Autistic Adults' Experiences and Perceptions of Golf:
A Baseline Analysis of Barriers and Participation Factors

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Executive Summary

This report examines autistic adults' perceptions, experiences, and disengagement from the sport of golf. The research prioritises a neurodiversity-affirming approach. It moves away from correctional or deficit-based frameworks to centre on the Autistic voice, interpretation, and meaning. An inductive, interpretive, non-interventionist method was used to create an open space for reflection across sensory, social, and structural domains of participation.

Nine formally diagnosed autistic adults took part, submitting responses to five open-ended interview questions. The questions were intentionally sequenced to move from general perception toward abstract reflection. This allowed participants to define their own terms of engagement without being led by behavioural or comparative logic.

Key themes include:

- Sensory ambivalence (golf as both calming and unpredictable)
- Rejection or reframing of competitive/social motivators
- Emotional tension around unspoken social codes and etiquette
- Structural exclusion through cost, access, or conceptual distance
- Deep resonance for some participants through solo play or sensory engagement

The findings suggest that traditional sport participation, which commonly relies on standardised frameworks and normative social modelling, may exclude those whose motivations are coherence-based or self-regulatory.

Participants' reflections align with critiques of universalised behavioural models in autism research and support calls to shift toward participatory, rights-based inclusion practices.

This report offers an empirical foundation for future research on inclusive practices, participatory sport strategies, and the interpretation of neurodivergent engagement.

Introduction

Golf is often portrayed as a sport suited to individual temperament, measured pacing, and sensory consistency. In public discourse and media these qualities are sometimes cited as potentially appealing to autistic individuals. Yet there is a lack of empirical investigation into whether golf is meaningfully accessible, conceptually coherent, or socially navigable for Autistic adults.

This research contributes to a growing body of critical inquiry into Autism and sport. As such, the emphasis shifts away from behaviour, adaptation, or intervention, toward focusing on how Autistic people interpret, experience, and construct meaning around sport. This supports the neurodiversity paradigm (den Houting, 2019), which reframes Autism as a valid and valuable way of being in the world. It also reflects the recent evolution in UK policy concerning the national Autism strategy (GOV UK, 2021). The policy agenda aims at promoting a better public understanding of Autism and improving socially integrated support programs. Autistic participation in sports has been studied in the context of quality of life and physical wellbeing (Cuesta-Gómez et al., 2022). However, the adaptability of individual sports such as golf remains under-examined. Growing evidence indicates that self-paced, structured, and spatially predictable environments may offer greater resonance with Autistic preferences for cognitive and sensory coherence (Mottron et al., 2006, pp. 29-31; Samaritter & Payne, 2017, pp. 8-9; Cuesta-Gómez et al., 2022). Nonetheless, structural features do not necessarily translate into cultural or conceptual accessibility. For many Autistic people, ‘norms’ such as social opacity, cost structures, and unspoken etiquette, as embedded in golf, can result in a perceived exclusion long before physical participation is considered (Leedham et al., 2020; Finch et al., 2022, p. 14). This echoes broader findings on Autistic adults' disengagement from spaces that rely on implicit social norms or performance-based identity (Crompton et al., 2020, pp. 1709-1711; Harwood, 2020, pp. 1-2). Similarly, while Self-Determination Theory recognises autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000, pp. 227-231; Ryan and Deci, 2006, pp. 1557-1563), its application in sport generally validates these needs through socially normative frameworks. Such application risks marginalising non-normative or solitary expressions of Autistic engagement.

This exploration repeats calls to restructure how questions about Autism are posed. Rather than asking, “How can Autistic people participate in sport?” this study begins with, “What does golf look like, feel like, and mean to Autistic adults?” In doing so, it aligns with emerging approaches that centre Autistic agency and coherence-based motivation, rather than adaptation or normative performance (Block et al., 2022, pp. 54-56).

Finally, this enquiry responds to critiques of Autism research that frame Autistic people as passive subjects, rather than epistemic agents (Botha and Cage, 2022, pp. 4-6; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019, pp. 943-944). By designing a study rooted in lived narrative, interpretive autonomy, and non-comparative logic, this report positions Autistic insight not as

supplementary, but as central to understanding the structure, relevance, and inclusivity of sport.

Research Objectives

This study was designed as a narrative, reflective inquiry into how Autistic adults perceive, experience, or reject the sport of golf. It follows a non-interventionist, neurodiversity-informed approach and avoids generalising or prescriptive ideologies. The goal is not to assess outcomes or define best practices but to understand meaning-making from within the Autistic experience.

The research employed a five-question, self-led interview structure, that moved progressively from basic perceptual reflection to higher-order conceptual interpretation. This sequencing reflects both phenomenological inquiry (Beyer, 2022) and the importance of processing autonomy in neurodivergent communication (Finch et al., 2022, pp. 15-18). See Appendix A for the question sequence.

Primary Objectives

1. To identify key sensory, social, and structural barriers influencing Autistic adults' perceptions and experiences of golf.
   This helps to understand experiences of discomfort related to unpredictability, unspoken rules, social fatigue, or unclear access routes.
2. To examine how Autistic individuals interpret golf's structural and cultural features, including its pacing, etiquette, and participation norms.
   This objective focuses not on inclusion efforts, but on understanding whether golf is legible and resonant in the first place.
3. To raise observational reflections on whether dominant sport motivation models, particularly those grounded in competition, social comparison, and peer validation are developmentally normative rather than developmentally universal.
   The study explores alternative motivators such as coherence, predictability, and solo routine.
4. To establish a thematic foundation for future research, including participatory or policy-informed studies, without imposing theoretical models or recommending behavioural adaptation.

Research Relevance

These objectives respond directly to calls for Autistic-led, epistemically inclusive research, as well as to recent critical reviews of Autism inclusion in leisure and sport. They also serve as

a counterpoint to prevailing assumptions about what motivates participation, reaffirming that inclusion must be based not on access alone, but on resonance, coherence, and meaningful engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

This study followed a qualitative, narrative inquiry design, while grounded in phenomenological principles informed by the neurodiversity paradigm. Reflective autonomy, participant pacing, and interpretive sovereignty were prioritised (Mruck and May, 2019, pp. 658-679). Thus, rejecting deficit comparisons or outcome-based assessments. The goal was to document how Autistic adults construct meaning, rather than assess behaviour or conformity. The five-tiered question format allowed for layered reflection. The questions start with schema-level perception and end with abstract, identity-level meaning-making. This structure supports the cognitive pacing and processing styles often preferred by Autistic participants.

The thematic analysis followed the reflexive approach endorsed by Braun and Clarke (2024). Themes were derived directly from participant language. No imposition of external frameworks or subjective interpretation was made. Themes were derived exclusively from explicit participant wording, and coding decisions were cross-checked against raw transcripts to ensure fidelity. No reflexive journal was maintained. The analytical process prioritised literal participant meanings over interpretive layering. Participants were assigned an anonymised identifier (i.e., P01) to support privacy.

Participants

- Total: N=9 Autistic adults, formally diagnosed under DSM-5 or ICD-11
- Age range: 18–65
- Location: United Kingdom
- Experience: Mixed (golfers N=5 and non-golfers N=4)
- Inclusion: Adults able to complete a self-led reflection independently or with informal support
- Support needs: Two participants disclosed support needs. One used WhatsApp text submission for accessibility, another received parental help

Recruitment was facilitated with the kind support of Autonomy Shropshire and The PGA. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Birmingham (Ref: 2118449).

Data Collection

Participants received a five-question prompt sheet via email and were given 14 days to respond. A single reminder was sent at the 7-day mark. Participants were given the option to respond in PDF or audio format, although in practice, responses were submitted as either PDF attachments or WhatsApp text messages (with consent for transcription).

All interviews were self-led, with no real-time dialogue or researcher presence. A format validated in neurodivergent research practice (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021) to respect communication autonomy and avoid imposing real-time interaction expectations.

The phenomenological oriented questions, shown in Appendix A, were designed to support cognitive scaffolding, moving from familiarity to abstraction, and respecting the reflective logic preferred by many Autistic adults (Robertson and Simmons, 2015, pp. 6-7; Finch et al., 2022, pp. 15-18).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted manually via inductive coding (Clarke and Braun, 2016), with themes derived directly from participant language. Quotes and responses were first coded descriptively, then grouped into emergent themes across participants. Codes were not applied prescriptively, and no quantitative comparisons were made between “types” of participants (e.g., golfer vs non-golfer). Quoted participants are documented in Appendix B by theme for transparency.

Themes were interpreted through the lenses of sensory regulation, conceptual coherence, and motivational relevance, without presuming deficit or behavioural misalignment. This aligns with inclusive approaches to meaning-making in Autistic-led and participatory research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Crompton et al., 2020). The full participant-by-theme matrix is included in Appendix C.

Key Findings

This section presents five core themes that were drawn from the interviews. Quotes are taken directly from participants’ responses and reflect individual experiences with/or reflections on golf. Themes were identified using inductive thematic analysis, with emphasis placed on lived meaning, cognitive coherence, and sensory-emotional framing.

1. Golf as Sensory Ambivalence: Calm but Unpredictable

Participants described golf’s physical environment as both potentially soothing and unpredictably dysregulating, echoing findings on sensory modulation in autism (Lane et al.,

2010, pp. 119-121). While open space and quietness were praised, changes in weather, noise, or pace were described as destabilising.

“I feel totally at ease on a course, I love watching the deer, birds and general goings on at the club… but I get grumpy when the weather prohibits golf.” - P01.

“I like the rules of golf and that all aspects of the rules are clearly defined, and I also like the open space… but I didn’t really like… when a slower group was in front of me… or when a quicker group was approaching, I felt pressurised and ended up playing worse…” – P06

This reflects findings by Robertson & Simmons (2015), who describe sensory processing differences not as fixed impairments but as context-sensitive, based on environmental clarity and predictability.

2. Reframing of Competitive and Social Norms

A consistent theme was discomfort with competition and group participation. Participants preferred solo play or personal routine over structured peer engagement. Where competition was valued, it was experienced as a self-structured, perfectionist activity, rather than a form of social comparison. Some viewed the social rituals of club-based culture in golf as alienating or exclusionary, reflecting critiques of institutional emotional politics (De Venanzi, 2006). Others rejected competition or found it overwhelming.

“Spending 4+ hours with a group of ‘lads’ and then being expected to go upstairs and share a pint before going home has never been my idea of fun.” – P02

“Golf removes many social barriers and gives people an experience to build relationships… there is also no requirement to engage with others, and an afternoon or evening alone… is quite cathartic.” – P05

This challenges the general applicability of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) in Autistic contexts and supports recent critiques that propose coherence-based models of motivation over extrinsic or social motivators (Samaritter & Payne, 2017; Block et al., 2022).

3. Unspoken Etiquette as Exclusionary

Participants mentioned that unclear norms (etiquette, procedures) contribute to anxiety or prevent participation altogether. There was a reoccurring sentiment that golf lacked entry-level transparency. Insko et al. (1992, pp. 287-290) attribute this to ‘group discontinuity,’ where implicit norms solidify ingroup/outgroup boundaries, alienating those unfamiliar with unwritten codes.

“Golf seems quite exclusive and cliquey… attitude of golfers, club, and rules… doesn’t seem something geared for the general population.” – P04

“The golf environment is difficult to understand if you don't already know it… signage is not great… interactions are unavoidable, and that’s not great for everyone.” – P05

This matches Finch et al. (2022, pp. 15-18) in that cognitive dissonance with unspoken cultural expectations can result in withdrawal or avoidant behaviour in Autistic adults.

4. Structural Barriers and Time-Access Costs

Logistical concerns like transport, fees, and time commitment also played a role in non-engagement and included those who felt conceptually interested in golf. These concerns reflect systemic exclusion patterns observed in disability sport research (Maher et al., 2023, pp. 123-126, 132-135).

“I don’t drive a car or live near a golf club… I imagine that a round of golf would take about four hours… I would struggle to find the time.” – P03

“The game needs investment (time and money) to get to the capability of being able to go on the course and have a good experience.” – P05

“It’s an expensive sport, both in terms of membership fees and equipment.” – P06

These issues compound with cognitive and sensory barriers, resulting in an implicit multi-layered exclusion profile, even in normative “individual-friendly” perceived sports.

5. Golf as Solace, Structure, or Persistence

Despite challenges, some participants described emotionally significant engagement with golf. This was expressed through self-structured routines or solo practice. Golf served as a personal domain of focus and regulation, rather than a social sport.

“It's a perfectionist sport… somewhere I can go and use my brain to problem solve… routine, focus, one problem after another and solve it.” – P01

“When practicing, it is mostly an exercise in social isolation and enjoying outdoors with only myself and my thoughts… time where my anxieties and self-doubt diminish.” - P02

These reflections affirm Mottron et al.’s (2006) Enhanced Perceptual Functioning model, where deep engagement is driven by rhythm, repetition, and internal clarity and not necessarily performance or recognition.

<u>Analysis and Interpretation</u>

The evaluation interprets participant narratives, considering the broader theoretical and policy contexts. The neurodiversity paradigm (den Houting, 2019) and sensory processing theory (Robertson and Simmons, 2015) were used to critique how traditional sport

psychology models are commonly applied. The findings challenge assumptions about what constitutes inclusion, motivation, and accessibility in sport.

1. Golf as a Conditionally Regulated Environment

Participants' reflections reveal that golf is not inherently sensory-friendly, but conditionally regulated and dependent on controllability of pace, noise, weather, and social pressure. Golf's outdoor and spaced format was appreciated, aligning with evidence of outdoor environments as calming sensory sanctuaries (Doughty, 2023), but disruptions such as 'unexpected weather shifts' or 'unclear turn-taking' were cited as stressors.

This affirms Robertson and Simmons (2015), who note that Autistic sensory experiences are modulated more by predictability and coherence than by volume or frequency of input. Inclusion, then, is not achieved through sensory reduction alone, but through environmental stability, interpretability, and the capacity to anticipate and regulate one's experience.

2. Autistic Motivation appears Coherence-Based, Not Competitive

Mainstream sport participation models usually identify autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core motivational drivers. In contrast, participants in this study consistently described solo routines, personal sensory regulation, and the avoidance of group comparison as preferred engagement strategies.

The participants' preferences therefore align more closely with coherence-based motivation. This motivation reflects preference for internal rhythm, perceptual stability, and emotional regulation, rather than social comparison. It suggests that Autistic engagement may be driven more by rhythm, internal consistency, and emotional regulation, instead of competition or peer validation (Samaritter & Payne, 2017; Block et al., 2022; Fletcher and Sedgewick, 2023). One participant even described golf as an *"exercise in social isolation" (P02)* that provided a calming escape from anxiety and self-doubt.

3. Unspoken Norms as Cognitive Barriers

Many participants described the etiquette and entry pathways into golf as unclear, unwelcoming, or loaded with implicit social expectations. These procedural ambiguities led to avoidance, despite general interest in the sport itself.

This reflects Finch et al. (2022), who describe Autistic disengagement not as a lack of desire, but as a response to unstructured social complexity. When expectations are unspoken, the cost of misunderstanding becomes too high. Social Identity Theory also suggests that such norms function to reinforce group boundaries and perform identity maintenance (Insko et al.,

1992; Harwood, 2020), potentially explaining why even seemingly open environments can feel culturally closed. This mirrors descriptions of group discontinuity where unspoken norms signal ingroup membership.

4. Cultural Belonging Is Not Guaranteed by Structural Access

Participants repeatedly identified that physical access to golf does not equate to conceptual or emotional belonging. Even those with access to clubs or familiarity with the sport described a sense of misfit, alienation, or the need to mask.

This matches Botha & Cage (2022), who argue that inclusion efforts must move beyond surface access and engage with how Autistic people interpret space, community, and belonging. It also supports the work of Fletcher-Watson (2023), who positions participation as a process of meaning-making, not simply presence.

5. Persistence, Identity, and Autistic Engagement

Despite these barriers, several participants expressed long-standing, emotional relationships with golf. They described a form of engagement rooted in persistence, structure, and self-guided discovery where identity and activity were harmonised.

This reflects Mottron et al. (2006) and Crompton et al. (2020), who describe Autistic cognition not in terms of impairment, but as alternative perceptual and interpersonal logic. When allowed to engage on their own terms, Autistic adults create deep, sustaining relationships with spaces that neurotypical models fail to interpret as meaningful.

These findings suggest that structural accessibility cannot be reduced to physical presence or open availability. Participation frameworks must be understood in relation to how people are positioned socially, economically, and logistically.

Conclusions

This study explored how Autistic adults perceive and experience the sport of golf through a narrative, reflective inquiry method. Rather than treating participation as an objective to be optimised, the research investigated whether golf is conceptually resonant, sensorially coherent, or structurally interpretable for Autistic individuals.

Findings reveal a layered picture. Some participants identified golf as a source of sensory regulation, solitude, and emotional balance. Others described it as opaque, inaccessible, or symbolically distant. The key distinction was not between those who played and those who did not. It was rather between those who could frame golf within their own logic of

motivation, and those for whom the sport's cultural signals, normative expectations, and procedural assumptions remained alienating. For the latter, golf was perceived or experienced as unrewarding, or outright unattractive.

These observations and considerations reinforce critiques of universal application of sport motivation models, particularly those reliant on normative drivers. They support a shift toward recognising coherence-based motivation where internal structure, predictability, and cognitive intelligibility become the foundation for meaningful engagement.

Moreover, the findings support the claim that access alone does not constitute inclusion. Environments must not only be reachable but also intelligible and emotionally viable for the people engaging with them.

Recommendations

This report does not propose interventions or models. However, the following lines of inquiry and consideration develop naturally from participant narratives:

1. Reframe Research Questions in Sport Science

Future research should move away from asking, “How can Autistic people participate in sport?” and instead ask, “What does participation mean to Autistic individuals?” and “How is it cognitively, socially, or sensorially interpreted?”

2. Expand and Challenge Existing Motivation Frameworks

Studies that rely on normative expectations, social bonding, or competition-based metrics should be critically reassessed. There is a growing need for sport psychology to incorporate non-comparative, identity-coherent motivational logics.

3. Support Participatory, Autistic-Led Research

Further investigations should adopt co-designed, Autistic-led models that respect epistemic agency. Research priorities must emerge from lived needs and experiences, not imposed objectives.

4. Acknowledge Structural and Conceptual Barriers

Golf institutions should explore how cost, procedural ambiguity, and social expectation function as gatekeeping mechanisms. Further, inclusive design principles need to be informed by practice-based insight, as resources compiled for England Rugby by

Neurodiverse Sport demonstrate (Neurodiverse Sport, n.d.). Inclusion efforts must go beyond “inviting in” and consider how systems are coded, narrated, and experienced.

5. Recognise Non-Normative Participation as Valid

Engagement that is solitary, non-competitive, or non-linear should be respected as legitimate and meaningful, not pathologised or seen as transitional toward ‘full participation’.

These recommendations point toward a broader re-evaluation of how inclusion is understood in practice. While this report has focused on participants’ own framing of accessibility and meaning, future research may benefit from exploring how wider structural factors, such as economic precarity, employment discrimination, or geographic access, shape participation conditions for Autistic adults. Despite these factors not being the focus here, they remain relevant to understanding how inclusion is positioned and experienced.

Limitations

This study was designed as a qualitative, non-interventionist inquiry into the lived experiences and interpretations of golf among Autistic adults. Its intent was not to be predictive or comprehensive, but to establish a baseline of narrative insight.

Nonetheless, several limitations are acknowledged below in the interest of transparency and future replicability.

1. Sample Size and Scope

With nine participants, the study does not seek to represent the full diversity of Autistic experiences. Participants were UK-based, formally diagnosed, and fluent in text communication. Autistic adults with additional language, cognitive, or cultural barriers may have different perspectives that are not reflected here.

2. Communication Format and Medium Constraints

All data were collected via asynchronous, self-led submissions (PDF via email and WhatsApp text). No follow-up interviews, elaboration prompts, or field observations were conducted. While this format was chosen deliberately to respect Autistic communication preferences, it limited opportunities for real-time clarification or developing dialogue.

3. Demographic Detail and Variability

The study did not collect detailed demographic information beyond diagnosis, age, and broad experience with golf. Variables such as ethnicity, gender identity, class, or co-occurring conditions were not recorded or analysed. Such data may significantly inform how Autistic individuals engage with sport. Also, it remains unclear whether the amateur golfers were casual players or club members. This limits interpretation of the overall influence of formal affiliation or recreational status on experience.

4. Temporal and Structural Boundaries

Participants had a two-week window to respond and were engaged during a specific time limit. Reflections may be shaped by current life context or temporal mood, rather than stable outlook. Additionally, while the study reflects on the structure and culture of golf, it does not include input from golf organisations or institutions directly.

5. Researcher Positionality

The lead researcher is a professional golfer. This positionality informed the study's focus, tone, and design. While steps were taken to allow participant narratives to lead interpretation, reflexive bias is acknowledged, particularly in what was chosen to analyse, emphasise, or leave unexamined.

While qualitative studies often employ reflexive journals to track researcher bias, this study's design centred on participant autonomy and literal language analysis. The researcher's systematic adherence to direct participant wording mitigated the need for interpretive reflexivity.

Despite these limitations, the study maintains internal consistency and strong methodological alignment with its guiding paradigm. Its strength lies in the space it creates, not in the claims it makes. By foregrounding Autistic voices and resisting deficit-framed logic, it contributes meaningfully to the rethinking of what inclusive sport might look like.

What can materialise, if we begin with how Autistic individuals experience meaning, is a different concept of participation.

Appendix A: Questions

1. What are your general perceptions of golf as a sport?
2. Have you had any personal experiences with golf, and how have they shaped your perceptions?
3. What factors (e.g., sensory, social, environmental) influence your decision to participate in golf or not?
4. How do you perceive the structure and environment of golf, particularly in terms of Autistic accessibility or compatibility?
5. Is there anything else important to mention about golf and Autism?

Appendix B: Quoted Participants by Theme

Theme	Quoted Participants
1. Golf as Sensory Ambivalence	P03, P05
2. Reframing Social Norms	P02, P05
3. Unspoken Etiquette	P04, P05
4. Structural Barriers	P03, P05, P06
5. Solace and Persistence	P01, P02

Appendix C: Participant Theme Map

Theme	P01	P02	P03	P04	P05	P06	P07	P09	P10
1. Sensory Ambivalence	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
2. Competitive/Social Norms	X	X	-	-	X	X	X	X	-
3. Unspoken Etiquette	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X
4. Structural Barriers	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X
5.Solace/Structure	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-

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Participants were invited through direct communication and contributed voluntarily. All data has been anonymised, and no personal identifiers are included in this document.

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