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Article

Workplace Communication Inclusivity Among Pwd Academicians in Malaysia: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: Workplace communication inclusivity is vital in promoting equitable and empowering environments, especially for Persons with Disabilities (PwD). This research addresses the gap of understanding workplace communication inclusivity among PwD academicians. Previous studies on PwD often focused solely on physical facilities and financial support. This study investigates the challenges and opportunities of inclusive workplace communication among PWD academicians in Malaysia. Six semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews using purposive sampling were conducted with PWD academicians from various Malaysian higher education institutions. Thematic analysis was conducted to find recurring themes within the research. Findings revealed that while the PwD respondents received support from their workplace and colleagues, the support are often personalized, rather than structural support from institutions. Workplaces are more inclusive with great peer support and availability of assistive technologies to help them cope with demanding work of academicians. They highlighted limited accessibility to digital communication platforms that have full range accessibility, lack of disability awareness among colleagues and administrators and vague guidelines on inclusive communication practices. The findings highlighted a need for updated comprehensive communication policies and institutional commitment to foster a more inclusive communication in the workplace for the disabled communities. This policy can also be expanded into country wide reform for communication inclusivity to ensure PwD employees feels more included and supported in their work.

Keywords: Communication inclusivity; person with disabilities; academicians; communication practices; organizational inclusivity

Introduction

Workplace inclusivity is increasingly recognized as a vital element in ensuring equitable and empowering environments for all employees. For Persons with Disabilities (PwD), inclusivity goes beyond physical access and financial support. It requires thoughtful integration into the communication structures of the workplace, to allow PwDs to be fully integrated into society and build their identity as members of the society. However, one of the most overlooked groups are disabled academicians, who might be minority within the academic world, but plays pivotal and unique role because and despite of their disabilities. PwD academicians are required to perform complex intellectual and administrative tasks just like any other academicians. In their case, communication inclusivity is not a luxury, but a necessity. In understanding this, the challenges of the disabled people must be scrutinized in details. Alternatives for communication formats such as sign language,

captions, subtitles, Braille and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems are very important for creating communication that includes everyone.

Research shows that having them helps all employees, including those with different communication needs to take part more fairly (Iacono et. al., 2016; Elsahar et. al., 2019). Even though some institutions have policies, these tools are still not used often, especially in Malaysian public universities where there are problems with structure and lack of awareness. The lack of communication format alternatives pose a problem for academicians with hearing and speech disabilities to perform fully at the workplace. For academicians, these tools are critical for lecture delivery, research collaboration, and administrative communication Mukupa et al. (2023) proposed reframing inclusivity as a strategic practice within the strategy-as-practice (s-as-p) perspective. The scholars suggested that communication inclusivity should not just be about following rules or ethics but should be seen as a smart strategy that improves performance, creativity, innovation and diversity of thought at micro (individual), meso (organizational) and macro (policy) levels. For micro level, employee empowerment increases job satisfaction, and this is the key for effective communication among PWDs. For the meso level, rules, culture and behavior affect whether communication tools are truly inclusive or just for the show.

Moreover, Groenewald (2024) highlighted the importance of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and continuous reassessment of organisational policies in supporting PwD inclusivity. In academic settings, ERGs can provide an important platform for PwD academicians to voice their needs, share lived experiences, and propose communication accommodations that reflect their professional realities. Collectively, these insights point to both the challenges and opportunities in cultivating an inclusive academic workplace, where communication is not only accessible but also empowering for PwD academicians. Extending this discussion to the Malaysian context, existing literature reveals that workplace support for persons with disabilities has largely concentrated on infrastructural accessibility and financial assistance, with comparatively less attention given to communication and social dimensions of inclusion. Recent Malaysian studies have begun to address this gap by foregrounding the role of social support and interpersonal relationships in shaping inclusive experiences.

For instance, Maepa and Nekhavhambe (2025) demonstrate that social support networks, including family and peer understanding, significantly influence the quality of life and communication confidence of persons with disabilities. These findings reinforce the argument that inclusivity extends beyond institutional structures to encompass empathy, relational support, and sustained social connection. Similarly, Mohd Nabil, Matore, and Zainal (2025) highlight how systemic barriers in early identification and communication accessibility mirror institutional gaps within Malaysian universities. Their findings suggest that delayed, fragmented, or inaccessible communication structures can perpetuate exclusion and limit meaningful participation among individuals with special needs, underscoring the need for more inclusive communication practices within higher education institutions

Although these elements are essential, they do not fully capture the systemic challenges faced by disabled individuals in professional environments. Studies from Western contexts have shown that communication barriers significantly impact the job satisfaction, productivity, and psychological wellbeing of disabled employees. In contrast, local scholarship has yet to offer a comprehensive account of how communication practices in Malaysian universities either include or exclude PwD employees. What makes the experiences of PwD academicians particularly significant is their dual role. They are not only navigating professional interactions with colleagues and administrators but are also responsible for communicating knowledge to students, managing digital learning environments, and contributing to institutional development. Their daily work is saturated with communication demands from departmental meetings and interfaculty collaboration to email correspondences and virtual engagements. Yet, limited research has explored how these interactions unfold when disabilities intersect with institutional communication practices.

This study aims to fill this critical gap. It examines the communication experiences of PwD academicians in Malaysian higher education institutions, focusing on the challenges they encounter, the support mechanisms available to them, and the opportunities for improving inclusivity. Unlike previous studies that generalize about PwD employees, this research concentrates specifically on academic

professionals whose work heavily depends on advanced and frequent communication. By doing so, it brings to light the structural and cultural aspects of workplace communication that either enable or inhibit inclusive participation for PwD in the academic workforce. This research aims only to answer one objective, namely to find out the challenges and opportunities of inclusive workplace communication among PwD academicians in Malaysia. The objectives of this study is to identify the challenges and opportunities of inclusive workplace communication among PwD academicians in Malaysia. Although this study is guided by a single research objective, the objective is deliberately broad and integrative, allowing for an in-depth exploration of both challenges and opportunities shaping inclusive workplace communication among PwD academicians. This focus enables the study to capture structural, interpersonal, and institutional dimensions of inclusivity, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of communication inclusion in Malaysian higher education.

Inclusive workplace communication for persons with disabilities

Workplace communication inclusivity has become an essential pillar in contemporary discussions of disability inclusion, especially in knowledge-intensive sectors such as higher education. Scholars agree that communication is not only a medium for task execution but also a determinant of belonging, identity formation, and workplace participation for Persons with Disabilities (PwD). When communication systems are not designed with diverse needs in mind, PwD employees face structural disadvantages that affect their job satisfaction, sense of legitimacy, and professional visibility (Brown & Leigh, 2018). In this context, inclusivity refers to the intentional design of communication practices, norms, and tools that allow all employees to receive, process, and express information equitably.

Workplace communication inclusivity is a developing area of concern, especially for Persons with Disabilities (PWD) in academics, where communication access directly affects performance, engagement and inclusion. Literature for the past decade has been identified and there are three recurring challenges that inhibit communication inclusivity in the workplace which is, access to communication tools, availability of alternative communication formats and awareness of disability-related issues (Zainah & Zainuddin, 2020; Abdul Razak, 2018). These problems not only make it hard to share information but also increase the gap between PWD employees and others, leaving them out.

Access to appropriate communication tools has been widely cited as a foundational requirement for workplace inclusivity. Tools such as screen readers, captioning systems, sign language interpretation, Braille materials, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) technologies enable individuals with varying sensory, mobility, or cognitive challenges to engage fully in work processes. Research shows that the availability and proper use of such tools improve not only productivity but also professional confidence and social integration (Iacono et al., 2016; Elsahar et al., 2019). However, studies across multiple contexts reveal that although institutions may possess these tools, they are often underutilized or implemented inconsistently due to technical barriers, lack of training, or limited awareness among staff. This implementation gap hinders equitable communication, especially in settings like universities where complex digital platforms, hybrid classrooms, and administrative systems demand high levels of communication engagement.

Despite global commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), institutional gaps in policy communication remain prevalent. Literature suggests that many organizations possess disability-related policies, but these are poorly socialized, inconsistently enforced, or not translated into everyday practice (Zainah & Zainuddin, 2020; Abdul Razak ., 2018). Awareness of these policies is often low among both management and employees, resulting in PwD staff repeatedly having to self-advocate and educate others about their needs. This burden contributes to emotional exhaustion and reinforces power asymmetries within the workplace. Policy visibility is further complicated in Malaysian universities, where disability-related communications tend to focus primarily on students rather than staff, leaving PwD employees without robust mechanisms for support or accommodation. The lack of clear guidelines and accountability structures creates symbolic inclusion rather than substantive equity.

The academic profession presents unique communication demands that intensify the challenges faced by PwD. Academicians must navigate teaching, research communication, departmental decision-making, administrative reporting, and student interaction. Studies from Western contexts show that disabled academics

often encounter heightened scrutiny, limited understanding from colleagues, and a tendency for institutions to downplay their communication needs (Brown & Leigh, 2018). In Malaysia, research on disabled academicians remains scarce, with existing literature focusing predominantly on students' accessibility issues. This absence of scholarly attention contributes to a lack of institutional preparedness for supporting PwD staff. As a result, many disabled academics rely heavily on informal peer or student support systems, which, while encouraging, are unsustainable and inconsistent. The lived experiences of PwD academicians indicate that communication barriers are not only technical but deeply tied to workplace culture, expectations of independence, and misconceptions about disability.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) complements this by highlighting how workplace communication influences group belonging and intergroup relations. Inclusive communication practices affirm the professional identity of PwD employees, reducing the sense of marginalization and enhancing psychological safety. Conversely, opaque communication systems signal exclusion, reinforcing perceptions of being "othered." Applying these theories together positions communication inclusivity not only as an accessibility concern but as a core component of organizational culture and identity-building.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative in-depth interview rooted in the interpretivist paradigm. It sought to understand the subjective experiences of PwD academicians regarding workplace communication inclusivity. The study utilized a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants who fulfilled three main criteria: they identified as Persons with Disabilities, held full-time academic positions in public or private higher education institutions in Malaysia, and had a minimum of two years of experience in teaching, research, and academic service. Six participants were selected, each representing different types of disabilities including visual impairment and mobility challenges to ensure a diverse set of perspectives. The researchers acknowledge that the sample size is rather small, but the sample size was considered appropriate as data saturation was reached, with recurring themes emerging across interviews and no substantially new insights identified in later interviews. Moreover, the relatively small population of PwD academicians within Malaysian higher education and the specialised nature of the participant criteria further justified the use of a focused, in-depth sample.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with all participants. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was carried out either in person or via accessible online conferencing platforms, depending on the participant's preference. The interview questions were designed to explore participants' experiences with institutional communication practices, accessibility of digital platforms, peer support, and perceptions of inclusivity or exclusion in their work environment (Aswan et. al., 2018, Brown & Leigh, 2018). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This approach allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and the development of rich, contextual themes.

In terms of the interview protocol, the interview questions were adapted from Aswan et. al. (2018) in terms of how the academicians cope with workplace communication practices and institutional communication support that was given. Among theme questions adapted from this research are: "Can you describe your everyday communication experiences in your workplace (e.g., meetings, emails, online platforms, informal interactions)?"; "Have you ever encountered communication barriers that affected your ability to perform your academic duties?", and "what challenges, if any, do you face when participating in online meetings, hybrid classes, or digital communication systems?". Questions from Brown & Leigh (2018) was adapted to understand the aspect of inclusion, exclusion and identity at the workplace as per the Theory of Social Identity. Among questions asked were "In what ways do workplace communication practices make you feel included or excluded as an academic?", "Have you ever felt that your disability influenced how others communicate with you professionally?" and "How do institutional attitudes and assumptions shape your experience as a PwD academician?". The questions were general enough to accommodate different forms of disabilities in order for the researchers to allow the participants to define their own disabilities and challenges.

First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts to gain an overall understanding of participants' experiences. Initial codes were then generated systematically to capture meaningful features related to communication practices, accessibility, and workplace inclusivity. These codes were subsequently collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness across the dataset. Each theme was then clearly defined and named to reflect its analytical focus before being interpreted in relation to the research objectives and existing literature on workplace communication and disability inclusion. The final themes are reflected in the findings. In the context of disability research, qualitative interviews are especially powerful as they center the lived experiences of individuals navigating structural barriers. Moreover, this method aligned well with the goals of the study, to understand not just what challenges exist, but to also capture how they are experienced and interpreted by those affected.

Theoretically, this research is anchored by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory largely focus on understanding intergroup prejudice, discrimination, and group-based behaviors. It also focuses on workplace communication in terms of employees feeling included or excluded in workplace context, but rarely focused on the disabled community. Practically, the study offers evidence-based insights that can guide institutions in developing more inclusive communication policies and structures. These insights are timely and essential, especially as higher education institutions strive to align themselves with international commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

Using Social Identity Theory, this study conceptualised workplace communication as a key site where inclusion, exclusion, and group-based identities are constructed and negotiated. Accordingly, the interview questions were designed to elicit participants' perceptions of belonging, marginalisation, and identity as PwD academicians, while the data analysis sensitised the researchers to patterns reflecting intergroup dynamics, institutional assumptions, and communicative practices that shaped participants' sense of inclusion or exclusion. Social Identity Theory therefore provided an analytical lens for interpreting how communication practices reinforced or challenged identity-based boundaries within academic workplaces.

The Findings

The findings from the interviews revealed three major themes that shape the workplace communication experiences of PwD academicians: (1) variations in interpersonal and institutional support, (2) persistent barriers related to digital and physical inaccessibility, and (3) lack of institutional policies, awareness, and effective implementation. Analysis of the six transcripts demonstrates that these themes cut across disability types and institutional contexts, suggesting that communication inclusivity challenges faced by PwD academicians in Malaysia are systemic in nature rather than isolated incidents.

Theme 1: Variations in peer, management, and student support

Participants consistently reported uneven support from colleagues, administrative staff, and management. While some experienced respect and cooperation, others encountered indifference, lack of sensitivity, or inconsistent recognition of their needs. Respondent 6 shared multiple instances where colleagues assumed she was fully capable and therefore did not offer assistance, especially when physical effort was required. She explained, *"There was no ready computer in the classroom. I bring my own laptop, projector and extension. They often feel that I am capable of it and did not offer any help*'. Physical limitations interfered particularly with classroom communication, where the respondent's disability made it difficult to maintain eye contact without a stage, affecting her teaching presence.

Similarly, Respondent 1 described repeated experiences of being overlooked despite clear communication of her needs. Even after seven years at her institution, she still had to remind administrators every semester about classroom locations: *"Every single semester, I have to remind them to actually put me in classes nearest to my office… I'm not here for 7 days, I'm here for 7 years."* She also narrated how her emails regarding inaccessible invigilation rooms went unanswered until she confronted staff in person.

In contrast, it is noteworthy that three out of six participants spoke positively about student support. They mentioned instances where students proactively assisted in different ways. Students voluntarily assisted

in carrying equipment, adjusting classroom seating, or offering physical help. Respondent 2 noted, *"My students are always helpful… they come early to help me to bring my things."* Respondent 1 too mentioned "*my students will often drop by my office, making sure that I have my lunch and asking if I need help buying. They always help me to readjust the table and projector knowing that I cant reach."* However, this support is informal, inconsistent, and dependent on goodwill, not institutional responsibility. The respondents highlighted that such ad hoc support could not replace structural accommodations.While informal support exists, all six participants emphasized that ad hoc assistance cannot substitute for institutional policy

Theme 2: Persistent digital and physical inaccessibility

Digital inaccessibility and physical barriers remained major obstacles affecting communication and work performance. For Respondent 4, infrastructural issues directly contributed to communication barriers. The absence of a functional lift for over four years and the lack of ramps rendered movement between academic spaces difficult: *"The lift had been spoilt since 2020 and there was no repair… There was no ramp for wheelchair."* Respondent 3 similarly explained that infrastructure improved only gradually after the introduction of institution inclusive campus policy, yet fundamental issues persisted. Her experience reflects institutional inertia: *"The ramp only existed five years after… things get better but I have to be patient."*

Physical access constraints ultimately translated into communication challenges such as difficulties reaching meeting venues, transporting teaching materials, or navigating examination duties created additional emotional and professional strain. These barriers forced participants to expend unnecessary labour simply to be present and communicatively functional in their roles. This was reiterated by Respondent 5 when he said, "*I can't say there are no efforts. I understand that sometimes, university has bureaucratic issues especially in maintaining physical facilities for us. We are the minorities. But, we have the same workload as any other academicians. It gets tiring at times. Emotionally….sometimes we have to put it aside so that we can focus. So if anything, I think we want consistencies.".* Respondent 3 recounted her experience of not being able to navigate examination duties due to her usage of wheelchairs. She said "*I had to bring all the examination papers in a luggage to the examination hall by myself through the hill and there was no help offered. I was the head of invigilation. In the end I was so exhausted from all the carrying that I had to take leave the next day,"*

Theme 3: Lack of policy awareness, implementation, and institutional sensitivity

In terms of policy, it is interesting that the experiences of the participants differ depending on their level of involvement within the policy making. Two of the respondents expressed uncertainty or limited knowledge about institutional communication inclusivity policies, two expresses awareness but only at minimal level while two respondents are directly involved in drafting the campus policy for inclusiveness. Overall, ven when policies existed, they were poorly communicated, inconsistently applied, or focused primarily on students rather than staff.

Respondent 2 highlighted that her institution had inclusive policies "still in development," yet she was not informed about them despite being a PwD staff member. She stated, "*The policies was not annnounced properly. The university does not even have data of the OKU staff in in the campus, which I find is shocking."*

On the other hand, two of the respondents are involved in drafting their university inclusive campus policy. For example, Respondent 3 said she is involved with the drafting of universities policies for disabled community, but confirmed that implementation was mostly student-centric: "*The implementation is more student-driven… staff with disabilities are treated similar whether they have disabilities or not*." She also pointed out that accommodations for students such as extra exam time rejected by some lecturers, reflecting low awareness and inconsistent communication norms across departments.

This disconnect between policy and practice contributed to a sense of exclusion. Respondent 4 openly stated, "*In terms of a sense of belonging, I don't feel that I belong here… they want the best part of me, but when it comes to my well-being, they don't*." This was expressed by Respondent 5 too when he expressed that *"There were times I stopped giving feedback and I just deal with whatever is given. Because sometimes we get ignored, our emails are not answered and our pleas seems to be just another complain to the*

*university."*Across transcripts, respondents described institutional silence such emails ignored, requests delayed, and policies announced symbolically but not practiced—resulting in emotional fatigue and diminished motivation.

Discussion

From the findings, Table 1 showed the summary of participants' views of their challenges as PwD academicians.

Table 1: Summary of Communication Inclusivity Challenges Reported by PwD Academicians

Issue Category	Challenges Reported by Both Respondents
Communication Support	Lack of proactive administrative help; reliance on supportive students
Physical Accessibility	Burden of carrying equipment; inaccessible classrooms; broken or absent accessibility infrastructure
Policy Awareness	Staff unaware of existing policies; policies not communicated; policies focus on students
Workplace Culture	Bureaucratic and hierarchical systems reduce responsiveness; stigma and being overlooked
Professional Identity	Identity strengthened through leadership roles; sense of belonging inconsistent and fragile

A key theme throughout the study is the uneven support experienced by PWD academicians. While administrative staff often failed to provide reasonable accommodations, students were consistently supportive. Respondent 6 shared frustrations over having to transport her own teaching equipment without assistance, stating, "*They think I am capable and didn't offer any help*." Similarly, Respondent 3 expressed disappointment at having to repeatedly request classroom accommodations, despite having worked at the institution for seven years. These experiences reflect findings by Zainah and Zainuddin (2020) and Abdul Razak (2018), who reported that PWD employees often face neglect from support staff, largely due to low disability awareness. Conversely, student support was described as proactive and empathetic, with Respondent 2 noting how students adjusted their seating for better communication. However, such support was informal and not backed by institutional mechanisms, raising concerns about sustainability (Groenewald, 2024).

The findings indicate that communication inclusivity for PwD academicians in Malaysia is shaped by infrastructural inaccessibility, uneven interpersonal support, and weak institutional policy implementation. Barriers such as inaccessible classrooms, difficulties transporting equipment, and limited visibility echo prior research on the importance of alternative communication formats and accessible environments (Iacono et al., 2016; Elsahar et al., 2019). However, despite existing policies, these supports are rarely operationalised in Malaysian universities, reinforcing Mukupa et al.'s (2023) argument that inclusivity is often treated as symbolic compliance rather than a strategic institutional practice. Beyond infrastructural gaps, respondents highlighted limited awareness and poor communication of institutional policies. Several participants were unaware of disability-related support until encountering it incidentally, while others noted that university initiatives prioritised students over disabled staff. These findings extend existing literature by showing that policy invisibility itself functions as a communicative barrier, producing what Mukupa et al. (2023) describe as symbolic inclusion with minimal practical impact.

This study advances Social Identity Theory (SIT) by demonstrating that, in the Malaysian higher education context, professional identity recognition for PwD academicians is often contingent on positional authority rather than systemic equity. While leadership roles enhanced visibility and reduced stigma for some participants, reliance on positional power risks reinforcing merit-based inclusion, consistent with concerns raised by Brown and Leigh (2018) and Groenewald (2024). Unlike Western contexts where formal disability policies and employee resource groups are more institutionalised, Malaysian inclusivity practices remain fragmented and highly individualised. Furthermore, the findings reveal a distinctive Malaysian dynamic where informal support from students is strong, empathetic, and consistent, aligning with collectivist cultural norms. While this peer support offers emotional validation, SIT helps explain why it cannot compensate for exclusion

from the primary institutional in-group of colleagues and administrators. Identity affirmation from students does not offset systemic neglect, resulting in emotional fatigue, persistent self-advocacy, and weakened institutional belonging.

Overall, this study contributes new insight by showing how communication practices in Malaysian universities do more than enable access; they actively shape social categorisation, identity legitimacy, and professional belonging for PwD academicians. This extends SIT by highlighting how under-institutionalised inclusivity, characteristic of many Global South higher education contexts, intensifies identity vulnerability despite strong interpersonal goodwill. Physical and digital inaccessibility also emerged as a major barrier, reinforcing prior studies showing that inaccessible environments significantly hinder communication for disabled employees (Iacono et al., 2016; Elsahar et al., 2019). Respondents described broken lifts, distant classrooms, missing ramps, and the physical strain of transporting heavy teaching materials across campus. These infrastructural limitations created additional communication barriers by reducing visibility in classrooms, delaying participation in meetings, or making it difficult to engage fully during invigilation. While Mukupa et al. (2023) argued that communication inclusivity must be viewed strategically rather than as a compliance measure, this study shows how Malaysian institutions remain slow and reactive in implementing accessible systems, which contributes to identity strain. The need to expend extra physical and emotional labour to simply perform basic communication tasks undermines the ability of PwD academicians to identify confidently with their academic roles.

Policy awareness and implementation also mirrored broader patterns in Malaysian higher education, where disability-related policies often exist on paper but lack enforcement or visibility. Participants who were not involved in policy development reported having little to no knowledge of existing inclusive communication frameworks, while those involved in drafting such policies noted that implementation remained heavily student-focused. This finding supports Mukupa et al.'s (2023) argument that symbolic inclusion—policies that exist without meaningful execution—creates a gap between institutional rhetoric and lived experience. According to SIT, such institutional silence reinforces the perception that PwD staff do not fully belong within the academic in-group. Respondent 4's statement that she did not feel she belonged, despite contributing significantly to the institution, reflects the identity consequences of policy invisibility.

Interestingly, the study also highlights that leadership roles can temporarily enhance legitimacy and reduce stigma for PwD academicians, an insight consistent with Brown and Leigh (2018), who noted that occupational status can buffer against disability stigma. Respondent 1 described improved respect and communication when she held a leadership position. Through the lens of SIT, this reflects how role-based identity can temporarily override disability-based categorisation, enabling greater acceptance within the in-group. However, because this recognition is status-dependent rather than structurally grounded, it remains fragile and does not resolve deeper institutional inequities. Once participants no longer held senior roles, many reported that stigma and exclusion resurfaced.

Overall, this study supports and extends existing literature by demonstrating that communication practices such as email responsiveness, classroom allocation, accessibility of physical spaces, and the clarity of policy dissemination play a pivotal role in shaping the social identities of PwD academicians. While past research has focused on accessibility tools or discrimination, this study shows that structural communication behaviour itself becomes a form of identity reinforcement or identity threat. It also introduces the idea that PwD academicians navigate a dual identity: their professional identity as academics and their disability identity as members of a marginalised group. The tension between these identities, exacerbated by institutional silence and infrastructural neglect, contributes uniquely to the theoretical expansion of Social Identity Theory. Rather than focusing solely on interpersonal prejudice, SIT in this context must also account for structural and organisational forces that categorise, marginalise, and exclude.Consistent with the observations of Mohd Nabil, Matore, and Zainal (2025), systemic barriers in early identification and communication accessibility parallel the institutional gaps found in Malaysian universities.Studies highlight how delayed or fragmented communication structures can perpetuate exclusion and hinder full participation among individuals with special needs.

Ultimately, the study illustrates that communication inclusivity is fundamental not only for productivity and engagement but also for the psychological safety, belonging, and identity development of PwD academics. Without consistent structural support, inclusive policies, and accessible environments, PwD staff remain symbolically incorporated yet practically marginalised within the academic community. Embedding inclusivity into communication systems at every institutional level is therefore essential for creating environments where PwD academicians can claim full membership and legitimacy within their professional identity group. The findings reveal several practices that demonstrate the potential for inclusive workplace communication among PwD academicians. One key strength is the consistent and empathetic support provided by students. Participants described students as responsive and adaptable, often adjusting communication modes and offering informal assistance. This student-driven support highlights the role of everyday empathy in fostering inclusive communication, even in the absence of formal structures.

Leadership roles also emerged as an important opportunity for inclusion. Participants in positions of authority reported greater visibility, acceptance, and reduced stigma, as leadership status helped challenge disability-related assumptions. While reliance on positional authority risks reinforcing merit-based inclusion, increased representation of PwD academicians in leadership can nonetheless contribute to normalising disability within academic communication spaces. Assistive technologies and adaptive tools further supported inclusive communication when available. Participants noted that accessible digital platforms, flexible classroom arrangements, and alternative communication formats significantly improved participation, although their implementation remained inconsistent. These findings suggest that relatively modest technological adjustments can meaningfully reduce communication barriers.

To ensure sustainability, these practices must be institutionalised rather than reliant on individual goodwill. Student support can be formalised through disability awareness training and inclusive pedagogy guidelines, leadership inclusivity strengthened through mentorship and promotion pathways, and assistive technologies embedded through clear standards, dedicated funding, and regular accessibility audits. Collectively, these measures can support a shift from ad hoc inclusion toward systematic communication inclusivity for PwD academicians.In conclusion, the findings reinforce that communication inclusivity is central to identity formation and belonging for PwD academicians. Without consistent institutional support, accessible infrastructure, and clear policy communication, PwD staff remain positioned at the margins of the academic group, relying on informal student support and personal resilience to sustain their roles. Embedding inclusivity at the structural and cultural levels is essential not only for equity and performance but also for enabling PwD academicians to claim full membership and legitimacy within the academic community.

Overall, this study illustrates that while informal efforts by students and colleagues can be encouraging, they cannot replace the need for structured policies, accessible environments, and a cultural shift toward strategic inclusivity. Communication inclusivity must be embedded at every level—individual, institutional, and policy if higher education is to truly empower PWD academicians.The main limitation of this study lies in its small sample size, which, while adequate for qualitative depth, may not capture the full diversity of experiences across Malaysia's higher education sector. Future research could expand the sample or incorporate a comparative study across different types of institutions. Another limitation is the potential for social desirability bias in self-reported data, although the trust established during interviews likely mitigated this concern.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the need for immediate, practical interventions within higher education institutions to improve communication inclusivity for PwD staff. These include the implementation of regular disability awareness training for academic and administrative personnel, as well as systematic accessibility audits of digital platforms, classrooms, and communication channels. Such actions can address everyday communication barriers and increase institutional responsiveness in the short term. In the longer term, higher education institutions in Malaysia must adopt comprehensive and enforceable communication policies that explicitly address the needs of disabled staff. This includes establishing dedicated accessibility support units, embedding inclusive communication standards into institutional governance, and adopting a rights-based

approach that recognises accessibility as a fundamental requirement rather than discretionary support. Beyond the institutional level, the study also calls for national policy reforms to standardise inclusive communication practices across sectors. As Malaysia seeks to strengthen its higher education system and meet international obligations, ensuring communication inclusivity for PwD is both an ethical responsibility and a strategic priority.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, reflecting the qualitative and interpretivist design of the study and the limited population of PwD academicians within Malaysian higher education. While this allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Second, the study represents a limited range of disability types, with participation primarily from academicians with visual impairments and mobility challenges. As experiences of workplace communication may vary across different forms of disability, future research should include a broader spectrum of disabilities, such as hearing impairments, neurodivergent conditions, and psychosocial disabilities, to capture more diverse communicative needs and experiences.

Finally, future studies could adopt a comparative approach by examining communication inclusivity across different higher education institutions, including public versus private universities or research-intensive versus teaching-focused institutions. Comparative and mixed-methods research would strengthen understanding of how institutional culture, resources, and governance structures shape inclusive communication practices and outcomes for PwD academicians. By centering the voices of PwD academicians, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of workplace inclusivity and underscores the critical role of communication in building equitable institutions. The recommendations derived from this research can serve as a foundation for larger national conversations on inclusive academic environments.

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