

# **AUTISM-FRIENDLY PUBLIC BUS TRANSPORT: HEARING THE VOICES OF AUTISTIC PERSONS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THEIR NEEDS**

## *Background*

Being able to participate fully in the community and form social networks is crucial for leading a qualitative life. To this end, transportation plays an essential role. Autistic persons often rely on public transport to fulfill their mobility needs. Nevertheless, previous research shows that it is not always easy for them to use it. What issues autistic people face while traveling with public bus transport and how to make public bus transport more autism-friendly has not been researched in-depth to date.

## *Objectives*

The current case study in Flanders aimed to (1) allow autistic persons to express the issues they face while using public bus transport and (2) create awareness for more autism-friendly public transportation.

## *Methods*

A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was carried out. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and processed based on the interpretative phenomenological analysis method.

## *Results*

The interviews were conducted with 17 autistic individuals (mean age: 23.4 years, 53% male) and 3 non-autistic employees of a public transportation company about their experiences when taking (autistic individuals) or driving (employees) the bus. After analysis, three main themes emerged: (1) creating predictability (subthemes: providing an overview, presence of consistency, and providing factual and accurate information), (2) limiting stimuli, and (3) communication tailored to autistic persons. In addition, various coping strategies were described, such as using noise-canceling headphones or using a smartphone application to follow the route.

## *Conclusion*

The current study was one of the first to give an indication of how autistic persons experience public bus transportation. The results are both interesting to the autism community and public bus transportation companies. The coping strategies described are relevant for autistic persons in case they feel reluctant to use public bus transport. Furthermore, the current study's findings could also help public bus transportation companies further develop a universal and inclusive design to provide access to public transport at the same level of service for everyone.

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