



# Making online platforms autism-friendly

Koteyko N., Manni S., Featherstone C., Harper G., Barros Pena B., van Driel M., Vines J.



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
**informatics**



*How are you supposed to engage with something when you can't see in through the virtual front door to see if you'd want to be part of it?*

- Autistic research participant

## What we know

**Today, digital tools play a significant role in our social environments and mediate many aspects of our lives.** For autistic people who cannot always get their sensory and communication needs met in physical venues and public spaces, these digital platforms and services offer unique opportunities and advantages. Despite this, digital platforms still often fall short in meeting the specific needs of this population, shutting many people out of services and conversations as reliance on digital tools increases.

**Autistic people often have diverse sensory needs.** Some individuals find certain sensory inputs overwhelming, while others may actively seek out specific stimuli<sup>1,2</sup>; many autistic people experience a combination of these. The sensory needs of autistic people are rarely considered in digital design, and many social media platforms are designed to capture attention regardless of whether this is experienced positively. As a result, many autistic people are shut out of platforms and services they could have benefited from. Participants in our focus groups highlighted barriers such as pop-ups, auto-playing videos and multiple audio and visual stimuli on opening a webpage.

**The “different ways of socializing, communicating and sensing”<sup>3</sup>** of autistic people, known as autistic sociality<sup>4</sup> is not accommodated online as many digital services primarily cater to neurotypical social norms. Such norms are often implicit and therefore still make online interactions challenging for autistic people even though they have more time to process and respond due to the written mode of communication. The implicit social norms and lack of social cues can make digital platforms overwhelming and confusing for autistic people and often prevent them from fully engaging and connecting with others. Our participants spoke about the uncertainty and anxiety they felt during online interactions and highlighted the lack of control over the different audiences their content could reach.

**Autistic individuals face exclusion and misunderstandings** in online spaces<sup>5,6,7</sup>, which can negatively impact their well-being and participation. The "double empathy problem" reframes the supposed social communication deficits of autistic people as a mutual and reciprocal matter between autistic and neurotypical interlocutors<sup>8</sup>. Poor moderation and support systems within online platforms can amplify wider attitudes blaming unsuccessful interaction on the so-called deficits of autistic people.



*Trying to work out how you're meant to react... Are your emotions appropriate? How do you say that? How do you have to fluff it out to make it palatable to other people? Just exhausting, totally exhausting.*

- Autistic research participant

## What we need to find out

A collaboration between Autistica, Queen Mary, and University of Edinburgh on the Autistic Adults Project ([www.autisticadultsonline.com](http://www.autisticadultsonline.com)) has helped to highlight top research priorities in order to ensure better recognition of autistic needs and preferences in digital spaces:

- How suitable are mainstream digital platforms for autistic adults' communicative preferences and needs?

- What can we learn from autistic sociality about the design of mainstream digital services and social media platforms?
- How can we effectively create digital environments which people can adjust and tailor to their sensory and communication needs and preferences?
- How can we effectively moderate digital spaces to keep them safe while allowing for self-expression and differing communication styles?
- What are the most effective ways of providing guidance for using a range of digital spaces, providing sufficient detail for those who need it without overwhelming new users?



*To be honest... the things I find hard are just things that would improve the user experience anyway.*

- Autistic research participant

## What we should do now

- **Digital platforms and services should refer to our new toolkit<sup>9</sup> for improving accessibility for autistic people.** The toolkit covers areas such as facilitating positive interactions, controlling the sensory experience and clarity around privacy, all contributing to a culture of acceptance and education around autism and neurodiversity. Digital public services and charities can set a powerful example by demonstrating good practice using existing resources such as the toolkit.
- **Digital platforms and services should provide adequate support to navigate the social nuances and unspoken rules of online communities.** This involves provision of clear guidelines in a range of formats, spelling out of community norms, and development of effective moderation systems. Guidance and supporting materials need to strike a balance between allowing users' self-expression while moderating spaces to keep them safe, and providing sufficient detail without overwhelming users. Moderation policies should be capable of considering the wider context of autistic sociality and differing communication styles.
- **Ofcom should consider the needs of autistic users in its forthcoming guidance for digital platforms and search engines.** The forthcoming Online Safety Bill will impose duties on certain platforms to protect against illegal content and content harmful to children, and instructs Ofcom to regulate these duties and provide more detailed guidance. This could be an opportunity to provide wider advice on improving accessibility for neurodivergent people.

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