

TACIT KNOWLEDGE SHARING AMONG BARISTAS IN THE COFFEE SHOP INDUSTRY: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY AT DE NGOKOW COFFEE ROASTERY & TEA CLUB

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the mechanisms of tacit knowledge sharing among baristas in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the food and beverage sector in Indonesia. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study design at de Ngokow Coffee Roastery & Tea Club in Yogyakarta. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires with 14 baristas, then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of knowledge sharing and organizational learning. The results showed that experiential learning is the primary means of barista skill acquisition, particularly related to sensory abilities, brewing techniques, and customer service. Tacit knowledge transfer occurs predominantly through senior-junior mentoring, direct observation, and informal interactions in the workplace. The study also found that high employee turnover risks the loss of organizational knowledge due to the lack of a structured knowledge documentation system. These findings emphasize the importance of developing mentoring programs, visual documentation, and employee retention strategies to maintain the sustainability of competencies in MSMEs in the food and beverage sector. This study provides an empirical contribution to the study of knowledge management in the hospitality industry and MSMEs in Indonesia.

Keywords: Tacit Knowledge, Knowledge Sharing, Barista, Human Resource Management, MSMEs

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi mekanisme berbagi pengetahuan tacit di antara barista pada usaha mikro, kecil, dan menengah (UMKM) sektor makanan dan minuman di Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus pada de Ngokow Coffee Roastery & Tea Club di Yogyakarta. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan kuesioner terbuka terhadap 14 barista, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola berbagi pengetahuan dan pembelajaran organisasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman menjadi cara utama dalam memperoleh keterampilan barista, terutama terkait kemampuan sensorik, teknik penyeduhan, dan pelayanan pelanggan. Transfer pengetahuan tacit berlangsung secara dominan melalui mentoring senior-junior, observasi langsung, dan interaksi informal di tempat kerja. Penelitian juga menemukan bahwa tingginya pergantian karyawan menyebabkan risiko hilangnya pengetahuan organisasi karena belum adanya sistem dokumentasi pengetahuan yang terstruktur. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya pengembangan program mentoring, dokumentasi visual, dan strategi retensi karyawan untuk menjaga keberlanjutan kompetensi dalam UMKM sektor makanan dan minuman. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi empiris terhadap kajian manajemen pengetahuan pada industri perhotelan dan UMKM di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Pengetahuan Tersirat, Berbagi Pengetahuan, Barista, Manajemen Sumber Daya Manusia, UMKM

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INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian coffee shop industry has undergone a period of extraordinary transformation, evolving from a simple beverage consumption space into a dynamic arena of social interaction, lifestyle expression, and cultural identity. This rapid growth trajectory has positioned the coffee shop sector as one of the most competitive and experiential segments within the broader food and beverage (F&B) industry. In this highly dynamic business landscape, service quality and the interactive competence of baristas have emerged as primary determinants of positive customer experience and sustained brand loyalty. Consequently, the human resource (HR) competencies of baristas, those individuals operating at the frontline of service delivery constitute a critical strategic asset that provides organizations with a meaningful competitive advantage (Rivera-Acosta et al., 2021).

A barista's expertise, however, extends well beyond the boundaries of formal written procedures or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The craft of coffee preparation is fundamentally grounded in tacit knowledge, knowledge rooted in embodied action, sensory perception, and personal experience (Ribeiro, 2014). This includes intuitive sensory calibration during the brewing process, fine motor control during techniques such as latte art and manual brew, and interactional expertise in navigating the nuanced dynamics of customer engagement (Collins et al., 2006). Because tacit knowledge is deeply personal and experientially embedded, it resists easy codification or transfer through conventional training methods (Kabir, 2013). Its effective transmission requires a degree of immersion (Ribeiro, 2013a) and tends to occur organically through collateral learning knowledge acquired as a natural byproduct of daily work activity rather than through deliberate instruction (Zigler & Abington, 2001).

The broader knowledge management literature has consistently affirmed that the sharing and effective management of tacit knowledge is a primary driver of organizational performance and innovation (Koskinen, 2000). Despite this recognition, the scholarly discourse remains disproportionately focused on large-scale industrial sectors, particularly automotive manufacturing, construction, and formal corporate institutions (C. Pathirage et al., 2008; C. P. Pathirage et al., 2006; Schmidt et al., 2021). Research that specifically examines the dynamics of tacit knowledge transfer within MSMEs operating in the hospitality and F&B sectors remains remarkably scarce (Ribeiro, 2013b). Furthermore, the predominantly quantitative methodological approaches employed in earlier studies are often inadequate for capturing the social, relational, and cultural dimensions that fundamentally underpin interpersonal knowledge exchange. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on tacit knowledge sharing among baristas within an Indonesian coffee shop MSME through a qualitative case study

approach, an area that has received limited attention in previous knowledge management research dominated by large-scale industrial and quantitative studies.

Departing from this identified gap in the literature, the present study aims to conduct a rich and systematic exploration of tacit knowledge sharing among baristas through a qualitative case study at de Ngokow Coffee Roastery & Tea Club, a representative MSME in the Yogyakarta coffee industry. The study focuses specifically on three central inquiries: how implicit expertise is managed and cultivated within the organization; how tacit knowledge is transmitted from senior to junior baristas; and in what ways the organizational culture at de Ngokow Coffee facilitates or constrains this transmission process. The findings are intended to make a meaningful empirical contribution to the human resource management literature on knowledge-based human capital in small enterprises, while simultaneously yielding practical managerial implications for optimizing service quality in the coffee shop industry

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design, chosen deliberately on the basis of the epistemological characteristics of tacit knowledge itself. Because tacit knowledge is deeply embedded in human experience, organizational routine, and social interaction, it resists quantification and requires an interpretive methodology capable of capturing contextual depth and phenomenological nuance (Olomolaiye & Egbu, 2005; Sharma, 2002). A case study approach is particularly well-suited to this inquiry as it enables a comprehensive and contextually bounded examination of tacit knowledge dynamics as they unfold within a single, richly described organizational setting.

The research site selected for this study is de Ngokow Coffee Roastery & Tea Club, a coffee shop operating under the MSME classification in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. De Ngokow Coffee was selected as the research context for several reasons: it represents a typical yet accomplished example of the independently operated specialty coffee shop model; it operates with a multi-role barista team of varying experience levels; and its management has demonstrated awareness of the challenges associated with skill transfer and employee development, making it a fertile site for exploring tacit knowledge dynamics. The study involved 14 baristas as research participants, selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation across experience levels, roles, and tenure within the organization. Participants included full-time and part-time baristas as well as all-rounders occupying hybrid service roles. Data collection was conducted through two primary instruments: open-ended questionnaires designed to elicit narrative accounts of skill acquisition, mentoring experiences, and perceived

challenges; and semi-structured interviews that allowed for probing follow-up questions in response to participant responses. The interview protocol was structured around four thematic inquiry domains: the history and process of skill acquisition; the nature and experience of mentoring relationships; the dynamics of social interaction and informal learning within the team; and organizational responses to staff turnover and knowledge continuity.

Data analysis followed the procedures of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke, involving an iterative process of familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes from transcript content, development of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, and final thematic definition. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of interview data with observational field notes, as well as member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretive summaries with key participants. The combination of these methodological safeguards supports the credibility and dependability of the findings presented in the following section.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Experiential Learning as the Primary Mode of Skill Acquisition

The overwhelming consensus across participant responses was that meaningful barista competence is not acquired through formal instruction or written documentation, but through sustained, hands-on practice and the iterative process of trial and error. When asked how they developed their core technical skills, nearly all respondents emphasized the role of repeated experimentation and learning from failure as the primary developmental mechanism. Respondent Z, a part-time all-rounder, articulated this clearly:

"I received direction from my senior, but beyond that, learning from failure has been the biggest driver of my development."

This sentiment was echoed by Respondent DW, who described a particularly inventive approach to learning latte art technique:

"To learn latte art at the beginning, I practiced with soap first for trial and error, only after that did I use actual coffee and milk."

This improvised practice technique demonstrates both the creativity with which baristas seek to develop tacit skills and the degree to which formal training channels are insufficient as standalone learning mechanisms. These findings are consistent research in the restaurant industry, which confirmed that barista skill mastery is overwhelmingly driven by on-the-job experiential learning rather than classroom-based instruction (Bitange et al., 2026). The data clearly establish that experiential immersion is not merely a supplementary learning channel

but the foundational one through which tacit knowledge is initially acquired and subsequently refined.

Theme 2: The Tacit and Sensorially Embedded Nature of Core Barista Competencies

A second prominent theme concerned the inherently implicit, difficult-to-articulate nature of the most critical barista skills. When participants were asked to identify techniques they found impossible to fully explain verbally yet essential to master practically, the consistent responses across the sample were manual brewing and latte art two competencies that require a sophisticated integration of motor skill, sensory perception, and embodied judgment. Respondent S provided a particularly illuminating account:

"Everything in manual brew [is difficult to explain verbally], because different durations and water pouring patterns affect the taste."

This finding reflects the "silent skills" dimension of tacit knowledge, where subtle and context-dependent variations in technique produce significantly different outcomes but remain difficult to articulate explicitly through verbal explanation alone (Giuseppe, 2014). Participants explained that product quality is evaluated not merely through measurable standards, but through the ability to recognize and balance acidity, aftertaste, and aroma profiles based on sensory experience. Such competencies align with Korhonen's (2014) concept of "weak signals," which require deep experiential sensitivity and continuous practice to interpret accurately. These findings reinforce Polanyi's (1966) proposition that the most valuable forms of professional expertise are deeply personal and experiential, representing knowledge that fundamentally "we know more than we can tell."

Theme 3: Mentoring, Observation, and Informal Socialization as Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms

The third theme identified in the data concerned the specific mechanisms through which tacit knowledge was transmitted between individuals within the organization. Across participant responses, a consistent and revealing pattern emerged: knowledge transfer occurred not through structured training programs or written instructional materials, but through a process of social immersion involving observation, imitation, and guided practice. Respondent H summarized this process with notable precision:

"Observe, imitate, and practice."

This three-stage process reflects the socialization dimension of Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) SECI model, where tacit knowledge is transferred through shared experience, observation, and apprenticeship rather than formal documentation. In this study, senior baristas functioned as informal mentors and custodians of knowledge, while junior baristas developed their competencies through direct interaction, workplace observation, and immediate feedback during daily operational activities. The findings further indicate that the effectiveness of tacit knowledge transfer was strongly influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships within the workplace. Junior baristas who interacted with approachable and supportive senior staff demonstrated faster skill development and higher confidence in applying their knowledge. This finding supports Venkitachalam and Busch's (2012) argument that a supportive organizational climate plays a crucial role in facilitating tacit knowledge sharing within organizations.

Theme 4: Organizational Vulnerability to Knowledge Loss Through Employee Turnover

The fourth and arguably most strategically consequential theme to emerge from the data was the acute organizational vulnerability created by the absence of formal knowledge repositories and the heavy reliance on personal mentoring relationships. When participants were asked to reflect on what would happen to the organization's knowledge base if a senior barista were to resign, the responses revealed a significant level of concern and acknowledged risk. Respondent Z expressed this vulnerability candidly:

"I would be fairly overwhelmed, because personally I am not yet an expert... I usually still bother seniors to ask questions."

This admission encapsulates the phenomenon of knowledge loss, a well-documented organizational risk in settings where intellectual capital is embedded primarily in the experience and practices of individuals rather than formal organizational systems (Mahroeian & Forozia, 2012). When experienced baristas leave the organization, much of their tacit expertise also disappears, potentially weakening service consistency and operational continuity. The findings further revealed that although the owner of de Ngokow Coffee occasionally conducted direct knowledge-sharing sessions with baristas, these activities remained informal and inconsistent. This condition indicates that organizational commitment alone is insufficient to ensure sustainable knowledge retention without systematic transfer mechanisms.

Table 1. Summary of thematic findings

Theme	Core Finding	Key Theoretical Anchor
1. Experiential Learning	Skills acquired through practice and failure, not formal instruction	(Mokua Bitange et al., 2026)
2. Tacit Nature of Skills	Manual brew and latte art are sensorially embedded and difficult to verbalize	(Ribeiro, 2013b); Polanyi (1966); (Giuseppe, 2014)
3. Mentoring & Socialization	Transfer occurs through "observe → imitate → practice" pattern	Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) SECI Socialization Mode
4. Knowledge Vulnerability	Knowledge loss risk occurs when senior baristas exit without structured transfer systems	(Mahroeian & Foroza, 2012)

Note. Compiled by the author based on research findings

Table 1 summarizes the main thematic findings identified in this study. The findings indicate that barista competencies are predominantly developed through experiential learning processes rather than formal instruction. Tacit knowledge is embedded in sensory-based practices such as manual brewing and latte art, making it difficult to verbalize or document explicitly. The table also highlights that mentoring and socialization between senior and junior baristas function as the primary mechanism for transferring tacit knowledge through observation, imitation, and repeated practice. In addition, the study identified knowledge vulnerability as an important organizational issue, particularly when experienced baristas leave without structured knowledge transfer systems. The theoretical anchors presented in the table demonstrate that the findings are strongly connected to established theories of tacit knowledge, organizational learning, and knowledge management.

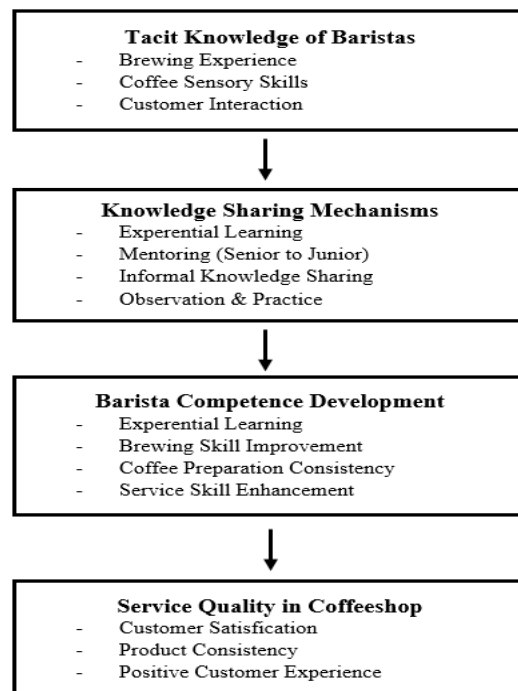


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Tacit Knowledge Sharing and Competence Development among Baristas

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship between tacit knowledge, knowledge-sharing mechanisms, barista competence development, and service quality within the coffee shop context. The model demonstrates that tacit knowledge, including brewing experience, sensory skills, and customer interaction capabilities, becomes the foundation for knowledge-sharing activities in the workplace. Knowledge transfer occurs through experiential learning, mentoring, informal interaction, observation, and continuous practice among baristas. These processes contribute to the development of barista competencies, particularly in brewing consistency, technical skills, and service quality. Ultimately, the enhancement of barista competence supports improved customer satisfaction, positive customer experiences, and consistent product quality within the coffee shop industry.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings from de Ngokow Coffee Roastery & Tea Club provide a rich and substantive contribution to the knowledge management literature, particularly as it pertains to MSMEs operating in the hospitality and F&B sectors. Taken collectively, the four themes identified through thematic analysis form a coherent and theoretically integrated account of how tacit knowledge operates, is transmitted, and is put at risk within a specialty coffee shop environment. The finding that experiential learning constitutes the primary mode of barista skill acquisition is consistent with the broader educational literature on situated and embodied cognition. Skills such as manual brew precision and latte art are not, at their core, intellectual competencies, they are perceptual-motor competencies that develop only through repeated cycles of practice, sensory feedback, and correction (Ribeiro, 2013a). The improvised practice approach described by Respondent DW using soap to simulate milk foam during early latte art training is a vivid illustration of what the literature terms collateral learning ((Zigler & Abington, 2001): knowledge acquisition that occurs not through formal channels but as a byproduct of engaged problem-solving within the work environment.

The deeply tacit nature of core barista competencies, as captured in Theme 2, affirms the theoretical centrality of Polanyi's epistemological framework to this domain. The inability of Respondent S to verbally describe the variations in manual brew technique that produce different taste outcomes is not a failure of communication, it is a precise illustration of the structural character of tacit knowledge. As (Ribeiro, 2013b) argues, truly expert knowledge in craft domains is inseparable from the bodily and perceptual experience through which it is acquired; to describe it fully in language is to misrepresent it. This has profound implications for organizational training design: text-based manuals and written SOPs are necessary but

fundamentally insufficient for transmitting the knowledge that most determines quality outcomes in coffee preparation.

The socialization-based transfer model identified in Theme 3 summarized in the barista's formulation of "observe, imitate, and practice" is a practically observed enactment of the theoretical socialization mode described by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). This finding carries important implications for how MSMEs conceptualize their training infrastructures. If socialization through informal mentoring is the most effective channel for tacit knowledge transfer, then organizational strategy should focus not on creating more documentation but on creating more and better opportunities for senior-junior interaction. (Jafari et al., 2013) similarly argue that human resource evaluation in knowledge-intensive contexts must extend beyond formal certification to assess an individual's capacity to absorb and adapt within an experiential ecosystem a capacity that only develops through active social participation in the work community.

Perhaps the most organizationally consequential finding of this study is the knowledge vulnerability revealed in Theme 4. The acknowledgment by junior baristas that they would be "overwhelmed" without their senior colleagues is a clear indicator that the organization's intellectual capital is insufficiently institutionalized. As (Mahroeian & Foroza, 2012) note, the greatest challenge in managing tacit knowledge is not acquiring it in the first place, it is ensuring that it does not dissipate when key personnel exit. The periodic knowledge-sharing sessions conducted by the owner of de Ngokow Coffee represent a promising organizational practice, but their informal and irregular nature limits their capacity to serve as a systematic solution to knowledge retention. (Ciechanowska, 2014; C. Pathirage et al., 2008; C. P. Pathirage et al., 2008; Tuuli & Thesis, 2013) contend that transforming tacit knowledge into organizational rather than individual capital requires deliberate managerial investment in codification, mentoring structures, and learning culture investments that MSMEs must find ways to implement despite their constrained resource contexts.

Synthesizing these findings, this study proposes an empirically grounded model designated as The de Ngokow Tacit Knowledge Sharing Model. This model conceptualizes the knowledge transfer process as a sequential yet iterative pathway: the tacit knowledge embedded in baristas comprising brewing experience, coffee sensory skills, and customer interaction competence is disseminated through a set of knowledge sharing mechanisms including experiential learning, senior-to-junior mentoring, informal knowledge sharing, and observation-based practice. This dissemination process gives rise to barista competence development, manifested in improved brewing skill, coffee preparation consistency, and service enhancement. The ultimate

organizational output of this competence development is improved service quality, expressed through customer satisfaction, product consistency, and positive customer experience. Crucially, the effectiveness of each link in this chain is conditioned by the organizational learning culture that either facilitates or inhibits the flow of tacit knowledge between individuals and across organizational levels.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study carry several concrete and actionable implications for managers and owners of MSME coffee shops and, by extension, for small enterprises in the broader hospitality sector. Formalizing structured mentoring programs. Given that senior-to-junior mentoring is the primary and most effective knowledge transfer channel, organizations should formalize this process through structured buddy-mentoring schemes with clear milestones, defined role expectations, and periodic progress evaluations. Relying on informal mentoring driven solely by individual initiative introduces unnecessary fragility into the knowledge transfer chain and creates uneven development across the junior cohort.

Developing visual knowledge repositories. Because the most critical barista competencies are sensorially embedded and resist verbal description, written documentation alone is an inadequate knowledge capture strategy. Organizations should invest in visual documentation formats video demonstrations of key techniques such as latte art pouring, manual brew sequencing, and espresso calibration as these media are significantly more capable of capturing tacit dimensions than text-based manuals (Taylor, 2009). Photo-guided procedural references can complement video content to provide accessible on-the-job reference materials. Institutionalizing regular knowledge-sharing sessions. The knowledge-sharing sessions conducted by the owner of de Ngokow Coffee were identified as a critical organizational buffer against knowledge discontinuity. These sessions should be formalized into a regular schedule, weekly or monthly with structured facilitation and explicit learning objectives. Systematizing this practice transforms it from a contingent good intention into a reliable organizational mechanism.

Implementing competency-based retention strategies. Every senior barista who exits an MSME carries with them embodied intellectual capital of immeasurable organizational value. Managers should design career development pathways and performance-linked incentive structures that encourage experienced baristas to remain in the organization long enough to fully transfer their knowledge to the next generation. The cost of investing in retention is

substantially lower than the cost of the knowledge loss and quality degradation that accompanies high turnover.

Academic Implications

This study also yields several directions for future scholarly inquiry. First, the sample should be expanded through multi-location, multi-city replication studies to assess the transferability of these findings across different organizational contexts, regional cultures, and coffee shop formats. Second, future research would benefit from adopting a mixed-methods design that combines the depth of qualitative inquiry with quantitative instruments, such as a knowledge transfer effectiveness index to produce findings that are both contextually rich and statistically comparable across sites. Third, the moderating role of digital technology, including internal e-learning platforms, video-based training systems, and knowledge management software, warrants specific investigation within the MSME F&B context, where such tools are increasingly accessible but remain underutilized. Finally, longitudinal research designs would allow scholars to measure the long-term organizational outcomes of implementing structured knowledge transfer practices, providing evidence-based guidance on the causal relationship between organizational learning culture and sustained service quality.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that tacit knowledge among baristas is primarily developed through experiential learning and transferred through informal socialization processes such as observation, mentoring, imitation, and repeated practice. Competencies related to brewing techniques, sensory evaluation, and customer interaction are deeply embedded in personal experience, making them difficult to transfer through formal documentation or standardized training alone. The findings also demonstrate that supportive interpersonal relationships between senior and junior baristas play an important role in accelerating skill development and strengthening confidence in workplace practice.

In addition, the study reveals that the absence of structured knowledge transfer systems increases the risk of knowledge loss when experienced baristas leave the organization. This condition may affect service consistency and operational sustainability within MSME coffee shops. The study contributes to the knowledge management literature by providing empirical evidence on tacit knowledge sharing in the MSME F&B sector, an area that remains underexplored in previous studies. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of

systematic mentoring, knowledge documentation, and employee retention strategies to maintain organizational competence and service quality in the coffee shop industry.

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