

Article

Expressive Silence: Managing Message Through Sign Language on Tiktok By Deaf Communicators

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Abstract: Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for fostering inclusivity, enabling people with disabilities to convey diverse messages to broad audiences. The TikTok account @jennifernatalie_ exemplifies this by delivering educational content on sign language. As a deaf Social Media Influencer (SMI), @jennifernatalie_ has successfully engaged her followers despite communication challenges. This research aims to analyze the communication strategies employed by @jennifernatalie_ in promoting sign language education on TikTok. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study examined 112 short videos from the Sign Language playlist on @jennifernatalie_'s TikTok, supplemented by relevant literature. The findings reveal that @jennifernatalie_ employs specific strategies to effectively deliver sign language education. These include using TikTok's features, such as closed captions, to enhance accessibility and involving her child as a co-communicator, which adds relatability and diversity to the content. Her messaging targets both disabled and non-disabled audiences, extending her reach and impact. Additionally, she utilizes other platforms like Instagram and YouTube to support her educational efforts. The study highlights @jennifernatalie_'s ability to bridge communication gaps through social media, demonstrating how influencers can educate and raise awareness on important issues. This suggests a model for other educators and influencers to emulate in their efforts to promote inclusivity and accessibility.

Keywords: Content analysis; deaf; social media influencers; tiktok; engagement

Introduction

Apart from serving as a communication tool, social media facilitates the dissemination of diverse educational content to its audience. Gitnux (2023) reported that approximately 1.25 billion people access educational material on Facebook monthly. Additionally, Intelligent (2023) surveyed 1000 students across various countries, revealing that 51% use TikTok to aid in completing academic assignments. Educational content on social media spans beyond academia, encompassing topics like financial literacy (Hidayat et al., 2023), digital literacy (Rahardaya & Irwansyah, 2021), and health education (Bintang et al., 2022). This medium is effective due to its visual and versatile nature (Sharma & Sharma, 2021), allowing various stakeholders to optimize its educational potential for easy information access.

Social media influencers (SMIs), such as Riya Agrawal and Victoria, are instrumental in delivering educational content on platforms like Instagram. Hartina (2023) analyzed how they educate about conditions like vitiligo through informational posts, emotional support, and personal experiences. For instance, @dr.tirta promotes healthy lifestyles with tips on exercise and nutrition (Bintang et al., 2022), fostering health awareness. During the Covid-19 pandemic, influencers like @rachelvennya and @awkarin contributed by educating their followers on hygiene and social distancing, supporting governmental efforts (Annisa et al.,

2021). SMIs play a crucial role not only in endorsing products but also in disseminating educational content that raises public awareness. Furthermore, SMIs have proven effective in campaigns promoting health (Kostygina et al., 2020) and environmental awareness (Okuah et al., 2019) through engaging social media content. Financial influencers (finfluencers) use platforms like TikTok to educate Generation Z on financial literacy under hashtags like #investing (Zhou et al., 2023). Additionally, influencers focused on family and parenting provide motivational and educational content to young mothers (Chee et al., 2023), addressing issues often overlooked by mainstream media. Engagement on social media, encompassing interactions like likes, shares, and comments, is pivotal in shaping audience perceptions and behaviors (Wisessathorn et al., 2022). SMIs generate engagement by fostering emotional connections and social relationships with their audiences (Ngai et al., 2020), thereby encouraging meaningful interactions and influencing audience actions. In conclusion, SMIs wield significant influence in effectively communicating educational messages on social media, leveraging engagement to foster audience understanding and action.

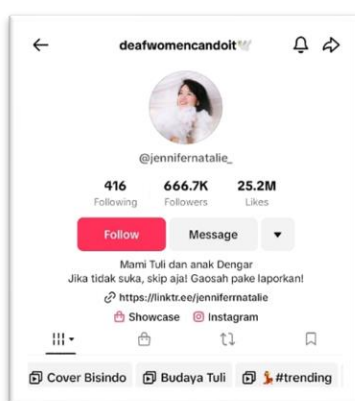


Figure 1. TikTok profile @ jennifernatalie_
Source: Jennifernatalie_ (2024)

The TikTok account @jennifernatalie_ serves as a notable example of an SMI specializing in educational content on sign language and deaf culture. As of March 22, 2024, the account boasts 666,000 followers and 25 million likes (Jennifernatalie, 2024). According to Ruiz-Gomez's (2019) SMI classification, @jennifernatalie_ falls under the Macro Influencers category due to her substantial follower count, embodying fame primarily derived from social media rather than traditional media channels. Achieving social media celebrity status hinges on the ability to consistently produce engaging and innovative digital content. A @jennifernatalie_ delivers diverse content related to deafness, including sign language tutorials, insights into deaf culture, and motivational messages for the deaf community, as organized in thematic playlists (jennifernatalie_, 2024). Content formats range from dance performances to interactive sign language practice sessions and personal interactions, showcasing versatility and creativity. Notably, @jennifernatalie_ was invited to speak at the Inclusive Party event, underscoring her adeptness in content creation and management (Inclusive Indonesia Connection, 2023).

Content creativity plays a pivotal role for SMIs like @jennifernatalie_ in cultivating audience engagement and maintaining social media prominence (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). By curating content that resonates with her identity as a deaf individual—highlighted in her TikTok bio as "Mama Deaf" (jennifernatalie_, 2024)—she enhances authenticity and connection with her audience. Despite challenges in verbal communication, @jennifernatalie_ garners significant engagement, exemplified by videos receiving millions of views (jennifernatalie_, 2024). This engagement contradicts conventional assumptions about the impact of communication abilities on SMI engagement, affirming the power of compelling content in social media interactions (Ngai et al., 2020). Social media has been used by various parties to educate about sign language used by deaf people.

Natalia & Winduwati's (2023) studied on the @Nurhildahamid29 account which provides Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) education on TikTok shows that TikTok is an effective means of providing education for groups of people aged 14-24 years and can also encourage audiences to learn BISINDO.

Rajagukguk et al. (2021) also researched YouTuber Amanda Farliany's communication strategy in providing Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) education. Amanda Farliany's strategy is to convey educational messages by providing translated texts, using supporting media such as Facebook and Instagram, and targeting all levels of society as the audience (Rajagukguk et al., 2021). Apart from that, Faradilla & Purnamasari (2023) researched how TikTok content creator Rezki Achyana conducted education about BISINDO. According to Faradilla & Purnamasari (2023), TikTok is an effective medium for educating BISINDO, can be used as a place to express one's heart, and is also a medium for interaction between deaf and hearing friends. These various studies show that every sign language education communicator has a strategy for communicating on social media.

The right strategy is needed to manage communication via digital media so that maximum communication impact can be obtained. Communication strategy is a concept in communication science that can be used to analyze communication activities carried out by an individual. This concept can be interpreted as planning and management in achieving a communication goal which is implemented in actions so that it plays an important role in the success of a program (Romadhan et al., 2019). The communication strategy approach taken to achieve a goal will be different for each individual because it adapts to the conditions and resources they have (Nayiroh, 2020).

Through the importance of communication strategies, it is necessary to analyze @jennifernatalie_'s social media content management strategy in conducting sign language education. The concept of communication strategy is built on two terms, namely strategy and communication. Strategy refers to planning and management in achieving a goal (Effendy, 2008). Meanwhile, communication is the activity or activity of conveying symbols that have a meaning or meaning that must be understood by the parties involved in the process (Fatikhin, 2013). Based on these two terms, the concept of communication strategy refers to the transmission of ideas on a large scale and is designed to change the behavior of message recipients (Cangara, 2014). Cangara (2014) conveys four steps that can be taken in designing a communication strategy, namely: selecting and determining communicators, knowing the target audience, packaging the message, and choosing a communication method. @jennifernatalie_'s content management will be analyzed through aspects of this communication strategy so that it can be seen how a Deaf SMI fights against her limitations in communicating using social media

This research aims to analyze the management strategies of deaf communicators in delivering educational content using sign language delivered by the TikTok account @jennifernatalie_. As an SMI, @jennifernatalie_ has limitations in communicating verbally, but the engagement she gets on social media is not small. This research will focus on content created by @jennifernatalie_ in building engagement because this account is considered to have the capacity to create interesting and useful content. Social media not only serves as a communication tool but also facilitates the dissemination of diverse educational content to its audience. According to Gitnux (2023), approximately 1.25 billion people access educational material on Facebook monthly. Additionally, a survey by Intelligent (2023) revealed that 51% of students use TikTok to aid in completing academic assignments. Educational content on social media spans beyond academia, encompassing topics such as financial literacy, digital literacy, and health education. The effectiveness of this medium is attributed to its visual and versatile nature, allowing various stakeholders to optimize its educational potential for easy information access. Given the widespread use of social media for educational purposes, how can social media influencers like @jennifernatalie_ effectively utilize platforms like TikTok to educate audiences about sign language? What strategies can be employed to ensure that the educational content is accessible and engaging for both disabled and non-disabled audiences? How can features such as closed captions be maximized to enhance message clarity and inclusivity?

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach combined with content analysis methodology. According to Neuman (2013), qualitative descriptive research aims to narratively describe reality. In this study, content analysis using a qualitative approach involves examining both manifest and latent elements of text or communication content, drawing on hermeneutical traditions to uncover the intended meaning of

messages (Kassem, 2023). Specifically, the content analysis method used is deductive or directed, aligning closely with the research framework to derive comprehensive insights (Monggillo, 2020).

Primary research data were sourced from the TikTok account @jennifernatalie_ and supplemented by relevant literature, providing a broader understanding of how SMIs communicate educational content for deaf audiences on social media. The analysis focused on videos within the Sign Language playlist, comprising a total of 112 videos as of March 23, 2024. The research was conducted from March 18 to 26, 2024, aiming to explore educational content related to sign language use among deaf individuals.

To collect the data for this research, a comprehensive approach was employed, beginning with an in-depth review of the TikTok account @jennifernatalie_. The focus was specifically on the Sign Language playlist, which contained a total of 112 videos as of March 23, 2024. The videos were meticulously examined to identify key themes, patterns, and methods used by the social media influencer (SMI) to communicate educational content tailored for deaf audiences. The research process was conducted over a period of eight days, from March 18 to 26, 2024. During this time, each video was watched multiple times to ensure accurate understanding and to capture the nuances of the content. The videos were then transcribed, and relevant details, such as the use of sign language, visual aids, text overlays, and any accompanying audio descriptions, were noted. The data collection also involved observing the interaction between the SMI and the audience, including the types of comments and questions posed by viewers, as well as the responses provided by the SMI.

The analysis of the collected data was qualitative in nature. The focus was on understanding how the SMI effectively communicated complex concepts related to sign language in a way that was accessible and engaging for deaf individuals. This involved identifying recurring themes, such as the use of specific signs, the integration of cultural references, and the incorporation of educational strategies that aligned with the learning preferences of the target audience. In addition to analyzing the content of the videos, the research also drew upon relevant literature to provide a broader context for the findings. This literature review helped to frame the analysis within existing theories and practices related to social media communication, sign language education, and accessibility for deaf individuals. By combining the insights gained from the primary data with the broader academic discourse, the research aimed to provide a well-rounded understanding of the strategies employed by the SMI to educate and engage with deaf audiences on social media.

The Findings & Discussion

The presentation of research findings will begin by detailing various data dimensions related to communication strategies. Each dimension will be thoroughly discussed, supported by relevant literature to enhance the depth of the findings.

1. Supporting Communicators: Her Children and Husband

In delivering education about sign language, @jennifernatalie_ often delivers content where she delivers the material independently. Figure 2 provides two content illustrations where he delivers sign language educational material independently. Even though it is known that @jennifernatalie_ has a husband, she often delivers material independently. Social media itself has features to make it easier for someone to convey messages to their audience quickly, easily, and effectively (Babatunde, 2013). Through the nature of social media, it can be said that this media is inclusive and can be used by deaf people to communicate.

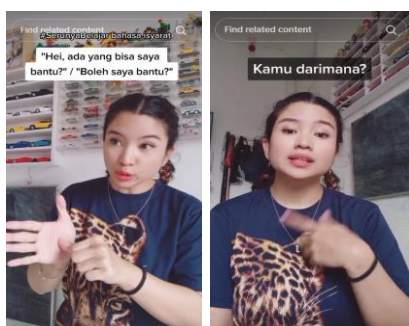


Figure 2. @jennifernatalie_'s content in educating sign language to the public
Source: jennifernatalie_ (2024)

Although @jennifernatalie_ able to deliver material independently, she often invites her children and husband to also deliver material about sign language to the audience. As a deaf mother, @jennifernatalie_ teaches her child sign language so that her child can communicate well with his mother and father. In this case, her child also follows the movements of @jennifernatalie_ in demonstrating sign language. Figure 3 below, @jennifernatalie_ is considered to have been able to collaborate with those closest to her in teaching sign language. This can provide the audience with their view of the reality of the relationship between a Deaf Mother, Deaf Father, and Hearing Child. It can be said that @jennifernatalie_ has been able to use her creativity as an SMI or content creator to create interesting content for the audience.

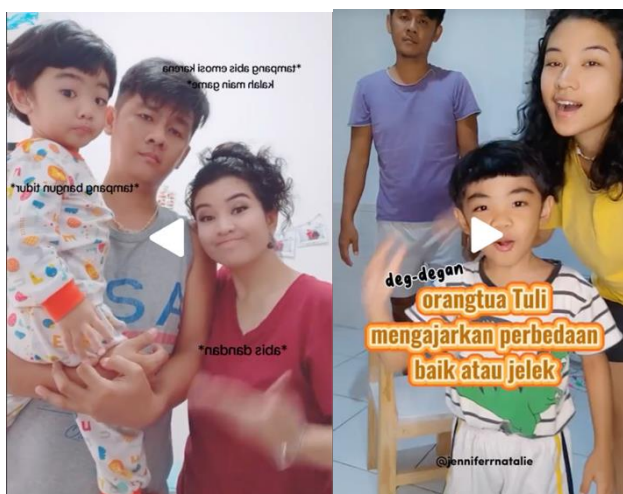


Figure 3. @jennifernatalie_'s content inviting her children and husband
Source: jennifernatalie_ (2024)

In the communicator aspect, it can be said that @jennifernatalie_ makes herself a communicator in terms of sign language education. However, with her creativity, @jennifernatalie_ often creates content where she invites her children and husband as sign language communicators. Through this, it can be said that @jennifernatalie_ is a content creator who can creatively provide content that is useful for the audience. As SMI, @jennifernatalie_ can collaborate with various other SMIs so that content can be created that has a further reach. @jennifernatalie_ often delivers sign language educational content independently, showcasing her ability to leverage social media features for effective communication. She also collaborates with her children and husband, enhancing the educational experience by demonstrating sign language in a family context. This approach not only makes the content more relatable but also highlights the inclusive nature of social media, making it accessible for deaf individuals.

2. Target Audience: Deaf, People with Disabilities, and the Public at Large

A communication strategy must be able to map the characteristics of the target communication audience so that content can be prepared that can be accepted by the characteristics of that audience. By knowing the characteristics of the audience, the communicator can compose his messages well so that the messages sent can be well received. Apart from knowing the characteristics of the audience, the communicator must be able to know what information the audience wants so that the message conveyed is what is needed. This must of course be a concern for SMI so that the message it conveys can be well received by the wider audience. Not only people with disabilities, @jennifernatalie_ targets the general public as her communication target.

Based on Figure 4 below, it can be said that @jennifernatalie_ often creates content according to the needs of her audience by creating content according to comments submitted by the audience. Meanwhile, @jennifernatalie_ also used CC as a message to clarify the sign language she conveyed. The use of CC, in this case, is important because not everyone can understand what @jennifernatalie_ said. Through @jennifernatalie_'s strategy of creating content according to audience requests and using CC as a communication medium, it can be said that the sign language education delivered by @jennifernatalie_ is aimed at the community at large.

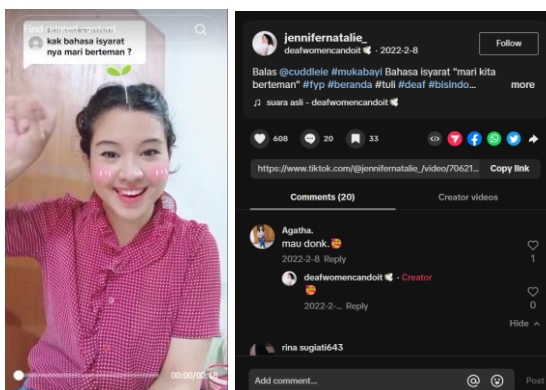


Figure 4. Content using sign language by responding to audience comments
Source: jennifernatalie_ (2024)

The communication strategy used by @jennifernatalie_ effectively targets both the deaf community and the general public. By understanding the characteristics and needs of her audience, she tailors her content to be easily understood and engaging. This ensures that her educational messages about sign language are well-received and impactful.

3. Media used: YouTube, TikTok and Instagram

In delivering education about sign language, @jennifernatalie_ uses TikTok as the main media. An illustration of @jennifernatalie_'s use of TikTok can be seen in Figure 1. This account has several followers who fall into the social media influencer category. TikTok itself is considered to be the main social media used by @jennifernatalie_ to convey sign language education because it has the largest number of followers compared to other social media. As a comparison, Instagram has 205 thousand followers and YouTube has 2.45 thousand followers on March 28, 2024. The number of followers is below TikTok @jennifernatalie_ which amounted to 666 thousand on the same date, and has even received 25 million likes for all of its content. The following is an illustration of supporting social media for @jennifernatalie_.

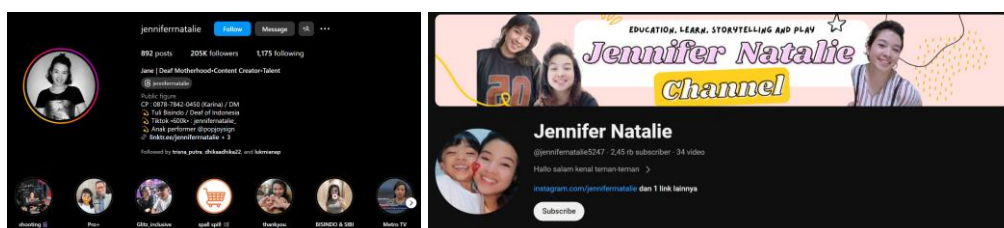


Figure 5. Instagram and YouTube social media @jennifernatalie_
Source: jennifernatalie_ (2024)

Through the number of followers previously explained, it can be said that the main media used by @jennifernatalie_ is TikTok. Currently, TikTok itself has been considered as a medium that can be used to convey Indonesian sign language education effectively (Natalia & Winduwati, 2023; Rajagukguk et al., 2021). Apart from that, TikTok can convey messages effectively to the younger generation (Rajagukguk et al., 2021). This shows that @jennifernatalie_ has been able to have suitable media to educate the public about sign language.

In delivering education about sign language, @jennifernatalie_ uses TikTok as the main media. This platform is chosen due to its large following, with 666 thousand followers and 25 million likes as of March 28, 2024. In comparison, her Instagram account has 205 thousand followers and her YouTube channel has 2.45 thousand subscribers. TikTok's popularity and effectiveness in reaching the younger generation make it a suitable platform for disseminating sign language education. Through this strategy, @jennifernatalie_ effectively educates the public about sign language, using Instagram and YouTube as supporting media to further her reach and impact

4. Content Packaging: Strengthening Captions and Closed Captioning

The content packaging aspect explains the form or format of the content delivered by @jennifernatalie_ in educating sign language. In general, @jennifernatalie_'s content contains information about sign language and how to use it daily. The preparation and packaging of the message must of course be adapted to the target community so that it can be received easily and effectively. In dealing with her limitations in communicating verbally, there are strategies used so that the communication carried out by @jennifernatalie_ can be understood by the general level of society. The following is an illustration of content packaging carried out by @jennifernatalie_ to educate sign language.



Figure 6. Content of using sign language to introduce yourself
Source: jennifernatalie_ (2024)

Figure 6 provides an illustration of @jennifernatalie_'s content which explains how to introduce yourself through sign language. In this content, @jennifernatalie_ explains how to get to know each other and also how to convey names using sign language. In the video @jennifernatalie_ gives hand and finger movements to form a certain symbol which is used as a signal. As for providing further information, @jennifernatalie_ uses additional writing in her video to help the audience understand the sign language she is practicing. This is considered aimed at providing explanations to a wider group of people, not just people with disabilities.

In @jennifernatalie_'s educational content on sign language, a strategic approach involves incorporating written text to clarify the meaning conveyed through sign language. In multimedia contexts, this practice is known as closed captioning (CC), which aids deaf individuals by providing textual explanations alongside video content, compensating for their inability to hear audio. According to Li et al. (2022), CC helps bridge communication gaps for deaf viewers, enhancing their comprehension of video content, although certain aspects reliant on audio remain inaccessible. Mack et al. (2020) highlight ongoing advancements in automatic CC technology, aimed at ensuring deaf individuals have access to CC across all social media content. These features illustrate how social media platforms are evolving to promote inclusive information dissemination.

The content created by @jennifernatalie_ includes detailed captions and closed captioning to make the sign language lessons accessible to a broader audience. This strategy is crucial for overcoming communication barriers and ensures that the content is comprehensible to both deaf and hearing viewers. The use of closed captioning is particularly important for providing textual explanations that complement the visual sign language demonstrations.

The research findings on the content packaging of @jennifernatalie_ emphasize the significance of using captions and closed captioning (CC) to enhance the accessibility and comprehension of sign language content. The content primarily includes information about sign language and its daily applications. The preparation and packaging of messages are tailored to the target audience to ensure they are easily and effectively received. @jennifernatalie_ employs written text in her videos to clarify the meaning of sign language, aiding viewers in understanding the content. This practice, known as closed captioning, is crucial for making the videos accessible to a wider audience, including those who are not familiar with sign language. CC provides textual explanations alongside video content, bridging communication gaps for deaf viewers and enhancing their comprehension.

TikTok is the primary platform used by @jennifernatalie_ due to its large following and effective reach to the younger generation. She also uses Instagram and YouTube as supporting media. These platforms allow @jennifernatalie_ to leverage various features to create engaging and accessible content. The content strategy involves using multimedia features to aid in communication. For example, incorporating hand and finger movements to form symbols and using additional text to provide further explanations. The use of CC and other features on social media platforms exemplifies how social media can be used to educate a broad audience about sign language, promoting inclusivity and understanding.

Ongoing advancements in automatic CC technology aim to ensure that deaf individuals have access to captions across all social media content, further illustrating the evolving nature of social media to support inclusive communication

Conclusion

The results of this research show that @jennifernatalie_ has a specific content management communication strategy to convey education about sign language via TikTok. In terms of communicator, @jennifernatalie_ often provides education independently or by inviting her children to participate in her video content. As for packaging and content management, @jennifernatalie_ is considered to have been able to maximize the features on social media so that she can create closed captions as a medium to convey the meaning of the sign language she uses. @jennifernatalie_'s target audience is the general audience, not just deaf people with disabilities. In this case, the social media TikTok itself is the main media used by @jennifernatalie_ to convey education about sign language, but she still uses Instagram and YouTube as supporting media. As SMI, @jennifernatalie_ in this case has been able to maximize social media to educate audiences regarding sign language to the wider community.

With this research, it is hoped that we will be able to contribute to the development of features on social media platforms so that they can be friendlier to deaf users. Apart from being able to help Deaf users use social media platforms, it is hoped that social media platform users can create Deaf-friendly content. The content created must add closed captioning features and more attractive visuals so that it can be enjoyed by deaf users. With this, it will be possible to add digital literacy that will not only be enjoyed by the wider community but also by deaf users.

The research highlights @jennifernatalie_'s effective use of TikTok to educate the public about sign language. By leveraging social media features, she creates content that includes closed captions, making the information accessible to a wider audience beyond the deaf community. Her strategy involves both independent presentations and collaborations with her children, enhancing the educational impact. Despite focusing primarily on TikTok, she also uses Instagram and YouTube as supplementary platforms.

The @jennifernatalie_ targets a broad audience, including both deaf individuals and the general public, and her content is often shaped by audience feedback. This approach underscores the importance of creating inclusive content on social media, incorporating features like closed captions to improve accessibility. The research suggests that social media platforms should continue to develop features that support users with disabilities, promoting digital literacy that benefits all users. With the above notes, in conclusion, @jennifernatalie_ demonstrates how social media influencers can effectively use digital platforms to educate and engage diverse audiences, contributing to broader societal understanding and inclusion

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