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Gender Experience, Identity and Expression in People on the Autism Spectrum: An intersectional approach

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SPECTRUM: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH**

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RESUMO

As vivências de pessoas no espectro do autismo no que concerne a experiência, identidade e expressão de género raramente foram exploradas, particularmente no contexto português. Frequentemente, literatura científica excluiu e ignorou as vozes dos próprios indivíduos autistas-trans. Por este motivo, o presente estudo procurou amplificar estas vozes através da condução de entrevistas individuais semiestruturadas de 23 participantes autistas, dos 18 aos 56 anos ($M = 27.43$), de modo a dar resposta às questões de investigação “De que forma pessoas autistas descrevem a sua vivência de género?”, “De que forma pessoas autistas descrevem a interação entre as suas pertenças a nível da experiência, expressão e identidade de género e da sua neurodivergência?” e “Quais as perceções da população autista sobre a preparação de profissionais na área dos cuidados de saúde no atendimento a pacientes autistas e que expressam variância de género?”. Análise temática das transcrições das entrevistas resultou em cinco temas: ‘compreender género como pessoa autista’, ‘conexão com género’, ‘pressões externas’, ‘autenticidade em expressar género’ e ‘navegar cuidados de saúde’, representando as formas nas quais as experiências de género dos participantes interagem com a sua identidade autista, tendo um papel na sua compreensão de género enquanto conceito, a sua sensação de e conexão com o seu próprio género, pressões sociais para corresponder a expectativas, expressão de género autêntica em comparação com performar expectativas sociais, e experiências de participantes com prestadores de cuidados de saúde.

ABSTRACT

The lived experiences of people on the autism spectrum regarding gender as well as its identity and expression have seldom been explored, particularly in the portuguese context. Often, scientific literature has excluded and ignored the voices of autistic-trans individuals themselves. As such, the present study sought to amplify these voices. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted of 23 autistic participants, ages 18 to 56 ($M = 27.43$), in order to answer the research questions “How does the autistic population describe their experience of gender?”, “How do autistic people describe the interaction between their identities concerning gender experience, expression and identity and their neurodivergence?” and “What are the perceptions of the autistic population concerning the preparedness of healthcare professionals to see autistic patients who express gender variance?”. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts resulted in five themes: ‘understanding gender as an autistic person’, ‘connection to gender’, ‘external pressures’, ‘authenticity in expressing gender’ and ‘navigating healthcare’, conveying the ways in which participants’ experiences of gender interacted with their autistic identity, playing a role in their understanding of gender as a concept, their feeling of and connection with their own gender, societal pressures to fit expectations, authentic expression of gender as compared to performing social expectations, and participants’ experiences with healthcare professionals.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing number of publications (Coburn & Williams, 2023; Toft, 2023; Krazinski, 2022) focusing on the autistic population which have started to move away from a medical and deficit-centered model and towards a view of autism under the lens of the social model of disability – placing the focus not on the limitations inherent to certain individuals but the limitations imposed by the physical and social environment they exist within (Barnes, 2019) – and the theory of neurodiversity – which challenges the pathologization of certain natural human differences such as autism and ADHD, seeing them as minority ways of neurocognitive functioning and placing at the origin of neurodivergent individuals' disability the fact that they exist within a predominantly neurotypical society (Walker, 2021) –, addressing not only autism itself but various topics relevant to the life of this population, scientific literature seeking to understand the intersection between autism and non-normative gender identities is still scarce, particularly when it comes to research focusing on the portuguese population.

As the theory of intersectionality explains, experiences of discrimination and oppression stemming from belonging to multiple marginalized groups interact and interrelate rather than exist only as separate experiences of which the sum constitutes the life of the individual (Nogueira, 2017). Thus, when a person is on both the autism and gender variance spectrums, this intersection results in unique experiences, not just the combination of experiences originating from autistic identity and from the non-normative gender identity or expression. For this reason, as Gillespie-Lynch and Botha (2021) state, to support every autistic person it becomes essential to understand the differences within the autistic community, taking an intersectional approach (Hartman *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, as Brown (2016), disability rights activist, points out, an effective activism for the rights of people on the gender variance spectrum requires recognizing and validating the population simultaneously on this spectrum and on the autism spectrum.

Various studies suggest there is a marked overlap between the autistic population and the transgender and non-binary population, with a number of autistic people across a spectrum of non-normative gender identifications (Coburn & Williams, 2023; Hartman *et al.*, 2023; Toft, 2023). This overlap, paired with a tendency to pathologize autism, frequently leads to an invalidation of gender-diverse autistic people and access barriers being put in place to keep

them from gender clinics and the exploration of gender identity, including in clinical contexts as well as scientific literature itself.

Regarding clinical context there are innumerable reports of this deterrence, including the uptake of litigious action to prevent access to this kind of care by autistic persons, as well as subjection of transgender healthcare for all trans and non-binary children to intense scrutiny and/or need for a court's approval (namely in the United Kingdom and in some states of the USA) as a result of evidence that several patients were shown to have traits of autism (Adams, 2020; Rummler & Luterman, 2023; Fraizer, 2023). This scrutiny had the goal of severely restricting this kind of care to autistic people (Hartman et al., 2023; Adams, 2022; Baczewski, 2023).

In regard to scientific literature, studies focusing on the intersection between autistic identity and non-normative gender identities tend to frame autism from a “deficit” viewpoint, seeking to understand “what it is about autism that makes people think they’re LGBT+” (Toft, 2023a). The assumption in many of these studies is that the gender identity of autistic people is somehow less valid, and that autism itself makes someone unable to state their gender identity, denying their bodily autonomy, defending therefore that these people should not be able to make decisions about their gender identity. Multiple theories are proposed in literature for this purpose, seeking to know what symptoms of autism lead the person to wrongly believe they belong to a non-normative gender, or to not identify with gender at all (Price, 2022; Adams, 2022; Toft, 2023a; Toft, 2023b; Perry, 2020; Pyne, 2021).

Denial of autistic people's autonomy regarding the affirmation of their gender identity contradicts the right to self-determination of gender identity and expression contemplated on several countries' law, Portugal among them (Diário da República, 2018).

The mentioned assumptions stem from research which often excludes and ignores the voices of autistic-trans individuals themselves (Adams, 2022). This emphasizes the need for research on the community of people on both the autism and gender variance spectrums to be done, amplifying the voices of people in this intersection to inform clinical practice (Hartman et al., 2023; Erickson-Schroth, 2022).

Currently, the contact and connections between the autistic and LGBTQIAPN+ communities made easier by social media has resulted in higher exploration of experiences and terminologies by these communities, even culminating in new words to describe the experience

of autistic people as to their gender identity. Among these are the words “*autigender*”, “*gendervague*”/“*vaguegender*” and “*neuroqueer*”.

The word “*autigender*” is a word thought to have first appeared in 2014, introduced by two users of social media app *Tumblr*, *Autismgender* and *Esperancegirl*, in the MOGAI archive (short for *Marginalized Orientations, Gender Identities, and Intersex*) (lgbtqia+ wiki: autigender, 2023). The term is used to explain how a person’s understanding of their gender is fundamentally impacted by the fact that they are autistic, it being impossible to untangle the two from one another. As such, it is a term that seeks to express the complex relationship that people on the autism spectrum have (or may have, as this community’s heterogeneity must be emphasized given that each person may have a completely different experience from the next) with gender, autism being seen as the lens through which the world is experienced (Hartman et al., 2023; Erickson-Schroth, 2022; Toft, 2023a). As Bernard Grant explains, “*autigender*” is not necessarily a label that someone uses for their gender like “*genderfluid*” or “*non-binary*”. A person can simultaneously be a cisgender man and autigender, if they feel like their gender experience diverges from the male norm. It is not a fixed label, but it adjusts to the experiences of autistic people who choose to use it (Jackson, 2023).

In a variety of autobiographical texts, people who identify with the term “*autigender*” have described experiences such as the impossibility of separating their gender from their autism, the incomprehension and/or rejection of social norms around which the notion of normative gender is based and the complex emotional effort it would take to perform gender roles which are uncomfortable for them, conveying a preference for expressing gender in the way in which they feel most comfortable, frequently resulting in a more fluid gender identity and expression. The impact of the sensory component in the way they physically present was also mentioned, as they preferred to dress and style their hair in ways deliberately conducive to their sensory needs even though this might not align with a normative presentation of gender (Young, 2023; Price, 2022; Adams, 2022; Toft, 2023b; Valvano & Shelton, 2022; Pyne, 2021).

Given the way society’s neuronormativity and cisheteronormativity can shape how autistic and/or gender diverse individuals interact with the world around them, though they may prefer to express gender in a way that feels comfortable and authentic, this is not always possible. As Day and Krazinski (2025) explain, autistic people often resort to masking – a strategy used to appear non-autistic in order to fit in (Neff, 2023) – a performance which “protects while simultaneously exhausts, drains, and burdens”. This experience can play a role

in how not only autism itself but other identities as well are expressed, given that this mask is built within a cisheteronormative system (Day & Krazinski, 2025). This is exemplified in an autistic person's account on her experience with asexuality, where she described how performing sexuality and physical attraction became "an extension of having been taught to perform being social to minimize her autism-related differences" (Kim, 2011).

Whereas masking is often done for reasons of safety, making unmasking, as Day and Krazinski (2025) point out, a privilege, unmasking allows for the burden of performing uncomfortable gender roles in the way that it was described above to be shed. This process of unmasking starts, for many, with discovering their neurodivergent identity, becoming able to access the language needed to understand and communicate it (Day & Krazinski, 2025).

Similarly to the term "*autigender*", the term "*gendervague*"/"*vaguegender*" refers to the way some neurodivergent people feel that their neurodivergence directly influences their gender identity, with this not referring, however, exclusively to autistic people. The word appeared, like the term "*autigender*", in 2014, introduced by Cryptomegha (nonbinary wiki: neurogender, 2024). Using this word, Lydia X. Z. Brown (2016) describes that gender has little meaning to many autistic people and primarily impacts them when it is projected on them through the assumptions of others.

In some writing, the term "*neuroqueer*" is also used, a term describing a neurodivergent and *queer* identity, in which these two aspects connect, intersect and interact (Hadley, 2021; Erickson-Schroth, 2022; Toft, 2023a).

Given the marked scarcity of studies on this topic in scientific literature, namely when it comes to the portuguese context, this study seeks to amplify the voices of the portuguese autistic population regarding matters of gender, its identity and expression, in order to understand their experiences.

METHOD

With the objective of understanding and affording visibility to the lived experiences of autistic people of portuguese nationality in that which concerns gender, such as gender identity

and expression, the present study sought to answer the questions “How does the autistic population describe their experience of gender?”, “How do autistic people describe the interaction between their identities concerning gender experience, expression and identity and their neurodivergence?” and “What are the perceptions of the autistic population concerning the preparedness of healthcare professionals to see autistic patients who express gender variance?”.

Research Methodology

To answer the research questions posed, a qualitative methodology was adopted. Thus, data collection was done through semi-structured individual interviews, administered with the due confidentiality and privacy conditions. The decided upon inclusion criteria were for the participants to be on the autism spectrum, be 18 or more years old and have portuguese nationality. Respondents were given the option to participate in-person, in a previously agreed-upon location, or online, through either a video-call or instant messages. Making different formats available was important in making participation accessible for anyone who, for any reason, was unable to and/or uncomfortable with participating in any of the formats.

This study obtained the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto (Ref. 2025-01-11d). Participants signed a consent form which included information on the study’s objectives, inclusion criteria, the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of the collected data, as well as any risks associated with participating and the contact information of the researcher. The possibility of later adding further information not shared throughout the interview through the email made available was also given to participants if they so wished, a measure taken to account for the possibility of participants needing more time to process or reflect upon the topics discussed.

The collected sample was made up of 23 participants of ages ranging from 18 to 56 years old ($M = 27.43$). Among the interviewees, 11 identified as non-binary, 6 identified as female, 3 as male, 2 as agender and 1 as genderfluid. This sample is a convenience sample, and patient recruitment was carried out through personal contacts, snowball sampling, social media – namely Instagram and WhatsApp – and through messaging pages and self-advocacy groups directed to the autistic and the LGBTQIAPN+ populations, as well as other pages of which the follower base might be interested in taking part in this study and fit the inclusion criteria, requesting to share the post created for patient recruitment. Table 1 shows participant

characteristics, namely their age, gender identity, pronouns and the fictitious name each participant will be referred to as throughout this study.

Upon concluding the interviews, their audio recordings, taken with participants' consent, were transcribed, and anonymity was assured through the strategy of pseudonymization. Afterwards, thematic analysis was done as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), starting with the familiarization with the collected data, identifying and coding all information excerpts that were relevant to answer the research questions posed in order to find themes and subthemes present in the interviews. The thematic analysis resulted in five themes: understanding gender as an autistic person, connection to gender, external pressures, authenticity in expressing gender and navigating healthcare. Figure 1 maps out results of the analysis.

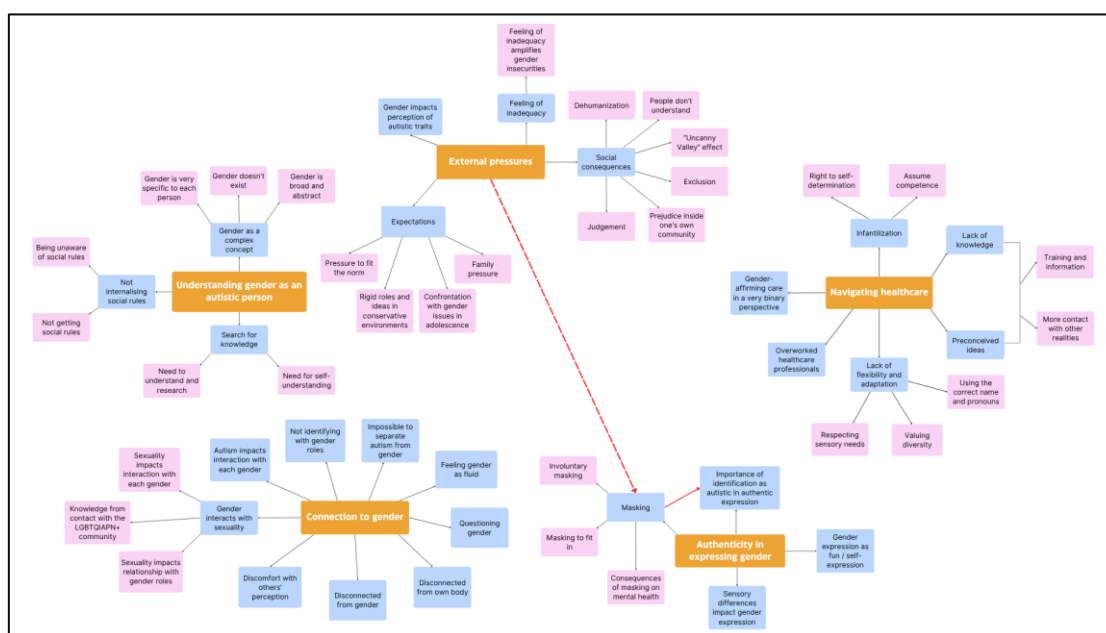
Table 1.

Participant characteristics

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Self-identification regarding gender</i>	<i>Pronouns</i>
<i>Artur</i>	24	Non-binary	He/Him
<i>Bárbara</i>	28	Female	She/Her/Hers
<i>Camila</i>	22	Non-binary	Any pronouns
<i>Daniel</i>	54	Non-binary	He/Him
<i>Elvira</i>	36	Female but has been using non-binary lately	She/Her
<i>Fátima</i>	23	Female	She/Her
<i>Gustavo</i>	26	Agender	She/Her/He/Him
<i>Hélder</i>	28	Non-binary	He/Him
<i>Iara</i>	27	Female	She/Her

<i>Josefina</i>	23	Non-binary	They/Them
<i>Kai</i>	25	Non-binary	They/Them
<i>Lígia</i>	23	Non-binary	She/Her
<i>Marcos</i>	23	Genderfluid	She/He
<i>Micaela</i>	24	Non-binary	She/Her/They/Them
<i>Natália</i>	56	Female	She/Her
<i>Ofélia</i>	20	Female	She/Her
<i>Paulo</i>	29	Male	He/Him
<i>Rosa</i>	30	Agender	Any pronouns
<i>Sérgio</i>	22	Non-binary	He/Him
<i>Tiago</i>	22	Male	He/Him
<i>Úrsula</i>	22	Female	She/Her
<i>Vasco</i>	27	Male	He/Him
<i>Vítor</i>	18	Non-Binary	He/Him

Figure 1. Thematic map



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding gender as an autistic person

When asked about their experiences and views on gender, many participants pointed out the ways in which they felt their perception of gender stood out from that of others around them, establishing connections between their understanding of gender and their neurodivergence as well as describing gender outside of a binary framework.

In regard to how autism shaped their perception of gender, the differences in internalization of social rules characteristic of the autism spectrum were brought up as having played a role. Rosa (any pronouns), an agender 30-year-old participant, mentioned an unawareness of the social norms associated with gender, saying:

When I was around 9-10 years old I had a situation where a female classmate and a male classmate said that I wasn't considered a girl and that was very confusing for me because it was the first time I realised that I was constantly being judged for something I didn't know was relevant. I didn't even know that it was relevant let alone that other people were interpreting things from it. I also didn't know I was supposed to perform gender expectations.

Referring to the lack of understanding of societal norms, Vitor (he/him), a non-binary 18 year old participant, pointed out how the trait fit into his identity: "Although there isn't a

relationship of causality, I think my non-binarity is directly linked with the fact that I don't get social rules, and, with them, gender roles". Besides a lack of awareness of social norms, the relationship that autistic individuals have with these norms played a role in the perception of gender of those aware of these expectations but who often did not act according to them all the same, expressing that they made no sense to them. One such person was 24-year-old Lígia (she/her), a non-binary participant who offered the following view:

I feel like being autistic deep down winds up alienating me a bit from current culture, right, I have more difficulty understanding or internalizing current culture and- with- with current culture, current gender norms too. Uh- and effectively in occidental culture, there is traditionally a very clear separation of the roles of man and woman, and it's something that ever since I was a child never made sense to me.

This effect on participants' views on gender of the way they described their struggles to understand social norms echoes what's been expressed in other accounts by autistic people, such as that of a person identifying as autigender and agender, who described these norms as "illogical" (Young, 2023). Toft (2023) makes the point that this interaction between autistic difficulties in understanding social norms and sexuality and gender highlights the potential of turning the focus of research towards understanding the social constructs involved.

Some of the interviewees also attributed their different understanding of gender as a concept to a need for knowledge and a way of doing research setting them apart from others. Non-binary 24 years old participant Josefina (they/them), explained how this applied to them:

I feel like an autistic person's way of researching and getting to know things is different from a neurotypical's way, I feel like in a certain way we're more... curious, and at the same time methodical in our way of doing things, and... obviously we... think- our thought process is different from that of neurotypicals, and I notice that and I've noticed that since I was a child. Even for example in doing maths I did it differently than my classmates. Like. The way things work for us is different, so, I believe that... definitely affected my way of... knowing my gender identity.

Not only was the autistic way of seeking knowledge about the concept of gender itself mentioned, but the need for self-understanding was also highlighted in the interviewees' speech. Josefina, while discussing their identity, described this by saying:

I think this comes from my autism a lot, because... I think that- the... my autism makes me... How should I say this? It makes my struggles very internal. Obviously I also don't like being discriminated against and such, but... the thing that worries me most is... how- who I am and how I see myself.

Artur (he/him), a non-binary 24 year old interviewee, also reflected on how his tendency to try and understand his own identity made his view different from that of those around him:

I think the main thing is- is- it's not a specific event, but it's the various times in which I think about who I am, about myself, and... and I think that if I were a neurotypical person I wouldn't think about this so much.

Throughout the interview, multiple participants described their understanding of gender as a complex topic going beyond the binary view of gender shared by many. Camila (any pronouns), a 22 year old non-binary participant, pointed out that “Most people understand gender as binary, so I don't relate. I relate to some, who are a minority and see gender in a broad way”. Some of the interviewees viewed gender as non-existent. As Artur said: “I say I'm non-binary, but for me like- sometimes I get asked ‘Ah, how many genders are there?’ to me, like, it's zero. Like because- because what is gender and all that”.

Micaela (she/her/they/them, non-binary), 24 years old, referred to gender in this way, as they, too, corroborated Toft's (2023) point by saying “To me gender is absolutely a social construct”.

Furthermore, gender was described as something very specific to each person, not just a fixed concept split into man or woman but a combination of traits, preferences and feelings unique to each individual. As 23-year-old genderfluid participant Marcos (she/he) put it:

(...) I can't... uh... feel like a binary division makes sense, and there are plenty of people who feel genuinely comfortable with that, but... uh... I think the best way to describe it is like- you know those videos that are like a collage of multiple aesthetic things and people are like ‘this is my gender’. It's a very abstract thing like that, it's pictures, it's ideas, and like- I don't have anything against for example people who involve- uh- like- animals in gender somehow, you know? Like- it makes perfect sense to me, just like it makes sense for a person to say that... a narcissus is their gender. I think it's more about that and about... to me specifically, because I- I love... I hate imposed rules, but I love rules which I accept for myself. So in regard to gender, my development in regard to... gender roles was very much choosing what I wanted from each one, so like... for a long time I- was still very stuck in that binary but at the same time trying to get out by choosing what really aligned with... what I think and what is natural to me.

Artur, likewise, described gender as follows: “Gender is- how we feel, understand and act on our emotions, gender is how we think, gender is what we believe we have to do”.

Connection to gender

The personal experiences of gender described by the study's participants evidenced their different ways of connecting to their gender, or, in some cases, the lack of such a connection.

Interviewees spoke of how they explored and felt their identities, how this connection was experienced or in some cases, sought out, and placed them as part of a greater whole, interacting with other important aspects of their identities.

For some participants, living, expressing and making sense of their gender involved experiences of discomfort with how society perceived and categorized them, in line with the words of Lydia X. Z. Brown (2016), who has explained how many autistic people are mostly impacted by gender through the assumptions of others. Lígia was one such case, who recalled a moment from her childhood illustrating this feeling.

So, when- I- one of the things I remember best as a child was that- was- when I was 12, 13 years old I went through a phase where I was much more masculine. And uh- effectively I- okay, dressed in a way- like my gender expression was much more masculine and I had very- very short hair, like just below my ears, uh- I didn't exactly like that length of hair, but- it helped me look a bit more masculine, and I wore like loose clothes, and- I had like a uniform of- a- basketball equipment, and I loved wearing that equipment, there, along with sneakers and a cap, and I- remember one day when I went to ride a bicycle with my parents and I was wearing- like my favorite equipment, and I remember that people came to talk to me and despite everything they still identified me as a girl and I was- I remember I was really mad, because I wanted people to- like see me as a boy at that time, and I was like- Okay, but I'm not a boy, why did I want to be se- seen as a boy?

This was also around the first time that Lígia started to make sense of the fact that maybe she was “not 100% a girl”, she explained, though it took some time to fully reflect on and understand how she truly identified. Úrsula, on the other hand, a 22-year-old woman, shared her feelings of discomfort over others' perception of her gender even while being sure of her own gender and identifying with her assigned gender at birth. Speaking of her own childhood, she described:

I did not want to be seen as... someone of the opposite gender to what I identified as and such, but I felt like I had to... like... show like... ‘no, I'm a girl’, and... and there, and- it's- it was like- I started to- to also have insecurities about that, because like I didn't want to be perceived as... the opposite of... what I've always identified as and all that.

In Úrsula's case, this discomfort was amplified by a feeling of inadequacy, and she described how societal expectations to act and look a certain way, pressure from within her own family and the feeling of inadequacy and consequent attempts to mask herself while navigating society as an autistic person made for an “explosive mix”. How this feeling of inadequacy was described as part of the lives of many autistic people who participated in this study and their experiences of gender is addressed further in the theme ‘external pressures’.

Whereas they felt discomfort with external perceptions of their gender, Gustavo (she/her/he/him), an agender 26 year-old interviewee, expressed discomfort over expressing or associating herself with any gender at all:

I understand myself as a human being – that’s all. I’ve never understood that separation, so much that I don’t even consider myself non-binary. I just don’t feel like I have any kind of gender. I did force myself during the years, between 16 and 19, when I was in a more catholic phase being ultra-feminine, but it was something that caused me a lot of internal conflict – the idea of associating any gender with my person.

Paulo (he/him, male), 29 years old, explained that though he self-identifies with his assigned gender at birth, he, too, does not feel connected to gender, as Lydia X. Z. Brown (2016) noted was the case for many in the autistic community:

I don’t have much of a... feeling of gender, meaning- I’ve always gone a bit more by my sex because gender to me doesn’t matter like it doesn’t restrict me nor does it... free me, so, I usually say male but I’m not very attached to the label so to speak.

In much the same way, Kai shared the perception that “Other people around me have a much more connected experience to the gender that was attributed to them at birth, as they tell me”. In that same line of thought, they mentioned that they didn’t feel connected to their own body, either.

I don’t identify much with my body, the body exists and I exist inside of it – it’s just the avatar I was born with. And now instead of trying to change how I am to exist in this body, I focus on altering my physique/appearance to feel more like myself.

A similar experience was described by Úrsula:

My body looks- it’s to me- my experience is... like... it’s just a body, you know? It’s- it’s just where I am, and I dissociate a bit like I, from... from my body, uh... there’s a pretty... uh... defined separation, but it’s weird and I can’t explain it, because... other people notice if they have a pretty body and all that. If I look at myself in the mirror, other than my face, it’s like ‘okay, it’s a body’. And I don’t... like I distance myself, and I dissociate myself, from the body I’m in, like- if I had... I like- now there isn’t- there isn’t like an attachment (...) No- the disconnection, the word disconnection, is very good, because... and yeah, and I- I really like tattoos because... I’m always joking that it’s the new skin in the game that I’m personalizing throughout my life, but- that’s really it, to personalize and- and feel like ‘okay, this- this is identifiable, this is mine. This is mine’.

In both of these cases, sharing similarities with the account shared in Young (2023) of someone who called their body “a mere vessel where my body is inhabited”, though a lack of identification and a dissociation from the participants’ own body was felt, experiences of seeking to connect further with their own bodies were described, not through trying to force

themselves to fit the body they inhabit and to change their perceptions of it, but through trying to personalize it into fitting who they were.

For some participants, finding themselves in regard to gender was described as an ongoing process, as they described doubts and questions about their gender. Vasco (he/him, male) commented “I’m 27 now, this was when I was 15, so- it’s 12, it’s nearly- it’s more than a decade, and there are still questions I think about, maybe- maybe it’s an eternal process, there’s no end”. Josefina, on the same note, also admitted “I don’t have a full idea, of what the concept of gender is and, special- also my identity”.

Others expressed feeling gender as something fluid, shifting in time. In the same vein, as Kourti & MacLeod (2019)’s research suggested, autistic people often have more fluid gender identities. Lígia explained:

I fluctuate quite a bit, there’s days where I actually feel good, as a woman, and- yeah, I don’t- I don’t feel dysphoric or anything, there’s other days where I actually feel a huge disconnection to- to that gender, and I feel more like a non-corporeal entity, shall we say, that’s a bit of a strange way to explain but that’s it.

When asked about what role, if any, autism may have played in their gender identity, many described autism as an important part of their identity, playing a role in their experience as a whole. Their neurodivergence was spoken of as the lens through which everything was perceived, making it impossible to separate the two identities, the same feeling underlying the creation of the term “*autigender*” (Toft, 2023). Fátima (she/her, female 23-year-old) explained this experience by saying:

I think- due to having autism, I think that- okay. I think in a different way, basically, about everything, including that. There. I think that... I can’t- I think it’s something I simply can’t stop and say ‘Oh, this here. I feel this... because- because it’s me, and then the autism is something else’. It’s not really like that.

Similarly, Kai (they/them), a non-binary 25-year-old participant, reflected:

In my case, I think it’s all linked. My entire existence is extremely queer in relation to what’s considered socially normal, so everything for me is linked. It’s not that I think that if I weren’t autistic, I couldn’t be non-binary anyway, more like they’re two things that shape me so much as a person, that for me I don’t exist as ‘me’ without the autism or without being non-binary, so I can’t separate them.

In addition to gender roles and social norms playing a part in participants’ understanding of gender, as described in the previous theme ‘understanding gender as an autistic person’, this was a topic that once again came up in reference to how gender was felt personally. From this

perspective, some of the people who took part in interviews spoke of these societal rules as something that they, personally, did not identify with, regardless of knowing them or seeing the point of them. Daniel, for instance, a 54-year-old non-binary person, voiced his experience:

I feel- I don't know, I started to question my gender identity precisely because I can't insert myself fully into what society expects from someone of the male gender, so the male biological sex and male gender, and, on the other hand, also not with someone who is of the female gender, and therefore, that doesn't mean I'm exactly in the middle, I think that- that this is a spectrum, and... inside of that spectrum- maybe I'm more on the male part than the female part, but- but that's it, it's not being able to relate, not being able to match what society stereotypically expects from someone of the male gender.

Iara (she/her), a 27-year-old woman, found that her autism played a role in her experience of gender through impacting who she interacted with in her childhood years.

(...) until I reached high school, generally, I got along better with the boys because boys go straight to the point. There aren't any of those little mind games, and the little secrets, and all those girl things, and at the time I didn't give that much importance, and now I recognize that- that I'm sure autism had a part, right? Because... precisely, right, the boys since they got straight to the point, would just tell you things, so I could understand what was going on and what they wanted from me. While the girls would play those little games of- in front of you they'd say one thing and behind your back say another, or saying things that aren't really what they wanted to say and I'm supposed to guess.

Never having been one for dresses and girly things, the interviewee reflected: "it also doesn't help the whole dresses thing and the whole thing associated with the girls, right, because since I was always with the boys... that would make me... wear clothes more like the boys' ones, right, that thing."

For Lígia, interaction dynamics with the other children were also a topic worth mentioning, though for her, it was sexuality rather than neurodivergence that shifted these dynamics. As she recalled:

Girls were- like- to me they were these creatures different from me, they were separate creatures, and- with whom I felt even some kind of fear of interacting because they were too perfect for me, for some reason, I felt that- there it is. Also the fact that I felt like an attraction to them, obviously not physical because I was too small for that, but- I felt the- what could- what we could explain as an attraction for my own- for my own gender, there, or for my own sex in this case. Uh- but I- played a lot with the boys and I was really one of the boys. You know?

Continuing, she also described how her sexuality distanced her from the typical gender roles:

And that's- my- my sexual orientation also interferes a bit with my gender, I feel that, uh- because- a big part of- of what society attributes to womanhood, to being a woman, is- and this, wait, this doesn't mean that- that I think every woman should like a man. No, but- it's imposed by society that part of being a woman means falling in love with a man, wanting to marry a man, forming a family with a man, and the fact that I'm a lesbian distances me from that reality a lot, (...).

Lastly, sexual orientation and being a part of the LGBTQIAP+ community were also described by some as having an impact on gender, through contact with more information surrounding it. In Josefina's words,

I think I understand more than the population in general, just for the fact- this- has a lot to do with the fact that I'm also gay, because... when I... finally accepted I was, I started to research a lot, about these things...

Other participants in the LGBTQIAP+ community agreed with the argument, adding that "cisgender people never had to question certain things" (Tiago, he/him, 22 year old male participant).

External pressures

Over the course of the conducted interviews, participants addressed the difficulties in navigating a mostly neurotypical and cisgender world as an autistic (and, in many cases, gender diverse) person, describing the external pressures they have experienced or continue to do so, namely society's expectations, the social consequences of not meeting those expectations and the feeling of inadequacy that often comes from not fitting in. It is these external pressures combined which often result in a need for masking, meaning making an effort to appear non-autistic (Neff, 2023), a phenomenon further addressed in the theme 'authenticity in expressing gender'.

Starting with the societal expectations that most participants recalled being faced with, some pointed out a pressure to fit the norm. On this issue, Rosa mentioned "in gender as in other questions I understood that if I didn't fulfill social expectations I'd have consequences". Elvira (she/her, 36 years old), who identified as a woman but mentioned that she'd been using the non-binary label more often lately, agreed.

(...) since childhood... it being expected for me to dress a certain way because I was a girl, to choose certain activities because I was a girl, and I think that ended up... it didn't come from my family nucleus, but it came... from society and the family around.

This pressure was felt from both the outside world, and, in some cases, inside participants' own home. Speaking about his family, Artur mentioned "my family being a place where it's not very comfortable to express something outside of the box gender-wise, uh, so, whenever I went to the doctor, I wouldn't go with my nails painted, for instance". Natália (she/her), a 56-year-old woman, described her own parents as "toxic and overprotective", saying that she felt she was "never good enough for them and they were extremely controlling".

Five of the interviewees added their own experiences of living with rigid rules and ideas in conservative and religious environments. Micaela explained that they grew up in a cult, mentioning that there were "very specific rules for- for binary genders". Rosa added that, having been forced into pseudoscience and spiritism circles during her childhood and teenage years, she was also met with strict ideas, telling the interviewer "For many years highly binary ideologies were inflicted on me, like the sacred feminine and masculine where my mental health issues were directly attributed to my "problems with femininity".

Many participants expressed confrontations with gender matters during adolescence. This was due to, on one hand, physical changes, as illustrated by Fátima's account:

I don't know, probabl- maybe at- at the time of my adolescence, maybe it's the time I remember most, like... that- those fears of developing a lot. Yeah. Uh... now I'm even thinking for example the hips part, that yeah, girls have hips that are more... defined than men, it was something that yeah, I also didn't- didn't really want, I wanted to be- I don't know. Weirdly I wanted to have a shape- uh- it's not... being... I didn't want to go through puberty, yeah. But- in the sense of... yeah, having a more androgenous shape, I can't explain it well.

On the other hand, with adolescence also came the social expectations of performing gender roles and different treatment from others. Lígia recalled:

Even the way that boys- and men, in- started to treat me after puberty. So, before, they saw-me as- uh- one of them, deep down, uh- and I felt pretty betrayed, I think betrayed is really the word, because they started to treat me differently, as if I was an object.

Interviewees described the social consequences of failing to meet all these expectations, or even to meet them convincingly enough. On the outside of the norm, participants described experiences of judgement, exclusion, incomprehension and dehumanization.

As Paulo verbalized, autistic people are oftentimes judged for being different:

And how many people don't walk by people like us, interact with them, or have had classmates like that, and simply treat us like weird people who don't now how to behave or be or so on, and as people who

are badly. Which is- I also feel a lot like that's how I was treated , which is- I'm a bad person. Not as in being bad, being Bad, but being bad at being a person.

Adding to the judgement that came with being autistic, some participants were also judged for having non-normative genders or gender expressions. Sérgio (he/him), a 22-year-old non-binary interviewee, offered an example of this:

Now I have even been identifying more as genderfluid, and- I feel like I really have like different masks depending on the way I'm presenting, in a more like masc way, or like with makeup and such, and sometimes- just because I feel like using a mask that's different or opposite to what I'm supposed to, I definitely notice that people are less friendly to me, like odd and such, which also sure, affects my own view of myself and brings me to feeling obligated to- to put on a specific mask for each, even if I don't feel like that mask, if that makes sense.

Exclusion was another way in which the social consequences of being different were felt by participants. On this matter, Paulo expressed:

When I was more openly myself, then I was much more likely to like- have arguments with my classmates, be set aside, not be invited to things, uh- only being invited when it was almost mandatory for everyone to go, but if it was a smaller group of friends it would already be very unlikely for me- for me to be invited.

He went on to explain how this social exclusion combined with his gender, making it harder to find people he could truly connect with and get along with:

Me not being a boy like the others were, I didn't really fit in with that and I didn't flow well. So, I was set aside more. But then, being a boy, I also didn't fit in with the girls either, or there were limits. In which beyond a certain point, they clearly didn't include me in the group, or so on, or did things and didn't even think to invite me because I was a boy, so, I had that sense of- I don't get along with this group in these aspects, but then the other group will also not accept me, purely because I'm masculine, meaning, you live sort of on the outside.

Lígia declared that anything that went up against the norm bothered people, describing it as a “sort of uncanny valley feeling”, comparing it to an effect used to describe how, when an object has near perfect human likeness, affinity for it drops and is replaced by a feeling of uncanniness (Kendall, n.d.): “I feel like it's really that, which is ‘you look like a human, but you're not’, or ‘you really look like a woman, but you're not, so that's odd’”

Paulo was of the same opinion, remarking:

People subconsciously know that we're acting slightly differently, and there's a lot of cultural evidence of that throughout history, of being accused of being inhumane things. Fairies, demons, possession,... but

it's true, it's like- simply another explanation for the same thing, people look at us sometimes like 'that's not a human, it's something pretending to be one'.

The topic of dehumanization was one that came up in several interviews, taking the form of infantilization, pathologization and the experience of being “put on top of a pedestal” (Lígia). Daniel described:

When someone like me shows up, with a lot of interpersonal communication difficulties, that's often – or almost always, that's reinterpreted as 'this poor thing's got a screw loose. He's not right in the head'. Or, since I'm of a certain age, 'he's getting senile'. Uh, and it's- and then people talk to me as if they're talking to a child, or to those old, really old guys with Alzheimer's.

When it came to gender, incomprehension was also a reaction some participants had to contend with. This came from the outside world, as in the scenario Gustavo described saying “I was talking to an older work friend, around sixty, and he was saying I was neither feminine nor masculine, he didn't understand. I tried to explain I didn't see myself as either, but he thought I was being illogical”, but also, sometimes, from within the LGBTQIAP+ and autistic communities themselves. “Sometimes it's really the people inside our own community that betray us most, and I think that's the betrayal that hurts most,” Lígia said, regretting that sometimes the hateful comments she came across online came from the LGBTQIAP+ community itself, and later appealing to some in the autistic community to stop trying to distance themselves from the LGBTQIAP+ community. “We wind up- uh- the community winds up playing the role, deep down, of the oppressor, from the outside, over these people”, she said, commenting that the autistic community was “already so fragmented”.

The appeal was in conformity with those of Gillespie-Lynch and Botha (2021), who reminded that support of every autistic person required understanding the differences within the autistic community, and Brown (2016), who stated that activism for the rights of people expressing gender variance could only be effective through recognition of everyone on that spectrum, including autistic members of the community.

As was mentioned in the theme ‘connection to gender’, a feeling of inadequacy was often mentioned by interviewees over the course of this study. Marcos admitted that he felt “like an alien everyday”. Speaking about his classmates, she elaborated on the feeling:

To them, they're just human! They just are, and they feel it, and they're in their place. And that's really weird to me. And it's the same thing with gender. It's feeling like in their place, and as an autistic person, I never feel like I'm in my place, so...

Other participants shared this feeling. Rosa put it as “a feeling of constant inadequacy and perceiving that maybe that inadequacy stopped me from creating interpersonal relationships I saw other children/teenagers achieve”. It was this feeling of inadequacy, compounded with pressure from family and from society as a whole, that worked as an amplifier for Úrsula’s insecurities and need to act like what was expected of her, as mentioned in the theme ‘connection to gender’:

Uh... but they really created a bubble of insecurities inside me, and all that, and then... I’d like to say- it’s joining- like- all this, all the signals that people sent me that... ‘you identify in this way but you don’t act like it’, or ‘you could be more’, or... that, mixed with... autism, and not feeling normal, and feeling like an alien, and... if they’re telling me that it’s because that’s how it is, and not having a thought of ‘ah, maybe’, everything was very... ‘okay, so this is it’, uh... and it often completely knocked me down.

Not only did autism impact a lot of participants’ feeling or expression of gender, but some participants also mentioned how their gender impacted outside perceptions of their autistic traits. Paulo felt that, due to being a man, his way of acting and speaking as an autistic person were often perceived as aggressive:

Also due to being autistic, I intimidate people, so... the way I talk, me not being aggressive and- and combined with my body language, there’s probably a dissonance, and me being a man it’s registered as more aggressive than it really is, and I feel like people are more intimidated by me.

Iara, on the other hand, admitted:

A lot of the things that help me calm down are only socially accepted because I’m a woman. For instance, I watch Asian shows, some with LGBTQIA+ characters; I create and listen to playlists of various musical styles, including those shows’ soundtracks, K-pop and T-pop; I have my bed decorated with stuffed toys and my bags/backpacks with stuffed keychains...

This was an experience mirrored by Marcos:

I notice it’s easier uh... you get more passes about autistic behaviors if you’re... if you look like you’re a woman, who... is acting like a woman is supposed to, at least. If you’re like, you’re smiling, you’re being pleasant, you can flap. You can flap your hands. You can... play with your hair, for instance, there are things you can hide with being apparently a woman.

Authenticity in expressing gender

Along with the impact of societal pressures and consequences of not fitting the norm acknowledged in the previous theme, ‘external pressures’, participants addressed the matter of

gender expression and authenticity. This, in line with the mentioned lived experiences, included memories of seeking to match expectations in order to avoid those consequences, a phenomenon referred to as ‘masking’ when in the context of autism (Neff, 2023). Respondents told stories of masking in their lives, camouflaging both their autistic traits and their gender expression, learning to unmask and express themselves authentically, seeing gender expression as a source of self-expression and enjoyment and even how their sensory needs played a role in gender expression.

In order to fit in, many described the effort they made to look and act more like others around them, forgoing authenticity to avoid exclusion and judgement and in hopes of connecting with their peers. This was something that was defined not only by an attempt to cover for traits of autism, but which, for several interviewees, also bled into how they expressed gender. As Day and Krazinski (2025) explained, masking can play a role in how other identities are expressed since the mask that was built to blend in was built within and informed by a cisheteronormative system. Rosa phrased her experience as: “more than appearing feminine it was not appearing abnormal”. Along similar lines, Camila explained: “When I mask to hide my autistic traits, I end up also trying to mask my identity as a non-binary person. So that I’ll fit in.” This wasn’t only described as a conscious process, however, as some people expressed having the practice so ingrained into them that they did it involuntarily most of the time. Iara pointed out “I’m still in the part where I’m deciphering what’s really my personality and what was masking”.

This doesn’t happen without consequence, though, as, in line with what the literature tells us (Day & Krazinski, 2023), masking often has a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing. Besides the loss of a sense of the real self, like Iara described above, respondents also described consequences when it came to their energy levels and happiness. Ofélia, upon thinking back to her past, admitted that she “would have been happier” expressing herself how she really wanted to. Marcos, too, confirmed:

I don’t feel like I had that difficulty where it was impossible for me to do, it was just extremely tiring, and then I’d take hours-long naps every afternoon and think that was normal, then I’d have- uh- burnout constantly and think that was normal.

A few of the interviewees added the importance of learning that they were autistic in starting to unmask and finding community. Daniel was one of them, and said:

I don't mask as much now, I was also only diagnosed a few years ago, and from the moment I was diagnosed I thought that maybe it would be better not to mask so much, and be more authentic, live more in accordance with what my life is, my life experience, and it's been good for me.

Micaela, also diagnosed in adulthood, added:

Since I never fit in- never fit in well socially, and then when I managed to connect with people and with groups it was with mostly neurodivergent people, uh... I ended up also having- and- in queer spaces, definitely, I ended up also always having spaces which... uh... respected my authenticity.

Day and Krazinski (2023), similarly to what participants touched upon, described how discovering identity, both in reference to neurodivergence and to gender, could be a starting point for many to start their journey of unmasking.

Authentic gender expression was also described in terms of self-expression, and something that could be fun and enjoyable. This was Micaela's experience, and they went on to say:

When I dress in a more feminine way... I feel like it's almost like drag. Like I'm... it's a persona. Like- I use bodices a lot, for example, like... in a really hyperfeminine way, I'd say, often, but it's just- it's fun, like, for me, like, it's- it's... it's the way I... it's a fun way to express myself, and it's comfortable for me.

For two of the participants, their sensory needs also played an important role in gender expression, defining what they felt most comfortable and confident wearing and doing. While Bárbara (she/her), a 28 year old woman, clarified that to her the biggest requisite was "these clothes I have to be able to sit on the floor with", Vítor provided an example of his experience: "Closing your legs, and, mainly, crossing your legs, while sitting is feminine; having your legs open and/or more relaxed is masculine. Having my legs closed or crossed is uncomfortable for me, but that's what's expected. Therefore, I'm automatically masculine." This aligned with Valvano and Shelton's (2022) work describing how autistic people might dress in ways conducive to their sensory needs, regardless of whether those ways align with a normative gender presentation.

Navigating healthcare

When asked about their experiences in healthcare, both mental and physical, almost all participants recalled poor experiences in this area, ranging from a lack of knowledge and understanding in important areas, to bias and a lack of support.

When it came to both neurodiversity and gender diversity, respondents reported that healthcare professionals, whether that be psychologists, psychiatrists or other doctors, often lacked knowledge of what autism was, how to properly and respectfully treat an autistic person, what autism could look like outside of textbook presentations and of queer identities. Sérgio noted that “professionals have very outdated information” on neurodivergence, while Gustavo added that a lot of them “are stuck to pretty old ideas of what gender and even sexuality is”. Preconceived ideas on what autism is were also pointed out as a problem by many. One example of this, described by Micaela, was:

(...) around a month before I had the appointment- the appointments that lead me to have my diagnosis, later with my last psychiatrist, uh... my family doctor I told him ‘I was diagnosed with ADHD, and there’s suspicions that I may have autism’. And he told me ‘But that’s diagnosed in childhood’. Just like that, like, immediate response.

Úrsula added to this that:

People... take it seriously if... you still have that preconceived idea of- an autistic person is a person who is like... normally it’s what you see, it’s like the kids with the pots spinning and clapping or something, and... and like- it’s a spectrum!

Because of this issue, several participants alerted to the need of deconstructing preconceived notions on both neurodivergence and gender, with Bárbara expressing “prejudices need to be worked on, and beliefs need to be worked on” and Marcos requesting for professionals to take the changes in their perspectives on autistic people and trans people and apply those perspectives to their day-to-day as well, considering that “it’s not enough uh... to accept it just from a professional standpoint. But it’s mandatory to accept it from a professional and ethical standpoint”.

One way to address this situation, as some suggested, could be for professionals to have more contact with realities apart from their own and with diversity. Artur exclaimed “don’t just study the books written by white, cisgender, straight men, but listen to people”.

A call for more training and information was also echoed by most participants, on both autism and other kinds of diversity. Micaela appealed to healthcare professionals, wanting to tell them:

I know you’re tired. Me too. If you- If you can arm yourselves with tools to make this appointment, or this exam, or whatever it is, uh... if you have information and tools to make this easier for me, it’ll be a lot easier for you too.

Marcos emphasized:

I think education on these themes is really one of the most important things because I think often even if people don't have... uh... aggressive or discriminatory intentions they end up being... pretty hostile to... to autistic or trans people, uh... ask questions they shouldn't be asking, or poke fun at certain things.

The issue of infantilization was addressed, with Lígia making an appeal for professionals to support people's exploration of gender, speaking of the "right to self-determination" contemplated in portuguese law (Diário da República, 2018). "We should assume competence", she told the interviewer. "thinking 'oh, the person is autistic, they're only confused, or they're only trying to join the LGBT trend' like- I think it's one of the worst things".

Furthermore, reported healthcare experiences reflected a lack of flexibility and adaptation to the patient. As Micaela put it,

Being 'neurodivergent friendly' doesn't just have to do specifically with autistic children, or children with ADHD, or this or that. It has to do with having an approach, in all areas of society, that's friendly to any kind of... atypical manifestation, in my perspective. (...) it could just be a child in need of... of something other than that, and... and I feel like they also weren't prepared for another type of response.

This meant, according to interviewees, not only respecting sensory needs, the necessity of which Úrsula emphasized:

Many neurodivergent people have sensitivity to... to being touched, to... like- to certain noises and certain exams, and they're like 'no, you have to', or 'we're doing this now'. And... there's no explanation of what it is, it's always... moving, and... there... there isn't respect.

It also meant not trying to fix what didn't need fixing, valuing diversity and being gender-affirming. This often didn't happen, as illustrated by episodes recounted in interviews. Gustavo, for instance, recalled being told that "asexuality and agender did not exist", and that she needed psychotherapy. Úrsula regretted that normally people "don't think that maybe people don't want a cure because there's no problem". The importance of respecting preferences, pronouns and social names was also brought up. Daniel wished that a "habit of asking people their pronouns" was created, adding "or when- when I approach someone, saying 'my name is whatever, these are my pronouns' so as to open the door for- for the person in front of me to feel comfortable with that".

Hélder (he/him, 28, non-binary) expressed concern over his perception that gender-affirming care was, in Portugal, conducted in a very binary perspective:

But they- it's not like they imposed it on me, but they were saying the only thing that could be done was a transition. Except I was saying 'but I don't want to transition. I don't identify as a woman'. So, I feel like in Portugal, that part of health is very turned to- you're either your gender, or you're the other one. There's no middle point, there's nothing else.

Lastly, a few participants felt that some of the issues with healthcare stemmed, in part, from how overworked healthcare professionals were. Micaela explained: "They should have every condition to keep their humanity and their empathy, uh- and that's not going to happen if they don't- if they don't rest, if there aren't- enough means, enough resources, on every level.". She continued by proposing "reducing workloads, uh- paying healthcare professionals better, uh... a number of labor questions that aren't working well, definitely."

CONCLUSION

The present study sought to answer the research questions "How does the autistic population describe their experience of gender?", "How do autistic people describe the interaction between their identities concerning gender experience, expression and identity and their neurodivergence?" and "What are the perceptions of the autistic population concerning the preparedness of healthcare professionals to see autistic patients who express gender variance?". Through thematic analysis, the themes 'understanding gender as an autistic person', 'connection to gender', 'external pressures', 'authenticity in expressing gender' and 'navigating healthcare' were obtained. When it came to describing their experience of gender, participants referred to gender as a broad concept, a social construction and something very individual and specific to each person. They reported experiences of feeling discomfort with others' assumptions of their gender, a disconnection with gender altogether, a disconnection with their own body, experiences of questioning gender and of gender as something fluid, with some respondents also describing gender expression as a source of enjoyment and self-expression. The interaction between autism and participants' gender experiences was established by them through unawareness and incomprehension of social norms, a need for knowledge and self-understanding and experiences of social exclusion and pressure leading to masking in order to fit in, as well as a process of unmasking, often following the discovery of neurodivergence, and the role of sensory needs in participants' gender expression. Speaking on the matter of

healthcare, most participants described poor experiences, with complaints regarding professionals' lack of information and flexibility, infantilization of patients and the binary perspective in portuguese gender-affirming care. Participants' suggestions for improvement included further training and deconstruction of preconceived notions, assuming competence and supporting gender exploration when faced with an autistic patient, and supporting patients' identities and preferences.

This research contributes to our understanding of the experiences of portuguese individuals on the autism spectrum in matters related to gender, though it is essential to reiterate that there are as many different experiences as there are people and this article is in no way exhaustive. Over the course of this study, more than one participant expressed concern over not having a 'diverse enough' identity or experience to participate, and as such, it is possible that there were others who did not contact the researcher to be interviewed due to assuming the study was only seeking participants belonging to the LGBTQIAPN+ community. Future studies might benefit from further exploring the experiences of autistic individuals accessing and receiving gender-affirming care.

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