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Intercultural organization communication of IT expatriate in the Netherlands

communication challenges, adjustment in narrative

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This study explores the intercultural communication experiences of IT expatriates in the Netherlands, focusing on their narratives obtained through interviews. The findings reveal two key aspects: the expat's communication challenges encountered in the workplace, and the cross-cultural adjustment process which contribute to a better understanding of the communication dynamics experienced by self-initiated IT expatriates, emphasizing the cultural learning process. These insights provide valuable implications for practitioners and researchers seeking to foster better intercultural communication within their workforce. By understanding the communication challenges faced by IT expatriates in the Netherlands, organizations can work to create a more supportive and inclusive environment that values diversity and effective intercultural communication, ultimately leading to better organizational outcomes.

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, international migration has become a common phenomenon leading to the temporary relocation of highly qualified employees, known as expatriates, to foreign countries for international assignments (Dowling & Welch, 2004; Feitosa, Kreutzer, Kramperth, Kramer, & Salas, 2014; McEvoy & Buller, 2013, as cited in Wilczewski, 2019). The concept of expatriates, commonly referred to as "expats", has captured the attention of scholars across diverse disciplines, notably in business management and psychology, resulting in varied definitions. In any case, expats commonly encounter intercultural experiences in their daily lives and workplace interactions in the host country. Hence, their narrative experiences provide valuable empirical material for intercultural research.

This study focuses on the intercultural communication of expats in the information technology (IT) sector workplace in the Netherlands, which is known for hosting major European technology corporations providing a valuable research opportunity. Additionally, (intercultural) communication, despite being a crucial soft skill, has often been overlooked in the IT sector (Rimer, 2007).

This study examined eleven self-initiated IT expats working in both IT-related and non-IT roles in IT companies. It employs a qualitative approach using narrative and case study methods that aims to explore communication issues faced by expats and their development of knowledge and (self-) cultural awareness to navigate these challenges. The research aims to comprehensively understand the expat experience in Dutch workplaces, investigating decision-making, problem-solving, employee management, communication issues, and collaboration. The findings can contribute to training programs, leadership strategies, and communication practices, benefiting expats and organizations. It also provides insights for expats planning to work in the Netherlands.

Research question:

- What are the communication challenges that IT expats encounter in Dutch workplace?
- How do IT expats deal with poor communication situations in the workplace, and what strategies do they employ to navigate such challenges?
- How do IT expats adjust socioculturally to their new work environment in the Netherlands, and what factors contribute to their better adaptation?

This paper begins with a comprehensive review of relevant literature on intercultural studies related to expats in the workplace, then presents my chosen methodological approach. Following that, the discussion of my findings. Finally, the conclusion addresses the research questions posed in this study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Expatriate

Business expatriation seems common in nowadays globalized society which has garnered scholarly interest. It's defined as the "temporary relocation to another country to accomplish a job-related task (McNulty & Brewster, 2017a as cited in Wilczewski, 2019, p.3)". As a part of corporate strategy, the expatriation could create and sustain the company's global competitive advantage (Cole, 2011, as cited in Wilczewski, 2019) such as professional knowledge sharing and labour cost reduction.

The term "expatriates" is widely used across different disciplines, leading to reader confusion and resulting "in inconsistent research and inconsistent findings" (McNulty & Brewster, 2017, p.37). To establish clarity in this study, I adopt M. Andresen et al.'s (2014) definition of "expatriate," which includes a typology of four business expats based on their motivation and employment (refer to Figure 1). In this study, the sample primarily consists of expats categorized under external mobility: ten inter-self-initiated expat and two drawn expats.

Initiative \ Organisational mobility	Internal mobility (within origination)	External mobility
individual	Intra-self-initiated expat	Inter-self-initiated expat
organisation	Assigned expat	Drawn expat

Current work contract partner
 New work contract partner

Figure 1 Typology of internationally mobile employees (based on Andresen et al., 2014, p.2307)

Traditionally, research has focused on assigned expats, but there has been a shift in attention towards the increasing number of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), primarily referring to external mobility in Andersen's definition. The focus of studies differs between the two types, with traditional expat research emphasizing cross-cultural adjustment and job satisfaction, while SIE studies explore motivation and career-related aspects (Peltokorpi and Froese 2012, as cited in Cerdin & Selmer, 2014).

2.1.1. Expatriate in the Netherlands

The Netherlands, ranked first in the 2022 EF English Proficiency Index among non-native European countries and stands out as the most English-speaking nation. Its attractive tax policy, known as the 30% facility or 30% ruling, lures many labour migrants, even though not all expats meet the eligibility criteria. Moreover, the country serves as a hub for major European technology corporations, fostering a convergence of multinational corporations and IT start-up companies.

Eindhoven, a prominent tech city in the Netherlands, is not only the birthplace of Philips Electronics but also the headquarters of two of the world's most valuable tech companies: ASML and NXP (Kavanagh, 2022). Due to a shortage of local professionals with specialized technical knowledge, these companies often recruit talent from abroad (Jennissen et al., 2023), attracting high-tech expats to the area.

Accessing statistics on expats presents a challenge due to the intricate nature of their definition. According to a 2015 report titled: *Expats, wanneer ben je het?* (Expats, who are they?) by Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS), while there is no clear-cut definition of expats, certain characteristics such as non-Dutch nationality, age between 18 to 75, and earning a wage that falls within 15 to 35 percent of the highest wage levels in the sector, enable them to be distinguished from other migrants. In 2015, the estimated number of expats ranged from 39 to 75 thousand people; however, newly updated data is unavailable.

2.2. From essentialist to sociolinguistic

Previous intercultural communication (ICC) studies about “expats” involved have mostly assigned expats (headquarters-subsidary expats) in U.S., China, Japan, but rare in self-initiated ones who are growing year by year. Besides, prior business management studies and cross-cultural communication of expats, an essentialist approach has dominated long-time due to highly function to predict individual’s actions. That is, to conceptualize communication practices based on national cultural differences. Edward T. Hall, one of the pioneers in this field, introduced the concept of "high/low context cultures," which pertains to the extent to which the comprehension of a message relies on contextual cues, resulting in different communication styles across countries. Geert Hofstede's "cultural dimensions theory" has also gained widespread usage in understanding communication behaviors by categorizing

individuals into different cultural dimensions. However, the criticism of this approach is likely to overgeneralisation and stereotyping (Holliday 1999; Holmes 2012; Piller 2009 as cited in Warren 2020).

With the rapid advancement of this field, alternative approaches have emerged. Sociolinguistic perspectives, such as those proposed by Blommaert, Gumperz, Holmgren, and Kramsch, consider language and communication as socially constructed and intricately linked to specific contexts. These approaches have paved the way for new avenues of understanding and investigating ICC. Various branches or subfields of research have emerged, including discourse studies, sociopragmatics, and identity studies. This paradigm shift has also extended to the study of expats in intercultural studies. Researchers now view culture as dynamic and contextual, rather than unchanging and stable. Luring (2011), for instance, conducted a study on expats within a Danish multinational corporation, highlighting the significance of organizational power relations in analyzing ICC. He proposed that “the cultural differences should be understood as negotiated and socially organized in the local setting rather than being something a priori” (Luring, 2011, p233). It is no longer solely national culture that influences ICC practices, and the narrative methodology offers a valuable framework for exploration.

2.2.1. Intercultural study in narrative

Narrative inquiry is not a new research method, it has not been widely adopted in expat research, with a few exceptions (Harry et al., 2019; Kohonen, 2004; Siljanen & Lämsä, 2009). Narratives are not merely compilations of facts and events, but are also how individuals understand cultural learning (Megías et al., 2017) and transform in new social, cultural, and business circumstances (Wilczewski, 2019). Narratives serve as a sense-making and sense-giving tool (Bamberg, 2012) to analyze the dynamic process of how individuals navigate cultural encounters, negotiate their identities, and interpret their intercultural experiences. The Narrative method have also been employed in business management by a Danish scholar Anne-Marie Søderberg (Gertsen & Søderberg, 2011; Søderberg, 2006). Her narrative analysis provides an important framework to my research combined with Wilczewski and Gut (Wilczewski, 2019; Wilczewski et al., 2018).

Wilczewski's book *"Intercultural Experience in Narrative: Expatriate Stories from a Multicultural Workplace"* published in 2019 has been highly inspirational to my research. Wilczewski emphasizes the use of a combination of case study approach and narrative method to conduct a comprehensive and context-specific investigation into various aspects of ICC such

as collaboration, culture-related phenomena, and adjustment processes. This approach surpasses the limitations of traditional qualitative research methods, enables to analyse the intricacies and complexities of intercultural interactions and experiences in a specific context.

This study adapts narrative methodology expanding beyond national cultural differences and examines a wide range of variables is both novel and promising. Assessing the experiences and perspectives of narrators offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of individuals, allowing for a nuanced and multifaceted analysis that sheds light on communication.

2.2.2. Intercultural organizational interactions

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the central concept is "interaction," which emphasizes the dynamic nature of behavior and language usage (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Firstly, unlike cross-cultural communication which examines cultural groups' communicative practices comparatively, ICC focuses on how these practices are enacted in interactions with each other (Piller, 2007). The "intercourse approach" is often employed in conjunction with examining "how and under what circumstances concepts such as culture are produced by participants as relevant categories for interpersonal ideological negotiation" (Scollon & Scollon, 2005, p.544). Related research, such as adaptations in interactions or interaction sociolinguistics, has experienced significant growth. (Gumperz 1970, Scollon and Scollon 1995, Pan et al. 2002 as cited in Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2012).

Helen Spencer-Oatey is a renowned sociolinguist specializes in the relationship between language and intercultural interaction. Her theory about "rapport management" has had a profound influence on many studies of ICC in business settings. Her approach to culture aligns with the constructivist perspective, which posits that culture is not an inherent or fixed characteristic, but rather a socially and individually constructed phenomenon. The thing to remember is that people not only defend their own face as an individual but also the group they belong to which aligns with Kramersch that the interaction enables participants to construct their own, shared cultural practices, which can be understood as a "sphere of interculturality" or "third place, third culture" (Kramersch, 1993; 2009) in the field of applied linguistics. Spencer-Oatey called additionally that linguists should pay more attention to speaker-hearer authentic interaction rather than language features. Hence, to conduct contextually-based research, it is crucial to consider participants' reactions and interpretations of specific interactions (Spencer-Oatey, 2005).

Successful communication heavily relies on effective interaction between communicators, and this becomes especially crucial in ICC where diverse cultural backgrounds intricately shape communication dynamics. Additionally, factors such as language and culture can also significantly influence the success of communication in ICC.

2.2.3. Language, culture and communication

The relationship between language, culture, and communication is intricate and interwoven. Language is a cultural reflection that serves as a tool for communication, while culture in return shapes language use and communication practices. These three elements are fundamental to how people interact and form social relations within a community or society. The discipline of ICC aims to understand their complex relationship.

Spencer-Oatey (2008) points out two main functions of language: transactional (or information-transferring) and interactional (or maintenance of social relationships). Therefore, both functions constitute the important meaning of language in business activities. The term “rapport management” is based on politeness and face conceptualized study related to language use for promoting, maintaining, and threatening harmonious social relationships with others in cross-cultural encounters. Spencer-Oatey (2002) stressed that "rapport threat" and "rapport enhancement" are personal evaluations based not only on the message's contents but also on "interpretations and reactions to who says what under what circumstances." In alignment with Blommaert's perspective, the inherent unpredictability of ICC is a notable characteristic, making it challenging to achieve precise accuracy in communication (Spencer-Oatey, 2005).

Previous studies have indicated that simply sharing a common language does not guarantee efficient communication in intercultural contexts result in message misinterpretation (Angouri 2013; Björkman et al. 2005; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1997; Peltokorpi 2007; Peltokorpi 2010 as cited in Wilczewski, 2018). Wilczewski's study (2018) aligns with the findings of Peltokorpi (2007) and Wright et al. (2001), suggesting that local individuals may exploit their language proficiency to control information flow and act as gatekeepers. Consequently, this can lead to frustration and resentment among expats. In addition to psychological experiences, it is important to understand how expats adapt and act.

2.3. Intercultural communication strategies

Intercultural communication strategies arise from the context in which they develop, shaped by experience and interactions with people. Previous research primarily focused on expats moving between North America and Europe, and China/Japan, where cultural values have significant differences from an essentialist perspective suggesting that the strategies are influenced by individual, situational, and cultural factors. It's worth noting that national cultural differences are just one of several determinants, as organizational factors like hierarchy, rules, company climate, and the nature of the task also play a crucial role (Fu and Yukl, 2000; Peltokorpi, 2007).

Peltokorpi's study on Nordic expatriates in Japan (2007) found that the Japanese work environment is characterized by collectivism and hierarchy, leading local employees to align their ideas with their superiors. As a result, expats adapt to engage in informal communication with individuals before formal meetings, as well as one-on-one interactions. This indirect communication style can also be observed in Wilczewski's study (2018) on Polish expatriates in a Chinese subsidiary. However, the expats in this case chose a culture-congruent strategy, adapting to the indirect communication style by primarily communicating through local superiors. This decision may be attributed to the significant language barrier that proved difficult to overcome. While language issues are also present in the Japanese context, they appear to be less severe. Consequently, written channels such as email are used to facilitate shared understanding.

The communication tactics, therefore, need to be understood as context-specific studies. The culture learning process stems from mutual interaction, where expats adjust their behaviors to local conditions in order to establish effective connections.

2.4. Cultural adjustment

The terms "cross-cultural adjustment" and "cross-cultural adaptation" are often used interchangeably by scholars. Haslberger and Brewster (2008) argue that "adjustment" refers to minor changes made in response to new circumstances, while "adaptation" refers to significant changes after a severe crisis. However, Ali, Van der Zee, and Sanders (2003) contend that "adaptation" refers to the process of dealing with intercultural transitions, and "adjustment" is the result (Bierwiazzonek and Waldzus, 2016). According to Kim (2001, p31), cross-cultural

adaptation is "a dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments." In general, the term cultural adjustment is used to describe the degree of psychological comfort an individual experiences in a new cultural environment (Black, 1988; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Nolan & Morley, 2014 as cited in Nolan, 2023). Black et al., (1991) proposed a three-facet model of expatriate adjustment which includes work adjustment (job responsibilities and working conditions), general adjustment (living conditions in the host country), and interaction adjustment (with locals). This model has been widely used, although not without criticism. Many studies have explored the relationship between successful adjustment and job performance (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2004; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Bolino & Feldman, 2000; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997; Peltokorpi, 2008; Ramalu et al., 2010; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Lee & Sukoco, 2008; Verquer et al., 2003; Vogel & Feldman, 2009, as cited in Nolan & Liang 2022; Kim et al., 2008). While this study acknowledges the variable factors of adaptation, our focus is on gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamic process of adaptation since Individuals acquire socio-cultural adaptation through a process of cultural learning in which they choose their "acculturation strategies". Communication accommodation is recognized as a crucial element in this process.

H. Giles proposed the influential Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) suggests that individuals adapt their communication behaviors based on the particular person or group they are interacting with, in order to manage social relationships and achieve communication goals. The CAT centers around two accommodation strategies: convergence and divergence. Convergence refers to individuals making their communication style more similar to their interlocutor, whereas divergence emphasizes the differences in their communication style from their interlocutor. This process may be intentional or unconscious. However, convergence may have unintended consequences, including potential identity crises or social ostracism. On the other hand, divergence may occur when individuals intentionally choose to deviate from the communication norms of a particular social group or when they seek to assert their distinct social status or identity. Today, CAT is widely applied and studied as an interdisciplinary model. The theory is quite important when analysing how expats adapt local communication patterns through time.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection method

As a distinctive aspect of this study, qualitative research is conducted using semi-structured narrative interviews, which have been previously discussed in the literature as a method for collecting data (Lamnek, 1989; Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995; Riesman, 1993; Flick, 1998 as cited in Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The interviewees, referred to as "informants", "narrators", or "storytellers", are requested to recount a significant story in a specific social setting (Wilczewski, 2019). This narrative approach through storytelling enables an understanding of dynamic cultural adaptation, the informant's identity formation during transitions, and sense-making in intercultural interactions.

The primary focus of this research is on intercultural encounters in the workplace in the Netherlands. The expat interviewees were asked to share communication-related stories with the interviewer. The research goes beyond the conventional question-answer format, allowing exploration of the challenges, strategies, and outcomes experienced by the informants, as well as their identity negotiation and sense-making in diverse cultural contexts.

Although the narrative approach has several advantages, there are also challenges in its implementation. For instance, not providing pre-structuring during interviews can result in the inclusion of irrelevant information and unnecessarily prolong the interview. Additionally, the absence of narrative prompts may lead to hypothetical situations, potentially introducing bias into the research findings, and the absence of spontaneous strategies. Therefore, considering these limitations and the researcher's interview skills, it is advisable to utilize a semi-structured narrative interview approach instead of a pure narrative method.

3.2. Data collection procedure

The semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted from March to April 2023, with durations ranging from 54 to 144 minutes, and an average time of 68 minutes. The first interview was held offline in a quiet meeting room, while the remaining interviews were conducted online using Teams meeting software.

To ensure a comprehensive and meaningful narrative, I divide my interview process into three parts. The first part involves opening questions, which serve as a crucial stage for building trust and rapport with the interviewee. I typically start with a common question such as "What

brought/motivated you to the Netherlands?" to collect socio-demographic information and a glimpse of the person's life story.

The second part of the interview focuses on narrative questions. I ask questions such as "Tell me about a communication challenge you experienced with your co-workers" to encourage the interviewee to share their unique experiences and insights. These narrative questions allow them to freely express their thoughts and feelings. Only explicit encouragement, attentive listening, and paralinguistic support, such as "Hmm" and "yes," appeared since the influence from the interviewer should be minimal (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). In addition, as the narration shows a clear end, it's an open questioning phase by the interviewer. I avoided asking why questions, opinions, and point contradictions in the narrative since that would cause justification and rationalizations, instead asking "What happened then?" and using the informant's words.

The final part of the interview is a concluding session that focuses on cultural adaptation. I ask questions such as "How would you describe your expat life since the beginning and now?" to elicit the interviewee's reflections on their overall expat journey. This provides valuable insights into their thoughts on cultural assimilation, integration, and their overall experiences in a new cultural environment.

The interviews were conducted either in English or Mandarin and were audio or video recorded. For the Mandarin interviews, I translated the data into English as much as possible to capture the original meaning. The data were transcribed verbatim. Conducting the interview in the interviewee's first language facilitates the expression of rich and emotionally nuanced stories, and can also foster a greater sense of trust, particularly when the language is Mandarin. However, this approach may also result in the over-representation of certain cultural perspectives, as the shared cultural background between the interviewee and researcher can introduce a bias in the data.

3.3. The interviewees

3.3.1. sampling strategy

A total of 11 participants were recruited using two sampling methods: snowball sampling (also known as chain-referral sampling) and social network sampling via Facebook groups. Out of the 5 participants recruited through the snowball sampling method, some were from the researcher's private contacts or referrals from previous interviewees, while others were through

access to the expat offline network. Additionally, the researcher posted announcements on various Facebook expat groups in the Netherlands to recruit participants. To be eligible for participation, the IT-expat had to meet at least one of the following criteria: working in the IT industry or being an IT professional.

3.3.2. Interviewees' profiles

In this study, a total of eleven expats participated, consisting of four males and seven females. They were employed in the IT industry or related job. Their duration of stay in the Netherlands ranged from 11 months to 20 years. English served as their primary working language, except for one participant who had been in the Netherlands for over 20 years and used both English and Dutch in their workplace. The interviewees had diverse ethnic backgrounds, including five Taiwanese, two South Africans, two Indians (in a marital relationship), one Canadian, and one Iranian. The participants had various working models, including on-site, hybrid, and nearly remote arrangements. Among the expats, two were recruited by a Dutch company, three had initially come to the Netherlands for educational purposes and then decided to stay, while the remaining expats were self-initiated expats (SIE).

3.4. Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, the empirical material is transcribed verbatim and followed by thematic analysis. The absence of an interview guide allowed for a more organic and exploratory approach to the data. The themes that emerged were based solely on the data itself, rather than being predetermined by a theoretical framework (Patton, 2015). This approach allowed for a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of the expat experience in the IT industry by identifying key themes and patterns within the data.

Tableau1: Interviewees information

	Nationality	gender	Time in the Netherlands	Working model	Interactive circle in workplace	First language	Expat type	Note
p1	Canadian	Male	11 months	Hybrid (3d:WFH/2d:on-site)	International Peers	English and French	SIE	*small team
p2	Iranian	Male	13 months	Hybrid (4d:WFH/1d: on-site)	International Peers computer-based	Persian	SIE	
p3	South-African	Female	16 months	remote	Global Clients Base + Global Colleagues	English(L1)/Afrikaans(L2)	SIE	
p4	Taiwanese	Female	17 months (2015-2017)	On-site work	Global colleagues+ regional clients (USA)	Mandarin	Drawn- expat	
p5	Taiwanese	Male	22 months	On-site to remote	computer-based	Mandarin	SIE	*small team
p6	Taiwanese	Female	3,5 years	on-site	Global-Dutch Clients + International Peers	Mandarin	Student-expat	
p7	Taiwanese	Female	3,5 years	Remote	Matrix Teams	Mandarin	Student-expat	
p8	Taiwanese	Female	4,2 years	Hybrid (2d:WFH/3d:on-site)	Global Colleagues	Mandarin	Drawn- expat	
p9	Indian	Female	near 8 years	Remote	Global Clients Base+ Indian peer	Hindi	expat partner	
p10	Indian	Male	near 11 years	On-site work	corporate Leadership	Hindi	Student-expat	
p11	South-African	Female	near 20 years	various	Matrix Teams	English(L1)/Afrikaans(L2)	SIE	

4. Result and discussion

As I investigate organizational communication, the “workplace” becomes an important scene to observe various forms of communication and social interaction that take place between individuals, groups, and teams from formal meetings to informal chats. In my corpus, expats who were interviewed described the working environment in the Netherlands as having four common features: a low hierarchy, employee-centric culture, the use of English as a lingua franca, and a non-traditional working model. By understanding these features, we can better analyze the behaviors of expats in their professional settings.

Expats first emphasized the low hierarchy in the Dutch work environment, especially those who had previously experienced a more bureaucratic working style in their home countries, such as Taiwan, South Africa, and India. This low hierarchy is characterized by a focus on equality, flat management, openness and transparency, with the possibility to challenge superiors. One senior expat, who had accumulated 20 years of work experience in the Netherlands, referred to this management/meeting style as the "polder model".

Polder model translates through to everybody in the Netherlands wants to feel heard. Once they have had the opportunity to voice themselves and be heard, then they work extremely productively. But if they weren't heard, they weren't. (P11, South-African, 20 years)

Expats have also highlighted the importance of an employee-centric culture that values work-life balance, job security, and well-being, which for some, is a crucial factor in choosing to work in the country. However, the extent to which work-life balance is achieved depends on the size of the organization and the expat's specific responsibilities and goals. For example, one expat who held a director position reported working long hours. Despite this, most expats interviewed indicated that the work-life balance in the Netherlands is generally more respected than in their home country, which is reflected in clear working hours. However, this distinction between work and private life may create two distinct groups - "Dutch people" and "expat group," according to one expat's experience. Overall, expats appreciate the benefits of employee welfare, paid sick leave, vacation time, and other perks offered in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands' international working environment attracts many foreign workers due to its high level of English proficiency. Only two expats had worked in Dutch-speaking companies, while the rest reported English as the corporate language. However, using English as a lingua franca is not without its challenges, which will be discussed further.

The hybrid or all-remote working model is becoming more prevalent due to the increasing prevalence of IT-related work and the nature of tasks that expats may undertake. This model is more common among managers and professionals whose work can be performed remotely (Noonan & Glass, 2012). The statistics from Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS) show that information and communications companies mostly use the hybrid model. This shift in the work model means that social interaction in the workplace must consider online interaction. The growth of remote work has increased ICC as the internet has virtualized national borders.

Expats' reported working culture provides a context for better understanding how they navigate the challenge of ICC and adjust to the local working pattern in terms of social interaction. The upcoming section will first address language and communication issues in the workplace, followed by the dynamic adjustment of expats.

4.1. Language and intercultural communication issues

The social interaction in the workplace is quite large from local employees, expats, and clients. That is, interpersonal communication involves a rich diversity of both cultural and language (Henderson, 2005). In addition, the IT industry is also characterized by the extensive use of information and communication technologies (ICT), which also brings new challenges. On the one hand, made international collaboration possible even inevitable result; but it also added complexity to ICC.

After analyzing the interviewees' narratives, I have identified five aspects of communication challenges: communication style, Dutch directness and lack of emotion; online communication issues related to the hybrid/remote work model in the IT industry. Finally, linguistic and cultural barriers, as well as generational differences.

4.1.1. Communication styles

Communication style differences become noticeable when people realize that the communication styles they are used to are significantly distinct. This is the case of Dutch directness, all respondents without exception mentioned the communicative cultural feature of Dutch: directness, a result that seems to fit with the findings of many politeness scholars. "The Dutch" are renowned for their directness (Rottier et al., 2011); the Dutch have been accused of being direct and even rude in business, rather than diplomatic and ambiguous (Van Rijswijk, 2002 as cited in van Meurs 2003). However, the directness is not perceived in the same way by interviewees. The way of perceiving the culture will be different according to "personal background" (Gumperz 2003 as cited in Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2012) and this also applies to expats' understanding of Dutch directness. Especially for those expats who experienced a completely different way of communication, they are more sensitive to the difference and enable to compare it with their home country. Therefore, Dutch directness becomes a polysemous term that requires deconstruction. In the following section, we will discuss how Dutch directness is expressed in the workplace and how it is understood by expats. In the second part, we will explore the lack of emotional expression in Dutch communication.

4.1.1.1. Different understanding about Dutch directness

Dutch directness or an excuse to be rude

There is actually a thin line between being rude and being direct, and it is highly dependent on one's subjective feelings and personal background. A younger interviewee (p1, Canadian, 11 months) pointed out that directness can sometimes be perceived as rudeness. Despite not experiencing the rudeness in the workplace himself, he indirectly expressed his dislike by conditional tense for Dutch directness.

(...)before Christmas. I did something where I meant to send something out and I didn't. And then I went away for Christmas for two weeks and instead of kind of giving me any fluff to it.

My boss is like “*Yeah, you screwed that one up*”, like you needed to have done that before you go in.

And I was like yeah, the it's like, I don't. **I would have been nicer if you had not been so directed at it.** But you're right, that is what happened.(p1, Canadian, 11 months)

As an efficient communication style

For Taiwanese expats, who come from a country categorized as high context according to Hall (1976), they generally value the Dutch approach of directness, which is synonymous with an "open" and "efficient communication style." The Netherlands, being a low-context country, relies less on the context of a situation to convey messages, resulting in more explicit communication.

Directness as a symbol of trust

A senior expat explained that directness is associated with trust. She mentioned that Dutch may not always engage in direct communication right from the beginning. However, once they have established trust with someone, they are more likely to be direct in their communication, ensuring that the other person feels comfortable being treated straightforwardly.

they will tell you straight up.(...), but they need to feel safe to say it. They need to trust you that you're not gonna take it personally, and sometimes it's just genuinely that they think you're not aware that.(...) So I quite appreciate the directness. Umm, because it shows to me that they trust me.(P11, south-Africans, 20 years)

The ambiguity of directness

Based on the experiences that expats have shared, Dutch directness shows more in communication style than in content. As a result, expats (p2 and p3) may encounter unclear

messages delivered directly, leading to ambiguity in interpretation. A younger expat perceived that the Dutch are not as direct as they initially believed due to this ambiguity in directness.

I was expecting some kind of directness, but I didn't see that much.(...) they don't tell you the their feedback really directly. So maybe they tell you something and I don't get it exactly what they're meaning, but maybe they had another meaning in their mind and the level of importance was different than I was that I guessed. And then I hear it from someone else that. Ohh that was the thing. But I didn't get it at the 1st place to get that feedback. (P2, Iranian, 13 months)

Except for subjective feelings, the feature of the text channel is an important clue to explain this disparity. When the expat was asked what example made him feel that Dutch was not direct, he gave many examples involving “text miscomprehension”. Collaborators are more likely to misunderstand one another while communicating over email (Damian DE, Zowghi D, 2002 as cited in Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020) than when speaking face-to-face or on the phone. The absence of nonverbal cues takes more effort to decode the meaning of the text.

In conclusion, the term "Dutch directness" is overly stereotyped and fails to account for the complexity of the concept. The perception of "directness" is subjective and comparative, based on one's personal experiences. The findings of the Politeness Study, a comprehensive investigation of directness, further support this notion. Le Pair (2005) highlighted the Dutch preference for "indirect" requests, while van der Wijst (1996) and Hendriks (2010) identified the use of "negative politeness strategies" in requests. It is important to note that these findings do not necessarily contradict the existence of Dutch directness, but rather caution against interpreting the term too broadly.

4.1.1.2.Coldness or calmness

Expats have also noticed that Dutch people tend to be emotionally reserved, which can come across as coldness or calmness. Interestingly, two expats (P2, Iranian and P11, South African) blame it on Dutch weather, which they think makes people more reserved. This difference in emotional expression can lead to communication misunderstandings. For instance, when an expat (P11, South African) expresses herself more emotionally, she might assume that her colleagues think she's very upset when in reality she's only slightly annoyed.

While emotional restraint can be seen as a positive trait in the workplace, being matter-of-fact (as all Taiwanese expats and one Indian expat stated) or staying calm during arguments, it

may not be as desirable in informal social interactions as an expat (P2, Iranian) found it difficult to connect with Dutch people in such situations.

4.1.2. Computer-mediated communication issues

Undoubtedly, the rise of hybrid and remote work in the IT industry has brought many benefits, but it has also resulted in some problems. Wang et al (2021) identified four main challenges of remote work, including work-home interference, ineffective communication, procrastination, and loneliness. As part of my research, I analyze the challenges of online communication and the strategies used by expats. It should be noted that not all difficulties are overcome or have strategies to deal with them.

Digital/online communication is characterized by the extensive use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for professional collaboration, which includes audiovisual, audio, and text-based tools (Gibson & Cohen, 2003) as well as instant messaging. Two types of communication are distinguished and will be discussed their issues respectively: synchronous communication (online meetings) and asynchronous communication (email).

4.1.2.1. Text-based communication issues

Asynchronous communication tools are widely used by IT expats as they allow for collaboration across spatial and temporal limitations, while also ensuring accountability and traceability. However, these tools are not without their flaws, and the following issues have been raised by expats.

Communication timeliness

Several Expats have highlighted the difficulty get feedback on time. In the remote work mode, each employee works at their own pace from home, so it isn't as easy as in the traditional work mode to discuss with colleagues only by approaching his desk; This means that no guarantee of immediate answers in the online working model. Kayworth and Leidner (2000) indicate that planning and coordination processes in virtual teams may be particularly negatively impacted by communication delays. The emergence of instant messaging (IM) has greatly alleviated the timeless problems.

“I’ll Slack you.” Slack, the popular online messaging system has been eagerly incorporated into the daily operations of established businesses and growing startups (York, 2020). I notice “Slack” frequent appearances in many narrations. In the eyes of an expat, instant messaging(IM)

helps to improve the effectiveness of communication, because enables immediate correcting their intended meanings, or by keeping their working environment via the use of recorded transcripts or transmitted documents, IM allows to develop a common knowledge(Cho et al., 2005). One expat (P5, Taiwanese, remote worker) emphasizes the benefits of IM: First, the information sharing in collective circumstances (Group, sub-group in IM), which can ensure unnecessary repetition (line with Munzer and Borg's finding that "repeated unshared pieces of information" more often,2008) and information is understood by stakeholders in the same way. This suggestion is what we called "closed-loop communication" (Marlow, 2017). At the same time, it involves face theory (Ting-Toomey,1988) conceptualized "face" as a person's alleged perception of a positive social self-image in a relationship. While the expat mentions that he felt a little shame when he replied in a public group rather than a private chat the first time.

I think it's just.....Sometimes consider the group as a tree hole, and then if you can talk in the group chat don't do in private messages, because the information may be useful for the third person. You can use tags as much as possible, and don't send private messages. In fact, this will be a bit of a hindrance at the beginning, that is, you will feel a little ashamed, especially when the group is large, but you will be ok once used to it (P5, Taiwanese)

Although IM is considered a useful collaboration tool for decision-making, coordination, organizational learning, and issue resolution(Isaacs, E 2002, as cited in Hurbean et al., 2022); it's not without disadvantages: many studies have related research on technostress and communication overload (Stephens et al., 2017). One expat (P1, Canadian) felt helpless when using multiple digital platforms (emails, phones, Slack, Teams) at the same time. He stated that he wouldn't know which platform to use to contact his collaborators.

Poor communication

It is not surprising that different people may have different interpretations of the given text. The provided information is misunderstood or misinterpreted as a result of differences in perspectives (Bandow, 2001 as cited in Marlow 2017). Given the possible cultural and value disparities among team members, which might result in drastically different understandings of given issues; the likelihood of misunderstandings increases in more virtual situations (Kayworth & Leidner, 2000). This phenomenon is particularly common in the fields of semantics and pragmatics. Both of them involve linguistic research in that the composition, structure, usage, and interpretation of language are studied. The original intention of the sender may be different from the receiver's understanding due to differences in background, language experience, cultural context, and situational factors. Especially the lack of nonverbal cues (e.g.,

pitch, tone, inflections) characteristic of text-based computer-mediated communication (e-mail and SMS message) increases the possibility of misunderstanding.

This complete reliance on verbal information may have consequences for the decoding of others' emotions as well as the expression of our own emotions which happens unconsciously (Derks and Bakker, 2010). Additionally, depending on tone, emphasis, and emotional expression, the same vocal messages can convey different meanings (e.g., Clark, 1996; Drew, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Lee & Wagner 2002 as cited in Derks and Bakker, 2010)

Turnage (2007) analyzed conflictual messages in email often referred to as “flames” (Baruch, 2005 ; Cleary & Freeman, 2005 ; Landry, 2000 ; Markus, 1994 ; McGuire, Kiesler, & Siegel, 1987 ; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kies , & McGuire, 1986 as cited in Turnage, 2007). Because the message is also part text-based as email, I will analyze the examples proposed by the one expat: *"how do you mean?" or "why you do this? We talked this before, you didn't listen?"*(P5, Taiwanese). He emphasized that these messages were understood as aggressive when there is no contextual cue: tone.

The lack of important non-verbal communication elements makes it necessary for interactants to use other methods to convey relational messages. In the past decade, emoticons have been the object of research such as serve as emotional function in nonverbal cues context in CMC (Derks et al., 2008 ; Ganster et al. 2012), and mitigating threatening formulations (Wilson, 1993)

One expat (P5, Taiwanese) described “emojis have its own arts.” His explanation of how he uses Emojis in virtual work and in what context shows the emojis serve as facial displays (Darics, 2012). Firstly, he used thumbs up (👍) or the eyes (👁️) as a way to signal his reading. Here, the function of emoticons serves as a backchannel signal. Furtherly, he enlightened the hidden meanings of similar emojis. For him, the slightly smiling face (😊) is passive-aggressive instead of a grinning face with smiling eyes. According to Wilson (1993), a smiley can have three functions: express feelings, a joke or an ironic statement (‘illocutionary force intensifying devices’ (IFIDs) from his word) and a politeness device. The massive virtual working environment enables this expat to notice the potentially threatening situation.

At least you should reply... or send an emoji, emojis are important. Sometimes when someone sends a message, they're not asking for a response, they just want to express something to everyone. You can give them a “like” or click the eye icon to show that you've seen it.(...) Also, don't use the laughing face emoji that doesn't show teeth. It gives the impression that ...not sure how to say... that you're being sarcastic or passive-aggressive. That's just my

personal opinion, though. It's subjective. However, I think if you ask others, they might share the same view. So, emojis have their own art.(P5, Taiwanese, 22 months)

To conclude, the text-based method plays an important role in the contemporary work model; although encounters many challenges, it is undeniable that it brings more opportunities. It asks human beings to adjust to the situation of lack of nonverbal (with the progress of technology, the future with only text is predictable). Even though the alternative is accessible (i.g. emoji), it is more important to develop one's own communication skills and change the ethnocentric perspective especially when it involves complex ICC. The communication strategies proposed by expats are nothing more than empathy and respect, perspective-taking (putting oneself into the shoes of another person in order to understand his or her thoughts and feelings.), and a respectful attitude. The latter suggestion is in line with Baruch's netiquette (2005) which said the misunderstanding and bullying in the email were due to a lack of net manners (net etiquette).

4.1.2.2. Videocall issues

The videoconferencing tool is considered to the informational richness by sending and receiving nonverbal and vocal cues as face-to-face communication does (Kirkman and Mathieu's, 2005) and eventually foster fosters higher team performance (Cramton, 2001, Hertel et al., 2005 as cited in Marlow, 2017).

Intercultural Communication Barriers in Telecommuting

Telecommunicating magnifies the difficulty of an ICC since the infrastructure requirements (computer equipment and stable network) and proficiency in the shared language are even more important. Multinational corporations have benefited from technological advances that enable them to connect employees from all over the world, but the premise is that the hardware equipment must be achieved.

In addition, although online communication makes nonvocal cues possible, it still lacks mutual eye gaze or perceives body movements and gestures (Ferrán-Urdaneta and Storck, 1997; Neureiter et al., 2013 as cited in (Ruben et al., 2021), also highlights the language barrier challenges such as the speed and clarity of participants' speech (Cohen and Kassis-henderson, 2012; Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Ehrenreich, 2010 ; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010 as cited in Evans, 2013). When collaborators only speak English as a second language may

make collaborators overwhelmed from attempting to follow the talk (Kayworth TR, Leidner DE 2002; Sarker S, Sahay S, 2004 as cited in Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

Two expats are particularly sensitive to this online intercultural situation, and both have mentioned the issue of accents. However, it is worth noting that they have different ideologies. One South African expat (P3) attributed the accent problem to herself and expressed guilt for not knowing any European languages because everyone is doing their best to speak English. The other expat (p5) is more likely ethnocentric and stated, "*He (the ex-boss) was one of those French people with poor English and a heavy accent.*" As a result, he classified the French people and put his former boss in this stigmatized group. He believes that the absence of body language during remote communication makes it challenging.

our (the Hongkongese colleague and interviewee's) languages are quite difficult to understand, particularly because we're remote and so I think my accent is quite difficult for him to understand and his accent in turn is also a little difficult for me to understand. So that took a bit more time than we initially anticipated. (p3, south-African)

Hard to build a trust relationship

Remote work highlights 'trust' building issues in workplace relationships due to reduced opportunities for social and emotional interaction. "People will only share their expertise and ideas if they trust one another" (Hendry 2006 as cited in (Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2012). According to research (Harrington & Ruppel, 1999), managers who are unable to "see" their direct reports sometimes struggle to make out that their staff are actually working. The research shows that "body language, subtle voice inflections, facial expressions, etc.", are hardly transmitted through communication technology, but are critical to the development of trust (Boland D, Fitzgerald B, 2004; Olson JS, Olson GM, 2006 as cited in Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). No trust leads to "micro-management" where managers closely oversee and control the work of their subordinates, often involving excessive monitoring and control over minor details. The consequences are serious, both for the psychological well-being of employees and for company performance. The Taiwanese expat (P5) cited an instance where his supervisor inquired frequently about his working situation.

Furthermore, another point to consider is that online meetings tend to represent a more formal atmosphere due to the inherent notion of time constraints. An expat (P6, Taiwanese) describes the online/offline meeting distinct situation "*People tend to just say "okay, time's up, bye" and leave the online meetings, but in office meetings, there's usually more social talk.*" As a result, the lack of casual conversation that would occur in the ends of offline meetings leads

to a significant reduction in opportunities to build trust. In this context, the opening of online meetings has its importance. As part of the "pedal model" (P11, South African), the greeting at the beginning of the meeting is a ritual aims to make people feel heard. The expat who was nearly remote (P5, Taiwanese) especially pointed out the importance of small talk before formal online meeting, as it helps to cultivate a sense of collaboration.

Overall, despite the many shortcomings of online communication and the difficulties of building global virtual teams, through the description of expats, we understand the efforts that companies have made to overcome their difficulties, and expats give positive recognition to these efforts. For example, a project manager expat (P7) mentioned, she designed interactive activities and one-on-one talks with her engineering team in order to build teamwork. Another expat (P11) told me that playing virtual games (puzzle) with people from different teams foster interconnection in the workplace.

4.1.3. Language use in the workplace

Language is the most common and powerful medium of communication and is essential for connecting with others, yet it can also disconnect others. A rising number of employees are being forced to deal with linguistic barriers as a result of increased globalization (Lauring, 2008). Although most expat interviewees work in an English-speaking environment, this does not mean that Dutch language disappears. Within the framework of the company's language policy, there are three language interaction environments: English-only working environment, a direct working language of English but an overall Dutch-speaking environment, and a bilingual working environment, and communication challenges can vary depending on the specific context.

4.1.3.1. English as dominated language

From a mechanistic point of view, English as a lingua franca in a European corporation is a necessary result of economic globalization's tightening and thickening web since the early 1990s (Evans, 2013). It has indeed brought a lot of economic benefits which is proven in professional collaboration. Most expat interviewees use English as their working language although there are differences in language proficiency and accent, they rarely experience misunderstandings due to the shared business context. (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen,

2010). This is a part of the feature of Business English as lingua franca (BELF) along with multiple varieties rather than “standard English”; contextuality, and dynamism have also become the characteristics of BELF (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012). In addition, if both parties are not non-native English speakers, they tend to less use complex English structures, the simple words and sentences alleviate the "performance anxiety" and eventually create a more comfortable communication environment, increasing the confidence of non-native speakers (NNSs) in using English. This is what we called linguistic accommodation (Long, 1983).

Nevertheless, the problems that come with BELF is not surprisingly similar to the ELF situation: English proficiency, different accents and discourse practices, and the emergence of English variety due to diverse linguistic background. One expat pointed out an interesting example when her Dutch colleague translated Dutch idiomatic expression into English without noticing that may not work.

I was in a very stressful situation with work and everything is just going wrong and you're like but the deadline is in three hours and The stuff is just not working and then colleague came by and he said “I want to stick your heart under the belt.(Iemand een hart onder de riem steken)” You go “what?(Shocked face)” so that is a Dutch. “Hey, good luck. You've got this.” (P11, South African)

4.1.3.2. Bilingual working environment

Using Dutch and English in the workplace refers to one south-African expat (P11) who stayed in the Netherlands for more than 20 years. Here, I need to mention the high similarity between Dutch and Afrikaans, her second language. Afrikaans is considered a daughter language of Dutch developed in South Africa during the 18th century due to colonization. Thus, language similarities between Afrikaans and Dutch can provide some advantages for South African expats working in Dutch-speaking environments. However, there are still small linguistic challenges that can arise.

One of the South Africans (P11) provides a false friend example about the word “amper” existing in Afrikaans and Dutch. It means “almost” in Afrikaans but “barely, hardly, only just” in Dutch (Cambridge Dictionary). Thus, this may lead to misunderstandings in the workplace. Or phonetical differences in two languages: the example is “verskoon my” (Excuse-me in Afrikaans) and “verschoon” (change baby diapers in Dutch) may lead to an awkward situation.

4.1.3.3. Dutch in informal interaction

Despite not being able to speak Dutch, this fact hardly causes issues in a professional setting. However, when it comes to informal communication, the only English rule no longer applies that challenges. The expats (P1 and P8) have worked in English with their team or clients, while their Dutch colleagues were more present in the workplace and mentioned feeling less included, and isolated and finding it challenging to participate in informal interactions. In this context, language becomes the source of power (Gallois & Callan, 1988; Marschan et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999) to distinguish who is in or out of the group and the native speaker and other highly proficient professionals benefit. Language issues were noted by Neal (1998) as the main cause of friction, dissatisfaction, and frustration for those who are “outsiders”.

The common situation is what we called “language clustering” in informal interaction. It involves people naturally dividing into different groups based on language differences: Dutch local workers and expats. The actions taken by expats in these situations vary. For example, one expat (P2) indicated that he won’t join Dutch group since he will feel embarrassed to interrupt the conversation. Another CEO-expat (P10) has totally different attitude, he felt “naturally” to join his Dutch colleagues’ conversation. There is a possibility that this difference can be attributed to the positions individuals hold within the hierarchical structure.

The fact that speaking the local language is helpful to better adapt during assignments, but I found that the process of learning the host language is already helpful. One expat (P8) pointed out that through the language assignments, she got to know her colleagues better.

(...) After they help me with my homework, we usually become closer, and they have a better understanding of who I am, which leads to more topics for discussion and better cooperation at work, without as many barriers as before. For example, the homework might involve creating 18 present tense questions and a few weeks later, there might be another homework about past tense. There were some funny moments, like when I asked one person about their grocery shopping, and they eventually told me that I had already asked that question before. Through these interactions, I get to know more about people's personalities, like for people buy groceries whenever they feel like it, they are the people don't plan for holidays at all. They might tell you on Friday that they have a holiday for the next three weeks. (p8)

Despite facing social challenges due to their inability to speak Dutch, the expats perceive the prevalence of Dutch language as "natural" since it is the native language of the local population. Consequently, the prevailing language ideology in this multilingual setting is characterized by "one nation, one language." In contrast to findings in other intercultural

studies aforementioned, expats do not believe that Dutch speakers intentionally use their language as a power to exclude them.

4.1.4. Non common culture sharing

Expats (p5, p7, p8) highlight the cultural background difference as another factor that hinders relationship building. One expat (p5) particularly emphasizes the difficulty of engaging in small talk, which aligns with Henderson's (2005) observation that speaking about technical subjects is viewed easier than conducting basic small talk. He (p5) further described the non-common culture fact linked with gender, stating that conversations among male colleagues mainly revolve around football and beer, which is starkly different from Eastern cultures. The frustration experienced in small talk eventually led him to quit his previous job, and he is now working remotely. Both p8 and p5 also encountered difficulties in maintaining conversations, resulting in both parties feeling fatigued and drained. Gudykunst's anxiety and uncertainty management theory (AUM) offers a valuable theoretical framework, particular in situations where communication occurs across different cultural or social groups. Such communication often involves higher levels of uncertainty compared to communication within one's own group (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996). According to AUM, individuals have maximum and minimum thresholds for uncertainty and anxiety. When uncertainty falls within these thresholds, people feel comfortable enough to interact effectively with others. However, when uncertainty exceeds these thresholds, individuals need to actively manage their uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1993). As a result, expats who experience higher levels of uncertainty in such circumstances may be more prone to relying on stereotypes as a means of interaction.

Sometimes expats tend to attribute many communication problems to cultural differences and ignore the deeper factors. However, in my finding, some expats have comments like "I don't know if this is unique to the Dutch, or just that a personal problem", this awareness reveals intercultural competence.

4.1.5. Generational gap

The impact of intergenerational differences on communication effectiveness may not always be apparent, but it is a significant factor. Especially when relatively young expats (p8 and p11) face senior local employees. A younger expat pointed out that the topic is always

around work, pension and retirement in small talk. In a formal setting, the generation gap appears in the acceptance of new ideas especially in the IT field (P11).

In summary, it is evident that the workplace poses numerous communication challenges, encompassing not only cultural differences but also linguistic and generational gaps. Having examined these diverse issues, let us now delve further into the process of how expats navigate and adapt to these formidable challenges.

4.2. Cross-culture adjustment

When it comes to adjustment, my main focus lies in three key aspects that shed light on the dynamic process. Firstly, I delve into their professional adaptation, given that this study centers around the workplace. Secondly, I explore their overall adjustment in the Netherlands. Lastly, I analyze the factors that may influence this process, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the various elements at play.

4.2.1. Local working culture learning

Adaptation to the local workplace culture is a social learning process that appears to a range of behaviors, such as adhering to cultural norms and being mindful of the local work culture, also communication accommodation. In the literature reviews, I've introduced some factors to influence socio-cultural adjustment, but this is not my study focus. I'm more interested in the dynamic process, how expat attitude shift, and how they rationalize to actions.

4.2.1.1. Working style

The first example is the work-life of the Canadian expat (p1) revealed his adaptation to the 5 o'clock rule by attitude shift from doubt to acceptance: "*Because that's what they'll tell you in Canada too, but, They (Canadian) don't necessarily mean that (5 o'clock)*", and environmental factor "*4:35 the people that I need are gone anyway.*" Thus, the transformation in his behavior begins with a shift in attitude, which is further influenced by external factors. Another example refers to a Taiwanese expat's (P8) narration about a Christmas dinner organized by the company. The context is the CEO initialized choose a Teppanyaki restaurant and use an iron griddle to cook mainly meat food. She has different opinions on this matter, so

through her narration, we can understand her adjustment. She firstly rationalizes her actions since this decision excludes vegetarians and goes through a process of self-struggle on whether to express her opinions or not. She even pointed out that other people have taken the same actions to prove her behavior. Finally, she emphasized the CEO's post-event attitude.

During Christmas, our CEO was very excited and booked a Teppanyaki restaurant, and kept telling everyone how delicious it was. However, we had a vegan in our group (...) Then something interesting happened. Several of us went to talk to the CEO at different times (...) since this restaurant excludes the vegan person. **Actually, at first, I was a bit unsure whether I should do this thing or not, because I certainly wouldn't do this thing in Taiwan.** I eventually talked to the CEO. "Hey CEO, I have something to discuss with you." (...) I talked for about 10 minutes and then left after finishing. (...) I remember one time during lunch, the CEO began to ramble and said, "With the American company I worked for before, the boss said what he meant and meant what he said. It's not like here where the employees always know more than I do. (p8)

Observation is always the first step to learning the local culture, especially if expats are from a totally different working culture. One observation by a South African expat (p11) is that informal leadership is stronger and developed around coffee talk. She thereby adjusts her management styles to be more supportive.

In the Netherlands I've been in meetings where the boss says, "OK, we're going to do this and this and this. Everybody good? Yeah. Let's go." And then they go sit around the coffee. And they decide the boss has no idea what he's talking about "This is not going to work", and around the coffee they decide what they're going to do and if the boss isn't there, he won't know the plan is changed. So it totally changes the way in which you manage teams. You're more supportive guidance of a team than hierarchy (p11)

From silence to engagement is also observed specially among Taiwanese expats (P5 and P8) who initially exhibit hesitation in asking questions, displaying reserved or cautious behavior, and even avoidance. As individuals spend more time in a foreign country, their confidence and willingness to inquire typically increase. These "question" habits learned by the expat :*"I intentionally practiced asking questions in meetings. Even if they were stupid questions, I had to ask two or three before the end of the meeting. I set that rule for myself, and it was quite effective (p5)"*. Opposite to the Netherlands, the working culture is quite hierarchical in Taiwan: *"In Taiwan, before you go into a meeting, you probably know who will lead the meeting, and who the decision maker is that you need to persuade in the end. (P8)"*. In this context, Taiwanese expats in the beginning tend to be more passive since afraid of losing "face": *"When I used to work in Taiwan, I would just sit there and do my work quietly. I was afraid of asking stupid questions" (p5)*. The contrasting working cultures between the two

countries present challenges for expats. An expat shared an intriguing example of a "town hall meeting" that highlights the differences in how such meetings are conducted in the two countries.

(In Taiwan) During the Q&A session, few people raised their hands and asked a very general question about the company's prospects. However, in the Netherlands, everyone raised their hands and asked questions that were not very difficult but.... They asked like "you said that we've had done well this year, but it seemed like there wasn't much development?" (P4)

We can thus conclude that adaptation is heavily influenced by internal organizational factors, such as the local working culture and colleagues. However, it is also closely related to the circle of interactors within the workplace.

4.2.1.2. Intercultural adjustment in superdiverse context

I found a tendency that expats who work in super diverse environments are more likely to categorize individuals within the national culture framework, as it makes actions easier especially when dealing with international clients and colleagues. Considering the example of an expat (P3) working with international clients, it becomes evident that the decision-making process varies not only based on national culture but also on regional practices, such as in the case of APEC. This highlights the profound impact of business practices on shaping the worldview of expat.

so, in my work we do evaluation and adjudication of a bid. In the UK I will study the documents and I will give my commentary and then the client partner will usually accept my commentary and change the deal to match what I've suggested. In France, I will do the same adjudication and I will give them that feedback and they will argue. In the Middle East, they don't care about your feedback. And in APEC, the decision is made between regional managers gave his blessing. So the deal is fine. Your adjudication is your adjudication. But if regional manager gave his blessing, then this deal can go ahead. So it's very different and experience based on which culture I'm working with around the world. (p3)

4.2.1.3. Adjustment in communication style differences

In this section, I will discuss how expats adjust their communication style over time in response to cultural differences. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Bennett (1993) provides a framework for understanding how individuals adapt to cultural differences. This is a model of the development of cognitive structure rather than changes in

attitudes and behavior emphasised by Bennett & Bennett (2004). According to the model, "as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more sophisticated, their competence in intercultural relations increases" (M. Bennett & J. Bennett, 2004, p152).

The DMIS consists of six linear stages. The initial three stages are ethnocentric and include denial, defense, and minimization. The subsequent three stages are ethnorelative, progressing from acceptance to adaptation and culminating in integration. Bennett (1993) encourages individuals to move from acceptance to the adaptation stage through practical experience. To illustrate this, I will use the example of adjusting to Dutch directness.

Expats, as a group immersed in culturally diverse environments, have likely already transitioned from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. This transition represents a shift in their approach to cultural differences, moving from avoidance to actively seeking out and embracing those differences. However, this transition may also bring about emotional side effects known as "culture shock" (Moallemi, 2019). In my study, one expat (P3) shared her experience of culture shock shortly after arriving in the country. She recalled asking her colleague for a favor, only to receive a straightforward "no" as a response saying : *"I would be like, wow, I maybe I offended him or maybe I didn't ask him the right way."* Shortly, she said : *I'm learning to not take it personally because that's just their communication style.* This demonstrates the expat's ability to reevaluate and reconsider cultural differences, indicating a progression away from ethnocentrism and towards the first stage of ethnorelativism: acceptance. It's important to note that acceptance does not imply agreement or liking (M. Bennett & J. Bennett, 2004). This corresponds to the experiences of two other expats (p1, p5) who acknowledge the directness of the Dutch communication style but don't fully agree with it. This can lead to a divergence approach in the communication accommodation theory proposed by Giles. Unlike convergence, where expats would adapt to become more "direct," divergence refers to adopting different strategies, such as being less direct. The expat (P5) describes this alternative as being "polite" and considers it an additional tool to use. This aligns with the contextual features of ethnorelativism, where expats choose to adapt their actions based on the cultural context they are in.

The next stage in the process is adaptation, which involves "cognitive frame shifting" as individuals "attempt to take the perspective of another culture" (M. Bennett & J. Bennett, 2004, p156). This cognitive shift is supported by the emergence of "behavioral code-shifting" and "cultural empathy" (Bennett, 1998), allowing individuals to adjust their behavior appropriately within different cultural contexts. Bennett & Bennett (2004, p156) emphasizes that this adapted behavior arises because it "feels right" to individuals, rather than "that is how one is supposed

to act.” Adaptation is characterized by intentionality and differs from assimilation. An expat (p4) shared her experience of the dynamic process of adaptation with cultural empathy: *At first, I couldn't be too straightforward, I would use more tactful language to express my concerns or suggest alternatives. I would gradually try to find the line or boundary of what was acceptable to them.* Cultural conflicts may arise before reaching the final stage of integration. The conflict here doesn't mean ignoring cultural differences but potentially resulting in cultural intense interaction before achieving compromise. For example, a Taiwanese expat (P8) initially struggled with direct communication in the workplace due to her previous experience in a strict hierarchy working environment. However, after reflecting on the incident, she recognized the need to be more direct in her communication approach.

(...) I didn't feel comfortable telling her directly that it was her priority which is not my usual way of doing things. (...) This situation continued for a while until we had a big argument in a meeting, which was unusual because we usually got along well. I can't remember what happened exactly, but I was clear said “everything was ready three months ago, and the ball was in your court”. I told her straightforwardly “OK, so are you going to do it NOW or NOT?” After the meeting, she finally started to work on it. I think Dutch people are like..., they understood that I was pushing gently and not very hard. The emotions were building up slowly, and we finally had a big argument in the meeting. But why didn't we talk about it directly from the beginning?”(p8)

In the adaptation stage, one of the main issues is authenticity and the question is “*If people can shift among several cultural contexts, in which contexts do their true identities reside?*” (Bennett, 2017, p6). This can be seen as an expanded repertoire in different contexts or individuals becoming bicultural or multicultural.

For individuals who have spent more time immersed in other cultures than their own, they may eventually reach the final stage of integration. Cultural identity becomes the key focus during this stage. Bicultural or multicultural individuals need to reconfigure their identities to navigate complex intercultural circumstances. As Bennett (2004, p.72) suggests, “They construe their identities at the margins of two or more cultures and central to none”. There are two forms of marginality: encapsulated, where one's sense of self between cultures may feel like alienation or an inability to fit into cultural contexts; and constructive, which refers to the ability to move in and out of different cultures and represents a resolution of the identity issue. An expat who has spent more than 20 years in a foreign culture may be seen as being in this phase.

I was in South Africa last August and I realized I am not South African anymore. A lot of norms and values there make me feel so uncomfortable because I'm so used to the Dutch equality, for example. Umm. "Am I totally Dutch?" Nope, I do miss the sunshine and the mountains. So I do think that's a natural process of... I'm not trying to recreate South Africa here. I'm not trying to be dutchier than a Dutch. Umm, but that's natural balance of what works and what doesn't. How to uphold my own traditions into up to certain sense, but also assimilate new Dutch traditions. (p11)

Bennett's model offers a valuable framework for understanding the development of cultural differences among expats. However, it is not without flaws. Firstly, as Zafar, Sandhu, and Khan (2013) point out, human behavior rarely fits into linear and clear-cut categories. Cultural adaptation is a complex process that involves a range of behaviors and responses. Secondly, Bennett's model tends to overlook the emotional aspects, such as culture shock and conflict, which play a decisive role in the process.

Despite these limitations, Bennett's model remains highly valuable. My study supports the notion that the more the sensitivity of the individual regarding cultural differences increases, the more he becomes competent in intercultural relations.

4.2.2. General adjustment

Expats face various challenges when adapting to a new workplace and way of life. Among these challenges, two common obstacles are adjusting to the local food and weather (P2, P5) in their new location, as well as integrating into the local community. Both p9 and p11 attributed the enduring Dutch friendships to the notion that strong bonds are formed in early years. This suggests that establishing close and long-lasting relationships with locals.

Additionally, two South African expats mentioned an interesting observation that Dutch people are less "spontaneous" and prefer making plans in advance. This trait, as mentioned by p11, is attributed to the influence of weather on Dutch culture.

4.2.3. Factors Affecting Adjustment of Expats

In the theory of cross-cultural adaptation, various factors contribute to an effective adaptation. However, for the purpose of our discussion, I will focus on three main factors. The first factor is the fluency level of the Dutch language. As previously mentioned, the ability to speak Dutch has a significant influence on social interactions and communication efficiency,

particularly in formal working settings. This observation is supported by the experience of one expat (P11) who is proficient in both English and Dutch, highlighting the advantage of speaking the local language for successful cultural adaptation.

(Speaking Dutch) it's very helpful. Umm. Because most dutch people would speak English, but they confidence in Dutch is higher, and especially if you're coming to technical discussions on a deep level with high risk, strategic impact, etcetera. Umm, it's always easier in your first language. So for them to explain to me is easier for them (p11)

The second variable to consider is the international working environment. Expats interviewed expressed a greater sense of comfort in more international companies, primarily because they face less pressure to conform to the local norms. The expat (p7) found that pure-Dutch companies tend to have a higher degree of monolingualism. Interestingly, the paradoxical situation arises where a greater diversity and recognition of cultural differences can actually foster a sense of common ground among individuals from different backgrounds.

Thirdly, the support from fellow nationals plays a significant role as an adaptation factor, especially during the initial stages of arrival. One south African expat (P3) stated: *we're sticking together*. However, it is worth noting that conflicts in values can arise within the national peer group. As mentioned in P5, there is a perceived implicit norm pressure from this peer group: *I feel like if you're able to blend in, you're superior, and if you can't, you're worthless. I sense this implicit feeling, and I feel like it's present in the Taiwanese community in the Netherlands group (p5)*.

In conclusion, the narrative method proves to be a valuable tool in comprehending the experiences of expats in their host country and the intricate process of identity formation. This approach enables a profound exploration of the learning journey, as it involves deconstructing the underlying factors and processes at play. By doing so, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the obstacles and possibilities that expats encounter in their host country, and subsequently devise effective strategies to foster their personal development.

5. Conclusion

This study used in-depth interviews to understand the real experiences of expats in the Dutch workplace. Through these narratives, we have gained valuable insights into the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation and the strategies employed by expats to overcome them, leading to the cultivation of their intercultural competence and enhanced effectiveness in their work and interpersonal relationships. However, it is important to acknowledge that the adaptation process is not always smooth, and expats may encounter cultural misunderstandings and conflicts along the way.

Despite certain limitations, such as a lack of diversity in expat nationalities, less experienced interview skills, and potential bias due to cultural similarities between the researcher and interviewees, this study recognizes its shortcomings. One potential approach to address these limitations could be to involve another interviewer with a different background, thereby reducing the potential bias resulting from cultural similarities. Also, the personality factors should be more detailed and examined and considered in expat research.

Addressing the research question, the study focused on the communication challenges faced by IT expats in the Dutch workplace. These challenges encompassed differences in communication styles (directness, emotional expression), work practices (remote work issues), and language barriers. Although language challenges may have less impact in English working environments, they can still affect the establishment of relationships, subsequently influencing expats' psychological adaptation. It is important to note that not all problems have universal solutions, highlighting the complexity of intercultural communication and the need for context-specific approaches.

Furthermore, expats' sociocultural adjustment in the host country involves aspects such as working culture, communication accommodation, and general adaptation. Factors such as Dutch proficiency, a diverse working environment, and support from national peers partly explain the adjustment situations. Additionally, the type of interlocutors in the workplace can also shape expats' adjustment outcomes, with expats in superdiverse environments tending to categorize people by nationality. Moreover, one's position within the organizational structure influences their worldview, as it entails access to social capital. For instance, a CEO-expat reported minimal communication problems.

Based on the aforementioned findings, it is essential to understand that expat studies should be viewed as context-specific. Everyone's perception of events varies based on their cultural background and available social capital. This highlights the notion that culture is constructed

through social interaction and is not static. Cross-cultural interaction should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a predetermined outcome. The narratives provided by expats allow for a deeper understanding of the dynamic process of adaptation and the social relationships between expats and their counterparts.

For many self-initiated expats, their assignment is seen as an adventurous journey, often driven by a desire for a change from their home country's working environment or a longing for a new life. This personal journey encompasses unique ups and downs that only they can truly comprehend. Furthermore, as expats spend more time in the host country, identity crises may arise as they adapt to the local culture. There is no universal model or strategy to resolve cross-cultural conflicts, as everyone has their own distinct perspective in interpreting events. Their narratives about intercultural experiences hold significant value in understanding communication dynamics in the workplace and how they perceive and cope with communication-related issues.

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Appendix A.

Interview guide: semi-structured, narrative interviews

- **Personal background**
 - Sociodemographic information: Nationality, name
 - How long you have been working and living in the Netherland?
 - motivations for accepting/becoming the expatriate mission
 - Any difficulty adjusting when you first arrived?
 - previous work and intercultural experience
 - Did your family move with you?

- **Intercultural interaction in the organization**
 - Position title
 - Could you tell me a little bit about your working environment?
 - How many people are you working with, local or international?
 - How about the organizational culture in your host country or previous work experience in foreign country?
 - Your team, superior and subordinate, colleagues

- **Communication issues**
 - Tell me a story about your (communication) experiences with your co-workers in the workplace.
 - Informal talk: Describe your interaction with local employees, and interaction between them? (lunch time, small talk)
 - Describe a communication conflict/poor communication situation.
 - An experience when different opinion happens in the meeting
 - Have you experienced a situation when different language speaking in the workplace?
 - What cultural challenges do you face in working with local employees
 - In which ways have you adapted to the situation?

EXCELL Intercultural Skills model : seeking help, making social contact, participation in a group, refusing a request, expressing disagreement, and giving feedback

- **Intercultural adjustment**
 - What kinds of preparation do your company provide before coming to host country?
 - In personal level, how did you prepare your expatriate mission?
 - Have you had Dutch language class ?
 - Join expat community
 - (Do you feel your previous abroad experience helped your adaptation here?)

Concluding:

How do you describe your expats' life since the beginning and now?