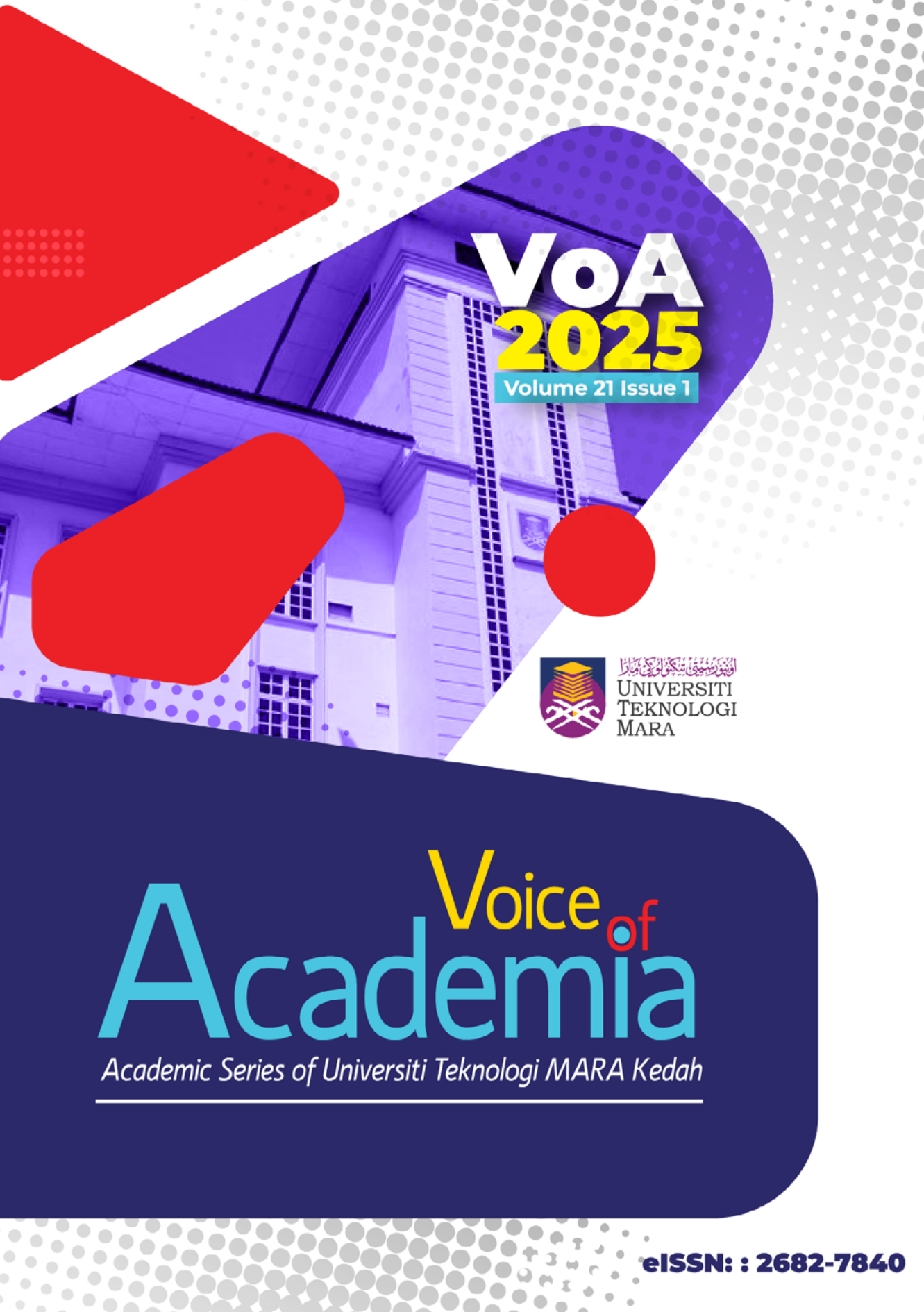




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## **ANALYSING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF AN ART CAREER FROM THE CAREGIVERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVE FOR AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the sustainability of art careers for autistic individuals by exploring the experiences and perspectives of caregivers, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities within this unique career path. Utilising a qualitative methodology, the research involved thematic analysis of interviews and observations, categorised into nine themes: Early Interest and Skill Development in Art, Art as a Means of Communication and Expression, Sensory Issues and Adaptations in Art, Techniques and Mediums in Art, Autonomy in Artistic Decisions, Participation in Art Activities and Programs, Exploration of Other Art Forms and Interests, Marketing and Support for Artistic Endeavours, and Benefits of Art for Well-being. Findings indicate that early interest in art leads to skill development and emotional expression, art facilitates non-verbal communication and specific adaptations are necessary to address sensory issues. The study also reveals that while art enhances autonomy and well-being, limited access and support often hinder participation in art activities. The implications suggest that enhancing support systems and opportunities for autistic individuals in the arts can significantly improve their quality of life and provide viable career paths. However, the study is limited by its

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qualitative nature and the small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

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## **1. Introduction**

In a world increasingly driven by technology and innovation, the inclusion and empowerment of neurodiverse individuals have become paramount. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects millions globally, presenting unique challenges in communication, social interaction, and employment. A study conducted by Johnson et al. (2016) and supported by Harmuth et al. (2018) implied that the worldwide low job rates could be associated with personal and environmental influences. Based on a review by Hayward et al. (2018) and Lallukka T. et al. (2020), despite significant strides in understanding and support, autistic individuals often face barriers to sustainable careers. According to a 2024 scoping review, many autistic people strongly desire career progression. Still, they are usually underemployed or stuck in jobs that do not match their skills and qualifications. The review highlighted by Davies et al. (2024) that about 85% of autistic adults are unemployed or underemployed, which is a significantly higher rate than the general population. Furthermore, a discussion conducted by Nicholas et al. (2019) on employment in autism revealed that barriers such as a lack of understanding in the workplace, insufficient job accommodations, and underutilisation of available funding streams contribute to these employment challenges. These statistics underscore the need for tailored support and inclusive employment practices to help autistic individuals achieve sustainable careers.

Art offers a valuable way to overcome employment barriers for autistic individuals. Creative expression promotes communication and self-advocacy, paving the way for fulfilling careers. Bowles (2024) highlighted studies showing art's transformative potential in fostering career paths for this community. While about 85% of autistic adults face unemployment or underemployment (Golden Steps ABA, 2024), art provides an alternative pathway, enhancing emotional well-being and social skills. Programs focused on art therapy improve cognitive and social functioning, making autistic individuals more adaptable in various professional settings (Hofmann, 2024). Art-related careers can be tailored to individual strengths, creating more inclusive work environments.

In Malaysia, the unemployment rate among individuals with autism is a significant concern. In 2022, there were 674,548 persons with disabilities, including many with autism, as reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (Chandran, 2024). Despite initiatives to increase job opportunities, autistic individuals face substantial barriers to securing and maintaining employment. Research by Ghuzal et al. (2023) highlighted the lack of legislation for transition services for students with special needs. The Malaysian Plan of Action for People with Disabilities (2016-2022) aims to improve employment support services and training for better job transitions. A study by Vanessa et al. (2023) asserted the reduced employment opportunities for those with ASD, stressing the need for more inclusive hiring practices. Additionally, only 22% of autistic adults are employed, reflecting a troubling global trend of high unemployment in this population. This disparity between autistic individuals and the general workforce underscores the need for targeted interventions and systemic changes to enhance employment opportunities.

System Analysis Program Development (SAP)'s Autism at Work initiative demonstrates that matching job functions to the strengths of autistic individuals and offering customized assistance can result in positive employment results (Austin et al., 2017). SAP announced that the initiative enhanced team dynamics and boosted overall productivity, highlighting the advantages of

neurodiversity in the workplace. This program has motivated other organizations, such as Microsoft and JPMorgan Chase, to adopt comparable initiatives. Malaysia might find advantages in implementing comparable models and policies aimed at fostering a more inclusive workforce for individuals with autism. This highlights the necessity for tailored accommodations, training, and support systems that are vital for their effective integration into the job market.

Research consistently highlights the significant issue of underemployment among autistic individuals. For instance, Chen (2015) demonstrated that many autistic adults are employed in positions that do not align with their qualifications or skills, often resulting in inadequate pay and job dissatisfaction. This issue is intensified by findings from Griffiths et al. (2020), which suggested that employers frequently underestimate the abilities of autistic job candidates, further contributing to their underemployment. Recent studies continue to shed light on these challenges. Davies et al. (2024) emphasised that many autistic adults are actively seeking research and initiatives aimed at improving their employment conditions and opportunities, reflecting their ongoing struggles with underemployment. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2024) highlighted the persistently high unemployment rates among autistic individuals, illustrating the systemic barriers they encounter in the job market. These studies underscore the urgent need for more inclusive employment practices and workplace environments that can fully leverage the skills and talents of autistic individuals.

An area of significant research gap is the exploration of self-employment as a viable alternative to traditional employment for autistic individuals. Szaban et al. (2018) predominantly focused on integrating autistic individuals into conventional work environments, often overlooking the potential benefits of self-employment and entrepreneurship. This gap highlights the need for research into how autistic individuals can utilize their unique skills and interests to pursue self-employment, particularly in creative fields such as the arts. Exploring self-employment in the arts offers potential advantages, such as flexible schedules and tailored work environments, which can be more accommodating for autistic individuals. According to studies by Bennie (2016) and Islam (2020), self-employment in the arts allows autistic individuals to harness their creativity and transform it into a profitable venture. This approach can lead to greater economic independence and job satisfaction, providing a promising avenue for addressing this population's persistent challenges of underemployment and unemployment.

This paper explores art as a sustainable career path for autistic individuals from a caregiver's perspective. The introduction discusses the challenges autistic individuals face in traditional jobs and presents art as a viable alternative. The literature review covers research by Jeong et al. (2021), Hofmann (2024), and Vicente (2023), highlighting art's therapeutic and professional benefits. The methodology section outlines the qualitative approach, involving interviews with caregivers to assess the impact of art-based careers on well-being and as career starters. By examining case studies, the study provides insights into the financial and emotional benefits of art careers for autistic individuals, supporting findings from Spiro et al. (2023). The results and discussion, informed by Hollander (2023), share case study findings on the successes and challenges autistic artists face in their careers. Finally, the conclusion emphasizes the need to support autistic individuals in artistic careers for financial independence and personal growth, offering recommendations for future research and inclusive policies.

## **2. Literature Review**

Understanding the unemployment challenges faced by autistic individuals begins with recognizing ASD, a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects communication, social skills, and behaviour, impacting about 1 in 54 children in the U.S. (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention; CDC, 2020). In Malaysia, awareness of the strengths of autistic individuals is growing, and support groups are helping parents (Chu et al., 2018).

Autistic individuals often struggle with social interaction and communication, making employment difficult due to differences in communication styles with neurotypicals. Research highlights their challenges in interpreting social cues and nonverbal communication (Ara et al., 2024; Andari et al., 2010). Those with Level 1 autism may find it hard to initiate social interactions and understand expectations (Round et al., 2017; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These barriers can lead to isolation and an increased risk of depression (Attwood, 2013). The unemployment rate for autistic individuals is high due to these challenges (Halid et al., 2020). Art therapy has been demonstrated to help children on the spectrum cope with their challenges, aligning with their preferred learning styles and helping to build positive relationships (Round et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2001).

Empirical research underscores the efficacy of art interventions for children with ASD. For instance, Allison et al. (2022) demonstrated that art interventions significantly enhance occupational therapy outcomes, thereby improving both functional abilities and overall well-being. Similarly, Schweizer et al. (2014) observed that art therapy fosters improvements in social communication, flexibility, and attention in children with ASD, owing to its structured yet adaptable nature. Durrani (2019) argued that art therapy effectively addresses core ASD symptoms by facilitating sensory regulation, psychomotor development, and communication. Roth (2020) emphasized the necessity of a nuanced understanding of creativity in autism to fully appreciate the distinctive artistic expressions of autistic individuals. Furthermore, Emery (2004) highlighted art therapy's substantial impact on child development, particularly in enhancing object constancy through drawing.

Recent studies continue to emphasize the role of art in advancing cognitive and behavioural development among autistic individuals. Ji (2023) demonstrated that art appreciation alleviates cognitive barriers and supports multidisciplinary treatment approaches. Sampurno et al. (2020) discovered that combining art therapy with play and empathy enhances communication skills, advocating for a flexible and natural learning environment. Wright (2023) extended these benefits to autistic adults, noting improved communication and emotional regulation. Martin (2009) reviewed the unique advantages of art therapy despite prevailing challenges. Sampurno (2019) revealed that conceptualizing therapeutic processes as performing art can enhance communication, memory skills, and confidence in autistic children and their families. Collectively, these findings highlight art's extensive impact across different developmental stages and its potential to support cognitive and emotional growth.

The growing trend of self-employment in artistic fields such as design, writing, and photography offers a promising solution to unemployment among autistic individuals (Woronkowicz et al., 2017). Agrawal et al. (2010) documented the alignment of artistic pursuits with entrepreneurial endeavours, while Berkell (1987) emphasized the need for career development programs tailored to individuals with disabilities, including autism. Nagib et al. (2020) advocated for autism-specific career-matching tools and enhanced self-employment support.

Freelancing is prevalent among artists, who frequently alternate between self-employment and traditional roles. Artists in high-density artistic communities are likelier to engage in self-employment (Woronkowicz et al., 2019). However, traditional workplaces can present significant challenges, leading to lower self-efficacy and well-being among autistic individuals (Buckley et al., 2021). The Integrated Model for Self-Structuring Portfolio Professions by Wyszomirski and Chang illustrates how creative workers sustain their careers by managing diverse income sources and work practices (Wyszomirski et al., 2017). Jeong et al. (2017) also reported that job satisfaction influences

entrepreneurial intentions, suggesting that self-employment may be a viable alternative for those facing challenges in conventional employment settings.

The connection between art and autism has gained significant interest from researchers. Creative expression can provide unique opportunities for autistic individuals. As careers evolve, especially in the arts, it is crucial to develop and maintain a resilient and flexible career identity. Ashforth et al. (2001) theory regarding the formation of adaptive career identity, as referenced by Bridgstock (2013), offers a convincing framework for comprehending how experiential learning in arts entrepreneurship can enhance this adaptability. According to this theory, career identity is an evolving concept rather than a fixed trait moulded by participation in significant experiences that resonate with a person's values and goals.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology for this paper was designed to explore the role of art in providing career opportunities for autistic individuals in Malaysia as a preliminary research study. The research adopted a qualitative design to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of caregivers of autistic individuals. This approach was suitable for understanding complex, context-specific phenomena that could not easily be quantified. The population for this study consisted of caregivers of autistic individuals in Malaysia. A sample size of three caregivers was selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was selected as it offers the most relevant and comprehensive insights, ensuring the gathering of the most valuable information possible (Han et al., 2021). The three caregivers were selected as key informants based on three criteria: (1) their experience, (2) their familiarity with the topic, and (3) the diversity of their contexts. This sampling method was effective in selecting participants who possessed pertinent experience, enabling them to offer comprehensive, detailed, and varied insights regarding the research questions. These caregivers possess first-hand experience in autism care, having worked directly with individuals on the spectrum. They are actively engaged in their communities, demonstrating a commitment to support and advocacy. Their diverse backgrounds and rich array of contextual experiences contribute to a well-rounded perspective, forming a robust foundation for their selection as exemplary caregivers. To support the decision to select three caregivers through purposive sampling, the principle of data saturation was crucial. This approach ensures that collecting further data yields no additional insights or themes, reinforcing the adequacy of the chosen participants.

In this study, a modest sample size proves adequate, as data saturation was accomplished with participants offering rich, detailed, and varied insights on the subject matter. Saunders et al. (2018) highlighted the significance of data saturation over participant count, arguing that even a small group, like these three caregivers, can be valuable if no new themes or insights arise. This underscores the depth of understanding that can be achieved with focused, qualitative analysis. Data collection involved face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility to probe deeper into relevant topics while maintaining a structured set of questions. This approach captured the complexity of the caregivers' experiences and perceptions. The interview data was analyzed using Atlas.ti 24 software. Transcribed audio recordings were coded to identify key statements and themes, which were then grouped through thematic analysis. This method highlighted how art can provide career pathways for autistic individuals, adding to the existing literature on autism, art therapy, and career development.

### **4. Results**

In this paper, a qualitative preliminary study was undertaken to investigate the impact of art on the lives of individuals with autism, uncovering several significant themes. These are the key findings from the preliminary study interview transcript with caregivers of autistic

individuals. Accordingly, nine themes were identified from the interview transcripts for further discussion.

Table 1

Overview of the Coding and Thematic Analysis of the Preliminary Interview Study Transcripts

| Theme                                                          | Codes                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Theme 1: Early Interest and Skill Development in Art</b>    | Early interest, painting skills, doodling practice, daily drawing, evolving interest.                         |
| <b>Theme 2: Art as a Means of Communication and Expression</b> | Non-verbal communication, emotional expression, use of colours, and requests for sketchbooks.                 |
| <b>Theme 3: Sensory Issues and Adaptations in Art</b>          | Sensory issues, motor skills, sensory overload adaptations, and coping strategies.                            |
| <b>Theme 4: Techniques and Mediums in Art</b>                  | Tool preferences, challenges with mediums, doodling vs. painting, and structured art practices.               |
| <b>Theme 5: Autonomy in Artistic Decisions</b>                 | Independent artistic choices, mood-based themes, storytelling, and inspiration from surroundings.             |
| <b>Theme 6: Participation in Art Activities and Programs</b>   | Volunteering in school mural programs, social media resources, exhibition participation, and teacher support. |
| <b>Theme 7: Exploration of Other Art Forms and Interests</b>   | Lego, music interest, paper art, building blocks activities.                                                  |
| <b>Theme 8: Marketing and Support for Artistic Endeavours</b>  | Social media promotion, limited marketing, teacher support, exhibition sales, and financial motivations.      |
| <b>Theme 9: Benefits of Art for Well-being</b>                 | Time engagement, emotional regulation, stimming effect, self-expression.                                      |

Upon thoroughly examining the code, the identified themes have elucidated the potential for establishing a viable art career for individuals with autism through the experience with the caregivers. It presented quotes from participants advising on discovering artistic talents and cultivating the potential for a successful art career; these ideas can be implemented.

Table 2

Theme 1: Early Interest and Skill Development in Art

| Codes                                      | Contexts                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Initial Exposure and Evolution of Interest | - Early interest began with simple activities like drawing, which gradually deepened.                            |
|                                            | - Participant C started with basic drawing and began to enjoy it.                                                |
|                                            | - Participant B was introduced to art through small motor skill tasks like doodling, which sparked her interest. |

|                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Drawing and Painting Preferences         | - Participants developed specific material preferences.                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                          | - Participant B preferred pencils for easy correction.                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                          | - Participant C used pencils and watercolours.                                                                                                                                                             |
|                                          | - Participant A preferred brushes and earth tones and avoided finger painting due to sensory sensitivities.                                                                                                |
| Early Interest in Art and Painting       | - Caregivers observed that participants started engaging with art at a young age, as early as four years old for Participant B, which provided a foundation for skill development and personal expression. |
|                                          | Art helped participants to express emotions, emphasizing its role in self-expression and emotional regulation.                                                                                             |
| Daily Art Practice and Skill Development | - Participants practised art daily, showing dedication.                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                          | - Participant B requested paper and sketchbooks for daily drawing, indicating genuine solid motivation.                                                                                                    |
|                                          | - Participant C explored themes like seasons and personal experiences through regular practice.                                                                                                            |
| Art as a Medium for Emotional Expression | - Art provided an outlet for managing emotions.                                                                                                                                                            |
|                                          | - Participant A found painting therapeutic and could spend long periods on it.                                                                                                                             |
|                                          | - Caregivers noted that art supported emotional expression and self-regulation.                                                                                                                            |

The early interest and skill development theme highlights the journey of autistic individuals from initial exposure to deeper engagement with art. Caregivers noted that simple drawing exercises evolved into preferred mediums, leading to emotional expression and self-regulation. This foundational involvement not only enhanced their skills but also laid the groundwork for a sustainable art career in the future.

Table 3  
Theme 2: Art as a Means of Communication and Expression

| Codes                                    | Contexts                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Art as a Means of Self-Expression        | - Art provided a crucial outlet for self-expression that was hard to communicate verbally.                                                                |
|                                          | - Participant B used drawing as a "stimming" activity to calm herself at school.                                                                          |
| Expressing Mood and Feelings through Art | - Participants conveyed moods and emotions through art.                                                                                                   |
|                                          | - Participant C expressed perceptions and emotions through drawing.                                                                                       |
|                                          | - Non-verbal Participant A used colours and shapes to convey his inner experiences.                                                                       |
| Non-verbal Communication through Art     | - Art served as a primary communication tool for non-verbal individuals like Participant A.                                                               |
|                                          | - Participant A used shapes and letters to communicate his thoughts and emotions non-verbally, allowing caregivers to gain insights into his inner world. |
| Use of Imagination in Art                | - Participants displayed creativity and storytelling through art.                                                                                         |
|                                          | - Participant B's drawings told stories.                                                                                                                  |

|                                        |                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                        | - Participant C incorporated Lego designs, showing personal ideas and creativity. |
| Use of Earth Colours Based on Emotions | - Participant A preferred earth tones to express emotions and feel grounded.      |
|                                        | - Earthy colours helped him manage emotions better through art.                   |
| Requests for Sketchbooks               | - Participant B requested sketchbooks to self-regulate during overwhelming times. |
|                                        | - Daily use of sketchbooks helped her manage stress, especially in school.        |

Theme 2 highlights that art is crucial for the emotional well-being, self-expression, and communication of autistic individuals. It allows them to convey their inner experiences, especially for non-verbal participants like A. For others, like B, art serves as a coping mechanism and a means to tell their stories. Caregivers note improvements in communication skills and therapeutic benefits through art, underscoring its value as an ongoing activity.

Table 4

Theme 3: Sensory Issues and Adaptations in Art

| Codes                                         | Contexts                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fine Motor Skill Difficulties                 | - Participant B faced challenges in holding small tools like pencils and brushes due to fine motor skill limitations.                                                                                  |
|                                               | - Participant A also struggled with fine motor tasks, requiring ongoing skill-building tasks like doodling or cutting to improve control and coordination.                                             |
| Sensory Overload and Training to Handle Tools | - Participant A experienced sensory overload when handling some art tools, needing the training to handle them comfortably.                                                                            |
|                                               | - Adaptive techniques helped Participant A gradually increase tolerance and engage in art.                                                                                                             |
| Challenges with Watercolour                   | - Participant B found the watercolour work tiring and challenging due to the sustained focus and energy required.                                                                                      |
|                                               | - Participant B required support and needed to slow pacing and breaks to manage this medium effectively.                                                                                               |
| Sensory Issues with Painting on Hands         | - Participant A avoided painting with his fingers, preferring brushes to avoid direct contact with the paint, reducing sensory discomfort and enabling him to participate more in painting activities. |
| Frequent Hand Washing Due to Sensory Issues   | - Participant A frequently washed his hands when encountering uncomfortable textures, helping him to manage sensory discomfort and continue with art.                                                  |
| Coping with Sensory Overload at School        | - Participant B used her sketchbook for self-soothing during sensory overload at school, which helped her handle sensory challenges in other environments as well.                                     |

The third theme examines the sensory challenges faced by autistic individuals in art, such as fine motor difficulties, sensory overload, and specific aversions to textures. Caregivers employed adaptive methods to help build skills, limit uncomfortable contact, and implement coping

strategies like hand washing. Accommodations, including tool adaptations and sensory breaks, allowed participants to engage more in artistic practices.

Table 5

Theme 4: Techniques and Mediums in Art

| Codes                                         | Contexts                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Painting with Brushes and Watercolours        | - Participant A demonstrated skill in blending colours with brushes, which they found calming.                                                    |
|                                               | - Participant C used brushes and watercolours, exploring themes like seasons and inspiration from movies and travel.                              |
|                                               | - Participant B found watercolours challenging and required additional support.                                                                   |
| Skills in Painting and Blending with Brushes  | - Participant A developed skills in blending techniques with support from caregivers and teachers.                                                |
|                                               | - Teachers guided skill expansion, leading Participant A to volunteer for a school mural, enhancing his sense of inclusion.                       |
| Preference for Using Brushes                  | - Due to sensory discomfort, Participant A preferred brushes over finger painting, allowing a more comfortable and enjoyable painting experience. |
| Doodling with a Pen                           | - Participant B enjoyed doodling with a pen, offering a spontaneous and different creative outlet compared to painting.                           |
| Preference for Drawing with Pencils over Pens | - Participant B preferred pencils for easy corrections, giving her control and flexibility and boosting her confidence in art.                    |

The fourth theme explores the techniques and preferences in the artistic practices of autistic individuals, focusing on how tools and sensory needs influence their art experiences. Participants exhibited unique inclinations for various mediums, such as brushes and watercolours, with painting offering both challenges and therapeutic benefits. Caregivers emphasized the importance of guidance in skill development. Sensory-friendly tools, like brushes, helped those with sensitivities engage comfortably, while pencils provided control and adaptability, fostering self-confidence. These insights underscore the need for diverse mediums to make art accessible for autistic individuals.

Table 6

Theme 5: Autonomy in Artistic Decisions

| Codes                                        | Contexts                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Drawing Based on Surroundings and Activities | - Participants found inspiration in daily life, such as friends, activities and travel.                                                          |
|                                              | - Participant C explored seasonal themes, especially winter, reflecting a preferable connection between his imagination and artistic expression. |
| Drawing Based on Mood and Perception         | - Art reflected participants' emotions.                                                                                                          |
|                                              | - Participant C created art based on mood.                                                                                                       |
|                                              | - Participant A used earth tones to express personal feelings and self-expression.                                                               |

|                                              |                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Drawing without External Influence           | - Caregivers let participants choose their art themes, encouraging self-expression and building confidence.              |
| Storytelling through Art                     | - Art served as a storytelling medium.                                                                                   |
|                                              | - Participant B drawings narrated unique tales.                                                                          |
|                                              | - For non-verbal, Participant A used art to convey emotions and ideas.                                                   |
| Replicating Based on Perception and Feelings | - Participants replicated scenes they faced with personal interpretations.                                               |
|                                              | - Participant C drew based on his feelings and observations.                                                             |
|                                              | - Non-verbal Participant A created animal-like shapes or word art, combining external inspiration with personal meaning. |
| Inspiration from Movies and Travel           | - Exposure to diverse experiences like movies and travel expanded creativity.                                            |
|                                              | - Participant C included themes from these experiences in his artwork.                                                   |
|                                              | - Participant B drew scenes from her travels, showing experiences fostered autonomous exploration in artworks.           |

Theme 5 emphasizes the significance of autonomy in the artistic choices of autistic individuals. It showcases their ability to independently decide what and how to create, drawing inspiration from their surroundings and experiences. Caregivers adopted a non-interventionist approach, allowing for free exploration of creativity. This independence fostered confidence and ownership over their artistic processes, providing a meaningful way to express and communicate their emotions and experiences.

*Table 7*  
*Theme 6: Participation in Art Activities and Programs*

| <b>Codes</b>                                 | <b>Contexts</b>                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Doodling and Drawing Practice                | - Initial doodling and drawing activities introduced participants to art.                                                                                               |
|                                              | - Participant B began with small motor skill tasks like doodling and cutting, which sparked her interest.                                                               |
|                                              | - Participant C's simple drawings evolved into a meaningful practice.                                                                                                   |
|                                              | - Caregivers used social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to find autism-friendly art resources and connect with potential buyers for participants' artwork. |
|                                              | - The caregiver encounters problems with limited marketing exposure.                                                                                                    |
| Volunteering in School Mural Programs        | - School programs allowed participants, like Participant A, to paint murals and share their talents.                                                                    |
|                                              | - Participant C's caregiver noted that schools lack specialized art programs for autistic individuals, limiting their exposure and skill development.                   |
| Participation in Art Classes and Exhibitions | - Art classes and exhibitions helped participants improve their skills and gain recognition.                                                                            |
|                                              | - Participants entered an art exhibition where their paintings were sold.                                                                                               |

|                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                          | - Teachers connected participants with exhibition opportunities.                                                                                                                                                      |
| Attending Art Classes                    | - Structured classes offered guidance and skill-building in techniques like watercolour, which benefited participants like B and C.                                                                                   |
| Lack of Art Activities for Special Needs | - Caregivers noted a lack of inclusive art programs for autistic individuals, making it challenging to find suitable resources like music tutors and highlighting broader gaps in resources for autistic individuals. |

Theme 6 highlights the role of structured art programs and community support in engaging autistic individuals in art. Participants grew through organized activities, while social media helped caregivers share resources and artwork. Despite this, caregivers noted a lack of resources and called for more inclusive programs to support artistic potential.

Table 8

Theme 7: Exploration of Other Art Forms and Interests

| Codes                                            | Contexts                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interest in Building Blocks                      | - Building blocks like Lego provided a creative outlet.                                                                                        |
|                                                  | - Participant C enjoyed experimenting with designs.                                                                                            |
|                                                  | - Participant A used Lego to explore shapes without instructions freely.                                                                       |
|                                                  | - Participant B had an interest in Lego, highlighting its broad appeal.                                                                        |
| Interest in Music                                | - Music was a key interest for Participant D, who could follow and recite notes.                                                               |
|                                                  | - This interest added sensory and cognitive engagement, complementing art.                                                                     |
| Creating Shapes and Word Art from Tearing Papers | - Participant A tore paper to create shapes and words, combining sensory enjoyment with fine motor and spatial skill development.              |
| Building with Building Blocks                    | - Building blocks enabled imaginative and autonomous play.                                                                                     |
|                                                  | - Participant A enjoyed creating various shapes and structures, aligning with a preference for structured, repetitive and hands-on activities. |

Theme 7 highlights the diverse creative and sensory interests beyond traditional visual art, showcasing the importance of multi-sensory engagement in autistic individuals. Activities like building blocks foster tactile creativity and spatial understanding, while music enhances auditory engagement and memory skills. In particular, paper tearing combines sensory and fine motor skills, reflecting preferences for both deconstructive and constructive play. These varied interests underscore the need for a broad range of art and sensory activities to support the creative development of autistic individuals.

Table 9  
Theme 8: Marketing and Support for Artistic Endeavours

| Codes                                      | Contexts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social Media to Promote Artwork            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Caregivers used platforms like Instagram to showcase, promote and market participants' artwork and used the platform for greater visibility.</li> <li>- Participants' caregivers managed promotions despite limited reach.</li> </ul>                                  |
| Sales and Commissions through Social Media | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social media facilitated actual sales and commissions for participants.</li> <li>- Participants received custom orders through social media.</li> <li>- This demonstrated the potential of social media as a marketplace for autistic individuals' artwork.</li> </ul> |
| Selling Artworks at Exhibition             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exhibitions provided public display and sales opportunities.</li> <li>- Participant C sold paintings at an exhibition, and Participant B's teacher promoted her work.</li> <li>- These events validated the participants' artistic achievements.</li> </ul>            |
| Motivation to Create Financial Rewards     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial rewards motivated participants to create more art.</li> <li>- Participant C linked art sales to buying toys, boosting his motivation.</li> </ul>                                                                                                             |
| Support from Teachers in Promoting Art     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teachers and autistic committees played an instrumental role in promoting participants' artistic work.</li> <li>- Teacher support encouraged participants with exhibition opportunities, enhancing their reach.</li> </ul>                                             |
| Upcoming Exhibition Participation          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ongoing exhibitions provided future opportunities.</li> <li>- Participant C is scheduled to participate in another exhibition, reflecting growing public engagement.</li> </ul>                                                                                        |
| Limited Marketing Exposure                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Caregivers faced marketing challenges due to limited time and resources.</li> <li>- Participant A's social media presence was constrained by caregiver availability.</li> </ul>                                                                                        |

Theme 8 emphasizes the importance of social media, exhibitions, financial incentives, teacher support, and autistic committees in promoting the artistic endeavours of autistic individuals. Social media (Instagram and Facebook) boosted visibility and sales, while exhibitions offered public recognition and financial rewards that motivated continued creation. Teachers in the autistic committee helped connect artists with promotional opportunities, and financial incentives linked their artwork to tangible benefits, highlighting the advocacy role of teachers in promoting autistic artists' work. However, limited marketing exposure due to time and resource constraints remained a challenge, highlighting the need for ongoing, additional support to enhance the reach and visibility of autistic artists.

| Codes                                         | Contexts                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Occupying Time                                | - Art provided a constructive way to occupy time meaningfully.                                                                                               |
|                                               | - Participant C engaged in drawing and Lego, while Participant A spent his time painting and building with Lego.                                             |
|                                               | - Art activities reduced boredom and promoted a sense of self-fulfilment.                                                                                    |
| Calming (Stimming) Effect of Art from Drawing | - Art, especially drawing, helped manage sensory overload and emotional regulation.                                                                          |
|                                               | - Participant B used drawing as "stimming" to calm herself, especially in challenging environments like school, providing a safe method for self-regulation. |
|                                               | - Painting helped Participant A maintain calm, balance and tranquillity.                                                                                     |

The final theme highlights the dual benefits of art for autistic individuals. Art activities like drawing, painting, and building with Lego not only engage participants constructively but also provide a calming effect that helps manage sensory overload and emotional challenges. These creative outlets foster a sense of accomplishment while offering therapeutic benefits, aiding in emotional regulation and enhancing well-being. Overall, art serves as a valuable, non-verbal tool for autistic individuals to navigate their daily lives with greater comfort and confidence.

Word frequency clouds, also called word clouds or text visualizations, are graphical depictions that showcase the frequency of words within a specific body of text. The tool can provide instant insights into the dominant themes and topics discussed by participants through qualitative data analysis, like the interview data depicted in the word frequency cloud provided. Below are the Word Frequencies Cloud generated by Atlas.ti 24 from the analysis results.

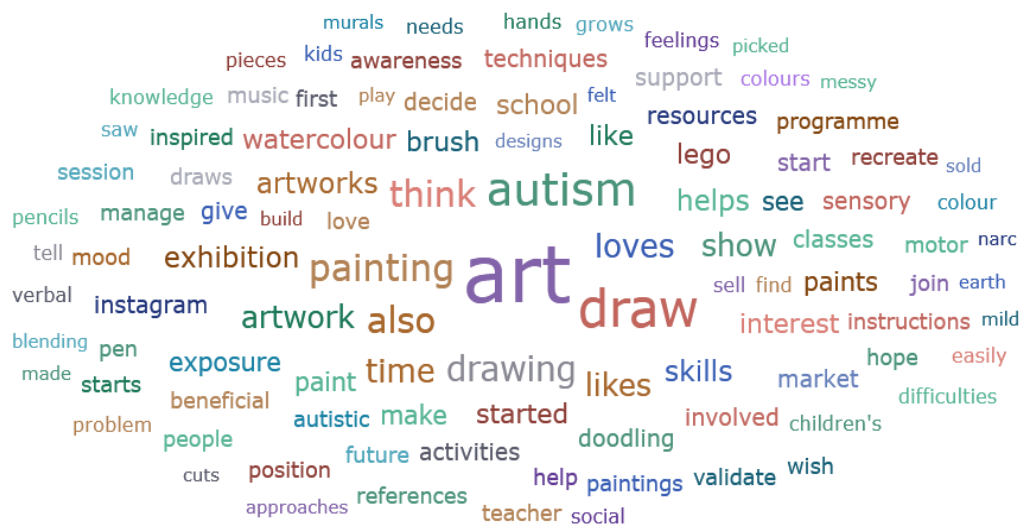


Figure 1. Preliminary Study Data Collection in Word Frequencies Cloud

The word frequency cloud above emphasizes various important terms connected to an art show and its apparent influence on people with autism.

The word frequency cloud highlights key themes with prominent words like "art," "draw," "autism," and "painting," underscoring art's importance for autistic individuals. This suggests that art is more than a hobby; it is a vital means of expression, development, and connection. Terms like "display," "talents," "affection," and "assistance" indicate the exhibit's role in showcasing autistic individuals' abilities, fostering a passion for art, and providing support, contributing to their personal and social growth.

The cloud also demonstrates a variety of art-related activities, with words like "drawing," "watercolour," "Lego," "brush," and "pencils," reflecting participants' diverse artistic interests and methods. The mention of "classes" implies that structured learning environments play a crucial role in helping participants build skills through guided artistic exploration.

Emotionally and socially, terms like "helps," "support," "inspired," "love," and "awareness" reflect art's role in enhancing well-being and social interaction. Art serves as a therapeutic outlet, allowing autistic individuals to express emotions, develop social skills, and connect with the community, thereby improving their quality of life.

Finally, words like "difficulties," "manage," "needs," and "problem" highlight challenges faced by autistic individuals in engaging with art, emphasizing the need for tailored support. "Sensory" underscores the significance of addressing sensory sensitivities, which often affect how they experience and participate in art, requiring specific accommodations to fully benefit from artistic expression.

## **5. Discussion**

This study reinforces the positive influence of art on autistic individuals by highlighting how early engagement, autonomy, and structured programs foster essential skills and well-being. Each theme underscores the therapeutic and developmental benefits of art, aligning with previous literature on art's role in supporting cognitive and emotional growth (Schweizer et al., 2020; Rojas-Torres et al., 2020).

Early exposure to art helped develop fine motor skills and provided participants with a foundation for skill progression. This theme aligns with research emphasizing the importance of early exposure to creative activities in skill acquisition (Rojas-Torres et al., 2020). Similar to theories on skill acquisition, repetitive, structured activities in art allowed for both cognitive and motor development (Mayer-Benarous et al., 2021).

Art also served as a non-verbal communication tool, crucial for those with limited verbal abilities. This aligns with findings by Sutarjo (2023), who suggested that art offers a bridge for non-verbal autistic individuals, allowing them to share emotions and stories through visual expression; like Participant A, art became a vital means of expressing emotions and connecting with others, underscoring art's role as a communicative bridge.

Sensory sensitivity was a common challenge, but adaptive strategies like specific tools and sensory breaks enabled participants to engage in art more comfortably. This supports sensory integration theories that advocate for customized environments to improve engagement (Morgan, 2019). These adaptations underscore the need for individualized approaches in art programs to cater to diverse sensory profiles among autistic individuals (Schweizer et al., 2020).

Distinct techniques and preferences for mediums, such as brushes and colours, allowed participants to express emotions while managing sensory needs. The choice of colours and tools aligned with personal preferences and sensory comfort has been shown to support both skill development and emotional resilience (Rojas-Torres et al., 2020). This suggests that colour choice may serve as an additional layer of emotional expression for autistic individuals (Schweizer et al., 2020).

Autonomy in artistic choices was significant, as caregivers encouraged independent decision-making, which aligns with self-determination theory (Grove et al., 2018). The freedom to choose art subjects helped participants build confidence and a sense of ownership over their work, fostering intrinsic motivation and a stronger sense of self, enhancing their sense of self and purpose (Rojas-Torres et al., 2020).

Structured art programs, social media, and exhibitions provided avenues for skill development and public recognition. Consistent with studies by Yucesoy et al. (2020), these programs offered autistic individuals social connections, a sense of community, and self-esteem. However, caregivers highlighted the need for more inclusive programs designed explicitly for autistic individuals. Gabarron et al. (2023) reported that social media is a valuable tool for connecting communities and accessing resources, highlighting its potential for promoting social inclusion for autistic individuals. However, caregivers reported challenges in finding art programs specifically designed for autistic individuals, indicating a need for more inclusive options.

Exploring other art forms, such as music and building blocks, offered alternative avenues for creativity and sensory engagement, aligning with studies on sensory-based play (Yustesari et al., 2023). Engaging in diverse art forms helped broaden their creative experiences and provided complementary cognitive and emotional benefits.

Caregivers used social media to promote participants' work, helping them gain financial rewards and public exposure, which aligns with findings that digital platforms support autistic artists in building sustainable careers (Gabarron et al., 2023). While social media expanded its audience, limited marketing resources hindered broader visibility. Support from teachers and caregivers was essential for navigating the art market, and financial rewards motivated participants by linking art sales to tangible benefits, reinforcing their commitment to artmaking.

Finally, art proved to be a calming activity that supported emotional regulation and provided participants with structured, self-directed engagement. Drawing, in particular, served as a stimulating activity, helping manage sensory overload and maintain stability, consistent with Schweizer et al. (2020), who discovered that art can serve as an effective self-regulation tool for autistic individuals. The ability of art to occupy time productively and provide a sense of purpose further supports its value in enhancing the quality of life, particularly for individuals who benefit from structured, repetitive, and self-directed activities (Yustesari et al., 2023).

## **6. Conclusion**

This study highlights art's profound impact on autistic individuals, offering a foundation for skill development, self-expression, sensory management, and social inclusion. Art provides a unique, non-verbal platform for communication and allows autistic individuals to engage meaningfully with their world, emphasizing the need for inclusive, accessible programs to maximize its potential. Future research could investigate the benefits of different art forms and the role of digital platforms in promoting autistic artists.

Artistic activities are shown to enhance employability for autistic individuals by enabling self-expression, developing fine motor and cognitive skills, and fostering career-related abilities. Aligning with Bernier et al. (2022), this study suggests that art serves as both a therapeutic and developmental tool, supporting growth in various domains.

Art also enhances communication for non-verbal autistic individuals, suggesting that art-based programs could be further incorporated in educational and therapeutic settings. By enabling autistic individuals to explore their creativity, these programs could help them develop skills for potential careers in the arts. Round et al. (2017) advocated for additional marketing support to help autistic artists navigate the art market, which this study also recommends.

However, the study encountered several limitations. The small sample size and the focus on a specific cultural context—Malaysia—restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. This limitation is compounded by the study's narrow demographic scope, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of autistic individuals globally. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative data from caregivers could introduce bias and affect the objectivity of the results. Future research should aim to include more extensive, more diverse samples and investigate the long-term impacts of sustained art engagement on career development for autistic individuals. Sampurno et al. (2020) discovered that expanding the research to different cultural settings and including quantitative measures alongside qualitative insights could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term benefits of art therapy for non-verbal autistic individuals. Exploring the impact of different art forms and techniques could also help tailor more personalized therapeutic interventions.

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