Research Article:

Exploring Challenges Related to Social Identity Acceptance and Interpersonal Relationships Among Disabled University Students in Malaysian Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

In the higher education environment in Malaysia, disabled university students often face difficulties with their social identity acceptance and forming interpersonal relationships. This study investigates these challenges among disabled university students in Malaysian public universities. By employing Social Identity Theory and Social Comparison Theory, the research explored how these students navigated their identities and relationships within the academic environment. The study used a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with eight disabled university students. The findings revealed that negative self-perception, societal stigma, and non-inclusive infrastructure significantly hindered their ability to form meaningful interpersonal connections. These challenges were further worsened by the lack of inclusive practices and inadequate support systems in the university setting. The study emphasised the need for targeted interventions to improve social identity acceptance and enhance the quality of interpersonal relationships for disabled university students, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive educational experience.

Keywords: Social identity, interpersonal relationships, students with disabilities, Higher Education, social inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Disabled university students face unique challenges in forming interpersonal relationships due to societal stigma and negative perceptions of disability (Simplican et al., 2015). In the context of this study, disabled university students refer to university students with physical disabilities, such as mobility impairments, visual impairments and other physical conditions that limit their ability to perform day-to-day activities. This specific group is chosen to highlight the challenges they face in forming interpersonal relationships with mainstream peers within university settings. For disabled students, issues like low self-confidence and poor self-image are often compounded by societal attitudes that label them as 'different' or 'weak' (Ward Khan et al., 2021). Some of them feel ashamed and lack the confidence to interact with the mainstream population, whom they perceive as more attractive and perfect in society's eyes (Xu & Liu, 2020). This labelling can lead to a sense of isolation, preventing these students from engaging in social interactions and fully participating in university life. Moreover, they may feel pressured to meet societal standards of physical beauty and ability, leading to body image dissatisfaction and reduced sense of self-worth (Johnson et al., 2023). As a result, they tend to isolate themselves and avoid participating in social activities, which ultimately have a negative impact on their psychological and emotional well-being.

Social identity refers to an individual's sense of self that is derived from their membership in a social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this study, it pertains to how disabled university students perceive themselves as part of the broader university community and how they navigate their identities within a predominantly non-disabled environment. Social identity acceptance, on the other hand, involves the extent to which individuals feel acknowledged, valued and included within a social group (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). When disabled students struggle with social identity acceptance, they may experience feelings of exclusion, marginalisation or self-doubt, which can hinder their ability to form meaningful interpersonal relationships. Understanding these concepts is crucial to examining how disabled students integrate into university life and how their social experiences influence their psychological well-being.

Interpersonal relationships are crucial for building a healthy psychological well-being among People with Disabilities (PWD). These relationships, which encompass social interactions and connections with peers, lecturers and other individuals in various contexts, significantly influence PWD's psychosocial development. Sullivan (1953) argued that interpersonal relationships are essential for an individual's identity formation and emotional stability. However, the stigma associated with physical disabilities often leads disabled university students to avoid social settings and limit interactions with others (Johnson et al., 2023; Ward Khan et al., 2021). Due to the lack of institutional awareness and adequate support, they frequently encounter feelings of loneliness, marginalisation and social isolation (Simplican et al., 2015; Xu & Liu, 2020). These challenges hinder their ability to participate fully in academic and social activities, affecting both their psychological well-

being and overall university experience. This is particularly evident in Malaysia, where disabled university students face unique challenges due to limited institutional support and societal stigma. Yusof et al. (2020) emphasised the need for improving the inclusion of students with disabilities in Malaysian higher education to address these challenges. Similarly, Alias et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of addressing the special educational needs of students with disabilities to foster greater integration and support in Malaysia. By investigating these challenges, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how to create a supportive, inclusive environment for disabled university students, which could ultimately improve their social and psychological well-being within the university setting.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research on psychological challenges such as issues of social identity acceptance and interpersonal relationships among disabled university students at universities is still underexplored. Several significant gaps have been identified. It was found that past studies focused more on aspects of accessibility or physical mobility of individuals with disabilities and less on examining the social and psychological challenges faced by disabled university students in university environments. For example, a study by Fernandez-Batanero et al. (2022) emphasised that while there has been an increase in accessibility facilities on campuses, disabled university students still face challenges in social aspects and interactions on campus. The study found a lack of research exploring the role of interaction between types of disabilities and other demographic factors, such as ethnicity and gender, in shaping interpersonal relationship experiences. This gap is significant as disabled university students often struggle with issues beyond physical accessibility, such as societal stigma, negative self-perceptions and low self-esteem, which impact their social integration and academic engagement (Simplican et al., 2015; Ward Khan et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, the challenges faced by disabled university students are further compounded by insufficient institutional support and the lack of inclusive policies that cater to their unique social and psychological needs. Although policies like the 2019 Inclusive Policy for disabled university students in Public Universities have been introduced (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2019), practical implementation often falls short of providing the psychological and social support necessary to foster a sense of belonging and identity acceptance. While physical accessibility can be enhanced through ramps and elevators, the psychological and social aspects required for full integration remain largely unaddressed. This lack of support contributes to the difficulties these students face in forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships, which are crucial for their psychological well-being and social integration.

Furthermore, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that examine the evolution of interpersonal relationships among disabled university students over time. Most research provides only a snapshot of their experiences rather than exploring how their social interactions and identity acceptance develop throughout university life. Kim and Kutscher

(2021) emphasised the need for long-term studies to assess the impact of social stigma, self-image and institutional support on their ability to build and sustain relationships.

Thus, while efforts have been made to improve physical accessibility, the social and psychological dimensions of inclusion remain largely neglected. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the challenges related to social identity acceptance and interpersonal relationships among disabled university students in Malaysian public universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory and Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory

In an effort to understand the social and psychological challenges faced by disabled university students in forming interpersonal relationships at university, Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, along with Social Comparison Theory by Festinger (1954), provide valuable insights. Both theories offer deep perspectives on how individuals identify themselves within social groups, how they compare themselves to others and how their position within these groups influences their behaviour and attitudes. Social Identity Theory posits that an individual's identity is not solely shaped by their personal characteristics but also by their membership in specific social groups. Social identity refers to the aspects of a person's identity derived from their membership in different social groups, such as ethnic groups, gender or in this study's context, as a disabled student or mainstream student. Membership in these groups brings meaning and values that influence how individuals view themselves and others around them.

Social Comparison Theory complements this understanding by explaining how individuals assess themselves by comparing themselves to others. Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals tend to make either "upward" or "downward" comparisons to evaluate their own abilities, status or competence. In the context of disabled university students, this social comparison may occur when they compare themselves to mainstream students or other disabled university students. By integrating these two theories, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological and social challenges faced by disabled university students and how their social identity is influenced by social comparisons. Figure 1 shows the integration of Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory with Festinger's Social Comparison Theory in understanding the formation of social identity among disabled university students.
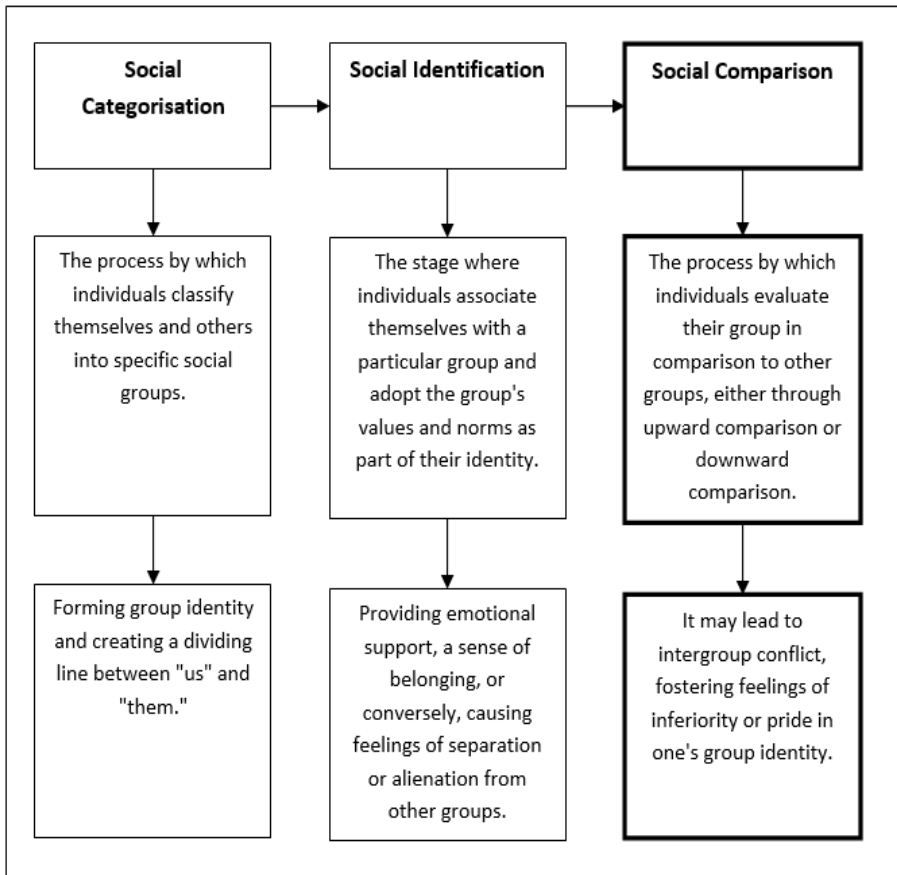
Figure 1. Integration of social identity theory with social comparison theory in understanding the formation of self-identity among disabled students. [Adapted from Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Festinger (1954)].

Challenges in Social Identity Acceptance Among Disabled University Students

Social identity acceptance plays a crucial role in shaping the positive psychological well-being of disabled university students. Studies indicate that low levels of social identity acceptance can lead to feelings of alienation, depression and social withdrawal among these students. This aligns with Social Identity Theory, which emphasises that social belonging within a group is essential for an individual's positive self-concept and well-being (Ryzhova et al., 2020; Mahfuz et al., 2022).

Ryzhova et al. (2020) emphasised that difficulty in social identity acceptance can hinder the adaptation of disabled university students in inclusive educational environments. When

disabled university students struggle to accept their identity, they may feel disconnected from the educational community, leading to depression and dissatisfaction with themselves. This sense of alienation and loneliness may further prevent them from participating in social activities. Similarly, Mahfuz et al. (2022) discuss how visually impaired students in Bangladesh faced social identity challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic due to inadequate access to technology. These interpersonal relationship challenges increased their feelings of isolation, further impacting their self-confidence. Both studies support the view that low social identity acceptance among disabled students can result from a lack of social support and interpersonal relationship challenges, resonating with Social Identity Theory's focus on the importance of group belonging.

In contrast, Wertans and Burch (2022) examined how disabled university students faced discrimination and ableism stigma at universities, which affected their self-confidence and social identity acceptance. Ableism, or negative attitudes towards disabled individuals, can cause disabled university students to feel marginalised in the university environment, making it difficult for them to accept their identity. In social identity theory, this discrimination can weaken their connections with the broader social groups at the university, preventing them from developing a positive social identity. The findings of this study also indicate that disabled university students who experience discrimination or prejudice tend to isolate themselves from others. A study by Ward Khan et al. (2021) support this, showing that disabled individuals often internalise societal stigma, viewing their disabilities as weaknesses, which limits their social interactions and self-worth. They view these differences as symbols of weakness and inability, leading to lower self-worth compared to others.

Overall, these studies reveal that social identity acceptance challenges among disabled university students stem from both internal struggles and interpersonal relationship challenges like societal pressures. Social Identity Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how these factors interact to affect the students' psychological well-being and social inclusion, which ultimately impacts their academic and personal success.

Challenges to Interpersonal Relationships Among Disabled University Students

Interpersonal relationships are essential for the psychosocial and academic development of all university students, including those with disabilities. For disabled students, positive relationships with peers, lecturers and university staff can improve motivation, engagement and well-being, reducing feelings of isolation. However, interpersonal factors like stigma, prejudice and social exclusion frequently hinder these relationships, creating significant challenges to social integration (Worley et al., 2023; Barnes et al., 2021).

Worley et al. (2023) and Barnes et al. (2021) emphasise that positive peer interactions contribute to the emotional stability of disabled students by fostering a sense of belonging, which is essential for social confidence. Supportive environments mitigate feelings of

isolation and promote both social and academic participation. Conversely, Khir and Zakaria (2023) and Bialka et al. (2017) highlight how discriminatory attitudes and social exclusion negatively impact disabled students. Khir and Zakaria (2023) found that disabled students often experience disappointment and exclusion when their peers fail to accommodate their needs, leading to feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. Similarly, Bialka et al. (2017) show that mainstream students' reluctance to interact with disabled peers creates a social gap, limiting opportunities for participation in university social life.

Additionally, Johnson et al. (2023) further discuss how societal prejudice, including body shaming, affects the interpersonal relationships of disabled students. Such interpersonal relationship challenges increase the risk of anxiety, depression and social withdrawal, as disabled students internalise negative perceptions from their environment. Both Johnson et al. (2023) and Khir and Zakaria (2023) suggest that discriminatory attitudes create challenges to forming supportive relationships, ultimately impacting disabled students' emotional well-being and social confidence.

In summary, while supportive relationships can enhance the social and emotional health of disabled students, interpersonal relationship challenges like stigma and discrimination pose significant challenges. Universities must recognise the impact of these challenges and work towards creating an inclusive environment that encourages meaningful social connections for disabled students, thereby enhancing their academic and social experiences.

Research Objective

1. To explore the challenges related to social identity acceptance among disabled university students in Malaysian public universities.

2. To examine the challenges faced in forming interpersonal relationships among disabled university students in Malaysian public universities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach which focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how they perceive and make sense of their world. Phenomenology emphasises capturing the essence of participants' personal experiences without imposing preconceived notions or theories. A semi-structured interview method was used to explore challenges related to social identity acceptance and interpersonal relationships among disabled university students in public universities in Malaysia. The phenomenological approach was deemed highly appropriate as it focused on participants' lived experiences, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their social and academic struggles. The researcher examined how these

students navigated their identities and relationships within the university setting. Fuller et al. (2004) and Shah (2006) suggested that this approach is crucial as it allows researchers to create a dialogue between the researcher and community members, providing a space for the participants' experiences to be voiced. The phenomenological approach also aided in identifying challenges and factors influencing the social engagement experiences of disabled university students.

Population and Sampling Technique

This research used purposive sampling. To determine the sample size, the number of research participants was determined until data saturation was achieved. Creswell (1998) suggested a sample size of 5 to 25 informants for phenomenological studies, while Morse (1994) recommended six. Therefore, this study involved eight university students with disabilities enrolled in public universities in Malaysia, including Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The selection of participants was conducted using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria being students who were physically disabled or visually impaired and possessed a valid disability card registered under the Department of Social Welfare (Jabatan Kebajikan Malaysia, JKM).

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with all eight disabled university students. The semi-structured format allows for flexible yet focused exploration of the research themes, enabling participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words while ensuring that key topics related to social identity acceptance and interpersonal relationships are covered.

The interview guide was designed to explore key areas such as participants' perceptions of their social identity, experiences of stigma and social exclusion and challenges in forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships in a university setting. Open-ended questions were used to encourage detailed and reflective responses, allowing for the emergence of unexpected themes.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interview locations were chosen based on participants' ease of access, with places like cafes, study areas within faculties and libraries being selected. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent to ensure that the collected data was accurate and accessible for transcription and analysis. Informants were also provided with informed consent forms to ensure they understood the research purpose and their rights.

Ethical Considerations

In the ethical considerations section, the researcher outlined the precautionary measures to ensure the integrity of the research. Since the study involved disabled university students, it was crucial to prioritise their welfare, privacy and rights throughout the research process. The researcher first ensured informed consent was obtained from the participants, with detailed explanations of the study's purpose, procedures, risks and benefits. The participants' voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences was also emphasised. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms or codes to protect participants' identities. This study has received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Secretariat of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) with Reference No. JEP-2023-942.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This method was chosen due to its ability in identified, analysed and reported patterns or themes in rich and detailed data about participants' experiences. The analysis followed six key steps: (a) familiarisation with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the final report. Initially, the transcripts were coded to identify key phrases and concepts related to social identity and interpersonal relationships. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflect participants' experiences and challenges.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the coding process, the texts were read and re-read multiple times. The researcher also conducted inter-coder reliability checks to ensure that two individuals agreed on the coding of an item (Bryman, 2012). Peer debriefing was another method employed to ensure data validity. This involved providing fellow researchers with copies of the interview transcripts and asking them to give additional comments or clarification regarding the initial coding of themes. This process allowed the researcher to obtain insights from other researchers regarding the relevance of the identified themes. In this research, the validity and reliability of the data were established through several means, including (a) expert validation, (b) preliminary coding review and (c) peer review evaluation.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile of Informants

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the informants in this research. The demographic profile of the informants in this study involves eight university disabled university students, consisting of five males and three females, aged between 21 and 29 years. The informants represent two major ethnic backgrounds, namely Malay (5 informants) and Chinese (3

informants). In terms of type of disability, there are five informants with physical disabilities and three with visual impairments. The level of study includes seven undergraduate students and one PhD student, with four informants from UKM and four informants from UPM.

Table 1. Demographic profile of informants

Informant	Gender	Age	Race	Type of disability	Level of education
P1	Male	29	Malay	Physical disability	Doctor of Philosophy, UKM
P2	Female	23	Malay	Physical disability	Bachelor's Degree, UKM
P3	Male	23	Malay	Visual impairment	Bachelor's Degree, UKM
P4	Female	21	Chinese	Visual impairment	Bachelor's Degree, UKM
P5	Male	23	Chinese	Physical disability	Bachelor's Degree, UPM
P6	Male	22	Malay	Physical disability	Bachelor's Degree, UPM
P7	Female	22	Malay	Physical disability	Bachelor's Degree, UPM
P8	Male	23	Malay	Visual impairment	Bachelor's Degree, UPM

Notes: UKM = Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia; UPM = Universiti Putra Malaysia

Thematic Analysis Overview

Through thematic analysis, four main themes emerged from the data, each capturing different dimensions of the social and psychological challenges faced by disabled university students. These themes were categorised based on the study's research objectives, ensuring a structured approach to the findings.

In addressing the first research objective, one of the major themes identified was challenges related to social identity acceptance. This theme highlights the psychosocial struggles of disabled students, including low self-confidence, emotional distress and anxiety about future participation in social and academic settings. To provide a more detailed discussion, this theme is further divided into two subthemes, which are low self-confidence and emotional struggles and anxiety about social participation and the future.

Additionally, in response to the second research objective, another key theme was identified: challenges related to interpersonal relationships. This theme captures the barriers to social integration, including negative stigma, social isolation and difficulties in forming

meaningful peer connections. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged, which are social exclusion and discrimination and communication barriers and lack of understanding.

Challenges Related to Social Identity Acceptance

The findings revealed that disabled university students faced significant challenges related to social identity acceptance, primarily due to low self-confidence, emotional struggles and anxiety about their future and social participation. These challenges often stemmed from negative self-comparisons, feelings of exclusion, and environmental barriers, making it difficult for them to integrate into university life. The thematic analysis led to the identification of two key subthemes: (1) low self-confidence and emotional struggles and (2) anxiety about the future and social participation.

Low self-confidence and emotional struggles

Most informants exhibited low self-confidence, a factor closely due to their physical disabilities. This lack of confidence arose from negative self-comparisons, which adversely affected their level of social identity acceptance. For example, P1, a university student with a physical disability, explained how his condition impacted his self-esteem. He shared that his low confidence stemmed from feeling different from others: "For me, self-confidence didn't exist initially. Plus, in primary and secondary school, I was the only one who was different from everyone else."

Similarly, P2 described feeling marginalised within their family because of her disability. This sense of difference was echoed by many informants, who described feelings of depression, lack of pride and self-doubt due to their unique circumstances. As P2 described, "Sometimes, I feel sad... That's when I feel down, wondering why... Why were we born this way? It's not just about connecting with the community, even communicating with our own siblings is difficult."

The challenges of social identity acceptance were also evident in childhood experiences. P3 reflected on how being the only disabled student in school made him feel uncomfortable and alienated:

> During my primary school years, I was the only [disabled student] in school. And being the only one meant that all eyes were on me, people would talk and I felt uncomfortable. That's why I felt like, I want to leave, to be someone else. (P3)

Another participant, P5, highlighted the emotional toll of his condition: "I felt depressed, tired, uninterested in life... I used to be adventurous, but after being diagnosed with this disease, it feels like my life is limited."

Anxiety about the future and social participation

In addition to struggling with self-confidence, many informants expressed anxiety about their future, particularly in securing job opportunities and adapting to life after university. This anxiety forced them to work harder than their mainstream peers to secure fair opportunities. P1 expressed his concerns about the uncertainty of his future, stating: "Other people study, we study too, but sometimes it doesn't feel enough because securing a job is hard. I've studied, but it feels like something's still missing."

P7, expressed her fears about recovery after an operation and the challenges she might face in the future, stating, "I thought after the operation, what would I do? I started wondering, can I do this?... I'm worried about the recovery time and how I'll live after the operation."

Another participant, P4 shared similar struggles, reflecting on how a noisy and unsuitable environment affected her ability to focus and study:

> I feel so stressed. The [noisy] environment isn't suitable for me to study... If the environment is noisy, I can't focus and it stresses me out. I'm also worried about how I'll manage life after university because the outside world might be even more challenging. (P4)

P1 also believed that the shame and low self-esteem of disabled students significantly impacted their participation in social activities. He emphasised the importance of joining associations to overcome low confidence:

> I realised they were not confident. That's why they always declined invitations to participate. This makes it hard for us to fight for our rights. That's why we need to join associations, to do something for ourselves and let the university know our goals. This way, our welfare is taken care of, not only our welfare but also our confidence, self-motivation and soft skills. (P1)

Overall, low social identity acceptance among disabled university students was primarily driven by self-doubt, negative self-comparisons and anxiety about their future. Many informants struggled with low self-confidence and emotional distress, which affected their ability to form meaningful relationships. Additionally, concerns about future job security, environmental challenges and the fear of social participation further intensified their struggles. These findings highlight the urgent need for better support systems to help disabled students build self-confidence and integrate more effectively into university life.

Challenges Related to Interpersonal Relationships

The findings indicate that disabled university students face significant challenges in forming interpersonal relationships, mainly due to social exclusion, discrimination and communication barriers. These difficulties not only hinder their ability to form meaningful connections with mainstream students but also contribute to feelings of isolation, emotional

distress, and reluctance to engage in social activities. The thematic analysis identified two key subthemes: (1) social exclusion and discrimination and (2) communication barriers and lack of understanding.

Social exclusion and discrimination

Many informants reported being mocked, treated differently or marginalised, highlighting the impact of interpersonal relationship challenges on their social interactions. For instance, P4 shared an incident where she was left behind when a monkey attacked, despite their friends knowing about her visual impairment. This led to a communication gap and hindered interpersonal relationships: "They left me when a monkey came. I didn't know what was happening because I couldn't see, so I was very scared. They only came back after the monkey left." (P4)

Similarly, P5 and P1, both wheelchair users, described instances where they were often asked insensitive questions by the public, which discouraged them from participating in social activities. P5 explained, "There was a feeling of discrimination when I was mocked by kids. The first thought that came to my mind was that they were being discriminatory. I felt like the kids were being disrespectful."

P1 elaborated further on the emotional impact of these interactions:

> It hurts [being asked why I use a wheelchair] because they didn't understand. I thought, 'Why do people ask such things?' It made me feel like, 'I don't want to go out, it's crowded out there.' I didn't want to face situations like that. 'Why are his legs like that?' 'Why is he using a wheelchair?' 'Look at that person sitting on that thing'... I preferred staying at home. (P1)

These experiences created feelings of loneliness among disabled university students, as interpersonal relationship challenges such as societal prejudice and discrimination led them to feel isolated from mainstream society. P4 reflected on these challenges, stating, "I don't have any close friends, just 'hi hi, bye bye' friends... For me, my course mates, I don't know why they chose this course [Special Education], but sometimes they discriminate against disabled people. Sometimes they leave me alone during group assignments."

P2 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the daily struggles of disabled students: "Like me, sometimes we buy our food and go to get a drink and people just take our food. Sometimes when I'm carrying food, people just push me aside because they know I don't have the same strength as they do."

P3 further explained:

> It's sad being different... So naturally, we're sidelined, we don't have many friends. People use us as a target [for jokes], to mock us. We become the point of ridicule. (P3)

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Communication barriers and lack of understanding

Beyond direct discrimination, disabled university students also struggled with communication barriers, which contributed to misunderstandings and a lack of meaningful relationships with mainstream students. Several informants expressed frustration over how non-disabled peers failed to understand their experiences, leading to a gap in communication and interaction. P8 summarised the overall sentiment by stating, "I don't want people to pity me. We want people to befriend us, but not because they feel sorry for us."

The informants also mentioned that mainstream society struggles to understand the real challenges faced by disabled university students. This has created a wide understanding gap between the two groups. P2, P3 and P4 expressed that their mainstream peers would never understand them like their fellow disabled university students, further widening the social gap.

P2 explained:

> Since school, people would say it's a privilege to be us... But the truth is, we're not going to tell them our struggles. That's why I say normal people don't understand. The biggest challenge for disabled people is our emotions. We're very sensitive and easily disturbed. So, when facing a community that says disabled people don't try to befriend normal people, the problem is that normal people don't provide that understanding. (P2)

P3 reinforced this, stating that she felt more comfortable interacting with fellow disabled students because mainstream students often reacted insensitively:

> I feel more comfortable being friends with them [other disabled university students]. There's a special connection between us. I feel uncomfortable when normal people stare at me, avoiding eye contact and later ask my friends what's wrong with my eyes. I'd feel more comfortable if they just asked me directly in a respectful way. (P3)

P4 stated:

> When it comes to interacting with other typical friends, I'm fine. But of course, they don't know how to communicate with me. So, I tell them to just treat me like a normal person. Just communicate normally. Don't be afraid, don't worry. I can communicate; I just can't see. And if you want to guide me, I'll teach you how to do it properly. (P4)

Additionally, a lack of public awareness and accessibility issues made simple daily tasks more challenging for disabled university students. P4 shared her struggles when crossing the road, as bystanders failed to help:

> For example, at UKM, when I want to cross the road, normal people just cross without asking if I need help. They don't care. They just look out for themselves. (P4)

Similarly, P1 reflected on the frequent misuse of facilities meant for disabled individuals and the resulting challenges in raising public awareness:

> For example, for the disabled people's parking space, [the public] just take it. 'There's no disabled people here'... So, they don't realize that 'Hey, there are people who use wheelchairs, don't park here,' like that. So, it's about raising awareness among others. (P1)

Overall, the challenges related to interpersonal relationships among disabled university students stemmed from both external discrimination and internal communication barriers. The first subtheme, social exclusion and discrimination, highlighted stigma, prejudice and a lack of inclusivity, which often led to social withdrawal and isolation. Meanwhile, the second subtheme, communication barriers and lack of understanding, underscored the difficulties disabled students face in bridging the gap with their non-disabled peers, resulting in misunderstandings and a lack of social integration. These findings emphasise the need for greater awareness, inclusivity and communication support systems to ensure that disabled university students can fully participate in academic and social life.

The challenges faced by disabled university students can be broadly categorised into two main aspects which are social identity acceptance challenges and interpersonal relationship challenges. Social identity acceptance challenges refer to the internal struggles students face in embracing their identity within the university environment, including issues related to self-esteem and self-perception. In contrast, interpersonal relationship challenges involve external social barriers that hinder their ability to form meaningful connections with peers, such as discrimination, exclusion and communication difficulties. Figure 2 provides a summary of these key challenges.
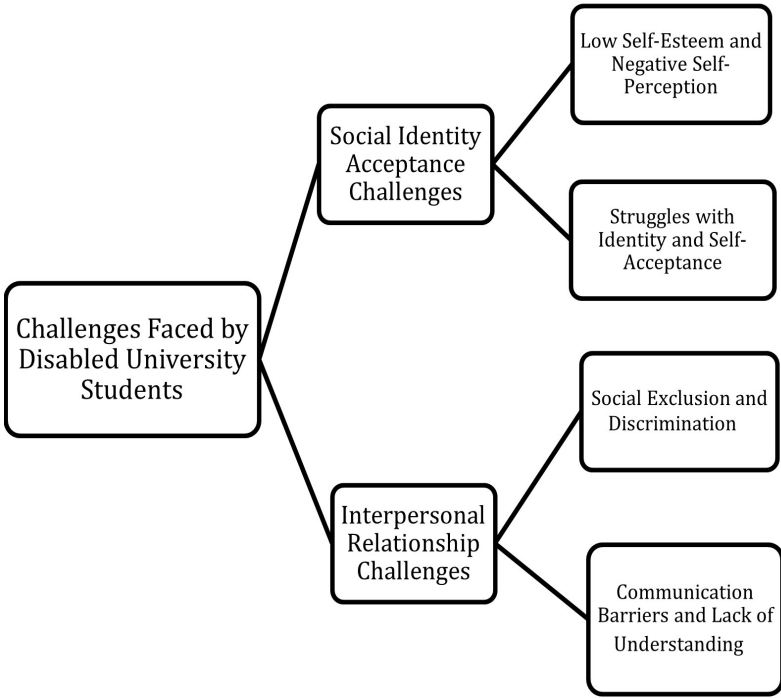
Figure 2. Social identity acceptance challenges and interpersonal relationship challenges.

DISCUSSION

The study's findings indicate that most informants experience low self-confidence due to their physical disabilities. This lack of confidence stems from negative self-comparisons, a key factor that adversely affects their acceptance of their identity. These findings align with previous research, such as Ward Khan et al. (2021), which demonstrated that individuals with disabilities are significantly impacted by their interactions with others, particularly due to noticeable physical differences. They often perceive these differences as symbols of weakness, which leads to a lower sense of self-worth compared to others. These challenges may result in loneliness and social isolation.

Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, which explains that disabled university students often engage in upward comparisons with mainstream students, leading to feelings of inferiority and a loss of motivation. Additionally, Johnson et al. (2023) found that teenagers subjected to body shaming face negative mental and emotional consequences, such as low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Experiences related to physical teasing can also contribute to social isolation and difficulties in forming healthy relationships.

The findings further reveal that feelings of shame and low self-confidence in disabled university students hinder their participation in social activities. This supports Ryzhova et al.'s (2020) research, which emphasised that low identity acceptance can impede students' adaptation to inclusive educational environments. This aligns with social identity theory, which highlights that social integration is essential for psychological well-being. When disabled university students struggle to accept their identity, they may feel alienated from the university community, potentially leading to depression and dissatisfaction with themselves. This, in turn, can result in isolation and reluctance to engage in social activities.

The findings reveal that most informants have experienced teasing, poor treatment and social exclusion, which are interpersonal relationship challenges factors that have created communication gaps and a lack of understanding between disabled university students and others. This has made it difficult for them to form interpersonal relationships. Consequently, disabled university students are often reluctant to engage in social activities for fear of encountering similar attitudes. Wertans and Burch (2022) support these findings, observing that disabled university students who face prejudice or ableism tend to withdraw from social interactions. Their study also found that disabled university students who experience discrimination or prejudice often prefer solitude and avoid interacting with others. Additionally, Yusof et al. (2020) reported that social gaps between disabled university students and mainstream students hinder the development of interpersonal relationships within the university, with stigma, discrimination and a lack of support preventing disabled university students from building interpersonal connections.

Informants also expressed that mainstream society struggles to understand the true challenges faced by disabled university students, further widening the communication gap between these groups. As a result, they feel more comfortable befriending other disabled university students, which only exacerbates the social gap. Worley et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of strong interpersonal relationships, especially with peers, to ensure that disabled university students feel accepted and supported in the university environment. When communication gaps between these groups are wide, it complicates the development of interpersonal relationships, making integration difficult. Barnes et al. (2021) also found that positive interactions between disabled university students and mainstream students help boost the confidence and motivation of disabled university students to participate in academic activities, ultimately improving their academic performance.

Informants also reported low awareness among mainstream students, which leads to the misuse of disability-friendly infrastructure, preventing disabled university students from benefiting from these resources. This finding is supported by Khir and Zakaria (2023), who stated that disabled university students feel disappointed and saddened when those around them fail to understand their circumstances and limitations. This creates feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem. These negative experiences reinforce the perception that they are incapable of forming positive interpersonal relationships, ultimately limiting their future social participation.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the challenges faced by disabled university students in accepting their identity and forming interpersonal relationships in Malaysian public universities. Societal stigma negatively affects their self-perception, leading to social isolation and limiting their engagement with the university community. A critical issue identified is the entanglement between mainstream students' struggle to understand disabled students and disabled students' own feelings of unworthiness in reaching out. This disconnect reinforces isolation and reduces opportunities for meaningful interactions. Addressing this requires initiatives that foster empathy, promote awareness and encourage open communication within the university.

To foster a more supportive environment, universities should implement comprehensive support systems addressing both social and psychological well-being, such as peer mentoring and disability awareness campaigns. However, the study's limitations, including a small sample size and focus on specific disabilities, suggest the need for broader research. Future studies should examine the long-term effects of these challenges on academic and mental well-being and expand the scope to multiple universities for more comprehensive insights.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The researchers declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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