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Exploring the Impact of Everyday Music on the Lives of Autistic Females

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ABSTRACT

The effects of passively listening to music have been underexplored when compared to music therapy in autistic people, especially the effects it has on female adults. Therefore, this study aims to review the self-reported impacts of everyday music on autistic female adults in the current field of literature. Through a thematic analysis of five sources, with a total of 20 participants aged 18 and above, this research yielded several notable findings. The cognitive functions, emotional regulation methods, and social skills of the participants were positively impacted by everyday music. Everyday music also led to an improved acceptance of neurodivergent identities, but in some cases, reflected a potential for triggering camouflaging behaviors in social circumstances. These cognitive, emotional, and social findings highly align with the achievements of music therapy; therefore this research suggests that everyday music can be a supportive, accessible form of self-coping for autistic adult females.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), is a neurodevelopmental condition that often causes differences in social communication, preference for routine, and deep interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). To diagnose an individual with ASC, medical professionals ascertain whether the criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) are met. This involves identifying how the individual's abilities differ in developing social-emotional bonds with others, communicating nonverbally, and preference for predictability from standards that are considered neurotypical (NT)[1]. During the diagnostic process, medical professionals also explore sensory processing differences, which include hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity to environmental stimuli like sounds, lights, and physical textures. Such differences have led researchers to explore potential intervention tools to help support autistic people, one being music.

[1] Neurotypical people/person (NT): This term refers to those that are not diagnosed with ASC or any other neurodevelopmental conditions. Though no two brains are alike, these individuals have brains that are considered the 'norm,' and are similar to 80-85% of the brains in the world (Cleveland Clinic, 2025).

Due to the aforementioned social and verbal skill distinctions, autistic people[2] may experience more difficulty creating and sustaining a social community (Orsmond et al., 2013) as opposed to NT individuals. The lack of such community and sense of belonging have been correlated with lower life satisfaction and self-esteem, as well as higher rates of depression and anxiety (Mazurek, 2013). It is estimated that autistic individuals are eight to ten times more likely to be diagnosed with depression and anxiety amongst other mental health conditions like ADHD, bipolar disorder, and OCD, than NT individuals (Underwood et al., 2023). Furthermore, 34.2% of autistic individuals have experienced suicidal ideation, and 24.3% have attempted suicide (C. M. Brown et al., 2024); premature mortality in autistic populations has been correlated with depression (Hirvikoski et al., 2018), establishing that mental health plays a large role.

In recent years, the research field has immersed itself in exploring the impact everyday music[3] has on the general public. Everyday music has proven to be an effective positive force on well-being (Krause et al., 2021), as well as depression (Chan et al., 2011), and anxiety (Harney et al., 2023) for NT individuals. However, its effects on autistic people remains a gap in the current scope of research. Exploring the effectiveness of music on autistic individuals may provide insight into a solution to regulate negative emotional states.

Other tools used for diagnosis, namely the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS-2) (Lord et al., 2012) and the Autism Diagnostic Interview Revised (ADI-R) (Rutter et al., 2003), were developed using predominantly male samples and therefore fail to account for female symptoms. This contributes to what is commonly referred to as the "female phenotype," meaning that the symptoms that autistic female individuals show often remain unaccounted for (Hull et al., 2020). This phenomenon is also explained by females facing more pressure to conform to gender expectations and stereotypes, causing females to suppress, or "mask" their autistic traits (Gellert et al., 2025). Ultimately, this has led to a 1:3 ratio in the ASC diagnoses of females to males, with some sources reporting as high as 1:4 (Gellert et al., 2025). Furthermore, diagnoses usually occur later in females' lives due to the masking. Evidence-based research proves that timely access to receiving adequate support for autistic children improved development in communication and social skills that later played crucial roles later on in adulthood (World Health Organization, 2025), suggesting that females are more often delayed in the support that they require.

Therefore, this raises the question: What do qualitative accounts reveal about the function and impact of everyday music in the lives of autistic females? By thematically analyzing qualitative accounts of music

[2] Autistic people/person: This term refers to those that are clinically diagnosed with ASC. Although there are arguments that emphasize person-first language that would use terms such as "person with autism," the semantics of this term argue that autism is a defining trait that reduces the value of the individual who would benefit from not being autistic (L. Brown, 2011).

[3] Everyday music: Everyday music refers to musical sounds that an individual hears on a daily basis, whether it be intentional music that the individual turns on, or involuntary music that the individual happens to hear. This is to be differentiated from music therapy, which involves passive listening but is often in a controlled setting, where the music is chosen by the therapist.

listening drawn from published studies of autistic females, this study aims to ascertain where everyday music is effective in the lives of autistic females to better serve as a therapeutic tool. This study aims to:

- Examine the impact of everyday music engagement on social, mental, psychological, cognitive, behavioral, and other functions reported by autistic females.
- Explore how autistic females describe using music to regulate emotions, manage distress, and navigate everyday experiences.
- Study how autistic females report the role of music in facilitating socialization, verbal communication, and speech.
- Identify and synthesize recurring themes regarding different types of functions and significance of music engagement for autistic females.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are social, cognitive, and behavioral differences between autistic and NT people (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). These key differences are explored in greater detail through this literature review. It also explores the experience of autistic females, and concludes with studying the impact of everyday music on their mental health.

1. Psychological Attributes of Autistic People

1.1 Social

Autistic people have expressed the desire to have social relationships (Ciric et al., 2025), but simply require more support with creating them due to the fact that they express socializing skills differently from NT individuals and/or have not been taught NT-normative cues to initiate them (Sosnowy et al., 2019). Furthermore, autistic individuals self-reported that having friends, family, or peers socially supported them against loneliness (Lasagaard et al., 2010), establishing awareness of the impact socialization can have.

Socialization encompasses verbal and nonverbal categories, which are thought to both be dissimilar to that of NT individuals. Autistic people's verbal communication differs from NT people, in that many autistic people speak in direct, precise language and find sarcasm, metaphors, irony, and other forms of figurative language challenging to understand (Kalandadze et al., 2018). They may also have distinct prosodic patterns, where speech may be expressed with uncommon pacing, robotic tone, or unconventional emphasis (Godel et al., 2023). Echolalia, which refers to repeating words or phrases, or using self-invented words, is also common amongst autistic people (Xie et al., 2023). Finally, autistic people may use limited speech in a temporary state, due to stressful or overwhelming environmental factors (Oldenburg et al., 2026), or a permanent state, which has been known to occur when they are diagnosed with a co-occurring learning disability (National Autistic Society, n.d.). Like verbal

communication, autistic people engage in different types of non-verbal communication. For example, autistic individuals experience differences in recognizing and interpreting body language and facial expressions (Radford et al., 2025). Furthermore, they often engage less in direct eye contact and may find it difficult or uncomfortable (Garvey et al., 2025).

Due to the stigma associated with differences in socialization skills developed by NT people, autistic people may face poorer mental health outcomes. Autistic people often navigate unique challenges in traditional friendships that often rely heavily on NT communication patterns (Koegel et al., 2016). Unfortunately, these challenges, which have been associated with a smaller number of friendships, have reportedly led to "lower life satisfaction and confidence in socialization, [and] diminished self esteem, …" (Koegel et al., 2016). As a result, autistic people have turned to masking by forcing expression of NT traits (Garvey et al., 2025). Consequences of this involve burnout, chronic fatigue, and anxiety (Evans et al., 2024). Perspectives of social communication therefore establish that poorer mental health outcomes are associated with the lack of ability to communicate both verbally and non-verbally.

1.2 Cognitive

Autistic individuals possess different cognitive strengths and challenges than NT individuals. Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)[4] is known to be commonly diagnosed with ASC, as their diagnostic traits overlap (Antshel & Russo, 2019). Some ADHD and autistic individuals are known to have a skill in maintaining their attention span, commonly referred to as "hyperfocus" (Rowland, 2020). Some view this as a negative trait, associating it with having a perfectionist mindset, neglecting other activities, or being unable to shift their attention (Dupuis et al., 2022). Others have taken a more positive stance, with some describing this talent as being in a state of "flow," where individuals are more creative and are in a "highly focused state" to pursue hobbies (Nicholson, 2022).

Autistic individuals experience what is typically termed "executive dysfunction" at a higher rate (Craig et al., 2016), which mainly affects working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibition control (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Differences in working memories were associated with difficulty recalling facts and executing verbal instructions (Rabiee et al., 2020). Autistic individuals also face challenges with what is referred to as "cognitive inflexibility" by preferring to adhere to routines, repetitive behavior, and also engaging in predictability-focused and structure-seeking thinking (Hollander & Ferretti, 2023), which is described as "[focusing] intensely on their own thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours, often to the exclusion of all others" (Hollander & Ferretti, 2023). Others add that autistic people with "cognitive inflexibility" require higher cognitive demand in moving from one topic to another and reacting to unanticipated situations (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Finally, the relationship between inhibitory control and autism remains strong, and is thought to be the underlying cause of repetitive behaviors and differences in response timing (Schmitt et al., 2017).

[4] Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition that encourages acts of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (2026).

The two prominent cognitive traits of autism, hyperfocus and "executive dysfunction," were also found to have a mixed impact on the emotional well-being of autistic people. Being able to engage in hyperfocus was found to positively impact the mental health of autistic people, as they were engaging in activities that "allowed them to be themselves" (Rapaport et al., 2023). Others linked cognitive functions of autism with poorer mental health through facets of "executive dysfunction." In particular, "cognitive inflexibility" was found to highly correlate with anxiety, depression, and aggression (Hollander & Ferretti, 2023). Furthermore, because the working memory of autistic people operate differently, routine tasks demand more energy; over time, this constant effort can lead to overcompensation, negatively impacting their quality of life (Habib et al., 2019).

1.3 Behavioral

Autistic adults also exhibit different behavioral habits than NT people. Repetitive behaviors, like "stimming[5]," help autistic people manage their emotions and focus (Collis et al., 2024). Autistic people are also known to prefer working, playing, and overall spending their time alone rather than surrounded by people (Neville et al., 2024).

Such behavior distinctions of autistic people were found to directly correlate with a more positive state of mental health. Stimming and repetitive and restrictive behaviors (RRBs) were found to be an outlet that autistic people use to cope with sensory and emotional overload (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Suppressing this core outlet has led to autistic people engaging in self-harm and harm to others (Kapp et al., 2019). Autistic individuals are more apt to become socially overwhelmed and use solitude to recharge and regulate their emotions, engaging in "flow-state activities," and exploring topics of enjoyment. (Neville et al., 2024). As such, it can be concluded that the behaviors autistic people engage in help them manage their mental health.

2. Autism in Females: Diagnostic and Social Differences

The aforementioned social, cognitive, and behavioral traits of autistic people are applicable to autistic female and male individuals. Although these traits are generalized to capture the experience of both genders, the extent to which these findings apply specifically to females differ.

Socialization especially looks different for autistic males and females. Many autistic females develop skills in mimicking NT social behaviour, referred to as "camouflaging" or "masking" their autistic traits in the social sector (Gellert et al., 2025). This is thought to be explained by societal gender expectations that females are more pressured to conform to (Faragó et al., 2022), such as being more social, and

[5] Stimming: short for self-stimulatory behavior, are often coping mechanisms in response to sensory sensitivities like noise, lights, textures, and smells (Kirby et al., 2016).

"emotionally expressive and relationship oriented" (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989, as cited by Eisenchlas, 2013). This belief asserts that autistic females have heightened levels of social behavior, which contradicts one of the hallmark traits of autism: experiencing difficulty in communication (de Marchena et al., 2025). As such, this phenomenon explains why females are less diagnosed with ASC than males (Giarelli et al., 2010).

Females may also be underdiagnosed due to the underlying foundation on which the DSM-5 was created. It specifies behavioral distinctions, directing autism diagnosis to be reliant on "restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities" (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Developed with a predominantly male sample (Diianni et al., 2025), the experiences females partake in aren't flagged as autistic as often.

Autistic females have reported that responding to these social pressures, whether they are engaging in camouflaging or using their inherent skills at communicating, have caused them to lose their sense of self (Miller et al., 2021). Likewise, other sources have found that camouflaging autistic traits were correlated with stress, autistic burnout, depression, and identity confusion (Hodge & Meltzoff, 2026). Others include self-harm and behavioural and social problems as other consequences (Hosozawa et al., 2021). Therefore, autistic females are at a greater need for positive interventions in their day to day lives.

3. Music

3.1 Neurotypical Individuals and Mental Health

Music has been researched extensively, and the benefits of passive listening involve promising solutions for the consequences of mental health associated with the social, cognitive, and behavioral profiles of NT people, though the experiences of autistic people remain underreported. Music engages endorphins, which are found to help create and strengthen social bonds, cooperation, and contact with others (Tarr et. al, 2014), highlighting music's potential as a panacea to creating lasting relationships. Music has also been a potential intervention for "executive dysfunction," specifically in cognitive flexibility by helping individuals achieve better reaction times (Hao et al., 2023), and developing working memory (Nutley et al., 2014). Finally, controlling the music's rhythm and tempo were found to calm "stimming" behaviors and hyperarousal, and regulate emotions (Berger, 2011). Simply turning on music has also been found to temporarily pause humming, vocal sounds, and echolalia (Lanovaz et al., 2011). These are qualities that autistic people often require additional support to develop and regulate, which have impacted their mental health. As such, music serves as a promising factor that can help autistic people meet their needs to achieve a more positive state of mental health.

3.2 Autistic People and Music Therapy

Music therapy (MT)[6] allows patients to "sing or play instruments, listen to music, and discuss the meaning of lyrics" (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). MT differs from everyday music, which, for the purposes of this research, refers specifically to passively listening to music.

MT has been established as an efficacious tool to enhance the social, cognitive, and behavioral profiles of autistic people, especially children, to increase verbal and nonverbal social communication skills (James et al., 2014; LaGasse, 2014). Cognitive benefits discuss working memory (Haering, 2018), and other forms of executive functions, like cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control, as the latter was "strengthened via musical play and movement activities" (Wanicharoen et al., 2026). Finally, the impact MT has on behavior remains underexplored, but current studies have reported that MT has helped children improve movement synchrony (Ke et al., 2022).

3.3 Impacts of Passive Listening on Autistic People

Passively listening to music has been underexplored amongst adult autistic females; its effects on children have been more prominently discussed in current literature. Studies have compared the results in social skills between receiving active musical therapy and passive listening; although active intervention proved to be more effective, the difference was minimal (Bharathi et al., 2019). Passively listening to music with "spoken words, sung words, and piano tones" were found to engage language abilities in autistic children (Sharda et al., 2014). Behavioral differences, such as auditory hypersensitivities, were found to be reduced through passive listening (Porges et al., 2014).

3.4 Musical Abilities of Autistic People

Although the particular musical talents of autistic females remain underreported, autistic people have also shown exceptional abilities in music than that of NT people. Despite its smaller population, a greater number of autistic people have a pitch ability superior to that of NT individuals' (Hisaizumi & Tantam, 2024). Autistic people have also expressed better musical judgement, as well as superior memorizing abilities (Masataka, 2017), which may be attributed to their detail-focused processing mechanisms (Happé, 2018). These events suggest that autism plays a role in receiving music.

4. Addressing Existing Gaps

[6] Music therapy (MT), by the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA), has been referred to as "the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program."

Although large advancements have been made in this field concerning autistic people and music, there remains an opportunity to explore the relationship between everyday music and autistic females.
The field has emphasized the impact music has had for children with ASC, overlooking the significance music can have for adults. This may be explained by the fact that music is seen as a therapeutic tool to help children develop crucial skills during their formative years to ensure their full development in adulthood (Yiwei, 2025). However, autistic adults, especially females that are diagnosed after childhood, may have never undergone MT and its powerful implications. Therefore it is important to explore the impact that everyday music can have for autistic females, for whom music can still play a vital role in their well-being.

The current scope of literature discusses the collective experience of music and the qualitative impact music has had for autistic people, but there is a scarcity of articles focusing on females in particular (Kirby & Burland, 2022; Korošec et al., 2024, as cited by Shalit et. al., 2025). In comparison to NT females, autistic females are at an increased risk of developing mental health complications such as anxiety and depression (Shawon et al., 2024), which are detrimental to their mental and physical well-being. Focusing on such a group to explore the potential of everyday music in helping them cope is therefore imperative. Since the subjective experience of these females remains underdocumented, assessing personal accounts is crucial as surface-level behaviors, like masking and camouflaging, can conceal psychological realities (Cage & Whitman, 2019).

Finally, as MT has proven to be an effective means of facilitating verbal (Shi et al., 2024) and nonverbal communication (Novenia, 2019) and uplifting emotional well-being (Feng & Wang, 2025), MT has become a prominent factor in this field of research. However, it is crucial to note that MT is often inaccessible to populations due to financial and socioeconomic barriers (Kang et al., 2025). Everyday music, on the other hand, remains an accessible option that most of the world already engages in. Therefore, exploring the impact of this shared experience is crucial.

This paper will bridge these gaps by exploring the themes rooted in the subjective experiences of autistic adult females when listening to everyday music by qualitatively reviewing their experiences in existing research. Such themes will be centered around social, cognitive, and behavioral aspects as they are hallmarks of autistic traits and have been explored to be impacted by music in previous research.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was chosen as the objective was to bring the subjective experiences of females to light. Oftentimes, in this field of research, the effectiveness of interventions like music and music therapy have been documented by quantitatively measuring the presence of autistic features, shifts in behavioral, changes in emotional well-being, and other discernable signals visible from an objective lens. This approach can dilute or shadow the nuanced experiences of the participants themselves, especially of a population that requires additional support in emotional communication (Koegel et al., 2016).

1. Inclusion Criteria

The literature selected purposefully features participants 18 and above; the impact music has on minors has already been under extensive review. Furthermore, many research studies theoretically include both female and male participants, but oftentimes the female ratio of participants is disproportionate, skewing the results of the study to reflect a male-dominated perspective. As mentioned in the literature review, the female experience may differ from their male counterpart, emphasizing the need to focus on their experience. Furthermore, these sources must be qualitative as opposed to quantitative accounts to capture the nuanced perspectives and experiences of listening to music; therefore, quantitative studies were excluded from analysis.

The studies were then selected based on their focus on everyday music experiences as opposed to others such as music therapy or music making. Studies that contained both excerpts or quotes of such experiences were kept, but only the sections that discussed the impact of listening to them everyday underwent analysis.

In all, five sources, published between April 2021 and September 2025, met the inclusion criteria and the focus of the study. All five sources procured data through ethical means; all participants were briefed about the study's procedure and privacy details and were allowed to opt out at any point of the interview(s). Additional details regarding the sources are in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of Studies Included in the Thematic Analysis

Source #	Study Name	Researchers	Sample Size[7]	Age Group	Location of Study	Study Design
1	Exploring music in the everyday lives of autistic women: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	Shalit et al. (2025)	N = 9	25-55	Israel	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
2	"A space to be myself ": Music and self-determination in the lives of autistic adults	Korošec et al. (2026)	N = 13 (females = 7)	24-42	Sweden	Directive Qualitative Content Analysis (DQCA)
3	Understanding the lived music listening experiences of adults on the autism spectrum	Venter et al. (2023)	N = 3 (females =2)	Not mentio ned, but	South Africa	Interpretive Phenomenologic al Analysis (IPA)

[7] Some studies had female and male participants in their study, but recorded the all experiences separately. Such studies were kept, and only female input was used during analysis.

				over 18 years.		
4	"It is more Important than food sometimes"; Meanings and Functions of Music in the Lives of Autistic Adults Through a hermeneutic-phenomenological Lense	Korošec et al. (2024)	N=13 (female = 7)[8]	24-69	Participants are fluent in Swedish and were recruited from a Swedish magazine. Conducted on Zoom	Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Analysis
5	Exploring the functions of music in the lives of young people on the autism spectrum	Kirby & Burland (2022)	N = 11 (female = 2)	23	London and Yorkshire	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The sources above were found to fit the inclusion criteria. Their study titles, researchers involved, sample sizes, age groups of the participants, locations, and the methodologies used are detailed above.

2. Procedure

A systematic search was conducted across various databases and search engines such as PubMed, JSTOR, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and Science Direct from the search period of May 2026 to June 2026. Collected studies were found based on the following keywords: "autism," "ASD," "ASC," "autistic," "autistic women," "autistic females," autistic adults," "everyday music," "listening to music," and "music."

To ensure an in-depth examination, a thematic analysis approach was deemed suitable for the five sources. A thematic analysis approach ensures that the recurring patterns and themes are identified within the participants' subjective experiences, enabling the researcher to interpret the meaning behind such trends. Thematic analyses have been compared with similar research approaches such as Grounded Theory (GT), Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses (IPA), and Content Analyses (CA). After further investigation of these sources, GT and CA were not selected as they required large sample sizes that this study could not afford. Although the IPA allows for a small sample size, it must be homogenous for its goal of understanding how the participants interpret their experiences; this study utilized papers that procured participants from a variety of areas. Therefore, the thematic analysis approach was deemed appropriate for this study as it allows flexible sample sizes of data and because its purpose is to "identify and interpret patterns/themes in data" (Ahmed et al., 2025).

[8] It must be noted that the participants of study conducted by Korošec and colleagues in 2026 overlap with that of their study in 2024. Therefore, 20 distinct total number of participants were included in this study.

This study follows the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which details six instructions on conducting thematic analyses. The researcher completed the first step through repeatedly reading the participant's experiences five times in an active manner while searching for meaning and patterns. The researcher then created a code list by assigning certain words or short phrases "that [appeared] interesting to the analyst" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as a code. By the third step, the researcher created main and sub-themes using their codes, ultimately arriving at five main themes. Undergoing a two-step process for phase four required reviewing the themes to ensure that they formed a cohesive pattern, and determining if the themes "accurately reflect[ed] the meanings evident in the data set as a whole" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Phase five and six involved the naming and defining of each individual theme, and concluded the process by producing a written report. These codes and themes were found manually rather than using external tools such as any machine or artificial learning to ensure that no details were missed.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, five sources matched the inclusion criteria and the focus of the study after careful review as opposed to the initial 17 sources that were selected based on the systematic search. In total, 20 female participants from the five sources gave responses that were admitted for analysis; although there are 27 participants totalled in Table 1, there are 20 distinct participants due to overlapping participant recruitments in sources 2 and 4. These studies were conducted from various areas; nine participants were from Israel; seven from Sweden; two from South Africa, though the study was conducted through Zoom; seven participants were recruited on the basis that they were fluent in Swedish, and the study was conducted through Zoom; and two participants were from the United Kingdom. The names of these participants have been given pseudonyms by the studies themselves to protect privacy. The musical experiences of these participants were not specified, nor were their employment status or living conditions.

After an extensive review of the quotes provided by the research studies in Table 1 and thoroughly fulfilling the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke, five major themes emerged, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes	Supporting Studies
Positive impact on cognitive	• Enhancing productivity	Source(s): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

and executive functions	• Serving as a stimulus to start activities • Serving as a break from reality	
Enhancement of emotional regulation and processing	• Regulating emotions • Serving as an outlet to release negative emotions	Source(s): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Acceptance of neurodivergent identities	• Validating identities through resonance • Expressing personal identities	Source(s): 1, 2, 3,
Improvement of social connection and relationships	• Facilitating companionship • Creating a space for solitude	Source(s): 1, 2, 4
Potential for triggering camouflaging in social circumstances	• Refraining from music engagement in fear of societal judgement • Prohibiting oneself from music engagement that incites behaviors that differ from the NT norm • Resisting repetitive listening	Source(s): 1

Table 2 depicts the themes and subthemes found within the text. The themes were supported by the sources listed on the right.

Theme 1: Positive Impact on Cognitive and Executive Functions

1.1 Enhancing productivity

Participants from all five studies noted that listening to music has improved their productivity, ultimately bettering their cognitive and executive functions. Cassidy, a participant from source 3, found that "listen[ing] to the music" enhanced her abilities to "organize [her] thoughts" (Venter et. al, 2023). Others note that listening to music over other undesired sounds emerging from their ambient environments has helped them focus, therefore improving their productivity—such was the case recalled by Mira from source 2 (Korošec et. al, 2026) and Erica from source 3 (Venter et. al, 2023).

On the other hand, Lovis from source 2 (Korošec et. al, 2026), Kim from source 4 (Korošec et. al, 2024), and Danielle from source 5 (Kirby & Burland, 2022) explain rather than overlapping ambient noise with music, listening to the sonic phrases of the music helps them focus, even when there isn't any background noise. Certain types help them focus more than others, with Kim and Danielle referring to personal playlists and specific genres like classical and film soundtracks (Kirby & Burland, 2022; Korošec et. al, 2024).

1.2 Serving as a stimulus to start activities

Lovis and Erica recall that music has served as a tool to stimulate inspiration. For both, music has been incredibly helpful during their writing processes (Korošec et. al, 2026; Venter et. al, 2023).

Music can also serve as motivation by making experiences more entertaining, as was the case of Omera from source 1 when she said music makes "everything feel alive inside me" (Shalit et. al, 2025). Iris from source 2, Erica and Cassidy, and Britt from source 4 similarly place great emphasis on the motivational nature of music. Iris states that playlists have been particularly helpful, serving as a time indicator (Korošec et. al, 2026). Erica describes how music makes her feel less stressed, more stimulated, happy, and energized, while Cassidy explains that music helps her develop her own fictional characters (Venter et. al, 2023). Britt, like Iris, explains that music can help with procrastination and overcome creative impasses (Korošec et. al, 2024).

1.3 Serving as a break from reality

Music has also been noted as an immersive and spiritual experience where participants take a break from reality. Participants from two sources: Erica (Venter et. al, 2023) and Mira and Frida from source 4 (Korošec et. al, 2024), recall that background events become largely forgotten and "one becomes one with that music" (Venter et. al, 2023). Mira attests that she avoids stores that play music inside, which source 4 discovered was a behavior exemplified by many of their interviewees. The reason, given by Mira, pinpoints to the alluring nature of music (Korošec et. al, 2024).

Frida believes that listening to music transcends the physical experience, describing it as leaving Earth (Korošec et. al, 2024). Erica agrees, believing it to be a "spiritual experience" where her "soul left [her] body," and pairing it to be analogous to hearing her choir warming-up (Venter et. al, 2023).

Finally, music has also been a form of escapism for multiple participants during stressful situations and also for pleasure. Rachel from source 1 utilizes listening to music to regulate herself while navigating "meltdowns" from her children (Shalit et. al, 2025). Erica presents a different point of view, seeing music as a way to interact with the music artist and put herself in their perspective (Venter et. al, 2023).

Theme 2: Enhancement of Emotional Regulation and Processing

2.1 Regulating emotions

All sources indicated that listening to music is extremely important to regulate their emotions. After listening to music, all participants felt more calm, composed, or happier. May from source 1 notes that listening to music makes her feel her emotions with greater intensity:

> What the songs do is they make the emotions worse than they actually ought to be, and making them worse is actually a way of getting them out of my system, I feel the emotions. I feel the emotions in their full wrath, and then after that, the emotions subside. My thoughts become clear, and I've dealt with it. (Shalit et. al, 2025)

May from source 1 also shares that music has helped her calm herself during anxiety attacks (Shalit et. al, 2025). Similarly, Erica shares that music instills a sense of calm, though she attributes it to its repetitive nature (Venter et. al, 2023).

Orit from source 1, Frida from source 2, and Cassidy note that music has the power to elicit happiness. Orit describes her experience of involving herself in listening to music as "pure fun" (Shalit et. al, 2025). When Frida finds new music, she receives a dopamine kick (Korošec et. al, 2026). Cassidy expresses her happiness through pacing around her kitchen table while listening to music (Venter et. al, 2023).

Further, Cassidy, Kim, and Megan from source 5 voluntarily turn on music that they know will regulate negative emotions. Cassidy's friends turn on music that helps them calm down during emotionally unstable situations (Venter et. al, 2023). Similarly, Kim puts a song on repeat to calm herself down (Korošec et. al, 2024). This approach can also work to overturn sad emotions and bring happy ones, Meg shares (Kirby & Burland, 2022).

Erica also uses the act of listening to music to regulate her emotions as well, but interestingly, she uses music to amplify negative emotions such as sadness (Venter et. al, 2023). Helena from source 2 talks about using music to manipulate more than her emotions but her energy state, where she recalls being able to become alert or relaxed by listening to certain types of music (Korošec et. al, 2026).

2.2 Serving as an outlet to release negative emotions

Erica and Cassidy discuss that music has served as an emotional outlet, though no other sources have evidence supporting this phenomenon. Therefore, this result should be treated with skepticism regarding its appliance. Erica reveals that her parents didn't empathize with her "sensory issues" and felt it to be rather "annoying" (Venter et. al, 2023). To cope with these situations, she turned on calming music to reduce her cortisol levels. Like Erica, Cassidy uses music to purge herself of negative emotions like anger, ultimately replacing them with empowerment (Venter et. al, 2023).

Theme 3: Acceptance of Neurodivergent Identities

3.1 Validating identities through resonance

Participants from sources 2 and 3 note that the lyrics in musical songs help them develop and validate their identity, as was the case of Iris (Korošec et. al, 2026). Erica notes that these songs help her feel seen, and the presence of a connection between them helps her accept her identity (Venter et. al, 2023).

On the other hand, Neta from source 1 and Erica emphasize how resonance to the authors of the songs rather than the lyrics help them accept their identity. Neta states that she felt "alienated and rejected," which prompted her to look for music artists of similar identities or experiences (Shalit et. al, 2025). Erica mentions listening to Billie Eilish, a music artist who was likewise struggling with depression, who helped her achieve self-acceptance (Venter et. al, 2023).

3.2 Expressing personal identities

Music has served as a form of communication for Iris, and for participants in source 1, namely Sharhar, Malka, and Danielle (Korošec et. al, 2026; Shalit et. al, 2025), ultimately helping them engage in self-validation. Iris notes that music allows her to recognize her emotions and validate them (Korošec et. al, 2026). Sharhar uses music to express who she is and communicate with others. Like Sharhar, music helps Malka navigate social situations by becoming a topic of discussion. Danielle shares that by being a part of a community that listens to metal music, she was able to "express sides of herself," and began to accept herself as what she referred to as an "outsider" in the "modern autistic experience"(Shalit et. al, 2025).

Theme 4: Improvement of Social Connection and Relationships

4.1 Facilitating companionship

The experiences provided by the research studies suggest music provides the participants with companionship. Even in solitude, passively listening to music allowed the participants to feel as though they were in the space of others. Erica in source 3 terms the experience on three different occasions throughout her interview; "companion" who gives her company, "cooler older sister," and "supportive friend," and also adds that it has reminded her of the bond with her mother (Venter et. al, 2023).

As seen by Neta, participants recorded their ability to form companionships through music. Neta recalls that being a band member during her adolescent years was incredibly important to her social life. Listening to music together with her band members enabled her to initiate and maintain relationships (Shalit et. al, 2025). Similarly, Britt from source 2 places emphasis on listening to music as a large factor in her social life (Korošec et. al, 2026).

4.2 Creating a space for solitude

Many participants noted that listening to music created a voluntary space in which the participants felt alone, as attested by Neta. Neta uses music to create a barrier to isolate herself when on a bus (Shalit et. al, 2025), inferring it as noisy and full of people. Others phrase this phenomenon as creating a safe place to avoid social interaction, as Danielle does when expressing autistic traits such as sensory overloads (Shalit et. al, 2025).

Mira adds that listening to music creates a safe place far from societal judgement. In this space, she can solely think about herself and not think about the opinions of others (Korošec et. al, 2026). In a later study, Mira asserts that listening to music provides a solitary experience to generate creativity, similarly without judgement (Korošec et. al, 2024).

Theme 5: Potential for Triggering Camouflaging in Social Circumstances

Unfortunately, music serves as a medium to engage in masking, especially in social contexts. This has been categorized into three subthemes: 1) compliance, meaning complying to others' musical preferences, 2) behaviors, meaning refraining from expressing autistic behavioral traits by not listening to music at all, and 3) repeats, meaning that they are shunning repetitive listening to the same song. Although this is seen as a theme, it must be noted that this is only present in one source; it should therefore be interpreted with caution.

5.1 Refraining from music engagement in fear of societal judgement

Five out of the nine participants from source 1 engage in masking their autistic preferences to music due to self-consciousness of others' emotions, namely Shira, Orit, Omera, Danielle, and Sharhar (Shalit et. al, 2025). Shira and Orit express that they only turn on and listen to music that everyone enjoys. Omera acknowledges that she doesn't have a specific music taste, though she is aware that types of music play a large role in impressions. Danielle finds listening to music less enjoyable because she feels obligated to mask her music tastes. Orit, and all of these participants, seem to be aware of a social etiquette dividing their tastes and more conventional music preferences.

5.2 Prohibiting oneself from music engagement that incites behaviors that differ from NT people

Two participants, Rachel and Sharhar, also note that the behavioral responses to listening to music are discouraged by society, and consequently feel the need to mask their autistic traits that occur while listening to their music preferences. These behaviors included stimming for Rachel, while Sharhar has experienced staring, flying, running, pacing, and muttering (Shalit et al., 2025).

5.3 Resisting repetitive listening

Two participants, Malka and May, expressed that they felt the need to mask playing the same song multiple times. Malka feels ashamed of her own behavior and therefore prevents herself from doing so around others. May does the same, because she has received negative feedback from her peers (Shalit et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze how music relates to the everyday experiences of adult, autistic females through a thematic analysis across five sources. It revealed that passively listening to music aided participants in various facets of everyday life. Socially, it helped them build community; cognitively, it helped them enhance their focus skills and motivated them; emotionally, it helped them regulate their moods; and individually, it helped them express their own identities through resonance with the music and artists. Although some participants reported that listening to music in social contexts initiated masking behaviors, highlighting a limitation in the benefits of passively listening to music, it can be interpreted as a potential clinical tool for autistic adult females to develop social skills, enhance their cognitive profile, and regulate physical and emotional behaviors despite its limitations.

There were overlaps between the experiences found throughout the themes of the autistic female's experiences and that of NT populations, and it must be noted that experiences unshared with NT people throughout the Discussion does not mean that they are not specific to autistic people only; rather, the reviewed evidence cannot guarantee the level of specificity to attribute such experiences solely to autistic adult female populations. In addition, it should be noted that the results found in this study are dependent on subjective accounts of the participants and do not rely on empirical data. Furthermore, sample sizes of these studies range; some have as few as two participants. As such, approach findings found across certain sources with caution.

1. Positive impact on cognitive and executive functions

Passively listening to music helped autistic females enhance their cognitive profiles and executive functioning. This theme was experienced by participants from all five of the studies (Kirby & Burland, 2022; Korošec et. al, 2024, 2026; Shalit et. al, 2025; Venter et. al, 2023). Particularly, music helped enhance productivity and served as a form of escapism.

Enhancing productivity was conveyed through multiple experiences: organizing thoughts, calming overstimulation, and focusing, especially when studying. Although this paper does not focus on MT, this phenomenon is consistent with what MT achieves with children; a study investigating the effect of MT on children aged five to ten years found that MT was positively associated with adaptive functioning, which is positively correlated with cognition and executive functioning (Vercontaire et al., 2026).

Like enhancing productivity, listening to music can help autistic females achieve efficiency with their tasks, often serving as a form of inspiration and motivation of sorts. Music has helped participants with their writing, fueling their imagination and overall creative process. Music has also made daily tasks more enjoyable; participants have admitted that they wouldn't be able to do as much without music. However, these phenomena have also been experienced by NT people; listening to music cues imagination, and the relationship between music and motivation has been established, suggesting that both may be quotidian experiences (Margulis & Jakubowski, 2024; Dimitriadis et al., 2023).

Two perspectives of escapist behavior emerged: a negative group, who used music to escape from the harsh realities of the world and their own neurodivergent identities, and the positive group, who saw music as a path to have a spiritual experience. NT people also polarized themselves into the two groups (Rohani, 2024), suggesting yet again that this may be a universal experience and not specific to autistic adult females.

2. Enhancement of emotional regulation and processing

Everyday music functioned as a healing tool for emotional processing and regulation among autistic females (Kirby & Burland, 2022; Korošec et. al, 2024, 2026; Shalit et. al, 2025; Venter et. al, 2023). The themes' prevalence suggests that listening to everyday music is a tool for emotional well-being through regulation and by serving as an outlet.

The regulation of emotions has included evoking calmness, especially during times of anxiety. Others take a more lighthearted stance, finding that music gives them a dopamine kick, excitement, and happiness. Though it diverges from the focus, MT is also known to be associated with dopamine release and the stimulation of happy and positive emotions (Zaatar et al., 2023). On the other hand, rather than sharing observations, others admitted to actively manipulating listening to music to incite certain emotions, even if they may not be positive. Likewise, a prominent goal of MT is to regulate the emotional states of participants, especially children, which is somewhat analogous to manipulation (Moore & Hanson-Abromeit, 2015). For those that aim to achieve positive emotional states, they are engaging in a well-established MT concept called the "iso principle" that has been clinically used for those with mood "disorders" (Starke et al., 2026).

Some participants noted that listening to music was an outlet that they could use. Oftentimes the behavioural and sensory traits that autistic females show are not perceived positively by other NT people because they deviate from what is considered the norm. This makes the autistic person feel negative emotions, which listening to music has helped release. MT is known for its efficacy in emotion regulation and expression, as well as managing stress, but unlike previous parallels between MT and passive listening, there remains little evidence that MT is a way that autistic people cope with the shunning of their identities. Therefore, passive listening to everyday music may bring to light some experiences that are unassociated with MT.

3. Acceptance of neurodivergent identities

Passively listening to music has facilitated the expression of autistic females' neurodivergent identities. Reported by three out of the five sources (Korošec et. al, 2026; Shalit et. al, 2025; Venter et. al, 2023), this suggests that this was a moderately experienced theme. Acceptance has been achieved through the resonance participants felt with the music, and/or through personal skill growth.

The autistic females have recalled that they find resonance in two ways: through the identity of the artist themselves, or through the meanings of the lyrics in the songs. Both cases have helped these females accept their neurodivergent identities, which can be developed through a variety of experiences and composed of mental health diagnoses. In all, it has helped validate the identities of these NT females, who are at higher likelihood of developing mental health instability due to rejection of their identities (Blecher et al., 2023).

Others have developed their neurodivergent identities by listening to music. Socialization can be difficult for autistic individuals, but listening to music has helped them overcome the psychological barriers that had previously hindered them. MT is often targeted at children to cultivate socialization skills at an early age (Geretsegger et al., 2014), but this result suggests that simply listening to music may have the same outcome for autistic adult females, which can be crucial for developing self-acceptance.

4. Improvement of social connection and relationships

Participants from three out of the five total sources (Korošec et. al, 2024, 2026; Shalit et. al, 2025), though overlaps of participants were present between the two studies conducted by Korošec et. al in 2024 and 2026, mentioned that listening to everyday music played a crucial role in their social lives. Such benefits could further be categorized into two subthemes that emphasize the immediate and long term effects of passively listening to music: 1) facilitating companionship and 2) creating a space for solitude.
Across the three sources, the participants revealed that listening to music facilitated companionship by establishing a setting where they were in the presence of another being they found comfort in, like mothers, sisters, and friends. This may be explained by the fact that the participants themselves were feeling lonely, which may be attributed to the high likelihood of them experiencing isolation as an autistic person. The songs themselves invite the participants to reminisce on a specific person or memory and create this illusion of companionship. This phenomenon, however, is largely experienced by the NT population, who has termed this as music acting as a "social surrogate" (Paravati et al., 2026).

Ironically, participants felt that creating a space for solitude enhanced their social skills and connections. Autistic people have been reported to enjoy spending time alone, with reasons due to sensory and social overstimulation, self-regulation, and recharging, Neville et al. (2026) notes. Neville et al. (2026) have also examined that participants best achieved this through "intense interest[s]," which ultimately led to one of their themes, being "[r]eady to reconnect with others." This shows that by creating a space where participants can feel alone, music ultimately helps the participants create social relationships long-term.

5. Potential for triggering camouflaging in social circumstances

Although participants most often recorded positive experiences that music elicited, there were some events that could be perceived as negative: masking and camouflaging their autistic identities. Only source 1 (Shalit et. al, 2025), discussed this topic. The lack of other sources suggests that their interviews did not ask the participants about this topic, therefore highlighting a gap in this field of research. The masking behaviors mentioned in source 1 were then separated into three groups: 1) compliance, 2) behaviors, and 3) repeats.

When masking, compliance means catering to the specific music tastes of others or more conventional approaches. The participants noted that they engage in such behaviors in social contexts; they turn on music that they think others will like and constrain themselves from music that they know others will dislike.

The participants also masked their musical preferences because of the autistic behaviors they engaged in while listening to music to appear more "normal," or NT. These behaviors are recorded to be "stimming" and staring, walking, running, flying, pacing, and muttering. Contrary to initial expectations, this behavior suggests that listening to everyday music encourages and stimulates these behaviors while MT is known to act as an intervention to discourage them (Kim et al., 2024).

Finally, participants also noted that they find themselves engaging in a song multiple times, which may be an autistic trait due to its consistency with the trait of preferring routine and predictability (Applewhite et al., 2022). The participants also were aware that this was not NT behavior and therefore engaged in masking. However, this also suggests that passively listening to music actively encourages repeating the same song while MT discourages RRBs.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored how everyday music has an influence on the lives of adult autistic females. Across the five papers that examined the relationship music has with autistic females, everyday music was discovered to be extremely helpful in improving cognitive functions, emotional regulation, socialization, and self-acceptance of their identities. Though, some of the subthemes were found to overlap with the experiences with NT people, suggesting that the experiences are not specific to autistic adult females. Such subsections are: Serving as a stimulus to start activities and Serving as a break from reality in theme 1, Validating identities through resonance in theme 3, and Facilitating companionship in theme 4.

Although it was also found to encourage some to practice masking, the positive impact music can have for autistic adult females in clinical settings emerges as a crucial area for future empirical research, as subjective accounts have acclaimed everyday music. This is primarily because the benefits of everyday music coincide significantly with that of MT. Therefore, the integration of passively listening to music to

educational, therapeutic, and family settings should be considered as it can be financially sustainable and accessible for autistic females who may not be able to afford MT.

While these findings reveal that music can generate a wide range of positive outcomes in autistic females, it is important to recognize its limitations. Due to time and budget constraints, the researcher was unable to conduct primary research. Ultimately, the researcher turned to a thematic analysis approach, synthesizing findings from other papers. Although this approach has revealed pioneering information, it is important to highlight that each paper focused on females from a particular region (Israel, South Africa, England, Sweden), and there was limited diversity amongst the participants. There were only a total of five sources, and the small sample size of each places the applicability of the findings at a tenuous state.

Furthermore, the fifth theme discussing camouflaging of music tastes was only supported by source 1. Therefore, this finding cannot be concluded as a general effect of listening to music. This may have occurred because questions regarding the topic simply were not inquired by the interviewer. As such, future studies should consider asking a variety of questions that shed light on a multitude of experiences as the narrow range of questions can limit the variability of experiences of such vulnerable populations.

Subsequent research could also focus on being conducted in various different geographical settings to examine whether the cultural and genre differences in music can have different implications socially, emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally for autistic adult females. Having a large sample size would also be beneficial in generalizing the applicability to the environment. By conducting a similar experiment in person, in the format of an observational everyday setting instead of a thematic analysis, the researchers will be able to gain full context of each patient's responses. In these conditions, future researchers should also consider asking a variety of questions, especially regarding the topics that are not supported by all five sources in this study. Taken together, these findings highlight the potential of everyday music as an accessible, meaningful resource in the lives of autistic females. Its therapeutic role could benefit immensely from sustained investigation, with this research acting as a starting point towards its possibilities.

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