

# The Intersection of Art and Autism Spectrum Disorder through the Lens of Personal Narratives

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**KEYWORDS.** Autism spectrum disorder, art, social connection, well-being

**BRIEF.** Exploring the role of art for individuals on the autism spectrum through in-depth interviews.

**ABSTRACT.** The intersection of art and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has often been explored through the lens of art therapy. However, there has been limited focus on the experiences of individuals with ASD who engage in art as a profession or hobby, separate from art therapy. Through in-depth interviews with nine artists who have ASD, this research examines the relationship between ASD and the arts. The nine artists described how art empowers them, allowing them to articulate complex emotions and create connections both within and outside the autism community.

## INTRODUCTION.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that involves challenges in communication, repetitive behaviors, and fixated interests [1]. The studies that intersect art and ASD together primarily focus on art therapy for individuals with ASD, specifically targeting children. Art therapy is an approach where making art is used to promote mental and emotional well-being [2]. Art therapy is considered to be effective because it allows children with ASD to express their thoughts and emotions in a way that is comfortable for them [3]. It can also improve social communication skills in children with ASD [4]. Despite extensive research on the benefits of art therapy for children, there is limited focus on adults with ASD and art. For instance, one study explores how artists with ASD have distinct design characteristics, like repetition, in their artwork [5]. Another study investigates whether the artistic abilities of individuals with ASD were linked to their artistic skills, disorder, or cognitive abilities [6]. However, these existing studies mainly focus on how the disorder can affect the artwork, rather than how art influences the identity, social interactions, and overall well-being of adult artists with ASD.

This research aims to fill this gap by investigating how art shapes their interactions within and outside the art community and contributes to their well-being. The hypothesis guiding this study is that ASD and art intertwine with each other positively. By shedding light on these new voices, this research can broaden the understanding of how art and ASD can connect with each other, promoting more acceptance and celebration of neurodiversity in society.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS.

### *Participants.*

Eight participants were chosen via purposive sampling to meet the specific criteria of this study – being above the age of 18, engaging in some form of art, and reporting an ASD diagnosis. Outreach was conducted through social media, personal websites, and organizational websites. One participant was selected based on snowball sampling [7], where current participants were asked after their interviews to recommend other people who fit the study's criteria. Outreach to potential participants was conducted through direct messages on social media platforms and emails that outlined the purpose and methodology of the study. Incentives were not provided for participation. Participant data was anonymized by removing names and any personal details from the interviews that could potentially compromise confidentiality. The nine participants ranged from the age of 18 to 52, with detailed demographics are displayed in Table S1.

### *Interview Design.*

In-depth interviews were used as the primary qualitative research method to explore the focus of the research. Interviews were conducted over Zoom because it allowed participants to be in an environment where they felt most comfortable. It also broadened the geographical reach of participants, creating a more diverse participant sample.

Before starting the interviews, the focus of the study was reiterated, consent was requested to record the Zoom interview solely for note-taking purposes, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions. Flexibility in preferences were accommodated, such as the option to turn off their camera. All participants consented to recording, and one participant chose to turn off their camera. Turning off the camera did not affect the results, as it did not hinder the participant's ability to answer the questions or impact the quality of the responses.

The interviews were semi-structured, where open-ended questions were prepared before conducting the interviews. This encouraged participants to provide detailed responses. Questions that were being asked included their motivation for pursuing a creative path, the impact of art on their well-being, and how art has allowed them to connect with others.

It is often very easy for qualitative researchers to subconsciously put their interests over those of their participants during the research process, influencing their outcomes [8]. To eliminate this, ethical considerations, specifically positionality and reflexivity, were considered. Positionality is the recognition of a researcher's identity, and reflexivity is the practice of reflecting on one's own biases and assumptions because of one's identity and upbringing [7]. The potential bias identified was confirmation bias, influenced by societal stereotypes about ASD. To avoid this, it was important to consider how the questions might feel if asked to the researcher, ensuring that the participants feel comfortable. This is an example of reflexivity.

### *Data Analysis.*

Data was prepared by transcribing the audio from video recordings to a written transcript. While transcribing the audio, intelligent verbatim was employed, removing superfluous verbal and non-verbal details, such as the filler word "um," to make the code more concise [7]. Then, the transcripts were analyzed manually through qualitative coding. This was done by creating a two-column table: the left-hand column contained the transcript of each interview, while the right-hand column contained codes that correspond to specific sections of the transcript to represent patterns and concepts. Through the process of thematic analysis, these codes were grouped together to develop broader themes.

## RESULTS.

ASD and the arts closely "go hand in hand because so often autistic people turn to the arts as a form of self-expression and ... escapism. And because of that, the arts are full of autistic creators" (Lauren). This relationship is illustrated by the themes that represent participants' experiences: "navigating alienation and bullying by using art,"

“the power of art as a means of self-expression,” and “finding connections and communicating with others.”

#### *Theme I: Navigating Alienation and Bullying by Using Art.*

Many participants expressed feelings of alienation at some point in their lives. Amelia had negative experiences in traditional workspace environments.

I’ve had a lot of jobs with just horrible bosses...I felt like I was treated very poorly. So, I kind of rebelled against that and kind of got into trouble.

This led her to pursue self-employment. Making art as a career has positively impacted her overall well-being.

I’m really happy because I am painting every day... I just love doing that kind of thing. And I really love working online.

She also uses art to express her personal experiences of feeling alienated.

Likewise, Michael has also faced many social challenges. One experience that stayed with him throughout his life was at a summer camp, where a group of girls constantly insulted and humiliated him after a former friend spread rumors about him. This led him to physically retaliate by attacking the former friend with an umbrella. This incident severely impacted Michael’s well-being, and it affected his chances of connecting with anybody else. The COVID-19 pandemic further isolated him from others.

To cope with these challenges, Michael wrote a song about his experience at summer camp, which helped him express his feelings through his music.

The experiences shared by participants Amelia and Michael demonstrate how art provides an outlet for emotional healing in the face of such challenges. Their ability to process their emotions from these traumatic experiences through art highlights the resilience and creativity among individuals with ASD.

#### *Theme II: The Power of Art as a Means of Self-Expression.*

For many, art is a way to express their identities and emotions. Jason uses art as a tool to express a range of emotions, from sadness to happiness. Additionally, John creates pictures not only because it’s a way to alleviate his stress from watching the news, but it’s also a way to present a view of how an individual with ASD thinks, feels, and interacts.

I paint my reality as I see and know it, and I invite you to experience this reality through my paintings.

John paints abstract works to bring out his thoughts, feelings, and ideas in different textures and colors.

Once I start painting and I’m able to bring a corner of the canvas to life, I’m often running. Acrylic paints allow me this freedom to move as fast as I want. As the viewer looks at my mixed media paintings, a myriad of meanings and feelings jump out of the work.

John hopes that through his art, he can have people see his world, as he believes, “We’re all the same. We just see things differently.”

Like John, Ellis also feels as though art allows them to invite others to see their point of view.

I think autism in and of itself is just a different way of looking at things. So having that be the starting point of my art, in my experience, is an advantage because I’m going to see things that neurotypical people would either overlook or not really pay heed to.

These narratives collectively demonstrate how art allows individuals with ASD to articulate their feelings and express themselves.

#### *Theme III: Finding Connections and Communicating with Others.*

Many participants have found that art provides them opportunities to connect with others – both within the community of artists with ASD and outside that community. Ruth sees music as a catalyst that helped her grow in the areas of advocacy, leadership, and socialization. As a co-founder of a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to music, she is actively involved in advocacy work and has built many friendships throughout her music career. Similarly, Ellis feels the same way, as art has gotten them into places where they can communicate with others.

I just feel less alone in my experience. And there’s also that pride of like ‘wow, people like my art,’ and I can tell them I am autistic. I have my own business and can be an inspiration to other people, whether they’re neurotypical or neurodivergent.

However, not all artists find the comfort in seeking connections through art. For instance, Amelia doesn’t feel excited by sharing her work live in a group for critiques. She much rather prefers selling her artwork online instead of in galleries. Ellis, on the other hand, enjoys socializing. She views her life as an extension of collage.

[Collage is] taking things that don’t seem to go together and putting them together, kind of like with my autism. I feel like I can be extroverted, which kind of puts people off guard because people think, ‘oh, you’re autistic; you don’t leave the house.’

In addition, several participants - Olivia, Ellis, Jason - find joy in teaching others. For Olivia, teaching has allowed her to connect a lot. She has a lot of social anxiety, where she can’t really cope in a social situation most of the time. But when she’s in a teaching role, she feels confident due to its clear structure of the teacher-student relationship.

From the participant’s experiences, it is evident that art has the power to connect strangers. Ruth recalls a touching moment from a concert she played at a nursing home. She played a slow-paced song, and there was a person in the audience that was crying because she was moved by the music.

I felt like I connected with them as I continued playing...And by the time the song was over, there was a feeling in the room that just made me feel like I’m with this person because I know what they’re going through – physically, mentally, psychologically – because I, too, experience those things.

Ellis currently has an art piece that focuses on autism at their event, and they find that both neurotypical and autistic people love it and can connect with each other due to their piece of artwork.

Opening the line of communication about autism now with basically strangers on the street has really opened doors for me and gotten me into the artistic autistic community. People think it’s kind of something maybe shameful or something not to talk about with strangers, but I talk about autism with people all the time. It’s one of my favorite things to talk about.

Art serves as a universal language that connects people. It allows Lauren to communicate with people regardless of whether they have ASD or are neurotypical.

Furthermore, discovering her ASD diagnosis has helped Lauren identify her optimal learning methods, which has influenced her approach to rehearsal environments and strengthened her communication with teachers.

As someone that has different needs from the norm, ...I try to create a much more welcoming rehearsal environment than others because I know that everyone learns differently.

Lauren shares that she learns choreography more effectively when she is not making direct eye contact with the teacher while they are giving the combination. In a lot of classroom settings, this behavior is often

seen as disrespectful. Thus, every time Lauren goes to class, she advocates for herself by explaining to her teacher ahead of time that she doesn't intend any disrespect; it is simply the way she learns best.

Although there are positive aspects of connecting and communicating with others, there are also challenges too. Olivia addresses challenges around application processes within the arts. She believes her writing skills can misrepresent her, leading others to perceive her as less skilled than she thinks she is. Thus, she prefers to be evaluated solely on her artworks, emphasizing that the art itself should be able to communicate who she is.

Just like everything else, you don't want the diagnosis to be seen before the art.

Ellis expresses the same concerns of being treated negatively due to their diagnosis.

I don't want people to look down on me or differently. Autism is a very natural human experience, and it's nothing to be cured or ashamed of.

The participants' experiences exhibit the different ways in which they connect with others through art and reveal the challenges they face.

## DISCUSSION.

Based on all the participant's responses, the results support the idea that the intersection of art and ASD are deeply intertwined with each other. Participants all felt as though art has influenced their overall well-being positively. This positive relationship is demonstrated across several themes that are prevalent throughout the participants' experiences.

First, navigating experiences of alienation and bullying through art is a common thread. Some of the participants, like Amelia and Michael, have used art to cope with negative experiences in traditional workspaces and social environments respectively. Amelia's transition to self-employment illustrates the difficulties that many individuals with ASD often face in a traditional work environment. Her experience aligns with the challenges highlighted by Amber Pryke-Hobbes's study, where both autistic and non-autistic neurodivergent participants felt vulnerable to social rejection in the workplace and have expressed experiences of marginalization, where they felt alienated [9]. Table S1 illustrates that many of the participants are self-employed artists. Individuals with ASD often struggle to find jobs and feel disconnected from their communities [10]. Because of this, adults with ASD have lower employment rates compared to other disabilities [10]. There's a lower employment rate of 58% among individuals with ASD compared to 74% for those with intellectual disabilities [10]. This big gap underscores the employment challenges faced by individuals with ASD. Amelia's transition from traditional workspaces to becoming self-employed supports the studies. Michael's experience at his summer camp highlights the fact that individuals with ASD are particularly susceptible to bullying due to their challenges in social communication [11]. Bullying is prevalent among students with ASD, with a percentage of 44% [11]. This percentage is much higher compared to neurotypical individuals and those with other disabilities [11].

Secondly, the power of art as a means of self-expression plays a vital role in the lives of the participants. Participants feel like art is a tool for them to express who they are and how they feel. For example, Jason feels like art is an outlet for him to let out all his emotions. Visual arts help individuals express complex emotions that are challenging to articulate verbally [12]. This is displayed when John uses art as a bridge to connect his world and reality to others, allowing him to communicate with others in a way that words alone cannot express. Ellis views ASD as an advantage that provides a new perspective in art for them that neurotypical individuals would overlook, and with art, they

are able to share this perspective with others. Individuals with ASD often process sensory information differently, which can lead to unique artistic perspectives [13]. In fact, atypical sensory experiences have been observed in about 90% of individuals with ASD [13].

Third, for the participants, art facilitates connections and allows them to communicate in ways that they were not able to effectively. Participants like Ruth, Ellis, and Lauren find connections with other artists and even strangers through displaying their art in the public, while others find connections within teaching. On the contrast, Amelia doesn't enjoy connecting with other artists and sharing her work in groups. Roberta A. Schriber found that individuals with ASD were less extraverted than neurotypical individuals [14]. Ellis challenges these findings and the social assumption that all individuals with ASD are introverted, as they enjoy conversing with others, which takes people by surprise. Lauren's ASD diagnosis has allowed her to be more mindful of creating a welcoming rehearsal environment and understand her learning preferences. Individuals with ASD often have specific strategies and learning preferences compared to neurotypical individuals and understanding these differences in how people with ASD learn can lead to better support [15]. Olivia feels that art is a much better indication of her capabilities than her writing skills for applications, as it reflects who she is without the bias of her diagnosis. Although many have found positive connections within and outside the art community, stigma and bias still exists, shaped by the public's interpretation of visible ASD traits and the lack of accurate knowledge about ASD [16]. Stigma leads to an impact on their well-being and an increase in masking, which is a way for individuals with autism to appear as neurotypical [16]. There are various ways to reduce stigma, such as creating "autism-friendly" environments and representing autism accurately in media [16]. But the main takeaway is to "always celebrate autism, accept it for what it is, and be an ally to that person." (Ruth)

## *Challenges, Limitations, and Future Directions.*

Recruiting the participants was challenging because cold emails were sent to potential participants through social media and their personal emails that were found from the websites. Out of the 27 messages and emails that were sent out, only 10 individuals replied. Nine of them agreed to participate in the study. This resulted in a recruitment process spanning three months and a smaller sample size than initially anticipated. In future studies, a larger and more diverse group of participants will be included by allowing a longer timeframe for recruitment. Additionally, there could be a possible bias in the responses because many of the participants (55.6%) were in the 30- to 40-year-old range, while others had ages that were more dispersed. Experiences may be different across different generations, as the public understanding of ASD has changed over time.

This study does include self-diagnosed individuals. Including self-diagnosed individuals in this research can offer new insights that differ from formally diagnosed individuals. It is also important to emphasize that many individuals face barriers to getting a formal diagnosis, such as financial constraints, lack of access to healthcare, and diagnostic biases. Sometimes, current research and information on ASD can lead to individuals being misdiagnosed, particularly for women who do not fit into the stereotypical mold of what ASD looks like [17]. This issue persists now because most of the existing research on ASD used male samples and participants [17]. Including self-diagnosed individuals ensures that their voices can be heard.

Looking forward, future studies could focus on a specific form of art or explore the role of gender in the experiences of individuals with ASD. Each participant provided unique insights on their experiences relating to art. The hope in the future is to dive even deeper into each of these insights to further support individuals with ASD.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION.

- **Table S1.** Participant Demographics

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