

## EXPECTATIONS TOWARD INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS IN RETAIL SETTINGS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEURODIVERGENT INDIVIDUALS

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**Purpose:** The aim of the article was to understand the expectations that neurodivergent individuals hold with regard to interpersonal interactions in retail settings. The authors also sought to identify factors that support or hinder the comfortable functioning of these individuals in their interactions with sales staff and other customers.

**Design/methodology/approach:** To achieve the stated objective, the authors conducted an empirical study among neurodivergent individuals using individual in-depth interviews. The research process adopted an approach grounded in the recognition of the importance of direct insight into the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals, while data analysis was based on reflexive thematic analysis.

**Findings:** The exploration reveals a pronounced sense of overwhelm experienced by neurodivergent respondents, triggered by the presence of other shoppers in retail environments. Neurodivergent customers are characterized by an increased need to control interactions with sales staff, particularly with respect to autonomy in choosing the timing and manner of initiating such interactions. Moreover, they expect friendly and empathetic treatment from retail personnel.

**Research limitations/implications:** The study considered the perspectives of representatives of only selected manifestations of neurodiversity, which should be taken into account in future scholarly explorations by further diversifying the sample of respondents.

**Practical implications:** Recommendations were formulated concerning the creation of conditions conducive to positively perceived interactions between sales staff and neurodivergent customers in retail environments. These guidelines should be applied in the everyday practices of sales personnel and store managers.

**Social implications:** The findings are intended to contribute to increased awareness of the expectations of neurodivergent individuals regarding interpersonal interactions in retail settings. As a result, this may lead to an improvement in the quality of life of neurodivergent individuals.

**Originality/value:** The article contributes new insights to the academic discourse on the under-researched issue of creating neuroinclusive retail environments. The value of the paper lies particularly in identifying the expectations of neurodivergent customers toward interpersonal interactions accompanying the shopping process.

**Keywords:** interpersonal interactions, neuroatypical customers, customer service, stores.

**Category of the paper:** research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Retail spaces are designed as environments intended to generate maximum profits for store owners. Within these spaces, in addition to the physical environment (arranged in accordance with the principles of contemporary merchandising), the behavior of staff toward customers plays a crucial role in sales outcomes. Customer service can significantly enhance retail performance, but it can also discourage customers, leading them to refrain from making future purchases at a given store. In the context of effective communication between sales staff and customers, particular attention should be paid to neurodivergent individuals, whose perception of social interactions differs from prevailing and dominant social norms.

The purpose of this article is to understand the expectations that neuroatypical individuals hold with regard to interpersonal interactions in retail settings, as well as to identify the factors that support or hinder their comfortable functioning in interactions with sales staff and other customers. As previous research indicates, retail organizations barely acknowledge neurodiversity (Ali, Grabarski, Baker, 2004b). The authors adopted an approach that recognizes the importance of direct insight into the lived experiences of neuroatypical individuals, which is consistent with contemporary research directions in this field (Hens, Robeyns, Schaubroeck, 2019; Hens, 2021; Bernard et al., 2023; Bervoets, Hens, 2020). Qualitative data were collected through individual in-depth interviews, and the analysis of the empirical material was based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2025).

The approach proposed in the article is original and constitutes a significant contribution to the advancement of research on the still insufficiently explored issue of designing neuroinclusive retail environments. The primary strength of the paper lies in the identification and systematization of neurodivergent customers' expectations regarding interpersonal interactions in shopping processes.

## 2. Literature review

The term neurodivergence is used to refer to the naturally occurring neurological diversity within the human population, described as neurodiversity (Jaarsma, Welin, 2012; Blackburn, 2023). Neurodivergence encompasses less common neurological profiles, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attention deficit

disorder (ADD), Tourette syndrome, dyspraxia, and specific learning difficulties (Cruz et al., 2025; Baumer, Frueh, 2021). Notably, the term neurodivergence is most frequently associated with the first two of these conditions (Kamdar, Sabir, 2024).

The concept of neurodiversity was first introduced by the Australian sociologist J. Singer in correspondence with journalist H. Blume to describe the egalitarian dimension of the concept of neurological pluralism, promoted by online communities of individuals on the autism spectrum. According to the assumptions of the neurodiversity framework, the differences it encompasses should not be perceived as medical phenomena - deficits or dysfunctions - but rather as naturally occurring types of cognitive mechanisms characterized by specific strengths that contribute to technological and cultural development (Silberman, 2021, pp. 23, 441). The widespread prevalence of neurodiversity strongly supports the adoption of this perspective. It is estimated that neurodivergent individuals may constitute up to one-fifth of the global population (Doyle, 2020), and this proportion is increasing dynamically. Consequently, in virtually every domain of contemporary human functioning (e.g., professional contexts), there is a substantial likelihood of communication and cooperation with neurodivergent individuals (Dunne, 2024). In the context of retail, it can be assumed - on a global scale - that the population of neurodivergent individuals comprises approximately 1.85 billion customers. In addition, their families and acquaintances - potential customers familiar with neurodiversity - represent a further 3.3 billion individuals (Shin, Alexander, 2023).

Contemporary approaches to the study of neurodiversity emphasize the necessity of understanding the experiences of neurodivergent individuals through direct insight into their subjective perceptions (Hens, Robeyns, Schaubroeck, 2019; Hens, 2021; Bernard et al., 2023; Bervoets, Hens, 2020). In earlier explorations, researchers - drawing on neurocognitive theories (including theory of mind) - assumed that autistic individuals possess deficits that lead to difficulties in understanding the perspectives of others (Hens, Robeyns, Schaubroeck, 2019). Extending the theory of mind framework, some scholars argued that individuals with autism exhibit deficits in recognizing not only the mental states of others but also their own emotions (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, Frith, 1985; Frith, Happé, 1999), or are even devoid of emotions altogether (Mundy, 2009). These assumptions resulted in researchers focusing on the experiences of observers of disabilities/differences (Santuzzi, Waltz, 2016), while neglecting the self-perspectives of neurodivergent individuals. These premises were challenged only when neurodivergent individuals were granted the opportunity to speak on their own behalf and when their fundamental rights to autonomy, dignity, and respect were acknowledged (Pellicano, Heyworth, 2023).

At the same time, it should be noted that impairments in social communication and interpersonal interaction remain core diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorders, both in the DSM-5 classification of the American Psychiatric Association and in the ICD-11 classification of the World Health Organization (WHO). In this context, psychologists point to the double empathy problem, which refers to a bidirectional mismatch between autistic and

non-autistic individuals at both cognitive and communicative levels. This results in a partial or complete lack of mutual understanding (Milton, 2012). To mitigate this barrier, scholars advocate promoting open communication within neurodiverse environments that fosters mutual understanding and acceptance of “alterity” (Cruz et al., 2025).

Within the management literature, a clear shortage of research devoted to this issue can be observed (Doyle, McDowall, 2021). Existing studies on autism spectrum conditions have largely focused on the sensory challenges experienced by neurodivergent individuals, as well as on the specificities of their everyday functioning, most often in relation to public spaces (Manning, Williams, MacLennan, 2023; MacLennan et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024). Only a limited number of publications have explicitly addressed retail spaces (Bellamy et al., 2021). Based on these analyses, general recommendations have been formulated concerning merchandising practices, inclusive retailing, and supportive shopping environments (Taylor et al., 2019; De, Basu, Saraiwala, 2021; Iucolano et al., 2024).

Evidence suggests that people with complex communication needs may experience social exclusion in the retail environment (Taylor et al., 2022). With regard to the social dimension of neurodivergent individuals, the limited number of available studies has examined the potential use of digital technologies to provide support for individuals experiencing difficulties in interpersonal interactions (Walkowiak, 2021), including during shopping activities (Xia et al., 2021). It has been shown that, for many respondents, the mere necessity of engaging in interactions with other people is extremely exhausting, regardless of the specific manifestation of neurodiversity (Cruz et al., 2025, p. 3). Researchers have observed that the retail environment creates particular barriers that hinder the integration of individuals with complex communication needs. These barriers are primarily related to low levels of awareness and understanding of specific communication needs among retail participants, including store personnel (Taylor et al., 2020). In this context, it should be emphasized that shopping serves not only to satisfy basic needs but also includes maintaining one’s personal identity and self-image, and living a meaningful life (Sirgy, 1982). The importance of awareness of neurodiversity in the retail industry has been clearly demonstrated. At the same time, it has been observed that the frequency and intensity of interpersonal interactions, as well as sales staff attitudes toward customer neurodiversity, are influenced by the size of the store in which they are employed (Voelpel, Eckhoff, Förster, 2008; Ali, Grabarski, Baker, 2024a).

The considerations outlined above justify the need for scholarly exploration aimed at gaining insight into the perspectives and experiences of neuroatypical individuals - particularly in domains where solutions are designed by and for the neurotypical (dominant) majority (Cruz et al., 2025). Failure to conduct research in this area may lead to the social exclusion of individuals experiencing difficulties in social communication. Retail spaces should therefore be regarded as key areas of analysis (Taylor et al., 2021). Importantly, research should address not only the physical environments in which neurodivergent customers shop, but also the interactions they engage in with sales staff and other individuals present in retail settings.

A review of the existing body of literature indicates the presence of a research gap. There are no comprehensive studies focusing on the issues addressed in this article. To date, scholars have not published findings that examine the functioning of neurodivergent individuals in real retail environments through the lens of interpersonal interactions. The present publication seeks to contribute to partially filling this gap and to encourage scholars to undertake further research within this area of inquiry.

### 3. Research methodology

The authors of the present study collected empirical data using individual in-depth interviews (semi-structured interviews). The interviews were conducted on the basis of an interview guide containing questions directly related to the research problem, formulated as follows: Which aspects of the behavior of store personnel and other customers influence the perception of interpersonal interactions among neurodivergent individuals in retail settings? It was assumed that conducting an exploration focused on this research problem would make it possible to identify the expectations of neurodivergent individuals with regard to a selected - researcher-relevant - dimension of the shopping environment, as well as to formulate recommendations for sales staff concerning the accommodation of the needs of this customer group.

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the methodological rigor required for the selected research method. Data analysis was based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2022). The empirical material was collected in May 2024. With the respondents' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interview data were analyzed using CAQDAS software (Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software).

Participant selection followed a purposive sampling strategy. The study involved five respondents whose characteristics met the criteria of a neurodivergent profile. Interviews were conducted with individuals holding medical diagnoses confirming attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
*Profile of the study participants*

Respondent (code)	Gender	Age	Type of condition
Respondent 1 (R1)	Female	23	Dyslexia, migraines
Respondent 2 (R2)	Female	35	Migraine with aura, anxiety disorder
Respondent 3 (R3)	Male	31	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
Respondent 4 (R4)	Female	19	Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
Respondent 5 (R5)	Female	25	Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dyslexia

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The participants declared that they regularly engage in independent shopping. Given the specific characteristics of the respondents resulting from their neurodivergence, the researcher conducting the interviews demonstrated particular empathy and sensitivity toward the interlocutors. The interviews were adapted to the individual needs of the participants in order to ensure a sense of safety and to facilitate the free expression of their views. All respondents were adults and provided informed consent to participate in the study.

## 4. Results

The examination of the empirical material, conducted in accordance with the assumptions of reflexive thematic analysis, made it possible to identify three main themes (categories) relating to the experiences and expectations of neurodivergent individuals regarding interpersonal interactions in retail settings. The distinguished categories include: (1) social overload (excessive numbers of people in retail spaces); (2) intrusiveness on the part of sales staff and the feeling of being constantly observed; and (3) the need for friendly and empathetic customer service. Below, when presenting the interview findings, statements made by individual respondents are cited and labeled as R1 - R5 (in line with the symbols presented in Table 1).

With regard to the first identified theme, respondents emphasized the difficulty of shopping in stores characterized by high customer density. They pointed to feelings of being overwhelmed, frustration, and disorientation. Crowded environments hinder concentration among neurodivergent individuals. Moreover, according to the respondents, such conditions limit freedom of movement and evoke a sense of physical boundary violation through unwanted bodily contact.

*“In stores, what irritates me is that people keep getting in my way - to the point that I can't find anything; I get annoyed when this prolongs my shopping time. In shopping malls, instead of quickly buying what I need and leaving, frustration emerges because I find myself in a crowd. I then feel uncertainty and shame” (R1).*

*“I hate places with a lot of people; I avoid crowded stores. I much prefer shopping online or, alternatively, in smaller venues. I dislike stores where I feel the space shrinking - when people push past me, brush against me, bump into me, or touch me” (R2).*

*“I try to approach products in such a way that I don't have to push through crowds. It takes a long time because I walk around the long way. This only makes me more agitated, and I immediately want to leave the store” (R3).*

*“I feel reluctant to visit shopping malls because they are usually overcrowded with people who make noise and cause discomfort for me” (R4).*

*“The sheer number of people is very exhausting for me; when too much is happening around me, it’s hard to focus. During my last shopping trip, I repeatedly walked from the end of the store back to the entrance instead of moving sequentially. The presence of many people didn’t help - I got distracted quickly, for example when someone wanted to take an item from a shelf where I was standing” (R5).*

The second theme that emerged from the analysis of the empirical material concerned the need for autonomy during shopping and control over interactions with sales staff among neurodivergent individuals. Respondents acknowledged that the presence of other shoppers and store personnel is inevitable; however, they pointed to excessive noise generated by other customers and intrusive behaviors on the part of sales employees. Negative emotions were evoked particularly when sales staff failed to respect customers’ freedom to choose the timing and manner of initiating interaction.

*“I’m bothered by store or brand representatives offering samples. I really dislike being pulled out of my shopping rhythm or having contact forced on me - it frustrates me. I perceive it as a lack of respect for my personal space” (R1).*

*“I don’t like being approached by staff. It may not be irritating because I know it’s their job, but it is distracting” (R2).*

*“Other people bother me - that’s something that can’t really be changed in stores. But customers could at least be a bit quieter, if not in shopping mall corridors, then inside the stores themselves” (R3).*

*“When I’m looking for something, I usually ask on my own where a product is located. I don’t need staff jumping on me before I’ve even properly entered the store. Generally speaking, I don’t have a problem with shopping itself; the issue arises in stores where the number of people and the layout of aisles create a constant feeling of being observed - both by other customers and by sales staff” (R4).*

*“I don’t like it when staff approach me - it really bothers me. I feel as though they’ll try to persuade me to buy more than I intend to, and in the worst case, they might succeed” (R5).*

The third identified theme revealed specific expectations of neurodivergent individuals regarding friendly and empathetic customer service. In this context, respondents highlighted a contrast between negative experiences in shopping malls and positive experiences in smaller retail outlets, where contact with sales staff is voluntary, personalized, well-balanced, and empathetic. For some respondents, positive signals sent by store personnel - such as kindness, smiling, and genuine engagement - were particularly important.

*“I experience pleasant shopping in one small store. When I go there, I don’t feel attacked; no one forces anything on me, and at the same time I feel taken care of. They ask whether I need help - if I say no, they leave me alone; if I say yes, I can ask questions. There’s a kind of comfortable cooperation between me and the staff” (R1).*

*“During one vacation, I entered a small shop full of figurines. There were so many of them, and I picked a few. There were no other customers, and I could look at and touch everything. There was also a very kind woman who made the figurines by hand and happily talked about them - she was open and non-intrusive, capable of having a pleasant conversation. I liked it so much that I left smiling; the saleswoman also seemed happy” (R2).*

*“Customer service in stores can be terrible. I see situations where none of the employees smile; sometimes they mutter ‘hello’ or don’t say it at all. Some stores feel so depressing that I stop going there. A positive example is a small greengrocer near my apartment - it’s expensive, so I don’t really like shopping there, but it has a pleasant atmosphere. There’s a wonderful, extremely kind woman working there” (R3).*

*“I don’t like it when aggressive sales assistants approach me and ask, ‘How can I help you?’ - I then feel obliged to continue the interaction. However, when they phrase it differently - politely informing me that they are available and that I can approach them if needed - I perceive it completely differently. Sometimes, I do need such help” (R5).*

In summary, the analysis of interview content reveals a clear picture of the core expectations neurodivergent individuals hold toward interpersonal interactions in retail environments. These expectations include: (1) the desire for a safe space free from excessive social stimuli; (2) a non-intrusive presence of store employees and unobtrusive observation of customers; and (3) the creation of a friendly and empathetic atmosphere conducive to customer - employee interactions.

## **5. Discussion**

The statements quoted from the interview participants are consistent with the findings reported by the few scholars who have based their conclusions on first-hand accounts provided by neurodivergent individuals. Examples of neurodivergent customers’ statements drawn from the literature include the following: “the visual and audible cacophonies of thousands of gesticulating people engaging in conversation at varying volumes reverberate through the stands, spiking my stress and amplifying my already urgent need to move”; “perhaps the lack of ‘collegiality’ among sales staff stems not from maliciousness, but results from the frustration of their need for clear, direct communication, or the need for consistent application of processes” (Cruz et al., 2025, pp. 5-6).

As already noted, only a limited number of studies have addressed the issue of how neurodiversity conditions interactions between customers and sales staff. The findings obtained so far are consistent with the results of the interviews conducted by the authors of the present study (although the interview excerpts presented here allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under investigation). In particular, convergent conclusions indicate that

people with complex communication needs experience barriers when interacting with sales staff (Taylor et al., 2022). For diagnosed individuals, shopping constitutes a challenging daily living skill. When confronted with unfamiliar environments, such as supermarkets, such individuals have been shown to exhibit altered behaviors and affective responses (Adjorlu et al., 2017; Robles et al., 2022).

Given the significant social relevance of the issue under study, the practical implications derived from the interviews are of importance alongside their academic contribution. In light of the results obtained in the present study, as well as findings reported by other scholars, a practical recommendation emerges highlighting the need to formulate policies and guidelines supporting neurodivergent individuals in navigating a social world. Neurodivergent retail customers have indicated that they struggle to understand rules “if they are unspoken, ill-defined, changed mid-game, or even routinely ignored by others” (Cruz et al., 2025, p. 4). It therefore appears justified to propose the development - at a concise and synthetic level - of clear service guidelines for interactions with neurodivergent customers. Such a document should take into account situations that require support from sales staff as well as those in which assistance is unnecessary or undesired. It should also serve as a training resource for retail employees, as training is crucial given that sales associates can reduce customers’ levels of stress in crowded situations by employing their task and interaction competences (Lucia-Palacios, Pérez-López, Polo-Redondo, 2018). Retail companies’ policies in this area should be made visible within stores (e.g., in the form of posters or notices), thereby helping neurodivergent customers orient themselves with regard to the rules applicable in a given retail setting. It is recommended that such guidelines be supplemented with graphic elements to facilitate comprehension. When designing retail spaces, it is essential to consider that many neurodivergent individuals prefer limited social interaction and may display heightened sensitivity to sudden loud sounds. These sensitivities may contribute to impairments in language comprehension (e.g., understanding sales staff communication) and to a reduced ability to distinguish relevant sounds from background noise. The importance of this aspect of in-store functioning has been emphasized both in the scientific literature (Rotschafer, 2021; Perkowski et al., 2024; Cruz et al., 2025) and in the interviews conducted by the authors. Consequently, it is advisable to design “quiet zones” within stores or to introduce “quiet hours” - areas or time periods during which customer conversations are minimized. The interview findings further indicate that sales staff training programs should place greater emphasis on neuroinclusivity and non-intrusive customer service.

It should also be noted that, in addition to promoting attitudes of openness among sales staff, it is important to undertake initiatives aimed at preparing neurodivergent individuals to function as independent customers. This may be achieved through personalized training programs (including, for example, serious games or virtual reality - VR - solutions), which allow individuals with ASD to practice shopping-related activities in a controlled and supportive environment (Adjorlu et al., 2017; Bhatla, Shankar, Jalal, 2022; Vallefucio et al., 2022).

## 6. Summary

The conducted interviews provided valuable insights. However, as a pioneering study, it has certain limitations - primarily with regard to the representativeness and size of the interview sample, as well as the absence of methodological triangulation through the combination of multiple research methods. The further research should include respondents representing a broader range of neurological differences than those characterizing the participants of the present study (ASD, ADHD, dyslexia, migraines, anxiety disorders). Moreover, future studies should involve larger samples. To achieve a broader and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, it would be beneficial to apply additional research methods within a triangulation framework, including both qualitative approaches (in particular focus group interviews) and quantitative methods (such as surveys conducted among neurodivergent individuals). It would also be worthwhile for future studies to incorporate the perspective of the other party to the interaction, namely sales personnel.

The conclusions presented in this study - by identifying key themes related to neurodivergent individuals' expectations regarding interpersonal interactions in retail settings - contribute to the development of knowledge on the creation of inclusive retail environments. In doing so, the study constitutes an initial step toward addressing the identified research gap. Furthermore, it outlines directions for future research for scholars interested in the social dimensions of neurodivergent individuals' functioning (e.g., the need to further examine social overload in retail spaces). Importantly, the findings also provide practical guidance for sales staff and store managers.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the findings of the conducted interviews constitute new and broadly applicable knowledge, extending beyond the retail context. They may be used both in academic research and in practice with regard to all shared spaces in which interactions with neurodivergent individuals take place (including, among others, public offices, railway stations, airports, educational institutions, places of worship, and cultural institutions).

## Acknowledgements

The article presents the results of the Project no 058/ZJP/2025/POT financed from the subsidy granted to the Krakow University of Economics.

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