



Barriers to Romantic Experiences in Autistic Adults

¹Khyati Dutt, ²Tamanna Saxena

¹Post-graduate student, ²Assistant Professor at Amity University

¹Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences,

¹Amity University, Noida, India

Abstract: Adults with developmental difficulties, especially Autism Spectrum Disorder struggle with complex social relations like romantic relationships and tend to experience a lower success rate compared to neurotypical peers. The objective of this study was to review the previously existing literature on romantic experiences autistic adults have and highlight the factors that act as barriers to such relationships. Exploration of Autistic romantic relationships have only recently emerged and seems to be restricted to Western studies. This review integrates aspects of the Indian culture into the existing literature. The study will utilize academic databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Scinapse, and Google Scholar to search for relevant articles, journals, and publications. The review identified a lack of social opportunities, inaccessibility, sensory challenges, poor bodily awareness, poor self-esteem, psychiatric comorbidities, the label of a diagnosis, and stigma as the primary barriers to autistic romantic experiences.

Index Terms - Autism Spectrum Disorder, romantic relationships, Indian population

I. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD); is a neurodevelopmental disorder encompassing a wide range of conditions involving challenges in social interaction and communication. As for unique behaviours displayed by individuals with ASD, these include difficulties in transitioning, intense attention to detail, and strange reactions to sensory stimuli. These characteristics may differ as far as the intensity and presentation of individuals with ASD. For example, some people may go through trouble adjusting to changes in routines and possess deep-seated preferences for following specific rituals. Individuals with ASD frequently experience sensory challenges, such as being overly sensitive to certain sounds or textures. Overall, ASD is a complex and multifaceted condition that affects individuals in different ways. Autism is the world's third most common developmental disability. About 18 million individuals in India have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Seemingly, the rate of children receiving a formal diagnosis has been significantly increasing. Autism Spectrum Disorder can be better understood as a Neurodevelopmental disorder, meaning that symptoms typically start manifesting around childhood. However, ASD diagnosis can go undetected until adulthood. The central feature of Autistic symptomology lies in difficulties in communication and social interaction, as well as limited and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, and activity. (APA, 2013). A challenge for people with ASD lies in the social aspect of daily relationships with others. Individuals often have difficulty in the social use of language, use and decoding social cues, and misattribution of utilizing unsaid contextual social "rules. Hence, it is hypothesized that people with ASD also have difficulty initiating and maintaining deep, meaningful relationships, at least when we compare the same relationships with neurotypical individuals. There is enough data to support that this social impairment causes a significant impact on autistic individual's life satisfaction and overall well-being. Exploring the domain of romantic relationships, especially for the autistic population is crucial as multiple research projects shows higher suicide and depression rates in autistic individuals as compared to individuals with other neurodevelopmental disorders. Depression, with reported lifetime rates over 50% (Hofvander et al., 2009), has the highest comorbidity in autistic adults (Sterling,

Dawson, Estes, & Greenson, 2008) hence, is a significant risk factor for suicidal behaviour including suicidal ideation, attempts, and suicide (Darren Hedley, 2017). Although no positive correlation was found loneliness may be an indicator of depression or suicidal ideation in a study conducted by Darren Hedley. However, there is an abundance of literature that supports an association. A positive relationship between ASD traits and depression is present. A study conducted by Pelton and Cassidy (2017) identified a significant positive relationship between ASD traits, depression, and suicidal behaviour, in a non-clinical sample. It should also be acknowledged that the rates of depression and suicidal ideation in the ASD population are extensively undermined. Existing research recognizes that friendships and deep meaningful relationships are essential for emotional, physical, and psychological well-being (Antonucci T, 1987; Bukowski W, 2005; Hawkey L, 2010). It was found that happier and relatively healthier people had long-lasting, stable, and positive friendships and relationships. Furthermore, central themes that positively contribute to one's well-being and emotional support are associated with the quality of one's romantic relationships (Barry C, 2009). However, it should be noted that all these findings come from a neurotypical perspective.

Whilst the phenomenon of dating and its exploration has been encouraged in Western literature it is worth noting that culturally diverse empirical findings are rare. Especially when we consider the autistic population. It was seen that having romantic relationships without the intent of marriage was discouraged by adults in traditional societies where gender roles ideologies are clearly defined like India, and Indonesia (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016; Shen et al., this issue). This is why it is hypothesized that casual romantic relationships or the concept of "dating" seen in Western literature may be postponed or delayed during adolescence. (Espinosa-Hernández, 2020). Two studies conducted by Shen M., Purwono, U., & French, D. C. (2020) and Bowker J., Stotsky M., White H., and Kamble S. (2020) studied romantic constructs in Indonesia and India respectively. Both of these studies found that the population rated the importance and relevance of romance low compared to Western data. Homosociality is majorly encouraged in the adolescent population of India (Osella and Osella 2006), although platonic, it is suggested that a brother-sister relationships are considered an 'acceptable' heterosocial interaction for unmarried young people (Abraham 2002; Sancho 2012; Sinha-Kerkhoff 2003). Thereby, explaining the low relevance ratings of romantic relationships. Hence, criteria for measuring such variables should keep cultural implications and norms in mind. That being said, it should be noted that the Indian population has faced a striking shift in how gender is viewed along with sexual politics in the past 25 years. This could be attributed to globalization, particularly for the country's 'new' middle classes (Dasgupta 2014; Nijman 2006). A 2017 study conducted by Padmini Iyer, intended to study the dynamics of 'appropriate' gendered and sexual behaviour expressed by adolescents within a secondary school context based in New Delhi. The findings of this study suggested that students from this sample rejected traditional, conservative values to some extent by taking control of heterosocial friendships. The author also found that adolescent couples who showed interest in physical and non-platonic emotional intimacy were at a greater risk of damaging their social identity. This was also perpetuated by norms of gender segregation set by school authorities. Still, many students were willing to take this risk, suggesting a clear disparity between the norms set by institutions and what the students desired. This also highlights the need to bring about an awareness of this disparity. It seems that the students viewed the so-called 'Indian' cultural practices as restrictive and outdated hence rejecting them by pursuing heterosocial friendships and romantic relationships. doing so while remaining within culturally appropriate boundaries. This reinforces the notion that the Indian young adult population is showing an increasing interest in non-platonic relationships compared to the older generations.

Apart from norms and traditions, the aspect of "collectivism vs. individualism" also seems to play a huge role in romantic experiences and attitudes. Bejanyan (2014) and her colleagues bring to our attention that the Indian population expressed greater collectivism as compared to the American population. Furthermore, indicated more traditional partner preferences, expected customary gender roles, and greater anticipation of marital problems. Despite this, little progress has been made in academic literature specifically targeting the Indian population.

The extensive amount of literature supports the fact that individuals with developmental difficulties, especially ASD struggle with this process and tend to experience a lower success rate compared to neurotypical peers when it comes to complex social relations like romantic relationships. (Barneveld et al., 2014; Engström et al., 2003; Renty & Roeyers, 2006; cf. Strunz et al., 2017). Autistic people often struggle to put themselves out there even after expressing similar levels of interest in being in romantic relationships (Hancock et al., 2019; Strunz et al., 2017). Contrary to the previous and outdated data that understood autistic individuals as "odd" and prefer being alone. A plethora of studies conducted on autistic individuals remain constricted to the child or adolescent population, indicating a lack of comprehensive research on autistic adults. This results in a substantial research gap, thereby having a lack of understanding about the opportunities and challenges faced by an autistic adult. Trends of literature based on the Indian autistic population are mostly focused on

prevalence, diagnostics, causes, and interventions. Keeping the cultural implications stated above in mind along with the difficulties autistic individuals experience, the rationale for this literature review is to warrant further theoretical frameworks so we as a society can create a more empathetic and accepting dating environment for autistic individuals. This literature review aims to study the maintenance factors as well as barriers of non-platonic relationships whilst utilizing pre-existing theoretical frameworks and findings that are relevant to the Indian population to draw parallels.

II. METHODOLOGY

PROCEDURE

The primary objective of this secondary review paper is to conduct a comprehensive literature review on the barriers faced by autistic adults in dating. The study aims to provide a synthesized analysis of existing research, identify key challenges, and propose recommendations for addressing these barriers. To ensure a thorough review of relevant literature, the following methodological steps will be undertaken:

a. Database Selection: The study will utilize academic databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, scinapse, and Google Scholar to search for relevant articles, journals, and publications.

b. Keyword Selection: A combination of relevant keywords will be used, including "autism," "autistic adults," "dating," "romantic relationships," "sexuality," and related terms. Boolean operators such as "AND" and "OR" will be used to refine searches.

c. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: Publications in English, with a focus on autistic adults and dating barriers, will be included. Studies that are outdated (prior to 2005), unrelated to the topic, or not peer-reviewed will be excluded.

Barriers To Romantic Experiences

Rotheram-Fuller et al., (2010) found a significant decline in social engagement and relationships with ASD children in their study. His study compared the social involvement and peer relationships between children with and without ASD. A similar study conducted by Rowley et al. (2012) took parent's perspectives into account and found that only 34% of autistic children had at least one good friend. Even among the same category of "neurodevelopmental disorders", research indicates that children with autism and intellectual disability have the least amount of meaningful or "good" friendships. In Rowley's study, 71% and 93% of special needs children and non-clinician children respectively had at least one good friend. Preliminary work on autistic social experiences and relationships was undertaken by Orsmond et al. (2004). The findings of this study showed that the majority of autistic adults lived with their parents. 8.1% of the population had at least one close friendship that was not one-sided, and 20.9% had relationships with other peers where shared participation or activities were involved. More than half of the sample had no deep, meaningful peer relationships. Together, these studies indicate that there seems to be a trend when it comes to the intrapersonal relationship's autistic have. There seems to be a significant difference in the quality and quantity of relations autistic people have. This literature review will aim to examine some of the factors that may prevent the development of healthy relationships among people with ASD. By analysing and highlighting these barriers, we could learn about various difficulties that autistic people experience and may determine ways to promote more favourable social relations.

Neurological Underpinnings of Social Impairment

Social impairment is said to be the hallmark feature of ASD. A multitude of data varying on sample size and methodology state a clear disparity in autistic individuals and their inability to interpret the "unsaid" rules of social communication. A qualitative study conducted by Giorgia Sala (2020) highlighted authentic autistic experiences via conducting interviews. One common theme shared by the participants was the inability to give out and receive communicative signals. Specifically, the flirting and courtship signals. Participants report having challenges with configuring other's interests and how to "appropriately" respond.

"I'm oblivious to subtle flirting... I will talk to anyone about anything anywhere, and as I have a range of interests I have found that because I seem excited in talking to this person I am unknowingly responding to the flirting and seem shocked sometimes when people suddenly suggest more."

According to Hancock (2019), relationship difficulties could be partially responsible for the lack of opportunities ASD people get rather than a social "impairment" per se. Aspects of these "unsaid" social rules are said to play a crucial role in the execution of fluent communication. Fluent communication coupled with social-emotional regulation is said to be the key to meaningful romantic relationships. Factors such as emotional responsiveness and validation, emotional reciprocation, self-disclosure, and vulnerability are said to

be positively correlated to close attachments. (Reis and Patrick 1996; Reis and Shaver 1988). Updated literature (Sasson, 2020) has argued that limited data indicates that impaired social cognitive ability is attributed to poor relationship success. His study had 103 autistic adults without intellectual disability who completed a battery that had eight social cognitive tests psychometrically validated for administration on the autistic sample, five tasks assessing neurocognitive abilities, along with a test measuring functional skills, and a standardized scale for measuring social skills. The results aligned with Sasson's hypothesis that the social cognitive aspect of intelligence contributes to functional and social skills in autistic adults, however, the extent of this contribution may be more limited and indirect than commonly believed. This is consistent with the finding of Birt (2015), suggesting no significant correlation between the ability to "read between the lines" in conversations and relationship satisfaction.

There is a myriad of literature supporting that the social impairment feature of ASD impacts the social relations of ASD individuals, whether it is direct or indirect. Yet there are no concrete findings explaining how and why. Yang (2021) utilized event-related potentials (ERPs) in individuals with high and low Autism quotient (AQ) to measure neural reactions to emotional stimuli in an attempt to understand the neural processes. The findings of this study indicated that individuals with high AQ had more negative affective reactions with slower ERPs when exposed to negative social stimuli as compared to individuals with low AQ. Social impairment is often misconstrued as a lack of empathy or interest in romantic endeavours. Pecora L., (2019) suggested that compared to non-autistic adults, autistic adults seem to have problems identifying and describing their own emotions as well as recognizing others. However, in the same study, it was pointed out that autistic adults who were in romantic relationships reported intense feelings of connection and love. This finding suggests strongly against seeing autism as a 'disorder' of affect. Understanding and valuing individuals with ASD and not pathologizing them will help in recognizing individual experiences and points of view.

Recent empirical research has compared the manner in which autistic individuals and neurotypical individuals exchange information utilizing the diffusion chain paradigm. The findings indicate that autistic individuals share and exchange information more effectively with other autistic individuals than with neurotypical individuals. Furthermore, autistic individuals report experiencing higher rapport when interacting with other autistic individuals (Crompton & Fletcher-Watson, 2019). New data claims that a lack of understanding from neurotypical individuals plays in the social interaction experiences of autistic individuals. Sasson et al. (2017) found out that neurotypical people were less inclined towards interacting with autistic people, while Heasman & Gillespie (2019) revealed that the neurotypical population overestimated their ability to be supportive towards autistic people. Macmillan et al. (2019) found that autistic adults reported feeling much more understood by their autistic peers compared with their 'non-autistic' counterparts. This aspect stresses that there is still a lot to be discovered about autism and emotions to be able to help autistic individuals experience emotions and relationships positively.

Lack of Social Opportunities and Inaccessibility

A study by Felicity Sedgewick (2019) indicated that almost all women, both autistic and non-autistic, reported higher relationship satisfaction and emotional maturity in a relationship as they aged. Although, many autistic women reported continued social difficulties; however, they possessed confidence in handling them despite the ongoing nature of certain aspects of their problems like discerning other peoples' intentions. This implies that as they grew older, they acquired experience and practice in developing their social skills. Just like a neurotypical individual, more exposure to different situations and experiences may lead autistic adults to create their ways of coping with different social obstacles and contexts. Concerning exposure and experience of being in different social situations, autistic adults tend to find themselves at a great disadvantage. It was seen that along with challenges in social reciprocation, the autistic population tends to lack social opportunities. Lack of opportunities to meet new people can limit one's ability to have deep experiences and new learnings in relationships. Learnings associated with self and not only other people. Self-awareness is related to cognition of oneself where an individual is capable of identifying and understanding their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Social relational processing is a key feature here that entails how people relate with and engage one another in social contexts. Increments of time are involved in achieving self-awareness and thus do not come all at once. This requires a process of self-reflection, and examination of oneself over time whereby individuals are made aware of their thinking, feeling, and action. (Chen et al., 2006; Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1962). According to neurocognitive research, the combination of various perspectives occurs as a result of the repetition of certain events in social interactions and formations of particular brain areas such as frontal, temporal, and parietal cortexes (Decety & Sommerville, 2003; Keysers and Perrett, 2006). As Keysers and Perrett (2006) have claimed in their study, the processing of social information about both self and others is essential for social-

cognitive development based on Hebbian learning principles during the early stages of life. Such experiences provide the basis for forming certain neural connections, which allow us to comprehend and interact with others more naturally. It is also stated that a possible consequence of early, chronic disruption in integration capacities for self and others may be in the development of the consciousness of self-awareness among individuals with autism. (Mundy, 2010). Regarding the lack of social opportunities, Hancock (2019) states that during interviews conducted for his research on “Differences in Romantic Relationship Experiences for Individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder”. It was found that in typically developing (TD) populations, about 40% of the participants reported previous or current workplace romance.

The rate of employment seen in the ASD adult population has remained significantly and consistently low. Literature indicates that half of the population has never been employed and only one-third are presently employed. Thereby eliminating the opportunity to be exposed to a possible “dating pool”. Leaving employment aside, it was seen that the rate of ASD individuals enrolling for further or higher education was also low. Approximately only 34% of individuals with ASD attended college and 9.3% attended vocational school. This might explain the low employment rates mentioned above. Sala (2020) maintains that systemic issues like gaining support, having independence, and being unemployed can act as barriers to meeting new people and potential partners. Autistic individuals may face difficulties in such situations due to societal expectations and financial strain which may hinder their plans of obtaining an independent living arrangement. That being said, having a job or a place to yourself is not the only way one can form relationships. However, such factors do play a role in acting as barriers.

“If I knew that I could take girls home without being humiliated [due to living with parents], I’d be a lot less hesitant about pursuing relationships” is an excerpt from Sala’s qualitative research on “Romantic Intimacy in Autism”. For some autistic people, supported or shared living may be a preferred arrangement because of the required support and help. However, Balfe & Tantam argue that these setups are prone to induce more social isolation. Such isolation can be attributed to caregivers who may closely watch social interaction, thus reducing the chances of romantic relationships. Although caregivers are important for the protection and welfare of autistic people, participation in this may unwittingly limit potential interactions that could be more rewarding socially (e.g., English et al., 2018; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018). Similar themes can be seen in adults (not just autistic adults) living with their caregivers in India. Within the context of Indian societal norms, an adult living with their parents is considered normal and appropriate. This sort of living arrangement aligns with the fact that the Indian population seems to be more inclined towards a collectivistic society. These norms should be kept in mind while talking about adults seeking potential romantic partners in India. According to the National Autistic Society (2021), 75% of the autistic adult population lived with their parents, compared to 16% of the population with other neuro-developmental disorders.

Another factor that might act as a barrier to approaching and connecting with potential romantic partners is how the media portrays autistic individuals. Media portrayal often fails to see disabled people as adults. The infantilization of autistic individuals seems to be a recurring theme in media. This public image of autism only focuses on children, neglecting and silencing the voices and experiences of autistic adults. This exacerbates the existing social barriers to the sexuality and romantic opportunities of autistic adults. Anne McGuire (2016) highlights instances like the “autism speaks” campaign message on Starbucks cups, the UN World Autism Awareness Day resolution, and a speech made by President Obama where autism was generally considered as “a state of being off-tempo” and “a state of pathological underdevelopment”. Jennifer L. et al (2011) made a similar point in their study on the cultural representation of autism research and found out that a large number (95%) of the pictures available on webpages for autism support groups were about children. Nine of 12 of the top autism charities described/defined autism only regarding children. Furthermore, nearly all (around 80%) American journal publications on autism were only about young children. This means that autistic individuals remain underreported with respect to major aspects of their lives including relationships and sexuality which are primarily cantered on their adulthood (Brooks, 2018).

Sensory challenges and bodily awareness

Autistic adults face a unique set of challenges when it comes to finding potential romantic partners, this could be attributed to the idiosyncratic set of autistic traits. Sensory challenges appear to be one of those barriers. Having sensory sensitivities relating to sight, sound, and texture is a core feature of autism. Places like crowded bars and restaurants can be exceptionally overwhelming due to loud noises and bright lighting. More unconventional date ideas like taking a walk on the beach can also be challenging due to the texture of the sand. Crompton (2020) utilized thematic analysis on autistic adults to explore the nature of relationships with autistic and neurotypical friends and family. A central theme expressed in the study was inaccessibility,

specifically for participating in activities with neurotypical peers. Participants either reported being excluded or being physically unable to be there due to sensory challenges. *“The physical spaces we go to are extremely challenging. They often want to go to places that are busy or noisy”*.

Apart from sensory sensitivities, the autistic population often faces difficulties with perceptions of self. This is closely discussed in a study conducted by Sala (2020), where qualitative analysis is used to investigate maintenance factors and barriers to emotional and physical intimacy for autistic and non-autistic participants. More than half the autistic population described a unique barrier that was under-reported by the neurotypical population. The participants expressed distress and discomfort regarding the areas that included expectations and fruitful communication required for a relationship to thrive. The autistic adults talk about being seen as naive. However, a large amount of the autistic sample expressed this naivete stemming from a lack of experience, despite wanting to be in romantic relationships. Others talked about the inability to understand themselves and they even wanted a relationship in the first place. *“Learning to differentiate between friendships and partnerships would be helpful. I literally do not understand the difference”* was a quote directly from the study. The paper also explores the aspect of proprioceptive senses, this type of sense is associated with our bodies concerning other objects and open spaces. This can be understood in terms of kinaesthesia but also in terms of knowing when one is hungry, tired, overwhelmed, etc.

“Learning how to emotionally regulate is the biggest thing for me... The worst arguments I’ve had are when I am one of these: hungry, overstimulated (in a loud environment), or very tired/going to sleep. I am much more likely to be upset just because I don’t realize what my emotional state is like at the time”.

Self-esteem and psychiatric comorbidities

Anxiety is a prevalent condition that affects a significant portion of the general population, with prevalence studies indicating that about 14-31% of people have experienced clinical anxiety. (Australian Dept of Health 2009; Harvard Medical School, 2007). Joshi et al. (2013) and Lundegarde (2011) suggest that approximately half of people affected by ASD often develop anxiety as a comorbid disorder. It is due to the challenges they face in social relationships and their prior friendships or relationships. Some people with ASD have reported being highly anxious about relationship efforts in particular. In addition, studies have shown that people with ASD often have sexual anxiety that may be linked to their reduced interest in sexual encounters and romantic relationships. Also crucial to mention that about a third, i.e. 31-34%, of individuals with ASD, are prone to depression and anxiety (comorbid disorders).

Such findings highlight the need for greater awareness and understanding of the mental health challenges faced by individuals with ASD, as well as the importance of providing appropriate support and interventions to address these challenges (Hancock, 2020; Andersen, 2015; Mayes, 2014). similar findings can be seen in Hannah and Stagg’s (2016) qualitative research on sexual awareness and experiences related to sexual education for individuals with ASD. The participants discuss aspects of social anxiety, inadequate sexual education that takes autistic experiences into account, uncertainty about one’s sexual orientation, and a negative mindset concerning sexuality. The negative perspectives towards sexuality were attributed to anxious feelings related to sexually transmitted diseases and victimization.

The autistic population has a high comorbidity rate with other psychiatric disorders such as depression and anxiety. It would not be a stretch to hypothesize that the autistic population that has comorbid disorders like depression and anxiety would likely have low self-esteem. Literature supports this statement, Kiviruusu (2016) claimed that both adolescent to mid-adult populations showed increased difficulties with self-esteem, mental health, and personal identity. The author highlighted the significance of interpersonal conflicts that hinder with perception of self and how others see you. Interpersonal conflicts reported by the participants centralized around the themes of incongruency between needs or psychiatric issues of one or both partners impacting the relationship. Being lonely and having difficulties trusting other people also significantly impact one’s romantic relationship and intimacy.

Diagnosis and stigma

Deviation from accepted societal and cultural norms can elicit negative attitudes and stigma toward certain groups (Gofman, 1963). The stigma surrounding ASD negatively affects the well-being of autistic individuals and their caregivers. Turnock (2022) has pointed out that stigma comes about as a result of some factors such as public understanding of ASD, interpretation of visible characteristics related to the condition, interaction with individuals suffering from autism, culture, gender, personal differences, and reporting autism diagnosis. Kaplan-Kahn (2023) points out that autism research must involve active participation of autistic individuals to minimize biases and other negative attitudes towards people with ASD.

According to a study conducted by Someki et al. (2018) that compared stigma associated with autism among college students in Japan and the United States. It was found that stigmatization towards ASD was low. However, a larger majority of the population confessed that they would not date or marry an individual with ASD. This implies that increased stigma toward social impairment seen in adults with ASD was closely related to prejudice towards seeing adults on the spectrum as potential romantic partners. The APA (2013) notes that when individuals with high levels of the stigma of ASD were conscious of the label of ASD, there was a likelihood that they would rate social appeal negatively. This implies that the negativity associated with ASD could indirectly cause someone with autism to be perceived as less socially attractive. This might be attributed to the diagnosis criteria of autism mainly emphasize challenges related to social communication and interaction. These difficulties may influence how individuals with high stigmatization perceive the social attractiveness of someone with autism in a negative light, potentially leading to social exclusion or discrimination.

It could be seen that this stigma was not only dependent on others but could also be self-inflicted. Turnock (2022) conducted a narrative review to understand the stigma towards ASD. The paper shares accounts of negative self-perceptions and internalized stigma experienced by autistic individuals. *“my fear that my real self, idiosyncrasies, stimming, etc. will push that person away... I’ve been my own worst enemy”* was an excerpt from a 38-year-old heterosexual female with ASD.

Other papers have argued that the mere label of being diagnosed with ASD helped individuals understand themselves better and demand resources that helped them be better versions of themselves. Greater physical perception was linked to an explicit label of ASD. This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Sasson and Morrison (2019) that found that the faces of neurotypical people were considered to be more “desirable” when given a fake label of ASD on online dating sites and profiles. Similarly, it was found that a formal diagnosis of ASD was positively correlated to a reduction of negative experiences (Brosnan and Mills 2016; Butler and Gillis 2011; Matthews et al. 2015).

As per Brosnan’s (2021) study, the presence of an explicit ASD label plus positive wording led to positive effects on the perceived desirability of males on the autism spectrum in online dating platforms. However, individuals with highly prejudicial views towards autism reported declined desire-to-date when the explicit label of autism was present. It implies that there is a difference between low levels of stigmatization and lack of stigma because relatively positive views about ASD exist. Sasson et al. (2017) noted that a positive stigma on individuals with autism can be built on certain positive stereotypes like being naturally trustworthy or being incredibly talented. It may create unrealistic expectations in relationships.

The importance of positive wording in online dating profiles manifested, larger effects size relative to explicit labels and stigma. It seems like social success depends on conformation to implicit neurotypical social rules that govern both face-to-face and online interactions.

III. DISCUSSION

A large number of studies, in particular, concentrate on the extent and correlation between disability and dysfunction experienced by patients with ASD. However, the majority of these studies tend to conceive autistic people as just an assemblage of diagnostic criteria, ignoring how they live in accordance with the neurotypical rules and standards. Such views ignore the specific difficulties that autistic people face. (Lam, 2021). As such, it becomes necessary to have a deeper insight into what life entails for the autistic individual and how they interact with their environment, going beyond the diagnostic boxes. Dating is one aspect that has only recently emerged as a significant research topic. Preece and Jordan (2010) pointed out how there is a notable dearth of literature on the attitudes and life stories of autistic young adults and adults. Partially, this scarcity in research could be due to the difficulties involved in communicating well with people on the autism spectrum as highlighted by Beresford et al. (2004) and Lewis (2009). It is possible that such challenges in communicating

could explain the reluctance to include the ASDs in studies. In addition, the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may cause researcher bias due to overemphasis on certain symptoms. Therefore, one needs to carry out more open-minded, explorative investigations and contribute intellectually to this subject matter. Numerous papers have confirmed that social disorders influence one's life satisfaction and general health in persons diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Accordingly, investigating the realm of romantic relationships in ASD especially needs much more serious attention than many other published reports that suggest a close link between elevated levels of suicidal tendency and depression among autistic persons with other cases of neurodevelopmental anomaly. With a lifetime incidence rate of more than fifty percent (Hofvander et al., 2009), depression is the most common co-morbidity in autistic adults. This has a high association with suicidal behaviour which includes suicidal thoughts or suicides. In addition, research on ASD shows that there is a strong link between depression and the increased tendency towards suicide in people with ASD characteristic traits (Pelton and Cassidy, 2017). Camouflaging is a common occurrence among adolescents, and it involves concealing one's status so as to be accepted by peers. This practice can result in severe psychological stress and even depression for some adolescents (Cassidy et. al., 2018). This risk is exasperated by the fact that ASD traits have to be permanently hidden in varying environments. The prevalence of depression and suicidal ideation is usually underestimated in ASD patients. Therefore, more theoretical frameworks and academic writings are required that look into life satisfaction in people with ASD. Such relationships go beyond companionship, having far-reaching effects on emotional, physical, and mental health. Belongingness and fulfilment are achieved through interaction with a partner, making conversation, expressing themselves, and involvement in partner rituals. These bonds are meant to offer emotional assistance that goes a long way in ensuring good sanity or well-being for people with autism. Additionally, research has revealed that people with ASD who fall in love show huge potential to enrich their well-being. The findings underscore the importance of fostering and developing romantic connections with the individuals on the spectrum. There is evidence that the benefits of romantic relations far exceed mere companionship, touching emotional and psychological well-being. Interaction plays an important role in the improvement of overall well-being. Meaningful conversations, sharing experiences, and participating actively in 'relationship rituals' could create a sense of belongingness and fulfilment. Intimate connections help individuals with ASD experience emotional support that's crucial for their mental and emotional well-being. Investment of time and energy in forming romantic relationships has been observed to have a positive influence on the well-being of people with autism. Trust building, deepening emotional bonds, and active participation in shared activities bring about feelings of fulfilment and satisfaction. The effort invested in nurturing this relationship eventually results in reciprocal love and support, leading to happiness and life satisfaction overall. In addition, engaging in a romantic relationship may potentially increase one's self-esteem and self-confidence. Having a partner that desires and loves you reinforces one's self-worth, mitigating the negative self-perceptions associated with autism. This, on the other hand, may improve self-acceptance as well as mental well-being. However, it is essential to acknowledge that navigating the complexities of romance can be particularly challenging for individuals on the autism spectrum. Barriers such as difficulties with social cues, communication, and sensory sensitivities may present unique obstacles within the realm of romantic relationships. Nevertheless, these challenges do not render romance impossible or less valuable but instead require understanding, awareness, and support from partners and society as a whole. It is necessary to create an environment where neurodiversity prevails in order to increase inclusivity and ensure successful romantic relationships among people with Autism. It might involve promoting awareness and understanding of Autism; offering tailored and customized help for people with Autism; and enabling open discourse in relationships as relating to Autism. As a result, lovers of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder create a safe space that allows for their flourishing as they experience joy in their romantic connections. This discussion examines the complex barriers faced by autistic adults in the realm of dating and romantic relationships, shedding light on the need for a greater understanding of these challenges to create more inclusive and supportive dating environments. The review highlights that a significant majority of autistic adults live with their parents, which can impact their ability to pursue romantic relationships. This living arrangement raises questions of independence, societal expectations, and personal autonomy, potentially leading to hesitations and fears of humiliation when it comes to dating. Moreover, a substantial proportion of autistic adults lack close friendships that are mutually fulfilling, and more than half of the sample studied did not have deep and meaningful peer relationships. This disparity in the quality and quantity of relationships compared to neurotypical individuals underscores the need for greater social support for autistic individuals.

Neurological factors, such as impaired social cognitive abilities, contribute to difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships among autistic adults. However, the extent to which these factors directly affect relationship success may be more limited and indirect than previously assumed. Interestingly, autistic individuals report higher rapport when interacting with other autistic individuals, highlighting the need for supportive environments that facilitate these connections. This emphasizes the importance of increasing awareness and empathy among the neurotypical population to bridge the gap in understanding. The lack of social opportunities, particularly limited employment prospects, further hinders dating for autistic adults. The absence of financial independence and exposure to potential partners creates significant barriers. Supported living arrangements, preferred by some autistic individuals for the support they provide, can also pose challenges to dating due to social isolation and limited interactions. Cultural norms, such as adults living with their parents in Indian collectivist societies, shape the dating experiences of autistic adults. Understanding these cultural nuances is crucial in addressing dating barriers in different contexts.

Furthermore, the portrayal of autistic individuals in the media often presents them as childlike, which hampers their recognition as adults and reinforces stereotypes, making it difficult for them to find dating prospects (Turnock, 2022). In addition to media portrayal, sensory challenges also present a barrier to dating for autistic individuals. Their sensitivity to sensory stimuli can make it challenging for them to participate in activities with neurotypical peers, hindering their ability to engage in dating activities and form relationships.

Furthermore, autistic individuals often face psychological and emotional challenges that impact their dating prospects. Comorbid conditions such as depression and anxiety can result in low self-esteem, further complicating their ability to navigate the dating scene (Cherewick, 2023). A study by Kiviruu (2016) emphasizes the impact of interpersonal conflicts on self-perception and personal identity, highlighting the need for comprehensive support and intervention. It is clear that the dating challenges faced by autistic adults are multifaceted, arising from a combination of societal norms, neurocognitive factors, social dynamics, sensory sensitivities, and psychological well-being (Cherewick, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that considers the unique needs and experiences of autistic individuals.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the barriers encountered by autistic adults in dating are numerous and intricate. The findings presented in the text collectively highlight these challenges and underscore the need for comprehensive and informed strategies to support this population in their pursuit of romantic relationships. Understanding the neurological underpinnings of social impairment is paramount, as it emphasizes that the challenges faced by autistic adults in dating are not merely behavioral but may have neurological foundations. Recognizing the impact of sensory challenges, the influence of societal norms, and the portrayal of autistic individuals in the media is also crucial. The findings further emphasize the need for greater awareness and empathy among neurotypical individuals and the development of more inclusive and supportive social environments. Addressing the lack of employment opportunities for autistic adults is another vital step, as it not only contributes to financial independence but also exposes them to potential dating partners. In conclusion, the study sheds light on the complexity of dating challenges faced by autistic adults. It calls for a multi-faceted approach that considers both the individual's needs and the broader societal context. By addressing these barriers and fostering a more inclusive dating environment, society can better support autistic adults in their quest for meaningful and fulfilling romantic relationships. Furthermore, these findings underscore the pressing need for multi-faceted and inclusive approaches that consider not only the unique needs and experiences of autistic individuals but also the broader societal context. By addressing these barriers, promoting understanding, and fostering supportive environments, society can create a more inclusive and welcoming space for autistic adults seeking meaningful and fulfilling romantic relationships. Ultimately, the path to enhancing the dating experiences of autistic adults requires collective effort, empathy, and a commitment to breaking down the barriers that hinder their quest for love and connection.

V. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis guide, Dr. Tamanna Saxena, for their invaluable guidance and support throughout the entire process of completing this dissertation. Her expertise, patience, and dedication have been instrumental in shaping the direction of my research and helping me overcome various challenges along the way. I am truly grateful for her constant words of encouragement, insightful feedback, and unwavering commitment to my academic growth. Without her guidance, this dissertation would not have been possible. I am honored to have had the privilege of working with such an exceptional mentor, and their guidance has undoubtedly played a significant role in my personal and professional development.

REFERENCES

1. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
2. Byers ES, Nichols S, Voyer SD, Reilly G. Sexual well-being of a community sample of high-functioning adults on the autism spectrum who have been in a romantic relationship. *Autism*. (2013) 17:418–33. doi: 10.1177/13623613111431950
3. Cameron, L. A., Borland, R. L., Tonge, B. J., & Gray, K. M. (2022). Community participation in adults with autism: A systematic review. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 35(2), 421-447. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12970>
4. Crompton, C. J., Hallett, S., Ropar, D., Flynn, E., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020). 'I never realized everybody felt as happy as I do when I am around autistic people': A thematic analysis of autistic adults' relationships with autistic and neurotypical friends and family. *Autism*, 24(6), 1438-1448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320908976>
5. Espinosa-Hernández, G., Choukas-Bradley, S., van de Bongardt, D. and Van Dulmen, M. (2020), Romantic relationships and sexuality in diverse adolescent populations: Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Adolescence*, 83: 95-99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.07.002>
6. Hancock, G., Stokes, M.A. & Mesibov, G. Differences in Romantic Relationship Experiences for Individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Sex Disabil* 38, 231–245 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-019-09573-8>
7. Hannah, L. A., & Stagg, S. D. (2016). Experiences of Sex Education and Sexual Awareness in Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 46(12), 3678–3687. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2906-2>
8. Harrington, C.A., Foster, M., Rodger, S.A., & Ashburner, J. (2014). Engaging Young People with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Research Interviews. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 42, 153-161. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12037>
9. Hedley, D., Uljarević, M., Wilmot, M., Richdale, A., & Dissanayake, C. (2018). Understanding depression and thoughts of self-harm in autism: A potential mechanism involving loneliness. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 46, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2017.11.003>
10. Hillier A, Gallop N, Mendes E, Tellez D, Buckingham A, Nizami A, et al. LGBTQ+ and autism spectrum disorder: experiences and challenges. *International Journal of Transgender Health*. (2019) 21:98–110. doi: 10.1080/15532739.2019.1594484
11. Kaplan-Kahn, E. A., & Caplan, R. (2023). Combating stigma in autism research through centering autistic voices: a co-interview guide for qualitative research. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 14, 1248247. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1248247>
12. Keating, C. T., & Cook, J. L. (2020). Facial Expression Production and Recognition in Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Shifting Landscape. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 29(3), 557–571. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2020.02.006>
13. Kiviruusu, O., Berg, N., Huurre, T., Aro, H., Marttunen, M., & Haukka, A. (2016). Interpersonal Conflicts and Development of Self-Esteem from Adolescence to Mid-Adulthood. A 26-Year Follow-Up. *PLoS ONE*, 11(10). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0164942>
14. Lai, M. C., Hull, L., Mandy, W., Chakrabarti, B., Nordahl, C. W., Lombardo, M. V., Ameis, S. H., Szatmari, P., Baron-Cohen, S., Happé, F., & Livingston, L. A. (2021). Commentary: 'Camouflaging' in autistic people - reflection on Fombonne (2020). *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, and allied disciplines*, 62(8), 10.1111/jcpp.13344. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13344>
15. Mayes, S., Calhoun, S., Murray, M., & Zahid, J. (2011). Variables Associated with Anxiety and Depression in Children with Autism. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 23, 325-337. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10882-011-9231-7>.
16. Mazurek M. O. (2014). Loneliness, friendship, and well-being in adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 18(3), 223–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361312474121>
17. Mundy, P., Gwaltney, M., & Henderson, H. (2010). Self-referenced processing, neurodevelopment, and joint attention in autism. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 14(5), 408–429. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361310366315>
18. Pecora LA, Hooley M, Sperry L, Mesibov GB, Stokes MA. Sexuality and gender issues in individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *Child Adolesc Psychiatry Clin N Am*. (2020) 29:543–56. doi: 10.1016/j.chc.2020.02.007

19. Pellicano, E., Fatima, U., Hall, G., et al. A capabilities approach to understanding and supporting autistic adulthood. *Nat Rev Psychol* 1, 624–639 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00099-z>
20. Pellicano, E., Fatima, U., Hall, G., Heyworth, M., Lawson, W., Lilley, R., Mahony, J., & Stears, M. (2022). A capabilities approach to understanding and supporting autistic adulthood. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1(11), 624–639. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00099-z>
21. Roth, M. E., Gillis J.(2015). “Convenience with the Click of a Mouse”: A Survey of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder Online. *Sexuality and Disability*, 133–150.
22. Ruba, Y. J. (2017). A Study to Assess the Effectiveness of Video-Modeling on Social Skills among Children with Autism in Selected Schools, Coimbatore. The Tamil Nadu Dr. M.G.R Medical University, 1-63.
23. Rui Y., Samuel P., Hooley M., Mesibov G. (2021). A systematic review of romantic relationship initiation and maintenance factors in autism. *Personal Relationships*, 777-802. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/pere.12397>
24. Rutter, M. (1968). Concepts of autism: A review of research. *Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines*, 9(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1968.tb02204.x>
25. Sala, G., Hooley, M., & Stokes, M. A. (2020). Romantic Intimacy in Autism: A Qualitative Analysis. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 50(11), 4133–4147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04377-8>
26. Sasson, N. J., Morrison, K. E., Kelsven, S., & Pinkham, A. E. (2020). Social cognition as a predictor of functional and social skills in autistic adults without intellectual disability. *Autism research: official journal of the International Society for Autism Research*, 13(2), 259–270. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2195>
27. Sheppard, E., Pillai, D., Wong, G. T., Ropar, D., & Mitchell, P. (2016). How Easy is it to Read the Minds of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder? *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 46(4), 1247–1254. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2662-8>
28. Someki, F., Torii, M., Brooks, P. J., Koeda, T., & Gillespie-Lynch, K. (2018). Stigma associated with autism among college students in Japan and the United States: An online training study. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 76, 88–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2018.02.016>
29. Stirling J. (2001). Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research*, 1, 385-405. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307>
30. Teti, M., Cheak-Zamora, N., Bauerband, L. A., & Maurer-Batjer, A. (2019). A Qualitative Comparison of Caregiver and Youth with Autism Perceptions of Sexuality and Relationship Experiences. *Journal of developmental and behavioral pediatrics: JDBP*, 40(1), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000000620>
31. Turnock, A., Langley, K., & Jones, C. R. G. (2022). Understanding Stigma in Autism: A Narrative Review and Theoretical Model. *Autism in adulthood: challenges and management*, 4(1), 76–91. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0005>
32. Zeidan, J., Fombonne, E., Scolah, J., Ibrahim, A., Durkin, M. S., Saxena, S., Yusuf, A., Shih, A., & Elsabbagh, M. (2022). Global prevalence of autism: A systematic review update. *Autism Research*, 15(5), 778-790. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2696>