

Exploring the Relationship between Alexithymia and Social Camouflaging in High-Functioning ASD: Implications for Mental Health Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the connection between alexithymia and social camouflaging in high-functioning individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its potential impact on mental health outcomes. A quantitative approach was used, with a sample of 15 participants, aged 18 to 40 years, from both genders. The study utilizes established psychometric tools to measure alexithymia, social camouflaging, and psychological distress levels. The results reveal a notable link between alexithymia and camouflaging behaviours, suggesting important considerations for mental health interventions within the ASD community. These findings highlight the need to address both emotional regulation challenges and strategies for social adaptation when managing mental health in individuals with ASD.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder, Alexithymia, Social Camouflaging, Emotional Regulation, Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Mental Health Outcomes*

Autism Spectrum Disorder:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects a significant portion of the population. It is characterized by a range of symptoms, with the primary challenges being difficulties in social communication and interaction, along with the presence of repetitive behaviours and restricted interests. These symptoms can vary in severity, leading to a wide spectrum of experiences. One specific group within this spectrum is individuals with high-functioning autism, who typically demonstrate above-average cognitive abilities and intellectual functioning. However, despite these cognitive strengths, individuals with high-functioning ASD often struggle in social contexts, as they face challenges in understanding social norms, interpreting non-verbal cues, and managing emotional expressions.

Alexithymia:

Alexithymia is a condition marked by difficulties in recognizing, processing, and expressing emotions. It is commonly seen in individuals with ASD and is frequently linked to challenges in emotional regulation. People with alexithymia may struggle to identify their emotional states, making it difficult for them to communicate their feelings to others

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effectively. This can lead to social misunderstandings, feelings of confusion, frustration, and heightened anxiety. For individuals with ASD, the presence of alexithymia can intensify the existing social difficulties they experience, further complicating their ability to engage in social interactions and increasing emotional strain.

Social Camouflaging:

Social camouflaging refers to the conscious effort by individuals with ASD to conceal or modify their autistic traits in order to align with the social expectations of neurotypical individuals. This strategy often serves as a coping mechanism, allowing individuals to navigate social situations more successfully and avoid potential rejection or misunderstanding. While camouflaging can initially appear adaptive, long-term engagement in these behaviours has been linked to significant mental health issues, including increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Hull et al., 2020). The constant effort to monitor and adjust one's behaviour to fit social norms can create a heavy cognitive burden. As a result, individuals who engage in social camouflaging may feel isolated, unable to express their true selves, and emotionally drained from the ongoing effort to maintain their social persona.

Emotional Regulation:

Emotional regulation refers to the ability to manage and respond to one's emotional experiences in a balanced and effective way. In individuals with ASD, emotional regulation can be particularly challenging, often compounded by alexithymia. When individuals struggle to recognize and label their emotions, it becomes increasingly difficult to regulate their emotional responses. This can lead to heightened emotional distress, including increased anxiety and stress, as individuals are unable to appropriately manage or express their feelings. The combination of emotional dysregulation and alexithymia further exacerbates the social and emotional challenges faced by individuals with ASD, contributing to ongoing psychological difficulties.

Mental Health Outcomes:

This study aims to investigate the interplay between social camouflaging and alexithymia and their collective impact on mental health outcomes in individuals with high-functioning ASD. Specifically, it focuses on how these factors influence the occurrence and severity of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress. The emotional challenges posed by alexithymia, coupled with the psychological burden of camouflaging, often lead to significant mental health distress. By exploring these interconnected factors, the study seeks to provide insights into the cumulative effects they have on the well-being of individuals with high-functioning ASD, and how mental health interventions can be tailored to address their specific needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alexithymia in Autism Spectrum Disorder:

Alexithymia refers to a difficulty in identifying, processing, and articulating one's emotions, and it is especially common among individuals with ASD. Initially introduced by Sifneos in 1973, the term describes individuals who struggle to describe their feelings. As such, alexithymia serves as a barrier to emotional awareness, preventing individuals from fully understanding their internal emotional states or communicating them effectively (Taylor & Bagby, 2000). In people with ASD, this trait can significantly exacerbate pre-existing challenges related to social communication, including difficulties in interpreting social cues and engaging in reciprocal exchanges.

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Research consistently demonstrates that individuals with ASD experience higher levels of alexithymia compared to the general population. This emotional recognition and expression deficit creates substantial difficulties in both personal and professional contexts. For example, emotional dysregulation, which is often present in ASD, is further exacerbated by alexithymia, leading to difficulties in managing stressors and interpersonal conflicts. These emotional regulation challenges can manifest as elevated anxiety, irritability, and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships (Bird & Cook, 2013).

A meta-analysis by Kinnaird et al. (2019) revealed a notably high prevalence of alexithymia among individuals with ASD, with most studies indicating that individuals with ASD show significantly greater incidence of alexithymia compared to neurotypical individuals. The analysis also suggested that alexithymia contributes to a diminished quality of life in those affected. Individuals with alexithymia struggle with emotional processing and are more susceptible to mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.

Additionally, the relationship between alexithymia and empathy has garnered attention, given that empathy is crucial for social communication. In individuals with ASD, difficulties in emotional awareness are often linked to reduced empathy, which further hinders the formation of meaningful social connections (Kinnaird et al., 2019). Deficits in emotional empathy, in particular, can make it difficult for individuals with ASD to understand others' emotions, leading to challenges in social interactions and heightened feelings of isolation.

Social Camouflaging in Autism Spectrum Disorder:

Social camouflaging refers to the deliberate masking or alteration of natural autistic behaviours in order to fit societal norms. This can include mimicking social cues, suppressing stereotypical behaviours, and rehearsing scripts for social interactions. While camouflaging helps individuals with ASD navigate social situations, the emotional toll of such efforts can result in significant psychological distress. Hull et al. (2020) report that individuals who engage in more extensive camouflaging are at greater risk for mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Research indicates that camouflaging is an active and intentional process rather than a passive response, as individuals with ASD consciously attempt to align their behaviour with neurotypical expectations. This ongoing effort to mask one's true identity can be mentally and emotionally exhausting, often leading to long-term psychological repercussions. Individuals who camouflage frequently report feelings of emotional detachment or burnout, as suppressing autistic traits takes a significant toll on their emotional well-being (Lai et al., 2017).

In a study by Mandy et al. (2017), individuals with ASD who engaged in camouflaging behaviours reported higher levels of social anxiety and depression. The study suggests that camouflaging may prevent individuals from developing a cohesive sense of self, as they are constantly concealing their authentic emotions and behaviours. This ongoing suppression can foster feelings of isolation and diminished self-worth.

It is important to note that camouflaging is not a uniform experience. Individuals with ASD employ varying strategies depending on their social context and the severity of their condition. Those with higher-functioning ASD may camouflage more effectively, yet they are still vulnerable to the mental health consequences of this behaviour. Trevisan et al.

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(2019) found that even individuals with high-functioning ASD, who may mask their traits more successfully, still experience significant psychological stress, suggesting that camouflaging remains emotionally taxing despite achieving short-term social success.

Intersection of Alexithymia and Camouflaging in ASD:

While alexithymia and social camouflaging have been studied separately in the context of ASD, the interaction between these two factors has been less extensively explored. This study hypothesizes that alexithymia may influence the extent to which individuals with ASD engage in social camouflaging. Specifically, individuals with alexithymia may struggle to recognize and process their own emotions, which could impede their ability to regulate behaviour effectively in social contexts. Consequently, they may rely more heavily on camouflaging strategies to avoid negative judgments or social rejection.

Social camouflaging, when used as a coping mechanism, can also obscure the emotional difficulties associated with alexithymia, such as emotional dysregulation, anxiety, and depression. This masking of internal struggles may lead to an underreporting of these symptoms, as individuals focus more on adapting to social norms than on addressing their emotional well-being. As a result, the combined effects of camouflaging and alexithymia may increase the likelihood of psychological distress among individuals with ASD.

Objectives of the Study:

The main objectives of this study are:

- To explore the connection between alexithymia and social camouflaging in individuals with high-functioning ASD.
- To assess how alexithymia and social camouflaging jointly affect mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and stress.
- To investigate the influence of emotional regulation difficulties on the engagement in camouflaging behaviours in individuals with ASD.

Hypotheses of the Study:

Drawing from the literature review, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- **Hypothesis-I:** A positive relationship exists between alexithymia and social camouflaging behaviours in individuals with high-functioning ASD.
- **Hypothesis-II:** Elevated levels of both alexithymia and social camouflaging are linked to greater psychological distress, such as increased depression, anxiety, and stress.
- **Hypothesis-III:** Emotional regulation difficulties act as a mediator in the relationship between alexithymia and social camouflaging in individuals with ASD.

METHODOLOGY

Participants:

The study included 15 participants, aged 18–40 years, diagnosed with high-functioning ASD comprising both genders. Participants were required to have a formal diagnosis of ASD and no intellectual disabilities. Individuals with severe psychiatric conditions, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, or those using psychotropic medications that could affect emotional regulation, were excluded from the study.

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Variables:

The primary variables examined in the study were:

Independent Variables:

- Alexithymia
- Social Camouflaging

Dependent Variables:

- Mental Health Outcomes

Mediating Variables:

- Emotional Regulation

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

Inclusion Criteria:

The criteria for participant inclusion were as follows:

- A formal diagnosis of high-functioning ASD, according to DSM-5 guidelines.
- Age between 18 and 40 years.
- No intellectual disabilities or significant cognitive impairments.
- Capacity to provide informed consent and complete self-report assessments.

Exclusion Criteria:

The exclusion criteria included the following:

- Diagnosis of severe psychiatric conditions (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder).
- Ongoing use of psychotropic medications that might impact emotional regulation or cognitive functioning.
- Inability to provide informed consent due to cognitive or intellectual impairments.

Research Design and Measures:

To explore the relationship between alexithymia, social camouflaging, and mental health outcomes, three well-established psychometric instruments were employed:

- 1. Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20):** This scale was utilized to evaluate the participants' levels of alexithymia, specifically focusing on their challenges with identifying and describing emotions and their tendency towards externally-oriented thinking.
- 2. Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q):** The CAT-Q is a self-report instrument designed to assess the extent to which individuals with ASD engage in camouflaging behaviours. It includes items related to mimicking social behaviours, suppressing autistic traits, and adjusting to societal norms.
- 3. Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21):** This scale was used to measure psychological distress by evaluating symptoms associated with depression, anxiety, and stress.

Data Collection and Procedure:

Participants for this study were selected from various ASD support groups and outpatient clinics. The data collection process was carried out manually, with participants completing the assessment tools independently in a controlled setting. Once the data were gathered, they were analysed using SPSS for statistical evaluation.

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Statistical Analysis:

The relationship between alexithymia and social camouflaging was assessed using Pearson's correlation coefficient, which helped identify both the strength and direction of the association. To investigate the impact of social camouflaging on mental health outcomes, regression analysis was applied to determine its predictive role.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables:

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for alexithymia, depression, anxiety, and stress among participants with high-functioning ASD. The mean score for alexithymia, as measured by the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), was 61.2 (SD = 10.5), indicating a high prevalence of difficulty in emotional awareness and expression within this sample. Mental health outcomes, assessed using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), also demonstrated notable levels of psychological distress, with mean scores of 15.4 for depression, 13.7 for anxiety, and 12.5 for stress.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Alexithymia (TAS-20)	61.2	10.5	45	81
Depression (DASS-21)	15.4	7.2	5	30
Anxiety (DASS-21)	13.7	6.8	4	28
Stress (DASS-21)	12.5	5.4	3	23

These findings align with existing literature, reaffirming that individuals with ASD often exhibit heightened levels of alexithymia, which may contribute to increased psychological distress. Given the relatively high scores for depression, anxiety, and stress, it is evident that participants in this study experience considerable mental health challenges.

Correlation Between Key Variables:

To explore the relationships between alexithymia, depression, anxiety, and stress, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. As shown in Table 2, alexithymia was significantly correlated with all mental health outcomes, with the strongest association observed with depression ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), followed by anxiety ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$) and stress ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix for Key Variables

Variable	Alexithymia (TAS-20)	Depression (DASS-21)	Anxiety (DASS-21)	Stress (DASS-21)
Alexithymia (TAS-20)	1.00	0.63*	0.59*	0.55*
Depression (DASS-21)	0.63*	1.00	0.79*	0.77*
Anxiety (DASS-21)	0.59*	0.79*	1.00	0.70*
Stress (DASS-21)	0.55*	0.77*	0.70*	1.00

* $p < 0.01$ indicates statistically significant correlations.

The strong correlations between alexithymia and mental health outcomes suggest that difficulties in emotional awareness and processing contribute significantly to psychological

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distress in individuals with ASD. Furthermore, depression, anxiety, and stress are highly interrelated, reinforcing the notion that emotional dysregulation and social difficulties can lead to compounded mental health challenges.

Predicting Mental Health Outcomes:

To determine the extent to which alexithymia and social camouflaging predict mental health outcomes, a regression analysis was performed. As illustrated in Table 3, both alexithymia ($B = 0.30$, $p = 0.006$) and social camouflaging ($B = 0.38$, $p = 0.002$) were significant predictors of psychological distress, demonstrating that individuals with higher levels of these traits are more likely to experience poor mental health outcomes.

Table 3: Regression Analysis for Predicting Mental Health Outcomes

Predictor Variable	B (Standardized Coefficient)	t-value	p-value
Alexithymia (TAS-20)	0.30	2.89	0.006*
Social Camouflaging (CAT-Q)	0.38	3.42	0.002*

* $p < 0.01$ indicates statistical significance.

These findings highlight the dual influence of alexithymia and social camouflaging on mental health. Individuals who struggle with emotional identification and expression may rely more heavily on camouflaging strategies to navigate social interactions, leading to increased stress and emotional exhaustion. The need to suppress authentic autistic traits to fit neurotypical expectations places additional cognitive and emotional burdens on individuals with ASD, ultimately exacerbating psychological distress.

Summary:

This above given results provide valuable insights into the interplay between alexithymia, social camouflaging, and mental health outcomes in individuals with high-functioning ASD. The findings indicate that both alexithymia and camouflaging significantly contribute to depression, anxiety, and stress, highlighting the critical need for interventions that target emotional regulation difficulties and promote psychological well-being. Future research should explore long-term outcomes and intervention efficacy to develop more effective support strategies for individuals on the autism spectrum.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Mental Health Interventions:

The findings from this study hold substantial implications for both clinical practices and future research in the realm of ASD and mental health. First, the observed positive correlation between alexithymia and social camouflaging highlights the importance of emotional regulation difficulties in driving the need to mask autistic traits in social environments. This underscores the necessity of addressing alexithymia within a comprehensive therapeutic framework for individuals with ASD. By enhancing emotional awareness and regulation, it may be possible to reduce some of the psychological stress linked to camouflaging behaviours.

From a clinical perspective, mental health professionals working with individuals with ASD should remain attuned to the potential exacerbating effects of alexithymia and camouflaging on mental health conditions. Early interventions targeting emotional recognition, self-expression, and healthy coping mechanisms could significantly reduce the reliance on

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camouflaging and its associated emotional strain. Incorporating emotional regulation techniques, such as mindfulness practices and emotion-focused therapies, could equip individuals with ASD with the necessary tools to manage social interactions without resorting to masking their authentic selves.

Furthermore, the link between camouflaging and negative mental health outcomes suggests that interventions should extend beyond social skills training. It is crucial to focus on promoting self-acceptance and alleviating the pressure to conform to neurotypical social norms. Creating supportive, accepting environments where individuals with ASD feel understood and valued could minimize the need for camouflaging behaviours and help mitigate their detrimental mental health effects.

For future research, these findings highlight the need for longitudinal studies to investigate the long-term consequences of camouflaging behaviours on mental health in individuals with ASD. Gaining a deeper understanding of how these behaviours evolve and influence emotional well-being over time could provide valuable insights into developing more targeted and effective interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a thorough investigation into the connection between alexithymia and social camouflaging in individuals with high-functioning ASD. The results reveal a notable link between alexithymia and camouflaging behaviours, both of which contribute to increased psychological distress. These findings emphasize the need to take into account both emotional awareness challenges and social coping mechanisms when addressing the mental health needs of individuals with ASD.

Given the identified relationship between alexithymia and camouflaging, it is crucial for clinicians to implement a holistic approach in supporting individuals with ASD. Enhancing emotional regulation, encouraging self-awareness, and minimizing the reliance on social masking can lead to better mental health outcomes for this group. As ASD is increasingly recognized for its wide range of presentations and complexities, a tailored approach to therapy is vital to effectively address both the internal emotional struggles and the external social pressures that individuals with high-functioning autism face.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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