

Enabling and risky spaces: Autistic adults' experiences of dating apps



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Background

- Dating apps are now the most common way people meet intimate partners.
- Limited research has examined how autistic adults experience these platforms.
- Dating apps may provide opportunities for connection and relationship formation, but may also introduce risks.
- Evidence gaps remain regarding their disclosure experiences, victimisation, and relationship outcomes on dating apps.

Objectives

- Examine autistic adults' experiences with dating apps
- Explore motivations for app use
- Investigate disclosure decisions and responses to disclosure
- Analyse negative experiences across gender and sexual orientation
- Identify relationship outcomes associated with dating app use



Method

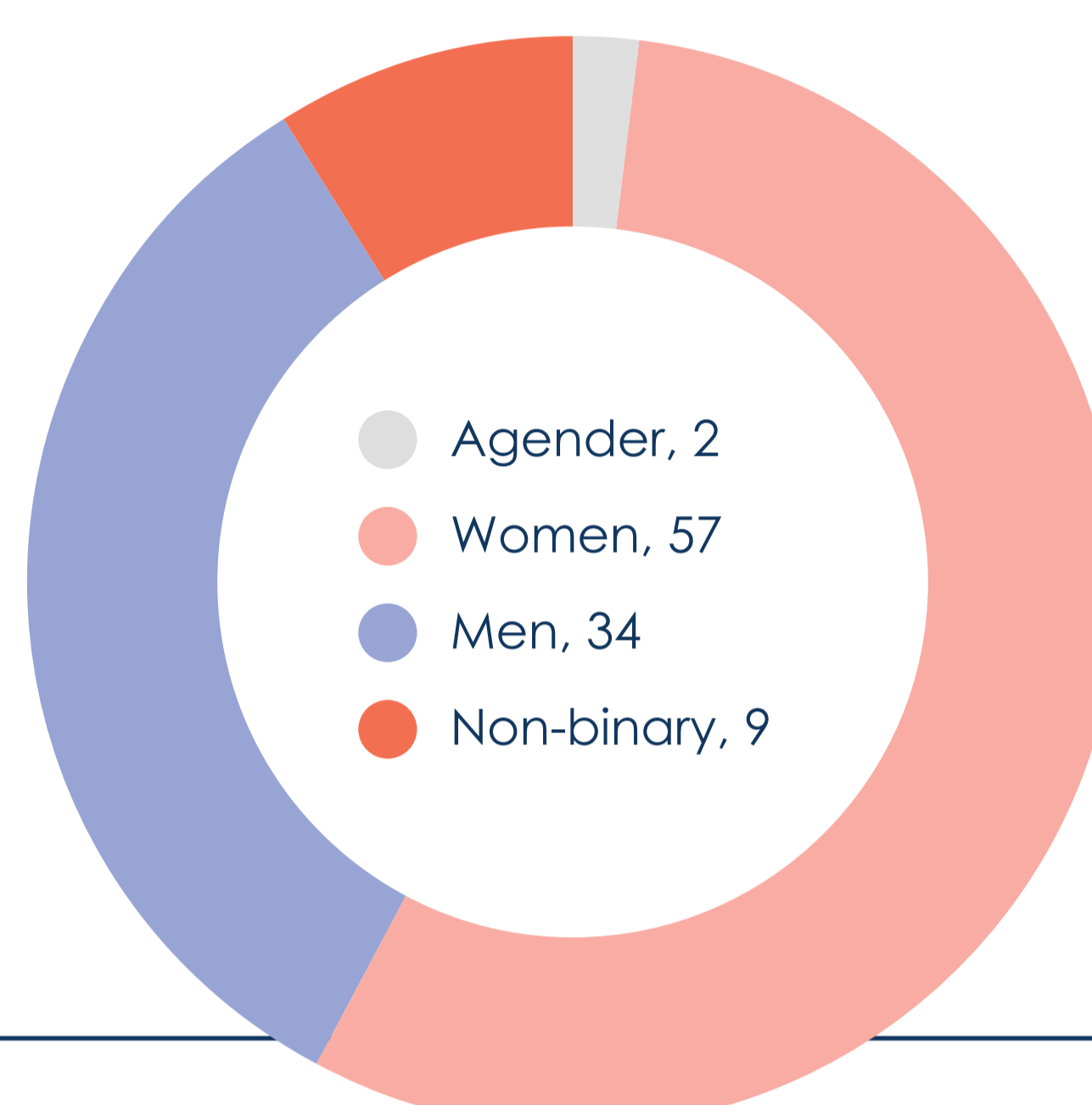
Online survey:

- dating app use
- disclosure decisions
- disclosure reasons
- responses to disclosure
- 14-item online victimisation checklist
- connections formed

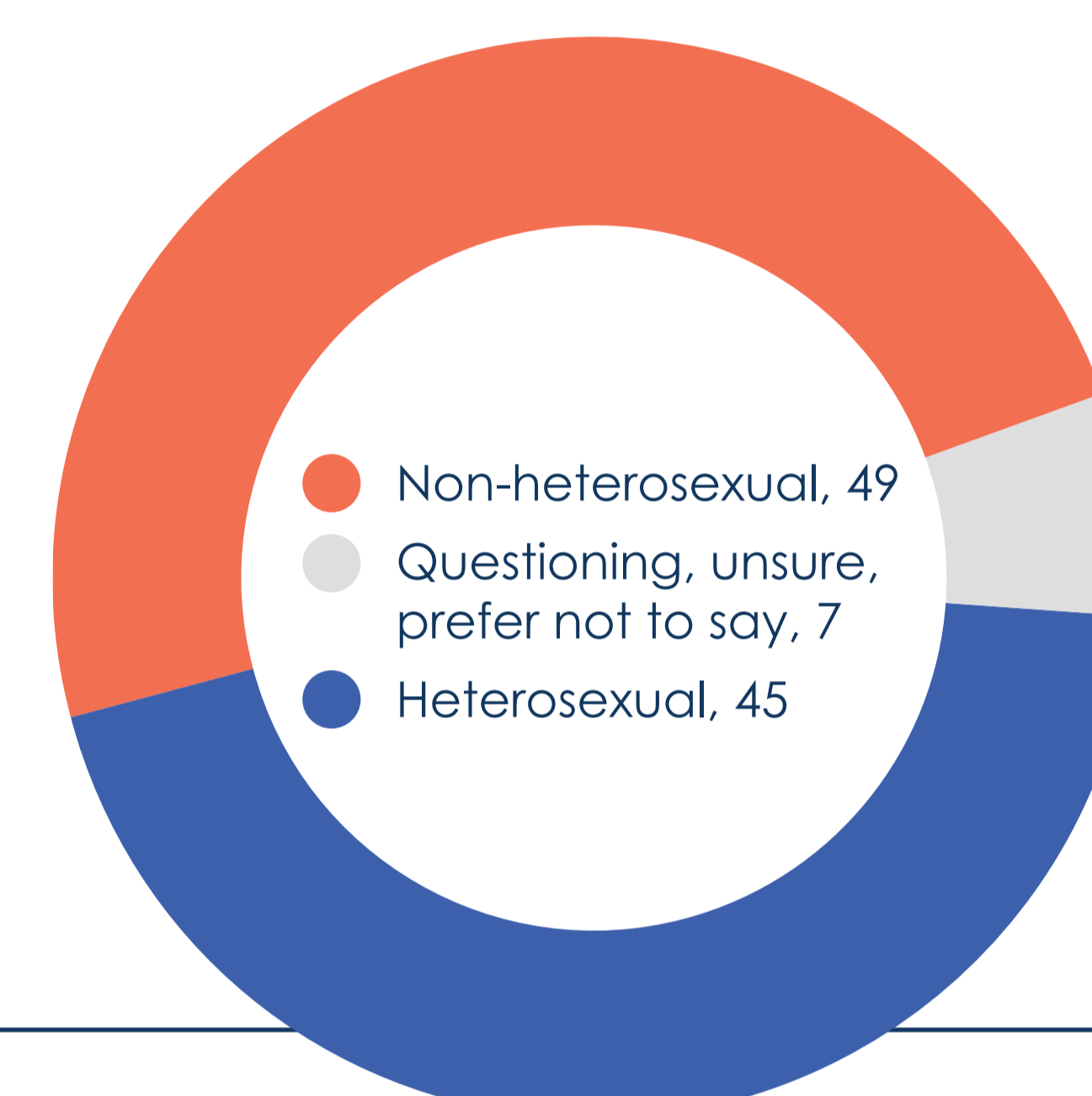
Participants

Autistic adults:
aged 18 to 69
($M_{age} = 35.52$)

Gender



Sexual orientation



Results

Connections formed

- 49% formed a long-term relationship
- 41% formed a short-term relationship
- 43% organised hook-ups
- 24% formed no relationships

Disclosure reasons

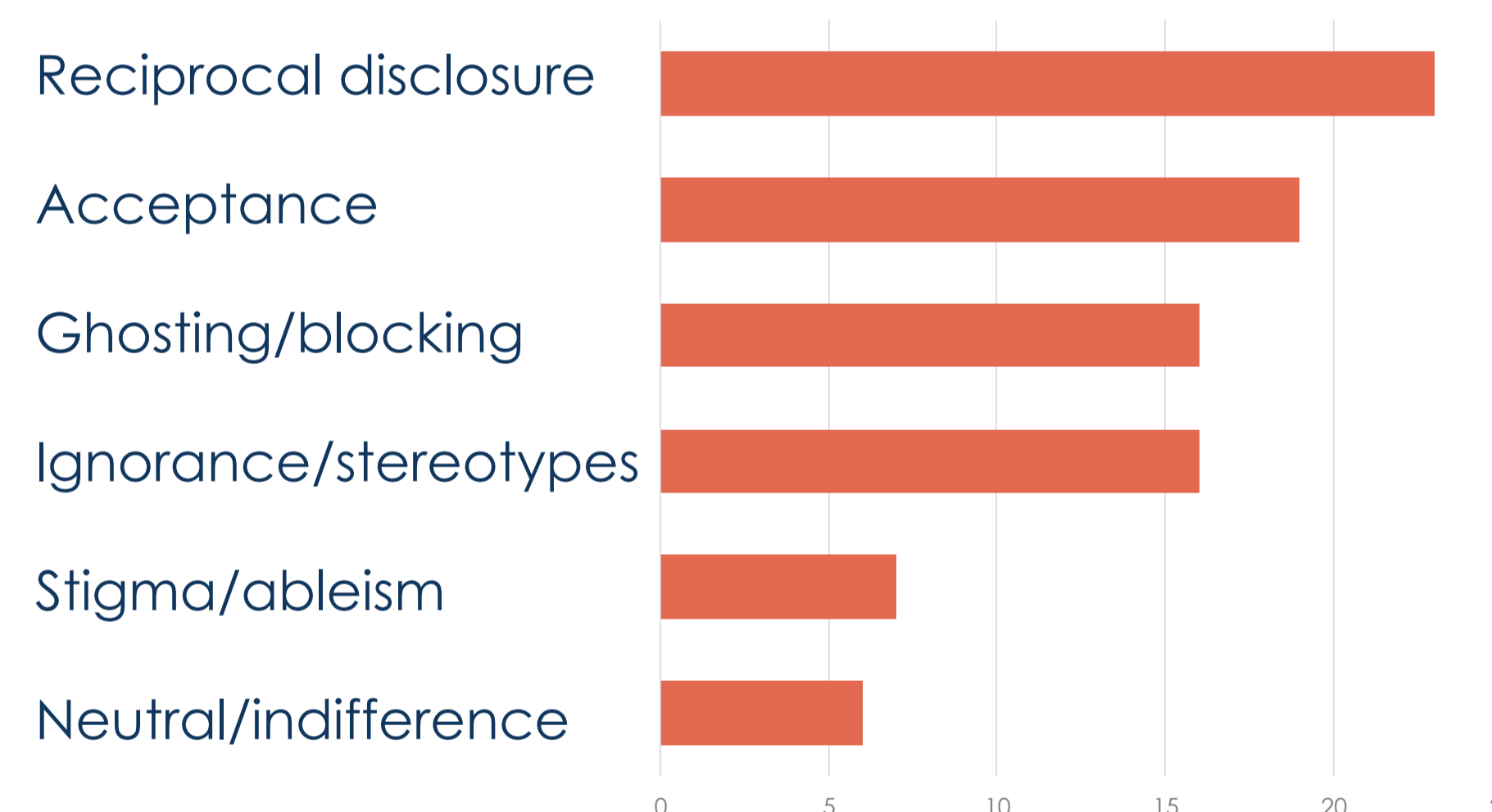
For

- Authenticity
- Filtering/efficiency
- Connecting with neurodivergent people
- Avoiding future harm

Against

- Fear of stigma and rejection
- Concerns about safety/exploitation

Responses to disclosure



66% never or rarely disclose on their profile

Online victimisation

- 43% received unwanted sexually explicit messages
- ~30% experienced repeated verbal abuse
- 20% experienced 6+ types of victimisation

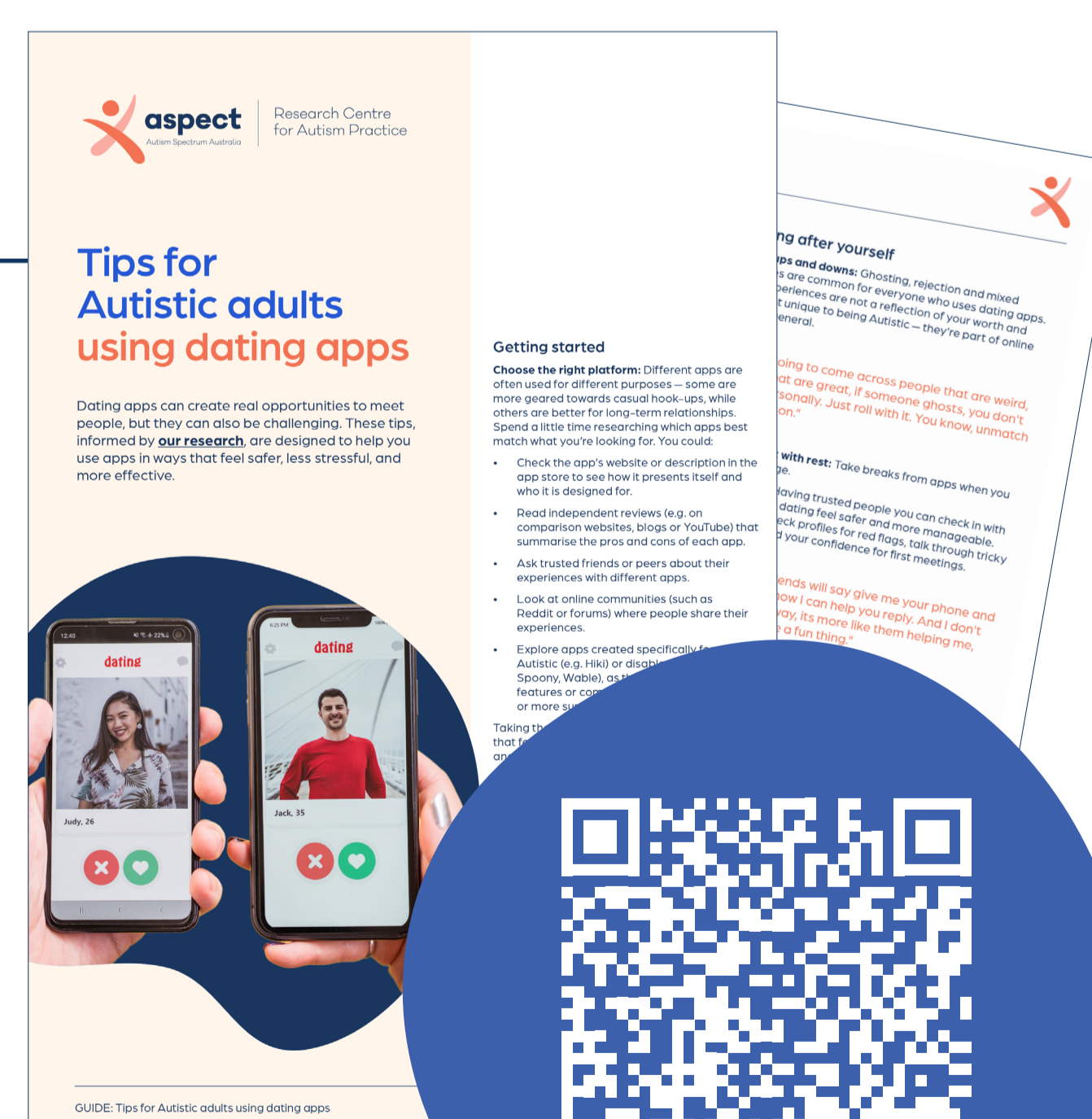
Number of victimisation types:

- Women: 4.43
- Men: 2.88
- Non-heterosexual: 4.96
- Heterosexual: 2.82

Women and non-heterosexual participants reported significantly more victimisation experiences.

Conclusion

- Apps can expand Autistic adults' opportunities for relationships but can also undermine wellbeing.
- Disclosure remains a double-edged sword.
- Greater protections are needed – safer, more inclusive platforms, broader societal efforts to reduce stigma.



Download tips for Autistic adults using dating app

Implications and Future Research

- Dating apps can offer meaningful opportunities for connection for autistic adults but also present risks such as harassment and exploitation.
- Improved platform safety, inclusive design, and guidance for autistic users may support safer engagement.
- Future research should examine protective factors, platform design, and experiences across diverse autistic populations.