‘*I feel like I need to go home and just be autistic*’:

The Perspectives of Autistic Students on Navigating Sensory Regulation in University Environments.

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I declare that this research was approved by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group.

Abstract: This dissertation investigates the experiences of autistic university students in navigating sensory regulation on campus. It adopts a mixed methods approach involving both the textual analysis of Reddit forums and 1:1 interviews with autistic university students and ex-students. The research examines the relationship between built and social environments and how these both influence the enactment of sensory regulation techniques on campus. The data reveals that sensory overwhelm continues to both impact students' experiences within the built environment and influence social interactions within the space. The findings critically examine the implementation of the Autism ASPECTSS Design Index (Mostafa: 2021) into university spaces, considering not only comfort of the individual, but also the influences of its implementation on social and communicational practices. The research supports the auditory, sequential spacing and escape space features of Design Index, albeit with a stress of the importance of lighting. Furthermore, the data reveals how the social environment continues to shape how autistic students enact sensory regulation techniques based on notions of normality, autistic visibility and embodiment. It is evident that sensory regulation continues to be viewed as a problem located within oneself, rather than an institutional failing of autistic students' sensory needs.

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1. Introduction

> *'The realm of social interaction is one context in which autistic individuals tend to consistently be disabled. An autistic child's sensory experience of the world is more intense and chaotic than that of a non-autistic child, and the ongoing task of navigating and integrating that experience thus occupies more of the autistic child's attention and energy. This means the autistic child has less attention and energy available to focus on the subtleties of social interaction. Difficulty meeting the social expectations of non-autistics often results in social rejection, which further compounds social difficulties and impedes social development.'* (Nick Walker, 2021)

This quote, from Walker's 'What is Autism?' forms the premise of this dissertation. While universities have increasingly shifted to present a more neuroaffirming pedagogy, autistic students continue to face significant struggles and drop out at higher rates than their neurotypical peers (see Cage and Howes, 2020). Rather than a deficit model, working with this definition of autism suggests the struggles of autistic students are due to an incongruity of autistic sensory needs and neurotypical university campus design.

While no data reflects the number of specifically autistic students, statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show the number of students with autism or other 'social/ communication conditions' now nationally supersedes 20,000 a trend which has been steadily increasing (Disabled Students UK, 2024). Literature suggests far higher numbers, particularly due to lack of disclosure (Hodges-Fulton and Monahan, 2025). As the autistic community becomes more prominent within higher education, it is essential to support not only their entry, but to facilitate positive experiences within.

The International Classification of Diseases (ICD) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) stress the centrality of sensory hyper/hyposensitivity in diagnosing autism (World Health Organisation, 2026; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The National Autistic Society (NAS) highlights these as 'sensory processing differences (SPD)' and, while not essential for a diagnosis, this is thought to be experienced by up to 95% of autistic people (NAS, 2026). Research has increasingly focused upon the positive outcomes

of sensory regulation and how this can benefit the sensory integration of individuals (Smith-Roley, 2001). Therefore, sensory regulation techniques (SRTs) address all actions used to manipulate sensory experiences in such a way that helps the brain to sort sensations into information, including stimming, withdrawal, sensory blocking and embodied regulation.

Combining work from psychological, geographical, sociological and educational research, the literature review establishes the importance of sensory regulation on the wellbeing of those with SPD. Much of this literature does not align with the values of the dissertation as they not only work to a medical model of disability but also utilize stigmatising narratives. However, achieving a comprehensive overview of the current state of autism research requires a reflexive engagement.

To critically engage with the literature, the review addresses calls from autistic scholars and advocates to understand where research fails to address the integration of sensory experience into social interaction. This research therefore supports the work of the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2014), providing an approach that is guided by measured difference in sensory processing, rather than disorder. Consequently, this dissertation sought to find; how do built and social environments influence autistic students' perceptions and enactments of SRTs in higher education?

Conducted through a mixed methods approach involving both the textual analysis of Reddit forums and 1:1 interviews with autistic university students and ex-students, autistic, first-person perspectives were prioritised to challenge behaviourist outcome driven research. The findings reveal how the sensory and social are impossible to extract from one another and the conclusion presents the implications of the research for university practices. While literature addresses sensory regulation and social challenges separately, there is little that explores how regulation is shaped through interactions with both space and people. Consequently, this research adopted a phenomenological approach to attend to this gap.

2. Literature Review

This review maps the current academic knowledge surrounding sensory integration and regulation techniques. It then addresses the perspectives of autistic writers who demonstrate how mainstream understandings fail to accurately conceptualise or address SRTs.

What we 'know'

'She assumes our limits are innate, our society benevolent.' (Montgomery, 2012)

Sensory integration refers to the ways in which the brain organises sensory input from the environment and body (Ayres and Robbins, 1982). There are eight sensory systems which sort input; tactile (touch), visual (sight), auditory (sound), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), proprioceptive (body awareness), vestibular (movement) and interoceptive (internal signalling). When an individual has SPD, different input may be required to allow the brain to interpret sensations correctly, often achieved through a range of behaviours known as SRTs.

Autism studies were historically based on observatory function analysis (e.g. Kanner, 1943; Fuller, 1949). These (mis)interpretations framed visible SRTs as non-functional and aimed to manipulate behaviours to conformity (see Neumeier, 2012). Through this approach, behaviours are separated from their meaning and treated in isolation (e.g. Koegel and Koegel, 1990). Applied behaviour analysis (ABA) was accordingly widely adopted (Dixon et al., 2012), in which positive reinforcement and undesired consequences were used to encourage desired behaviours. This shaped the dominant understanding around autistic behavioural 'treatment' (Foxx, 2008). ABA has come under criticism in recent years from autistic advocates (Loud Hands Project and Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2012 pp.177-220), as well as in established sociological academia (Kirkham, 2017; Wilkenfeld and McCarthy, 2020; Anderson, 2022), encouraging a move from observational research towards first-person perspectives. While the autistic community have widely established SRTs as multifunctional, it is important to understand how psychological research continues to influence mainstream understandings and perceptions in potentially harmful ways.

Much of the foundational work around the use and benefits of SRTs is grounded in paediatric psychology. Studies have increasingly sought to understand autistic sensory experiences in childhood (see Boterberg and Warreyn, 2016; Baranek et al., 2006; Blanche et al., 2012) and some neurobiologists have begun to conduct research into the differences in autistic brain rhythms (see McCarty and Brumback, 2021). Such focuses in scholarship do suggest that academic narratives around SRTs and stims are shifting from a 'non-functional' approach. Educational psychology has focused upon regulatory techniques encouraging child engagement and attention (see Leinfuss and O'Hara, 2024; Pingale et al., 2019) and as such, there has been increasing use of sensory diets, movement breaks and other SRTs in SEN and primary mainstream classroom settings (Mere-Cook, 2016; Biel, 2017; Greene, 2017), but this implementation has not been developed to higher education.

Despite the shift in pedagogical understanding, behaviourist research continues to dominate the field of disability. Research remains observation-based and lacks qualitative feedback from participants into individual understanding of regulation. Strategies such as the 'Zones of Regulation' intervention model (see Kuypers, 2025) provide opportunity for formative sensory education, which anecdotally appear to be positively viewed by students (Goerdt, 2025). Still, practical evaluation continues to focus upon observational occupational performance (see Peters et al., 2024). Therefore, while paediatric research has increasingly focused upon sensory regulation, their methods perpetuate that behavioural observation must be how outcome is measured.

Similarly, there is a dearth of post-paediatric research into facilitating sensory integration, focussing instead on behavioural patterns. Age appears to be an important factor in the enactment of visible SRTs as they seem to reduce as an individual gets older, which historically and pathologically has been measured as 'improvement' (Kanner, 1943, p. 249, Chowdhury et al., 2010). However, reflective accounts shed light on this as increasing internalised physical restraint in response to social environment, rather than a reduction of need (Zisk, 2012).

This reveals how behavioural 'fixing' continues to be prioritised above behavioural understanding (see Petscher et al., 2009). There is an almost complete focus on adapting the individual to the environment, reinforcing the 'individual model of disability' (Oliver, 1983).

Within the educational research outlined above, positive outcomes are measured based upon observations on attention, stillness and academic achievement (Pingale et al., 2019). Indeed, Tomchek et al. address this as a limitation of their study into patterns of sensory processing (2014). While such measurements may indicate a regulated student, they are not informant, as many students may choose to mask for positive societal feedback (discussed below), while still struggling internally with dysregulation and low self-esteem (Vivian, 2012).

What we ought to know

'It is also up to the non-autistic to reciprocate in this communication exercise.' (Sequenzia, 2012)

Since current academic literature does not appropriately address the meanings of SRTs or social factors that may de-influence an autistic person from stimming, we must move the metaphorical goalposts toward holistic wellbeing understandings. The dominance of the normative approach highlights the 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2012) that pervades society; deviation from 'neurotypicality' can be displayed as a deficit of the autistic individual, rather than failure of two social actors to communicate in a manner effective for both parties. In moving these goalposts from such normative interpretations, a sociological approach must be taken to understand meaning-making behind behaviour and how these may be socially and spatially influenced. To do so, it is important to address the lived experience of autistic advocates (Loud Hands Project and Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2012). Autistic behaviour is often misinterpreted by not only neurotypical peers (Edey et al., 2016) but also by experts. Walker observes that 'some of the most pernicious nonsense... has come from the mouths of highly credentialed professionals' (2018, p.103).

Due to the observational nature of much of this autism research, harmful impacts of dysregulation on the individual's mental health and wellbeing are often overlooked, so long as the individual presents as visibly 'normal'. However, there has increasingly been a focus by autistic scholars into the link between autistic embodiment and their social experiences (see Leong, 2012; Walker, 2018). Sensory dysregulation can be physically painful for an autistic person- sometimes described as 'sensory trauma' (Fulton et al., 2020)- and so using SRTs to regulate bodies is essential.

The term 'autistic behaviours' is used to generalise a wide spectrum of actions and therefore, it is important to interpret meanings behind actions rather than the nature of the behaviour itself (Bowden, 2024). Whilst predominantly reactionary to sensorily overwhelming environments, some behaviours are used as a communication tool (Chiang, 2008) and others provide feedback to regulate the body (Bascom, 2012, p.180). Critically for educational understanding, there are a small selection of articles which have conceptualised

stimming as a tool to improve cognitive functioning (Tancredi and Abrahamson, 2024), which advocates endorse (Kim, 2013). Stims are often reactive to the 'demands of spaces' (Petty and Clegg, 2025) and it is therefore important to understand environments as disabling rather than problematising the individual. By adopting Oliver's social model of disability (1983), spaces can be read as possessing societally implemented barriers rather than assuming dysregulation as an individual deficit.

In managing sensorily demanding environments, autistic people often must rely upon the use of SRTs. Usually, these act to either provide familiar feedback, reduce/increase sensory stimuli or to manage stressful environments (NAS, 2025). They may be visible and physical manifestations, such as hand-flapping, eye tracking or echolalic (repeated) vocal stims, which provide familiarity or preferred sensory feedback to help to reduce anxiety in unfamiliar spaces or situations (Petty and Clegg, 2025). Other SRTs may be more localised, responding to an environment that is sensorily overwhelming by reducing sensory input and allowing the body to process sensory input at a level manageable for the individual (Herren, 2012; Doherty, 2025). This may require external objects, such as headphones, sunglasses or hoods to block out additional sensory input. They may also be full body movements that help to integrate an individual's proprioceptive or vestibular senses to adapt to a space (Cheldavi et al., 2014; Kaviraja, 2021). Furthermore, 'risky behaviours' such as drug and alcohol consumption and disordered eating may be used to manage sensory differences (Weir et al., 2021) or provide input (Gray-Hammond and Adkin, 2023). Regulation strategies are person-dependent but provide similar outcomes in that they calm dysregulated nervous systems and help individuals organise sensations into information.

Since it has been established that spaces can be sensorily overwhelming, a distinction shall be made between the influences of built and social environments.

'Built environment' refers to how the physical characteristics of a space can provide dysregulating sensory input. The concept of a 'disabling environment' has been addressed in geographic and sociological scholarship (Hall, 2016; Swain et al., 2014), which has been followed by an interest into spatial redesign to aid sensory regulation. This has included use of the digital world to allow communication without sensory impact (Hall, 2016, p.6) and how stimulus reduction can facilitate accessibility (Gopan, 2025). Despite the deep diversity

of autistic sensory profiles, prominent commonalities emerge; namely auditory, tactile, visual and olfactory overwhelm (Habbak and Khodeir, 2022). In paediatrics, research has ventured into sensory features in school environments (e.g. Martin, 2014; Birkett et al., 2022, Rajotte et al., 2024). To address this, an architectural sensory index known as the Autism ASPECTSS Design Index (see Mostafa, 2015; 2021) has been established, which focuses upon considerations that must be made in designing educational and living spaces for autistic people. This index shall be utilised within the 'Findings and Discussion' chapter.

While geographical spaces may provide the location for sensory regulation to be required, a population that are judgmental or unsupportive of visible stims can create a restrictive 'social environment'. Given that that visible normalcy does not equate to a regulated individual, a sociological approach must be taken in relation to spatial literature, to understand how individuals act relational to their environment.

Sensory issues are far less noted by proxy in comparison to self-report studies (Petty and Clegg, 2025). This discrepancy proves how the sensory sensitivities of autistic people are socially underrecognized and consequently misunderstood and ignored. Oliver indeed notes how public consciousness relegates disability to the private sphere and encourages fitting to 'as near a normal state as possible' (1983, p.15), thus reinstating normative regulation of bodies. These interpretations attribute to the perpetuation of neuro non-affirming spaces. Even environments created *for* autistic people – such as therapies or day-schemes – remain largely guided by these problematic approaches (Dallman et al., 2022). Embodied conformity is therefore adopted, to maintain an appearance of 'normalcy' in neurotypically dominated spaces- commonly known as 'masking'. While social benefits of masking are cited insomuch that they allow for autistic people to 'fit' into neurotypical spaces (Zisk, 2012), the negative effects of compensation on holistic individual wellbeing have been attested (Livingston et.al., 2019; Morris et al., 2025). This displays a discrepancy between desired and normative embodiment for autistic people which requires them to self-survey and 'adopt a mask' (see Vaz and Bruno, 2003) that is socially accepted. This may not necessarily create environments that require SRTs but does form one that restricts it.

Building upon this understanding of dysregulating built environments and restrictive social environments, it is critical to understand how the two interact. Forcing oneself to restrict

stims can be doubly detrimental to the dysregulated individual. Not only are they unable to access the sensory feedback they require, they also are obligated to exert effort to actively suppress movements (Sagar et al., 2023). This can affect individuals physically; in that they must force their bodies to remain dysregulated, and mentally; due to awareness that they must adapt themselves to be socially accepted (Charlton et al., 2021). Within bioethics, this has been addressed as the 'hidden labour of disability' (Scully, 2010). Reflective writings from autistic advocates have increasingly elbowed their way into mainstream understanding. These accounts illustrate the internal detriment that forcing autistic bodies to 'normalize' (Winter, 2012, p.115) leads to for mental health, self-esteem and self-determination. Therefore, such factors should be considered in 'outcome' measurement.

While SRTs have long been established as behavioural, they must also be understood as relational and interactional, since 'all behaviour in the presence of another is communicative' (Watzlawick and Beavin, 1967). Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) may be used to communicate sensory overwhelm when unable to verbally (Whitlock et al., 2014). Kapp et al. (2019) demonstrated how skin-picking and head banging were both signifiers of stress. Another study found that alternate sensory stimulation resulted in a complete removal of NSSI for one individual (Moseley et al., 2019) displaying how when meanings are properly understood, it can be extremely beneficial in reducing 'negative stims'. But stims do not have to signify negative emotions. Several participants in Kapp et al. (2019) presented how hand flapping signified happiness to those who understood their behaviours. Autistic people note they identify other autistic people by their stims and feel an affinity which even can encourage stimming by signalling the space as safe (Baggs, 2012). Therefore, stims can be important for other autistic people in navigating 'safe' environments and as a form of non-verbal communication. A recent qualitative study by Bates et al. (2026) supported stimming as communicative and revealed how stims are responsive to social environment but did not address the role of spatial factors.

Essentially, understanding stims from autistic people's perspectives is vital in suitable and meaningful communication, (a relationship further discussed within the methodology chapter). By inadequately conceptualising SRTs, academia risks both the inappropriate extrapolation of paediatric findings to autistic adults and the neglect of their distinct needs.

In establishing not only how SRTs are essential for maintaining wellbeing, but also how environments can be influential upon embodiment, it is evident that sensory regulation remains severely absent in universities. Several sociological studies reference sensory issues within higher education environments (Gurbuz et al., 2018 Van Hees et al., 2014; Knott and Taylor, 2013; Anderson et al., 2017; Pinder-Amaker, 2014; Shmulsky and Gobbo, 2013). However, they continued to present sensory sensitivities and social difficulties as disparate, ignoring their intersections (see Knott and Taylor, 2013; Gurbuz et al., 2018; Pinder- Amaker, 2014). A pertinent issue from the perspectives of autistic students was lack of awareness about autism in the environment and dealing with the associated stigma (see Van Hees et al., 2014). Sensory barriers to social inclusion have been addressed in both geography (Madriaga, 2010) and nursing (Mulder and Cashin, 2014), but these studies do not address how autistic students navigate embodiment and regulation in these spaces.

Overall, this review highlights the importance of sensory regulation in allowing students to participate in educational settings. While there has increasingly been research on paediatric sensory integration, this is limited for higher education and remains guided by a behavioural observation approach whereby the individual's wellbeing is less considered. Moreover, the literature on autistic university experiences continues to separate the sensory and social as distinctly different from one another. Understanding not only the importance of SRTs for autistic students, but also how social and built environments shape enactment requires further development to improve facilitation and support.

3. Methodology

'We can speak (or write or sign or type) for ourselves, and it's time to listen.' (Silberman, 2012)

This dissertation took a qualitative, multi-method research design to explore autistic students' experiences of sensory regulation within higher education. A qualitative phenomenological approach was selected as it is particularly well suited to examining lived experience, meaning-making, and subjective interpretations of everyday environments (Howard et al., 2019). Given that sensory regulation is both highly individual and context dependent, methods that prioritise depth, flexibility, and participant voice were essential to addressing the research question. To this, methodological triangulation was used to increase both the breadth and depth of the data and to strengthen findings through cross-validation.

The design followed a two-stage, sequential process of data collection and analysis. The first stage involved an inductive textual analysis of online forum discussions, which allowed for the identification of shared points of view, language, and experiences across a geographically diverse group of autistic students. This initial phase was intentionally exploratory and participant-led, enabling themes to emerge from naturally occurring discussions rather than from researcher-imposed assumptions. The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews with autistic university students and graduates. Findings from the online analysis were used to inform the interview, ensuring links between the two data sources and allowing for deeper exploration and clarification of issues already identified as salient by autistic individuals themselves. This sequential design enabled the research to move from breadth to depth, while remaining grounded in autistic perspectives.

Methodological decisions were informed by principles of ethical and participatory autism research, particularly those outlined by Nicolaidis et al. (2019), emphasising the importance of respect, accessibility, transparency, and meaningful involvement of autistic people across all stages of the process. This framework was particularly relevant given longstanding critiques of research as extractive or misaligned with the priorities of autistic communities (Pellicano and Stears, 2011; Pellicano et al., 2013). As such, the methodology was designed not only to generate data but also ensure that the research was conducted with sensitivity

to power dynamics, communication preferences, and the emotional labour often involved in discussing personal experiences of sensory difficulty.

The first stage of data collection involved textual analysis of discussions posted on Reddit, an international online forum that hosts topic-specific communities known as subreddits. Reddit was selected due to its widespread use among autistic individuals and its function as an online 'third space' (Rizzo et al., 2012) where many autistic people report finding community, support, and shared understanding (Davidson, 2008). Previous research has suggested that autism-focused online forums contain relatively low levels of medical misinformation (Cadwell-Harris et al., 2023) and function primarily as spaces for peer support and experience-based knowledge sharing (ibid.), making them a particularly appropriate site for identifying commonly shared challenges and coping strategies.

The platform allows users to engage anonymously, which can reduce social pressures and enable more open discussion of sensitive or stigmatised experiences. As users do not typically disclose identifying information such as location, age, or institutional affiliation, the data collected could not be geographically situated. While this limited the ability to contextualise experiences within specific national or institutional frameworks, it also enabled access to a broader international population of autistic students and graduates, aligning with the exploratory aims of the first stage of data collection.

Data was collected from the autism subreddit using the search term 'sensory regulation at university'. Due to the high volume of posts, the sample was limited to the ten most recent discussion threads at the time of collection, making a total of twenty-two comments. This approach prioritised relevance while ensuring the dataset remained manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis (Smedley and Coulson, 2018). The decision to analyse existing discussions rather than initiate new posts was guided by ethical considerations, as it avoided disrupting established community dynamics or placing additional demands on forum users.

Using Reddit data offered several methodological strengths. Most notably, it provided access to naturally occurring, participant-generated accounts that were not shaped by the presence or expectations of a researcher. This reduced the likelihood of social desirability bias and allowed for the analysis of how individuals frame their experiences when speaking to peers

rather than a researcher (Devotta et al., 2016). Additionally, the forum functioned as a space where users sought advice, shared personal stories, and discussed aspects of autistic experience that may not be addressed in a research context, offering valuable insight into issues that might otherwise remain underreported. However, the observational nature of the analysis meant that no rapport could be established with participants, and clarification or follow-up questions were not possible. Interpretation therefore relied entirely on textual content, increasing the potential for misinterpretation of intent or contextual nuance. Awareness of assumptions and a consequent reflexive approach encouraged exploration of interpretations and meanings within the following interviews. While the Reddit sample may overrepresent individuals who are confident using online platforms and potentially exclude those with different communicational needs or limited digital access, adopting a mixed-methods approach helped to manage sample limitations as the interviews did not require platform use.

The second data collection stage involved semi-structured interviews with six autistic university students and graduates. This method was selected to allow participants to explore their experiences in depth while maintaining sufficient flexibility to accommodate diverse communication styles and priorities. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited to research with autistic participants, as they allow for conversational flow while providing a predictable structure to reduce anxiety (McLeod et al., 2013). Importantly, the interview guide was informed by findings of the Reddit analysis, enabling a focus upon topics that had emerged organically within autistic peer discussions, rather than relying solely on theoretical assumptions.

Participants were recruited using response-based sampling. Adverts were posted within autism and neurodiversity networks, including university societies and social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Additionally, recruitment was conducted through personal connections with the intention of establishing trust, framing the research as conducted *for* autistic people rather than *on* autistic people, as advocated by Cridland et al. (2015). While this approach facilitated engagement with participants and appeared to contribute to participants' willingness to share openly, it also restricted the boundaries of the sample. The study does not include autistic individuals who were unable to access

higher education due to sensory or other barriers, and as such cannot fully account for experiences of exclusion to university entry. As such, the limitations of the sample are reflective of the barriers that universities continue to present for people with SPD.

Prior to participation, all interviewees were provided with a participant information sheet and consent form, alongside a list of preliminary topics to be discussed during the interview. This was intended to allow informed consent and allow participants time to prepare, in recognition that autistic individuals may benefit from prior knowledge of interview content (Nicolaidis et al., 2019). Participants were given the choice of conducting the interview either online or in person, both for reasons of accessibility and in response to research indicating that some autistic individuals find online communication preferable to face-to-face (Hall, 2016). Two interviews were conducted in person in private, pre-booked campus rooms, while four were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Online interviews were transcribed using the platform's transcription function, with recordings reviewed to correct any errors. In-person interviews were recorded via private Teams calls and transcribed using the same process.

Ethical considerations extended beyond written consent and were continued throughout the research process, following the guidelines of the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2017). At the end of each interview, participants were informed about how the data would be analysed and given the opportunity to ask further questions about the study. Once transcribed, interviews were returned to participants for respondent validation, allowing them to review, amend and clarify their contributions and ensuring that the data accurately reflected what they intended to communicate. This process was to mitigate potential misunderstandings and to maintain participants' involvement in the research beyond data collection. Consent for analysis was obtained once participants had approved their transcripts, returned a written consent form and given verbal consent after completion of the interview. Although literature on participatory autism research suggests that multiple interview stages can further enhance participant involvement (Macleod et al., 2013), time constraints on both the researcher's and participants' behalf made this unfeasible. To partially address this limitation, participants were invited via email to provide additional reflections or feedback following the interview.

Reflexivity was a central component of the methodological approach. As a non-autistic researcher diagnosed as neurodivergent (ADHD), I occupied an insider–outsider position, as described by Griffith (1998). This positionality facilitated rapport, particularly as several participants identified as AuDHD, and appeared to contribute to a relaxed and open interview environment. Most participants asked why I had started this project, and I explained that I have spent 4 years working with autistic children at schools. This appeared to establish trust that the research was guided by a genuine interest. However, it also required reflexive attention to assumptions of shared understanding, and the potential influence of familiarity on interpretation. To mitigate these risks, participants were asked to clarify key terms and concepts, such as burnout, overstimulation, and sensory issues, to avoid assuming common definitions. This approach aligns with Breen's (2007) caution that familiarity can lead to a loss of analytical distance if not continually examined.

Once all transcripts were approved, identifying details such as names, specific locations, or institutions were altered to maintain anonymity. Participants were given pseudonyms, and references to specific spaces were replaced with descriptive labels (e.g social study space 1). All recordings and transcripts were stored on a university-protected OneDrive and destroyed upon dissertation completion. Participants were reminded verbally and in writing before and after their interviews of their right to withdraw from the study until the 1st of April, as by this point in the research data would be too firmly embedded within analysis, given the project's completion date was the 29th of April.

Data analysis for both stages followed a thematic analytical approach. The Reddit data was analysed first to identify initial patterns and recurring themes. Following transcription, interview data was subjected to a second round of thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006) guided the analytical process, ensuring continual engagement with the data and ongoing reflexivity. A combination of inductive and deductive coding was employed, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also engaging with concepts identified in existing literature. Themes were refined through iterative comparison across both datasets, and final findings were developed through the corroboration of online and interview data. This integrative approach strengthened the analytical rigour of the study and

ensured that conclusions were grounded in multiple forms of participant-generated evidence.

4. Findings and Discussion

Overall, listening to the voices within this research highlighted that university as an environment shapes the relationships between disabled and non-disabled actors which, in turn, shape the experiences of autistic students. The findings conclude that social challenges are often structurally reproduced by the sensory environment. Similarly, normative expectations implicit within the social environment forces autistic students to manage their visibility whilst coping with dysregulation.

Aligning with current SPD and autism comorbidity statistics (NAS, 2026), all respondents on Reddit and in interviews expressed a difference from neurotypicality in how they experienced university as a sensory environment. While individuals experienced different sensory profiles, commonalities pervaded the findings as to where dysregulation occurred. Respondents' perspectives were underpinned by an assumption that sensory differences are a problem located within the individual and, as such, SRTs were seen as an extremely personal matter. The findings of this research elicit two clear outcomes; (1) physical sensory space impact social relations and (2) social relations define how autistic students deal with sensory integration.

Thus, this chapter is structured into two subsections. The first will employ a sociological spatial analysis into why and how students use SRTs, with reference to the Autism ASPECTSS Design Index (Mostafa, 2021) and its' uses as a design framework. The second subchapter shall address how students navigate social interactions and expectations in SRT use within university settings.

Built Environment

This section demonstrates how physical features of the university provides sensory barriers to accessing different spaces on campus. ASPECTSS is an architectural design framework (henceforth referred to as 'the Index') that aims to respond to the sensory needs of autistic people in 'built environments' and has been developed to fit to the needs of educational and home spaces. Recently, this was developed upon with researchers at Dublin City University to provide an 'Autism Friendly University Design Guide' (Mostafa, 2021) as part of a wider neuroaffirming initiative (Dublin City University, 2022). Mostafa's assessment of the implementation of the Index in schools addresses certain 'social implications', however the discussion is brief and focusses upon self-image and societal perceptions.

Adopting sociological spatial analysis adds empirical evidence of autistic students', not only for the benefit of the Index design on sensory regulation, but also for the consequent positive social repercussions. Respondents discussed issues of auditory, olfactory, tactile and visual sensory integration and processing difficulties. The three most frequently mentioned of the seven principles shall be discussed: auditory, sequential spacing and escape space. The importance of lighting shall be addressed, suggesting that instead of a secondary design feature, it should be considered one of the foundational principles.

Acoustics

> 'I just feel like normal volume is loud for me. So, then what's loud for everyone else is painful to me.' (Ruby)

Aligning with current knowledge, auditory sensory overwhelm was particularly notable for participants. The Index organises areas by stimulus intensity (eg. low/ high-stimulus zone) so that spaces can be designed based upon its' use. Teaching spaces such as lecture halls should be considered low-stimulus zones and therefore adopt design features that reduce sensory input, such as wall mounted sound-absorbent materials (Mostafa, 2021, pp.49-50). Notwithstanding, lecture halls were especially acoustically challenging. Ellen and Poppy, as

well as some online respondents, expressed frustration with their lecturers due to auditory overwhelm, especially in relation to microphone feedback and irritation with lecturer vocal intonations. One Reddit user commented on their lecturer's 'scratchy, jarring voice'. In forums, this appeared to strain relationships between respondents and their peers, with annoyance arising from classmate's inabilities to remain quiet. One respondent had been told to 'just ignore' chatty peers, the same response Poppy received about a perpetual buzzing from the lights which distracted her. Ellen similarly said her dream lecture hall would be void of anything that 'makes that whirr sound'. To mitigate, participants strategically placed themselves in quieter areas of the lecture theatre. Interviewees and forum users sometimes also used noise cancelling headphones. This suggested that experiences of auditory sensory disintegration for participants were impactful on their relationship with the space and those within it (Anderson et al., 2017). Therefore, an adaptation that should be addressed by the university is invalidated and left to be navigated by the individual.

Sequential spacing

Sequential spatial organisation refers to environments where the intended use and sensory expectations of a space are clearly structured and predictable. When spaces lack clear direction about their function, they can create uncertainty about appropriate behaviour and sensory expectations (Mostafa, 2021). Spaces that failed to have clear and direct sensory expectations, norms and uses were difficult to navigate for respondents. A common theme was that of confusion over how to use 'social study spaces';

> 'I don't really understand if it's meant to be a silent place or not. Because I know it's not officially, but the vibe seems to be that.' (Ruby)

> 'I don't necessarily mind having lots of people around if they're also working, so I don't mind the library because you're in an environment that feels like everyone's working, but going back to that [social study space] example, that's [neurotypical peoples'] social space so I don't get how they work there.' (Dylan)

Instead of being able to rely upon clearly signposted social expectations, the individual had to themselves interpret the social norms and assess whether it was a sensorily appropriate place to work. For some, the library was an adequate workspace since it was low-stimulus and had clear behavioural expectations.

> ‘I like the library because there's not many people in there. And you have to be quiet in there, and the bit we go to, you can't really eat in there, so there's no noise or smells.’ (Ellen)

However, some interviewees like Ruby, Dylan, Toby and Poppy found their library layouts made them stressful environments to be in, due to physical features that affected the acoustics, layout and overall comfort of the space.

> ‘Some libraries are just completely empty nowadays no divides, it's just a completely open room and you can see everyone moving and talking around you.’ (Toby)

> ‘It's one where it's almost doughnut shaped and there's three-story buildings around, but I always find it's quite loud in there and it echoes. I just find it quite a hard space to focus in.’ (Dylan)

It appeared silent libraries were a space of where sequential spacing was afforded, but comfort still denied due to auditory design failure, reiterating the importance of adopting all aspects of the Index. Places with ambiguous spatial and sensory expectations often led autistic students either to avoid these environments entirely or to experience tension with peers whose behaviour did not align with their expectations of the space. Frustration with the situation frequently caused withdrawal from spaces, creating sites of exclusion. While neurotypical students appear to tolerate spatial ambiguity, autistic students were required to interpret and mediate ‘rules’ of a space. Therefore, exclusion was structural rather than interpersonal- but presented social challenges.

Escape Space

Aligning with well-established literature, respondents discussed a need for a low-stimulus space to retreat and regulate after experiencing overwhelm (Neville et al., 2024). The Index labelled this ‘Escape Space’. Since respondent’s’ campuses did not provide purposeful escape spaces, save one university’s sensory rooms (addressed below), respondents deferred to alternate means causing specific social barriers. Issues concerning escape space were often focussed upon an inability to escape, and a lack of viable escape space options. The Index suggests a range of clearly signposted and easily accessible escape spaces around campus (Mostafa, 2021, pp.53-55), to avoid reliance upon ‘random’ rooms, as is the current experience of autistic students.

> ‘If I'm not at the end, then I can't get up, even though I wouldn't get up because it was awkward. But if I wanted to get up theoretically, then I wouldn't be able to if I'm not at the end of a row, but I wouldn't get up anyway, but you know, the idea I can't get up.’ (Ellen)

> ‘And then that starts to make me panic because I think there's nothing I can do about it. And I'm trapped in the row and, like, I'm so hot, and what am I gonna do?’ (Ruby)

This sense of restriction in lectures was echoed across participants. While Ellen described the discomfort of physically being unable to leave a row without social disruption, Ruby similarly discussed how lack of ability to exit intensified panic during sensory overload. Autistic students faced difficulties in that they felt pressure to comply to social norms in lectures and would often face sensory overwhelm in halls without an ‘accepted’ opportunity to escape.

As for finding escape spaces, unused rooms were relied on heavily for respite from the sensory overwhelm of crowded spaces. This appeared to be both a common recommendation on Reddit and technique used by interviewees;

> ‘I think mainly there just wasn't anywhere accessible to go. I tended not to go to places where there were lots of people already there. Often, if I had a spare hour in between, and I had to find somewhere to take a break, I'd often go to like a lecture theatre that was empty.’ (Toby)

> ‘Find quiet places around campus where you can go for a bit of alone space. This could be an unpopular cafe or some random end of a library that no one uses much.’ (Reddit User)

While this proved a popular method, it requires autistic students to consistently assess and seek out quiet areas on campus. It remains an individual strategy, rather than an institutional accommodation. Since users establish that escape spaces are mainly used when dysregulated, autistic students not only were required to do additional mental work to find somewhere but had to do so when already experiencing overwhelm.

On escape spaces on campus designed specifically with neurodivergent students in mind, there was consensus over which were and weren't useful. Ellen and Toby, who attended the same university for their undergraduate studies both described their displeasure with the sensory rooms on their campus. While inside the room was a low-stimulus environment (quiet, low-lit), it required going through a high-stimulus (loud, busy) social space to enter. Ellen noted how she would rather use other informal ‘escape spaces’;

> ‘If anything, I think it'd be probably more productive for me to go and like cry in the toilet than like trek out to the sensory room to sit in the dark.’

An idea echoed by Toby in discussion of the placement of the room;

> ‘I think they opened that in a really obscure place. So it was behind one of the most busy places on campus. So I just thought, why on earth did they put it there? You're just going to avoid going there if it's located there.’

Despite the supposed availability of the sensory room, it was not functional due to impractical placement. Escape spaces should be clearly signposted and able to be accessed without the navigation of high-stimulus or social spaces (Mostafa, 2021). Autistic students with theoretical access to purpose-built escape space still had to assess its uses and opt to use informal methods just as much as those who did not have sensory rooms on campus.

Lighting

> ‘My college is painted bright white everywhere with the fluorescent lighting everywhere. Completely inescapable.’ (Reddit User)

The Index addresses lighting as a ‘barrier to effective accessibility’ within the Index. However, these findings suggest that lighting is a particularly pertinent issue in facilitating inclusive environments, requiring it to be considered a foundational principle. Nine reddit users noted ‘fluorescent’ light as particularly overwhelming, with four participants discussing it in their interviews. The Index states fluorescent lighting both flickers and can be audibly distracting, instead recommending LEDs. it is also stressed, however, that natural lighting should be used to all possible extent (Mostafa, 2021, p. 64). Respondents across both platforms discussed using other spaces off campus with natural lighting, such as cafes, to study. Therefore, once more autistic students had to make decisions around where to go on campus to mitigate sensory pain.

Sometimes decisions involved sensory and social factors. Ruby recalled;

> ‘The light really, really bothered me [on a course workshop] ... I think I then didn't leave my house for two days after that. Cuz I was like, I can't. The light was too bad. I probably did go lie on the floor after that.’

Ruby stopped attending the workshops due to the difficulty of spending extended periods with fluorescent lighting. Her account demonstrated how social inclusion and sensory regulation acted in opposition to one another, forcing autistic students to prioritise *either* sensory regulation or social interaction.

The findings regarding light were perhaps most cohesive from all respondents; bright, white lights provided considerable discomfort which, for some, was painful. Rather than individual preference, this was established across institutions, requiring attention as a foundational principle of the Index, more like that of acoustics, rather than a secondary feature consideration.

Responses concluded that built environments are influential upon the sensory experiences of autistic students, not only creating inaccessible spaces, but influencing embodiment and

social interactions. These patterns illustrate how sensory accessibility is often managed through individual coping strategies rather than institutional accommodation. Findings even suggest that where institutional accommodations are presented, they must still be navigated and sought out to be meaningful. ‘Hidden labour’ was expressed (Scully, 2010), in that respondents were particularly contentious about what parts of campus that they used and how, which Ellen addressed as the ‘mental load’ that comes with being autistic in public. It can be inferred that implementing the Index would not only support the sensory experiences of autistic students on campus but also have important social implications in supporting and sustaining positive peer and staff relations.

The Social Environment

While the previous chapter established the importance of the built environment on comfort and social interaction, structural developments can only shape so much of regulatory experiences. Therefore, this section demonstrates how the social environment prescribes behavioural embodied norms that students must adhere to, or else face stigma. This is particularly important in understanding regulation techniques as relational- and understanding the social environmental influences upon enactments of SRTs.

There was a wide variety of ways respondents reported self-regulating. Music was used by respondents on both the forum and in interviews to produce familiar, soothing input and block out the unfamiliar. Three respondents; Poppy, Ellen and Ruby, all discussed using fidget toys, which was heavily recommended on Reddit, alongside one thread which suggested a 'comfort kit' to be carried around of items to aid regulation. In the interview, Poppy and Ruby both also had small bags that they described as 'toolkits' of regulation aids that they carried around campus day-to-day. Ellen reported using echolalic stims, but only around safe people. Aisha's university experience was markedly different from other participants but aligned with literature elsewhere (Scott and Sedgewick, 2021), as she relied upon substance use throughout the course of her study. Her experience shall be discussed in 2.3. People in both interviews and on Reddit also withdrew to low-stimulus spaces where sensory regulation could be more comfortably enacted. While some techniques posed similarities and some marked differences, all were discussed with specificity to the built and social environments they were used within.

Constructing 'normal'

Respondents illustrated binaries between themselves and neurotypical peers, often using language of normalcy. There appeared tensions between a desire to conform to 'normality' but also resentment toward the notion.

Acceptable adult embodiment was often seen to be betrayed by using visible regulation tools.

> ‘Like you’re nearly 21, you're an adult who has a job, who is intelligent and nearly graduating uni and you're sat there with something for six-year-old autistic boys who can't concentrate. I do just feel like, isn't that ridiculous.’ (Ruby)

> ‘Sometimes it's really humbling. I have something and it's like obviously made for a child. And I'm a grown girl. Give me my professional stuff where it's made and intended for autistic adults, but that's just me being judgy, right?’ (Poppy)

This discomfort with visible regulation reflects how normative expectations of adult embodiment are internalised and place restrictions upon their use. While fidget toys were recognised as effective regulation tools, participants restrained or restricted how they used them to meet social conventions. While overt discrimination was absent, students practiced anticipatory self-surveillance to adhere to normative embodiment and keep SRTs privatised (further discussion in 2.3).

However, it was not only in visible embodiment that participants adhered to social norms. Ruby admitted that discussing SRTs felt ‘humiliating’ even within the context of the interview. Similarly, while Toby had openly said he was autistic, he corrected the terminology ‘neurodivergent’ to ‘different’. It was evident that notions of normality were internalised and respondents considered SPDs to be ‘wrong’.

Some had developed an understanding of what they viewed were the struggles of being autistic, but this presented as reduced self-deprecation, rather than positive identity.

> ‘While it's not something that's brilliant, it's is what it is, and it's something you have to work with and not to beat yourself up over because they’re not dealing with being overstimulated all the time.’ (Dylan)

> ‘I learned to notice the signs that I was getting overwhelmed and try to remind myself, it's okay to not be doing what everyone else can, before it takes over.’ (Poppy)

Therefore, while they had developed a kindness towards themselves, they continued to view overwhelm as a definitive shortcoming compared to neurotypical peers, signalling how taught social norms influenced internalised ableism.

Peer Relationships.

(1) People and predictability

Having people that were socially and sensorily predictable allowed individuals to navigate unfamiliar environments more freely than without.

> ‘If you have friendly classmates or friends, use them as barriers from randos.’ (Reddit user)

> ‘I go everywhere with my safe people. If they can't go – I'm not going.’ (Ellen)

Ellen went on to explain how her ‘safe people’ facilitated a lot of the university experience for her, allowing her to attend university in person more frequently as she could rely upon them for familiarity. Ruby discussed a friend trying to initiate a similar routine without such luck:

> ‘One of my friends was nice enough to come and pick me up from my house and take me there. That didn't last very long because she was always late to everything, so that didn't really help with any of the issues.’

These experiences challenged the notion that regulation must be an individual practice. Familiar peers could provide predictability and shield participants from sensory or social unpredictability. The importance of friendships for autistic students therefore, appeared to extend upon enjoyment of social interaction and proposed it to manage sensory overwhelm in a de-individualised manner. However, the social legitimisation of sensory regulation as a private practice penetrated these relationships, as participants expressed guilt when reliant upon friends.

> ‘It makes me feel like a burden, like a shit friend, because I'm like, nobody else has to do this.’ (Ellen)

Consequently, even when engaging in relational behaviours that challenged social SRT privatisation, social norms still prescribed the lens through which they viewed the relationship dynamic.

(2) Other's perceptions of 'visible SRTs'

Participants were aware of how other people perceived autistic embodiment and the consequences that this had for social relations in different settings.

The findings of Welch et al. (2020) suggest 'autistic embodiment' to be central to a neurodivergent individual's identity but also stigmatising. Toby discussed similar themes in his interview:

> 'If you got to an airport or a train station you pass through and no one will tend to know you that well. But then somewhere like [main university road] if you're neurodiverse, I mean...particularly nowadays, neurotypical people don't like neurodiversity so you're worried about being exposed as different or whatever in the way you speak or the way you walk, your gait or whatever. The fact you're there regularly means people could pick up what I'm like as a person.'

Toby's discussion clearly expressed the stigma he felt around autistic embodiment, not through a series of actions or behaviours, but rather in his way of 'being'.

Ellen similarly described how she often masked because 'I don't want anyone to realise that I'm not the same as them'.

Poppy noted that in social interactions she will 'either try and avoid it or try to control it as much as I can, which is something you can't control'.

Sensory- influenced embodiment is not something that is restricted to specific moments, but rather a feature that defines the way in which autistic people actively construct their identity.

The fear of social stigma surrounding autistic 'visibility' was not limited to their peers and had significant effects on student/lecturer relationships in asking for sensory

accommodations, aligning with the findings of Accardo et al. (2019). Ruby discussed discomfort with disclosing diagnosis, and the effects it had on interpersonal relationships with staff.

> ‘I feel like even people who think they know about autism don't. And even lecturers/members of staff who are very nice and empathetic, I don't think they actually know much about autism. So, I would prefer not to be identified because I don't want misconceptions about me...
>
> ...I do often find afterwards I regret [disclosing diagnosis]. Even if it's improved the actual situation, I feel like it's almost damaged our interpersonal relationship.’ (Ruby)

This aligned with von Below et al. (2021) who found an ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ between lecturer’s perceived and enacted inclusive practices. The experiences echoed the normalisation of the ‘double empathy problem’ (Milton, 2012), that autistic students felt perceptions of them remained clouded by a deficit model of autism. Even those who were accepting of neurodivergence were seen to hold subconscious biases.

Similarly, rather than identifying herself as autistic, Poppy preferred explaining sensory overstimulation descriptively, to ‘signpost without explicitly having to say anything’. Other individuals weighed up impacts of stigma alongside the benefits of SRTs, with one Reddit user providing a caveat; ‘this solution can be socially damageable’ when recommending an accommodation.

Ellen described how she felt she acceptably could wear sunglasses to mitigate visual overwhelm in nightclubs;

> ‘I just think people can think that I just think I'm cool. Like, whatever. It doesn't matter. It's not like ‘what's wrong with you’.’

Whereas in educational social settings she was aware that stigma would be far greater;

> ‘There was a person in my sixth form who wore sunglasses, and everyone made fun of them.’

Entering unfamiliar environments required autistic individuals to actively reassess sensory and behavioural norms, either through active interpretation of social cues, or by drawing upon previous experiences. For Ruby, the nightclub functioned as a space where sensory overwhelm was collectively normalised and anticipated, while at school this was pathologized and consequently discouraged. Prior experience consequently acted as a framework through which to interpret the norms of higher education and present herself accordingly. Therefore, in interacting within neuronormative spaces, individuals were aware which 'behaviours' signify visible autistic embodiment. Adopting a 'mask' appeared to be a consistent negotiation with surroundings in which they assessed the social space and modified actions correspondingly.

Self- Regulation

Participants navigated their regulation strategies to align with social norms.

The interview with Aisha provided an interesting divergence from literature which previously noted reductions in visible SRTs with age (Chowdhury et al., 2010); drawing attention to a subsection of the autistic community who have found age a positive factor in stim use. She felt had a lifetime of 'sensory trauma' exacerbated by three 'stressful' years at university, which culminated in psychosis post-graduation. During the interview, she identified stims she had begun to use more recently, such as eating ice, massaging herself and breathwork. Reflecting upon her undergraduate degree, she noted ′if I had all of these tools whilst I was back at university, I wouldn't have had as much of a problem with drugs and all that kind of stuff'.

Finding an online community of other autistic people had created a social space where she 'felt less crazy' than she had done during university, which had encouraged her to find SRTs that worked for her. Comparatively, university had been an environment that did not allow her to recognise her needs since 'there was no language for it at the time'. Instead, she relied upon drug-use to provide momentary sensory relief, but this had long-term negative effects upon wellbeing. Consequently, what outwardly appeared to be a recreational activity was, on reflection, a socially mediated SRT.

Returning to the built university space, interviewees discussed stimming practices within teaching spaces. Conclusive with current literature, Ellen, Poppy and Ruby in their respective interviews discussed the ways that they had modified or restricted their stims due to the fear of being identified as different or 'othered' (Livingston et al., 2019; Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

> 'I actually avoid stimming. But I feel like when I avoid a stim, stimming really helps me regulate. So, if I was in a lecture, I would never have something to fidget with. But if I did, I feel like that would be quite helpful to focus on what I'm doing.' (Ellen)

> 'I have started occasionally bringing a fidget toy of some kind that is quiet. I have a little pouch, but it's not something I would bring out generally. I would only use it under the table in a discreet way. Or I just have my hand in my pocket. In a lecture or a seminar, I would probably only do it if there were people that I didn't care about.' (Ruby)

> 'I don't know if it's a process that I can put a time on, but there has been something with me being just more comfortable in general with having these stims in my bag and getting them out in a lecture or in a seminar with people I don't even know, because before I would have been like people think I'm weird or judge me.' (Poppy)

Experiences ranged, for Ellen it meant a complete restriction of stimming, while Poppy had developed a recent, more positive relationship. Ruby navigated stimming based upon the immediate peer group. One pertinent theme emerged; the judgement of others remains perhaps the most defining factor for the respondents in managing when and how to stim in class. The importance of stimming for cognitive functioning (Kim, 2013; Tancredi and Abrahamson, 2024) implies the behavioural norms of the classrooms may hinder autistic individuals in their ability to access learning in comparison to those who do not rely upon stimming.

Therefore, the social environment of university campus not only on occasion contributed to the sensory overwhelm of autistic students, but it also influenced the enactments of sensory

regulation. SRTs are not simply behaviours used at times of dysregulation, but rather part of a continued mediation which requires navigating social and spatial influences upon self-presentation. When the body commands 'autistic behaviour', it is viewed as a failure of the self, which impacts negatively upon identity. Frequent dysregulation acts alongside the stigma of autistic embodiment on campus, inducing an exhaustive process of behavioural and situational assessment and modification.

5. Conclusion

> *'Autism has been frequently misconstrued as being essentially a set of "social and communication deficits," by those who are unaware that the social challenges faced by autistic individuals are just by-products of the intense and chaotic nature of autistic sensory and cognitive experience.'* (Walker, 2014)

This dissertation set out to understand the built and social environmental influences on autistic students' SRTs. While methodological limitations are addressed in the methodology chapter, the research establishes an empirical link between sensory experience and social interaction that is absent within existing literature. This link is not new; it has existed as common knowledge within the autistic community, particularly demonstrated by the Loud Hands Project (2012). Therefore, it highlights what is lost when autistic knowledge is sidelined in mainstream research.

The findings add qualitative weight to support the Autism ASPECTSS Index (Mostafa, 2021), providing evidence from student perspectives that working to this framework would not only facilitate access and regulation but also have benefits upon social interactions on campus. To this, students could engage more meaningfully with the university space, and nurture feelings of 'belonging' (Hastwell et al., 2012).

A second, more implicit, finding highlighted how societal embodied norms direct SRT enactment. Not only are universities spatially designed around neurotypical sensory profiles, but the social environment continues to command normative embodiment. University campuses reproduce wider social expectations which may be navigable for neurotypical students but are socially and sensorily precarious for those with sensory differences. The stigma associated with autistic embodiment not only acts as external judgements but impinge upon how the individual views themself- reinforcing internalised ableism and poor self-image.

While established academic literature often separates the social/ communicational from the sensory in understanding autistic university experiences, this dissertation presents a far greater connection between the two. Visible methods of sensory integration remain substantially stigmatised in normative society. Therefore, autistic students must navigate

how they present by considering sensory dysregulation, decisions around SRT modification and an underlying knowledge that autism continues to hold stigma. These components constitute a set of social challenges unique to the autistic experience.

The importance of anecdotal knowledge from autistic advocates should not be overlooked, and yet, policy development typically requires empirical evidence to establish the link. Therefore, future sociological research should seek to qualitatively develop the sensory/social relationship for autistic students, exploring themes of autistic embodiment and sensory overwhelm at university, as well as the ways that stigma shapes autistic students' identities.

In terms of policy, change must occur institutionally. This dissertation's findings recommend universities to adopt the principles of the Index for future spatial design, and obligatory basic autism education for all university staff. 'Autism & Uni' (2025) has been adopted by a small number of universities as a toolkit but making the Best Practice Guide (Fabri et al., 2016) mandatory would ensure staff are equipped with a basic understanding of autism prior to forming staff/ student relationships.

Overall, the perceptions from both interview participants and forum users express '*that's just how it is for us until the public finally realizes we actually exist'.* Participants accept and even expect sensory difficulties when coming to university, suggesting environmental barriers remain internalised and reliance on SRTs continue to be viewed as failures of the self. While surface-level attitudinal changes appear to have occurred within universities, wider understanding continue to problematise autistic embodiment on campus.

Essentially, this dissertation speaks to a wider issue in which autistic people predict, allow and even excuse discomfort in public spaces. So long as autism continues to be addressed as an individual issue, autistic people must continue to monitor their responses to environments and mediate an 'appropriate' balance between sensory need and social expectation. If universities are truly to welcome their increasing autistic student population, socially and structurally reproduced neuronormative conventions of both space and embodiment must be addressed.

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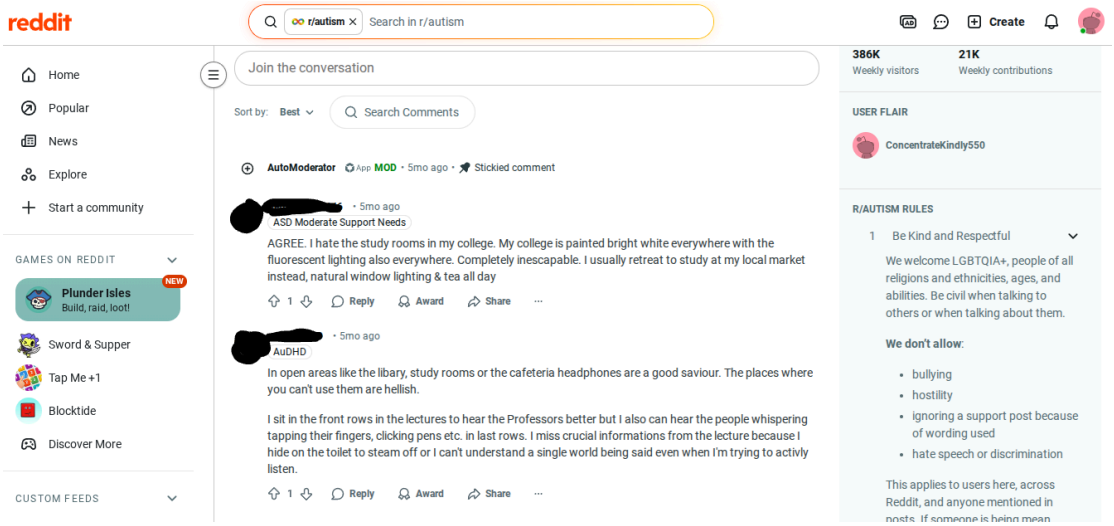
Appendix 1.


reddit
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Search in r/autism
Create
Home
Popular
News
Explore
Start a community
GAMES ON REDDIT
Plunder Isles
Build, raid, loot!
Sword & Supper
Tap Me +1
Blocktide
Discover More
CUSTOM FEEDS
Join the conversation
Sort by: Best
Search Comments
AutoModerator App MOD • 5mo ago • Stickied comment
• 5mo ago
ASD Moderate Support Needs
AGREE. I hate the study rooms in my college. My college is painted bright white everywhere with the fluorescent lighting also everywhere. Completely inescapable. I usually retreat to study at my local market instead, natural window lighting & tea all day
1 Reply Award Share
• 5mo ago
AuDHD
In open areas like the libary, study rooms or the cafeteria headphones are a good saviour. The places where you can't use them are hellish.
I sit in the front rows in the lectures to hear the Professors better but I also can hear the people whispering tapping their fingers, clicking pens etc. in last rows. I miss crucial informations from the lecture because I hide on the toilet to steam off or I can't understand a single world being said even when I'm trying to activly listen.
1 Reply Award Share
386K
Weekly visitors
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USER FLAIR
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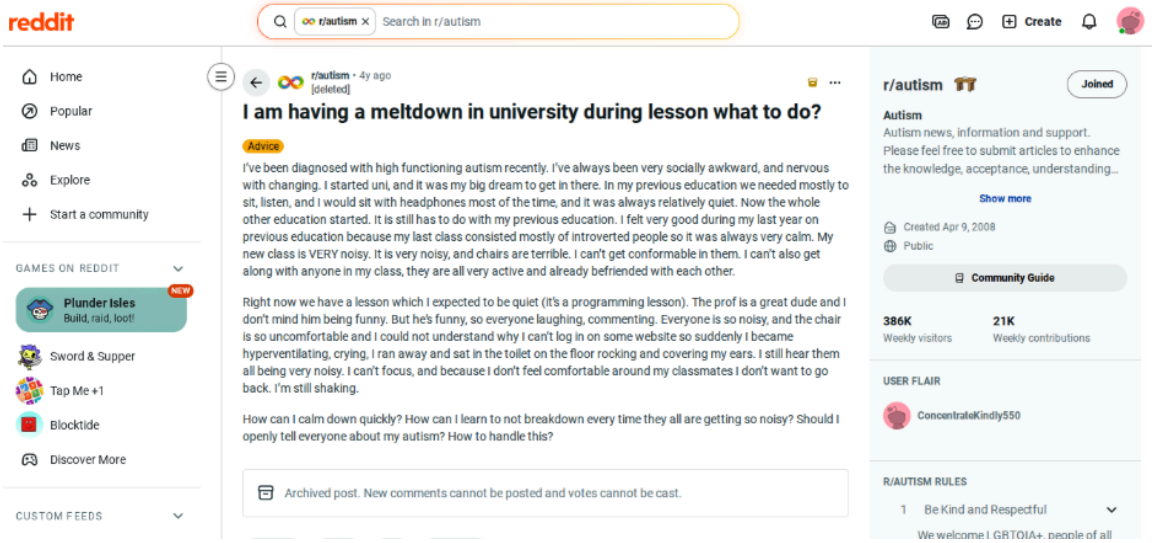
R/AUTISM RULES
1 Be Kind and Respectful
We welcome LGBTQIA+, people of all religions and ethnicities, ages, and abilities. Be civil when talking to others or when talking about them.
We don't allow:
bullying
hostility
ignoring a support post because of wording used
hate speech or discrimination
This applies to users here, across Reddit, and anyone mentioned in


reddit
r/autism
Search in r/autism
Create
Home
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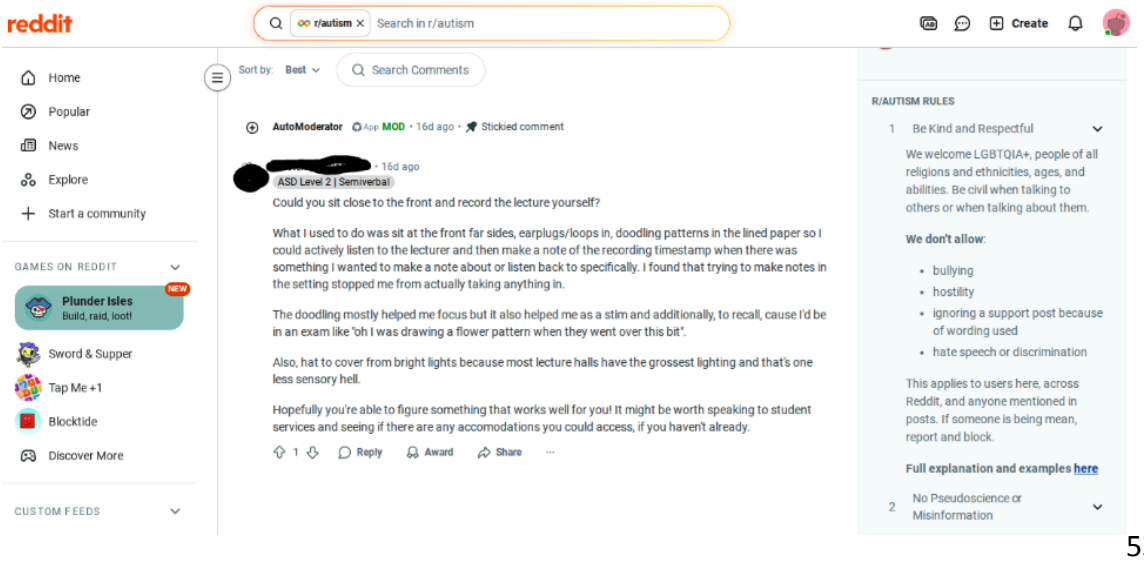
Start a community
GAMES ON REDDIT
Plunder Isles
Build, raid, loot!
Sword & Supper
Tap Me +1
Blocktide
Discover More
CUSTOM FEEDS
r/autism • 4y ago
[deleted]
I am having a meltdown in university during lesson what to do?
Advice
I've been diagnosed with high functioning autism recently. I've always been very socially awkward, and nervous with changing. I started uni, and it was my big dream to get in there. In my previous education we needed mostly to sit, listen, and I would sit with headphones most of the time, and it was always relatively quiet. Now the whole other education started. It is still has to do with my previous education. I felt very good during my last year on previous education because my last class consisted mostly of introverted people so it was always very calm. My new class is VERY noisy. It is very noisy, and chairs are terrible. I can't get comfortable in them. I can't also get along with anyone in my class, they are all very active and already befriended with each other.
Right now we have a lesson which I expected to be quiet (It's a programming lesson). The prof is a great dude and I don't mind him being funny. But he's funny, so everyone laughing, commenting. Everyone is so noisy, and the chair is so uncomfortable and I could not understand why I can't log in on some website so suddenly I became hyperventilating, crying, I ran away and sat in the toilet on the floor rocking and covering my ears. I still hear them all being very noisy. I can't focus, and because I don't feel comfortable around my classmates I don't want to go back. I'm still shaking.
How can I calm down quickly? How can I learn to not breakdown every time they all are getting so noisy? Should I openly tell everyone about my autism? How to handle this?
Archived post. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast.
r/autism
Joined
Autism
Autism news, information and support. Please feel free to submit articles to enhance the knowledge, acceptance, understanding...
Show more
Created Apr 9, 2008
Public
Community Guide
386K
Weekly visitors
21K
Weekly contributions
USER FLAIR
ConcentrateKindly550
R/AUTISM RULES
1 Be Kind and Respectful


reddit
r/autism
Search in r/autism
Create
Home
Popular
News
Explore
Start a community
GAMES ON REDDIT
Plunder Isles
Build, raid, loot!
Sword & Supper
Tap Me +1
Blocktide
Discover More
CUSTOM FEEDS
Sort by: Best
Search Comments
AutoModerator App MOD • 16d ago • Stickied comment
• 16d ago
ASD Level 2 | Semiverbal
Could you sit close to the front and record the lecture yourself?
What I used to do was sit at the front far sides, earplugs/loops in, doodling patterns in the lined paper so I could actively listen to the lecturer and then make a note of the recording timestamp when there was something I wanted to make a note about or listen back to specifically. I found that trying to make notes in the setting stopped me from actually taking anything in.
The doodling mostly helped me focus but it also helped me as a stim and additionally, to recall, cause I'd be in an exam like "oh I was drawing a flower pattern when they went over this bit".
Also, hat to cover from bright lights because most lecture halls have the grossest lighting and that's one less sensory hell.
Hopefully you're able to figure something that works well for you! It might be worth speaking to student services and seeing if there are any accomodations you could access, if you haven't already.
1 Reply Award Share
R/AUTISM RULES
1 Be Kind and Respectful
We welcome LGBTQIA+, people of all religions and ethnicities, ages, and abilities. Be civil when talking to others or when talking about them.
We don't allow:
bullying
hostility
ignoring a support post because of wording used
hate speech or discrimination
This applies to users here, across Reddit, and anyone mentioned in posts. If someone is being mean, report and block.
Full explanation and examples here
2 No Pseudoscience or Misinformation

Appendix 2.

Participant 1 1:13
The way I sort of view things is I have quite a clear separation between like work areas and so work areas and places where sort of I can relax and unwind so.

Kate Barness 1:28
MMM.

Participant 1 1:28
For me, I do pretty much all my work in Uni, I don't really work at home at all, so it's kind of a case of what.

Kate Barness 1:34
Mm-hmm.

Participant 1 1:39
Sort of places I work best in uni and I think obviously my autism plays sort of a role in what spaces I'm able to sort of feel more comfortable and focus best in.

Kate Barness 1:55
Yeah.

Participant 1 1:56
So sort of thinking about that, there's a few places I particularly tend to stay in where I find I'm able to focus better. They're a bit quieter. There's sort of less people about.

Kate Barness 2:04
Hmm.
Hmm.

Participant 1 2:12
So there's one place, for instance, where.
A lot of a lot of my friends go the engineering building and they'll sort of sit in like the big communal space in there, but that's like it's like a building. It's got a big atrium in the middle.

Kate Barness 2:26
Mm-hmm.
Mm-hmm.

Participant 1 2:32
And it's kind of one knows where it's like sort of almost like doughnut shapes and there's sort of three Storey buildings around, but I always find it's quite loud in there and it sort of echoes.

Kate Barness 2:38
Hmm.

Participant 1 2:48
And yeah, I just find it quite a hard space to focus in so.

Kate Barness 2:53
Yeah, yeah, I'm the same. I need it really quiet. I find other people quite distract. Distracting.

Participant 1 2:56
Yeah.
Yeah.

Kate Barness 3:00
Do you think it? Because I think I work better with less people as well near me.

Participant 1 3:08
Yeah, I think as a rule, yeah, trying to find somewhere that's a bit quieter. So I mean, I'm in the politics department at the minute and there's basically no one in. And then even when there are people actually and in term time, there's sort of.
Various different meeting rooms that hardly ever use that. You can just kind of go and sit in sort of just off to the side, which is quite handy I find.

Kate Barness 3:30
Hmm.
Hmm.

Participant 1 3:36
I don't necessarily mind having lots of people around if they're also working, so like I don't mind the library because again, you're kind of in a environment that feels like it's everyone's working.

Kate Barness 3:42
Yeah.
Hmm.

Participant 1 3:51
Whereas sort of going back to that engineering example, that's kind of their social space, so.

Kate Barness 3:56
Yeah.
So is it the other people, their voices? Just distract you and you can't kind of stay like focused in on what you're doing.

Participant 1 4:00
And.
Yeah. Yeah, it's sort of, yeah, just the wider atmosphere of it, I guess is. Yeah, it's almost a bit too relaxed for me to. There's too much sort of too much of a background noise. Too many people sort of moving about.

Kate Barness 4:10
Yeah.
Mm-hmm.
Hmm.

Participant 1 4:24
None.
Whereas like where I am here for instance is.
It's a lot smaller for a start, so that it's just less people.

Kate Barness 4:37
Hmm.

Participant 1 4:39
It's generally just the atmospheres calmer, so yeah, you're able to just have that space to actually work.

Kate Barness 4:43
MMM.
Yeah. So it's not necessarily about maybe the the number of people that are around. It's just how much they're focused in as well, yeah.

Participant 1 4:57
Yeah.

Kate Barness 5:00
Right, OK. I see. I'm. I'm pretty similar. I can't really focus. And So what about in terms of like if you do you just not you just don't do your work at home, you do it all in uni, do you find that separation makes it easier?

Participant 1 5:16
Pretty much.
Pretty much, yeah. I mean, and I've been like that for years, to be honest. I mean sort of COVID, especially working at home. I really didn't like and then all through a levels, even I tended to.

Kate Barness 5:20
Yeah.
MMM.

Participant 1 5:35
Go to one of the university libraries in Sheffield to revise and stuff. It's kind of just, yeah, a tactic.

Kate Barness 5:38
Mm-hmm.

Participant 1 5:44
I've stuck with kind of a mix of. I find it more productive and also I think for me mentally it's more.

Kate Barness 5:46
Hmm.

Participant 1 5:55
I found that to work better for me in terms of you sort of go out for the day and then you get back and you don't. You can sort of switch off.

Kate Barness 6:03
Yeah, it's a bit of a compartmentalization, yeah.

Participant 1 6:06
Yeah. And yeah, I think that's something that, yeah, definitely. I'd say for me came out of COVID because that was. Yeah, that whole sort of sitting at home for months on end was something I really struggled with.

Kate Barness 6:23
Hmm.

Participant 1 6:23
And when it sort of came to uni, for me it was a case of you can especially doing sort of the degree I do when I mean I had 3 and a 1/2 contact hours a week last semester. So you can in theory just sort of sit at home and work from home the whole time.