Original Article

The Art of Blending In: Unveiling Camouflaging Traits in Adults with or without Autism

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Abstract

Camouflaging a complex behavioral and social phenomenon commonly associated with individuals on the autism spectrum, takes center stage in this study. However, it doesn't stop at autism; it delves into the intriguing realm of camouflaging strategies employed by both adult individuals with and without autism. Additionally, the research further investigates the influence of gender on these camouflaging behaviors. This quantitative study exposes notable distinctions in camouflaging traits between adults with and without autism. Individuals with autism spectrum frequently utilize camouflaging to replicate socially accepted behaviors, such as maintaining eye contact and suppressing repetitive actions, in order to integrate into society and escaping potential stigmatization. Nevertheless, this adaptive coping strategy can exact a toll on their mental health & well-being, resulting in heightened stress, anxiety, and mental exhaustion. Remarkably, the research also highlights that camouflaging isn't unique to autism; individuals without autism also harness these strategies in various social situations. These individuals may adjust their body language, behavior, emotional expressions, and appearance to align with dominant societal norms, foster social harmony, or seamlessly integrate into specific social circles. This indicates that camouflaging is a broader phenomenon rooted in the universal human impulse for social adaptation and compliance. Moreover, the study underscores the significance influence of gender expectations on the adoption of camouflaging strategies. It notes that camouflaging appears to be more prevalent among females, irrespective of their autism status, reflecting the unique social challenges and societal expectations faced by women across various cultural landscapes. In essence, this research illuminates the multifaceted nature of camouflaging behaviors and their far-reaching implications. It emphasizes the vital importance of comprehending these behaviors and their potential impacts on individuals' overall mental health & well-being. Moreover, the study advocates for further exploration of the long-term effects of camouflaging and the creation of interventions focused on promoting authenticity in social interactions while alleviating the need for excessive camouflaging efforts.

Keywords : Camouflaging, compensation, masking, assimilation, adults, autism

1. INTRODUCTION

Camouflaging, also known as compensation or masking, refers to the behavioral as well as social strategies that individuals employ to blend in and appear neuro-typical or socially competent, particularly in situations where they may feel socially different or awkward (Petrolini et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2022a). This phenomenon has been detected in various populations, animals, as well as in human beings; including individuals with autism and other neuro-developmental conditions, but their motivations and experiences may be different. Camouflaging involves imitating socially acceptable behaviors and expending mental and emotional effort to understand and respond to social cues (Sajjad et al., 2023).

In the context of autism, camouflaging typically occurs when autistic individuals try to mimic or imitate socially acceptable behaviors (Cremone et al., 2023; Cook et al., 2022; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019), such as maintaining eye contact, imitating facial expressions, or suppressing stimming (repetitive

behavior patterns such as hand-flapping). They may also expend substantial mental as well as emotional effort to understand and respond appropriately to the social cues, even if it does not come naturally to them (Hannon et al., 2023; Hull et al., 2020). This can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and mental exhaustion (Rehman et al., 2022a; 2022b; Fombonne, E., 2020). Desire to fit in the society, avoid judgment or stigmatization, and improve social acceptance and relationships with others, these are the most common motivated reasons by autistic individuals to do camouflage (Hull et al., 2020). It is believed to be more prevalent in individuals with higher functioning or cognitive capabilities and those who have received prior social skills training (Cremone et al., 2023; Jedrzejewska, & Dewey, 2022). However, camouflaging can come at a cost, as it can lead to mental exhaustion, identity confusion, feelings of segregation, and some mental health challenges due to the strain of masking one's true self (Hull et al., 2020).

On the other hand, adult individuals without autism may also involve in some camouflaging activities, although the underlying motives of using these activities may differ (Jedrzejewska, & Dewey, 2022). They may camouflage certain aspects of their personality and behavior to conform to societal expectations or to workplace norms (O'Loghlen & Lang, 2023). They may modify their behavior, attitude, appearance, body language, and/or speech to avoid standing out or to fit into a social context. However, in some cases, camouflaging can be a coping mechanism to navigate challenging or unfamiliar social situations.

2. REVIEW LITERATURE

Camouflage is indeed a fascinating mechanism observed in both animals and humans, enabling them to blend into their surroundings and increase their chances of survival by reducing the likelihood of detection (see Rehman et al., 2022a; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2020). In the animal kingdom, various species employ physical adaptations for camouflage, such as patterns or coloration that resemble their environment (Stevens, & Merilaita, 2009). Such as, the chameleon is known for its ability to change its skin color to match its surroundings, while certain insects like stick insects or leaf-mimicking insects have evolved body textures or shapes that make them indistinguishable from their surroundings.

In contrast, humans display versatile behaviors and psychological strategies for personal protection through camouflage. In military contexts, soldiers employ camouflage equipment, clothing, and utilizing patterns as well as colors that match the specific terrain they operate in. Additionally, specialized camouflage techniques, such as ghillie suits or face paint, are used to break up the human outline and blend into the natural environment (Sajjad et al., 2023).

Camouflaging in Autism

Camouflaging is also known as compensatory or masking behavior; it refers to the practice of hiding or suppressing autistic traits or behaviors in order to fit into social situations or to mask the challenges faced by individuals with autism (Hannon et al., 2023; Sajjad et al., 2023). It is commonly observed in individuals with autism, particularly among females, but it can also occur in individuals without spectrum in certain contexts (Jedrzejewska & Dewey, 2022).

In the context of autism, camouflaging can involve consciously mimicking or imitating the behavior of neuro-typical individuals to appear more socially adept or "normal." This may comprise suppressing stimming behaviors (repetitive movements or vocalizations), imitating social gestures & cues, or actively learning, masking sensory sensitivities, and adopting suitable social responses (see Cremone et al., 2023; Hannon et al., 2023; Sajjad et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2022a).

The term "camouflaging" encompasses several aspects within the behaviors and subjective experiences of autistic individuals as they strive to blend in and conform to social norms (Hull et al., 2020). This multifaceted concept comprises the utilization of strategies to hide the behaviors of autistic that may draw attention and compensate for social-communicative deficits, either consciously or unconsciously. According to Hull et al. (2019), it is an adaptive process employed by individuals with autism to enhance their social adjustment within specific environments. This coping strategy, in terms of camouflaging, is not an inherent feature of autism itself but rather a transactional phenomenon that appears in the interaction between the individual and their ecological niche (Chapman et al., 2022). It is crucial to identify that camouflage should be examined within the context of an autistic individual and their environment, rather than being viewed as a singular measure or defining characteristic of autism (Jedrzejewska & Dewey, 2022).

However, researchers Hull et al. (2019) provided an actionable definition and shed light on the

significance of camouflage for the long-term outcomes of autistic individuals. According to Hull et al. (2020; 2019), autistic individuals often employ camouflaging behaviors to mitigate social challenges and improve social acceptance through compensation, masking and assimilation techniques. These camouflaging techniques especially compensation allow individuals to mask their difficulties and function in social settings (Livingston and Happé, 2017). Camouflaging is seen as one of many coping strategies employed by autistic individuals to adapt to social environments, alongside other non-camouflaging behaviors (Fombonne, E., 2020). These coping strategies may not be exclusive to autism and calls for conceptual clarity and discrepancy between various aspects such as cognitive processing, feelings, behaviors, and practices related to camouflage (Sajjad et al., 2023).

Camouflaging in Individuals without Autism

While camouflaging is typically related with autism, it is important to note that individuals without autism can also engage in camouflaging related behaviors. In certain situations, such as when individuals feel socially anxious or perceive a need to fit in, they may modify or hide certain aspects of their personality or behavior (O'Loghlen & Lang, 2023; Jedrzejewska & Dewey, 2022; Cook et al., 2022). It involves unconsciously or consciously adjusting their body language, behavior, characteristics, or emotions to fit in with societal expectations and/or follow to a specific social group. This can be seen as a form of social adaptation or conformity (O'Loghlen & Lang, 2023).

People often suppress their true emotions, feelings, desires, opinions, and interests in order to conform to societal norms and avoid judgment or refusal. This involves adapting speech & language to match those around them, regulating their body language to create a sense of similarity, meeting the requirements to social norms in terms of clothing & behavior, suppressing emotions that may be deemed inappropriate, masking their personal opinions & interests, adjusting behavior to fit in with a particular social group or setting, hiding vulnerabilities or insecurities to avoid appearing weak, and modifying physical appearance to align with fashion trends or social expectations. These adaptations are made to navigate several social situations and maintain a sense of acceptance within a given context. Similarly, some people hide their knowledge which is refer to the deliberate act of an individual concealing or withholding requested information from another person (Altenmüller et al., 2023). Some individuals do hide their true identity, and mask their characteristics. There may be a certain reason behind these acts. They perform these acts purposefully to meet their desired needs from their surroundings.

Camouflaging in individuals without autism typically occurs in situations where they feel the need to conform to societal norms or fit in with a specific social group. This can involve suppressing certain behaviors, emotions, or characteristics that may be seen as socially unacceptable or undesirable in a particular context (Hannon et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2022a). For example, someone might hide their true thoughts or feelings to avoid conflict or maintain harmony in a group setting. According to Kurbanovna & Aubakirovna (2023), there is a strong relationship between social norms, psychological adaptation, and the pursuit of balance and self-evaluation. For successful adaptation, individuals have to navigate the expectations of society while maintaining a sense of personal identity and satisfaction. In this regard they adopt patterns & behaviors from their surroundings to fit in the society in terms of assimilation.

Reasons of Camouflage

Camouflaging, also known as masking, refers to a set of strategies and behaviors used by individuals to hide or suppress their autistic traits in order to fit into social situations more effectively (Sajjad et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2022a). There may be different reasons behind this act. Hossain (2023) in his study elaborated that cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) regulates various aspects of human brain function, including electro-physics, neuro-physics, and neurotransmitter control. Neuro-camouflaging is linked to neuro-responses and the release of dopamine and melatonin, influencing human behavior, as neuro-camouflaging has implications for defense, criminal protection, and psychological disorders.

Camouflaging in individuals with or without autism is driven by complex factors. One key factor is social expectations (Cremone et al., 2023; Hull et al., 2021), which lead people to hide their true selves in order to conform and avoid judgment or exclusion. Autistic individuals particularly struggle to meet these expectations naturally due to differences in social processing, making camouflaging a way to fit in and avoid stigmatization by society (Rehman et al., 2022a; 2022b). Social anxiety and the desire to fit in the society and acceptance by others contribute to camouflage, as individuals aim to protect themselves from negative experiences and establish connections with others (Hull et al., 2020). Moreover, camouflaging can serve as a compensatory mechanism and help individuals avoid judgment or criticism by imitating

social norms (Sajjad et al., 2023; Hull et al., 2021). Cultural and gender expectations further influence the adoption of camouflaging strategies, with evidence suggesting it is more prevalent among females on the autism spectrum (Roach, 2023).

Research Objectives

- To explore the camouflaging traits in adults with and without autism
- To analyze the camouflaging traits in adults with respect to gender differences
- To explore masking, assimilation, and compensation strategies in adults with and without autism

3. METHODOLOGY

This quantitative survey was designed to evaluate the camouflaging traits in adults with and without autism in terms of compensation, masking, and assimilation strategies used by them. The targeted population was adults with and without autism, aged 17 years and above, without any gender discrimination or location. Within the context of autism, individuals with Asperger's and mild autism were targeted for this study, because they can communicate their views without assistance (Sajjad et al., 2023).

To identify camouflaging traits in adults with and without autism, the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CATQ) was used by the researcher with the permission of its developer, Hull et al. (2019). The tool was developed to assess the traits for three basic components of camouflaging, including compensation, masking, and assimilation, using a 7-item Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'somewhat disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', somewhat agree', 'agree', and 'strongly agree'. However, the tool CATQ comprises 25 items; with 8 items focused on masking, 9 items on compensation, and 8 items on assimilation within the questionnaire. However, the tool has its own scoring system to identify the camouflaging traits in individuals. The tool has very strong reliability 0.94, as measured by the developer.

Through the online survey form, the data was collected from 123 individuals without autism and from 112 individuals with autism, as shown in table 1. The study included 137 female and 98 male participants. Among the total population of 112 autistic adults there were 53.6% male and 46.4% were female autistic adults. While in the other group of individuals without autism there were 123 participants, 69.1% were female and 30.9% were male adults. Majority (42%) of the participants were in the age range of 22 to 25 years. Furthermore the data was analyzed through non-parametric tests including chi-square and Mann-Whitney with the help of SPSS version 25.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

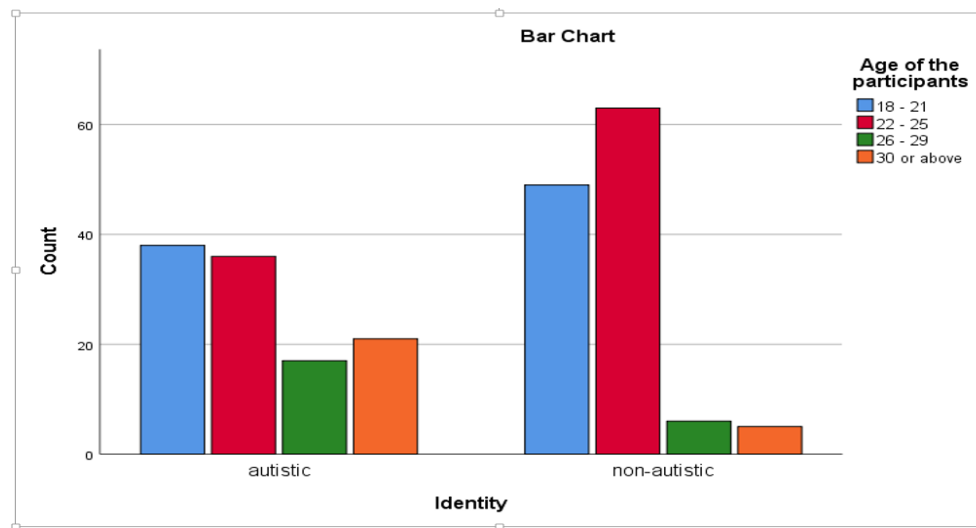|		Individuals with Autism	Individuals without Autism	Total M	SD
Number of Participants		112 (47.7%)	123 (52.3%)	1.52	.501
Gender	Male	98 (41.7%)	60 (53.6%)	38 (30.9%)	1.58	.494
	Female	137 (58.3%)	52 (46.4%)	85 (69.1%)		
	Total	235	M = 1.46 SD = .501	M = 1.69 SD = .464		
Age	18 – 21	87 (37%)	38 (33.9%)	49 (39.8%)	1.95	.955
	22 – 25	99 (42.1%)	36 (32.1%)	63 (51.2%)		
	26 – 29	23 (9.8%)	17 (15.2%)	6 (4.9%)		
	30 or above	26 (11.1%)	21 (18.8%)	5 (4.1%)		
	Total	235	M = 2.19 SD = 1.103	M = 1.73 SD = .736		

Figure. 1. Age of participants

Findings

- To explore the camouflaging traits in adults with and without autism

H1: There is a significant difference exist in camouflaging traits between adults with and without autism.

H0: There is no significant difference exist in camouflaging traits between adults with and without autism.

The table 2 shows the results of a statistical test comparing camouflaging traits between adults with and without autism, demonstrating a significant difference between the two groups. The p-value (.000) suggests that this difference is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance alone, the Mann-Whitney statistic for the variable CATQ is 1393.000. Mean rank observed for adults with autism (160.84) and for adults without autism (73.33) as shown in Fig. 2.

Table 2
Mann-Whitney Test for Camouflaging Traits in Adults with & without Autism

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
CATQ	1393.000	9019.000	-10.046	.000

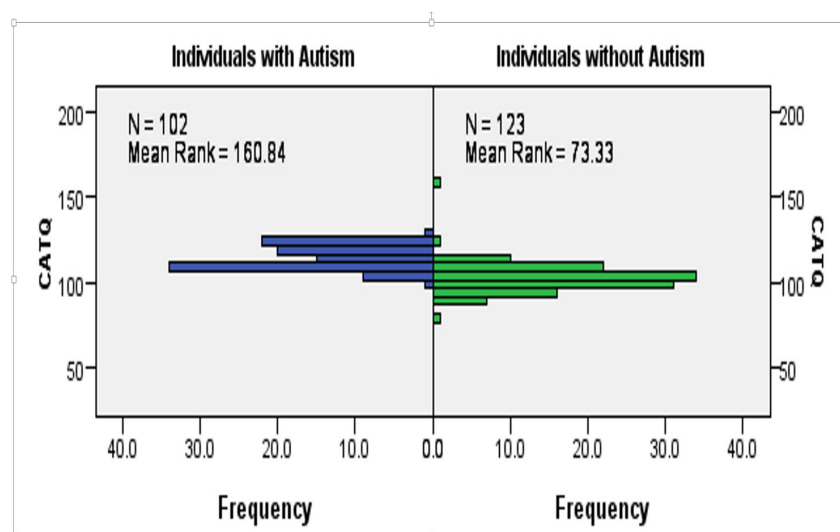Grouping Variable: Identity (individuals with & without autism)

Figure. 2. Mann-Whitney Test for camouflaging traits (CATQ) in individuals with & without autism

- To analyze the camouflaging traits in adults with respect to gender differences

H1: There is a significant difference in camouflaging traits between females and males adults with and

without autism.

H0: There is no significant difference in camouflaging traits between females and males adults with and without autism.

The results of chi-square tests examining gender differences in camouflaging traits among adults with and without autism shows in table 3, that there is "Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)" values in all cases are very low (p=.000), indicating a highly significant association between camouflaging traits and gender. This advocates that there is indeed a significant difference in camouflaging traits between genders in both groups, individuals with and without autism. However, camouflaging traits were more noticeable in females as compared to males (Fig. 3).

Table 3
Chi-Square Tests for Gender Discrimination for Camouflaging Traits in Adults with & without Autism

	Individuals without Autism			Individuals with Autism			Both		
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	68.020a	31	.000	67.226b	25	.000	126.560c	41	.000
Likelihood Ratio	83.451	31	.000	87.024	25	.000	156.620	41	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	34.166	1	.000	45.936	1	.000	2.873	1	.090

a. 61 cells (95.3%) have less than 5 expected counts. Minimum expected count .31
b. 51 cells (98.1%) have less than 5 expected counts. Minimum expected count .46
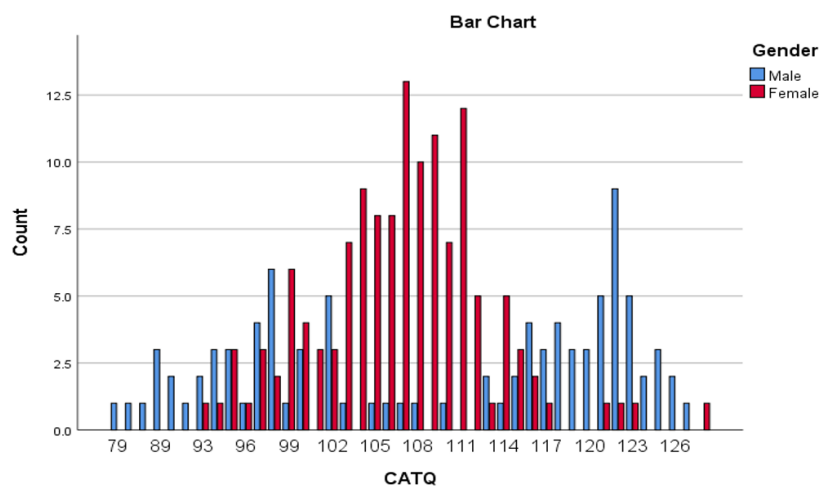c. 75 cells (89.3%) have less than 5 expected counts. Minimum expected count .41

Figure 3. Camouflaging traits (CATQ) and gender differences

- To explore masking, assimilation, and compensation strategies in adults with and without autism

H1: There is a significant difference in the use of masking, assimilation, and compensation strategies between adults with and without autism.

H0: There is no significant difference in the use of masking, assimilation, and compensation strategies between adults with and without autism.

The table 4 reveals highly significant differences in the utilization of camouflaging strategies including compensation, masking, and assimilation between adults with and without autism. In all groups either separate and when combining them, p-values were less than .001 (p=.000), signifying substantial distinctions. Expected cell frequencies stick to 5, confirming the validity of the chi-square tests. See fig. 4 below that illustrates the compensation, masking and assimilation strategies used by adults with and without autism.

Table 4

Test of Chi-square for Compensation, Masking, & Assimilation

		Compensation	Masking	Assimilation
Individuals with Autism	Chi-Square	55.946a	58.393b	72.786b
	Df	14	12	12
	Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000
Individuals without Autism	Chi-Square	93.829c	78.138d	62.894e
	Df	13	19	16
	Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000
Both	Chi-Square	87.284f	106.400	78.879
	Df	17	17	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have less than 5 expected frequencies. Minimum expected cell frequency = 7.5
b. 0 cells (0.0%) have less than 5 expected frequencies. Minimum expected cell frequency = 8.6
c. 0 cells (0.0%) have less than 5 expected frequencies. Minimum expected cell frequency = 8.8
d. 0 cells (0.0%) have less than 5 expected frequencies. Minimum expected cell frequency = 6.2
e. 0 cells (0.0%) have less than 5 expected frequencies. Minimum expected cell frequency = 7.2
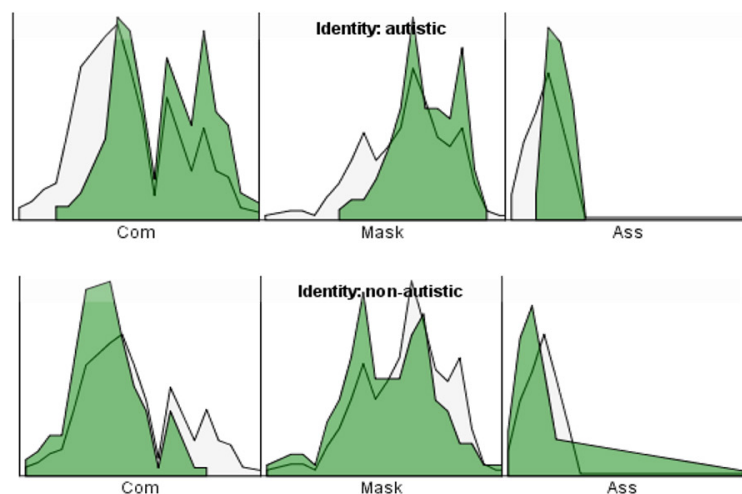f. 20 cells (55.6%) have less than 5expected count. Minimum expected count = .45

Figure. 4 Compensation, masking and assimilation strategies used by adults with and without autism

4. DISCUSSION

Current study delves into the multifaceted phenomenon of camouflaging in adults with and without autism. Camouflaging involves the strategic deployment of behaviors to blend into social contexts effectively with the help of compensation, masking, and assimilation strategies. This research explored the prevalence and different shades of camouflaging traits, and the factors that influence its manifestation in various populations.

Camouflaging among adult individuals with autism has garnered significant attention in recent years. It represents a complex interaction between the individual and their social environment. Our study findings affirm the prevalence of camouflaging behaviors in this population. Individuals with autism spectrum often go to great lengths to mimic socially accepted behaviors, such as imitating facial expressions, making eye contact, etc. These efforts to adjust to societal norms can be mentally and emotionally exhausting, leading to mental fatigue that heightened stress and anxiety. However, the motivation behind camouflaging among individuals with autism spectrum is driven by their desire to fit into the society, avoid judgment or stigmatization, and establish better social relations (see Sajjad et al., 2023). This adaptive surviving tactic is more often observed in individuals with higher cognitive competences and those who have received social skills training (Rehman et al., 2022a). Though, camouflaging may come at a cost, resulting in identity confusion or misperception by others and create mental health challenges.

While camouflaging act has frequently been associated only with individuals with autism, the current study also highlight the occurrence of camouflaging in individuals without autism. In certain

circumstances, individuals either consciously or unconsciously modify their appearance, behavior, and emotional expressions to adapt to societal expectations or to navigate challenging different social situations. The study findings propose that camouflaging is not unique to autism but rather a comprehensive phenomenon rooted in the human need for social adaptation and conformity. However, individuals with or without autism engage in camouflaging behaviors for various reasons, including the preservation of social harmony, the avoidance of conflict, and the desire to fit into specific social groups. In doing so, they may suppress their true identity, emotions, others' views, and interests to align with prevailing norms. So, it can be say that camouflaging as an act can be seen as a survival mechanism in the complex web of social connections and relations.

It is also worth noting that gender expectations also influence the adoption of camouflaging strategies in social context. Our findings align with previous research suggesting that camouflaging is more prevalent among females as compared to male (see Fig. 3), and within the groups, this ratio is more noticeable in females with autism spectrum (Rehman et al., 2022a; Hull et al., 2020). This may be recognized due to the different social challenges and expectations that females face within different cultural settings.

Future research should discover the long-term consequences of camouflaging strategies and its potential role in mental health & well-being outcomes in individuals with or without autism spectrum. Moreover, examining the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing the need for camouflaging and promoting authenticity in social interactions could yield valuable insights. The operationalization of camouflage in studies has been inconsistent, and the specificity of camouflaging to autism has not been established. The limited data available, primarily from small and atypical samples, calls for further research to establish the validity and relevance of camouflage in autism. It is important to consider other factors such as co-occurring psychiatric symptoms and the need for improved diagnostic evaluations in adults. While recognizing sex differences in autism is important, creating gender-specific diagnostic criteria may not be warranted given the small magnitude of these differences. Furthermore, investigating the intersectionality of camouflaging with cultural, class, race, and gender expectations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon.

In conclusion, camouflaging is a multifaceted behavior that goes beyond autism, encompassing a range of strategies employed by individuals to navigate the intricacies of social interaction. Recognizing camouflaging as a common human behavior paves the way for more inclusive and empathetic social environments, where individuals can feel accepted for who they truly are, without the necessity of concealing their true nature.

Competing Interests

The authors did not declare any competing interest.

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