



The Use of Emojis to Increase Clarity in Internal Communication Among Neurodiverse and Multicultural Employees

Sonja Kaitosaari

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

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Author(s) Sonja Kaitosaari
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Abstract <p>This product-based thesis explores how emojis can be used to improve clarity in internal communication among neurodiverse and multicultural employees. Written digital communication often lacks tone, emotion, and other nonverbal cues. The absence of these can cause misunderstandings and increase stress related to communication. These difficulties are particularly challenging for neurodivergent individuals; this thesis focuses on autistic people, who often experience specific challenges with interpreting tone and intent. It also considers culturally diverse employees, who may interpret messages differently due to varying communication norms.</p> <p>To address this issue, the aim of the thesis is to create a set of research-based and practical guidelines for using emojis to bring emotional cues to digital messages, with the goal of reducing ambiguity and misunderstandings. The target audience for this product is organizations with neurodiverse and multicultural teams that seek a tool to improve their internal communication. The development process began with theoretical research and personal observations and concluded with the collection of feedback from individuals with neurodiverse or multicultural backgrounds. The guidelines are designed to be simple, professional, and easy to implement, and are suitable for general use across various organizational settings.</p> <p>The findings suggest that controlled emoji usage can help reduce emotional ambiguity and misunderstandings in professional communication. Based on the feedback, there is a need for this type of product, especially among neurodiverse individuals. However, the feedback also indicated that further testing and development are needed before the product is ready for full implementation.</p>

Author(s)

Sonja Kaitosaari

Key words

Neurodiversity, Internal Communication, Emojis, Autism, Multicultural Communication

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Due to globalization, many workplaces have become more diverse and that increases communication challenges due to a plethora of different cultural norms, communication styles and implicit assumptions (Nardon, Steers & Sanches-Runde 2011). Misunderstandings in communication in multicultural teams can happen because of different norms in communication or mistakenly interpreted tones in the voice. In the worst-case scenario this can escalate into full-blown conflicts (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). This can be especially challenging in written communication. For neurodiverse employees, especially autistic individuals, miscommunication and the feeling of not being supported in the workplace can lead to burnout. (Hinze, Attwood & Garnett 2024.) These outcomes are undesired and doing something about it will not only decrease miscommunication, but it can prevent conflicts and burnout. Emojis are more than symbols, they can be valuable tools to improve clarity and the emotions behind the digital messages. (de Andrade 2024.) Improving clarity is vital to avoid miscommunication in modern workplaces where there is a lot of multiculturalism and neurodiversity. Emojis can help to disambiguate the tone of the messages in situations where using only words might not be clear enough. Even just one smiling emoji can transform the message from being perceived as rude to friendly (Kasteel 2022). This topic will be examined more closely in chapter 2.3.1.

The first step to avoid misunderstandings in diverse workplaces is to create communication practices that address barriers and promote understanding. (Nardon, Steers & Sanches-Runde 2011.) This is important in both neurodiverse and multicultural teams. To support neurodiverse employees, it is important to keep communication clear to prevent the heightened possibility of miscommunication and the negative consequences of it. For neurodiverse employees the challenges in interpreting the tone of messages are higher, and that can increase the chance of negative consequences that may have a higher impact on the employees and potentially even lead to long term harm. Improving the clarity of written communication and reducing the need to subjectively interpret the messages could decrease the mental toll significantly (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020). Emojis can provide the needed visual aspect to written language that can help bridge linguistic and cultural differences. For this to work effectively, agreeing to the meaning behind every emoji is crucial, due to cultural differences when using emojis. When used mindfully, emojis add an emotional context and improve clarity in digital messages in situations where using only words might fail to convey the correct message (Sun, Lasser & Lee 2023). Emojis have started to emerge as valuable tools in diverse workplaces. They are useful in expressing tone, building rapport and improving clarity (de Andrade 2024). The ability to express the tone of the

messages and to foster rapport better is highly valuable when creating clearer ways to communicate, especially in teams that are multicultural or have neurodiverse members. When used mindfully, emojis can bring emotional nuance to written communication. Emojis can transform digital conversations and make them into becoming richer and more human interactions (Li & Zheng 2024).

In order to strengthen digital communication in multicultural or neurodiverse teams, tools that acknowledge and accommodate the different tones, intents and styles are essential. (Lázár 2017.) The use of emojis can provide a visual way of communicating to mend the differences in linguistic and cultural norms. Adding vital emotional context in messages where using words alone might be lacking. Although emojis can help to bridge the cultural gaps in communication, the interpretation of different emojis vary between different cultures and generations (Sun, Lasser & Lee 2023). Neurodiverse people, especially those who have autism, have difficulties identifying different emotions, and this can expand to interpreting emojis as well. (Kasteel 2022.) For these reasons, if emojis are not used correctly they might increase misunderstandings rather than decrease them. Even though emojis are used increasingly often in professional settings, using them incorrectly or too much can often be perceived as unprofessional. Therefore, it is important to know when, how and to whom to send them (de Andrade 2024). The product that this thesis will produce is going to take these difficulties into consideration and is going to ensure that including emojis in internal communication practices reduces misunderstandings while staying professional.

The author chose this topic because when she started working in a professional workplace, she noticed that internal communication was in a gray area between professional and casual. It was quite difficult to learn how to communicate with her colleagues without being too unprofessional but also not seeming odd by being too rigid. It also created an unnecessary burden because she would sometimes stress about the tone of the messages and try to find the underlying meanings behind each "Ok" answer. The author also has several people close to me who are neurodiverse, so she knows how much they can struggle with communication. Through her studies in international business, she has experienced the clash of many different cultures in communication. These experiences have taught me how miscommunication can even lead to severe anxiety and, in the worst-case scenario, burnout for neurodiverse people, as well as how easily misunderstandings can happen in multicultural teams.

This thesis has used ChatGPT. ChatGPT has been used to brainstorm ideas and to help the author gather her ideas. For example, a prompt like this has been used when creating the critical review of the product *"Ask me questions one at a time to get my opinion and insight to get my opinions in a clear form so I can write a critical review of the survey. Ask me questions from these*

following topics: How many responders did the survey have, ask me to critically evaluate them (age, level of English, number of answerers), did only people who are interested in the topic answer the survey, the professional survey (there was only one who answered). Write my answers in a clear way so I can better format them into writing". Ai has been used responsibly and not as an information source and account data protection and copyright have been taken into account. The author has written everything by herself, and she only used ChatGPT as a tool to help her with writing. All sources cited in the report have been used correctly and are not AI-generated.

1.2 Objectives and scope

The problem this thesis examines is: Written internal communication often lacks emotional and social cues. This makes it difficult for multicultural and neurodiverse individuals to interpret the tone and intent of the messages. These problems can lead to stress and misunderstandings. This thesis aims to develop a set of practical instructions on how to use emojis in order to enhance workplace communication. These guidelines will help to alleviate the communication challenges faced by individuals with autism, who may find interpreting the tone of written messages particularly burdensome. (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020.) This thesis will focus on autism, as it is a mental condition that presents significant challenges in sociability, particularly in interpreting social cues (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020). However, since many other neurodivergent individuals experience similar difficulties, the research will also be broadly applicable to the wider neurodivergent community. The instructions will include examples of emojis and explanations of their meanings, designed to clarify tone and reduce misunderstandings. This product will help reduce stress relating to written communication. (Hinze, Attwood & Garnett 2024.)

Apart from neurodiversity, the thesis also touches on breaking communication barriers within multicultural teams. Cultural norms, linguistic styles, and implicit assumptions are just some of the elements that make workplace communication prone to misunderstandings and misinterpretation. (Lázár 2017.) For example, the same emoji might mean different things across cultures, further increasing the chances of confusion and unintentional offense. (Sun, Lasser & Lee 2023.) The guidelines will discuss how emojis can serve to bridge cultural divides by helping teams to establish a common understanding and reducing the potential for conflict. (de Andrade 2024.) This emphasis on multicultural teams has brought into focus the need to ensure clarity within diverse work environments where good communication becomes vital. (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020.)

The product's effectiveness will be measured by specific, measurable outcomes. Neurodiverse individuals will be surveyed to see if the instructions could be useful in decreasing their stress and increasing the clarity of communication. The author will also ask feedback from people who work in an environment that they are not native to, because they can provide feedback from the multicultural point of view. They will provide feedback on whether the instructions could be able to remove cultural barriers and help them understand each other better. Feedback will also be given by a leader in a company, who has the ability to give perspective about the usability of the instructions in the workplace. This is to determine whether the instructions are practical and realistic to implement. The feedback from the professional will be qualitative and the feedback asked from neurodiverse and/or multicultural will be quantitative. These outcomes will show the product's potential impact in fostering clear communication at workplaces.

This thesis does not involve external communications or marketing to maintain focus, even though the instructions could be expanded in those areas. This is because emojis are not yet deemed professional, and therefore it is more complicated and riskier to use them externally. Neurodiversity is an extremely broad term, so it will be researched solely from the point of view of autistic individuals. This is because autism is the most typical subgroup of neurodiversity that experiences challenges in interpreting the tone and emotions behind communication. (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020.) Even though the research is focused on autism, the information and results can, and probably will, be applicable to many other neurodivergent individuals. For example, people who have ADHD often share symptoms with autistic individuals. As a result, they might also benefit from similar strategies to address these shared challenges. Multiculturalism, however, will not be narrowed down, and the research will be based on broad information about different multicultural points of view. This is because the multicultural perspective is generally broader than, for example, specific symptoms of autism, and therefore does not require as deep a level of research. While the specific focus will rest on autism and multicultural teams, the guidelines coming out of this thesis can be helpful to a wide range of employees, from those who experience social anxiety to those in remote teams. This thesis is going to bridge the gap between traditional norms in communication and provide actionable tools in the making of a clearer communication.

1.3 Need and target audience

Making communication clear and accessible for all employees helps prevent the negative impacts of miscommunication. These negative effects for an autistic person can manifest as frustration,

stress, exhaustion, and, in the worst-case, burnout, which can have a long-term impact on the individual (Hinze, Attwood & Garnett 2024). In multicultural teams, misunderstood messages can create tension that escalates into larger conflicts. (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020.) Miscommunication can also reinforce stereotypes that may be perceived as favoritism. (Lázár 2017.)

These negative impacts can be minimized by addressing autistic individuals' difficulty in interpreting tone in messages and multicultural teams' challenges with varying social norms in communication by incorporating visual cues into digital communication (Nardon, Steers & Sanchez-Runde 2011). Tools to improve internal communication are not widely available, emphasizing the need to create these instructions. While many workplaces use emojis in internal communication (de Andrade 2024), clear guidelines on how to use them effectively are rare. Including such guidelines is crucial to ensure clarity, highlighting the significant need for this product.

The target audience for this thesis is organizations or teams with multicultural or neurodiverse employees, especially those with autism, aiming to make the workplace better for them. The instructions will be general enough to apply to multiple types of teams and easily customizable so any organization can tailor them to specific needs. These instructions are also recommended for use in other organizations, such as remote teams, because clear communication benefits any team. However, the primary focus is on neurodiverse and multicultural teams.

1.4 Description of the product

The product this thesis will produce is going to be a set of instructions on how to use emojis to reduce misunderstandings in internal communication. The instructions will include a short informational background into the challenges of detecting tone for autistic individuals and for multicultural teams. Then the instructions will provide information on how to use the emojis in a way that stays professional. This part will include tips on how many emojis you should use to prevent overusing them. Additionally, it will include a visual guide about different emojis and the meanings behind them, so everyone has the same context and knows when to use which emoji.

These instructions will be designed into a visually appealing and clear booklet using Canva. The design elements will be created using free tools available in Canva, to ensure the product is accessible for anyone. The copyrights of the design elements will be checked to make sure they are free to use. The emojis added to the instructions will be free to use and will include the Unicode of the emoji. Unicode is a unique numeric value that is assigned to a symbol. (Oxford Languages N.A.) The author will include the Unicode because it helps in identifying each emoji, even across

different platforms, because many platforms will have different art style for emojis. Additionally, all Unicode emojis are in the public domain, so they are free to use. (Herzfeld 2019.)

1.5 Key concepts

This thesis is product based and will focus on creating a set of instructions on how to decrease misunderstandings in internal communication using emojis. Emojis have been chosen as a tool because they are designed to bring emotional context into digital messages. Because one main challenge in written communication is emotional ambiguity, bringing the emotional context with emojis could potentially increase clarity. Internal communication refers to messages between employees or departments within the workplace. Additionally, the norms and rules of professional communication will be examined. Professional Communication refers to conversations and situations where ideas, information or messages are being exchanged in a professional setting. (Rajamanickam 2024.) The instructions are made to be implemented without the need to edit them, but they can be customized if wanted. The instructions will examine how to enhance communication, especially from multicultural and neurodivergent point of view. Multiculturality in this context will mean teams that have employees who are not native to the primary language used in the workplace. Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for people who have variations from the typical brain that can affect their sociability, learning, attention, mood or other mental functions. (Bacon & Marchant 2023.) In this thesis the author will focus her research on autism, because it is the mental disorder that has the most challenges in sociability and specifically with social cues. (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020.) But many other neurodivergent people can suffer from similar symptoms so the research will still be generally applicable for other neurodivergent people.

The focus of this thesis will be solely on how to reduce miscommunication using emojis. In the theoretical part the author will focus on how miscommunication happens, what can be the negative consequences of it and how to prevent it from happening. The research about why miscommunication can happen and what it can lead to will be done from an autistic and multicultural perspective. After that, we will do some research into emojis and their benefit for reducing miscommunication. Emojis are visual demonstrations, such as smiling faces, that can be added to digital messages to convey emotion. (Erle, Schmid, Goslar & Martin 2022.) These findings will be analyzed from the autistic and multicultural point of view. The correct use of emojis will be inspected as well, to avoid different kinds of miscommunication and unprofessionalism. After the theoretical part of the thesis we will focus on building instructions based on the research to ensure a good quality product and after creating the instructions their success will be measured.

Based on these ideas, this thesis will explore how to improve workplace communication and make it easier for people with autism. Professional communication can prove particularly difficult for neurodivergent and especially autistic individuals. Many autistic people have trouble understanding the tone of the message in both written and verbal communication and this can lead to miscommunication. These problems with understanding the true meanings of the messages are more prominent in written communication. This can be a problem because in modern workplaces internal communication is often through digital messages.

One way to address this issue can be using emojis as social cues in written communication. This can be helpful because, when used mindfully, emojis can add emotional context and make the messages easier to understand. This can improve communication in the workplace by making it more accessible for both neurodivergent (including autism) and non-native speakers. One consequence of poor communication for autistic people is burnout. Frequent miscommunications can be exhausting and stressful, especially for people who already struggle with social cues and - situations.

Another problem that may arise is that non-native speakers might interpret messages differently due to their unique cultural and linguistic background and this can cause further miscommunication. To avoid this confusion, the produced product will have specific emojis and explanations on how they should be used. If everyone follows those instructions it can help reduce misunderstandings that happen due to unique interpretations of the emojis.

By combining these ideas, this thesis will create practical, research-based guidelines to enhance workplace communication. The goal is to build a more efficient work environment where employees can communicate clearly and confidently. One outcome that might happen when implementing these instructions is that they are adapted and turned into clear but flexible guidelines. It would be ideal if they help to give structure and clarity to the messages but don't make the conversation too stiff and forced.

1.6 Success of the product

This product is successful if it can prevent miscommunication and is easy to implement. After the instructions have been created, the author will collect feedback from people who have worked in multicultural teams and neurodiverse people. These people will be collected randomly and will not represent a specific company. This survey will be called "Survey 1". It will be done using google forms and will include ratings, multiple choices and short answered questions. Answerers for Survey 1 will answer whether they feel the instructions could be beneficial and what, or nothing,

could have been done better when creating them. These answers will be based on hypothetical situations, because due to time limitations they cannot be tested in real life. The answerers will not give their identifiable personal details to ensure privacy. Based on their answers to the survey the author can determine if this product could be used to improve internal communication.

Feedback will also be asked for from one professional who has extensive experience in business and managing teams. They will represent a corporate point of view on the usability and practicality of the product. Their survey will be called "Survey 2", and it will be lengthier and ask for more details than Survey 1. These questions will be asked using open-ended questions that encourage longer answers/analysis. The business representatives will be asked not to represent a specific company, but to give answers generally from a business perspective. They will give insight into the usability of the product. This is vital to determine the success of the product, because it aims to be easily implemented and clear to use and understand.

By analyzing the answers from both surveys, the author can determine if the product is helpful and practical. The future continuation and improvement of the product can be planned if the surveys indicate that the instructions are lacking in some way.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 History of emojis

Emojis, were first developed in Japan in the late 1990s. Since then, they have quickly grown into a global digital language. Over time, emojis have expanded from the original set of 176 icons to more than 3,000 and counting, representing a wide collection of emotions, objects, activities, and cultural symbols (Li & Zheng 2024). Originally the word “emoji” was only used to refer those emoticons that had a face and conveyed specific emotions. With time the definition has expanded and nowadays it refers to all visual icons accessible on the specific “emoji”-keyboard (Miettinen 2020). Because mobile media has rapidly evolved, digital communication has also become increasingly vital to everyday interactions. This change has transformed the way people connect and express themselves. A major reason for emojis becoming so popular happened in 2010s when emojis were introduced on iPhones. This led to their rapid spread across different devices and social media platforms. Emojis ever-growing influence has been widely recognized. As an example of such an incident, ‘Face with Tears of Joy’ emoji (see appendix 1) was named as the Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionary. Currently, emojis are more than tools for personal communication but are widely also used in various other industries, like marketing (Miyake 2020). Emojis were originally created to replicate nonverbal cues in digital communication with the goal of making written messages clearer and more expressive. These nonverbal cues can be for example the tone of voice or emotions. Emojis can help users to convey feelings that might be difficult to show using plain text. Therefore, they can help reduce misunderstandings and improve digital interactions (Miettinen 2020).

2.2 Communicational norms in written professional communication

In professional settings, there are always rules and etiquette that guide expected behavior. This etiquette is essential for maintaining a positive and productive workplace atmosphere (Rajamanickam 2024). Professional communication should always be clear, conveying both purpose and intent without difficulty (Jones 2016). When composing professional messages, it is advisable to avoid unnecessary jargon. Taking time to gather thoughts and define objectives clearly before writing a message enhances clarity. Additionally, preparing by collecting relevant information and structuring the message logically ensures that all necessary data is included (Rajamanickam 2024). All communication can be seen as a structured narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. Ensuring that messages are clear and easy to read is important (Jones 2016).

This can be achieved by using bullet points, headings, and keeping paragraphs concise (Rajamanickam 2024).

When writing professional messages, it is important to stay polite and write the messages in the same tone and respect as you would if you were physically with them. But when writing messages, it is safer to write them more professionally than you would when speaking face to face, because via messages you cannot read the other person's mood and miscommunications might happen (Jones 2016). Maintaining a professional and respectful tone is especially crucial when talking to unfamiliar colleagues and senior personnel. It is beneficial to adapt your communication style according to the situation and the person you are talking to. Therefore, choosing words and phrases that convey professionalism are crucial to foster positive relationships and prevent unnecessary conflict. Messages to your superiors or when writing a formal report require precise language and structured formatting. If you are sending a memo to your colleagues, you can write it a bit more relaxed, but you should still stay respectful and professional (Rajamanickam 2024). Ensuring that communication within the company stays ethical, it is vital that all employees actively pay attention to the way they communicate together. Ethics in this context means that professional communication should stay truthful, respectful and transparent. Employees should pay attention that the communication is always aligned with their corporate values to ensure integrity, trust and accountability during all workplace interactions (Dutta 2017).

As the workplaces are becoming more digitalized, emojis are increasing in communication within organizations. (Miyake 2020.) Understanding traditional communication norms and etiquettes is crucial before introducing emojis into the workplace. In some situations, emojis can be seen too emotional and personal, making them a little bit taboo to be used in the workplace. (de Andrade 2024.) Because of this it is crucial to consider the context of the message and the culture of the company. In situations where it is crucial to stay professional, for example reports and messages to senior personnel, it would not be recommended to use emojis. But with more relaxed situations, for instance sending a message to a colleague, emojis could be considered and even encouraged to enhance the message and to better express tone (Miyake 2020). In more relaxed situations emojis can be used to help to clarify tone, reduce misunderstandings and enhance engagement. Misusing emojis or using them excessively could make the message unprofessional and undermine the senders' credibility (Gammoh 2021). For example, different people have different meanings for the same emoji. Some people might consider a specific smiling emoji as happy and nice, when it is ironic and rude to someone else. If a person sends the wrong smiling emoji, then they might accidentally be rude to the recipient of the messages. Because of this it is recommended to be mindful when using emojis (Hern 2021).

2.3 Neurodiversity in the workplace

Most autistic individuals are not currently employed, even though many wish to be able to do so. This is because they often experience difficulties and obstacles in obtaining and maintaining employment due to their autism. Communication difficulties are one of the biggest challenges autistic individuals face in the workplace. Many autistic employees struggle with understanding implicit expectations, processing verbal instructions, or managing social interactions, which can create misunderstandings with colleagues and supervisors. Often, these difficulties lead to workplace conflicts and job loss, rather than being based on actual job performance (Sreckovic, Schultz, Kucharczyk & Welsh-Young 2024).

It is important that autistic individuals' strengths and positive potential are identified and acknowledged to help them find suitable jobs where their unique skills are valued. Autistic individuals often have cognitive advantages compared to neurotypicals. These advantages include superior creativity, better focus and memory, increased efficiency, and they often have stronger personal qualities, such as honesty and dedication (Cope & Remington 2022). Therefore, autistic people often make extremely valuable employees because they tend to be reliable, efficient, and trustworthy. Additionally, some individuals tend to have exceptionally high skills in specific areas that can be very helpful in some roles. For example, one such topic that often has autistic experts is computers and coding (Sreckovic et al. 2024).

By understanding these strengths, employers could be inspired to make more effort toward recruiting autistic employees. This would require some adjustments, and an understanding of the challenges autism presents, but the benefit for the company and the employee could be great. The company could gain a loyal and knowledgeable employee, and the autistic individual could start to see autism as a strength and adapt and improve their valuable skills (Cope & Remington 2022). Companies should start to actively assess and address neurodiversity policies. This should be done without discrimination and without viewing autism as a negative issue (Kenyon 2015). It is good to do this even if there is no knowledge of having any autistic employees because there might be undiagnosed ones. Statistics show that 25% of people with autism have not been diagnosed (Smith 2023). In other words, about 1 in 45 adults in the U.S. is autistic (Dietz, Rose, McArthur & Maenner 2020).

2.3.1 Communication challenges for autistic people

When diagnosing autism, determining whether they have communication challenges is a major part of the diagnosis process. According to the DSM-IV-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, Text Revision), communication challenges are one of three major core deficits that autistic people possess. The severity of these symptoms varies widely for everyone. Some people are considered highly functioning autistic; even though they struggle with social cues etc., they have over time learned them, so they can communicate what is considered “normally.” In extreme cases, the communication struggles are so severe that the person is unable to even speak; this is called being non-verbal (Prelock & Nelson 2012).

Some autistic people face significant challenges with showing their emotions in a socially acceptable way. They often show their emotions very intensely, which can be perceived as off-putting, or they may show emotions in situations where displaying them might be considered rude. These emotions are often of happiness and frustration. One example of this could be that an autistic person does not show excitement when opening a gift or does not appear visually sad during a serious conversation (Laurent & Rubin 2004). An autistic individual often has challenges with coordinating their face with their emotions, which can make other people confused or even create small conflicts. (Prelock & Nelson 2012.) Often, autistic people learn to react in an appropriate way with practise, but it still can prove challenging for them. Even if some autistic individuals are good at identifying their emotions, they might struggle with expressing or explaining them to others (Laurent & Rubin 2004).

Neurotypical people often understand social cues intuitively; autistic people don't. They often need teaching and explicit explanations to understand how emotions are conveyed using body language and the tone of the voice. Autistic individuals might find it difficult to understand subtle social cues, such as sarcasm, indirect language, or taking sayings literally. This can make social interactions confusing and increase the likelihood of misunderstandings (Müller, Schuler & Yates 2008). Autistic people might often misinterpret or overlook simple gestures or facial expressions. These challenges can lead to stress or discomfort in social situations. They often tend to have trouble recognizing emotions in others, which increases the difficulty of responding appropriately in social situations. Because of these challenges, autistic people might sometimes react in a way that appears extreme or inappropriate to others (Laurent & Rubin 2004).

2.3.2 The consequences of poor communication for autistic people

Autistic adults occasionally have complex and mixed feelings regarding communication. While they identify the need and benefit of communication they can experience significant negative impact from communication. Sometimes the stress and anxiety originating from communication can be overwhelming enough that it results in them losing their ability to communicate verbally, find words

or speak fluently. Even though autistic individuals desire social interaction, they still feel like their difficulties in social situations can lead to feelings of isolation (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020).

Autistic people sometimes end up in a state of deep long-term exhaustion that typically lasts 3+ months (Raymaker, Teo, Steckler, Lentz, Scharer, Delos Santos, Kapp, Hunter, Joyce & Nicolaidis 2020). This is called autistic burnout and intense exhaustion is often physical, mental or emotional or a combination of these. Loss of function or skills is often present during autistic burnout (DeWeerd 2020). These skills could be for example the ability to speak fluently, decision-making or managing emotions. During autistic burnout the tolerance of stimulus is often reduced (Raymaker et al. 2020). This means that things like loud noises, bright lights, social expectations, or multitasking become even harder to tolerate, making daily life overwhelming.

Many autistic people say that autistic burnout happens because they must adapt and work in a world that is designed for neurotypical people with the lack of accommodation for them (DeWeerd 2020). Autistic burnout often happens due to chronic life stress. One of the leading stressors is masking (Raymaker et al. 2020). Masking is the act of changing the natural communication behaviors of the autistic person to seem neurotypical during social situations (DeWeerd 2020). While masking autistic people camouflage and modify the way they speak, their tone, facial expressions and body language. Masking can help to temporarily gain acceptance from peers, it is mentally exhausting and leaves the person vulnerable to burnout (Hinze, Attwood & Garnett 2024). Those who are more skilled in communication often experience higher social expectations, which leads to higher risk of burnout. Especially if they are working with neurotypicals so they must be constantly masking (DeWeerd 2020). Even when an autistic person is masking, they might still be misunderstood, this can lead to increasing feelings of rejection and stress. When these misunderstandings happen, they contribute to burnout and can generally make the autistic individual feel lonely and out of place (Hinze, Attwood & Garnett 2024). In the worst-case burnout can lead to severe consequences. *“Burnout may manifest as intense anxiety or contribute to depression or suicidal behavior”* (DeWeerd 2020).

2.3.3 How autistic people communicate and understand communication

Autistic people often struggle with communication, social situations and -cues. This does not mean that they are unaware of different social norms. Autistic people are often aware of different social “rules” and theoretically understand them (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020). The way autistic people understand social cues is different than neurotypicals. Neurotypicals understand and read social situations automatically. For autistic people, reading and understanding social situations is

conscious. Which means that they have the skills to learn and recognize explicit social rules, but it takes them constant effort and energy whereas for neurotypical people the understanding comes naturally (Bolis & Schilbach 2018).

Autistic people often do desire to engage in a socially acceptable way and they want to connect with neurotypicals. Unfortunately, these rules feel vague to the autistic people and because of that they find it difficult to follow them (Müller, Schuler & Yates 2008). So even though autistic people know about the rules, they struggle to apply that knowledge during real-time conversations and interactions. And they often even know what the “correct” response is to different situations and questions, but they struggle to say them authentically or in a spontaneous way (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020). This is because it doesn’t come naturally, but it has a process of reading the situation, identifying it, and based on that choosing the “correct” answer (Bolis & Schilbach 2018). When they are under pressure or distressed in any way (e.g. overstimulated, tired etc.) the struggle to say the correct thing is even higher (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020).

Because identifying and responding to real-time social cues is difficult for autistic people, they might often struggle to make friends and connect with other people. But these difficulties are mutual, and it is not only the autistic individual who struggles when they are interacting with a neurotypical person. When autistic and neurotypical people interact, each person has their own way of thinking, interpreting, and expressing emotions and intentions. Because these styles might not align the communication is not working efficiently. This phenomenon is called “double empathy problem” and it highlights that it is not the autistic persons fault, but rather a mutual miscommunication. This type of perspective shifts the blame from autism to focus on bridging the differences and to adapt to these different styles of communication (Crompton, DeBrabander, Heasman, Milton, & Sasson 2021).

2.3.4 Strategies for improving communication for autistic people

Improving communication for autistic individuals to create an environment where miscommunication is reduced lowers the risk of burnout. The first step toward this is training employers and employees on how autistic individuals communicate. Increased awareness can reduce misunderstandings, improve interactions, and decrease stigma around autism. If others understand even the basics of autistic communication, tension in workplace interactions can be significantly reduced. Additionally, creating an environment where autistic employees are not forced to mask will lead to better, more natural interactions. This support can include peer mentoring, structured conversations, and adapting communication expectations (Cummins,

Pellicano & Crane 2020). An environment that does not pressure autistic individuals to conform to neurotypical social norms can greatly reduce communication stress. Autistic employees should also be encouraged to advocate for their needs, such as requesting written instructions or alternative communication methods. To prevent burnout, autistic individuals should feel comfortable declining additional tasks if they become overwhelming (Raymaker et al. 2020).

Autistic individuals often require extra time to process information, making written communication more accessible and effective because they do not have time pressure that spoken communication has and they can go back to revise the messages if necessary (Shane, Laubscher, Schlosser, Fadie, Sorce, Abramson, Flynn & Corley 2015). Digital messaging provides a structured way to communicate while eliminating the stress of real-time verbal and nonverbal interaction (Hand, Kennedy, Filik, Pitchford & Robus 2023). Visual graphics further aid autistic individuals in understanding the social cues behind messages. This is especially important because spoken communication often conveys meaning through multiple factors, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Autistic people may struggle with these subtle communication cues, making sarcasm and indirect speech difficult to interpret. Adding a visual element that conveys the intended emotion can help ensure the message is understood correctly (Shane et al. 2015).

Emojis are commonly used in digital communication to convey emotional intent and reduce ambiguity in messages. However, a major challenge with emojis is that their meanings vary between individuals. This issue is even more pronounced between neurotypical and autistic individuals, as autistic people often struggle with emotional interpretation. As a result, they may miss subtle differences between emojis or misinterpret their meaning. For example, an autistic person may not realize whether a smiling emoji conveys genuine happiness or mild annoyance. This difficulty is because emoji meanings often depend on social context and tone, which autistic individuals may find hard to recognize. For autistic individuals who rely on explicit communication, the lack of standardized emoji meanings may add uncertainty to digital conversations (Hand et al. 2023). Therefore, when integrating emojis into internal communication practices, it is essential to establish a shared understanding of their implicit meanings to ensure clarity and consistency.

2.4 Multiculturalism in the workplace

Due to globalization, many workplaces are increasingly diverse, with employees from different cultural backgrounds. Because of this, it is vital to understand how this diversity affects multicultural teams and the success of the workplace (Oerlemans & Peeters, 2010). Companies

that aim to grow and succeed globally need to embrace diversity. Knowledge of how to communicate across cultures is key to reaching business goals (Sudhiir & Sudhiir, 2016). It is important to keep in mind that diversity can either improve or harm teamwork, depending on how well it is managed (Oerlemans & Peeters, 2010). According to Tilastokeskus (2024), there were 432,625 people aged 15–64 in Finland with a foreign background in 2023, meaning that about 1 in 8 working-age people in Finland has a foreign background. This highlights the growing significance of multicultural workplaces in Finland.

Working in culturally diverse teams can lead to benefits such as enhanced creativity, innovation, and improved decision-making. However, these benefits are only possible when the team is well managed (Oerlemans & Peeters 2010). Companies that educate their employees about cultural awareness and inspire them to respect each other are often more successful. This encourages employees to share new and different ideas, consider diverse perspectives, and collaborate effectively. These skills are crucial when a company decides to expand globally, as employees will already have experience communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016). Businesses that embrace diversity tend to be more flexible and better prepared to operate in different international markets (Oerlemans & Peeters 2010).

Cultural differences can sometimes cause misunderstandings in teams. If these misunderstandings are not addressed early, they can harm teamwork and create unnecessary conflict. Leaders need to identify potential issues and help employees navigate cultural differences (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). When cultural misunderstandings happen, they can lead to biases, decreased cooperation, and even division between the employees. In some cases, employees from different backgrounds might form separate subgroups, either intentionally or unintentionally. This can result to a lack of trust and increased miscommunication, which further weakens the overall team performance (Oerlemans & Peeters 2010).

2.4.1 Communication challenges in multicultural teams

One of the most obvious challenges in multicultural teams is language barriers. Although English has become the typical language in workplaces, the people who are not native English speakers might find communicating and expressing their ideas difficult at times. Additionally, they might feel unappreciated or left out due to inability to fluently speaking English. Language barriers can also cause miscommunication due to accents or just lack of vocabulary. Non-verbal cues also vary widely across different cultures. For example, in some cultures eye contact can be considered rude, while elsewhere it is considered polite and respectful (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016).

Different cultures communication styles can often be categorized as direct or indirect. When these communication styles clash there is a good chance for miscommunication. In direct communication style the people tend to say exactly what they mean, and they try to keep their messages clear. Some countries with this type of communication are Finland, U.S or Germany. In countries like Japan, the communication is often indirect. In indirect communication the true meaning is often implied instead of just saying the true message. This difference can cause misunderstandings, and even conflicts if the difference is not noticed and addressed correctly. (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). Different cultures have different ways to make decisions as well. Some cultures prefer fast decision-making. For example, in the U.S decisions are often made quickly based on the available data. Compared to Japan or Germany where making decision is a longer process involving detailed discussions and consensus before making the final decision. This can cause tension when employees have different expectations about how decisions should be made (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016).

Different cultures often have different conflict resolution strategies. In some cultures, like Japan, the conflict is resolved privately and subtly while trying to maintain the workplace in harmony and consensus. In some countries and cultures, like the U.S., open and direct communication about the conflict is preferred and expected. When these different approaches to conflict resolution interact, they might misinterpret each other's intentions. It can lead to unresolved tension or employees accidentally offending others (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). Different cultures also have varying ways to interact with authority and hierarchy. Some cultures are extremely hierarchical, where employees solely communicate through proper channels and tend to avoid direct contact with their higher-ups. Examples of this hierarchical cultures are China and India. In some countries the corporate culture is flatter, where employees are even expected to engage in open communication with management. Scandinavia and Netherlands are good examples of this more open style of communication. This mismatch can cause frustration when employees struggle to understand the hierarchy and the expectations of the workplace (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016).

Additionally, many workplace communication tools are designed to fit specific cultural communication styles. Which can make some project management software, or other apps used by the organization difficult to navigate and use if you are not part of the target group. Employees from different backgrounds might struggle with technology or misunderstand how it should be used, leading to communication failures (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016). For example, some cultures prefer communication through formal email, while others prefer instant messaging. This can lead to differences in expectations for response times and tone. If these preferences are not addressed, it can cause frustration and ineffectiveness in workplace collaboration.

2.4.2 The consequences of poor communication for multicultural teams

If there is poor communication because of language barriers or due to cultural misunderstandings, it can lead to barriers to effective teamwork. Language barriers can prevent information from being exchanged freely, and problem-solving and innovation may become weakened (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). Additionally, non-native speakers might feel excluded or undervalued due to the language barriers, which can decrease their motivation as well as their willingness to participate in discussions, which will reduce the overall effectiveness of the team (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016). When there are differences in communication styles, the instructions or expectations might be communicated in an unclear way. This leads to employees possibly misunderstanding their roles and responsibilities, which can result in delayed projects and decision-making, leading to inefficiency and frustration. For example, people who prefer direct communication may feel like indirect communicators are too vague or indecisive. And indirect communicators may find direct feedback too harsh and take it personally, which can cause unnecessary tension and more misunderstandings (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). Additionally, when communication is unclear, it can erode trust in leadership and management (Lázár 2017). If communication errors cause misunderstood instructions or faulty execution, businesses may experience missed deadlines, financial losses, or operational failures (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016).

In the worst-case scenario, a small disagreement might escalate into major conflicts that hinder teamwork immensely. Unresolved communication issues can lead to divisions within the workplace, where employees form different subgroups based on cultural similarities. Leading to even worse collaboration and trust within the team (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016). This can build frustration when employees don't understand the differences in each other's communication styles or have trouble grasping the workplace's expectations. When this happens, even minor tasks, like getting feedback, can become personal, stressful, and emotionally charged (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). Different decision-making styles can also lead to frustration. Because employees from cultures that value detailed discussions might see quick decision-makers as reckless, while fast decision-makers may view the detail-oriented decision cultures as inefficient and too slow (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016). When an employee is not fluent in the main working language or struggles with cultural barriers, they might have difficulty being heard by other employees and managers. If this happens, it could lead to the underutilization of great talent, causing the business to lose valuable insights and hindering the success of the team (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020).

When solving these cultural misunderstandings, it is important to address the communication gaps correctly. However, if leadership and management fails to properly assess the root cause of the miscommunication and implements solutions that do not align with the cultural differences, it might escalate the conflict instead of resolving the issue. This can lead to further disengagement and increase workplace inefficiencies (Nardon, Steers & Sanchez-Runde 2011). If misunderstandings are resolved without considering the cultural differences behind the conflict, there is a risk that management worsens the situation, which could lead to employees resisting leadership efforts and further disrupting the team (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020).

2.4.3 Strategies for improving communication in multicultural teams

Effective communication in multicultural teams requires good cultural awareness and the managers of multicultural teams should recognize and adapt to different communication styles to improve collaboration and prevent misunderstandings. Then conflicts can be prevented even before they occur, because teamwork can be adapted in a way that supports multicultural communication (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). Along with this it is important to develop active listening skills to reduce miscommunication. This is especially crucial in multicultural teams, because people use different tones and other social cues depending on their culture.

Understanding culturally different non-verbal cues like facial expressions and body language can help to prevent misinterpretations in cross-cultural interactions (Nardon, Steers & Sanchez-Runde 2011). Increasing awareness through diversity training can help to encourage employees to show new ideas, different perspectives and it can give a generally positive effect on collaboration (Sudhiir & Sudhiir 2016). However, increasing intergroup contact isn't always enough to improve the employees' relationships. Often well-structured and controlled interactions can be required to ensure positive interactions, especially in the beginning (Oerlemans & Peeters 2010).

In multicultural teams, clear and structured written communication is crucial to prevent misinterpretations. Using simple, precise language and avoiding phrases, difficult terminology, or culturally specific sayings can improve clarity. Written summaries of verbal discussions can help to ensure that key details of the conversation are saved and accessible for future references. This can reduce the risk of information loss and help improve clarity. This is because spoken communication can be unclear, especially in multicultural teams. It is important to note that the way people communicate is always influenced by their cultural background, which means that even written messages are different based on the culture of the author. Which means that cultural norms should be kept in mind even when writing written messages, to avoid miscommunication (Sudhiir &

Sudhiir 2016). Using structured formatting, such as bullet points and headings, can enhance the readability and comprehension of written messages.

Because written communication lacks emotion and visual-cues, and written communication norms vary across different cultures using emojis can enhance digital communication. But emojis interpretation varies highly across cultures (Erle et al. 2022). Emojis that convey friendliness in one culture might be considered too informal or unprofessional in another. To prevent unwanted miscommunication, organizations should establish specific guidelines for the use of emojis in professional settings. This could mean combining emojis with written explanations to ensure clarity (Sun et al. 2023). It is important to keep in mind that while emojis can help create a sense of warmth in digital interactions, they should be used appropriately to avoid ambiguity and cultural misunderstandings (de Andrade 2024).

3 The empirical part

3.1 Description of the starting point and presentation of the design

The product was not commissioned by any organization, but it was created due to authors personal interest in the topic as well as observations from the author's personal working experience. The author observed how internal digital communication lacked the tone of voice, which can cause stress especially for neurodivergent and multicultural teams. The author wanted to explore this topic deeper and to create a tool to improve digital communication. The author's academic background and her personal experience with neurodivergence and internationality supported the creation of this thesis.

The product this thesis creates is practical, research-based guidelines to enhance internal workplace communication. The goal is to build a more efficient work environment where employees can communicate clearly and confidently while maintaining professionalism. The outcome tries to help with the problem of lack of emotional clarity and tone in written digital communication. With the rise of remote work internal communication has become increasingly digital, and digital communication lacks social cues, emotion and body-language. This can lead to misunderstandings, stress, and even feelings of exclusion. These negative consequences especially affect neurodivergent employees and people who work in multicultural teams. To help reduce these negative aspects of digital communication the product helps by acting as practical, research-based guidelines for using emojis as nonverbal cues in internal communication

These instructions are intended to be used in any organization that is interested in enhancing their internal communication. The target group for this product includes employees/managers who work in multicultural and/or neurodiverse teams. This is because the product is researched and designed specifically to help neurodiverse/autistic or multicultural teams, but the benefit of the instructions is not limited to only those two groups. The research of neurodivergence was done by researching autism. This is because autism is the sub-type of neurodivergence that typically has the most communicational challenges, but these same challenges/symptoms are prominent in other types of neurodivergences as well. This means that the research about autistic symptoms is generally applicable for many other neurodivergent groups as well. By the multicultural aspect the research was focused on groups who are working in environments where English is not everyone's first language or people share different cultural backgrounds.

This thesis was not commissioned by any organization; therefore, it had no external expectations regarding the form, schedule, or development methods for the final product. However, there were other limitations for the development process. The biggest one was the need to keep the product

simple and applicable for different types of organizations to use without the need for any training. This meant that the product needed to be clear, easy and ready to be used without the need to explain/train how to use the product. This meant that the number of emojis included needed to stay quite low, the text had to be generally applicable, the focus on general internal communication scenarios rather than any specific cases. Because the project was created by one author, there were limitations to time, so the scope had to stay manageable. And because of these limitations the user feedback was collected on a smaller scale, which might limit the general applicability of the findings.

To evaluate whether the final product is successful the product should be clear and easy to understand, maintain a professional tone, be practically applicable and be helpful/have a positive effect if implemented. To determine whether this product fits the criteria the author collected feedback from neurodivergent and multicultural people, who would be the target audience for the product. In addition to this a professional with 18 years of experience as an entrepreneur gave their professional point of view on the product. Their opinion was especially valuable in determining the success of the professional tone and if the product would be practically applicable.

3.2 Description of how the outcome is produced

The idea to create this product started from the author's desire to create a thesis relating to neurodivergence. The exact topic became clear through the author's personal experience in an office setting, where the author noticed how written internal communication lacked feeling and seemed oftentimes cold. While the author realized that it's just the way to communicate in a professional setting, the author viewed the messages from a neurodivergent point of view. Due to prior knowledge of neurodivergence the author saw how this type of communication could potentially be a major stressor for neurodivergent people. The author belongs to the younger generation that is quite familiar with the use of emojis, and the author saw a potential tool to the previous problem. This observation sparked inspiration in the author and the decision to research this further.

Since the author is studying in the international business -programme, they wanted to add the international aspect into the thesis. The author had a good amount of experience working in multicultural groups and had occasionally run into miscommunication situations, especially in written conversations. The author realized that the multicultural teams could benefit from the final product as well as neurodivergent people. Adding them as another focus group didn't change the final product, it only influenced the amount of theoretical research needed.

When the idea of the thesis had been chosen, the author started by identifying the limitations of the thesis. After the limitations were clear, the author delved into research. The research began with the author deepening their pre-existing knowledge and collecting the findings into understandable chapters to form the theoretical part of the thesis. These theoretical findings were the foundation for the background information and descriptions for the text-portions of the final product. The background information in the final product is meant for the neurotypical and non-multicultural users of the manual to understand the need for such instructions. The information will also help them understand their neurodivergent and multicultural colleagues better. This written content was created as the next step after completing the research for the theoretical part of the thesis.

After the written text in the instructions was finished, the author continued by selecting the emojis that would be included in the instructions. When a good amount of emojis had been selected the author wrote descriptions for them. These descriptions will act as the shared context for the users of the manual and will ensure that everyone views each emoji the same way. After this step the author found the official names and Unicodes for each emoji, so it doesn't matter if the emoji visuals vary. This was important because different apps have different visuals for the same emojis. When this was done, the author edited the visuals of the booklet, so it looks more visually appealing and user-friendly. All these stages were done in the same document, so unfortunately there are no sketches for the initial designs.

The final stage was gathering feedback to evaluate the success and usability of the product. The author collected feedback from neurodivergent and/or individuals with experience from multicultural settings. One professional with 18 years of experience as an entrepreneur was surveyed to get insight into the professional usability of the product. Based on the feedback the author could assess the success and future improvement of the product.

3.3 Outcome and Critical Review of the Survey

A total of 22 participants completed the survey. When gathering feedback, the goal was to gain a general understanding of the need and current usability and to evaluate the success of the product and future development possibilities. And not to conduct large-scale scientific research to obtain statistically representative results that would require large number of answers. It has to be noted that the link to the survey was shared on social media and through large group chats. This means that many more people had the opportunity to respond but opted not to. The fact that only 22 answered could reflect that only people who are interested/passionate about the topic of neurodivergences and multiculturalism chose to answer the survey. Because participation was

voluntary it might have affected the answers and caused a more positive skew in the answers. Therefore, the feedback might not capture the full range of workplace attitudes, especially from those who are indifferent, skeptical, or even resistant about these topics. However, the survey included rather long paragraphs of text, so that might also be a factor that affected the number of people who chose to answer.

The demographics of the participants should also be critically considered. Most of the participants were young adults, between the ages of 18 and 29. People in this age group are generally more familiar with using emojis in communication. This generation also has the tendency of being more accepting and comfortable relating to topics such as neurodivergence and multiculturalism. If the age division had been more balanced the responses might have been more critical or skeptical about the use of emojis in professional settings. Older generations might be more set in their ways, and they are more likely to want to follow the traditional norms in professional communication that don't include the usage of emojis. In the survey there were a few comments regarding the "unprofessionalism" of emojis. Had the age distribution been leaning more on the older side the findings might have been vastly different (de Andrade & Barking 2024)

Another factor is the language of the survey. Although the participants were most likely living in Finland and some of their first language was Finnish, the survey was conducted entirely in English. Even though most people who answered were younger and younger generation of Finns are very proficient in English it cannot be assumed that every participant understood everything perfectly. Additionally, the language used in the instruction booklet was overly academic and complex, which did get some feedback. There was also feedback about the text being too verbose, and that can also affect the readability. Because of this the text was difficult to understand, especially if you have not much experience with reading complex and academic text. Due to this, some participants might have misunderstood some aspects of the product, and therefore their answers might not reflect their true feelings 100% accurately. In future development the language should be simplified, and the sentences should be written more clearly and to avoid unnecessary jargon.

Regarding the survey design, most of the questions used a 1 to 5 rating scale. Even though open-ended questions could have provided deeper insights, it was a strategic choice for the author to opt for the 1 to 5 rating scale. Choosing to avoid open-ended questions increased the likelihood of more people answering. This is because people are generally more willing to answer if answering requires less effort from them. The author deemed that getting a bigger variety of answers was more important than getting fewer but more detailed answers. To gain some deeper insight there was a voluntary option to give written feedback about their rating for each question. But when

analyzing the feedback, it should be noted that even with the option to elaborate on their answers, some information might have been lost because written answers were only optional.

The overall feedback from participants was quite positive. A large part of the scale answers leaned towards options "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" when asked about the perceived usefulness, clarity, and importance of the product. There was some difference between neurodivergent and multicultural answers. Neurodivergent people saw the product as more useful. They gave strong positive feedback, where they highlighted that the product could possibly make communication less exhausting and it might help to interpret the emotional tone of messages and reduce misunderstandings. Multicultural people also saw the benefits, but they were more critical and did not feel as strongly as neurodivergent participants. They did acknowledge that the tool could offer support to some extent, but they also expressed uncertainty about how much it could help. They felt that emojis are not sufficient enough in solving deeper cultural misunderstandings. Additionally, some responders were worried that cultural differences in interpreting emojis could be so strong that they overpower the meanings given to the emojis in the product. Based on this feedback we can determine that there is a real need for a tool like this, especially among neurodivergent people. But the feedback also suggested that this product would require polishing and improvement before it is ready to be implemented. Among multicultural people the product could be helpful as an additional aid but not as a complete solution to communication challenges.

The feedback about the realistic usability of the product was collected from one professional who had 18 years of experience as an entrepreneur. This feedback was extremely valuable in evaluating the success of the product, but the answers gained from the professional were quite short and did not go into too much detail, which affects the amount of information gained from the survey. Additionally, it would have been better to get feedback from more professionals to get a wider understanding and more perspective in the answers. The professional participant pointed out that the product's purpose was still too vague, and that the product did not feel ready for professional use yet. They also mentioned that the instructions should be clearer. Even though getting feedback from one professional cannot be seen as widely representative, it highlighted important issues. These issues might not have been discovered if answers only from the general survey had been considered when determining the success of the product. To fully determine the products' success in workplace use, it would be necessary to get more feedback from professionals across different industries and/or to test the product in actual workplace use in a real company.

There are a few other potential risks that must be acknowledged. Emojis are constantly evolving, and their meanings might change rather quickly due to social media. Because of this the tool might

become outdated quite quickly if it is not updated regularly. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that this product is not a solution for these deeper issues of miscommunication. The product is merely a tool to help improve communication. So, if an organization implements the product, it is crucial they understand that it does not fix these complex problems, and that those deeper organizational culture issues still need to be addressed.

In conclusion, the results of the survey show that the concept of product concept is promising, especially as a tool for neurodivergent people in the workplace. However, the results also revealed areas that still require improvement before the product is usable. The language of the product needs to be made clearer and more accessible, and the chosen emojis should be refined. The product should also be tested across a broader general and professional audience and tested within an organization before definite claims about its usefulness can be made. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that a tool like this is a supportive aid, and not a complete solution to difficult and complex communication issues.

4 Discussion

The objective of this work was to create emoji-based communication instructions to improve clarity and emotional tone in internal workplace communication, especially for neurodivergent and multicultural employees. Based on the feedback collected, the objectives were partially achieved.

The timing for this product is very timely because, in modern workplaces, digital communication is extremely prominent and the tone of written messages can be easily misunderstood. When it comes to the use of emojis, the use of them has slowly moved to professional settings, although emojis can still be viewed as unprofessional. Based on the feedback the author collected, the timeliness of the product in theory is great and its benefits are recognized, especially by the target groups, but the product still needs to be improved before it is ready to be implemented. The feedback from the entrepreneur with 18 years of experience highlighted that the instructions felt vague and complex. Some other participants mentioned the same problems. This shows that the instructions need to be altered to be clearer. In hindsight, the language the author used when she wrote the instructions used too much academic phrasing instead of being written simpler to fit day-to-day use. This was a significant learning point for her, to understand the importance of editing her writing for specific situations.

The main results showed that the product is timely, and the usability of this product got overall good feedback. 78% of responders found the instructions clear and easy to understand. However, some found the intended audience a bit confusing; they were unsure whether the product was meant for the whole team or only neurodivergent/multicultural individuals. This unveiled some lack in formatting the text or in her explanations. These misunderstandings might come from the high-level language used, and therefore if these instructions were to be further developed, it would require fixing. The academic style of language got some critique from the professional respondent as well. They mentioned that the language used in the instructions might make the content feel less approachable. If the language was made more approachable and less academic, the usability of the product could be significantly improved.

In addition, 91% of responders said that the emojis' meanings in the instructions were clear, and 86% felt that the product could help to improve communication. However, some users said that they were concerned about people misusing emojis, for example masking sarcastic comments as nice with emojis. Some were also concerned about the different meanings of the emojis across cultures or generations, and they felt that the explanations for the emojis might not be enough to keep personal meanings out from communication. The following example of this was highlighted in the feedback: someone was concerned that the winking emoji could be seen as potentially

flirtatious, and the heart emoji can be seen as too informal for professional use, even though they had been assigned neutral meanings in the guide. This showed that written definitions can't override deeply ingrained and learned social interpretations. These insights highlighted some good areas for improvement and showed why collecting feedback during development is crucial.

The conclusions based on the results are that while the guide fulfills a real need and is beneficial, especially for neurodivergent employees, it needs further adjustments before it can be widely implemented. The language should be simplified, the intended audience should be made clearer, and cultural differences in emoji interpretation should be acknowledged more explicitly.

The results can be utilized in practice by adapting the guide flexibly in different organizations. Some teams might prefer a flexible approach to use the instructions as general guidelines. But the tool would be the most effective in its intended use if it were to be implemented as a strict standard in internal communication. This stricter type of implementation would be especially helpful for neurodivergent employees because neurodivergent people thrive on following explicit rules. Ideally, these instructions would be clear and easy enough that they would not need any extra training, other than letting employees know that those rules are to be followed. However, this type of explicit implementation is not quite realistic, because in reality, people don't always follow rules consistently, even if the product is introduced as a strict tool. And if the instructions are forced, it might create some unhappiness and gain a negative reaction because it takes away people's freedom. Because of this, the author feels like the guide can act as a functional tool and a flexible starting point for better communication. Ideally, employees would see and understand the benefit and start a voluntary team-wide commitment.

Several aspects of the project were successful. The participants largely found the emoji meanings understandable and believed that the guide could significantly help workplace communication. The project also identified that emojis can play an important role in reducing anxiety and emotional uncertainty in digital communication, particularly for neurodivergent employees.

However, potential problems and failures were also observed. The most significant problems were that the language in the instructions was too academic for everyday workplace use, the intended audience was not clearly enough defined, and some emojis were perceived differently across cultures, leading to risks of misinterpretation. These problems were identified during the feedback phase. They highlighted the need to simplify the instructions and take cultural variations into account.

In hindsight, what should have been done differently is simplifying the language from the beginning and writing the guide in a way that matches daily business communication, not academic writing.

Additionally, piloting the tool in a company or a team could have provided more insights into its practical usability.

Ideas for future development were also gathered. In the future, it would be important to adjust the language to make it more accessible, clarify the guide's target audience, and possibly develop a simplified version of the emoji guide. It would also be beneficial to conduct real-world tests in companies to understand how employees actually use the guide and where further improvements are needed.

During the process, the author learned many important lessons. One major realization was the value of clear and accessible language. Because she was focused on creating a quality product from an academic point of view, she unintentionally made the product less accessible and harder to use in real-life settings. Now the author understands that effective communication must prioritize the end user, and she learned to adapt her work to appeal to the target audience. Additionally, the author learned more about how neurodivergent people experience communication challenges and how that is often misunderstood from the outside. The author had some prior knowledge about the neurodivergent point of view, but she had not seen how neurotypical people interpret or misinterpret those challenges. This taught her to try to find other viewpoints besides her own personal ones, and how that can broaden her understanding of different challenges. The author now realizes that she has often been stuck in her personal experience and has failed to see outside of it. Another thing the author learned was how multi-layered communication really is. To each person's communication style, there is a plethora of things affecting it. It's not only people's culture that affects their communication, but personality, power dynamics, familiarity, and even the content they read or watch affects it. This complexity makes it very difficult to create universal rules for communication, which is why feedback became such a crucial part of this thesis. The feedback that the author received challenged several of her assumptions and taught her a lot.

4.1 Personal Learning and Professional Development

The thesis process turned out to be a major learning experience in the author's academic and professional journey. One of the most significant understandings she gained was the importance of careful planning. Previously, she had not truly understood the saying "well planned is half done," but due to this project, she finally understood how much thoughtful and thorough preparation can impact the quality of the work and how much it can ease the writing process. This thesis challenged the author's work ethic, because it required sustained focus, time, and careful attention to detail. This thesis was not just a task to be completed but a consequential project that

demanded high-quality work. This pressured the author to work more deeply and thoroughly than ever before.

A pivotal moment of learning happened during one discussion with the author's thesis advisor. The advisor asked her for clarification about how autistic individuals experience communication. While explaining that autistic people often understand social norms but struggle to apply them in real-life interactions, the author realized that she had been over assuming the knowledge that the general public has about neurodiversity. This prompted her to shift her approach and point-of-view of the writing. After this she recognized the importance of making sure that she writes the text for the audience and to edit her writing to suit readers unfamiliar with the topic. This realization improved the accessibility of her work and helped her understand that in professional communication, the audience's perspective should always come first.

During the thesis process, the author also realized that some of her personal strengths could be applied to her academic work. The author has the tendency to immerse herself deeply in topics that genuinely interest her. This usually only extends to her hobbies, but she learned to apply it to her research as well. This happened when she got into reading academic articles for the research in the theoretical part of the thesis. She found herself increasingly interested in the topic, and this gave her a lot of extra motivation. This newfound motivation helped her stay focused even during demanding phases of the thesis. She learned to see this aspect of herself as more than a personal tendency, but as a professional asset. Her ability to explore topics in depth and maintain long-term focus emerged as a clear strength.

The author also faced some challenges during this process. At one point due to personal circumstances, she had to take a break from writing, this led to anxiety about her falling behind. During this time, she also struggled with motivation and started to question her ability to complete the thesis. However, with the help of peer support and shared encouragement from others who were also working on their theses, the author regained her momentum. This difficult period taught her the value of perseverance and collaboration. This experience showed her that with consistency and a good community and support she can maintain progress even during difficult times.

Most importantly, this thesis process helped the author to recognize how much she has grown academically. At the beginning of her studies, the thought of writing her thesis seemed intimidating and was something she associated with more experienced professionals. Now that she has completed the thesis, she has started to see herself as capable and as someone who is ready to graduate. The thesis validated the skills she developed during her studies and strengthened her professional identity. Through this process, she began to understand that she is knowledgeable

and can manage complex projects and produce high-quality work. This realization has given her confidence in her abilities as a communication professional.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji



Appendix 2. The final product

Product Description

These instructions are research-based and designed to help different organizations on how to use emojis effectively in their internal communication. The goal for implementing these instructions is to improve clarity and inclusivity in digital communication while maintaining professionalism.

The contents are created to increase inclusivity for neurodivergent employees and multicultural teams. The research and background information focus on autism, a type of neurodivergence chosen because it typically presents the most communication challenges. These challenges are not limited to autistic individuals but are shared with other types of neurodivergence as well. For multicultural teams, communication difficulties arise from differing communicational norms and are not tied to specific nationalities.

Written communication lacks emotional context, which can lead to misunderstandings, stress or even burnout. These problems can be prominent in multicultural or neurodiverse teams. Autistic people often know in theory about different social situations, but they struggle to actually identify them. Emojis can add the needed context and improve communication when used mindfully.

Although the instructions are based on research for multicultural or autistic people, using emojis to add social cues with shared context can improve digital communication for any team.

Contextual Emoji Usage

In digital communication, the lack of tone and body language can lead to misunderstandings. Emojis can add emotional clarity, which can help make messages less ambiguous. It is important to know that this is the case only when used thoughtfully and with shared context for each emoji (Erle, Schmid, Goslar & Martin 2022).

This instruction booklet will give everyone the same point of view to every appropriate emoji that can be used in the workplace. Shared context is crucial because a specific smiley emoji might seem friendly to one person but sarcastic to another, depending on context, culture, or personal experience (Hern 2021). Therefore, these instructions should be shared with everyone, to take away the possibility of different meanings for each emoji.

These instructions will not include all emojis, only a select few that are appropriate in professional settings. There are few emojis that have the same meaning, so there can be a bit of variety to the texts.

Autistic Background

Unlike neurotypical people, autistic people don't naturally understand sarcasm, indirect language or the tone of voice. This can make autistic people feel isolated from the rest of the group. (Müller, Schuler & Yates 2008; Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020). Autistic people struggle with other communication challenges as well such as understanding social cues or implicit expectations. These challenges might cause misunderstandings and can even lead to conflicts or the loss of performance (Sreckovic, Schultz, Kucharczyk & Welsh-Young 2024).

To fit in, many autistic people start to mask. Masking means altering their natural way of communication to appear neurotypical. Masking requires constant effort, and it can be exhausting. Constant masking is one of the leading causes of burnout for autistic people. Unclear communication increases the risk of burnout or emotional stress (Hinze, Attwood & Garnett 2024).

Despite these challenges, autistic individuals often have exceptional strengths that they can bring to the workplace. Some of these strengths include honesty, focus, reliability, and deep expertise in specific areas (Cummins, Pellicano & Crane 2020). Improving and increasing communication practices to be more inclusive, these strengths can thrive, benefiting both the employee and the organization.

Multicultural Background

Due to globalization workplaces are increasingly diverse. While diversity can improve creativity and decision-making, it needs to be managed well to avoid misunderstandings (Oerlemans & Peeters 2010; Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020).

Different cultures have different ways of communicating. Some prefer direct communication and some indirect. This can mean that the same message is understood differently. If this is not recognized it can cause misunderstandings that can lead to conflicts (Brett, Behfar & Kern 2020). Using emojis can bring more clarity into the conversation and that can help identify the intended meaning of the message.

Good Example

I think we'll need to make a few changes here 🤔
Some parts aren't quite clear yet, and we'll want
to tighten the structure before moving forward.
Let's go over it together when you have a
moment 🕒

Bad Example

I think we'll need to make a few changes here 🤔
🤔 Some parts aren't quite clear yet 🤔🤔 and
we'll want to tighten the structure before moving
forward 🤔🤔. Let's go over it together when you
have a moment 🤔🤔

Effective use

Use them mindfully, excessive use can be viewed as unprofessional. Safe rule of thumb is that an appropriate amount of emojis is roughly 1-3 emojis per paragraph.

These instructions should be used in internal communication, because emojis can sometimes be seen as unprofessional. So, if you are unsure about using them in communication with external people, it is recommended to not use them in that situation.

Use emojis in their right context. This instruction booklet will include emojis and specific meanings of them. It is important to use them according to this information, because it is the context everyone has.

If the emojis of your device look different than the visual representation in this booklet, use the emoji according to the Unicode. The Unicodes are the same on all devices, even if the visuals look different.

Appropriate emojis and context

Smiling face with smiling eyes



U+1F604

Genuine positive emotions

Smiling face with tears



U+1F605

Accidental, genuine mistake.

Laughing with tears



U+1F602

Funny, genuine laughter

Smiling face with smiling eyes



U+1F60A

Genuine positive emotions

Smiling face with sunglasses



U+1F60E

Success, or feeling proud

Smiling face with hearts



U+1F970

Feeling happy, or positive
(e.g. reaction to compliment)

Smiling face with heart eyes



U+1F60D

Positive reaction,
something is really good

Appropriate emojis and context

Star-struck



U+1F60D

Positive reaction, something is really good

Thinking face



U+1F914

Thinking, wondering about something

Pensive face



U+1F614

Sad, disappointed in themselves (e.g. made a mistake, sad news)

Winking face



U+1F609

Positive teasing

Crossed fingers



U+1F91E

Hoping for the best

Thumbs up



U+1F44D

Good, OK (can be used on its own as a message)

Thumbs down



U+1F44E

Bad, No

Appropriate emojis and context

Praying hands



U+1F64F

Hoping for the best or deep gratitude

Eyes



U+1F440

Curious about something (this one is more informal, be careful who to use it with)

Red heart



U+2764

Good and positive (all heart colors mean the same)

Raised hands



U+1F64C

Praising something, something was good

Ok



U+1F44C

Good, OK (can be used on its own as a message)

All the names and uniuodes of the emojis are from an online article from freeCodeCamp-website (Kolade 2021).

Unicode

Emojis change in appearance, so to avoid confusion all emojis in these instructions include their official names and Unicodes.

You can find the different ways the emoji looks by searching the Unicode in this website: <https://emojipedia.org/>

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