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"It's simply a different way of communicating" - Attitudes on Nonverbal Communication of Autistic Adults in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Most findings on autistic people's production and processing of nonverbal communication (e.g., co-speech gestures, body movements, or facial expressions) in face-to-face interactions come from controlled lab studies. To shed light on the subjective experience and attitude towards such visual communicative signals of this population, we present results from an online questionnaire, in which 162 autistic participants reported on their use of formalized visual language and their communicative challenges and strategies. We identified and grouped unprompted mentions of nonverbal communication according to attitude (positive vs. negative) and focus (self vs. other). While few participants use sign language or sign-supported speech, their attitude towards visual support tools is positive. We found eye contact and facial expressions to be associated with a negative attitude, while one's own use of body language is perceived as positive and others' as negative.

1 Introduction

Face-to-face communication combines visual information (gestures, body movements, and facial expressions) with speech (Kendon, 2014; Vigliocco et al., 2014; Holler and Levinson, 2019; Trujillo and Holler, 2023). Autistic individuals effectively produce (de Marchena and Eigsti, 2010) and process gestures in communicative situations (Trujillo et al., 2021; Matyjek et al., 2025), including such with background noise (Mazzini et al., 2025). However, their use of nonverbal communicative signals may differ from neurotypical individuals in type and frequency (Callejo and Boets, 2023; McKern et al., 2023) and may be associated with higher cognitive load (Aldaqre et al., 2016), potentially even impairing speech comprehension (Silverman et al., 2010). Additionally, next to specific tools for alternative and augmentative communication, sign language appears to be a promising, yet not extensively researched, communication strategy for at least some autistic people (Zisk and Dalton, 2019). Most findings on nonverbal communication in face-to-face interactions derive from lab studies, while autistic individuals are rarely asked directly for their experiences and attitudes. Therefore, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: Do autistic adults in the Netherlands use sign language, sign-supported speech, and natural gestures, and in what contexts?

RQ2: Do they mention nonverbal communication in face-to-face conversations without being prompted to do so, and what attitude do they express about their own and others' use of it?

2 Method

The online questionnaire was created with Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2024) and distributed via mailing lists and websites targeted towards autistic individuals. It included questions on different aspects of everyday communication, such as the challenges people face during it, and the strategies they use to overcome them. We analyzed data from 162 participants (weighted mean age = 29.9, $\sigma = 16.9$; gender distribution: 17% male, 41% female, 4% other, 38% preferred not to say), who indicated to be autistic (154 with a diagnosis, 4 self-diagnosed, 4 in the process of getting a diagnosis). 41 of them were additionally diagnosed with ADHD. We used R (R Core Team, 2024) for descriptive statistics and deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) for analyzing answers to open questions. In the spirit of community involvement, the iterative process of defining the research questions, designing the questionnaire, and shaping the thematic focus of the analysis was enriched by discussions in our neurodiverse team of researchers. In addition, we discussed the results in online meetings with two autistic individuals.

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3 Results

3.1 Use of nonverbal communication

Participants indicated their preferred communication mode on a scale from 0 to 100. On average, the preference was 77% for spoken, 31% for visual, and 22% for supported communication (e.g., with emotion cards, symbol-based software, or planning boards). When asked about their knowledge and use of formalized visual communication strategies, five participants indicated that they were familiar with Dutch Sign Language, but to only use it a few times per week or even less than once a week. 37 indicated to be familiar with sign-supported Dutch, but only four indicated to also use it. 145 participants reported using natural gestures in everyday communication. 62% of them indicated to do so several times a day, 8% once a day, 19% a few times per week, 2% once a week, and 6% less than once a week (3% did not provide an answer). There were 75% mentions of use with family, 75% with friends, 69% at work, 38% during free time, and 27% in an educational context. One participant reported: *I do it [using gestures] subconsciously, but I know that I do it less frequently than non-autistic people. And I don't know exactly why. But I think I mostly do it when I feel comfortable.*

3.2 Attitudes towards nonverbal communication

Overall, there were 17 unprompted mentions of nonverbal communication, which, given the size of the questionnaire is a very small number. We identified the following themes: (1) body language, (2) facial expressions, (3) eye contact, (4) visual support tools (see table 1). To each of them we assigned focus (one's own or others' use of nonverbal communication), and attitude (positive or negative). Throughout, theme 1 was associated with a positive and themes 2 and 3 with a negative attitude, both for self- and other-focus. For theme 4, self-focus was associated with a positive and other-focus with a negative attitude.

Theme	**Example**
(1) Visual support tools (self/other: pos)	*When I indicate that I need more information (. . .) something is made visual.*
(2) Eye gaze (self/other: neg)	*Don't look at me if I don't make eye contact.*
(3) Facial expressions (self/other: neg)	*My face doesn't always show expressions, and I also don't always instinctively understand other's.*
(4) Body language (self: pos/other: neg)	*I'd prefer less use of body language. Sometimes the abundance of gestures and facial expressions confuses the message.*

Table 1: Themes with focus, attitude, and examples

4 Discussion

While most of our participants do not use formalized sign languages, they expressed a positive attitude towards visual support tools. More access to visual communication tools and possibilities to learn sign-supported speech may therefore be a promising avenue to facilitate communication (cf. Zisk and Dalton (2019)). Participants expressed a positive attitude towards their own use of body language, frequently highlighting that it is special but not lesser: *[Communication in autistic people] is often seen as disrupted or worse, but it's simply a different way of communicating. Communication isn't good or bad—you can do it in many ways.* Conversations with other autistic people were therefore described as more enjoyable and successful, since they require less masking (and hence less cognitive effort and fatigue), as well as less pressure regarding eye contact, which was perceived as negative. At the same time, the negative attitude towards other people's use of body language was frequently mentioned in connection to overstimulation and subsequent communication difficulties, where multiple information flows are perceived as competing or distracting. In line with this, many participants indicated a preference for written over face-to-face communication, which aligns with findings by Howard and Sedgewick (2021).

One limitation of this study is that we found only few unprompted mentions of nonverbal communication in face-to-face interactions in our questionnaire. It could be that this was simply not a salient theme for our participants or that the questionnaire, which had a broader scope, did not capture the theme well enough. Future questionnaires could be designed with this specific goal in mind.

In conclusion, we argue for a shift, both in autism research and intervention: from solely speech to multimodal and co-created communication, focusing on what interlocutors – neurodivergent or not – need for a conversation to be successful and enjoyable.

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