

Background

What we already know

- Compared to their neurotypical peers, **Autistic and ADHD** identifying students **face barriers** when addressing social, sensory, and executive functioning needs **at university**.^[D,I]
- Intersectional** aspects of their **identities** may **exacerbate these barriers**^[B,E,G] and **impact the development** of their **disability identity**.

What we hope to learn

- We **do not yet know** how **disability identity**—or, how one understands themselves in relation to the concept of disability—**impacts university support needs** for Autistic and ADHD identifying students.
- By **understanding** if and **how disability identity impacts university support needs**, we **can** improve our support systems and **create a more accessible university environment** for Autistic and ADHD students.



Neurodiversity in University: A Mixed-Methods Study on Student Experiences and Disability Identity

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The goal of our community-led research project is to better understand how to support Autistic and ADHD students at UTSC.

Methods

Part One – Disability Experiences Questionnaire

- 30 students who **have, or suspect they have Autism and/or ADHD** rated their support needs across three themes: **sensory, social communication, and executive functioning** needs at university
- Statements attributed experiences of disability to oneself** (dispositional attribution) **or to one's environment** (situational attribution). Participant scores were calculated across themes and attributions

Part Two – Semi-Structured Interviews

- Four of the initial 30 students participated in a **semi-structured interview discussing their questionnaire responses and disability identity**.
- Students **provided recommendations** to address the gaps in the supports they were receiving at university.

Students were compensated with \$10 gift cards for completing the questionnaire, \$15 gift cards for completing the interview, and disability advocacy stickers for completing both parts.

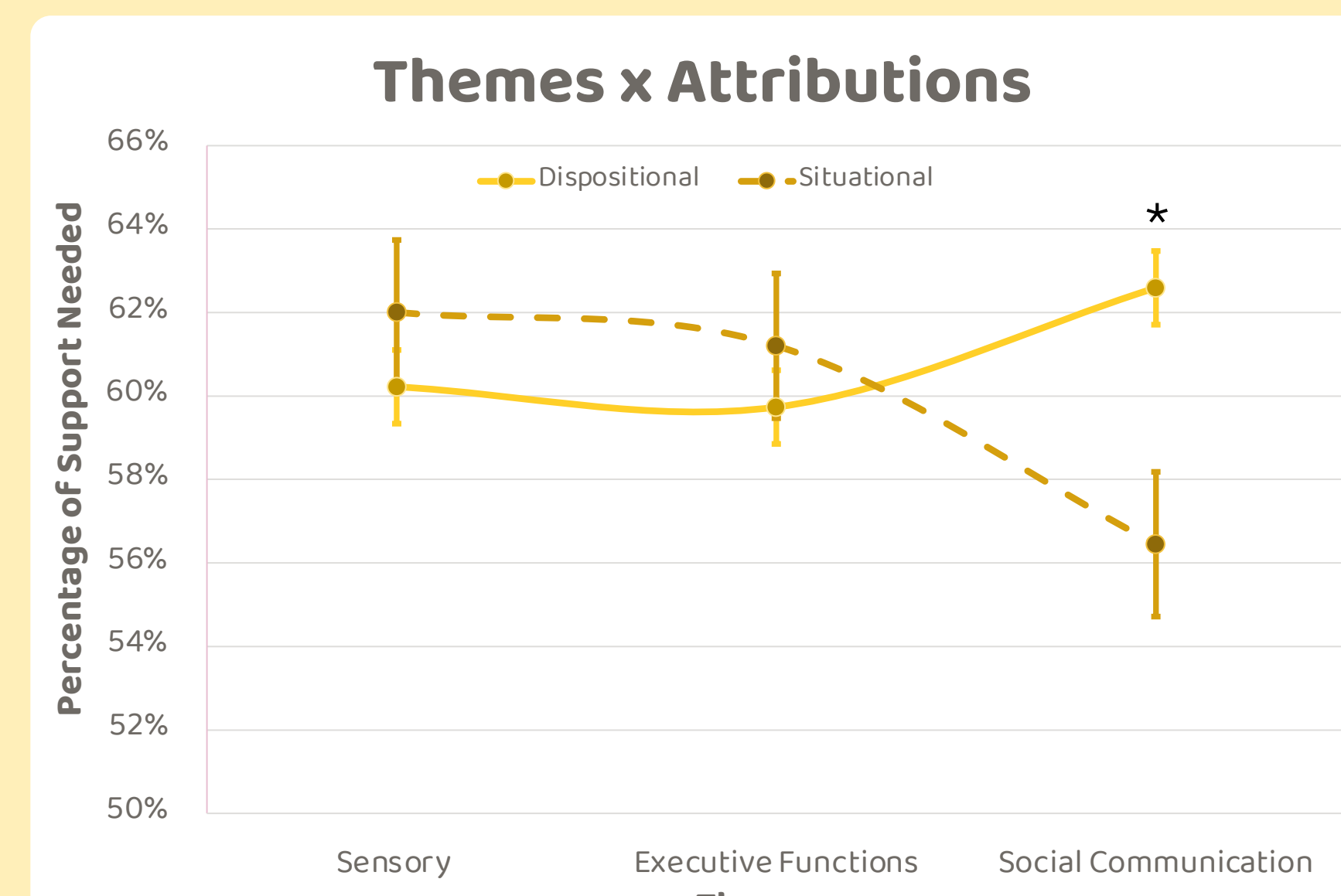
Quantitative Results – Student Experiences

Students responded similarly to each other, regardless of diagnosis or diagnostic status.

Suspected, Self-Diagnosed, and Professionally Diagnosed Autism or ADHD

Consistent with literature addressing the overlap in Autism and ADHD^[A,C], overall scores did not significantly differ, and scores across themes were positively correlated.

Students needed significantly more support in dispositional social contexts, compared with situational ones.

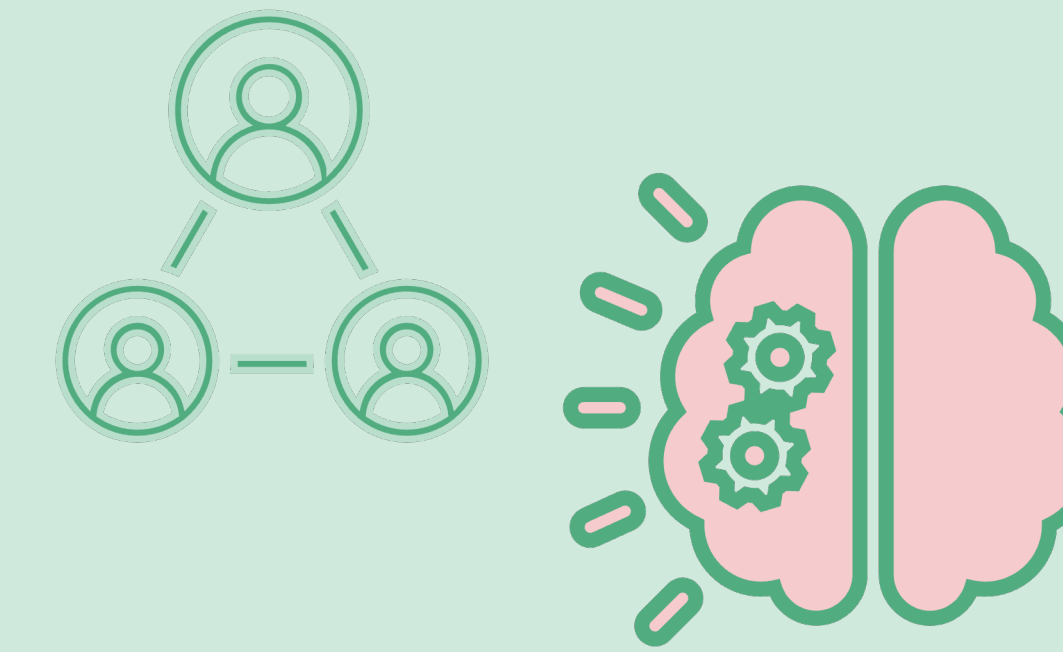


In a society with increased awareness on how to accommodate various social needs^[H,J], this repeated measures ANOVA ($N = 30$) may reflect the negative impacts of a dispositional attribution towards neurodivergent students' social experiences.^[M]

Qualitative Results – Disability Identity

Disability identity: how you understand yourself in relation to the concept of "disability". This considers both your self-identification as disabled or not, and your connection to a larger social group.^[F]

All students who identified as disabled experienced a mismatch between their own disability identities and the disability identities assigned to them by others.



Familial cultural beliefs, twice exceptionalism, and perceptions of overall capacity were major sources of disagreement between students and support persons, leading to unaddressed needs.

Students found comfort in a variety of social spaces, not only those consisting of other Autistic and ADHD individuals.

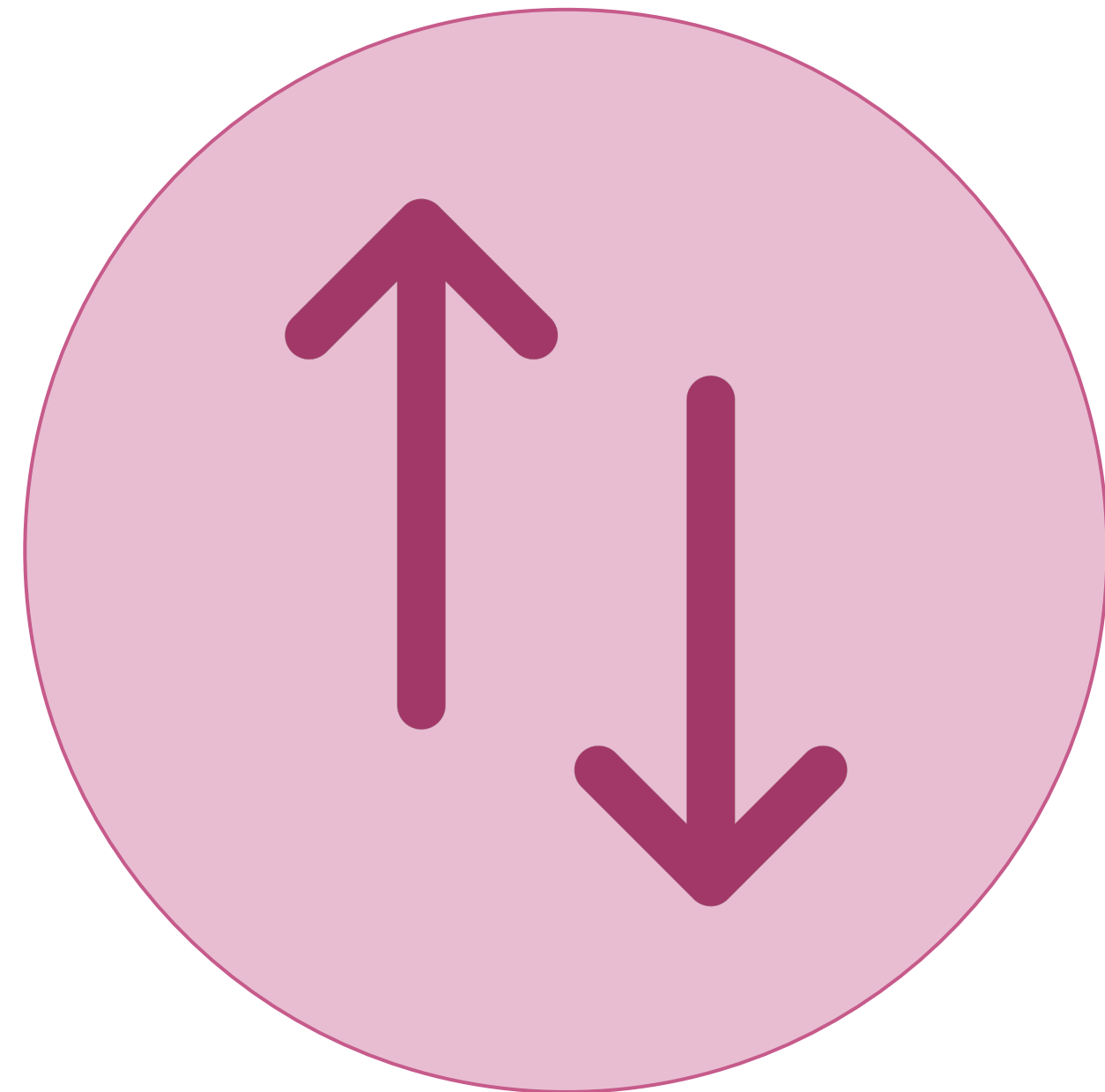


Social spaces where their disabilities were affirmed provided students the most comfort and made them feel safe.

Real-life Implications – How Student Experiences and Disability Identity Intersect



Students know themselves and what they need, even in the absence of professional opinion.



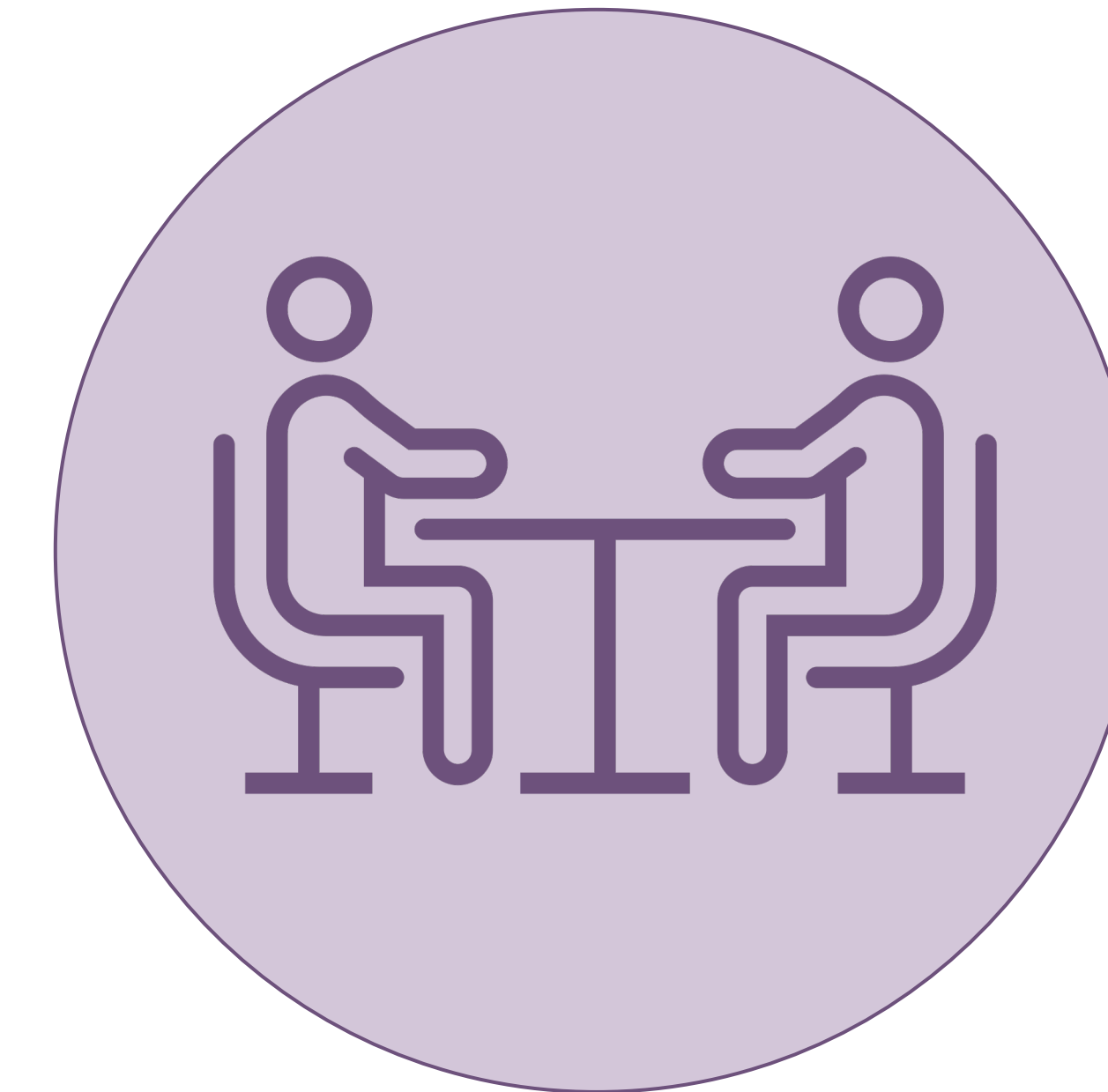
Disability identity is constantly evolving from bidirectional interactions between an individual and their environment.

"If I were to live in a world, without these forms of social class and productivity, I would not be disabled. I would simply be living."

"I didn't realize how different it was to be seen as like, a person with the disability label. You know, the disabled label...like, it just really changes your view of the world, like, especially if you've not been diagnosed with a disability from the beginning."

"[Identifying as a person without a disability] has made me a bit more hesitant to seek out help because I don't know if I deserve it."

"While there are definitely disabling things about my disability and my autism, it's more like, validating for me to first think about it as a difference."



How we talk about disability matters, and may even impact self-perceptions of capacity.



Identifying discrepancies between students' disability identities and external perspectives is an essential step in providing valuable support.



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References and Acknowledgements

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I'm extremely grateful to my supervisors Deb and Kyle for their extensive support, expertise and guidance throughout the research process. Thank you to the UTSC Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Postdoctoral Fellowship awarded to Deb in support of this project. Many thanks to Steph, Mehvish, and Farzana for providing feedback and insight on study processes and procedures. Lastly, thank you to all the participants who took the time to share their stories and lived experiences with me.