sense, medicalization acts as an institution of social control because it diagnoses human differences mostly as medical pathologies and as dependent on medical professionals (Zola, 1972).

Pattern Two: Victimization and Hardship Framing

Media representations often have a burden perspective that emphasizes the suffering in the family and financial hardship. A noteworthy incident is provided by Shafaq News' report on 2 April 2024, which reads:

"معاناة أسر المصابين بالتوحد: عائلات مكسورة مادياً وصحياً في مواجهة مراكز العلاج الأهلية"

(Related to the pain associated with autism: families that are split financially and health-wise with respect to private treatment centers)

A wider textual frame, analysed from a perspective of Fairclough's (1995) CDA framework, shows how the autism discourse is directly connected with systemic hardship and personal tragedy. The evaluative predicate "عائلات مكسورة" (broken families) and "مادياً وصحياً" brings financial failure and physical decay to the fore as the main story. Reporting on autism costs is acceptable but reducing autism to 'brokenness' feeds into a deficit-based view of autism, similar to Goffman's notion of a 'discrediting attribute' that casts autistic individuals and families as a drain on societal resources.

Pattern Three: Evaluative Sensationalism and Urgency

The third pattern is Evaluative Sensationalism and Urgency. The third pattern is Evaluative Sensationalism and Urgency. The sensationalist media framing strategy uses emotionally charged language to increase the public's anxiety about the prevalence of autism. In the same report by Shafaq News (2 April 2024), official statistics and news reports are given with an urgent tone:

"تسجيل ارتفاع غير مسبوق في إصابات التوحد بالعراق والخبراء تؤكد: الوصول إلى رقم خطير يتطلب تدخلاً حكومياً عاجلاً"

IQRA: "Autism cases are on the rise in Iraq more than ever before, and experts say it has now surpassed the dangerous limit, which demands an urgent government response.

Along with the evaluative modifier "رقم خطير" (a dangerous number), the pre-modifying clause "ارتفاع غير مسبوق" (unprecedented rise) frames autism as an epidemic. The sensationalist language turns neutral statistical information into an alarmist narrative, leading people to a state of anxiety and fear instead of constructive educational and social support.

Synthesis of Analyzed Discourse Patterns**Table of Selected Media Texts**

Text No.	Source & Media Outlet	Publication Date	Discourse Context / Topic	Primary Item / Citation	Lexical Target
Text 1	Iraqi News Agency (INA)	November 14, 2022	Official healthcare and service provision report regarding ASD care in Iraq.	“مرضى التوحد” (Autism Patients)	
Text 2	Shafaq News Agency	April 2, 2024	Special journalistic feature on family experiences and socioeconomic conditions.	“مكسورة ماديا وصحيا” (Broken financially and health-wise)	
Text 3	Shafaq News Agency	April 2, 2024	Statistical overview and epidemiological tracking of rising diagnosis rates.	“رقم خطير” (A dangerous number)	

"The synthesis presented in the table above demonstrates how verified lexical items operate within specific discourse patterns to construct pathologizing and deficit-oriented representations of ASD. Rather than reflecting isolated pragmatic violations, these language choices cumulatively function to shape public understanding, making specific negative attributes socially salient within Iraqi media discourse."

The Cumulative Mechanism Based on the Preceding Analysis

The findings are synthesised and a revised non-casual mechanism is proposed to explain how media lexical choices are related to the construction of linguistic stigma:

This process involves Media Lexical Choice, Discursive Framing, Negative Social Inference, Linguistic Stigma and Potential Social Exclusion.

This is a cumulative model and not a direct model. The effect of isolated lexical choices is not necessarily to create social discrimination; instead, repeated medicalised, burden oriented and alarmist framing in media reinforces deficit oriented perceptions. Media discourse is part of the social construction and upkeep of disability stigma in public discourse by rendering it visible and salient.

Discussion in Light of Theory

The analytical results are very similar to the Theory of Stigma of Goffman (1963) which shows how the linguistic label of a difference becomes a socially discrediting characteristic. The medicalizing and burden-denoting nature of media language makes autism more visible to the public, obscuring and marginalizing the personhood and agency of autistic people.

Moreover, the analysis aligns with the Critical Discourse Analysis approach of Fairclough (1995) that emphasises the reproduction of the traditional power structure in the media, resulting in autistic people being regarded as passive recipients of medical treatment and public pity. The use of Conceptual

Metaphor Theory (CMT) by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) also brings additional insights into the process by which the frames of alarmism become part of public perception through evaluative language (“رقم خطير”).

Secondly, in this discussion, the authors chose to focus on current literature on autism (Marocchini, 2023; Turnock et al., 2022), and refrain from deficit-based language or descriptions of communication by autistic people. Instead, it finds the communicative problem entirely in the framing of the institutional media, and defines a linguistic stigma as a stigma created by context-dependent discursive practices and not by diagnostic labels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study applied a theoretical framework grounded in the work of Goffman (1963) on Stigma Theory, Fairclough (1995) on Critical Discourse Analysis and Lakoff and Johnson (2003) on Conceptual Metaphor Theory to analyze selected Iraqi media discourse on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) published from 2020 to 2025.

The results indicate that Iraqi news discourse adopts certain lexical patterns to pathologize autists and to consider autism as an economic and emotional burden through the use of medicalizing labels (مرضى التوحد), the victimization descriptors (مكسورة مادياً وصحياً), and sensationalist expressions (رقم خطير).

The qualitative analysis shows that linguistic stigma is cumulative in a context dependent manner through the role of media framing. These patterns do not necessarily result in direct social discrimination, but rather if they involve negative stereotypes related to the deficit-based attributes of ASD, they promote the visibility of such attributes in society and reinforce the negative public perception of ASD in Iraq.

Recommendations

For Media Institutions and Journalists:

Adopt inclusive editorial practices that avoid pathologizing terminology (such as using “مرضى” in non-clinical public contexts).

Avoid sensationalist and alarmist modifiers when presenting statistics related to autism and disability.

Include autistic individuals and disability advocates directly in news coverage rather than relying solely on institutional sources.

For Academic Researchers:

Conduct large-scale quantitative corpus studies to measure the frequency of these media frames across broader broadcast and digital platforms.

Perform audience-reception studies to empirically assess how public attitudes are impacted by

specific media representations.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Based on the findings and scope of the present study, the following topics are suggested for future academic research:

A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis of Autism Representations in Iraqi Media:

Conducting a large-scale computational or quantitative corpus study to analyze the exact frequency and statistical distribution of pathologizing frames across digital and print news platforms.

Audience Reception of Media Discourse on ASD in Iraq: Investigating through qualitative interviews or experimental surveys how everyday audiences and families of autistic individuals interpret and respond to stigmatizing media language. **Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Disability in Iraqi Visual Media:** Examining how visual elements such as news imagery, videography, and television thumbnails combine with linguistic choices to construct public perceptions of disability and ASD.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declare that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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