The Intersection of Voice, Neurodivergent Masking, and Workplace Communication Demands in Business Settings

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22/03/2026

Total Essay Word Count: 5910

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1. Introduction

This research aims to explore the experiences of neurodivergent individuals in professional business environments and how workplace communication norms affect their vocal presentation. As a neurodivergent voice coach working with business clients, I experienced how performance-based voice training can intersect with the masking often required in neurotypical spaces.

Voice use is closely tied to social expectations and contributes to masking and impression management — the practice of concealing behaviours to avoid stigma (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). In business contexts, communication norms may unintentionally reinforce these behaviours, with negative effects for neurodivergent employees (Miller, Rees, and Pearson, 2021).

Despite growing attention to neurodiversity in employment (Branicki et al., 2024), little research has addressed how vocal expression, authenticity, and impression management interact in professional contexts.

The primary aim of this project is to explore the intersection between voice and neurodivergent workplace masking, aiming to fill a critical gap in existing voice and neurodiversity research by identifying:

- The implicit or explicit communication standards that affect neurodivergent people in their workplace.
- The specific vocal strategies used by neurodivergent individuals to alter their vocal presentation to conform to these standards.
- The impact of these alterations on the individual's authenticity as felt by themselves and emotional labour.

Through qualitative interviews and light ethnographic observation, the research will generate practice-informed findings that form the foundation for neurodivergent individuals seeking to communicate more effectively in their workplaces. It will directly inform how I support clients and help position me as a practitioner working in this space.

This research will contribute to uncovering broader implications for workplace inclusion of neurodivergent and other marginalised groups. By increasing understanding of masking and communica-

tion dynamics, it may support more inclusive practices and help organisations better consider how their norms affect neurodivergent employees.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This review aims to combine literature from three research areas: workplace communication norms, neurodivergent masking, and vocal pedagogy. It utilises a pearl-growing search strategy (Schlosser et al., 2006), with no explicit inclusion criteria befitting its narrative structure (Winter, 2023).

Voice use is closely tied to societal expectations and cultural communication norms (McGettigan, 2015; Podesva and Callier, 2015), which affect marginalised groups differently to those from the dominant group in a particular setting (McCluney et al., 2021; Opara et al., 2023). Neurodiversity research has documented the prevalence and costs of changing one's presentation to hide stigmatised qualities (masking) in everyday interactions (Cook, Crane, et al., 2020a; Miller, Rees, and Pearson, 2021; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). Studies of workplace authenticity, identity management, and emotional labour have highlighted some dynamics at play that affect how individuals present themselves in their workplaces (Cha et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2021).

This literature review combines these two strands of literature with an understanding of voice from the field of embodied voice coaching and speech pathology (Schlichter, 2014; Crow, Van Mersbergen, and Payne, 2021; Cazden, 2023). The primary goal is linguistic bridge-building between disparate research fields and generalisation of the patterns that arise (Cooper, 1988). It aims to provide foundational knowledge for this study's research questions by identifying past research into workplace communication standards, the vocal presentation of neurodivergent individuals, and the impact of workplace masking on experienced authenticity.

2.2. What is Neurodivergent Masking?

Neurodivergence refers to individuals whose neurological development falls outside the norm, such as autism and ADHD, and is often subject to social stigma (Dwyer, 2022a). Masking is defined as the strategies an individual employs to hide particular behaviours or aspects of their stigmatised identity (Cook, Crane, et al., 2020a). This practice is not unique to neurodivergent individuals,

and related terms from research into other marginalised populations include camouflaging, passing, code-switching, and impression management (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Cha et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2021; Miller, Rees, and Pearson, 2021).

For neurodivergent individuals, masking presents substantial costs to mental health, including increased anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth (Hull et al., 2021; Zhuang et al., 2023). It can lead to a low sense of felt-authenticity, with individuals feeling they are often ”playing a part” or ”adopting a persona” (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023, p.14).

2.3. Standing Out vs Fitting In: The Dynamics of Workplace Communication Norms

Workplaces are subject to both explicit and implicit norms that govern what types of communication are deemed acceptable (Cha et al., 2019). Pryke-Hobbes et al. (2023) identified that workplace masking is a pervasive experience for both neurodivergent and neurotypical employees, is more common than in other environments, and presents more severe costs to mental health. The tension between the desire to stand out and the need to fit in is well documented across domains including non-dominant ethnicities at work (Opara et al., 2023), standing out in the job market (Tikkanen, 2015), stigmatised gender and sexuality identities (Peel et al., 2022), and culture fit in technology companies (Goldberg et al., 2016).

Research into workplace authenticity shows that when employees feel able to express themselves authentically, they have higher job satisfaction, well-being, and lower job anxiety (Martinez et al., 2017; Cha et al., 2019). Despite these benefits, employees often make strategic adjustments to their social identities at work, particularly if they perceive those identities to be stigmatised or conflicting with their role (McCluney et al., 2021).

2.4. Neurodivergent Masking Strategies and Vocal Differences

Qualitative studies of autistic camouflaging provide a detailed accounts of the specific strategies that neurodivergent individuals employ to mask their stigmatised traits (Cook, Crane, et al., 2020a; Cook, Hull, et al., 2021; Cook, Crane, et al., 2022). Cook, Crane, et al. (2020a) identified 37 behaviours autistic adults report using, ranging from modelling neurotypical body language to rehearsing social scripts. Some autistic individuals even adopt entirely different accents than their

place of origin in an attempt to manage others' perceptions of them (Hall and Parish, 2024).

A substantial body of work documents vocal differences between autistic and non-autistic speakers, including differences in prosody, rate, stress, loudness, and voice quality (Shriberg et al., 2001; McCann and Peppé, 2003; Fusaroli et al., 2017; Asgari, Chen, and Fombonne, 2021). Established therapeutic interventions often attempt to reduce these vocal differences through behaviour modification (Gillon et al., 2017; Holbrook and Israelsen, 2020), though criticism of such interventions highlights ethical concerns around framing these differences as deficient (Wilkenfeld and McCarthy, 2020; Veneziano and Shea, 2023).

While much of the existing literature focuses on autism, masking is reported in other types of neurodivergence such as ADHD, dyspraxia, and dyslexia (Miller, Rees, and Pearson, 2021; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; McKinney et al., 2024; Van Der Putten et al., 2024).

2.5. Vocal Masking: Gaps in Current Literature

Despite extensive existing research into both neurodivergent masking and autistic vocal differences, specific vocal masking strategies remain under-explored. Of the 37 masking strategies identified by Cook, Crane, et al. (2020a), only three are exclusively vocal: laughing, adapting tone of voice, and slowing verbal communication for clarity.

I hypothesise that this lack of depth is caused by a limited awareness of vocal dynamics by autistic participants and an absence of voice practitioner-researchers. Given the extensive research into autistic vocal differences, I expect neurodivergent individuals to adapt various vocal properties when attempting to mask their innate social behaviours.

The objectives of this project are to fill these gaps by:

- Identifying more specific vocal masking strategies used by neurodivergent individuals, incorporating an understanding of vocal pedagogy.
- Broadening masking research beyond autism by including participants with other types of neurodivergence.
- Exploring how workplace communication expectations and norms specifically shape vocal masking.

2.6. Vocal Pedagogy

A key contribution of this project is to combine neurodivergent masking with vocal pedagogy to address the need for more voice practitioner-researcher studies in this area. This involves incorporating differing conceptions of voice that contribute to my understanding of voice as a teacher, including:

1. Embodied spoken voice pedagogy — Voice as an embodied, identity-linked process, emphasising breath, resonance, and freedom from unnecessary tension (Rodenburg, 1992; McCallion, 1998; Houseman, 2002; Linklater and Slob, 2006).
2. Vocal anatomy and acoustics — Physiological and acoustic properties such as prosody, pitch, and vocal quality, directly relevant to documented autistic vocal differences (Shriberg et al., 2001)
3. Speech and language therapy — Changing habitual vocal patterns often requires renegotiation of identity and self-image, offering a framework around the psychological impact of vocal adaptation (Cazden, 2023)
4. Gender-affirming voicework — Deliberate vocal exploration can support identity alignment, autonomy, and social belonging (Gumble, 2019)

2.7. Literature Review Conclusion

This review highlights the complexity of neurodivergent masking, particularly in professional environments where communication norms influence how individuals present themselves (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).

While autistic vocal differences are well documented (Fusaroli et al., 2017), the specific vocal adaptations used to mask remain under-explored, especially across wider forms of neurodivergence. This project addresses these gaps and explores vocal masking as both a communicative strategy and an expression of identity in the workplace.

3. Methodology and Methods

3.1. Research Paradigm

This study is situated within an interpretive, constructivist research paradigm, which understands reality as an individual's lived experience and the meaning making (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Interpretivism offers an alternative to positivist approaches, which focus on quantifiable phenomena and are less suited to describing the complex lived realities of neurodivergent individuals (Botha, 2021).

The neurodiversity paradigm provides an ideal framework that challenges the prevailing deficit-based models — which treat neurological differences as impairments in need of correction (Dwyer, 2022b) — by bringing neurodivergent voices into the research process itself (Sonuga-Barke, 2023).

Rather than seeking objective measurement of vocal behaviour, this study aims to understand how neurodivergent individuals experience and interpret their own vocal adaptations within the workplace, with knowledge co-constructed between the researcher and participants.

3.2. Choice of Qualitative Methodology

A qualitative methodology was selected as it allows rich contextual detail for exploring phenomena such as participants' life experiences, emotions, and complex interpersonal interactions (Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce, 2010). Quantitative approaches, such as acoustic vocal analysis or surveying, are less suited to exploring the nuanced and identity-linked experiences involved in vocal masking.

Potential limitations include the time-consuming nature of qualitative research and impact of researcher interpretation of data (Choy, 2014). These are addressed by keeping participant numbers small and integrating a critical exploration of researcher bias and positionality (Neville, 2022).

3.3. Overview of Methods Chosen

This study combines the following four overlapping methods:

1. Narrative literature review to explore existing literature, grouped into the key themes of workplace communication norms, neurodivergent masking, and vocal pedagogy (Winter, 2023).

2. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews (De Fina, 2019) are the primary method for data collection, allowing a deep understanding of participants' individual experiences without the influence of the group social dynamics present in the workplace that might cause them to engage in masking (Hollander, 2004).

3. Participant observation allows the capturing of information about participants' vocal use and communicative patterns during the interview (De Fina, 2019).

4. Thematic analysis of interviews is employed to identify and interpret recurring patterns present in the interview responses (Lim, 2025).

By combining personal narratives and voice-informed observations, this design can generate a deeper understanding of the vocal dynamics involved in masking than exists in the literature.

3.4. Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using a self-selection, purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling method through my professional networks and LinkedIn posting (see Appendix 3.). Inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as neurodivergent, have professional experience where spoken communication formed a regular part of their role, and have considered the impact of their neurodivergence on their own spoken communication.

A total of five participants took part in the study, representing a range of neurodivergent conditions, awareness of neurodiversity issues, and professional contexts. This sampling approach prioritised access to individuals with relevant lived experiences rather than statistical representation, which aligns with the goal of purposeful sampling to prioritise information-rich cases over comprehensiveness (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Due to time constraints, the complete thematic analysis focused on only three of those participants, chosen as the first interviews conducted.

3.5. Interview and Analysis Procedure

Interviews were conducted between November 2025 and February 2026 via Zoom remote conferencing calls, following a pause in studies between May and November 2025. Each interview lasted between 60 and 110 minutes and was audio and video recorded to secure cloud storage.

A semi-structured question guide, provided in Appendix 2., derived from the literature review, ensured consistency between interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to explore relevant experiences.

During interviews, brief handwritten notes were made to aid the flow of the conversation. Detailed field notes documenting observations of vocal qualities, body language, and other communicative behaviours were made during the subsequent review of the interviews.

To preserve the anonymity of participants, each participant was assigned a gender-neutral pseudonym once the interview had been completed and recorded. Recordings were anonymised, then transcribed automatically using secure software Happy Scribe and Otter.ai. Transcripts were uploaded into the software QualCoder for coding (Brailas, Tragou, and Papachristopoulos, 2023), with coding occurring during February and March 2026 after the completion of all interviews. Selected quotes relating to the chosen themes were then transcribed verbatim from the original recordings.

3.6. Data Analysis

Analysis of data was performed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019), which involves actively interpreting the data (spoken statements and observations), identifying keywords, and developing themes related to the research questions.

Codes and themes were chosen using the 6R framework, which states chosen keywords should have realness, richness, repetition, rationale, repartee (insight), and regal (significance) (Naeem et al., 2023). To address researcher bias, coding was conducted across multiple sessions, with reflective notes kept throughout.

3.7. Ethics, Insider Research, and Risk

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David ethics committee. Participants received an information sheet and signed an informed consent form prior to the interview. Interviews were conducted in a supportive manner and participants were offered a post-study summary of findings.

As a neurodivergent voice coach, I occupy an insider-outsider position: an insider to the lived experience of being a neurodivergent person, yet an outsider to the business contexts of the par-

ticipants. This positionality offered rapport while requiring continual reflexive awareness of potential bias. I adopted a reflexive practice of phronesis and kept notes throughout the research process (McAreavey and Das, 2013).

A key risk included the potential for negative repercussions if participant comments were found by employers; this was mitigated by primarily recruiting through personal networks, aggregating reporting to avoid organisational identification, secure data storage, and anonymising comments. The potential emotional distress when reflecting on masking, discrimination, or exclusion was mitigated by informing participants in advance of the sensitive nature of the topics, reminding them of their right to pause or withdraw at any time and skip questions without explanation, mentioning relevant support resources when appropriate.

4. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the participant interviews was conducted using an iterative process of reflexive thematic analysis. In addition to data relating to the voice, the data also produced codes relating to neurodivergent experiences, workplace communication and organisational culture. To focus the scope of this study, the following analysis includes only those themes that relate to the voice, vocal communication, and the workplace dynamics that influence participants' vocal use.

Three overriding themes were chosen to align most closely with the research objectives described in the introduction:

- **Professional communication norms are often implicit and influenced by feedback.** This theme addresses the research objective to identify the implicit or explicit communication standards that affect neurodivergent people in their workplace.
- **Psychological safety modulates vocal awareness.** This theme draws on a pattern that emerged from the data that participants were largely unaware of their voice use, but that challenging communication dynamics modulated this awareness. It addresses the research objective of identifying specific vocal strategies used by neurodivergent individuals in the workplace.
- **Masking can be emotionally and energetically draining, and experienced authenticity**

(Cha et al., 2019). This theme addresses the research objective to identify the impact of making these vocal alterations on the individual's authenticity and emotional labour.

4.1. Codes and themes

This table shows some extracted codes and related themes, with examples of quotes relating to those codes.

Participant quote	Code	Theme
"I don't think anyone ever has passed them on [. . .] that's all implied. It's all guesswork." (Ash)	Communication norms / rules	**Professional communication norms are often implicit**
"One of my, er, previous managers when I used to speak up in meetings, would. . . tell me how I'd, how I'd embarrassed them." (Taylor)	Explicit feedback	
"I think having masks is that self-preservation [. . .] You accept it." (Taylor)	Necessity of masking	
"Particularly in[. . .] an HR-type role, you kind of feel like you've got to be saying the right things quite a lot." (Sawyer)	Work situations	
"When I'm. . . comfortable [. . .] it feels like my brain's going at the same pace as my voice." (Ash)	Most authentic self	**Psychological safety affects vocal awareness**
"For those who if you feel safe you, you kind of take that mask off and you are yourself." (Taylor)	Psychological safety	
"Any conversation, if it's not [. . .] going well, there's an inflection point, which is like an internal voice in your head that says "This isn't. . . this isn't good" (Sawyer)	Awareness in the moment	
"A nervous. . . babble, I suppose of. . . "Oh this is this and this is that. . . and"" (Ash)	Vocal awareness	
"I'd be completely exhausted after having all those different levels of conversation throughout the day" (Ash)	Energy impacts	**Workplace communication is often energetically draining**
"I think if you're using more energy to mask [. . .] it's easier to be upset." (Ash)	Emotional impacts	
"At the time, I was listening. [. . .] I just completely forgot all of that detail the next time I spoke to him. So it became a bit awkward." (Sawyer)	Communication challenges	
"It's very tiring. . . not. . . knowing which neurodiverse state is going to be present each day." (Taylor)	When low resourced	

Table 0.1: Data structure showing representative participant data, codes, and higher-order themes derived through reflexive thematic analysis.

4.2. Reflective obsevations of speech and linguistic mazes

A reflective observation made during verbatim transcription was the high level of false-starts and corrections participants made when speaking. During the interviews and coding of the automatically generated transcripts, these verbal disfluencies passed almost unnoticed, as if my brain had filtered them out completely.

This was particularly noticeable with Sawyer, whose voice I perceived as very clear, measured, and grounded throughout the interview. To my surprise, verbatim transcription highlighted that Sawyer used a high number of false starts, repetitions, and silent pauses, as did the other participants.

These disfluencies are examples of linguistic mazes, a category of verbal disfluency found to be higher in autistic and ADHD children compared to typically developing children (Bangert and Finestack, 2020; Salem et al., 2021; Clin and Kissine, 2023). Compared to other speakers, autistic speakers tend to use more speaker-oriented pauses in speech (e.g. false starts) that reflect internal processing needs, but fewer listener-oriented pauses (e.g. um) that serve as cues to manage conversational flow.

It is unclear whether my failure to notice these disfluencies during the conversations indicates a peer-to-peer neurodivergent communication dynamic. Existing literature on linguistic mazes largely focuses on production patterns in children (MacFarlane et al., 2017) and lacks listener-focused studies, but peer-to-peer information transfer is shown to be more effective between autistic interlocutors than with non-autistics (Crompton et al., 2020). This highlights a need for future research into peer-to-peer neurodivergent communication.

In the rest of this analysis, the themes are presented narratively, incorporating the quotes verbatim with disfluencies included.

4.3. Theme 1: Professional communication norms are often implicit and inferred from feedback

A recurring pattern across interviews was that the workplace norms affecting vocal communication were rarely provided explicitly by the company or through training, aligning with findings that workplace communication norms are often implicit (Hoogervorst, Van Der Flier, and Koopman, 2004). Instead, participants described learning expectations indirectly through observations, negative so-

cial reactions from colleagues, and occasional explicit feedback.

4.3.1. Implicit workplace communication norms

Ash gave one of the clearest descriptions of this process when discussing how they learned the communication norms in status-influenced situations such as talking to senior leaders or clients.

> *I don't think anyone ever has passed them on. It was more just witnessing how other people responded and... having this kind of anxiety about knowing "Oh if you're putting, if you put your foot in it with this important person, like, it's gonna cost... the business [...] It, it's, at, that's all implied. It's all guesswork. It's all... quite difficult to know what to talk about.* (Ash)

The phrase "It's all implied. It's all guesswork." highlights a documented challenge experienced by neurodivergent employees that integration in the workplace is often governed by strong but implicit social norms (Longmire, Vogus, and Colella, 2025).

Ash also described this challenge of implicit social norms when moving from a small company to working in a large, mostly remote team.

> *When I did go into the office... there was almost this... "Am I allowed to talk to you? Random stranger?" [...] I was like "Hi. Hi" I was getting strange looks. [...] And it's like... okay. Very hard to get used to... or to know that was the rule.* (Ash)

Such negative social experiences appeared across the interviews as a common way participants learned workplace communication norms. After an initial implicit rebuff, Ash then consciously observed the behaviour of others and stopped talking to colleagues because this was the "rule" they observed.

Taylor described a similar deliberate process of changing how they communicate in the workplace, a theme that was present in all participant interviews.

> *I used to be very emotive. I, I used to be the person that at work who would put their hand up and ask questions... constantly, you know. But I've trained myself, or been*

> *trained... not consciously, but to... be quieter, to listen, to speak last... [...] Takes a lot of... training. No, and... but it means that you don't... um, annoy people, in meetings.* (Taylor)

While both Taylor and Sawyer spoke in positive terms about making such conscious changes to their communication style, participants often described how communicating in the wrong way led to their ideas not being appreciated or heard.

4.3.2. Explicit feedback and status

While most communication rules were communicated implicitly, some participants discussed explicit feedback they had received from managers, with status and hierarchy coming up as a common dynamic. Ash, for example, felt their communication was restricted in the presence of status, such as when talking to business leaders in their early career, saying "Better not say anything, because whatever you say isn't going to be the right thing to say."

Conversely, Taylor discussed not seeing hierarchy and instead seeing the person first, which is common among some autistic people (Caldwell-Harris and Schwartz, 2023), and receiving explicit negative feedback about it.

> *One of my, er, previous managers when I used to speak up in meetings, would... tell me how I'd, how I'd embarrassed them. [...] I guess hierarchical... conversations... annoy me... [...] and I know some people feel uncomfortable with that, they, "You can't speak to that person they're... you know, they're the Chief Operating Officer!"* (Taylor)

This implicit nature of workplace communication suggests a value in incorporating discussions of implicit norms into any vocal training for business settings, as has been found to improve consistency in workplace communication (Hoogervorst, Van Der Flier, and Koopman, 2004).

4.4. Theme 2: Psychological safety modulates vocal awareness

A second theme that emerged was that participants' awareness of their voice changed depending on whether communication felt psychologically safe.

In psychologically safe situations, participants often described not noticing the sound of their voice. When describing communication situations becoming challenging, their language changed to suggest a heightened self-awareness of their communication.

4.4.1. ”How do I get off this precipice?” — Moments of misunderstanding

One such challenging communication that appeared across the data occurred when miscommunication arose. Misunderstandings are a common and even beneficial occurrence in communication (Koçak and Puranam, 2024), but for the participants, they created a heightened level of anxiety, awareness, and stakes.

Ash described these moments as being on a ”precipice” and gave an example of when they were explaining an idea for a project, a solution which was later accepted by the team but misunderstood in the moment.

> *They all looked at me funny [. . .] and it’s like, it’s kind of like, maybe they thought I was talking gibberish or something. And then, later on when I did explain, they were like ”Oh yeah, that does make sense.” [. . .] But up until that moment it is like almost being on a. . . I don’t know, on a. . . precipice?* (Ash)

Such moments of precipice seemed to change the whole nature of communication. Ash described a sense of panic, a heightened awareness of interlocutors’ non-verbal behaviours (”What’s happened there? What’s that face mean?”) and an urgency to close the communication gap (”How do I get off this precipice?”). Sawyer used similar terms, describing any conversation that is not going well as having an ”inflection point” experienced as ”an internal voice in your head that says ’This isn’t. . . this isn’t good, it doesn’t feel good.”’.

Participants also reflected that their vocal quality changed in such moments, such as when Sawyer described their voice going ”high” in a moment of misunderstanding.

> *I’m taking somebody at work through a challenging process at the moment [. . .] she kind of shot back ”W-well what do you mean?” And at that point, I was like ”Ooh, ok” and that’s when I went into the high voice? [. . .] in that moment it was about rejection. Or being. . . erm, caught out about something that I don’t know.”* (Sawyer)

Although the language differs, both participants describe a moment of misunderstanding where their verbal communication stops feeling automatic and becomes conscious. This shift is important when designing voice interventions, as it suggests vocal awareness increases in those moments of high anxiety. This aligns with the finding that interoceptive awareness — the ability to detect internal bodily signals — increases in the presence of social anxiety (Durlik, Brown, and Tsakiris, 2014).

4.4.2. ”A nervous babble” — Heightened vocal awareness in ”the precipice”

In these moments of heightened awareness, participants often described their voice changing, such as when Ash described their vocal quality in terms of felt urgency, pressure, and self-justification.

> *I think... it would... kind of go into a bit of a nervous... babble, I suppose of... ”Oh this is this and this is that... and”... trying to catch up people as fast as possible, I suppose I, I'm quite a mumbly person anyway... but... I imagine, it, I, I picked, I f', I feel like it would ge', get worse in that scenario, 'cos it's just like... I almost gotta justify myself* (Ash)

The frantic speech pattern being demonstrated could be an example of cluttering, a pattern of rapid, disorganised speech associated with ADHD (Fidan and Sarıyer, 2025), which Ash explained was driven by an urgency to not be seen as ”stupid or weird” by colleagues.

Sawyer described a similar vocal shift, using the vocal term constricted. This is one of the few places in the data where a participant independently used vocal terminology, likely because of Sawyer's vocal knowledge acquired when singing in a choir.

> *It would have been a nerve, a nervy, kind of, quick, quick-talking. [...] If I'm... if I'm saying something... I gue-, whether you'd say it's a lie or I'm trying to cover something up or... fake it. It's like the, the voice, sort of, it's almost like it... the physical nature of it changes. So you, like, you can feel like a lump rising in your throat? [gestures to larynx going upwards] So it becomes constricted? [holding larynx gesture]* (Sawyer)

4.4.3. ”I feel stuck” — Anxiety as a vocal modifier

Anxiety came up in several of the interviews, which is common in neurodivergent individuals and may present differently from neurotypical social anxiety (McKay et al., 2023; Wilson and Gullon-Scott, 2024).

Sawyer described how the presence of heightened anxiety modified their vocal quality.

> *My anxious voice is... um... it... it wavers, it stutters... um... it, um... yeah, it just doesn't, it, and it, and it... huh... kind, kind of doing it now, um... It kind of... erm... it's very indecisive... when I'm in that anxious mode... um... I feel stuck. [...] it feels... fluttery and, and high up in the voice [indicates throat] not, not sort of... in the core [indicates torso]* (Sawyer)

At this moment in the interview, I perceived Sawyer's voice as deep and grounded, having missed the linguistic mazes as described above. When I then asked them to demonstrate the light, fluttery anxious voice, Sawyer said that they had been demonstrating. They then gave the following response, touching on a recurring theme in Sawyer's interview of a worry about being ”dishonest”, a documented concern among some individuals who engage in workplace masking (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).

> *There's a, there's a part of me which, which now... starts to think ”Oh, I wonder if Alex is thinking I'm... sort of, trying to... um... make it up, or, or tell a lie.”* (Sawyer)

This modulating influence of anxiety on the voice is well-documented (Trajano et al., 2016). These findings suggest that a discussion of anxiety is important to incorporate into voice interventions for neurodivergent individuals.

4.4.4. ”My brain's going at the same pace as my voice” — The impact of psychological safety

Across participants, vocal awareness seemed to reduce when they felt psychologically safe and they stopped consciously monitoring their communication, such as when talking with friends, family, or fellow neurodivergent colleagues in workplace support groups.

Taylor discussed psychological safety in terms of unmasking and showed a high awareness of their distinct masks.

> *I think there's different masks, different... types of masks for different people? [...] For those who if you feel safe you, you kind of take that mask off and you are yourself... um. For those that [...] you have to be professional you put on this kind of professional... persona.* (Taylor)

Ash reflected on the sound of their voice when they felt psychologically safe compared to their fast-talking, anxious voice.

> *If I was just relaxing with someone or some friends it'd be, I feel like my voice would be deeper... al', al', almost subconscious, subconsciously, non-consciously [...] when when I'm... comfortable it feels like I'm not masking? It feels like... it feels like my brain's going at the same pace as my voice.* (Ash)

The phrase "it feels like my brain's going at the same pace as my voice" is a valuable description drawn from this research data. It offers a subjective experience of neurodivergent speech patterns and disfluencies, such as cluttering, which has been linked to working memory differences (Fidan and Sarıyer, 2025).

All participants used terms like feeling deep or grounded to describe their voice when feeling psychologically safe. Sawyer, for example, used vocal terms to express the change in voice quality, such as "feels like you're on firm ground", "talking from your core", "it's centred, it's grounded." Along with their vocal demonstration, these suggest a release of tension in the vocal mechanism in psychologically safe situations.

In contrast to Ash and Sawyer, Taylor demonstrated using a deeper, measured voice for one of their business personas, as a workshop facilitator. When psychologically safe, they instead spoke with a "quick, fast, excitable" voice.

> *I'm often told when I facilitate, part of my role is a facilitator of workshops, that I have a very calm... professional voice that is akin to a radio presenter or a pilot... um. Yet*

> *when I speak to my friends and my family they're of-, always telling me to "Slow down. Stop mumbling... What are you talking about?" But when I'm in a, in a, in a work setting... I'm, I'm very... I'm very different.* (Taylor)

Any voice teaching interventions for business should therefore create a space where individuals feel psychologically safe, following practices as are used in trauma-informed voice work (Monti, Durham, and Reynolds, 2024), and include training in vocal release.

4.5. Theme 3: Workplace communication can be emotionally and energetically draining

A theme arose across all participants of workplace communication as energetically and emotionally draining. Often, descriptions were presented alongside coping strategies, such as taking rests and using flexible working arrangements.

This energy expenditure was not always apparent from the outside, as Taylor described seeing in colleagues.

> *I've seen other neurodiverse people who come across really, really confident. You think "Wow, they're brilliant! Look at, they're such a good speaker!" Actually... burned out inside and are absolutely shattered.* (Taylor)

When discussing masking, Ash described not knowing which version of themselves was the most authentic, but being able to recognise the energy expenditure.

> *I've never been able to figure out which bit's me. All I know is I come away from interactions exhausted. [...] I would have a, maybe even just a half an hour meeting and just need to have to have, like, a fifteen-minute break because it was so exhausting from pretending.* (Ash)

A prevalent reflection in the field notes was how many diverse coping strategies the participants had developed to overcome their challenges associated with workplace masking. However, as Sawyer noted, this continual drive to overcome challenges also used a significant amount of energy.

> *For me, I'm constantly thinking about how I present, how I come across, how I develop myself. [. . .] there are times where I just think "This is exhausting." Constantly thinking about me, how I tick, how I come across.* (Sawyer)

The high energy expenditure of workplace masking highlights a need to incorporate energy management into any voice training for business settings. It also indicates the importance of introducing voice interventions that help reduce the need to mask rather than adding to it.

5. Conclusion

Neurodivergent individuals strategically adapt their voice and communication style to meet the demands of workplace norms. This study supports findings that such norms are often communicated implicitly (Hoogervorst, Van Der Flier, and Koopman, 2004) and learned through negative social reactions or explicit feedback, requiring individuals to engage in an ongoing process of masking (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). Crucially, this study shows that masking extends to the voice as a dynamic, context-dependent process modified by anxiety and psychological safety.

A key contribution of this research is the identification of vocal masking as an under-explored dimension of neurodivergent masking. While previous research has identified a wide range of camouflaging behaviours among autistic individuals (Cook, Crane, et al., 2020b), these lacked detail into vocal adaptations by vocal practitioner-researchers. Participants described shifts in vocal quality, pitch, pace, and control in response to moments of miscommunication, described as being "on a precipice". These moments of increased anxiety led to heightened vocal awareness, as has been shown with interoceptive awareness and anxiety (Durlik, Brown, and Tsakiris, 2014). Psychologically safe social contexts were associated with reduced self-monitoring and a description of vocal qualities associated with released tension of the vocal mechanism, such as deep or grounded.

The findings suggest a preliminary conceptual model in which implicit workplace norms drive misunderstandings that necessitate vocal masking among neurodivergent individuals. These vocal adaptations are modulated by psychological safety and experienced through individuals' experienced authenticity and energy expenditure.

Practically, these findings have important implications for voice pedagogy and workplace practices.

Any voice training for neurodivergent individuals must provide a psychologically safe container for training and prioritize interventions that reduce the need to mask rather than adding to it. Voice training should also address the energetic costs of vocal adaptation and the impact of anxiety on the voice.

5.0.1. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations of this study are the small, non-representative sample and the selective focus on three participants for in-depth analysis. As a researcher holding insider-outsider positionality, my interpretations are shaped by my own interpretations as a neurodivergent individual operating primarily outside a business context.

Future research will extend the thematic analysis across all five participants, incorporating further study of linguistic mazes and other disfluencies with a rigorous conversation analysis to deepen understanding of neurodivergent speech patterns (Szczepek Reed, 2012). Applied research aims involve developing practical guidelines for businesses and evidence-based voice training approaches that better support neurodivergent communication in the workplace.

Part I

Appendices

1. Project Proposal

1.1. Project Title

The Intersection of Voice, Neurodivergent Masking, and Workplace Communication Demands in Business Settings

1.2. The Context

This project explores the communication experiences of neurodivergent individuals in professional business environments.

While not focused on one specific sector, I expect participants to come from workplaces where collaboration, meetings, and interpersonal communication are central—likely within startups or tech companies, reflecting my networks. Participants will be recruited through personal and professional contacts, with the study centred on individual experience rather than institutional structures.

Though the focus is on personal narratives, the wider business context is relevant—especially in workplaces where inclusive communication practices are increasingly prioritised. The tech sector, for instance, has been a pioneer in supporting neurodivergent employees (P. Hutson and J. Hutson, 2023). Companies already engaging with neurodiversity may serve as a backdrop, even if not directly involved in this phase of research.

1.3. The Justification

This project stems from both personal experience and professional interest. As a neurodivergent voice coach, I've long navigated how performance-based voice training intersects with the masking and adaptation often required in neurotypical spaces. In my own work, I've seen how these tools can help neurodivergent clients communicate more effectively—while also recognising their potential to unintentionally reinforce conformity.

Voice use is closely tied to social expectations and contributes to masking and impression management—the practice of concealing behaviours to avoid stigma (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). In business contexts, communication norms may unintentionally reinforce these behaviours with negative effects for neurodivergent employees (Miller, Rees, and Pearson, 2021). This project seeks to explore how voice supports both adaptation and self-expression, and how these tensions are experienced

in workplace settings.

Despite growing attention to neurodiversity in employment, little research has addressed how vocal expression, authenticity, and impression management interact in professional contexts. This project begins to address that gap.

1.4. The Intended Impact

This research will form the foundation for developing a voice coaching practice grounded in research, focusing on the intersection of voice, neurodivergence, and workplace communication. It will directly inform how I support clients and help position me as a practitioner working in this space.

Beyond my practice, this project has broader implications for workplace inclusion. By increasing understanding of masking and communication dynamics, it may support more inclusive practices and help organisations better consider how their norms affect neurodivergent employees.

1.5. The Outlined Intention

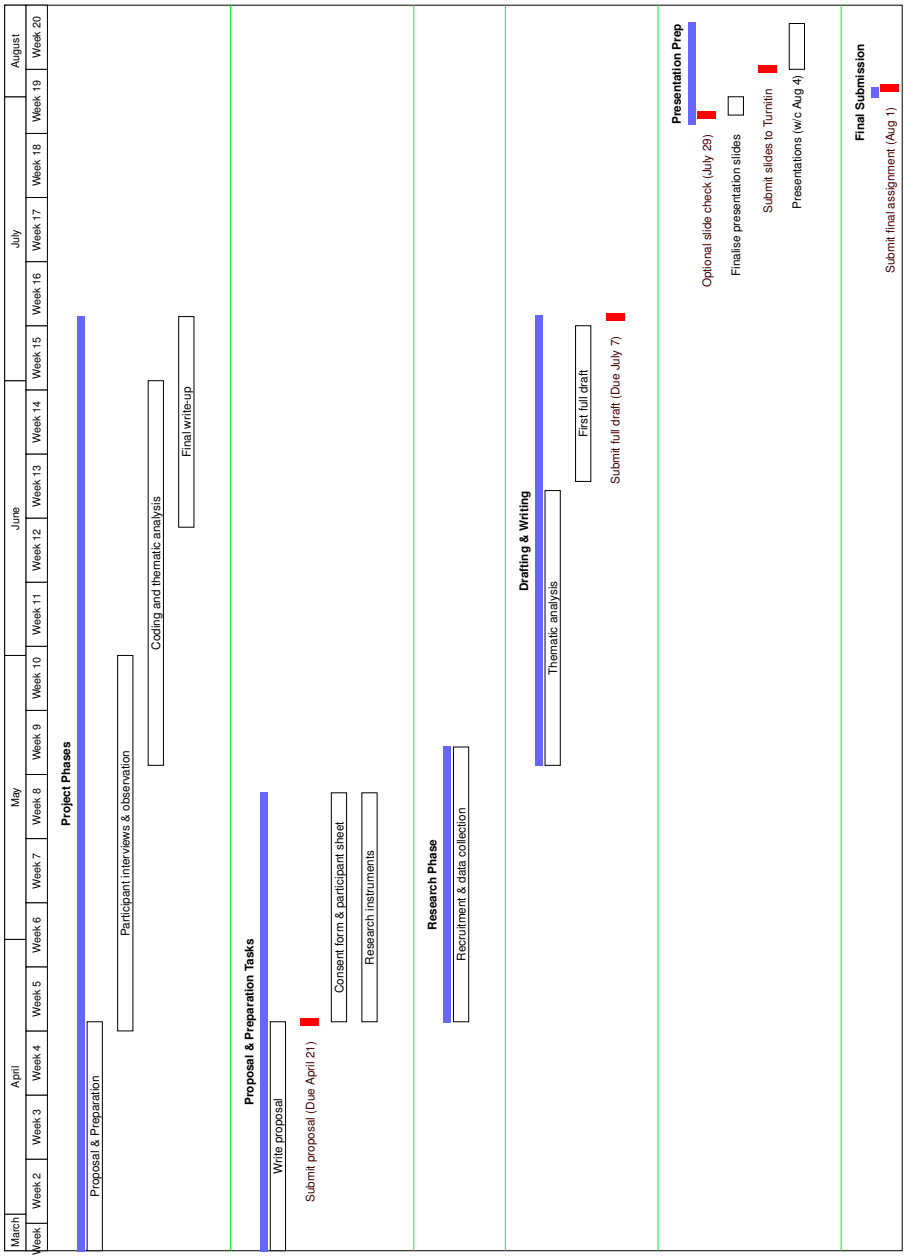
This small-scale, exploratory qualitative project will use semi-structured interviews with 3–7 neurodivergent individuals working in business settings. Interviews will include ethnographic observation of participants' vocal and communicative behaviours.

Thematic analysis will identify patterns across narratives, supported by a literature review examining gaps in research around voice, masking, and workplace norms.

Timeline:

- **April–May**: Participant interviews and observation
- **May–June**: Coding and thematic analysis
- **June–July**: Final write-up

This approach triangulates lived experience, observation, and theory to draw meaningful, practice-informed conclusions.



1.6. Ethics and Insider Research

As a neurodivergent person, I bring an insider perspective, particularly around masking, while also remaining an outsider to many corporate contexts due to my freelance career. This insider–outsider dynamic is common in qualitative research and will be addressed through reflexive practice.

Participants will be recruited through my network, with informed consent and anonymity offered. Ethical considerations include respecting neurodivergent communication preferences, addressing power dynamics, and maintaining transparency about the study's purpose and use of data.

1.7. Personal Learning Outcomes

Through this project, I aim to:

1. Deepen understanding of how neurodivergent individuals navigate vocal expectations in professional settings.
2. Strengthen my qualitative research skills in interviewing, coding, and thematic analysis.
3. Inform and refine my coaching practice through evidence, while clarifying my positionality as a neurodivergent practitioner working on inclusive, authentic communication.

2. Research Interview Questions

Approximate timings of the sections are included, to keep to

2.1. Introductory and Contextual Questions (00:00–00:20)

- Can you please spend a few minutes to explain a little about yourself and tell me why you wanted to take part in this research?
- Before I ask specific questions, what thoughts have you already had around your neurodivergence and communication in your workplace?
- What types of communication do you find most challenging?
- Which types of communication do you feel comfortable in?
- What (if any) would you say are the communication norms of your business?
- What (if any) would you say are the unwritten communication rules of your business?
- What (if anything) do you do about any social needs or challenges you may have?
- How do you manage those communication challenges day-to-day?

2.2. Exploring Relationship with Voice (00:20–00:40)

- Let's turn to your voice.
- What is your relationship with your voice?
- How would you describe your voice?
- Often, neurodivergent people talk about comments they receive about their voice.
- Have you received feedback on your voice that has stuck with you in your life?
- What comments or feedback regarding your voice do you remember, if any, receiving in your workplace?

2.3. Authenticity, Masking, and Voice in Different Contexts (00:40–01:00)

- In what situations in your life do you feel the most ”you”, like you can be the most yourself?
- How do you feel your voice is different at work than it is in those situations?
- Do you think you present different versions of yourself in different areas of your work? (e.g. customer facing, team meetings, social)
- Can you tell me what you understand by the term ”masking” or camouflaging?
- Do you ever mask or camouflage when interacting with other people?
- Have you ever had the experience of ”masking” your neurodivergence in the workplace?
- How do you feel masking has affected the way people around you treat or interact with you?
- What changes about your voice or communication when you are masking compared to when you feel more your authentic self?
- What are the energy impacts of using your voice in workplace settings?
- What are the emotional impacts of using your voice in workplace settings?

2.4. Authenticity and Social Dynamics (01:00–01:20)

- What does authenticity mean to you?
- Are there certain people with whom you feel you can be more like your natural, authentic, or true self?
- When you are with people that you feel you can be more like your natural, authentic, or true self around, what do you do or how do you behave?
- How do you use your voice in those situations?
- What (if any) are the advantages or benefits of being your natural, authentic, or true self when interacting with others at work?
- What (if any) are the disadvantages or risks of being your natural, authentic, or true self when interacting with others at work?

- What stops you from presenting yourself authentically in the workplace?
- Where do you think this perception comes from? (e.g., explicit external feedback or internal dynamics)
- What would need to change in your workplace to be able to show up and use your voice more authentically?
- What would need to change in yourself to show up and use your voice more authentically at work?

2.5. Voice Demonstration (If Interviewee Comfortable) (01:20–01:40)

If the interviewee has identified differences in how they present themselves in different situations:

- Would you be willing to demonstrate how you use your voice differently in those different work situations (for example, showing how your voice feels or sounds when you are ”masking” versus when you feel more authentic)?

2.6. Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences or anything I have not asked that you would like to talk about?
- Do you have any further questions about the interview today or the project in general?

2.7. General Prompts for Deeper Exploration

- Can you tell me more about that?
- What sense did you make of that?
- What was that like?
- What did or does that mean for you?
- What meaning did or does that have for you?
- How did you experience that?

- How did you feel about that?

3. LinkedIn Post

Does your neurodivergence affect how you communicate in the workplace?

Call for research participants
Do you identify as neurodivergent and have you noticed your voice or communication style change across different situations?

I'm currently conducting MA research at the Voice Study Centre and University of Wales Trinity Saint David exploring:
Voice, neurodivergence, and workplace communication

This study is for people who:
- Self-identify as neurodivergent (autistic, ADHD, AuDHD, dyslexic, etc.) — formal diagnosis not necessary
- Work (or have worked) in professional or business settings
- Use spoken communication as part of their job
- Notice changes in how they speak across situations
- Are open to reflecting on how they use their voice at work

If this sounds familiar, I'd really value your perspective.
DM me here or email alexowenhillvoice@gmail.com to take part.

CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS!
This research project explores...
Voice, Neurodivergence & Workplace Communication
If you...
Self-identify as neurodivergent
(e.g. autistic, ADHD, AuDHD, dyslexic, ...)
Work, or have worked, in a professional or business setting
Use spoken communication at work
Notice changes in how you speak in different work/life situations
Are willing to reflect on how you use your voice at work
... then we invite you to take part in this study!
Message @AlexOwenHill via DM or email
alexowenhillvoice@gmail.com
Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David
VOICE STUDY CENTRE

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