



# Communication Mode Preferences in the Autism Community

---

Dr Philippa L Howard

Dr Felicity Sedgewick



A vintage telescope with a silver body and brass accents is mounted on a metal stand on a rooftop. The telescope is pointed towards the left, overlooking a vast cityscape under a dramatic, cloudy sky at dusk or dawn. The city buildings are densely packed and appear in soft focus. The overall mood is contemplative and historical.

**Who are we and how did this happen?**

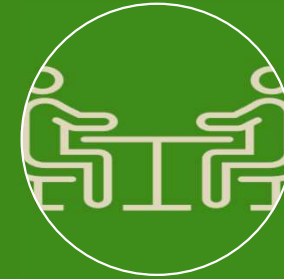
---

# Autism and Communication



Autism is a heterogenous neurodevelopmental condition (APA, 2013)

- Challenges with communication/social interaction
- Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour



Communication challenges in autism are associated with:

- Increased anxiety
- Isolation
- Difficulties with education and employment
- Challenges accessing services

(Baldwin et al., 2014; Crawford & Manassis, 2011; Howlin, 2000; Sumiya et al., 2018)

# Communication Modes and Autism

Many communication modes exist that are not face-to-face

Autistic adults may prefer written communication

- Improves perceived healthcare accessibility (Nicolaidis et al., 2015)
- May diminish social interaction challenges (Benford & Standen, 2009)
- Can support the development of social connectiveness and relationships (Burke, Kraut, & Williams, 2010)

# Research Questions

**1. What are the preferred communication methods of autistic people in different situations?**

**2. What reasons do autistic people give for their communication preferences?**

**3. Does age, age at diagnosis, camouflaging, and anxiety influence preferred communication methods?**

# Online Survey: Mixed Methods



Communication Preference Scale



Autism Quotient 10 (Allison et al., 2012)



Generalized Anxiety Scale (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Löwe, 2006)



Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (Hull et al., 2019)

# Communication Preference Scale

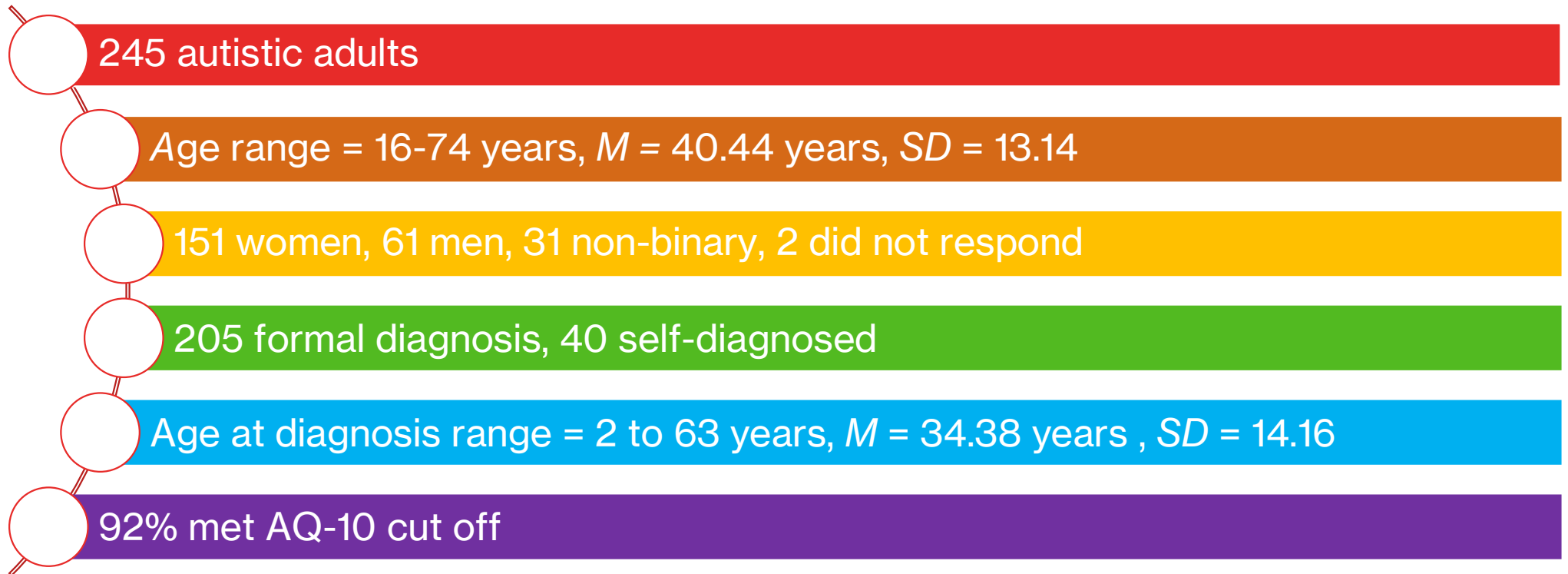
## Seven different communication scenarios

Accessing services, Employment, Education, Customer support, Family, Friends

## For each scenario participants were asked to:

- Rank six modes in order of preference: face-to-face, phone call, letter, email, text message, online instant messenger
- Provide an open-ended response to further explain and justify preferences

# Participants







---

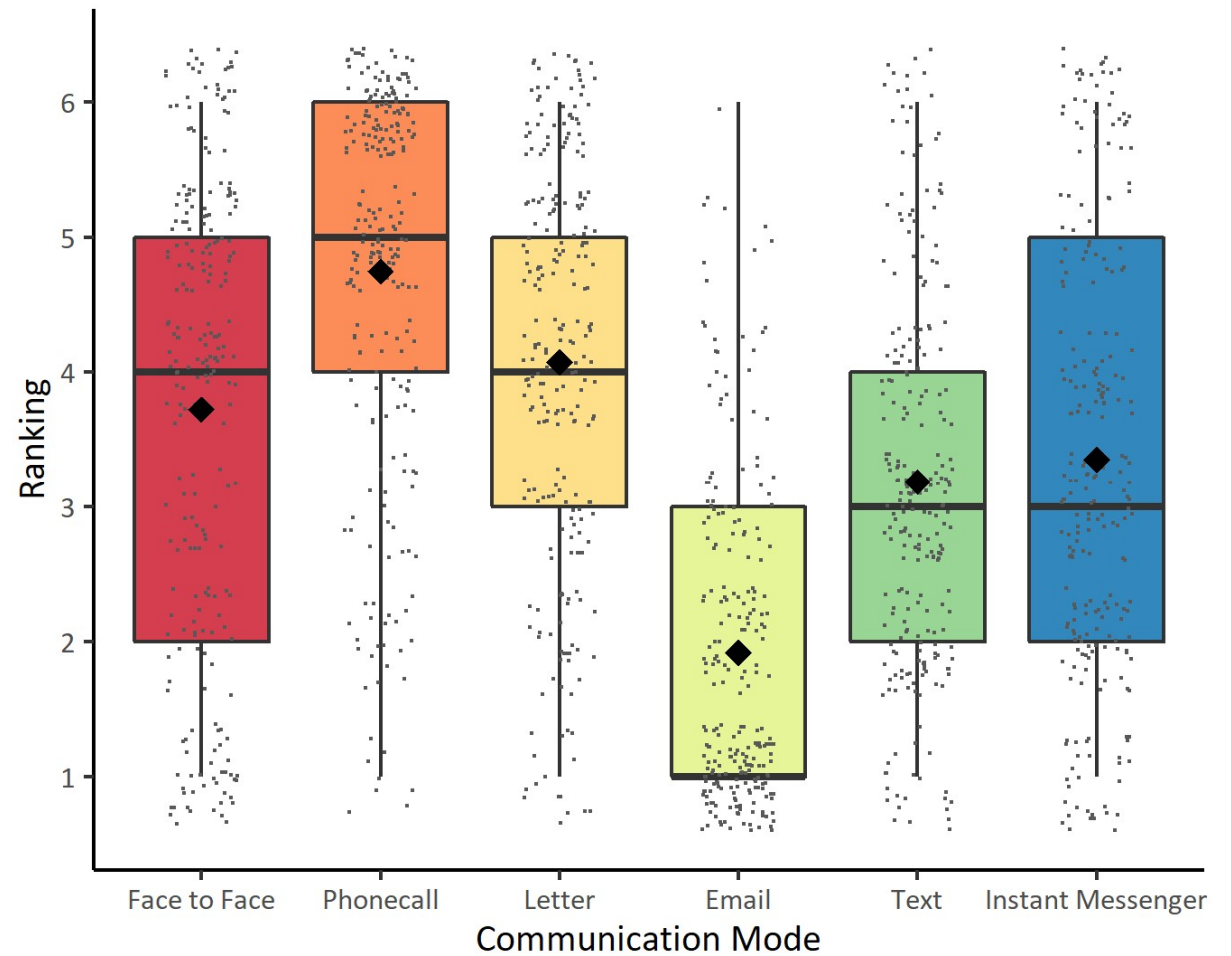
# Quantitative Results

---

## Accessing Services

- Email > all other modes
- Text messaging > face-to-face, phone calls, and letters
- Instant messaging > phone calls and letters
- Letters and face-to-face > phone calls

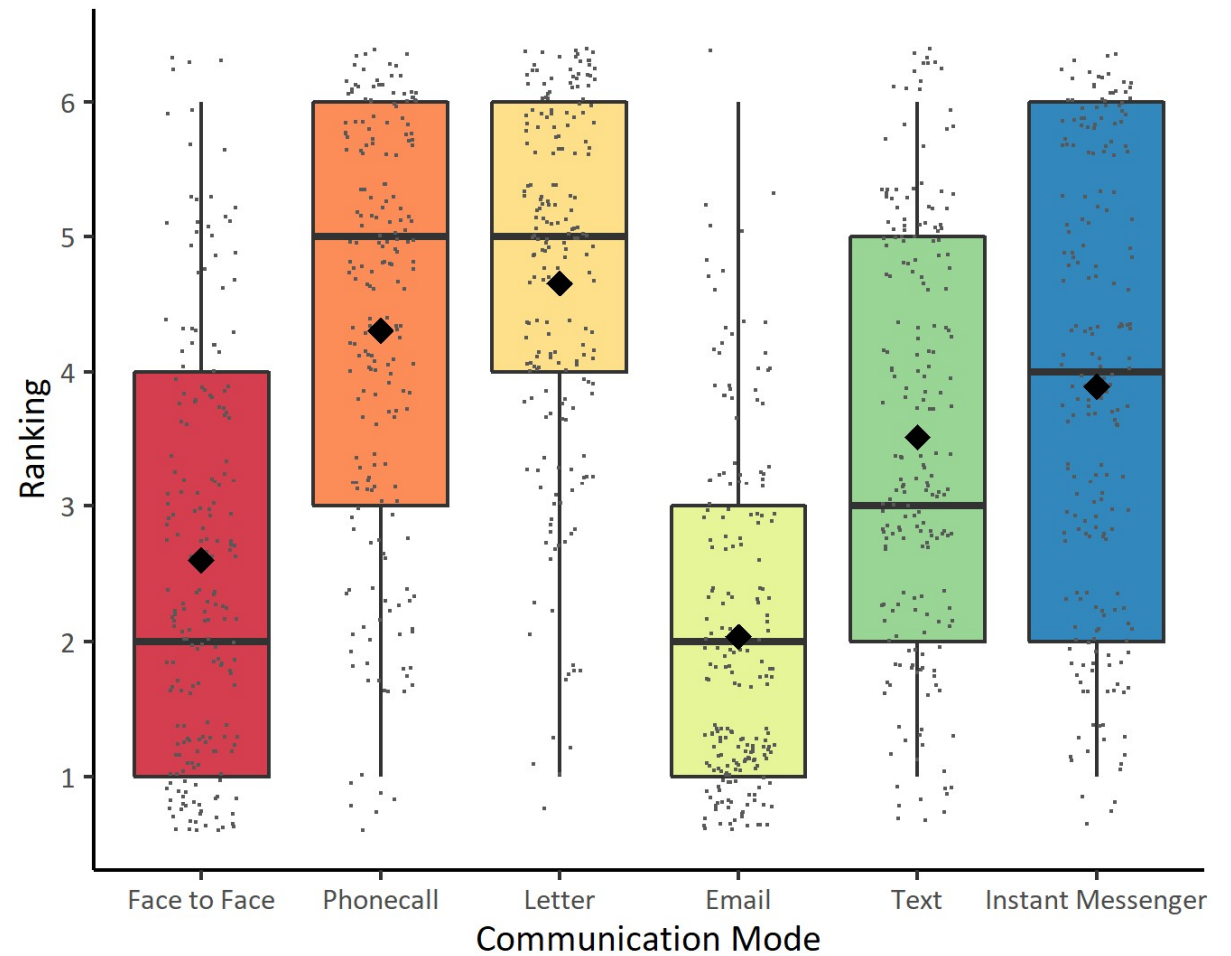
$\chi^2(5) = 315.47, p < .001$



# Employment

- Email > all other modes
- Face-to-face > all other modes (excluding email)
- Text messaging > phone calls, and letters
- Instant messaging > letters

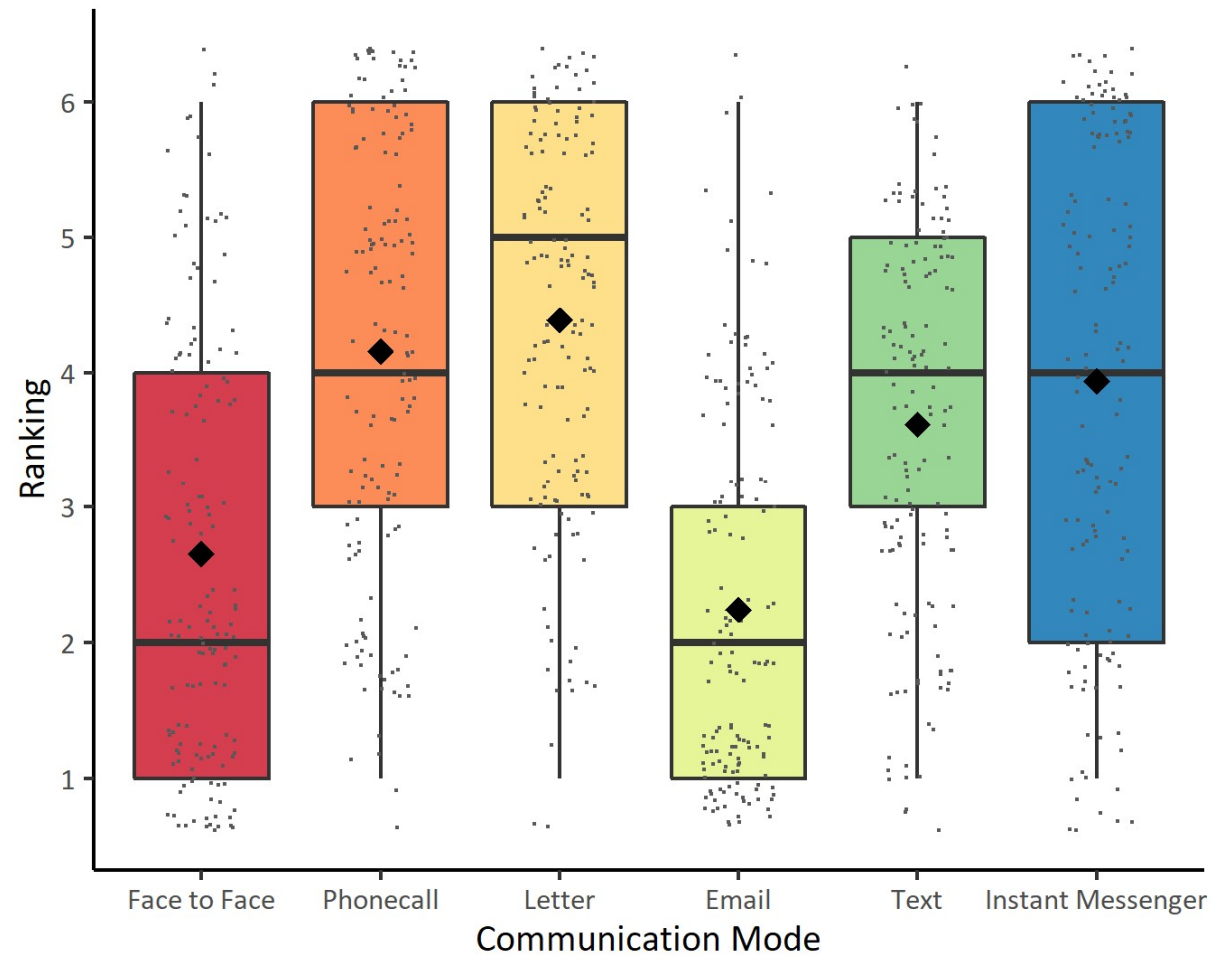
$\chi^2(5) = 297.28, p < .001$



# Education

- Email and face-to-face > all other modes
- Text messaging > letters

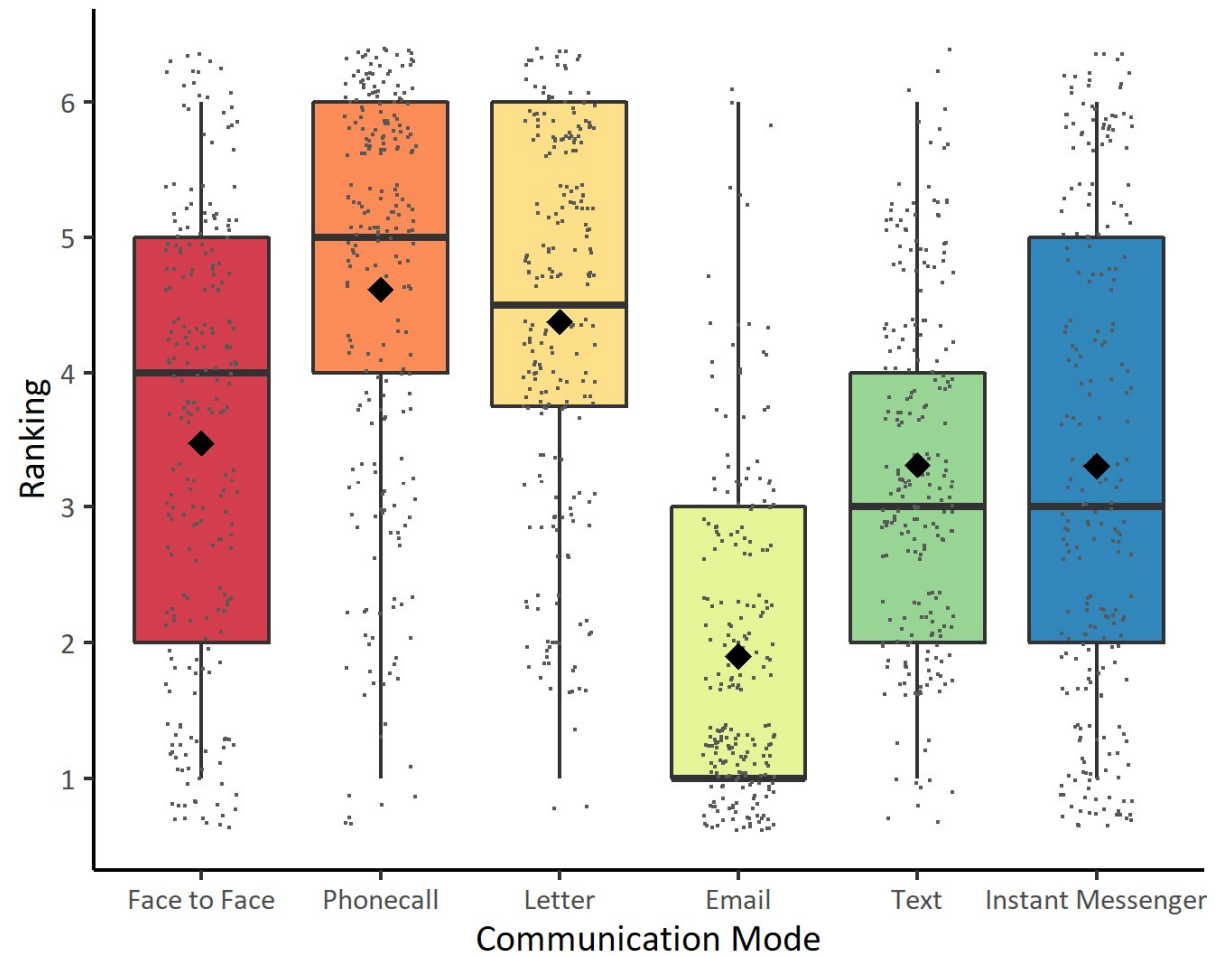
$\chi^2(5) = 153.40, p < .001$



# Research

- Email > all other modes
- Text messaging, instant messaging, and face-to-face > phone calls and letters

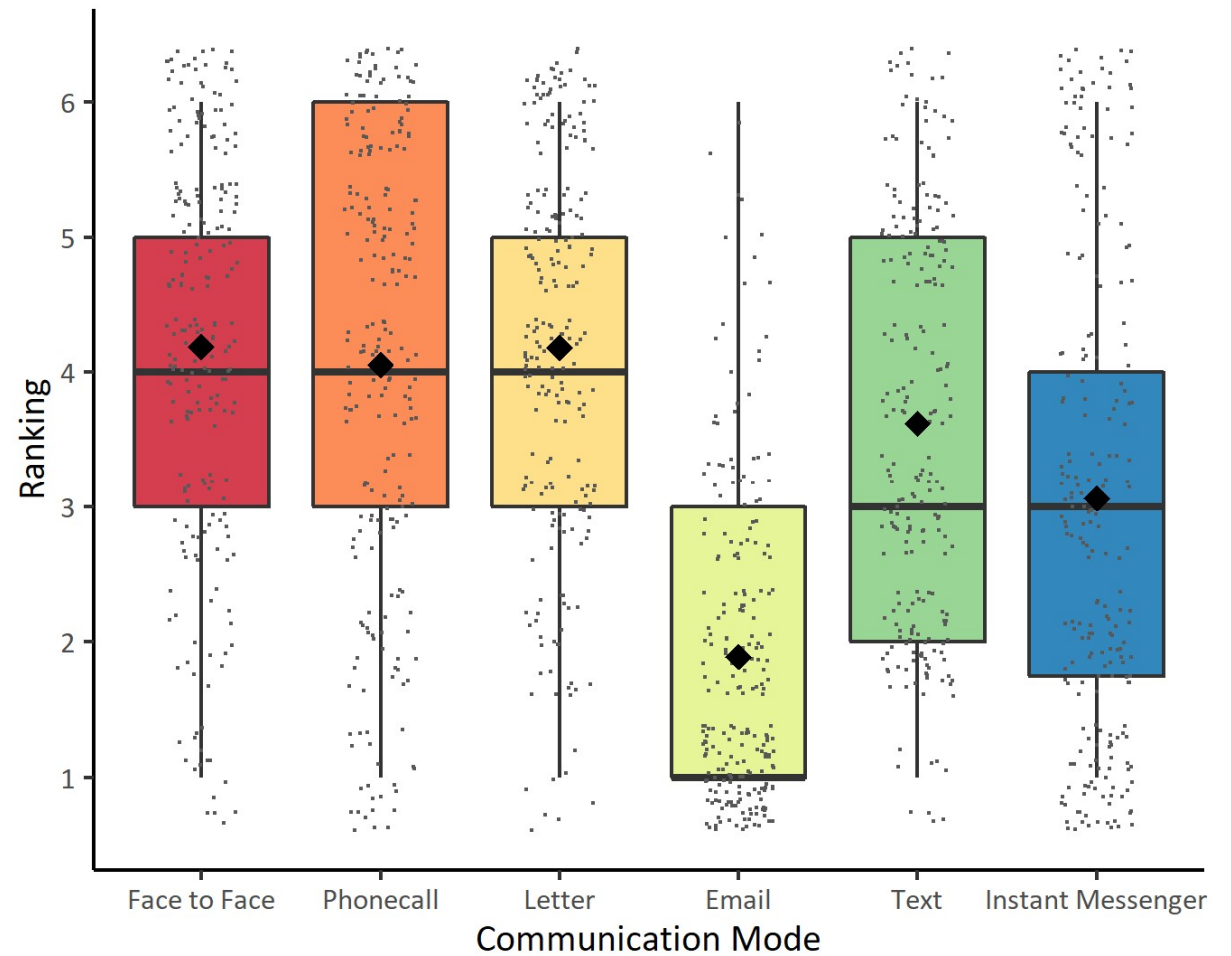
$\chi^2(5) = 307.46, p < .001$



# Customer Support

- Email > all other modes
- Instant messaging > to all other modes (excluding email)
- Text > face-to-face and letter

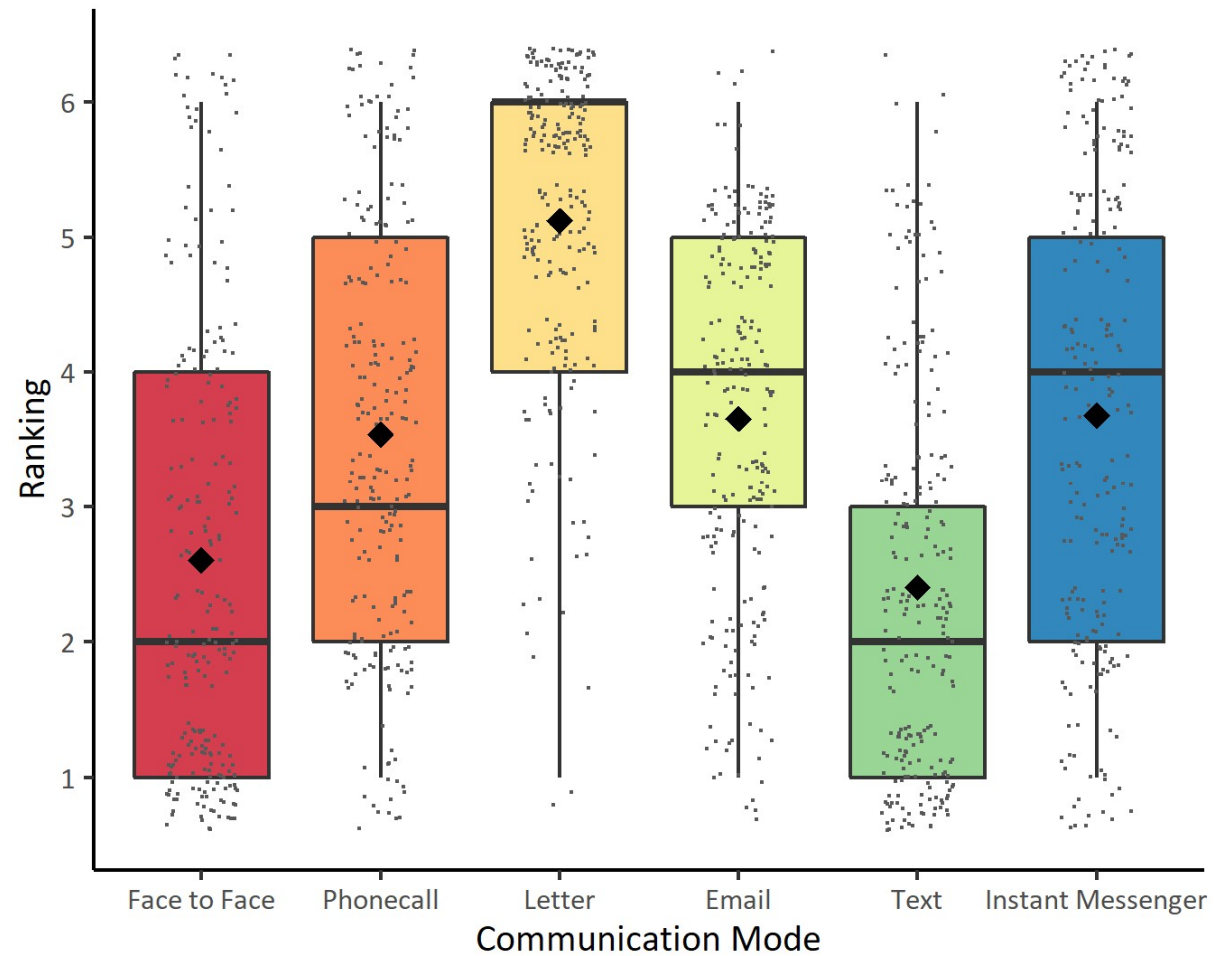
$\chi^2(5) = 263.82, p < .001$



# Family

- Text and face-to-face > all other modes
- Phone calls, emails, and instant messaging > letters

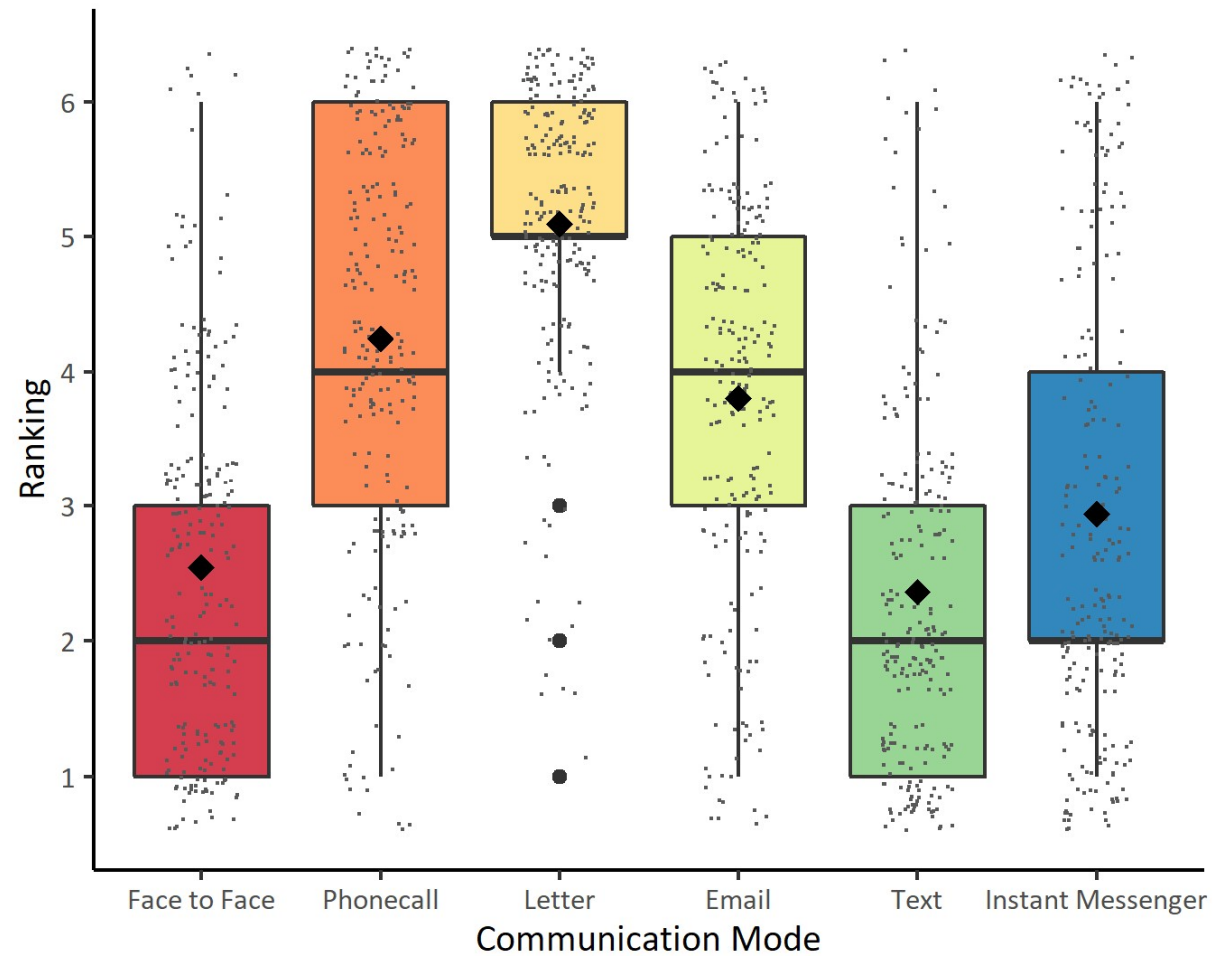
$\chi^2(5) = 311.34, p < .001$



# Friends

- Text > phone calls, letters, emails, and instant messaging
- Face-to-face > phone calls, letters, and email
- Instant messaging > phone calls, letters, and email
- Email and phone calls > letters

$\chi^2 (5) = 364.24, p < .001$





# Interim Summary

---



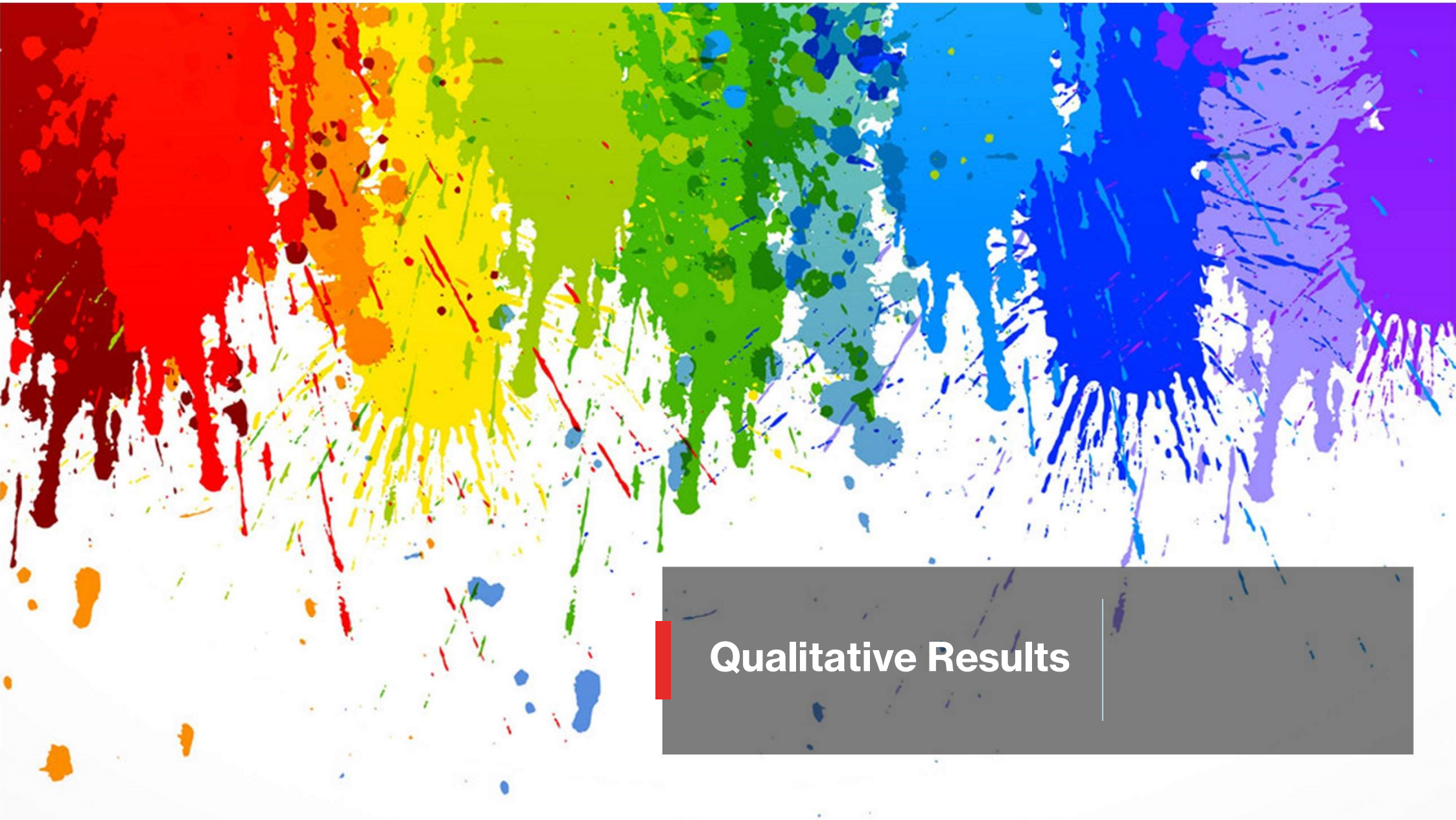
Email preferred when accessing services, seeking customer support, and communicating with researchers



Email and face to face preferred when communicating for employment and education purposes



Face to face and text message preferred when communicating with friends and family



## Qualitative Results

# Not the phone

**Clear across all scenarios, all participants:**

*"phones are TERRIBLE"*

*"I absolutely hate having to call anyone and I hate it when they call me too"*



**Processing challenges** – sensory and cognitive translation of words to meaning

*"tend to be paced quite quickly, which can overload me"*

*"trying to say what I want/need verbally is difficult"*



**Anxiety inducing** – reduced cues, often unexpected, associated with officialdom

*"extremely difficult to interpret [tone and intentions]"*

*"if I'm disturbed by a phone call it is quite jarring"*



# Written Communication

**Thinking Time** – allows for processing and planning

*"I can think of the response... without panicking or struggling to find the words I need"*

**Structured Communication** – reduces need for rapid adaptation, provides records

*"[I can] research templates for what I need"*

*"I have the information to go over again in the future"*

**Sensory Aspects** – means can communicate in a safe space

*"I stay calmer and concentrate more"*



---

# Masking vs. Autistic Communication

---

**Masking** – consciously trying to appear less autistic to be more accepted

*"performing neurotypicality to put others at ease"*

*"having to pull the right face" "uncomfortable making eye contact"*

**Autistic communication** – with autistic people or trusted people

*"No masking. All fun!"*

*"[I can] relax and communicate effectively and honestly"*



# Avoiding Communication



Many participants put off communication – to their detriment

*"my access to healthcare is undermined"*

**Anxiety** – people were so worried it would go wrong, they didn't try at all

*"[the methods] all cause great amounts of anxiety...I wish there were a way to communicate without having to feel so bad"*

**Supported Communication** – many had people who helped them deal with external communication situations

*"I confer with trusted parties e.g. my mother [before replying]"*

*"I want someone with me for moral support"*

# Discussion

Quant and qual agree on dislike of phone calls

Strong preference for written communication – though this decreased as participants rated people they knew better

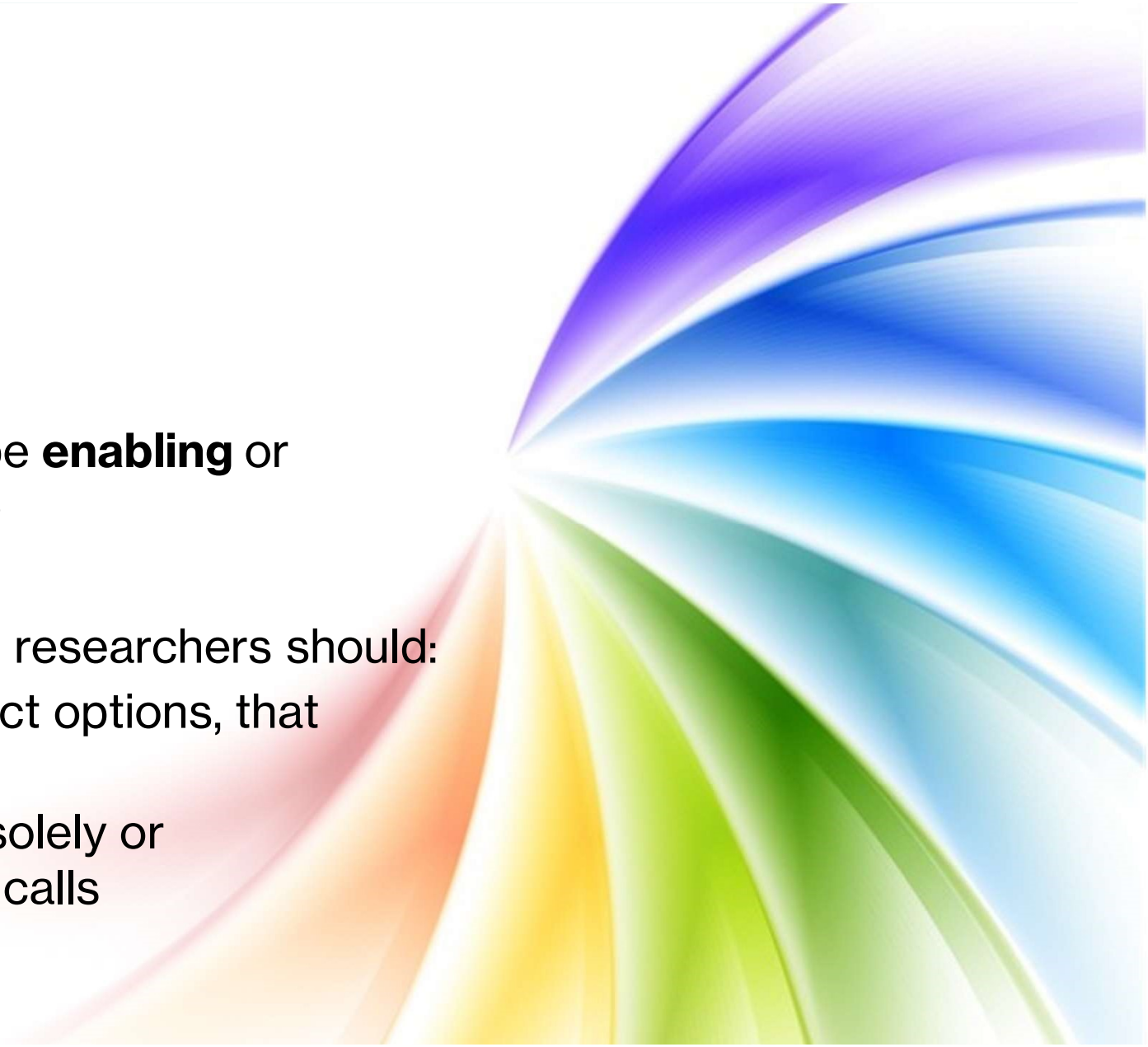
Clear positive impact of online communication for autistic people

Associated presence and lack of anxiety for different formats was key – aligns with work on autistic-autistic communication (Crompton et al., 2020)



## Conclusions

---

- Communication mode can be **enabling** or **disabling** for autistic people
  - Services, organisations, and researchers should:
    - Provide a range of contact options, that include written forms
    - Avoid systems that rely solely or predominantly on phone calls
- 
- An abstract graphic on the right side of the slide, featuring a central bright white point from which several curved, overlapping bands of color radiate outwards. The colors include shades of purple, blue, green, yellow, and orange, creating a dynamic, flowing effect.