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Digital Empathy as Moral Communication: Inclusive Coffee Consumption and Moral Identity Formation among Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study examines digital empathy as a mediated form of moral communication in inclusive coffee consumption among Generation Z in Surabaya, Indonesia. Digital empathy refers to empathic recognition, emotional response and moral interpretation that occur through digitally mediated narratives and interactions. Data were collected from twelve participants aged 18-27 who had visited inclusive coffee shops employing visually impaired baristas. Semi-structured interviews, limited participant observation and public social media documentation were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The analysis generated four themes: empathy as moral motivation, authenticity and product quality as moral credibility, social media as moral norm formation and inclusive consumption as everyday moral identity practice. The findings show that inclusive coffee consumption is not merely a lifestyle choice but a communicative act through which equality, dignity and inclusion are expressed. The study contributes to communication ethics and consumer culture studies by explaining how digital empathy connects online representation, offline interaction and moral identity formation in everyday consumption.

Keywords: Digital empathy, Generation Z, inclusive coffee consumption, moral communication, moral identity

INTRODUCTION

In Surabaya's emerging inclusive coffee culture, Generation Z consumers increasingly encounter coffee shops that employ visually impaired baristas not only as lifestyle venues but also as communicative spaces where empathy, inclusion and moral identity are negotiated. Coffee consumption among young people is therefore examined here as

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an everyday site where social media narratives about disability and inclusion are translated into face-to-face service encounters and moral self-expression. Recent research on coffee and Instagram shows that coffee posts can operate as communication tools and as symbols of group identity among young consumers (Kristof-Csaki, 2020).

The phenomenon is inseparable from the digital environments in which Generation Z is embedded. Digital empathy has recently been conceptualised as empathy experienced in digital communication and as a multidimensional response involving affective and cognitive engagement (Collins et al., 2024). Further work argues that digitally mediated interaction changes the conditions through which people interpret others' affective lives (Mossner & Walter, 2024). In this study, digital empathy refers not merely to feeling sympathy online, but to how empathy is produced, circulated, evaluated and translated through online stories, images, videos, comments and peer interaction before it is enacted in offline consumption.

Prior studies substantiate the link between digital media and ethical consumption. Social media information sharing can strengthen green purchase intention among Generation Z by shaping perceived value and subjective norms (Sun & Xing, 2022), while ethical consumption among Generation Z is influenced by values, peer communication and perceived behavioural control (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Research on Generation Z also indicates that digital platforms increasingly mediate visibility, authenticity and value formation (Tirocchi, 2024). However, existing studies still tend to emphasise purchase intention, sustainability outcomes or media influence, rather than how empathy itself becomes moral communication in everyday consumption.

Inclusive service research provides another important context. Food-service encounters involving employees with disabilities can produce genuine hospitality, social connection and customer perceptions of contribution to social change (Doan et al., 2023). Disability-inclusive service environments may also generate positive perceptions and word of mouth when inclusion is supported by expertise and hospitableness (Song & Park, 2023). Yet these studies do not fully explain how digital narratives encountered before the service interaction shape young consumers' moral interpretation of inclusive enterprises. This study therefore asks how digital empathy functions as moral communication in Generation Z's inclusive coffee consumption in Surabaya.

METHOD

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to understand how participants experienced inclusive coffee consumption as a moral and communicative practice. The research was conducted in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, an urban setting marked by active coffee culture and intensive youth engagement with digital media. Inclusive coffee shops were selected because they connect lifestyle consumption, disability representation, service interaction and digital storytelling.

The study involved twelve Generation Z participants aged 18-27. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on three criteria: they had visited inclusive coffee shops employing visually impaired baristas, regularly used Instagram or TikTok to engage with lifestyle or consumption-related content and demonstrated awareness of ethical or inclusive issues. Snowball sampling was then used to identify additional participants with similar experiences. Data collection ended when final interviews no longer produced substantially new meanings related to empathy, authenticity, digital communication or inclusive consumption.

Data were collected from April to August 2025 through semi-structured interviews, limited participant observation and digital documentation. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and explored experiences of inclusive coffee consumption, exposure to social media narratives and reflections on empathy, authenticity and equality. Observation focused on customer-barista interaction, spatial atmosphere and communication of competence and inclusion. Digital documentation included public Instagram and TikTok posts related to inclusive coffee shops, treated as social texts rather than engagement metrics.

The analysis followed four interpretive phases. First, transcripts, fieldnotes and digital materials were read repeatedly to identify emotional tone, context and significant statements. Second, open coding marked meaning units such as feeling touched, rejecting pity, respecting competence, quality expectation, digital storytelling and lifestyle with awareness. Third, related codes were clustered into four themes: empathy as moral motivation, authenticity and product quality as moral credibility, social media as moral norm formation and inclusive consumption as everyday moral identity practice. Fourth, themes were interpreted against recent literature on digital empathy, ethical consumption and disability-inclusive service. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation, peer debriefing, selected member checking and an audit trail. All names and public social media identifiers were anonymised.

RESULTS

The first theme shows that empathy was the main moral motivation for visiting inclusive coffee shops. Participants described their visits as encounters with emotional and ethical meaning rather than simple purchases. Some referred to becoming more aware of the experience of visually impaired baristas, while others emphasized respect for competence. Participant N3 described inclusive coffee shops as feeling “more human” than ordinary cafes. Participant N8 stated that observing professional baristas challenged common assumptions about disability. These accounts show that empathy was not organised around pity, but around dignity, equality and recognition.

The second theme concerns authenticity and product quality as moral credibility. Empathy encouraged participants to try inclusive coffee shops, but continued support

depended on taste, service consistency, comfort and professionalism. Participant N2 stated that "the coffee still has to taste good," while N10 argued that social value increased appreciation only when the product met expected standards. Participants were critical of what they called charity branding, especially when promotional stories emphasised emotional appeal without demonstrating competence. Observation supported this finding because customers paid attention to brewing technique, staff interaction and overall service quality.

The third theme identifies social media as an arena of moral communication and norm formation. Participants used Instagram and TikTok to view, share or discuss stories about inclusive coffee. Posts about visually impaired baristas, supportive atmospheres and respectful customer interaction allowed private experiences to become shared moral references. Participant N7 noted that friends often became interested in visiting similar places after seeing such posts. Social media therefore did not merely publicize inclusive coffee shops; it normalized inclusion through peer visibility and everyday digital storytelling.

The fourth theme shows that inclusive consumption became part of lifestyle and moral identity. Participants still understood coffee as a space for relaxation, work and social gathering, but inclusive settings added ethical meaning to familiar routines. Participant N6 said inclusive coffee consumption was "still part of my lifestyle, but with more awareness," while N4 called it a "small but meaningful action." These statements show how moral agency was practised through ordinary consumption rather than formal activism. Overall, digital empathy became meaningful when it moved across three connected sites: online representation, offline service interaction and everyday identity practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings contribute to communication studies by positioning inclusive coffee consumption as a moral communication phenomenon. Digital empathy was not merely an individual feeling; it was a mediated communicative process through which participants encountered, interpreted and evaluated narratives of disability and inclusion. This extends digital empathy research by showing that online content structures moral attention before consumers enter a service encounter (Collins et al., 2024; Mossner & Walter, 2024) Digital empathy is therefore located at the intersection of mediated representation and embodied interaction.

The study also contributes to communication ethics by distinguishing empathy from pity. Participants rejected representations of visually impaired baristas as passive objects of charity. Instead, they valued competence, equality and professionalism. This finding is consistent with disability-inclusive service research showing that customers may interpret interactions with employees with disabilities as genuine hospitality and as a contribution

to social change (Doan et al., 2023; Song & Park, 2023). The present study adds that such encounters become ethically persuasive when communicated inclusion aligns with actual service quality.

Authenticity emerged as a central condition of inclusive branding. Participants did not accept ethical claims as credible unless they were supported by product quality and respectful service. This is consistent with recent research showing that Generation Z evaluates media and consumption through authenticity and value alignment (Tirocchi, 2024). Moral identity studies also show that ethical consumption is strengthened when behaviour is connected to self-consistency and public moral symbolization(Li et al., 2022). In this study, inclusive coffee consumption allowed participants to communicate who they were and what values they wished to support.

Finally, social media operated as a space of moral norm formation. Findings support previous evidence that social media information sharing influences Generation Z's ethical consumption through peer norms and perceived value (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Sun & Xing, 2022). However, participants did not simply imitate online behaviour. They judged whether posts were authentic or merely performative, especially when empathy appeared to be displayed for social approval. This indicates that Generation Z participants acted as reflective moral agents within digital environments shaped by visibility, peer interpretation and algorithmic circulation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital empathy shapes inclusive coffee consumption among Generation Z in Surabaya by connecting online representation, offline interaction and everyday moral identity practice. Inclusive coffee consumption was experienced not only as a lifestyle activity, but also as a communicative act through which participants expressed equality, dignity and inclusion. The findings show that empathy becomes ethically credible when grounded in competence, product quality and respectful disability representation rather than pity or charity. The article contributes to communication ethics, digital communication and consumer culture studies by explaining how moral meanings are produced and stabilised across social media and face-to-face service encounters. Future research may examine similar processes in other cultural settings and different forms of inclusive enterprise.

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