

Autistic-Led Assessments of Australian Airports Using an Autism-Friendly Framework

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Background

- Airports are complex, high-stress environments with unpredictable stimuli, making air travel challenging for Autistic people.
- There is growing recognition of the need for autism-friendly spaces, yet research on airport accessibility remains limited.
- Autistic-led environmental assessments involve walkthroughs to evaluate sensory, social and communication experiences in real-world settings.
- This study analyzed environmental assessment reports from six airports to identify key accessibility challenges and enablers.

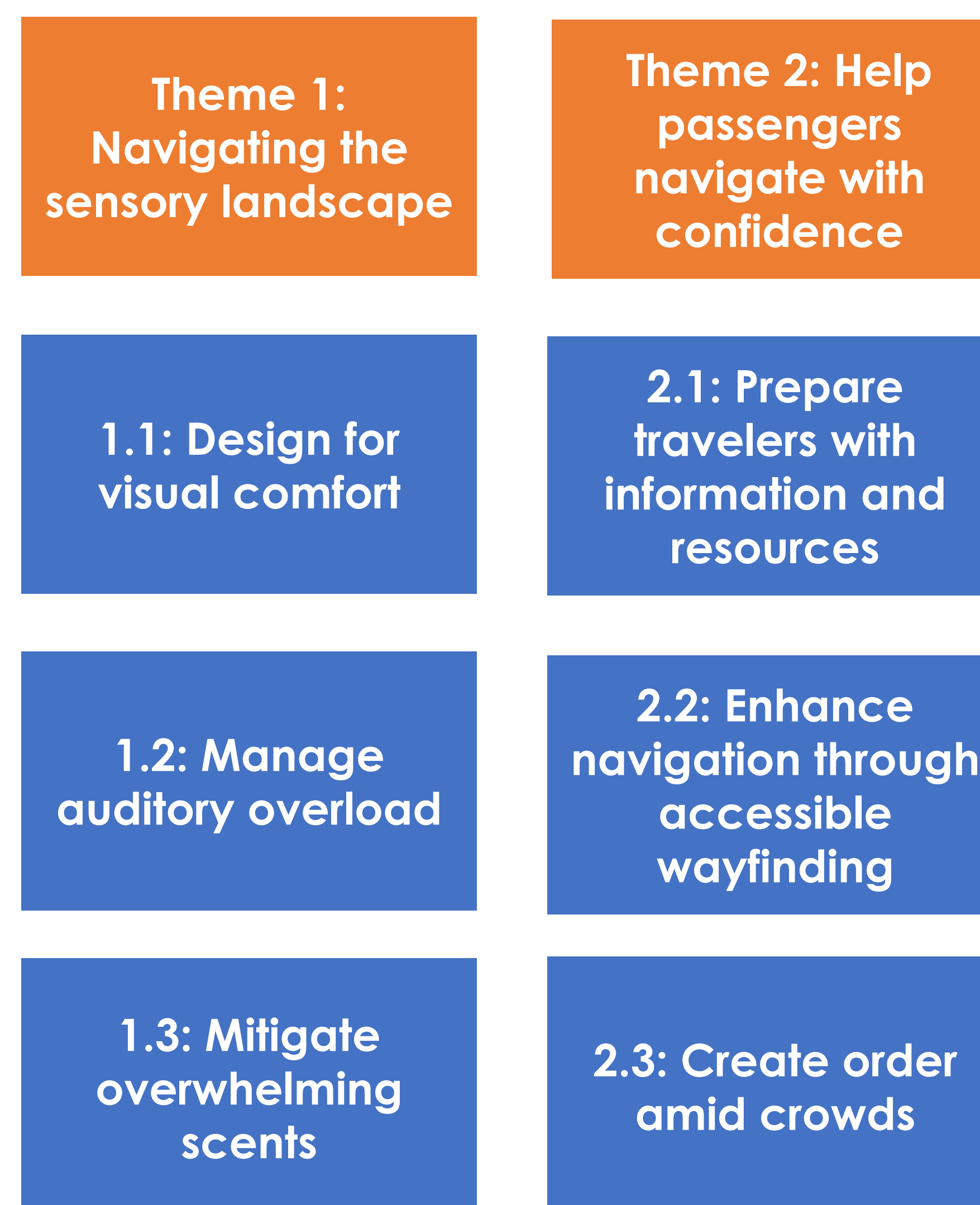
Research Question

- What are the common accessibility challenges and enablers in airports, as identified through Autistic-led environmental assessments guided by an autism-friendly framework?

Method

- A qualitative retrospective analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis.
- Six environmental reports from Australian airports (2017-2024) were analyzed.
- Reports ranged from 15 to 41 pages, documenting accessibility strengths and challenges.
- Reflexive thematic analysis led by an Autistic researcher with air travel experience.

Results

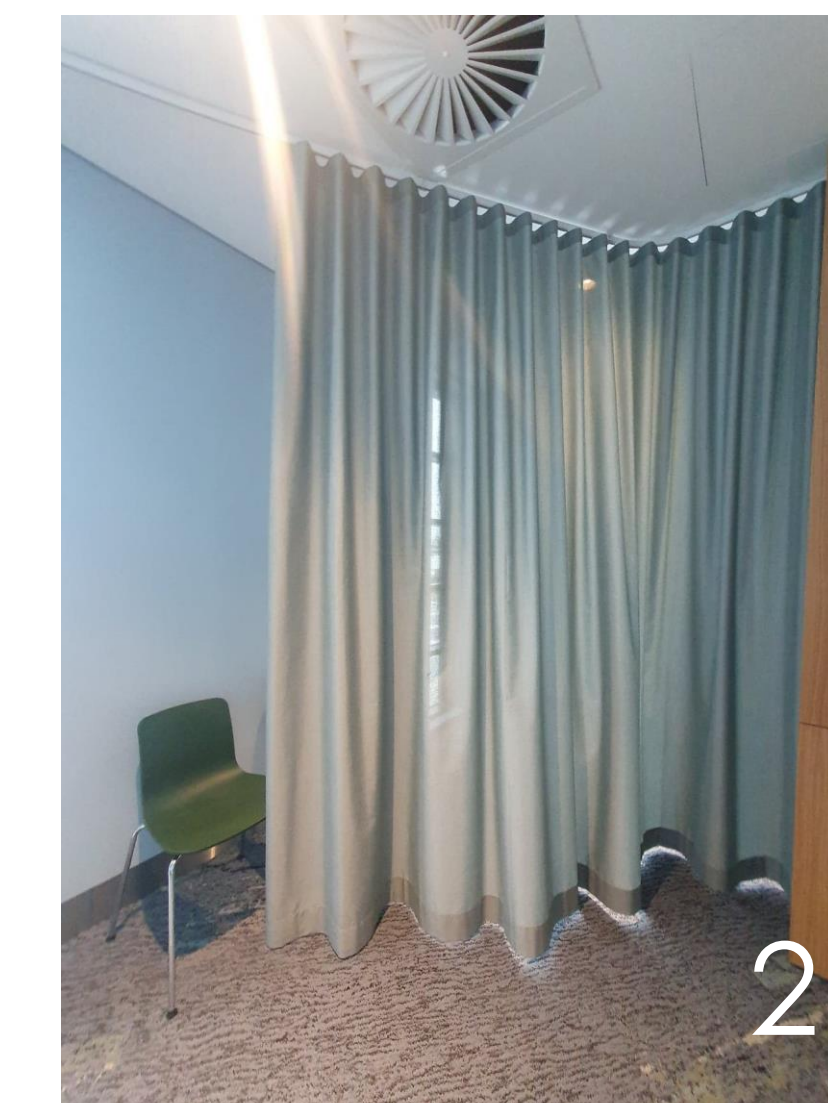
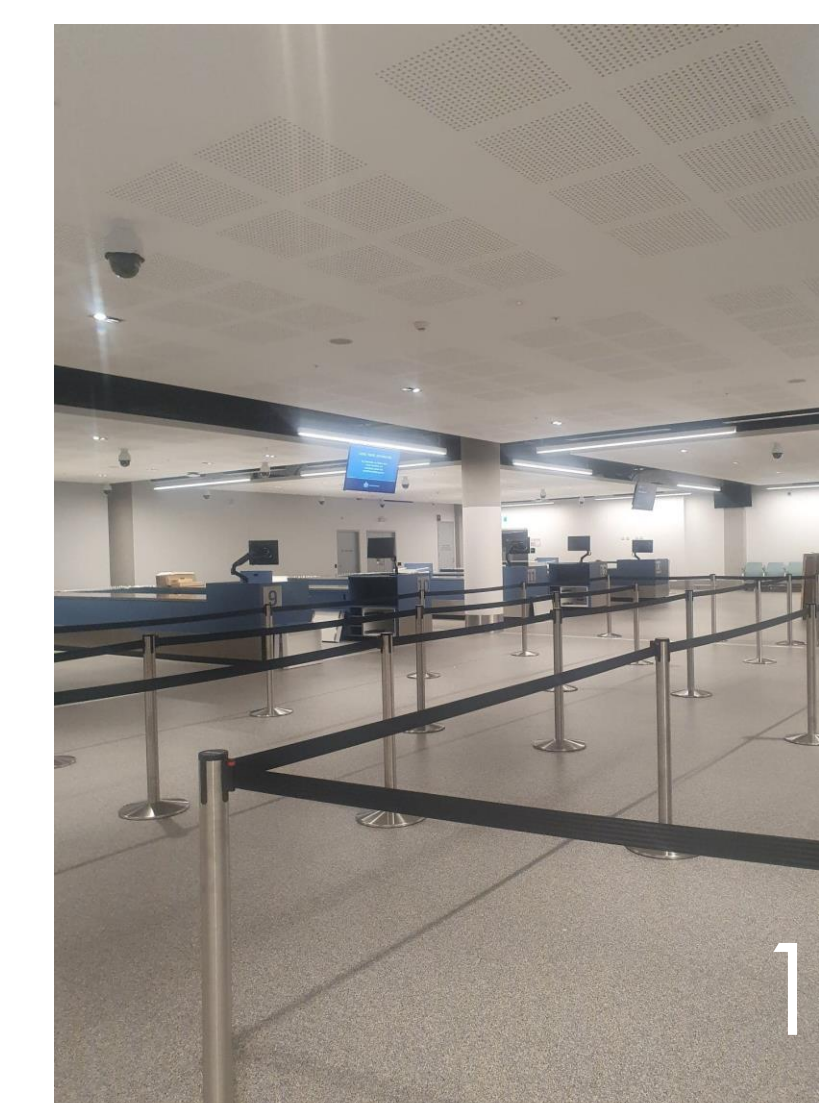


Significance

- Autistic-led research ensures accessibility improvements are informed by lived experience.
- Fills a critical research gap in airport accessibility.
- Aligns with universal design, benefiting a wide range of travelers.
- Supports a shift from isolated initiatives to systemic change in airport design.
- Encourages collaboration between researchers, airports, and policymakers.

Recommendations for Airports

- Minimize reflective surfaces, replace fluorescent lighting, and reduce sudden loud noises.
- Provide designated sensory-friendly rooms for travelers needing a break from overwhelming environments.
- Use high-contrast signage with icons, digital screens for queue times, and step-by-step security guides.
- Offer pre-travel resources, Easy English materials, and alternative ways to request assistance (e.g., Sunflower lanyards).
- Implement structured lanes, accessible pathways, and priority lanes for travelers with hidden disabilities.
- Equip airport personnel with knowledge on sensory needs, communication differences, and inclusive customer service.



Images

1. Bollards in place to support queuing and crowd control
2. Low sensory room
3. Clear signage including behaviour expectations
4. Signage informing passengers how many minutes it will take to get to their gate, helping to increase predictability

Poster

