

Feeding the Senses: Breastfeeding Through the Lens of Neurodiversity

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Introduction

Background

- 8 in 10 people in the UK cease breastfeeding before they intend to (UNICEF, n.d.)
- One barrier autistic individuals have reported is sensory difficulties whilst breastfeeding (Grant et al., 2024; Hampton et al., 2023)
- Factors that may contribute to these sensory difficulties are:
 - Sensory sensitivities
 - Interoception: the ability to sense and interpret bodily signals (Mehling et al., 2018)
- But research is limited meaning little generalisations can be made across both neurodivergent and neurotypical populations

We aim to investigate:

- If sensory profiles (SPQ) (Tavassoli et al., 2014) and breastfeeding interoceptive awareness (BFIA) are predictive of breastfeeding self-efficacy (BFSE) (Dennis, 2003) in neurodivergent and neurotypical parents
- Qualitative responses of the sensory experiences of breastfeeding and how that can impact overall breastfeeding experiences

Methods

Participants (N=325), who had to be currently breastfeeding, completed an online Qualtrics survey containing:

- Likert-scale questionnaires:
 - SPQ measuring sensory sensitivities
 - BFIA measuring interoception whilst breastfeeding
 - BFSE measuring breastfeeding confidence
- Qualitative questions looking at sensory experiences whilst breastfeeding including the impact of neurodiversity

Figure 1. Participant Demographics

General demographics	
Mean age	32.89 years
Ethnicity	White (96.6%)
Mean length breastfeeding	15.54 months
First time breastfeeding	Yes (56.6%)

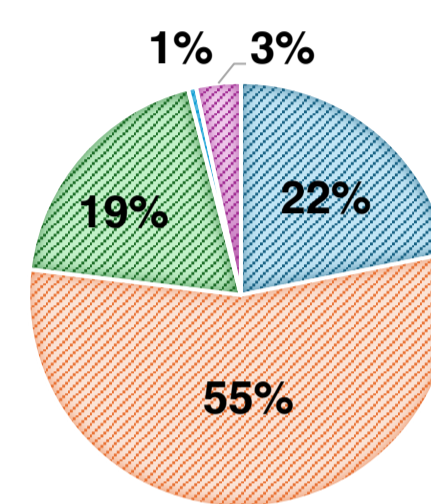


Figure 2. Neurodiversity (%)

- Neurodivergent
- Neurotypical
- Unsure
- Prefer not to say
- Missing data

Results

Linear Regression:

- The model was significant ($F(4,307) = 22.27, p < .001$)
 - Outcome: BFSE
 - Predictors: SPQ, BFIA, neurodivergence, and length breastfeeding
- Significance of predictors:
 - Length of breastfeeding ($t = 4.757, p < .001$) and BFIA ($t = 7.302, p < .001$) were significant
 - SPQ ($t = -.814, p = .416$) and neurodivergence ($t = .359, p = .719$) were NOT significant
- With these predictors explaining 22.5% of variance in the BFSE

Qualitative data analysis is ongoing, but this is an example quote of an emerging pattern of how sensations impact breastfeeding:

“Too much stimuli made me have days where I loathed breastfeeding. I did not want to be touched and felt disgusting. This was before solid food, 0-6months. It is rare I feel like this now as i am not the sole source of nutrition.”

T-tests:

- Compared the means of:
 - Neurodivergent and unsure participants
 - Neurotypical participants
- Found:
 - Significant differences in BFIA ($t(310) = -2.9, p = .004$) and SPQ ($t(249.134) = -5.704, p < .001$)
 - No significant differences in BFSE ($t(310) = -.930, p = .353$)
- The significance of these differences in means are highlighted below in figure 3.

Variable	Neurotypical		Neurodivergent & Unsure	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
BFSE	60.65	9.34	59.61	19.48
SPQ	44.27	10.39	36.56	12.77
BFIA	96.58	17.46	90.49	19.48

Figure 3. Table of descriptive statistics.

Discussion

To summarise, sensory experiences are implicated in breastfeeding outcomes:

- BFIA is predictive of BFSE: with a positive relationship between the two
- Neurodivergent individuals report lower SPQ and BFIA but not BFSE suggesting feeding experiences may be impacted but not outcomes
- Providing insight into the sensory experiences of breastfeeding in previously unexplored populations and variables

Evaluations:

- BFSE may not be an appropriate measure of breastfeeding outcome for those feeding older infants
- Sample bias; 96.6% of participants were white and BFSE was high
- 22.5% of variance in BFSE is accounted for suggesting other factors may be involved

Implications:

- Interoceptive techniques may be one way to support breastfeeding (Boybay Koyuncu & Yayan, 2022)
- Clinical considerations during the perinatal period

Conclusions

BFIA and length breastfeeding are predictive of BFSE unlike SPQ and neurodivergence which were found not to be.

Sensory experiences play a role in breastfeeding but much of this relationship is unknown and requires further investigation.

Sensory factors should be considered when providing breastfeeding support.



References

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