

Employee Service Communication in Creating Customer Satisfaction at Cue Club Pool and Coffee

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Abstract

This study examines how frontline employees' service communication shapes customer satisfaction in a business that combines two simultaneous service lines billiard and café using Cue Club Pool and Coffee in Madiun, Indonesia, as a case. Prior qualitative accounts of interpersonal service communication have concentrated on single-line service settings such as hotels, restaurants, banks, and hospitals, and the limited work on billiard-café ventures has examined servicescape and experiential marketing without addressing how frontline communication itself is enacted or how it translates into satisfaction. This study addresses that gap. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from five purposively selected informants (three customers and two employees) through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation, and analyzed with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model through open, axial, and selective coding. Findings show that employees' service communication reflects DeVito's five interpersonal characteristics (openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, equality) with uneven consistency, and as this study's central contribution that customer satisfaction is generated through two distinct mechanisms: a functional pathway (speed, information reliability, transactional accuracy) and a relational pathway (personal familiarity, preference recognition, memorable service moments), with the relational pathway emerging as the stronger driver of satisfaction that exceeds expectations. Declines in the SERVQUAL dimensions of reliability and responsiveness are explained by workload pressure and the emotional labor employees perform to sustain positive affect during high-traffic periods. The study contributes a dual-pathway model of satisfaction formation in combined entertainment-service businesses and offers practical recommendations for similar ventures.

Keywords

Service Communication, Customer Satisfaction, Interpersonal Communication, Functional And Relational Pathways, SERVQUAL, Billiard-Café Business



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INTRODUCTION

Service communication is a form of interpersonal communication that determines the success of a service business, as the quality of interactions between employees and customers directly shapes customers' perceptions of the company. Tjiptono (1996) outlined that quality service encompasses four key elements: speed, kindness, generosity, and comfort. Similarly, Parasuraman et al. (1988) proposed five key dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, one of which explicitly includes the means of communication between employees and customers. Service communication quality ultimately leads to customer satisfaction, which Kotler and Keller (2009) define as the feeling of pleasure or disappointment that arises after comparing perceived service performance with expected performance.

Empirical studies on service communication have developed across various single-service industry contexts. In the hospitality sector, the quality of front-line employee communication has been shown to be closely related to guest satisfaction, while the accompanying emotional workload also influences service consistency (Choi et al., 2019). In the retail and community-based business sectors, suboptimal communication strategies and operational constraints have been shown to hamper efforts to improve customer satisfaction (Aisyah et al., in the *Journal of Economics and Resource Management*). In the healthcare sector, interpersonal communication among hospital customer service officers has also been shown to impact patient satisfaction (DOAJ indexed source, 2018, complete reference not yet identified; authors are requested to provide author names and article titles before submission). In the public service sector, the application of DeVito's five interpersonal communication characteristics by frontline officers has been shown to build comfort and trust among prospective Hajj pilgrims at the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office in Madiun City (Prayogi, Hariyani, & Nurchayati, 2022). DeVito's interpersonal communication characteristics have also been specifically applied to the context of fast food restaurants and food and beverage retail outlets, where employee openness, empathy, supportiveness, positive feelings, and equality have been shown to influence customer satisfaction, albeit with uneven consistency across dimensions (Iksan & Sanjaya, 2023). This pattern is also reflected in the application of DeVito's five concepts in fresh produce retail outlets to build customer loyalty (Rizky Islami, 2025).

At the cafe business level, recent research shows that the quality of service interactions and the creation of a well-managed customer experience have a positive and significant impact on consumer loyalty (Putri & Suryani, 2024), in line with the

finding that excellent service communication training for employees contributes to service quality in similar cafe businesses (Sari & Diah, 2023). The growth of billiards-based entertainment businesses combined with the cafe concept in Indonesia demonstrates a similar pattern. Industry data shows that the number of coffee shops in Indonesia is estimated to reach around 10,000 outlets with revenues of around IDR 80 trillion (Indonesian Coffee and Chocolate Entrepreneurs Association, 2023), while the billiards business trend is also increasing, especially among the younger generation, who use it as a space for activities and socializing outside of the home and office. This lifestyle shift has encouraged many businesses to combine billiard tables with cafes, as the presence of a cafe not only adds to the attractiveness of the business but also opens up opportunities for customers to enjoy food or drinks while playing billiards. Cue Club Pool and Coffee itself represents the scale of this business in concrete terms: it stands as the only branchless location, with 26 billiard tables operating simultaneously with cafe services, so that service interactions occur simultaneously on two lines and require employees to manage two different communication contexts simultaneously.

Studies of existing billiards-cafe businesses, such as Setia Coffee & Billiards in Medan, show that servicescape (the atmosphere of the room) and experiential marketing significantly influence customer loyalty (Putri & Suryani, 2024). These studies emphasize the importance of the service experience in such combined businesses, but they do not examine how employee service communication is implemented in direct interactions, nor how these communication patterns mechanistically shape customer satisfaction. In other words, the development of the literature can be mapped as follows: research on service communication and customer satisfaction has largely covered the context of hotels, restaurants, banks, hospitals, and public service offices; studies in entertainment businesses (billiards, cafes) are still limited; studies on combined billiards and cafes are even more limited, focusing on servicescape-loyalty rather than service communication; and the narrowest gap that has not been studied at all in this combined context is employee service communication as a mechanism for shaping satisfaction. This research is positioned precisely in this gap.

The novelty of this research lies in two aspects. First, this study positions service communication, rather than simply the servicescape or physical experience of the space, as the primary unit of analysis in a billiards-cafe business context that requires employees to engage in service communication across two distinct lines of interaction simultaneously, a requirement not present in previous single-service communication

studies. Second, and more importantly, the findings identify that customer satisfaction in this context is formed through two distinct pathways: a functional pathway, which relies on speed, information reliability, and transaction accuracy, and a relational pathway, which relies on personal closeness, preference recognition, and exceptional service moments. This two-path model constitutes a key conceptual contribution of the study, as it demonstrates that satisfaction that exceeds expectations (rather than simply meeting expectations) consistently originates from the relational pathway, a distinction not explicitly addressed in previous service communication literature.

Although theoretically, service communication quality has a strong relationship with customer satisfaction, in practice, not all service businesses are able to achieve this ideal. This gap between ideal conditions and the reality on the ground is what makes this research urgent: the rapid market growth in the billiards-cafe sector has not been matched by adequate academic studies on how employee service communication is implemented in the field and how it actually shapes customer satisfaction.

Based on this description, this study aims to: (1) describe the patterns of employee service communication with customers at Cue Club Pool and Coffee; (2) identify the functional and relational pathway mechanisms that shape customer satisfaction; and (3) identify the factors that support and hinder employee service communication in creating customer satisfaction.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study strategy (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022; Yin, 2018), following the basic principles of qualitative research (Sugiyono, 2019; Rijal Fadli, 2021). The underlying paradigm is constructivism, which views social reality as the result of the construction of meaning constructed by individuals based on their experiences and interactions with their social environment. The case study was chosen because it allows the researcher to describe in detail the context, process, and meaning of service communication as directly experienced by employees and customers in its natural setting.

Research Location and Time

The research was conducted at Cue Club Pool and Coffee, Ruko Sun City, Jl. S. Parman No. 8, Oro-oro Ombo, Kartoharjo District, Madiun City. This business is the only location without a branch, with 26 billiard tables operating alongside cafe services. This single-site scale was chosen precisely because it fully represents the phenomenon of combining two types of services, which is the focus of the study, while also allowing for in-depth understanding of a single case unit rather than superficial comparisons between locations. The study lasted two weeks, from June 19 to July 2.

Research Subjects and Sample Size Justification

The study involved five informants selected purposively: three customers (Ardian Budi Handoko, Adib An Naufal, Daman Huri) and two employees (Jelo as a server, and Anggi Putri Setyo Nurani as a cashier). Inclusion criteria for customer informants included: (a) having visited and used the billiards and cafe services at least three times in the past three months; and (b) being willing to be interviewed. Inclusion criteria for employee informants included: (a) being an active employee/server with a minimum of six months' service; and (b) being willing to volunteer as an informant.

The sample size of five informants was justified following the principle of information power (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016), which states that the adequacy of a qualitative sample depends on the specificity of the sample, the research objectives, the use of established theory, the quality of the dialogue, and the analysis strategy rather than solely the number of participants. Four considerations support the adequacy of the sample in this study: (1) the specificity of the sample is high, because the five informants are key actors in a single, small-scale business unit (26 desks, no branches) so that the relevant informant population is indeed limited; (2) the study uses an established theoretical framework (DeVito's five characteristics and the five dimensions of SERVQUAL) as an initial coding map, which reduces the need for a large sample to build theory from scratch; (3) the quality of the dialogue is high, because informants are selected based on the intensity of engagement (regular customers with a history of one to three years of visits; employees with more than one year of service) so that each interview is rich in information; and (4) triangulation of sources (customers, employees, observations) strengthens depth without relying on increasing the number of informants in the same category. Data saturation is considered to have been achieved when interviews with the fifth informant no longer produce new codes or themes outside the categories that have been formed by the four previous informants, but instead only strengthen (confirm) the same pattern - a condition that is in line with the scale of the single-location business being studied.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through: (1) semi-structured interviews using interview guidelines developed based on DeVito's interpersonal communication characteristics and SERVQUAL dimensions; (2) participant observation, given that the researcher also served as an employee/server at the research site; (3) documentation in the form of photographs of service activities and standard operating procedures (if available); and (4) digital data from customer reviews on public platforms such as Google Maps or Instagram.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher's status as an active server at the research site provided insider access that enriched participant observation, but potentially introduced insider bias—both in the form of over-familiarity with practices considered "normal," which could be overlooked, and the potential for informant responses to be biased (social desirability) due to the knowledge that the interviewer was a co-worker. To manage this potential bias, the study adopted the principle of insider-researcher reflexivity (Mohler & Rudman, 2022; Sai Htong Kham, 2024) through three steps. First, the researcher consciously positioned herself as an insider during the interviews, explicitly explaining to the informants that their answers would be used for academic purposes and not for performance evaluation, to reduce the pressure of social desirability. Second, the researcher wrote reflective notes after each interview and observation session to separate personal assumptions as an employee from what the informants actually said or did. Third, the initial interpretations were reconfirmed with the reporter (member check) and cross-referenced with customer perspectives through source triangulation, ensuring that employee narratives (including the researcher's own narrative as a server) did not stand alone without verification from the service recipient.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. The coding process was carried out in three phases. In the open coding phase, interview transcripts and observation notes were read line by line to identify initial codes, without being constrained by a theoretical framework, such as specific expressions about information disclosure, responses to complaints, or recognition of customer preferences. In the axial coding phase, these initial codes were grouped into larger categories based on the a priori framework (DeVito's five characteristics and SERVQUAL's five dimensions), while allowing categories not fully captured by the framework to emerge as separate categories. It was during this process that the functional and relational path categories were identified as cross-cutting groups across the five DeVito characteristics, rather than simply being derived from one characteristic. In the selective coding phase, these categories were integrated into a core narrative explaining the relationship between service communication patterns and customer satisfaction, with the relational path designated as the core category because it consistently explained variance in satisfaction levels across all customer informants. The audit trail of this process was documented through field notes during

participant observation, verbatim interview transcripts, and analytic memos that recorded the researcher's considerations for each code grouping decision, allowing for retracement of the interpretation process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the Informants and Research Background

This study involved five informants who provided complementary perspectives on the phenomenon of service communication at Cue Club Pool and Coffee. Three customer informants represented different customer profiles. Ardian Budi Handoko (approximately two years of weekly visits) represented a highly frequent regular customer; Adib An Naufal (approximately one year of biweekly visits) represented a moderately frequent customer whose primary interest was playing billiards; and Daman Huri (approximately three years of weekly to twice-weekly visits) represented the most loyal customer with active involvement in the customer community. Two employee informants represented different service functions: Jelo (2 years and 3 months of employment), who worked as a server in the billiards area, and Anggi Putri Setyo Nurani (1 year and 1 month of employment), who served as a cashier in the transaction area. This combination of informants enabled a comprehensive understanding of service communication practices from both the customer and service provider perspectives.

Table 1. Research Informant Profiles

Informant	Role	Length of Involvement	Key Characteristics
Ardian Budi Handoko	Customer	Approximately 2 years, weekly visits	Highly frequent regular customer
Adib An Naufal	Customer	Approximately 1 year, biweekly visits	Moderate visit frequency, focused on billiards activities
Daman Huri	Customer	Approximately 3 years, weekly to twice-weekly visits	Most loyal customer with active community involvement
Jelo	Employee (Server)	2 years and 3 months	Assigned to the billiards service area

Anggi Putri Setyo Nurani	Employee (Cashier)	1 year and 1 month	Assigned to the transaction/cashier area
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Service Communication Patterns: DeVito's Five Characteristics

The analysis of interview and observational data revealed that all five characteristics of interpersonal communication proposed by DeVito (2011) were evident in the service practices at Cue Club Pool and Coffee. However, the consistency of these characteristics varied across different customer categories. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted in other service settings, such as research on interpersonal communication among McDonald's employees, which likewise found that all five communication dimensions were present but implemented with varying degrees of consistency (Iksan & Sanjaya, 2023).

I've translated your text into academic English while preserving the meaning, interview quotations, and qualitative research style.

Openness

Openness was reflected in employees' willingness to proactively provide important information to customers. Among customers with a high frequency of visits and well-established personal relationships, this communication pattern was consistently observed:

"They usually tell me right away which tables are available, the hourly rates, and whether there are any promotions without me having to ask first." (Ardian)

However, this openness was not applied equally to all customers. For customers who visited less frequently, communication remained conditional and largely responsive to direct inquiries:

"Sometimes I have to ask first before they tell me. For example, I only found out about the happy hour promotion because I asked about it myself." (Adib)

These findings indicate that communication openness has not yet become a universal service norm but instead depends on the level of familiarity between employees and customers. From the employees' perspective, openness was demonstrated through honesty in communicating service conditions, even when the circumstances were less than ideal:

"I usually tell them honestly, like, 'We're fully booked, you'll need to wait about 15 minutes,' rather than giving false information and making them more disappointed later." (Jelo)

Empathy

Employee empathy was demonstrated through their ability to recognize customers' needs without requiring verbal expression, relying instead on observations of nonverbal cues:

"Sometimes when I look like I'm searching for something, such as the right billiard cue, the staff immediately asks, 'Do you need help choosing a cue?' It makes me feel that they really pay attention." (Ardian)

The strongest expression of empathy appeared among customers with high visit frequency, where employees had become familiar with individual preferences and anticipated them without being asked:

"They know my habits, like the fact that I prefer sitting at the corner table. They prepare it for me without me having to ask." (Daman)

From the employees' perspective, empathy was practiced through strategic observation of customers' behavior, indicating that empathy is not merely an innate attitude but also a learned nonverbal communication skill:

"You can usually tell from their facial expressions or body language. If someone looks confused or seems to be looking for something, I approach them first and offer assistance." (Jelo)

Supportiveness

Supportiveness was reflected in employees' constructive and non-defensive responses to customer complaints:

"Once I complained that the air conditioner wasn't cold enough. They responded quickly, checked it immediately, apologized, and informed me that it was being repaired. They weren't defensive at all — they genuinely wanted to solve the problem." (Ardian)

From the employees' perspective, maintaining a supportive attitude required active self-management, particularly controlling emotional reactions when dealing with complaints:

“At first I feel nervous, but I try to stay calm, listen carefully, apologize, and then find a solution.” (Jelo)

This statement suggests that supportiveness is not a spontaneous response but rather the result of emotional regulation and learned communication strategies—a pattern that is further reflected in the dimensions of positiveness and emotional labor discussed below.

Positiveness

Positiveness was demonstrated through employees' friendly attitudes and pleasant tone of voice, which were consistently recognized by customers:

“Generally, yes. They’re always smiling. Of course, they’re human too, so sometimes they look tired when it’s really busy, but they’re still polite.” (Ardian)

This customer perception suggests that positiveness is not simply a natural emotional state but the outcome of employees' conscious efforts to maintain a friendly demeanor despite demanding working conditions, as acknowledged by the employees themselves:

“I just force myself to smile, haha. I remind myself that customers want to be treated well, so I push through the exhaustion.” (Jelo)

The phrase *“force myself to smile”* indicates that the displayed positiveness results from deliberate emotional regulation rather than authentic emotional expression. This finding is consistent with Hochschild's (1983) concept of **emotional labor**, which has been reaffirmed in contemporary frontline service contexts. Service employees systematically regulate their emotional expressions to create positive customer experiences despite experiencing fatigue (Zhao, Fu, Freeney, & Flood, 2020). Such emotional labor has been shown to enhance customers' perceptions of service quality while simultaneously increasing the risk of emotional exhaustion among employees (Choi, Mohammad, & Kim, 2019; Nggili, Sari, & Wijaya, 2024). Consequently, customers' satisfaction with employees' friendliness at Cue Club Pool and Coffee is fundamentally supported by a substantial emotional investment on the part of the employees.

Equality

Equality was reflected in employees' consistent treatment of all customers regardless of how long they had been patrons of the establishment:

"I think everyone is treated equally. Whether it's me, who comes here regularly, or my friend who's visiting for the first time, the service is the same. Nobody is treated differently." (Ardian)

However, equal treatment in terms of basic service did not eliminate the closer personal relationships that naturally developed with long-term customers:

"What's interesting is that even though I'm a long-time customer, I see the staff treating new customers the same way. There's no obvious difference in service. The only difference is that our conversations are more familiar because we've known each other for a long time." (Daman)

From the employees' perspective, faster and more efficient service for regular customers resulted from familiarity with their preferences rather than discrimination against new customers:

"Basically, everyone is treated the same. It's just more relaxed with customers we already know because we understand their habits." (Jelo)

Key Finding: Functional and Relational Pathways in Customer Satisfaction Formation

Beyond mapping DeVito's five characteristics of interpersonal communication, the selective coding analysis identified a core category that transcends these dimensions and represents the study's principal finding rather than a mere extension of existing theory. Customer satisfaction at Cue Club Pool and Coffee is constructed through two complementary yet distinct mechanisms: a **functional pathway** and a **relational pathway**. The functional pathway is grounded in the informative aspects of openness, including timely information delivery, reliable communication regarding pricing and table availability, and transaction accuracy. In contrast, the relational pathway is built upon empathy and equality, emphasizing personal closeness, recognition of individual customer preferences, and memorable service experiences that emerge through repeated interactions over time.

Table 2. Comparison of Functional and Relational Pathways in the Formation of Customer Satisfaction

Aspect		Functional Pathway	Relational Pathway
Underlying Characteristics	DeVito	Openness (informational)	Empathy and Equality (relational)
Core Elements		Timely information, reliable pricing and table availability, transaction accuracy	Personal closeness, recognition of customer preferences, memorable service experiences
Contribution to Customer Satisfaction		Minimum requirement (baseline satisfaction)	Differentiating factor leading to satisfaction beyond customer expectations
Resilience Workload	Under High	More vulnerable to decline during periods of high customer volume	Relatively stable because it develops through accumulated long-term interactions
Empirical (Informants)	Evidence	Adib An Naufal—standard level of satisfaction	Daman Huri—satisfaction exceeding expectations

The variation in the interview data demonstrated a hierarchical pattern of customer satisfaction corresponding to the intensity and duration of the customer–employee relationship. This hierarchy provides the primary empirical support for the proposed dual-pathway model.

Customers with frequent visits and strong personal relationships with employees, represented by Daman Huri, reported satisfaction that exceeded their initial expectations:

“It actually exceeded my expectations. At first, I thought this was just an ordinary billiards venue, but the service turned out to be very personal.” (Daman)

Customers with relatively regular visit frequencies, represented by Ardian Budi Handoko, described their satisfaction as meeting expectations while occasionally exceeding them under particularly positive service conditions:

“In my opinion, it meets my expectations. Sometimes it even exceeds them when the staff are especially friendly and the service is very fast.” (Ardian)

Meanwhile, customers with less frequent visits, represented by Adib An Naufal, reported satisfaction at a standard level without any distinctive or exceptional service experience. Their satisfaction was also somewhat diminished by inconsistencies in the information provided:

“For me, it simply meets expectations—nothing more, nothing less. I was a little dissatisfied with the inconsistency in the pricing information.” (Adib)

This hierarchical pattern indicates that the **relational pathway** plays a crucial role in moving customers beyond basic satisfaction toward long-term loyalty. Customers

who experienced a strong relational pathway consistently reported satisfaction that exceeded their expectations, whereas those whose experiences were primarily limited to the functional pathway reported only moderate or standard levels of satisfaction. Consequently, the functional pathway can be understood as the **minimum prerequisite for customer satisfaction (baseline satisfaction)**, while the relational pathway serves as the **key differentiating factor** that transforms ordinary service encounters into exceptional customer experiences with the potential to foster enduring customer loyalty.

Service Quality from the SERVQUAL Perspective: Why Reliability and Responsiveness Decline

An analysis based on the five SERVQUAL dimensions revealed variations in service quality across different aspects of customer service. **Reliability** and **responsiveness** emerged as the two dimensions most vulnerable to performance decline, particularly during peak operating hours or when services were handled by relatively inexperienced employees, as reflected in Adib's complaint regarding inconsistent pricing information. In contrast, **assurance** and **empathy** constituted the primary strengths of the service, with empathy demonstrating the greatest potential to differentiate Cue Club Pool and Coffee from its competitors.

The decline in reliability and responsiveness should not be understood merely as a surface-level observation but rather as the outcome of an interconnected causal chain. First, high customer traffic during peak hours increases employees' workload, requiring them to simultaneously manage both the billiards and café service areas. This heavier workload reduces their attentional capacity to communicate information consistently, accurately, and promptly. Second, the increased workload coincides with the emotional labor expected of frontline employees, who are required to maintain friendliness and a positive attitude despite operational pressures. This expectation was explicitly acknowledged by Jelo through the expression *"I just force myself to smile."* Such emotional regulation consumes the same cognitive and emotional resources needed to process and communicate information accurately. Third, the interaction between excessive workload and emotional labor ultimately reduces the quality of service communication in its informational dimension, which forms the foundation of the **functional pathway** of customer satisfaction. In contrast, the **relational pathway**, characterized by empathy and personal closeness, remains relatively stable because it

has been established through accumulated long-term interactions and therefore depends less on daily situational conditions.

This explanatory chain linking **workload**, **emotional labor**, and **service communication quality** is consistent with previous research demonstrating that frontline employees' emotional labor is closely associated with fluctuations in customers' perceptions of service quality, particularly during periods of high workload (Zhao, Fu, Freeney, & Flood, 2020; Choi, Mohammad, & Kim, 2019).

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Service Communication

Data triangulation across the five informants identified several factors that significantly influenced the effectiveness of service communication. The principal **supporting factors** included employees' work experience, team cohesion, and the initial training provided during the recruitment process. These factors were consistently identified as the foundation enabling employees to demonstrate DeVito's five characteristics of interpersonal communication effectively throughout the service encounter.

Conversely, the primary **inhibiting factors** were associated with high customer density during peak hours, limited human resources resulting from insufficient staffing, and inconsistencies in the information delivered by newly recruited employees.

The analysis further revealed that supporting factors were predominantly **internal**, reflecting employees' competencies, experience, and organizational capabilities, whereas inhibiting factors were largely **external** and **situational**, arising from operational conditions. The interaction between these two groups of factors is inherently dynamic. As customer volume increases during particular periods, the likelihood of communication barriers also rises, reinforcing the previously identified **workload–emotional labor–service communication** mechanism. However, these negative effects can be mitigated through stronger supporting factors, particularly by increasing the number of experienced employees available during peak operating hours and improving team coordination to maintain consistency in service communication.

Discussion: Positioning the Findings within Previous Research

The finding that all five of DeVito's interpersonal communication characteristics were present, albeit with varying degrees of consistency, **confirms** patterns reported in previous studies of frontline employee communication. For example, research conducted in the fast-food restaurant industry found that all five dimensions of interpersonal communication were evident but were implemented with unequal levels of effectiveness across service encounters (Iksan & Sanjaya, 2023). A similar pattern was also identified in studies of interpersonal communication among retail employees (Rizky Islami, 2025). Furthermore, the present findings support evidence from the public service sector, where the same five characteristics proposed by DeVito were shown to effectively foster comfort and trust among prospective Hajj pilgrims, despite being implemented in a non-commercial and single-service environment (Prayogi, Hariyani, & Nurchayati, 2022). The consistency of these findings across diverse service settings—including fast-food restaurants, retail businesses, public services, and now a billiards café—strengthens the theoretical generalizability of DeVito's interpersonal communication framework across different service contexts. At the same time, it highlights that the consistency with which these characteristics are implemented remains highly dependent on the specific situational conditions of each service environment.

The present study also **diverges** from quantitative SERVQUAL research conducted in similar hospitality settings. For instance, research employing the SERVQUAL model combined with Quality Function Deployment (QFD) in café businesses primarily quantified service quality gaps across individual dimensions without explaining the mechanisms underlying those gaps (Sandi Yudha & Isa Lufti, 2024). By contrast, the qualitative approach adopted in this study goes beyond merely identifying the magnitude of service quality gaps by providing an analytical explanation of how such gaps emerge. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that declining service quality can be understood through the interconnected mechanism of **workload**, **emotional labor**, and **service communication**, thereby offering explanatory insights that cannot be obtained from quantitative gap scores alone. This distinction illustrates the added value of qualitative inquiry in uncovering the processes and causal relationships underlying customer service experiences.

At the same time, this study **extends** the findings of Putri and Suryani (2024), who reported that **servicescape** and **experiential marketing** significantly influenced

customer loyalty at Setia Coffee & Billiard in Medan. The present research introduces **service communication** as an additional mediating dimension that was absent from the previous model. Accordingly, the process through which customer loyalty develops in billiards café businesses can be conceptualized as a more comprehensive framework. Rather than a simple pathway from **servicescape to customer loyalty**, the findings suggest that **servicescape** and **service communication**, operating through both the **functional pathway** and the **relational pathway**, jointly shape customer satisfaction, which subsequently promotes long-term customer loyalty. Within this framework, employees' **emotional labor** functions as a sustaining condition that enables the relational pathway to remain effective despite operational pressures and increasing workloads.

The present study also extends the work of Prayogi, Hariyani, and Nurchayati (2022) by transferring DeVito's interpersonal communication framework from a **single-service public sector context** (Hajj registration services) to a **dual-service commercial environment** consisting of both billiards and café operations. This shift in context generated an important conceptual contribution: the emergence of the **functional pathway** and **relational pathway** as two distinct mechanisms through which customer satisfaction is constructed. Such differentiation was less relevant in a single-service, non-commercial setting but becomes critical in a commercial environment where employees must simultaneously manage multiple types of customer interactions while maintaining both informational accuracy and interpersonal relationships.

Table 3. Positioning the Present Findings in Relation to Previous Studies

Previous Study	Context	Main Findings	Position of the Present Study
Iksan & Sanjaya (2023)	Fast-food restaurant (McDonald's)	All five of DeVito's interpersonal communication characteristics were present but implemented inconsistently across dimensions.	Confirms
Prayogi, Hariyani, & Nurchayati (2022)	Public service (Ministry of Religious Affairs, prospective Hajj)	DeVito's five interpersonal communication characteristics promoted customer comfort and	Confirms and extends by applying the framework to a dual-service commercial setting.

	pilgrims)	trust.	
Sandi Yudha & Isa Lufti (2024)	Café business; SERVQUAL with Quality Function Deployment (quantitative)	Identified service quality gap scores across SERVQUAL dimensions.	Diverges by using a qualitative approach to explain the mechanisms underlying the observed service quality gaps.
Putri & Suryani (2024)	Billiards café (Setia Coffee & Billiard, Medan)	Servicescape and experiential marketing significantly influenced customer loyalty.	Extends by incorporating service communication as a mediating mechanism through the functional and relational pathways leading to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

CONCLUSION

Cue Club Pool and Coffee's employee service communications reflect DeVito's five interpersonal communication characteristics with varying degrees of consistency: empathy and supportiveness emerge as key strengths, while openness remains dependent on personal intimacy with customers, and perceived positive feelings are the result of emotional regulation that requires conscious effort on the part of employees. Customer satisfaction is shaped through two complementary pathways: functional (speed, information reliability, transaction accuracy) and relational (personal intimacy, preference recognition, exceptional service moments), with the latter consistently driving satisfaction beyond expectations. Key enabling factors include work experience, team cohesion, and initial training; inhibiting factors stem from traffic congestion, resource constraints, and inconsistent information from new employees, which are analytically linked through the chain of workload and employee emotional labor.

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