

Building Understanding Through Signing: Interpersonal Communication Between Deaf Customers and Baristas

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Abstract

This research aims to explore interpersonal communication between customers and deaf baristas at Cafe Tulus, Makassar. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study utilised observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation to explore the forms of nonverbal communication used, barriers faced, and adaptation strategies applied. The findings show that sign language, gestures, and writing are the main medium of communication, while barriers often arise due to customers' lack of understanding of sign language. However, adaptations such as the use of the Bisindo alphabet or paper to write orders help bridge the communication gap. These results emphasise the importance of social inclusion and empathy in everyday interactions, and offer a model of communication practice that can be applied in other inclusive environments. This study contributes to the development of interpersonal communication science in the context of social inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities.

Keywords: *Interpersonal Communication; Sign Language; Social Inclusion; Disability Empowerment*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi komunikasi interpersonal antara pelanggan dan barista tuli di Cafe Tulus, Makassar. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini menggunakan observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi untuk mengeksplorasi bentuk-bentuk komunikasi nonverbal yang digunakan, hambatan yang dihadapi, dan strategi adaptasi yang diterapkan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bahasa isyarat, gerak tubuh, dan tulisan merupakan media komunikasi utama, sementara hambatan yang sering muncul adalah kurangnya pemahaman pelanggan terhadap bahasa isyarat. Namun, adaptasi seperti penggunaan alfabet Bisindo atau kertas untuk menulis pesanan membantu menjembatani kesenjangan komunikasi. Hasil penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya inklusi sosial dan empati dalam interaksi sehari-hari, dan menawarkan model praktik komunikasi yang dapat diterapkan di lingkungan inklusif lainnya. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan ilmu komunikasi interpersonal dalam konteks inklusi sosial dan pemberdayaan penyandang disabilitas.

Kata kunci: Komunikasi Interpersonal; Bahasa Isyarat; Inklusi Sosial; Pemberdayaan Disabilitas

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Introduction

Interpersonal communication plays a fundamental role in building social relationships, including in the context of public services (Prasetyo, 2024; Roem, 2019). In the café industry, interpersonal communication is not only a means of interaction between baristas and customers but also an important tool to create a positive and satisfying experience. However, this communication becomes a challenge when it involves baristas with deaf disabilities, where limitations in the use of verbal language become a significant barrier (Jacob, 2018; Medalla, D. & Medalla, 2018; Winduwati, 2021). In a society that still often ignores the existence and potential of people with disabilities, the existence of cafes that empower deaf baristas, such as Cafe Tulus in Makassar, provides an opportunity to highlight the importance of social inclusion through interpersonal communication. This study focuses on interviews with three deaf baristas. However, how customers and deaf baristas interact effectively and what barriers they face in this communication process is still an issue that has not been researched in depth (Afandi, 2019; Rino., 2023).



Figure 1. Logo of Café Tulus
Source: Author's Documentation, 2024

Interpersonal communication issues between customers and deaf baristas often include nonverbal, semantic and psychological barriers. On the one hand, customers may not be used to using sign language or other communication aids, creating gaps in understanding. On the other hand, deaf baristas often have to deal with social stigma and low expectations regarding their ability to provide service. This suggests an urgent need to understand the communication dynamics between customers and deaf baristas, including how they overcome these barriers. This study seeks to fill the gap by exploring the forms of interpersonal communication and barriers that occur at Cafe Tulus as one of the representations of inclusive cafes in Indonesia (Afifzuren et al., 2023; Bathesta, 2023; Cahyani, 2023; Zahra et al., 2024) In a previous study, (Setiawan, 2024) through their research at Kopi Difabis revealed that empowerment of people with disabilities in the workforce can be achieved through meaningful interactions between employees and customers. The symbolic interactionism perspective used in this study shows that nonverbal communication, such as the use of sign language signage, becomes an effective tool in creating congruence of meaning between the two parties. This research highlights the importance of communication media in overcoming the limitations of verbal communication of people with disabilities. Another study by (Putriana et al., 2024) at Cafe Difabis Sudirman showed that the use of technology, such as the *Hear Me* application, can improve the effectiveness of communication between customers and

deaf employees. This finding strengthens the argument that innovative solutions can help reduce communication barriers in customer service.

Meanwhile, Respatiningrum (Mocodompis, 2023) examined the implementation of sign language in service activities at Kafe Sunyi, Bekasi. This study found that sign language is not only a communication tool but also serves as a medium to change people's perceptions of the abilities of people with disabilities. The same thing was also found by (Cahyani, 2023) at Sunyi Coffee Yogyakarta, where the stellar communication pattern allows free interaction and creates a new experience for customers. This study highlights that the use of BISINDO (Indonesian Sign Language) can be a significant differentiator that adds value to the customer experience.

However, these studies still leave important research gaps. Most previous studies emphasise technical solutions such as communication media and technology, while few explore the emotional and social dynamics in interactions between customers and deaf baristas. In addition, existing research is more focused on cafés in big cities such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Bekasi, thus under-representing the local context in other regions, such as Makassar. Thus, this study offers novelty by exploring the interpersonal communication of deaf customers and baristas in Cafe Tulus Makassar, which has unique local and cultural characteristics.

This study aims to describe the form of interpersonal communication that occurs between customers and deaf baristas at Cafe Tulus, as well as identify the barriers faced in the communication process. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research seeks to uncover the under-explored dynamics of the interaction, including the role of nonverbal communication and the adaptation strategies used by both parties. The main argument of this study is that effective interpersonal communication depends not only on media or technology (Amali & Luay, 2019) , but also on the ability of individuals to create empathic and inclusive relationships.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the local context and in-depth exploration of the direct experiences of deaf customers and baristas. It also makes a practical contribution by offering recommendations to improve the effectiveness of interpersonal communication in inclusive cafés, such as the organisation of sign language training for customers and baristas, and the development of a supportive communication environment. Through these findings, it is hoped that this research can provide new insights for the development of communication science, especially in the context of social inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities. In addition, this research also contributes to efforts to raise public awareness about the importance of inclusive and empathic communication in creating positive service experiences in the service sector.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach (Farina & Wardhana, 2022; Putri, 2019) with descriptive methods to explore the dynamics of interpersonal communication between customers and baristas, namely Cafe Tulus located on Jl. Ujung Bori No. 10, Antang Village, Manggala District Makassar City, South Sulawesi. This approach was chosen because it allows

researchers to deeply understand communication phenomena in a specific social context. This type of research is a case study, which focuses on an in-depth exploration of the unique experiences of customers and baristas in an inclusive cafe environment.



Figure 2. Our Best Team Café Tulus
Source: Author's Documentation, 2023

Table 1. Research Key Informant Data

No.	Name	Age	Position
1.	Zaenab	29	Head of cafe and Finance Cafe Tulus
2.	Muhammad Taufik Dwi Putra	29	Business Development and Marketing
3.	Zakiyah	28	Customer
4.	Dila Adhelia	23	Customer
5.	Erlina	32	Customer
6.	Avryani Riri	37	Baristas with Disabilities

Source: Author's Data Processing Results, 2025

Data collection techniques were conducted through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to observe the forms of interpersonal communication that occur naturally between customers and baristas. In-depth interviews were conducted with customers, baristas, and the manager of Cafe Tulus to obtain diverse perspectives on communication dynamics and barriers faced. Documentation in the form of field notes, photos, and cafe promotional materials were also collected to complement the research data.

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis techniques, which involved a coding process to identify key themes in the data. The stages of analysis included data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This analysis was conducted to reveal the interpersonal communication patterns, barriers, and strategies used by customers and baristas to overcome obstacles in communication. Thus, this research method is designed to provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study.

Results and Discussion

Cafe Tulus is the first cafe in Makassar that focuses on the values of equity, empowerment, and inclusion, managed by deaf friends. Unlike similar sociopreneurs (disabled), cafe tulus is an inclusive collaboration and has a programme to create an inclusive environment. Cafe Tulus, located at Jalan Ujung Bori Number 10, Antang Village, Manggala District, is the first inclusive and disability-friendly space in Makassar. When we first visited, the customers were deaf friends who communicated with each other using sign language, and the baristas and waitresses were also deaf. Head of cafe and Finance Cafe Tulus, Zaenab told the story of how she and other friends established Cafe Tulus, which was also assisted by PLN Peduli. She said, initially she and other friends who were focused on disability issues conducted barista training for people with disabilities. However, they realised that there was no space to apply this.

Table 2: Interviews with Key Informants

Informant	Statements	Coding
Zaenab	Cafe Tulus provides an actualisation space for people with disabilities, becoming a platform for social inclusion and empowerment.	Social inclusion, empowerment
Muhammad Taufik Dwi Putra	Collaboration with PLN Peduli enables barista training for deaf friends, resulting in inclusive employment opportunities.	collaboration, inclusive working
Zakiyah	Nonverbal communication such as sign language, written	Sign language, nonverbal, written

	gestures, and writing are used to interact with deaf baristas.	
Dila Adhelia	Interpersonal communication barriers initially occurred due to lack of familiarity, but were overcome with the prompts provided.	Adaptation, communication barriers
Erlina	Difficulty understanding customers who speak too fast, overcome by asking customers to write down the order.	Verbal barriers, adaptation strategies
Avryani Riri	Use sign language and hand gestures to communicate with customers, offering paper if needed.	Sign language, empathy, communication strategies

Source: Results Author's Data Tabulation, 2025.

The findings based on table 1. tabulation of interview data above showhow Cafe Tulus is a model of social inclusion that successfully empowers people with disabilities, especially deaf people. Informants Zaenab and Muhammad Taufik Dwi Putra underlined that the cafe was established to provide a space for actualisation and equal employment opportunities for deaf friends. Collaboration with PLN Peduli made it possible to organise barista training that provides specific skills to people with disabilities, so they can work independently. These findings emphasise the importance of collaboration and institutional support in creating an inclusive work environment that can change society's perception of the abilities of people with disabilities.

In terms of communication, the findings presented by Zakiyah, Dila Adhelia, Erlina, and Avryani Riri show that nonverbal communication, such as sign language and body movements, plays an important role in the interaction between customers and baristas. Communication barriers often arise at the beginning of the interaction, mainly due to customers' lack of understanding of sign language. However, such barriers can be overcome through adaptations, such as using paper to write orders or spelling out the Bisindo alphabet.

This approach not only creates a unique experience for customers but also builds empathy and social awareness towards the importance of inclusive communication. The findings highlight how innovations in communication strategies can increase the effectiveness of interactions in inclusive environments such as Cafe Tulus.

Cafe Tulus as a Platform for Social Inclusion and Empowerment

The research findings show that Cafe Tulus not only functions as a place of business, but also as a place of empowerment and social inclusion for people with disabilities, especially deaf friends. As a pioneer of inclusive cafes in Makassar, it provides space for people with disabilities to actualise their abilities, as emphasised by Zaenab and Muhammad Taufik Dwi Putra. Support from PLN Peduli enabled barista training that included 20 deaf and 5 hearing participants, creating equal employment opportunities. This effort proves that social inclusion can be realised through cross-sector collaboration that focuses on empowering marginalised communities.

Nonverbal Communication Dynamics in Customer and Barista Interactions

The interviews revealed that nonverbal communication, such as sign language, gestures, and writing, became a key tool in the interaction between customers and deaf baristas. Informants like Zakiyah and Avryani Riri highlighted that sign language is not only a communication tool, but also creates a unique experience for customers. Initial communication barriers are common, especially for customers who are unfamiliar with sign language. However, adaptation through aids such as paper or Bisindo instructions help bridge this gap. This interaction demonstrates the importance of empathy, adaptation, and communication strategies in creating an inclusive environment.

Strategies for Overcoming Communication Barriers

Communication barriers in customer and barista interactions include process, semantic and physical barriers. Erlina and Dila Adhelia noted that communication barriers, such as customers speaking too fast or not understanding the instructions, can lead to miscommunication. Baristas overcome these obstacles by using hand gestures, lip reading, or asking customers to write the order. This flexible approach not only strengthens communication but also reflects the barista's dedication to providing inclusive service.

Customer Experience in an Inclusive Environment

Cafe 'Tulus' inclusive environment provides a unique experience for customers, especially those who are unfamiliar with interacting with people with disabilities. Zakiyah emphasises that the calm atmosphere of the cafe, coupled with empathetic interactions, creates a sense of comfort and a new experience. The proximity of the location and the presence of friends with disabilities are also reasons why customers choose Cafe Tulus. This shows how an inclusive environment not only supports baristas but also provides added value for customers who want to support social inclusion.

Discussion

Cafe Tulus as a Platform for Social Inclusion and Empowerment

Cafe Tulus reflects the success of an inclusive initiative that not only provides employment opportunities for people with disabilities but also creates a space that facilitates equality and empowerment. As revealed by Zaenab and Muhammad Taufik Dwi Putra, the cafe was established on the basis of collaboration with PLN Peduli, providing barista training to deaf friends, and providing employment focused on social inclusion. These results are relevant to Hafiz and Setiawan's research (2024) which highlights the importance of meaningful interactions in creating meaning congruence in the world of work for people with disabilities. Thus, Cafe Tulus succeeds in becoming an empowerment model that empowers marginalised communities through collaborative strategies and holistic inclusion.

Nonverbal Communication Dynamics in Customer and Barista Interactions

Interactions between customers and deaf baristas at Cafe Tulus rely on nonverbal communication as the main element. Sign language, gestures, and writing are the dominant mediums, as noted by Zakiyah and Avryani Riri. This finding is consistent with research (Mocodompis, 2023) which shows that the use of sign language can change people's perceptions of the abilities of people with disabilities. In the context of Cafe Tulus, this kind of interaction creates a unique experience for customers while strengthening empathy. Initial communication barriers are common, but adaptations such as the use of paper or the Bisindo alphabet help bridge the understanding gap.

Strategies for Overcoming Communication Barriers

Communication barriers, as identified by Dila Adhelia and Erlina, include process, semantic and physical barriers. Customers who speak too fast or do not understand instructions are often a major challenge. Baristas overcome these barriers with adaptive approaches, such as lip-reading, using hand gestures, or having customers write down orders. This finding is in line with research (Putriana et al., 2024) that highlights the importance of innovative solutions in overcoming communication limitations. These strategies not only strengthen communication effectiveness but also reflect the baristas' flexibility in providing inclusive services.

Customer Experience in an Inclusive Environment

Cafe Tulus' inclusive environment provides a different experience for customers. Zakiyah emphasises that the cafe's calm atmosphere, empathetic interactions, and the presence of deaf friends create its own appeal. The proximity of the location and the supportive atmosphere are also reasons why customers choose Cafe Tulus. This finding confirms the relevance of research (Cahyani, 2023) which highlights that new experiences resulting from interactions with people with disabilities can increase social awareness and create more empathic relationships.

In the analysis of interpersonal communication between customers and deaf baristas at Cafe Tulus using social penetration theory (Muhammad Hasyim, 2024; Saleh, 2019; Sari, 2023), the interactions that occur can be understood as a gradual process in which interpersonal relationships develop from a surface level of communication to a more deep and personal level. The social penetration theory proposed by Altman and Taylor emphasises that

interpersonal closeness occurs progressively through various stages of openness in interaction, influenced by expectations of reciprocity and social benefits obtained in the relationship.

In the context of this study, the communication process between customers and deaf baristas starts from the most basic stage, which is often transactional superficial communication, where customers and baristas interact simply to deliver and receive orders. At this early stage, communication is dominated by simple gestures, writing, or the use of the Bisindo alphabet as an initial strategy to overcome communication barriers. First-time customers generally have limited understanding of sign language, so they tend to use universal nonverbal communication, such as pointing at menus or writing on paper. As the frequency of interaction increases and customers become aware of the communication patterns used by deaf baristas, communication begins to develop to a deeper level, where customers show more effort to understand and even learn some basic sign language. In social penetration theory, this stage is referred to as the affective stage, where interpersonal relationships begin to develop with mutual respect and acceptance of differences. At this stage, customers do not just see the interaction as a mere business transaction but begin to show empathy and emotional involvement in the communication. This can be seen from how some regulars start using simple words in sign language such as "thank you" or "good morning" as a form of their adaptation to a more inclusive communication environment.

At a deeper stage, which in social penetration theory is called the stabilisation stage or deeper affective exchange, occurs when customers and baristas share not only transactional information, but also personal experiences and stories. For example, customers who frequently interact with baristas begin to ask how they are doing or share their daily experiences, while deaf baristas feel more comfortable in showing expressions of emotion and building closer social relationships with customers. This stage shows that the communication barriers that initially exist can be overcome through a continuous process of learning, empathy and adaptation, so that the interaction between the two parties evolves into a more personalised and close form of communication. However, the findings also indicate that not all interactions reach the deepest stage of social penetration theory. Some customers who only come in occasionally may remain in the orientation stage, where communication is functional and limited to transaction needs. This difference suggests that the intensity and frequency of interactions play an important role in determining how far interpersonal relationships can develop.

The application of social penetration theory in this study provides a deeper understanding of how interpersonal communication between customers and deaf baristas develops gradually, influenced by levels of openness, adaptation, and repeated experiences of interaction. The findings confirm that inclusive environments such as Cafe Tulus can serve as a model for communities in promoting disability empowerment and social inclusion, where communication initially seen as a barrier can evolve into a closer and more meaningful form of interpersonal relationship.

Conclusion

This research problem focuses on interpersonal communication between customers and deaf baristas at Cafe Tulus, who face challenges in nonverbal communication. The findings show that although communication barriers often occur, such as semantic and physical constraints, the adaptive strategies that baristas apply can overcome the gap.

In early interactions, communication is still at the orientation stage, where customers and baristas communicate in the most basic ways, such as pointing at menus, writing on paper, or using simple gestures. At this stage, openness is still very limited and the interaction is more transactional. The communication barriers that occur, mainly due to the customer's lack of understanding of sign language, suggest that many interactions are still at a superficial stage with the main focus only on delivering the order. The significance of this finding lies in its contribution to raising public awareness of the importance of empathy and adaptation in creating inclusive environments. A weakness of this study is its limited generalisability due to its focus on one specific location. Future research is recommended to explore the influence of local culture on the effectiveness of inclusive communication in different regions, as well as evaluating the impact of interpersonal communication on customer satisfaction in inclusive cafes.

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