CultureCase

The elements of an autism-friendly relaxed performance

This research was conducted by **Ben Fletcher-Watson** and **Shaun May** at the **University of Edinburgh** and the **University of Kent**

Summary

This paper used the case study of the UK's Autism Arts Festival in 2017 to outline the components and characteristics of relaxed performances. During a relaxed performance the audience is expected to talk or move around and the sound and light effects are less intense than normal. The programming at the 2017 festival was designed to generate an 'autistic space'. This meant that autistic identities and behaviours were not merely tolerated but actively encouraged and celebrated. By having a suite of measures that give people a means to navigate their own way through a performance or event this case study showed that other venues and festivals can make themselves more accessible to people on the autistic spectrum.

The paper outlines audience reactions drawn from a mixture of qualitative data-gathering methods

A majority of those offering feedback said that they experienced barriers (especially anxiety) when going to regular performances. People stated that the most effective accommodations were often about having prior information, such as plot summaries or lists of possible sensory triggers.

Information is a big aspect to creating autism-friendly spaces

The organisers of the 2017 festival were keen to give people prior knowledge of what to expect so that they could navigate the space comfortably and safely.

Sharing information about oneself was also important, and so visitors to the festival were able to signal to others their preference for human contact using different coloured badges. Other accommodations were made such as turning off hand drying machines and providing paper towels instead, turning off ambient music in public spaces, prohibiting perfume, turning off fluorescent lights, etc. Some productions and venues offered a quiet area outside the main auditorium with a screen showing the action, allowing people to follow the performance.

Keywords

audience **neurodiversity** **autism** **relaxed** **UK**

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Author email	**S.R.May@kent.ac.uk**

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