

The Wardrobe for Patients With Autism Spectrum Disorder

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ABSTRACT

Autism is a developmental brain disorder that affects communication skills and social integration, often exposing stereotyped and repetitive patterns. People with this syndrome have an overreaction or underreaction to different sensory stimuli, presenting difficulty in sharing emotions and interpreting body languages. There are studies confirming different reactions between genders, and it is pertinent to analyze how both adapt to the act of dressing and to the reception of different pieces of clothing. Neglecting the practice of Fashion representation and highlighting the functionality of the act of covering and protecting the body, this study aims to discover the wardrobe of a patient with ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) and to know how Design can be more inclusive to improve their wellbeing. Being just the beginning of the investigation, now still based on literature review and pre-test results, the conclusion of the study is not fully defined. Elements of Fashion Design have not all been tested, and the small sample results reflect the needs of caregivers more than the needs of patients.).

Keywords: Autistic spectrum disorder, Autism, Caregivers, Clothing, Design, Communication

INTRODUCTION

Autistic Spectrum Disorder is known this way because there is a wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience. ASD is a disarray in the development of the brain that mainly affects communication skills and social integration. It usually appears in the first two years of life but can be diagnosed at any age. Its diagnosis only became possible with the consolidation of a specifically pediatric medicine and with the previous work of Leo Kanner (Kanner, 1943) in the US and Han Asperger (Czech, 2018) in Germany (Valente, 2014). For many years, autism was associated with a deficit considered almost as a disability, but what is certain is that according to studies carried out in 2003, for a population of 10,000 people, 30 were diagnosed with autism and 2.5 with Asperger's syndrome (Fombonne, 2003) although pervasive developmental disorders (PDD), now called ASD, could be 60 to 70/10,000 people. However, it remains unclear whether specific environmental, immunologic, genetic, or other unidentified factors have contributed to higher reported prevalence rates (Yeargin-Allsopp et al., 2003). Probably the diagnosis of these disorder types will also tend to increase because our society is also increasingly stimulating and wider information

processing, tend children in general to disconnect even more. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), people with ASD have difficulty interacting with other people, restricted interests, repetitive behaviors, and symptoms that affect a person's ability to function in school, job, and other areas of life. Girls with autism respond more easily to nonverbal communication, such as pointing or following gaze. They are less distracted and more focused than boys but are more likely to suffer from anxiety and/or depression, which can differentially affect reactions to personal objects (Rudy, 2020). While ASD can be a lifelong disorder, treatments and services can improve a person's symptoms and ability to function (National Institute of Mental Health, 2018). Symptomatic treatments include behavioral, family interventions and psychotropic medications, mostly sedative drugs, mood stabilizers, and antipsychotics but there are already new alternatives to treatments related to generalized joint hypermobility (GJH) and severe proprioceptive dysfunction (SPD) to control posture and challenging behaviors (Guinchat et al., 2020). This work is an initial study on ASD and, above all, an analysis of patients because it is still unknown how ASD patients relate to clothing and the way they like to dress. It is assumed that there will be unimportant and irritating details as well as more appreciated shapes and textures. And in this context, it is important to review how we can improve their day-to-day lives, whether individually, with others, or with the outside world.

Clothing or Fashion and ASD

Fashion term means a change for whatever is currently popular and today Fashion is currently living in a society dominated by ephemerality, whose obsolescence becomes the ultimate symbol of anxiety (for innovation) and dissatisfaction (for the consequent detachment). This does not happen only on those fashion clothing that lies in the prevailing adoption of certain style trends but in any type of goods. Fashion attributes to society the ability to equalise with its peers, being also responsible for the distinction of social classes, since it is understood as a stamp of a certain social group (Simmel, 2008). But apart from this social and exhibitionist imprint, clothing is a way of dressing implicitly conceived with a purpose; it is a particular signifier originating from a general meaning that is external to it, such as the time or country in which it was used or the social class that wore it (Barthes, 2005). And therefore, nowadays clothing describes all kinds of apparel that can be a very expensive piece of high fashion to wear to a special occasion, as well as a tracksuit for running (Barthes, 2005). According to historians, psychologists, and anthropologists, the three reasons that led to the adoption of clothing were: modesty, protection, and adornment, all of which were present during its historical evolution (Flugel, 1971). Clothing is a necessary good that, despite being subject to the dictates of society and the impositions of the consumer market, is nonetheless a form of individual expression, associated with desirable comfort characteristics. And, therefore, with many or few significant connotations, it is important to understand what is the relationship that an individual diagnosed with ASD has daily with this good.

Analysing and evaluating the patients' own need to wear or communicate with their clothes will be as difficult as assessing their autonomy, since the difficulty they present in expressing themselves verbally can make it difficult to understand epistemically their internal condition, as well as their priority values may be different from those of non-autistic people (Späth & Jong-sma, 2020). It is known that clothing can already improve motor control in autistic situations with loss of motor control (Guinchat et al., 2020) but to determine the viability of apparel by incorporating social and psychological characteristics related to the development of new skills, namely in communication, can also be an asset in improving their physical and emotional well-being.

METHODS

Autistic spectrum disorders or pervasive developmental disorders comprise a wide range of diagnoses that vary according to the severity of the characteristic symptoms. Assuming that the proportion of cases in Portugal is similar to the studies described in the literature, questionnaires were carried out using Google forms. The aim of these surveys is first to perceive their structure and see if the themes are well connected as well as if the inquired people understand them.

12 questions were administered, 6 of a personal nature and 6 related to clothing. They were:

1. Do you have autism spectrum disorders, or do you know someone with the diagnosis?
2. What the age group of the individual diagnosed with ASD (autism spectrum disorders)
3. Among the following characteristics (Learning difficulties, Communication difficulties, Repetitive and stereotyped movements, Hypersensitivity, Difficulties in maintaining eye contact, Extreme reactions) list from 1 to 10 which ones most affect the individual with ASD.
4. Communication is a very important factor in our daily lives, especially in our personal and social journey. From 0 to 7 how important do you consider it?
5. One of the important topics that is directly related to the communication and interaction of individuals with ASD are stimuli. List which stimuli (Tact, Hearing, Vision, Other) you find to be most affected by ASD.
6. Among the mentioned stimuli, which do you consider to be more important in everyday relationships and interactions?
7. Clothing is a very important part of our daily life, it is one of the objects that is almost always present with us. Do you agree with this statement?
8. Which pieces of clothing (T-shirt, Trousers, Shoes, Other) do you consider most relevant in a wardrobe of a child or individual with ASD?
9. Do you consider that clothing can be an important element in the integration of a child and/or individual with ASD?

10. For better functionality and practicality what components (Buttons, Elastic, Zipper, Other) do you look for?
11. Which of the options (Training suit style coat, T-shirt, Tracksuit style pants, Dress, Leggings, Sweat) do you consider more practical in terms of clothing?
12. If there was a tool that would allow you to adapt the garment to the needs of individuals diagnosed with autism and others, would you consider using it?

RESULTS

The questionnaires were delivered via email to associations and groups of parents with children with autism. After 1 month we collected 34 responses, from which we obtained the following outcome:

1. 42.9% have family members diagnosed with ASD, 32.1% are caregivers of ASD patients, and 25% have been or even have contact with ASD people.
2. 44.1% of respondents' ASD contacts are between 15 and 30 years old; 26.5% are between 10 and 15 years old; and 20.6% are between 5 and 10 years old.
3. The characteristics with the highest incidence among the contacts of respondents are 64.7% with "communication difficulties", 47.1% with "learning difficulties", 41.2% have "repetitive movements" and/or "extreme reactions"; 32.4% "have difficulty maintaining eye contact"; 23.5% have "hypersensitivity".
4. All respondents list "the communication" as an important factor in daily lives, of which the maximum value of 7 have been selected by 58.8% respondents.
5. 63.4% of inquired people think that "the touch" is the most stimuli affected by ASD patients while 50% choose "the vision" and 39.5% choose "the hearing"; 21.2% still answered "other stimuli".
6. 64.3% of respondents consider, however, "the vision" as the most important sensory element, followed by "the hearing" (57.1%) and "the touch" (46.4%).
7. 85.5% of respondents consider "clothing" extremely important in our daily lives.
8. 67.6% of inquired people consider "upper garments", such as "t-shirts or sweats", the most important items for an individual with ASD, followed by "pants" (52.9%) and "footwear" (47.1 %).
9. 58.8% consider that "clothing" can be an interaction mean for ASD patients while 35.3% remain undecided.
10. 64.3% of respondents consider the "elastic" one of the most functional and practical elements in clothing for ASD patients, following the "zipper closure" (57.1%).
11. The most practical clothing options revert to "tracksuit pants" (92.9%), also "hoodie jacket, training type" (53.6%); followed by "t-shirts" or sweets (50%) and leggings (10.7%) and "dress" (3.6%).

12. 71.4% of respondents would be able to use ways to integrate clothing to the needs of ASD patients.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the ASD diagnosis data, there is some analogy between the literature sources and the pre-test results. In questions related to stimuli, it was found that ASD patients are more sensitive to “touch”, following the reaction to “vision” and “hearing”. This sensitivity to stimuli is contrary to what their caregivers consider most vital (such as “vision”). Although the study sample was very small and the survey structure was well perceived, the conclusion from the practical analysis leads us to understand that the perspective of Späth & Jongsma (2002) is in fact real and that the true needs of autistic people may not be what their caregivers think they are, such as “achieving independence”, an important need for non-autistic people. On this account and according to the Portuguese Association for Developmental Disorders and Autism, 70% of people with autism are dependent on others. Regarding clothing, it was found that caregivers of ASD patients give greater importance to the practical and functional aspects of sportswear-type clothing, with elements (such as “elastic” detail) that facilitate the exchange, and that they would probably invest in any tool that would improve communication among their patients. Undoubtedly that is very important in the creation of tools that help in communication, even before improving aspects related to the wardrobe because the examined relationships was perceived from the caregivers’ point of view rather than real users. Therefore, until now, the connection among the ASD patients is still uncertain and to fill this gap, the observation component should be considered to analyze in detail the reaction to each Design element (such as Shape, Texture and Color, etc).

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