



Exploring the “Freedom to be Me” through Design Sprints with Neurodiverse Scholars

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Abstract

Social stigma negatively impacts the well-being of neurodivergent individuals. Specifically for autistic people, the social isolation and pressure to conform to normative ways of being can take a tremendous toll; such as a thwarted sense of belonging to the point of higher rates of suicide. Yet, few technologies are directly targeting the problem of stigma. Socio-technical systems have tremendous potential to shift public perception of traditionally marginalized populations. However, these systems are not consistently designed to reflect the values and needs of neurodivergent individuals. This work explores the use of design sprints to envision CT— a spectrum of technology that could reduce social stigma by increasing the public’s awareness, accommodations, acceptance, advocacy, and appreciation. This work reports on two design sprints across 25 HCI community members with varying lived experiences with neurodiversity and knowledge of design practice. The resulting design concepts were discussed in the groups and then analyzed to reflect on how they might combat stigma. Results reveal designs that support the freedom to be oneself via (1) safe spaces (2) public understanding, and (3) authentic expression of strengths, challenges, and needs.

CCS Concepts

• **Social and professional topics** → *People with disabilities*; • **Human-centered computing** → **Social networking sites**.

Keywords

Salutogenesis, Disability Justice, Celebratory Technology, Neurodiversity, Design Sprints, Community Engagement

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1 Background and Introduction

Celebratory Technology (CT) is a term first coined by Grimes and Harper in 2008, related to reorienting health technology from directly intervening on individuals with eating disorders to the broader context of celebrating the joys of eating [14]. CT is an example of a “countervention” [29] that aims to refocus the interventionist technologies that are predicated on the medical model that seeks to remediate perceived deficits of neurodivergence. To counteract a deficit model, this work adopts a salutogenic approach. Rather than focusing on deficit remediation, salutogenic models design interventions aimed at growth and development by aspects of life that promote well-being [13, 24, 27]. Recently, CT for neurodiversity has emerged as a paradigm to do the same, as a model to support the positive aspects of neurodiversity—the benefits of diversity across all neurotypes [6].

The primary goal of CT for Neurodiversity is to empower all individuals by acknowledging strengths and celebrating differences rather than trying to conform to common conventions. This approach holds promise, particularly in areas such as neurodivergence and disability, where technology can enhance the overall quality of life. This approach extends the current neurodiversity technology ecosystem to focus on addressing public deficits, such as the stigmatization of people with disabilities, shifting from remediation to social change. To respond to Boyd et al.’s call to continue to build this emerging paradigm as a scholarly community, this work expands upon the first proposed design principles of awareness, acceptance, and appreciation [6] by adding advocacy and accommodation that are also core tenants of the neurodiversity movement. In this work, we explore these 5 principles we assembled from our interpretation of disability justice literature at large [15, 18, 19, 23, 25, 26], and we built an initial rubric for CT for Neurodiversity. We invited colleagues to explore these concepts through design sprints. We present our analysis of 12 design concepts based on the verbal summaries collected during two design sprints and discuss how they inform our understanding.

Stigma is a barrier faced by neurodivergent, specifically autistic people in social, educational, and employment settings [28] which can negatively impact one’s quality of life [8, 9, 12]. Additionally, stigma is socially constructed [4, 16, 17]. Socio-technical systems

have the potential to shift public perception of those with marginalized identities, such as individuals with lived experiences relating to LGBTQ reproduction [2] and mental illness [20, 22]. Technology-enabled spaces, such as online forums, are one example of how digital technology can help push back against stigma by providing authentic, supportive, and safe spaces for those in the community and creating positive social change [1, 5, 11, 30]. However, beyond these online spaces, there are not many other exemplar technologies that primarily address social stigma towards neurodiversity.

This paper identifies new design priorities for addressing social stigma against neurodivergence by applying our 5As framework to generate multiple potential technology directions beyond online spaces. This work aligns with the mission of the Neurodiversity Movement which is to empower all individuals by acknowledging their strengths and valuing their differences, rather than conforming to normative conventions [6, 14].

Here in, we defined a design sprint process for scaffolding ideation and data analysis across 5 design aims. We found that the design sprint process enabled collaboration and ideation among neurodiverse people (i.e., some with varying lived experiences with neurodivergence and some neurotypical). The resulting 12 technology design concepts aimed to combat stigma by utilizing our conceptual framing of 5 design aims (5As described below) to reduce stigma which yielded the specific theme of the freedom to be oneself through (1) increased public understanding, (2) safe spaces, and (3) authentic expression of strengths, challenges, and needs. This work is an extension of the CT paradigm principles to include accommodation and advocacy, and a demonstration of using these principles as a rubric for analyzing design concepts.

Based on our findings, we extend the previous CT framework of the 5As to serve as a guide to navigating the nuances of celebrating neurodiversity via technology. We do so to improve upon the initial suggestions and build a more robust rubric for disability justice efforts. We propose five design aims (5As): Awareness, Acceptance, Accommodation, Advocacy, and Appreciation to form a hierarchy of actions aimed at well-being and disability justice, see Table 1. This work aims to foster meaningful encounters with diverse individuals, replacing entrenched stereotypes with personalized narratives that evoke empathy and appreciation. By leveraging technology, we aspire to catalyze a cultural shift towards inclusivity, dismantling the barriers of stigma that hinder the full participation of neurodivergent individuals in society by reducing discrimination.

This work investigates the following research questions:

- RQ1: Given the prompt to incorporate at least one of the 5As into a design concept, which aims do neurodiverse scholars address in a design sprint?
- RQ2: What new insights regarding celebratory technology— are learned from the qualitative analysis of the presentations of paper prototypes and accompanying verbal summaries?

2 Methods

We conducted two 75-minute design sprint workshops with two sets of HCI scholars at conferences within an 8-month period. Our first design sprint was conducted at a neurodiversity symposium in Tokyo, Japan, which was dedicated to introducing the concept of a neurodiversity technology movement to Japan. Twelve symposium

attendees participated in the design sprint, including HCI scholars and computer scientists from the US, Japan, UK, and Europe, as well as three autism advocates and one neurodiversity development and learning therapist. The majority of the HCI scholars conduct research on accessibility, assistive technologies, and critical theories in computing. This was a neurodiverse group, representing different aspects of the neurodiversity umbrella [31]. Some participants identified as being neurodivergent, centering around autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and psychosocial conditions [21]. The second design sprint was conducted at a CHI 2024 Special Interest Group (SIG), CT for Neurodiversity with Neurodivergent Scholars [7]. This SIG aimed to produce knowledge via a conceptual framework and empirically derived interaction designs for social change. Thirteen HCI scholars, some of whom identified as being neurodivergent, participated. Together, the two design sprints yielded 12 paper prototypes of CT for Neurodiversity. The Tokyo designs are labeled T1-T6. The SIG designs are labeled S1-S6.

At the beginning of each workshop, the first two authors of this paper gave a short presentation introducing the five-step design process to be followed during the design sprint. [3]. Design sprints occurred across two scholarly gatherings with the goal of creating paper prototypes to reflect on the process of creating CT. The five steps were as follows:

- (1) **Empathizing with Users:** In the Tokyo design sprint, we briefly discussed the lived experiences of stigma faced by neurodivergent individuals specific to the region. At the CHI SIG, some participants spontaneously shared about their neurodivergent identities and experiences.
- (2) **Defining the Solution:** We adapted to include a positive shift, and Define Solution: Utilizing the 5As to reduce stigma.
- (3) **Ideating:** In small groups, brainstormed technology concepts to reduce stigma.
- (4) **Prototyping:** Rapidly created prototypes using arts and crafts materials. The craft materials included colored paper, cardboard, markers, scissors, foil, popsicle sticks, and tape.
- (5) **Evaluating:** Reflected on the designs as a whole group.

2.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Across the two workshops, we collected the 12 design concepts and solicited verbal summaries from participants at the end of each sprint. Each design sprint occurred in teams of 1-6 participants. In teams, they brainstormed, paper prototyped the six design concepts, and shared out their concepts with the group to discuss (see Table 2 in the Appendix with detailed codes). We drafted results and then checked back in with scholars to confirm our interpretation and invite participants to be co-authors.

We then coded the designs using our 5As Design Aims as a codebook (see Table 1) to reflect on our understanding of how each concept is related to celebrating neurodiversity. We then reviewed the concepts regarding the contexts of designs to uncover themes. Regarding RQ1, the uptake of each aim is presented in Figure 1. Regarding R2, themes around the uptake of the 5As are presented.

Table 1: Codes for 5A Principles. The six codes include topic, awareness, accommodation, acceptance, advocacy and appreciation. Their description, included and excluded behaviors are listed in the table.

Code	Description	Includes...	Does not include...
Topic	Primary capabilities and aspects of the design concept	Clear intention	Possible, imaginable functions
Awareness	Public awareness, self awareness	Sharing information and experiences, interest in a situation	Taking additional action to rectify injustices
Accommodation	Adjustments for ND people	Provides assistance, following ADA	Does not extend to accommodations for everyone's needs
Acceptance	Action or process of being received; admitted to a group	Demonstrating belonging, goes beyond awareness	Going out of one's way to support to change public perception
Advocacy	Fighting for equality	Seeking equity	Going beyond equity to appreciation
Appreciation	Appreciated by the public	Public can be creator of tech, content and/or can be the consumer of tech, content	Tech and content that is intended to only reaches ND people and families

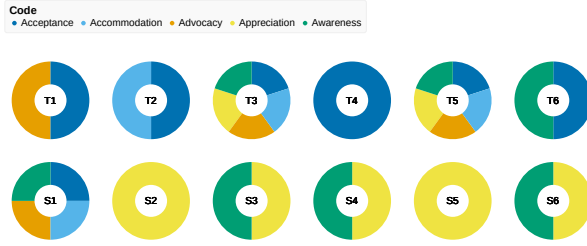


Figure 1: Distribution of codes across the different designs (T1-6 are Tokyo designs, and S1-6 are CHI SIG 2024).

3 Results

RQ1: The uptake of the 5As design aims varied between the two design sprints and within the design sprints, see Figure 1.

Despite the hierarchy of the As, As from different ends of the spectrum were the most popular combination. Additionally, The distribution of 'appreciation' appeared more prominently in the first design sprints. This may have been linked to differences in discussions and how the context of the activities were presented across both sessions. It is noteworthy that a few designs addressed all 5As whereas some only addressed one. We see this as an indication of the need to address a range of aims in a focused manner as well as an opportunity to integrate multiple aims into single designs. Future design sprints will allow for deeper analysis and potential design recommendations

RQ2: Coding the design topics using a grounded theory approach[10], we found an overarching topic of fostering the **freedom to be oneself**. We clustered the 5As within the sub-themes. The sub-topics encompass three approaches: broadening the understanding of the neurodivergent experience (i.e., *awareness* and

appreciation), facilitating expressions of both positive and negative experiences by neurodivergent individuals (i.e., *acceptance* and *advocacy*), and creating neurodivergent-friendly or safe spaces (i.e., *accommodation*).

For instance, under the code *awareness*, **enhancing public comprehension** of the neurodivergent experience is exemplified by initiatives such as the inclusive employer sunflower badge (T5), which encourages Canadian companies to improve their inclusive practices while gaining social recognition. Additionally, the deck of cards design (S4) provides valuable insights to newly diagnosed individuals or families about common characteristics and strengths associated with a neurodivergent label. Similarly, the Unboxing Autism (S3) prototype aims to explore and unpack the multifaceted nature of autism, moving beyond stereotypes to reveal nuanced understandings.

Connecting with the code *appreciation*, the translation tools (T2) serve as a bridge between typical and neurodivergent pattern language use, while the mirror maze offers non-autistic individuals a tangible, embodied perspective on the autistic experience. The storytelling project (T4) component allows individuals to release their hopes and dreams associated with a neurodivergent family, creating space for the unique beauty that accompanies it.

Aligning with *acceptance* and *advocacy*, **self-expression**, initiatives such as interactive walls in streetcars (S2) enable individuals to publicly share their feelings in a dynamic and ongoing manner, reinforcing a sense of communal unity. The well-being tree (S6) allows for anonymous self-expression, providing a platform for individuals to share their emotions with the world. Similarly, The strengths bouquet (S5) enables individuals to label their unique attributes beautifully, with different flowers symbolizing various strengths. Finally, *accommodation* presented in the creation of **neurotypical-friendly and neurodivergent-friendly spaces** is highlighted by

T3's app for inclusive social spaces, which provides a safe environment for socialization. Additionally, the sensory map provides opportunities for the general public to understand a sense of place as connected to the neurodivergent experience; makes it possible for people to accommodate themselves or their children by providing a location to retreat to; accepts the need for sensory space; makes it possible for people to learn how to change their sensory space in order to better support neurodivergent people; and is neurodivergent sensory experience as a kind of knowledge and world building. The village of houses designed to unique specifications further emphasizes the freedom to express oneself in a safe and accommodating environment. These diverse designs each echo the desire for neurodivergence to be expressed free of stigma.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The 5As framework curates a hierarchy of disability justice principles. We found more than one principle can be addressed in a single design although not required, and that each serves an important purpose in promoting social justice. Given the expanding array of principles apply to these designs, we call on other neurodiversity technology researchers to suggest several more mechanisms to apply to the 5As as design aims as we collectively aim to reduce social stigma. Lastly, we invite future meetups at academic conferences that encourage communication across neurotypes.

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A 5A Codes for Design Concepts

In this appendix, we present the detailed codes for all the designs.

Design Concept	Topic	Awareness	Accommodation	Acceptance	Advocacy	Appreciation
T1. Inclusive spaces for neurodiversity social engagements	Safety, Connecting, Find allies			Welcomes diverse identities	Carving out inclusive spaces	
T2. Pattern-based language and taxonomy	Translating language between ND and NTs		The neurodiverse way of communication is valid. Translation is needed in both directions	we each communicate in the way we want		
T3. Sensory map of local spaces with autistic annotation	Sensory-friendly spaces; expressing their appreciation of the space	the app provides opportunities for the general public to understand a sense of place as connected to the neurodivergent experience	the app makes it possible for people to accommodate themselves or their children by providing a location to retreat t	accepts the need for sensory space	the app makes it possible for people to learn how to change their sensory space in order to better support neurodivergent people	neurodivergent sensory experience as a kind of knowledge and world building
T4. Family storytelling	Children and families express their experiences with reality vs. hopes			parent's hopes and expectations for their child vs. the reality and interests of the child themselves		
T5. Employment tools	Strengths-based approach to getting and thriving in a job; Workplace changes to make it more neuro-inclusive	Employers understand value of ND employees	Level system to grow knowledge of how to accommodate	Seeks and promotes neurodiversity	Provides system of change for equitable employment	appreciate strengths of ND employees and ND -inclusive workplace
T6. Self-reflection mirrored maze	Reflect on your biases and see other perspectives	Off your own biases and concerns; gain awareness of other people's perspectives		learning and growing from others' perspectives. Accepting of ND behaviors and perspectives		
S1. Village without stigma	Places to unwind without judgment, also awareness for family members,	awareness of masking (puzzle floor)	private space to be yourself	accepted into the village	a whole village dedicated to specific needs and inclusion	
S2. Interactive Boards/Wall in Streetcar						sharing and tagging spaces about personal experiences and emotions
S3. Unboxing autism - dictionary of neuro-celebration	Reframing ND conditions to their strengths	Learning about strengths and multi-faceted conditions				Reframing and celebrating strengths through a dictionary to codify meaning

Design Concept	Topic	Awareness	Accommodation	Acceptance	Advocacy	Appreciation
S4. Neurodiversity pack of cards	A deck of cards explaining the positive and challenges/barriers faced by ND—guess the label	Learning about strengths and multi-faceted conditions				playful way to share positive and challenges/barriers faced as aspects of ND
S5.Strengthens bouquet	Identity as ND focused on positive traits					portray strengths of ND identity
S6. Mental health - wellbeing tree	Sharing of positive and challenging emotions	Awareness of mental health				shining light of dark aspects that may be shameful to discuss