

Customers' Interpretations of Drivers' Nonverbal Communication in Ride-Hailing Services: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Interactions between drivers and customers in online transportation services are often brief and without verbal communication. In these brief interactions, nonverbal communication becomes a crucial element in influencing customer experience (Avi, 2023). This study aims to examine how customers interpret the experience of encountering nonverbal communication forms conveyed by drivers, such as facial expressions, body gestures, tone of voice, and posture. Using a qualitative approach and the phenomenological study method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 active user informants in the Greater Jakarta area who were recruited purposively. The results show that nonverbal elements are interpreted ambivalently and situationally. This study presents a critical dialogue on the simplistic Albert Mehrabian 7-38-55 rule by presenting the results of non-deterministic emotional interpretations.

Keywords: *Nonverbal Communication, Online Transportation, Customer Experience, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Thematic Analysis*

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, online transportation services have become deeply embedded in everyday mobility practices in Indonesia. The proliferation of ride-hailing platforms has transformed how individuals navigate urban spaces by offering efficiency, accessibility, and flexibility in response to increasingly complex transportation demands (Lestianika, 2024). These platforms are not merely technological infrastructures but socio-technical systems that mediate human experiences through a hybrid interface of algorithmic control and human labor. The emergence of these services has not only reshaped the transportation industry but also introduced new dynamics in service interaction, especially in the ways drivers and passengers engage within a digitalized service environment.

While much scholarly attention has focused on the technological and operational efficiencies of online transportation, there remains a pressing need to explore how human experiences are formed in the course of such interactions. Customer experience, in this context, is increasingly recognized as a holistic phenomenon that emerges through lived, affective, and embodied engagements rather than as a discrete evaluation of service performance (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In online ride-hailing services, drivers serve as the primary human interface of the platform, bridging the impersonal nature of digital apps with the interpersonal reality of face-to-face encounters. The brief yet meaningful interactions between drivers and passengers offer a rich context for understanding how service is interpreted and experienced on the ground.

Bascur et al. (2020) explained that customer experience (CX) is the summation of a customer's holistic experience across all touchpoints, before, during, and after a transaction. Godoy et al. (2022) support this statement by explaining that customer experience (CX) is the total subjective response of customers when interacting directly or indirectly with a company. Customer experience is crucial to a company's image because positive sentiment can maintain a brand's reputation, while negative sentiment can damage it (Evelina & Safitri, 2019).

Customer experience (CX) has several dimensions. The affective dimension refers to the customer's mood, The cognitive dimension involves how customers process new information during transactions, The physical dimension relates to the customer's perception of their body movement or posture, The relational dimension concerns interactions with individuals representing the company, and The sensory dimension refers to the quality of sensory experiences (the five senses) during interactions (Gahler et al., 2023).

One notable characteristic of ride-hailing encounters is the limited scope of verbal communication. Unlike traditional services where extended conversation may occur, most online transportation interactions are restricted to brief exchanges about routes, pick-up points, or payments. This communication minimalism shifts the burden of impression-making onto nonverbal channels, making nonverbal communication a vital element in shaping the quality of service perception (Islam & Kirillova, 2020). Facial expressions, eye contact, body posture, gestures, vocal tone, and proxemic behavior become key indicators through which passengers evaluate the driver's professionalism, empathy, and attitude (Burgoon et al., 2016; Gantiano, 2020).

This phenomenon becomes even more salient in contexts characterized by emotional vulnerability or situational ambiguity. Passengers, particularly those traveling alone, during late hours, or through unfamiliar routes, often depend on subtle nonverbal cues to assess their sense of safety and comfort. Nonverbal signals are processed rapidly and often subconsciously, forming impressions even before any verbal exchange takes place. These cues can evoke reassurance or unease, friendliness or distance, thus directly shaping the emotional and psychological tone of the journey (Schmitt, 2011).

Despite its importance, nonverbal communication remains underexplored within the scholarship on online transportation services. Much of the existing literature continues to frame service encounters through measurable outputs such as satisfaction ratings, loyalty indices, or operational efficiency, often relegating nonverbal communication to a peripheral role (Zeithaml et al., 2018). However, such an instrumental view neglects the deeply felt, subjective dimensions of service experience. In the Indonesian context, Jusup and Candrasari (2022) observe that driver nonverbal behavior tends to be spontaneous and is rarely the product of structured training, revealing a gap between service standards and actual interpersonal delivery. While these studies provide important insight into the behavioral side of service provision, they often overlook how customers themselves experience, interpret, and internalize these nonverbal cues.

This reveals a larger epistemological gap in the literature, namely, the lack of inquiry that centers the customer's lived experience as the unit of analysis. Approaching service encounters solely through the lens of organizational performance or driver behavior risks missing the rich interpretative processes through which customers construct meaning. In this regard, a phenomenological approach becomes essential, as it

privileges the subjective, emotional, and embodied realities of the customer, uncovering the nuanced ways in which meaning is formed through nonverbal interaction.

To support this orientation, this study draws from Albert Mehrabian's foundational theory on nonverbal communication. Mehrabian (1972) posits that a significant portion of emotional meaning in interpersonal exchanges is communicated nonverbally, through tone, gesture, and expression rather than spoken words. While his famous "7-38-55 rule," which suggests that 7% of meaning comes from words, 38% from tone, and 55% from facial expressions, has been criticized for oversimplifying complex communicative processes, its core implication remains relevant: that nonverbal cues play a central role in shaping emotional understanding. This study, therefore, employs Mehrabian's theory not as a rigid metric, but as a sensitizing framework that highlights the salience of nonverbal expression in contexts of minimal verbal interaction.

Through this lens, nonverbal communication is not treated as a mere predictor of service quality or customer satisfaction, but as a dynamic and relational process that unfolds in real time within embodied interactions. This study adopts an experiential orientation focusing on how customers subjectively perceive nonverbal cues, how these cues elicit affective responses, and how meaning is actively constructed during the ride. Such an approach offers a more holistic understanding of service encounters that is grounded in real-life practice rather than post-hoc evaluations or decontextualized metrics (Schmitt, 2011).

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following question: How do customers experience and interpret drivers' nonverbal communication during online transportation service encounters in Indonesia? This inquiry centers on the lived and interpretive dimensions of customer experience and invites a deeper reflection on how meaning, trust, and satisfaction are co-constructed in seemingly mundane, everyday service moments.

To explore this, the study adopts a qualitative research strategy utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method particularly suited to investigating how individuals make sense of their personal experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Smith et al., 2021). Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with active users of online transportation services in Jabodetabek, this research captures the fine-grained ways in which nonverbal communication shapes passengers' emotional journeys. This methodology allows for a double hermeneutic process, in which participants interpret their experiences, and researchers

interpret these interpretations, yielding rich and layered insights into the phenomenon under study.

In sum, this study contributes to the literature on service communication and digital transportation platforms by bringing customer subjectivity and emotion to the forefront. It offers three key contributions: first, it advances a customer centered framework that takes nonverbal communication seriously as a core element of service experience second, it contextualizes service encounters within the specific socio-cultural dynamics of Indonesia, particularly the norms surrounding politeness, bodily proximity, and emotional expression; third, it offers a methodological innovation by applying phenomenological analysis to a largely behaviorally and economically framed domain. By doing so, this research repositions nonverbal communication from the margins to the center of scholarly inquiry in service interaction studies.

2. Research Method

2.1. Flow Chart

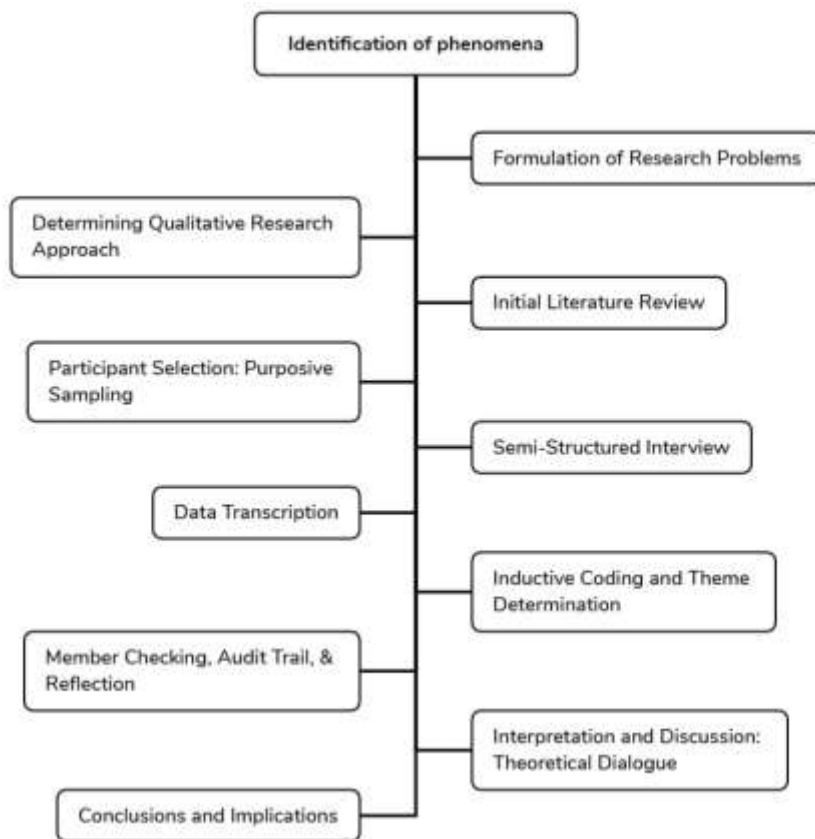


Figure 1. Research Flow Chart

2.2. Research Paradigm

This study uses an interpretive paradigm, which views social reality as a subjective construction based on individual experiences. This paradigm is used because the study aims to understand the meaning of customer experiences toward the nonverbal communication of online transportation drivers, instead of simply measuring the phenomenon quantitatively. Through the interpretive paradigm, researchers attempt to explore customers' personal perceptions and interpretations of nonverbal interactions that occur during service use.

2.3. Type of Research

This research uses exploratory research because it aims to deeply explore a phenomenon that has not been specifically studied, which is customer perceptions of nonverbal communication by online transportation service drivers to determine customer satisfaction based on their personal interpretations of nonverbal communication by online transportation service drivers.

2.4. Research Methods and Techniques

The method used was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This method allows researchers to:

- Explore participants' personal experiences in detail.
- Understand the interpretation process carried out by participants towards the nonverbal interactions of drivers.
- Discover the main themes to find out how customers interpret nonverbal communications.

2.5. Data Collection Techniques were carried out through:

This study will explore further information related to how consumers interpret nonverbal communication carried out by online transportation service drivers directly through subjects who have experienced this phenomenon. This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. The data analysis technique used by the researcher is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The reason for using IPA is that the researcher wants to find out how individuals interpret their personal experiences when using the service.

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with consumers of online transportation services operating actively in Indonesia. The criteria for participants were individuals who had subjective experience in using online transportation services. The researcher created invitations through their social media accounts as an initial means of dissemination, containing the requirements and brief information about the data collection procedures and participant criteria. The researcher also selected participants who met

the research criteria because the research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, which is a sampling technique based on specific considerations or criteria (Sugiyono, 2019).

Purposive sampling was used in this study because it required specific subjects with certain criteria and characteristics. There were 10 participants in this study with the following criteria: 1. Had direct interaction with online transportation drivers; 2. Experienced significant nonverbal communication moments while using online transportation services, referring to interaction experiences where participants consciously noticed nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, body gestures, physical distance, and professional appearance, which participants interpreted as factors that determined their experience as customers; 3. Willing to openly share their experiences when using the service. The interview will last 10-15 minutes and will be conducted online through the Zoom application. The researcher has prepared 5 core questions that will be developed based on the participants' answers. The questions asked include:

- How did you experience the driver's facial expressions and body gestures while using the service?
- How did you experience the driver's tone of voice while using the service?
- How much physical distance did the driver create while using the service?
- How did you experience the professional appearance of the driver and vehicle while using the service?
- How do you interpret the nonverbal communication displayed by the driver in relation to your experience using the service?

The use of 10 participants was due to the fact that in research using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data adequacy is not determined by quantitative data saturation but rather by the depth of interpretation of the data obtained (Smith et al., 2021). The book "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Methods, and Research" by Jonathan A. Smith explains that in IPA, sufficient data is data that deeply explains the meaning of the participant's experiences.

According to Cena et al. (2024), the indicator of a successful IPA is the presence of philosophical consistency in data collection. Philosophical consistency must contain three main principles, which is phenomenology, in which researchers must focus on the subjective experiences of participants; second, hermeneutics, in which researchers must interpret the meaning of participants's subjective experiences rather

than just taking notes; and third, idiography, in which researchers must focus on each case rather than just generalizing all cases and interpreting them in general terms. Cena et al. also state that success in IPA is also determined by an audit trail, which is transparency in research, such as how participants are determined, how interviews are conducted, and how data is coded and interpreted.

Another indicator of success described by Cena et al. is that the narrative in the IPA method must be coherent and deep, not just quotes from participants but stories that contain a whole narrative and are able to convey emotional and personal nuances. A good IPA must use sharp reading analysis, such as analyzing metaphors and implied meanings, and interpreting them in the transcript. Divergence and convergence also need to be considered when transcribing. Researchers should not assume that all participants have had the same experiences, but rather try to dig deeper to find the common thread.

2.6. Research Variables

a. Driver Nonverbal Communication (independent variable)

- Kinesics (body gestures, facial expressions, posture).
- Proxemics (interaction distance).
- Paralanguage (intonation, speech tempo).
- Appearance (physical appearance, cleanliness).

b. Customer Satisfaction (dependent variable)

- Service quality (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibles).
- Perceived value.
- Emotional experience during the trip.

2.7. Data Analysis Techniques

This analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis in accordance with the IPA framework in six stages (Malate et al., 2023):

- Familiarization: researchers will repeatedly read interview transcripts to understand the context.
- Initial Coding: assigning codes to data segments relevant to the research focus.
- Theme Development: grouping codes into early themes.
- Theme Review: reviewing the themes to ensure relevance and consistency.
- Theme Naming: giving clear names to the themes.
- Narrative Report: compiling a narrative of the results with supporting quotes from participants.

Data validity is maintained by:

- **Member checking:** confirming interpretations with participants. Researchers confirm their main interpretations with participants after interviews to ensure that they do not contradict the participants' experiences. This process is not intended to seek absolute confirmation from participants, but rather to ensure consistency between the researcher's interpretations and the participant's experiences.
- **Audit trail:** documenting the entire research process. Researchers use MS Word to perform manual coding so that the entire data analysis process is systematically documented. Researchers create analytical memos by coding line by line and then make reflective notes on each coding by writing down the researcher's initial assumptions to maintain subjective dominance in interpreting the meaning of the participant's experience. This process also aims to record the development and revision of themes. The audit trail process is used to maintain consistency between the researcher's interpretation and the empirical data obtained so that the analysis process can be understood transparently.
- **Reflexivity:** researchers prevent bias in interpreting data by not involving assumptions, personal positions as users of online transportation services, and subjective experiences in analyzing data. This reflection is carried out in an effort to prevent the dominance of the researcher's subjective perspective and to remain open to the meanings created by the participant's experiences.

3. Results

The researchers conducted interviews with 10 participants to find out how they interpreted the nonverbal signals of drivers when using online transportation services. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants with backgrounds as college students and office workers who regularly used online transportation services for mobility in the JABODETABEK area. The researchers identified four main themes, each with subcategories to help interpret the empirical data found.

The researcher identified the main themes and subcategories through manual coding using MS Word as a coding tool. Coding served to apply the idiographic principle required in the IPA method. The keywords found were compiled into a word cloud to make it easier for researchers to present the data.

Anchor Codes	Initial Codes	Data Evidence	Customer Interpretation
Appearance	Not wearing a uniform, different vehicle's number plates, dirty/unroadworthy vehicles, vehicle does not comply	P & AL: found a dirty and unfit vehicle, G: said cleanliness is the main thing in online transportation services, RF, RN, & RT: highlighting the importance of matching vehicle number plates for safety reasons, AA & AX: Ordered using the Grab-XL feature because of a long journey and looking for a bigger and more comfortable motorbike, but what arrived was a motorbike with a small body, G: admits that there is no problem with different number plates as long as there is a logical reason	Inconsistency of vehicle type is interpreted as an unprofessional action by the driver because it is detrimental to customers who have already paid more. The use of complete uniforms or attributes is interpreted as an element of formality that does not have much influence compared to driving performance and vehicle cleanliness/roadworthiness. However, some people find this uncomfortable because it makes it difficult for them to find a driver. Inconsistency vehicle registration numbers can be interpreted as a security risk in using the service because they cannot be traced.
Kinesics	Unfriendly facial expression, sleepy gesture, frowning facial expression, rude body gestures	P: consider a smile or friendly gesture as an added value for the driver, AL & RF: showing angry, cynical and sullen expressions G: got a sneer after reprimanding the driver AL: unpleasant	The rude gesture when giving the helmet was interpreted as a form of the driver's annoyance towards the customer and a lack of sincerity in serving. Sleepy gestures are interpreted as actions that make customers feel unsafe, rude gestures are interpreted as an act of

Anchor Codes	Initial Codes	Data Evidence	Customer Interpretation
		experience where the driver gave him a helmet roughly.	disrespect for customers, and a form of the driver's lack of sincerity in serving them.
Paralanguage	Click his tongue in annoyance, sigh, high intonation	AX, RF, & G: driver clicked his tongue in impatience, P: experienced drivers who used high-pitched voices, such as shouting and getting angry, AL: driver uses a complaining tone	High intonation is interpreted as an impolite act and a form of disrespect for customers. A tone that seems sharp is interpreted as a form of emotional complaint from the driver about the situation and conditions, which makes customers uncomfortable when using the service.
Proxemics	Bag as a divider, driver's back pressed against, sitting too far back	AL & AA: the driver deliberately reversed/pressed his back, G, AA, & RF: using a bag as a distance divider	considers the driver's behavior of deliberately moving the seat back as a violation of personal boundaries and makes customers uncomfortable. Customers feel that minimal contact is a logical consequence of technical factors. customer self-awareness using bags/luggage as a barrier to create personal distance

3.1 Appearance as a First Impression For Customers

The driver's appearance is a first impression of nonverbal cues that are considered important by participants. Participants produced

important elements in interpreting the driver's appearance as nonverbal cues. Elements such as wearing a uniform, the suitability of the vehicle or vehicle number, and the cleanliness of the driver and vehicle are interpreted as factors that can determine the customer experience.

Participant G in the interview explained that vehicle cleanliness is interpreted as a professional action by the driver and as an effort by the driver to improve service quality. According to him, vehicle cleanliness and suitability must be considered in order to improve service quality.

"...if you want to improve service to satisfy customers, something as simple as whether a car is dirty or clean actually has an impact." (Interview G, 2025).

All participants interpreted the suitability and cleanliness of vehicles as a form of respect for customers and leaving a professional impression. Besides cleanliness and suitability of vehicles, the appropriateness of vehicles was an important factor in being perceived as professional by customers. The use of uniforms bothered some participants because it was difficult to find drivers when customers ordered in crowded places.

"It matters because if, for example, we order and the driver isn't wearing a uniform, especially since I ordered a Gojek motorcycle, it's hard to tell which one is the driver, especially if I order in a crowded place like a station where there are many people gathered." (Interview AX, 2026).

AX participants interpreted this experience as something that disrupted their comfort when using the service. A similar sentiment was expressed by RT participants, who said that drivers who did not wear uniforms were not following Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). This interpretation shows that the use of uniforms is seen as a professional act rather than just a formality, even though some participants considered it to be merely a formality, like an AA participant, who considered that wearing a uniform did not really matter, but that the mismatch of vehicle numbers made him feel unsafe.

"Actually, the uniform doesn't really matter. But if the motorcycle has a different license plate or is a different type, that does matter." (Interview AA, 2025).

A similar view was expressed by participant RN, who believes that the vehicle number plate is very important for him when using the service.

“Because I think it’s quite serious. Why? Because we don’t know if the person picking us up is the one from the app or not. If something happens to us, who will be responsible?” (Interview with RN, 2026).

From the experiences of participants AA and RN, it can be seen that vehicle license plate mismatches are not merely technical errors but actions that can be interpreted as disrupting customer safety when using the service. However, differences were found among other participants who did not seem to care much about vehicle number matching.

3.2 Facial Expressions and Body Gestures as a Form of Appreciation

Facial expressions can determine how customers experience the service. The majority of participants interpreted friendly facial expressions as actions that left a positive impression. Positive body language and gestures that showed politeness were also often interpreted by participants as positive actions. On the other hand, unfriendly facial expressions and body language were often interpreted as negative actions.

Participant G shared his experience when he received unpleasant nonverbal cues from an online transportation service driver in the form of a cynical stare when he reprimanded the driver for being sleepy.

“....the driver was sleepy, and I almost had an accident, then I reprimanded him, and he was like.... giving me the side eye” (Interview G, 2025).

Participant G interpreted this experience as rude behavior on the part of the driver. In addition to the fact that drowsiness can endanger passengers, the researcher interpreted the cynical glance as not merely a response to the reprimand, but as a form of rudeness on the part of the driver.

“When it comes to politeness, especially in transportation, which is supposed to prioritize service. Service is how you treat people, right? Just one incident like that can ruin the company’s reputation.” (Interview G, 2025).

Participant G confirmed the researcher’s interpretation by saying that such behavior was rude and that in a service-oriented industry, such

actions could ruin a company's reputation. A similar finding was observed in participant AL, where unfriendly body gestures and facial expressions could leave customers with a negative experience.

“When I met the driver, he was indifferent, and his facial expression was angry, like he was sulking, then he gave me the helmet with an impolite gesture and drove the motorcycle recklessly (very fast).” (Interview AL, 2025).

Participants interpreted this as something that could interfere with their safety and comfort when using the service. Based on the participants' subjective experiences, the researchers interpreted that body gestures and facial expressions were not only seen as a formality in service but also as a form of politeness and respect for customers.

“Usually, if someone is really friendly, they are really friendly, smiling and very nice. That's a real plus...” (interview P, 2025).

Participant P confirmed this by saying that the driver's friendliness was an added value in improving service quality. This shows that friendly gestures are interpreted as a form of respect for customers, not just a formal complement to a service.

3.3 Voice Intonation as an Emotional Cue

Participants shared their experiences when encountering nonverbal cues in the form of voice intonation. Participants interpreted soft and friendly voice intonation as a sign of a professional and polite driver. On the other hand, unfriendly voice intonation and sounds used to express frustration were interpreted by participants as complaining and rude behavior. Participant G shared their experience of encountering drivers who often clicked their tongue to express their complaints.

“.....when there's traffic, it's like 'ck ck' like that....” (Interview G, 2025).

Participant G interpreted this as a form of complaint and emotional outburst from the driver, not as a normal action. This was acknowledged to make participant G feel guilty, even though G realized that it was not his fault. The researcher interpreted participant G's intention as complaining that providing service is unnecessary and can make customers uncomfortable.

Similarities were found among participants P and AA, who interpreted the complaining and unfriendly tone of voices as making their experience of using the services less safe and comfortable. Participants admitted to feeling afraid and uncomfortable when drivers began to express their emotions through certain sounds or angry tones of voice.

“.....actually, because usually when they are Grab Car or Go-Car drivers, their tone starts to get upset and we as passengers feel like we are not free to do anything” (Interview AA, 2025).

The researcher interpreted participant AA's experience as an interpretation of the driver's actions that made customers feel uncomfortable. Participant P even admitted to feeling afraid when the driver got angry because, as a passenger, he did not know the way.

“...it was my first time in that area, so I said, ‘just follow the map, I don't know the way,’ but then he got lost and started getting angry, saying, ‘how come you don't know your way around your workplace?’.....” (Interview P, 2025).

The researcher interpreted this experience as something that disrupted the customer's sense of security when using the service. The participant's fear created a perception of insecurity when using the service. From the above experience, it can be explained that certain intonations and sounds.

3.4 Interpersonal Distance as a Form of Respect for Privacy

The interpersonal distance created by drivers is considered an action that can determine the customer experience. Positive interpersonal distance is interpreted as an action that can leave a positive impression on customers. On the other hand, interpersonal distance that is considered inappropriate can be interpreted as a negative action and leave an impression of insecurity and discomfort on the customer experience.

Participants preferred to protect themselves when physical contact occurred rather than reprimanding the driver directly. To prevent physical contact when interpersonal distance was inappropriate, participants chose to maintain distance from the driver by placing items between themselves and the driver. Participant AA admitted that due to her background as a woman and wearing a hijab, she had a personal awareness to maintain physical distance. Similarities were found in participants G and RF, who chose to limit contact with bags or other belongings as a form of self-protection.

“...as a woman who wears a hijab, I am aware of this issue. I usually place my bag between myself and the driver or sit a little further away from the driver, but often the driver still sits too far back. At first, I thought that perhaps the driver felt uncomfortable sitting too far forward, but I realized that I was already sitting at the edge of the seat. As long as my bag acts as a barrier, I think it’s okay.” (Interview with AA, 2025).

Although the participant did not reprimand the driver directly, the inappropriate interpersonal distance was interpreted as something that disturbed the customer’s comfort. This was explained in an interview where AA admitted to feeling uncomfortable when experiencing this.

“...well, because I was already sitting at the edge of the motorcycle, about to fall, but the driver was still moving backward, which was a bit dangerous. I mean, my body didn’t feel safe sitting there; it was uncomfortable....” (Interview AA, 2025).

Researchers interpreted the experiences of AA participants as a form of insecurity and discomfort due to the interpersonal distance created by drivers. However, AA participants admitted that minimal physical contact and interpersonal distance that was not inappropriate could still be tolerated due to technical factors when using motorcycle-based services. This is in line with participant P, who believes that minimal and reasonable physical contact is a logical consequence of using motorcycle-based services.

“....for example, if he is really close, then it can’t be helped because the motorcycle is small, but if the motorcycle is big, then it’s like it never happens.” (Interview P, 2025).

The researcher interprets the participants' experience as an acceptance of the logical consequences of using motorcycle-based services. However, it should be noted that these logical consequences are based on technical factors such as the small size of the motorcycle. Participants still feel unsafe and uncomfortable if the interpersonal distance is less than reasonable.

4. Discussion

The findings show that nonverbal communication conveyed by online transportation service drivers is not only interpreted as an action

but also as an action that can build a sense of security and comfort in the customer experience. These findings are in line with the research by Malate et al. (2023), which found that nonverbal elements such as body gestures, tone of voice, and friendly facial expressions can enhance positive impressions in the customer experience. This study found that customer experience is determined not only by technical factors in the service, but also by brief nonverbal interactions that consumers interpret during service use. Nonverbal cues are interpreted as a form of respect and politeness towards users (Pijls et al., 2021). The similarity in using the IPA research method leads this study to agree not to reduce participants' experiences to mere quantitative indicators but rather to understand them through interpretation that takes context and subjectivity into account.

Although the research findings are broadly consistent, differences were found in this study because it used customers as participants, while Malate et al.'s (2023) study used Hospitality Management students interning at hotels. This clearly presents a difference. Malate's participants were homogeneous in background, resulting in more stable themes. This study, however, used participants with diverse service experiences, albeit within the same context, namely online transportation services. This makes the interpretation of meaning in this study more ambivalent and situational.

The use of Mehrabian's nonverbal theory needs to be understood carefully. Although the results of the study show the strength of nonverbal cues in customer experience, these findings are not intended to support the 7-38-55 rule described by Mehrabian. The findings of this study explain that the meaning of nonverbal cues is ambivalent, not deterministic, which criticizes Mehrabian's nonverbal theory, which is often used as a guide to emotional clarity. Burgoon et al.'s (2021) research also discusses the complexity of understanding nonverbal cues. Although he believes there is spontaneity, nonverbal cues are still prone to misunderstanding.

This study found surprising findings where customers were reluctant to give very bad ratings, such as 1 star, even though they had a negative experience. Customers said that elements such as compassion, pity, and concern for the impact on the driver's job made them reluctant to give very bad ratings to drivers. These findings are consistent with the phenomenon of reluctance in the study by Sofia et al. (2023), which states that there is empathy and fear of the immediate consequences that service providers will impose on their partners. Furthermore, the phenomenon of reluctance is the consumer's perception that partners are ordinary people,

not professionals in the service field, which makes customers more “tolerant” of driver errors. Finally, there is the collectivist socio-cultural context of Indonesia, which makes Indonesian consumers more forgiving and permissive (Sofia et al., 2023).

These findings constitute a limitation of the study because they do not specifically address how empathy influences ratings of online transportation service drivers. Another limitation pertains to the data collection method, which involved post-incident interviews. This approach may introduce recall bias, as participants' reflections on their subjective experiences could be affected. Additionally, the research subjects were limited to online transportation service customers. As a result, the study only examines customers' perspectives on nonverbal communication in online transportation services, leading to one-way data collection and not capturing drivers' perspectives. Finally, the study does not specifically explore the impact of culture on the interpretation of nonverbal communication. This gap highlights an opportunity for future research to incorporate cultural context, thereby providing more nuanced and contextualized results.

The results of this study answer the question of how customers interpret their experiences with nonverbal communication displayed by online transportation service drivers. Customers interpret nonverbal communication displayed by online transportation service drivers not merely as complementary elements, but as actions that determine the driver's attitude, intentions, and emotional state. The implications of these findings suggest that customer experience management cannot be reduced to purely quantitative elements, as the results demonstrate that the interpretation of nonverbal communication is complex and context-dependent. The finding that customers are reluctant to give bad ratings despite negative experiences illustrates that rating systems contain elements of empathy and moral dilemmas, not just technical ones.

Therefore, a more humane approach is needed that pays more attention to moral and relational considerations, such as evaluating the direct consequences of receiving a bad rating. This ensures that customers do not perceive a direct threat to the driver when given a bad rating. This clearly takes moral and relational values into account, recognizing the complexity of the customer-driver relationship. The absence of perceived threats to the driver when given a bad rating also eliminates the symbolic power imbalance that makes customers reluctant to exercise that power. By considering these elements, the rating system becomes more.

Practically, the differences in interpretation compared to previous research suggest that driver nonverbal communication training cannot

focus on the same behavioral standards. Instead, it can be directed at developing situational sensitivity and emotional awareness, fostering flexibility in understanding nonverbal interactions. The findings also provide a new understanding that customer experience management needs to be developed not solely through technocratic approaches but also through approaches that consider interpretation and experience.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that nonverbal communication in online transportation services plays a major role for customers in interpreting their experiences with online transportation services. Nonverbal cues displayed by drivers, such as facial expressions and body gestures, voice intonation, interpersonal distance, and professional appearance, are not interpreted merely as actions but as a means of conveying the driver's messages and emotions (Prameswari et al., 2023). The nonverbal cues that emerge are also not interpreted in a singular way but are interpreted in various ways by customers as representations of professionalism and respect for customers.

This study found that negatively interpreted experiences do not always result in very poor ratings. This is related to customers' experience, reluctance to give very poor ratings due to moral considerations, and empathy for drivers. Customers are known to fear the impact that will be felt by drivers as the object of evaluation. This shows that ratings are not only seen as a means of evaluation but also as a social consideration connected to customer morality.

This study uses classical theory that supports the importance of nonverbal communication, but at the same time sets limits on research on how nonverbal theory is viewed as a universal theory. Through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, researchers found criticism of the theory, whereby this study emphasizes nonverbal communication that is formed through subjective interpretation rather than referring solely to quantitative rules. This led the researcher to recognize another limitation, which is that this study was based on the subjective interpretations of participants as customers, which limited information about how drivers themselves interpreted nonverbal communication and drivers' views regarding assessment. Another limitation is that participant information is based on post-event stories, which may have been influenced by rationalization and memory, potentially affecting how experiences are recounted during interviews.

The solution found to address the problem of this research is not merely a technical solution, but rather one that is oriented and focused on

the customer experience, as an emotional response to the nonverbal communication displayed by online transportation drivers. The findings of this study demonstrate how customers perceive the service through subjective stories and their personal interpretations of its meaning. This can be used as a practical solution, whereby service delivery emphasizes not only technical standards but also sensitivity in interpersonal communication with customers, not merely a formality.

This research generates innovation by presenting interpretative-based findings from customer experiences that examine the ambivalent reception of nonverbal communication. The findings suggest that customers perceive this as something that is responded to emotionally, but not directly used as a fundamental basis for evaluating performance. This research repositions nonverbal elements as not merely linear elements that determine service quality but emotional clarity that is interpreted contextually and can be negotiated logically by customers. The findings of this study show that the rating feature is not merely a component used for quantitative assessment, but can also be a venue where customers' moral dilemmas arise, demonstrating evaluative behavior.

In practical terms, this study recommends that online transportation service providers pay attention to nonverbal aspects and emotional and relational experiences between customers and drivers, rather than focusing solely on technical aspects to improve service quality. However, the implications of this study should be understood reflectively, given that it was conducted from the customer's perspective and is not intended to be generalized as a guidebook.

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