

Media Framing Role in Shaping Organizational Opinion on Role of Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia's Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how four Malaysian online news media frame organizational perceptions of Persons with Disabilities (PwD) in the workplace, and how these narratives influence HR professionals' attitudes and practices, in comparison with international studies. The objectives are: (1) to examine how Malaysian news outlets frame PwD in relation to employment, and (2) to explore how these frames shape HR professionals' organizational responses. A qualitative case study approach was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews with five HR professionals and content analysis of PwD employment coverage in four Malaysian online news portals (2020–2025). Entman's diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames guided the analysis, while international framing studies from the UK, Japan, and UN disability discourse provided comparative context. Findings show that Malaysian media predominantly employ the compassion frame, portraying PwD as dependent and in need of assistance. The empowerment frame is less common but has gained visibility in recent years. HR interviews revealed that charity-oriented frames reinforce risk-averse hiring, with PwD perceived as requiring "special allowances," while empowerment frames position PwD as untapped talent aligned with diversity and corporate social responsibility agendas. Success stories and empowerment policies encourage HR leaders to consider flexible work arrangements and targeted training. International literature reflects a similar tension between compassion and empowerment narratives, though Malaysia's reliance on charity framing slows the normalization of PwD inclusion. The study contributes to organizational communication research in Southeast Asia by linking media frames with HR perceptions and workplace practices.

Keywords: *Workplace inclusivity, organizational policy, media framing, organizational communication, person with disability.*

INTRODUCTION

Workplace inclusivity for Persons with Disabilities (PwD) is increasingly recognized as a prerequisite for equitable and sustainable development. Global commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities)—reinforce the expectation that PwD should be included as capable contributors to the workforce, rather than positioned as recipients of charity. Yet, the translation of these inclusive ideals into workplace reality remains uneven, especially in developing economies such as Malaysia. In Malaysia, the cumulative number of registered PwD was reported as 674,548 in 2022, representing an estimated 2.0% of the population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022).

In the Malaysian policy context, inclusion has been institutionalized through the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, the National Policy and Action Plan for PwD 2016–2022, and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025), which targets a minimum 1% employment quota

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E-ISSN: 2289-1528

<https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2026-4201-24>

Received: 9 February 2026 | Accepted: 26 March 2026 | Published: 31 March 2026

for PwD in the public sector while encouraging private-sector participation. Despite these commitments, PwD employment remains substantially below policy aspirations. The barriers are not only infrastructural and procedural, but also perceptual: disability is frequently associated with dependency, fragility, and accommodation costs rather than competence and productivity. These perceptions are shaped in part by media discourse, which acts as a key meaning-making institution influencing how society and organizational actors understand disability and employability.

Media representations play a crucial role in framing public understanding of who is “employable” and what constitutes an “inclusive” workplace. Through selective emphasis and narrative cues, media outlets construct social realities that can either normalize or marginalize PwD participation. According to Entman’s (1993) framing theory, frames highlight certain aspects of perceived reality to promote particular problem definitions (diagnostic), causal interpretations and remedies (prognostic), and calls to action (motivational). When disability is framed through compassion or charity, PwD are portrayed as dependent, reinforcing paternalistic or risk-averse hiring attitudes. Conversely, empowerment frames depict PwD as skilled professionals and emphasize structural change, equality, and contribution to organizational performance. Prior research in Western contexts (Haller & Ralph, 2006; Shek-Noble, 2020) shows that empowerment narratives support diversity-driven human resource practices, while charity frames sustain tokenistic or segregated employment patterns.

Despite growing international attention to disability media studies, there are some very clear knowledge gaps. The link between media representation and organizational behaviour remains underexplored in Southeast Asia. Malaysian media research has tended to focus on accessibility or policy advocacy, with limited attention to how news framing influences organizational attitudes and practices. Yet, organizations often draw on prevailing public narratives when developing corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies or diversity initiatives. Hence, understanding media portrayals of PwD employment is vital to explain how organizational actors, particularly human-resource (HR) professionals, interpret inclusivity and operationalize it in recruitment, training, and workplace policies.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how four Malaysian online news media, namely *The Star*, *New Straits Times* (NST), *Free Malaysia Today* (FMT), and *Malay Mail Online*, framed organizational perceptions of PwD in the workplace, and how these narratives influence HR professionals’ attitudes and practices, in comparison with international studies. The research objectives are:

1. To examine how Malaysian news outlets frame PwD in relation to employment; and
2. To explore how these frames shape HR professionals’ organizational responses.

The analysis covers news articles published between 2020 and 2025, a period marked by heightened digital transformation and corporate diversity discourse during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By integrating content analysis of media framing with in-depth interviews among HR professionals, this paper bridges the communicative gap between public narratives and organizational sensemaking. It contributes to scholarly understanding of how symbolic representations in media translate into practical realities in workplaces, and how reframing disability in the news could foster more inclusive organizational behaviour. In short, Figure 1 below shows the conceptual pathway through which media framing of Persons with Disabilities (PwD) employment shapes societal narratives, influences how organizations

perceive and make sense of disability, and ultimately affects human resource (HR) practices such as recruitment, training, accommodation, and inclusion outcomes.

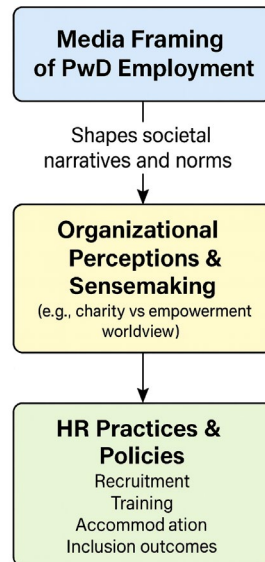


Figure 1: Conceptual pathway of media framing and people with disabilities (PwD)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disability Framing Theory

Originating from Entman (1993), framing theory focuses on how the media highlight certain aspects of reality to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, and solutions. This interpretive process affects not only public opinion but also how organizations, including human resource (HR) departments, make sense of disability inclusion in the workplace.

Two dominant frames frequently appear in disability coverage: compassion and empowerment. The compassion frame depicts Persons with Disabilities (PwD) as dependent and pitiable, evoking sympathy or charity. Stories often highlight personal struggle, family sacrifice, or public appeals for assistance. While such narratives humanize PwD, they also risk reinforcing the stereotype that disabled people are helpless or burdensome, what disability scholars term “*inspiration porn*” (Young, 2014). This frame, rooted in the medical and charity models of disability, can influence organizations to adopt protective or tokenistic hiring attitudes rather than structural inclusion.

Media framing studies demonstrate that news and media representations play a crucial role in shaping how disability is cognitively defined and socially understood, including within employment contexts. Empirical evidence shows that compassion-based frames frequently portray persons with disabilities (PwDs) as vulnerable, dependent, or burdensome, reinforcing deficit-oriented interpretations.

International Studies on Framing of Disability

For example, Briant, Watson, and Philo (2011) found that UK newspaper coverage during the austerity period increasingly framed disabled people as welfare dependents and social risks, thereby normalizing stigma and exclusion. Similarly, Haller, Dorries and Rahn (2006) showed that medicalized and charity-based language in U.S. media diagnostically constructed

disability as an individual deficit rather than a social or organizational issue. Such diagnostic framing is significant because it contributes to shared cognitive schemas that influence how employers and human resource (HR) professionals interpret disability and workplace communication barriers.

Empowerment-oriented frames, in contrast to compassion frames, emphasize agency, competence, participation, and rights, thereby shifting attention from individual limitation to organizational accountability. Empirical framing analysis by Goethals et al. (2020) demonstrates how empowerment counter-frames actively resist pity-based portrayals by positioning PwDs as autonomous social actors entitled to participation and equality. In employment-focused contexts, Shek-Noble (2020) found that Japanese media coverage oscillated between compassion and empowerment frames, with empowerment narratives aligning disability with productivity, policy compliance, and contribution to the workforce. For HR professionals, such prognostic framing legitimizes organizational solutions such as inclusive communication systems, accessible technologies, and competence-based evaluation rather than ad hoc or charitable accommodations.

At the organizational level, empowerment framing carries a motivational function that shapes whether communication inclusivity is institutionalized or treated as discretionary support. Visual framing evidence from Lin, Zhong, and Yang (2024) shows that when PwDs are depicted as active participants in social and work settings, inclusion becomes normalized as part of everyday organizational life. This normalization is critical for sustaining inclusive workplace communication practices, as it motivates organizations to embed accessibility into routine policies, leadership practices, and digital communication infrastructures. Collectively, these studies suggest that compassion frames tend to motivate short-term sympathy and individualized support, whereas empowerment frames encourage long-term structural change, positioning communication inclusivity as a strategic, rights-based, and organizational responsibility rather than a matter of goodwill.

In contrast, the empowerment frame portrays PwD as capable individuals with skills, agency, and rights. It emphasizes accessibility, participation, and equality, aligning with the social and rights-based models of disability. Empowerment narratives focus on opportunities and systemic change rather than personal tragedy, presenting PwD as contributors to productivity and innovation. Studies show that when media promote empowerment framing, organizations tend to associate inclusion with performance, corporate social responsibility, and diversity management (Haller & Ralph, 2006; Shek-Noble, 2020).

Media narratives thus play a key role in shaping organizational perceptions and HR practices, a process often described as sensemaking (Weick, 1995). When compassion dominates, employers may internalize risk-averse views, seeing PwD as needing special accommodation. When empowerment frames prevail, organizations are more likely to implement inclusive recruitment, training, and workplace policies. This dynamic demonstrates how symbolic media representations translate into concrete workplace actions.

Internationally, disability media research shows gradual movement from compassion to empowerment. In the UK, Barnes and Mercer (2010) observed a shift toward equality-based portrayals following the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Japanese studies (Tsutsui, 2021) report similar trends as media coverage increasingly aligns with corporate inclusion efforts. The United Nations (2022) emphasizes rights-based, empowerment narratives in promoting accessibility and universal design. However, in developing contexts, compassion

narratives persist. Ofori-Boateng (2023) found that Ghanaian media still relied heavily on deficit and pity frames despite emerging rights discourses.

Disability Frame in Malaysia Context

In Malaysia, this global pattern is mirrored in a dual discourse. Compassion framing remains dominant in human-interest reporting and charity campaigns, whereas empowerment narratives have emerged more recently in coverage of employment programs and diversity policies. National policy documents such as the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025), and the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (Ministry of Economic Affairs Malaysia, 2019) endorse workplace inclusion, yet PwD employment remains below 1 % of the public-sector workforce. Studies (Teng & Joo, 2020; Yaakup, 2024) suggest that while awareness of rights has grown, structural change is still limited. The ongoing tension between compassion and empowerment frames thus reflects Malaysia’s transitional phase from welfare-based support toward rights-driven inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study design integrating content analysis and semi-structured interviews to examine how Malaysian online news media frame the employment of Persons with Disabilities (PwD) and how such framings are interpreted within organizational contexts. The media sample consisted of 60 news articles published between 2020 and 2025, drawn purposively from four major Malaysian online news portals namely *The Star*, *New Straits Times (NST)*, *Free Malaysia Today (FMT)*, and *Malay Mail Online* with 15 articles selected from each outlet. These portals were chosen to reflect variation in ownership structure, editorial orientation, and audience reach. Articles were identified using keyword searches such as “OKU employment,” “persons with disabilities workforce,” “disabled entrepreneurs,” and “PwD hiring Malaysia,” and were included if they explicitly discussed PwD in employment, training, entrepreneurship, or workplace inclusion contexts. The coding instrument was developed based on Entman’s (1993) framing model, operationalizing three dimensions—diagnostic (problem definition), prognostic (solutions proposed), and motivational (moral appeals)—and categorizing frames into compassion and empowerment, informed by prior disability framing literature (e.g., Oliver, 1990; Haller & Ralph, 2006). Each article was coded manually, with frame dominance determined by the most salient framing cues across headlines, leads, sources quoted, and concluding emphasis.

To complement the media analysis, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR professionals from education, public service, media and communication, tourism, and hospitality sectors, selected through purposive sampling. All participants had a minimum of five years’ HR experience and direct or indirect involvement in PwD employment, ensuring relevance and experiential depth. The interview protocol explored perceptions of PwD employability, interpretations of media narratives, and the influence of news coverage on hiring decisions, workplace communication, and inclusion strategies.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, both the content analysis and semi structured instrumentation were adapted from previous studies, namely Haller and Ralph (2006) and also Entman (1993). The instrument was then vetted by two experts, one is an academician focusing on inclusive communication and another expert from NGO who focus on championing the cause of disabled people in workforce.

Interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Bahasa Malaysia, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically. Thematic analysis followed an inductive–deductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data while being sensitized by framing theory and organizational sensemaking perspectives. Methodological triangulation between media content and interview data enhanced analytical credibility, enabling the study to link media framing patterns with HR sensemaking processes and organizational communication practices. To enhance credibility, the study applied triangulation across data sources (media texts and HR interviews) and maintained an audit trail documenting coding decision, theme development, and frame classification criteria.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 60 articles published between 2020 and 2024 were analysed (15 each from The Star, New Straits Times [NST], Free Malaysia Today [FMT], and Malay Mail). Articles were coded according to Entman's (1993) diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing dimensions and classified into compassion and empowerment frames (Haller & Ralph, 2006; Oliver, 1990). Table 1 presents the distribution of frame dominance by outlet. Overall, the analysis shows a near-equal balance between compassion (48%) and empowerment (52%) frames. While NST emphasizes more charitable or welfare-based portrayals, The Star and FMT more frequently highlight empowerment through narratives of entrepreneurship, vocational training, and policy reform. Malay Mail demonstrates a mixed pattern, often blending emotional appeal with empowerment cues.

Table 1: Distribution of sample articles by news portal and frame type (2020–2025)

News Portal	No. of Articles (n)	Compassion Frame	Empowerment Frame	Dominant Frame
The Star	15	6	9	Empowerment
New Straits Times (NST)	15	10	5	Compassion
Free Malaysia Today (FMT)	15	5	10	Empowerment
Malay Mail Online	15	8	7	Mixed
Total	60	29 (48%)	31 (52%)	

Source: Author's analysis of 60 articles (2020–2025).

Overall, the analysis shows a near-equal balance between compassion (48%) and empowerment (52%) frames. While NST continues to emphasize charitable or welfare-based portrayals, The Star and FMT have progressively highlighted empowerment through narratives of entrepreneurship, vocational training, and policy reform. Malay Mail Online demonstrates an intermediate position, often blending both emotional appeals and empowerment cues. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of the different frames' prominence.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of compassion and empowerment frames

Frame Type	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Compassion	7.25	2.22	Moderate presence with higher variability across outlets — strongest in NST and Malay Mail
Empowerment	7.75	2.45	Slightly higher mean indicating gradual discursive shift — strongest in FMT and The Star

Although the numerical difference is modest (0.5 articles per outlet on average), the pattern suggests a gradual transformation from compassion-driven narratives toward empowerment-based storytelling. The identical standard deviations indicate that both frames are applied inconsistently across newsrooms, revealing outlet-specific editorial tendencies rather than a uniform national trend.

Analysis of the selected news articles indicates that compassion framing remains a salient and recurrent pattern, particularly within *New Straits Times* and *Malay Mail Online*. Headlines frequently rely on emotional appeal, familial sacrifice, and moral benevolence to construct disability narratives. For example, the NST headline “*A beacon of hope: Dad honours son’s memory by helping disabled kids*” (2024) foregrounds parental altruism rather than PwD agency, positioning persons with disabilities as recipients of charity and emotional care. Similarly, “*Please be kind to her, says father of first Malaysian toddler diagnosed with Werewolf Syndrome*” (Malay Mail, 2024) centres public sympathy and kindness, reinforcing a dependent and vulnerable portrayal of disability. Human-interest success stories such as “*From wheelchair to grill master: Abang Fakhruddin’s resilience wins hearts online*” (NST, 2023) further illustrate compassion framing by emphasizing adversity and perseverance, framing achievement as inspirational and exceptional. Even when structural exclusion is reported, such as in “*Only 0.36 percent of public-sector hires last year were persons with disabilities*” (NST, 2024), the emphasis remains diagnostic and emotive, highlighting marginalization without sustained attention to organizational responsibility or systemic change.

In contrast, empowerment framing is more prominently articulated in *The Star* and *Free Malaysia Today (FMT)*, where PwDs are represented as capable, skilled, and economically active individuals. Headlines such as “*Empowering OKU handicraft through online platforms*” (The Star, 2022) frame PwDs as adaptive entrepreneurs engaging with digital transformation, explicitly stressing agency and competence. Employment-focused empowerment is further evident in FMT’s “*24 persons with disabilities set to work in hotels after intensive training*” (2024), which positions PwDs as contributors to workforce productivity following structured skills development. Policy-driven empowerment narratives are also visible in “*Successful pilot OKU training initiative gets RM2mil*” (The Star, 2024) and “*Free public transport for PwDs will enhance their opportunities, accessibility*” (Malay Mail, 2023), where inclusion is framed as the outcome of institutional investment and infrastructural reform. Rights-based empowerment emerges most clearly in politically oriented reporting, such as “*GE15: Want our vote? Ensure the rights of persons with disabilities*” (FMT, 2022) and “*Historic win for OKU rights*” (The Star, 2025), which explicitly position PwDs as rights holders and civic actors within the national policy landscape.

At the same time, the findings reveal hybrid framing practices, suggesting that Malaysian media discourse is transitional rather than uniformly empowerment-oriented. Some empowerment narratives retain elements of compassion through personalized storytelling. For instance, “*Eerah rises above her disabilities to sell burgers*” (FMT, 2024) highlights entrepreneurial agency while simultaneously invoking emotional resilience and personal struggle. Similarly, “*Students with disabilities embrace opportunity as baristas in Madani Rakyat Programme*” (Malay Mail, 2024) emphasizes participation and capability, yet situates empowerment within a state-led welfare and training context. These blended frames indicate that while empowerment narratives are increasingly visible, they are often mediated through familiar human-interest conventions to maintain audience resonance. Overall, the

findings point to a dual framing environment, where compassion frames continue to dominate affective storytelling, while empowerment frames increasingly structure narratives around skills, rights, and policy solutions though not yet in a consistent or uniform manner across outlets.

The content analysis is then complemented with the interview data. Five HR professionals were interviewed from diverse sectors, as can be seen in Table 3. Each respondent had more than five years of HR experience and direct or indirect involvement in hiring or managing PwD employees.

Table 3: Profile of interview participants

Respondent ID	Sector	Position	Years in HR	Experience with PwD Employment
HR1	Education (Private College)	HR Manager	6 years	Manages inclusive internship programmes
HR2	Public Service	Senior Executive	10 years	Oversees compliance with administrative civil servant hiring quota
HR3	Media and Communication	Talent Development Lead	8 years	Employs PwD in frontdesk operation
HR4	Tourism	HR Director	15 years	PwD staff to help with promotion and materials
HR5	Hospitality	HR Coordinator	6 years	Supervises training for PwD housekeeping trainees

Theme 1: Media Framing Influence Perception of HR Professionals towards PwD

The findings indicate that media narratives play a significant role in shaping how HR professionals cognitively and emotionally perceive persons with disabilities (PwD) during recruitment and workplace integration. Interviewees consistently acknowledged that repeated exposure to news stories—particularly those emphasizing perseverance, work ethic, and personal struggle—filters into their evaluative judgments when interviewing or discussing PwD candidates. As HR2 noted, *“I read a lot about how hard people with disability work and have great attitude in the media. That shapes how I feel when I interview them la...”* This suggests that media representations do not merely inform awareness, but actively construct affective expectations about PwD as workers, influencing assumptions about motivation, resilience, and suitability.

However, the data also reveal a dual effect of media framing. While empowerment-oriented stories help HR professionals focus on capabilities, compassion-based narratives subtly reinforce dependency frames. HR3’s reflection—*“I think I find disabled people stories about making it is very inspiring. I think it also help me see their capability, not what they can’t do”*—illustrates how inspirational portrayals can counter deficit thinking. Yet, the reliance on “inspirational” framing also risks positioning PwD as exceptional rather than normal contributors, which may unintentionally sustain unequal expectations. This tension highlights how media narratives function as a cognitive shortcut for HR decision-making, especially in the absence of direct experience or structured disability inclusion training.

Theme 2: Persistent Stereotypes and Structural Barriers

Despite increasing exposure to positive media stories, deeply embedded stereotypes about PwD persist within organizational cultures. Respondents described ongoing uncertainty and discomfort among managers and colleagues regarding appropriate task allocation,

performance expectations, and communication boundaries. HR1's admitted that *"Sometimes my colleagues are unsure about what kind of assistance and task we can assign to the disabled colleague. It is quite taboo"*. This reveals that inclusion is often constrained not by hostility, but by fear of *"doing the wrong thing."* This uncertainty results in overprotection, reduced responsibility, or exclusion from meaningful tasks, thereby reinforcing perceptions of limited capability. This was further reinforced by HR3 when he said *"Its not that we discriminate against OKU. But we don't know if we can handle them..like I mean..do we provide enough facilities? Do we give facilities if only 1 OKU? Then, what we can say what we can't say...Also later legal action can be taken against us.."*

In addition to attitudinal barriers, respondents emphasized structural constraints such as perceived costs, productivity concerns, and infrastructural readiness. HR4's commented and said *"My boss honestly worry about the productivity and also if we need to pay extra"*. This reflects a managerial mindset that frames PwD inclusion as a financial risk rather than an organizational investment. These concerns are often amplified by physical and digital inaccessibility, where workplaces are not designed with universal access in mind. Together, these findings suggest that stereotypes are sustained through an interaction between misinformation, risk-aversion, and inadequate organizational systems, rather than individual prejudice alone.

Theme 3: Empowerment as Strategic Inclusion

A key finding is the growing recognition of empowerment narratives as strategically valuable, particularly when linked to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) agendas. Respondents indicated that media stories highlighting PwD success in entrepreneurship, skills training, or professional achievement help reposition disability inclusion as an organizational asset rather than a moral obligation. As HR5 emphasized, *"I think media need to highlight more about disabled people contributing to CSR and ESG strategy then it change the employer perception."* This reflects a shift toward instrumental inclusion, where PwD hiring is aligned with broader corporate performance indicators.

This strategic framing is further reinforced by organizational KPIs related to diversity and inclusion. HR3 candidly stated, *"Frankly, one of the reasons we started hiring people with disabilities is because we are trying to reach our KPI for diversity goals."* While this may appear pragmatic, it nonetheless creates institutional space for PwD participation and normalizes inclusive hiring practices. Importantly, empowerment narratives enable HR professionals to justify inclusion decisions internally, particularly to senior management by framing them in terms of innovation, diversity, and reputational value. However, the findings also suggest inclusion driven solely by metrics risks becoming symbolic unless accompanied by meaningful workplace support and long-term commitment. Table 4 illustrates the summary of themes, subthemes and quotes that supported the findings as mentioned.

Table 4: Summary of themes and subthemes from interview

Theme	Subthemes & Description	Supporting Quotes
Media Framing Influences HR Perceptions	Media narratives act as both cognitive and emotional filters, shaping how HR professionals evaluate PwD candidates. Empowerment-oriented stories encourage recognition of capabilities, while inspirational framing may unintentionally position PwD as exceptional rather than normal employees. In the absence of direct experience or training, HR professionals often rely on media representations as a shortcut in decision-making.	"I read a lot about how hard people with disability work... That shapes how I feel when I interview them..." (HR2) "It also help me see their capability, not what they can't do." (HR3) "Disabled people stories about making it is very inspiring." (HR3)
Persistent Stereotypes and Structural Barriers	Despite positive exposure, uncertainty and discomfort remain in interacting with PwD, driven by fear of making mistakes. This leads to cautious or limited engagement, influenced by concerns over legal implications, organizational readiness, and communication boundaries. Additionally, inclusion is often constrained by perceived costs, productivity concerns, and lack of accessible infrastructure, reinforcing structural barriers within organizations.	"We are unsure about what kind of assistance and task we can assign... It is quite taboo." (HR1) "What we can say what we can't say..." (HR3) "We don't know if we can handle them... legal action can be taken..." (HR3) "My boss... worry about the productivity and also if we need to pay extra." (HR4) "Do we provide enough facilities? Do we give facilities if only 1 OKU?" (HR3)
Empowerment as Strategic Inclusion	Empowerment narratives are increasingly linked to organizational strategies such as CSR and ESG, reframing PwD inclusion as a business and reputational asset. Hiring decisions are sometimes driven by diversity KPIs, providing justification for inclusive practices. However, when driven primarily by metrics, inclusion risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, unless supported by meaningful organizational commitment and support systems.	"Media need to highlight more about disabled people contributing to CSR and ESG strategy..." (HR5) "We are trying to reach our KPI for diversity goals." (HR3)

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how Malaysian online news media frame Persons with Disabilities (PwD) in employment contexts and how these frames shape organizational perceptions and practices, particularly among HR professionals. Integrating content analysis with interview data, the findings demonstrate that media framing operates not only at the level of representation, but as a key sensemaking resource that informs how inclusion is understood, justified, and enacted within organizations. In doing so, the study confirms core propositions of framing theory (Entman, 1993), while extending disability media scholarship by empirically tracing how frames translate into organizational decision-making.

Consistent with the literature, the content analysis revealed that compassion and empowerment are the dominant frames in Malaysian disability coverage. Compassion framing remains prominent in emotionally driven human-interest stories, particularly in NST and Malay Mail, where headlines such as *“A beacon of hope: Dad honours son’s memory by helping disabled kids”* (NST, 2024) foreground benevolence, sacrifice, and moral obligation. As noted in prior studies in the UK and the US (Briant et al., 2011; Haller et al., 2006), such framing diagnostically constructs disability as an individual condition associated with vulnerability and dependence. The present findings confirm that this pattern persists in Malaysia, despite policy commitments to inclusion.

Crucially, the interview data demonstrate how compassion framing is taken up within organizational contexts. HR professionals frequently described being emotionally influenced by media stories emphasizing perseverance and hardship. As HR2 explained, *“I read a lot about how hard people with disability work and have great attitude in the media. That shapes how I feel when I interview them.”* While this reflects the humanizing intent of compassion framing, it also illustrates what Haller and Ralph (2006) describe as *“benevolent prejudice,”* where admiration coexists with lowered expectations. Interviews revealed that empathy often translated into caution rather than confidence. HR1 admitted, *“Sometimes my colleagues are unsure about what kind of assistance and task we can assign to the disabled colleague. It is quite taboo.”* This uncertainty mirrors the literature’s concern that compassion framing reinforces risk-averse organizational behaviour rather than structural inclusion.

From Entman’s (1993) perspective, compassion frames are strong in diagnostic and motivational dimensions—they define disability as a social problem and evoke sympathy—but weak in prognostic guidance. This limitation is evident in the interview findings. Although HR professionals expressed goodwill, they lacked clear scripts for action, leading to overprotection, restricted task allocation, or hesitation in hiring. This confirms Oliver’s (1990) argument that charity-based discourses emphasize care over competence, reinforcing dependency even in well-intentioned settings.

At the same time, the content analysis identified a discernible rise in empowerment framing, particularly in The Star and Free Malaysia Today. Headlines such as *“Empowering OKU handicraft through online platforms”* (The Star, 2022) and *“24 persons with disabilities set to work in hotels after intensive training”* (FMT, 2024) frame PwD as capable, skilled, and economically active contributors. This aligns with empowerment-oriented literature emphasizing agency, participation, and rights (Goethals et al., 2020; Tsutsui, 2021). These narratives shift attention away from personal tragedy toward organizational and policy-level solutions, strengthening the prognostic function of framing.

Interview data strongly support this distinction. HR professionals consistently reported that empowerment narratives influenced them differently from compassion stories. HR3 noted, *“I think I find disabled people stories about making it is very inspiring. It also helps me see their capability, not what they can’t do.”* Unlike compassion framing, empowerment narratives recalibrated evaluative criteria, encouraging HR professionals to focus on skills, training outcomes, and contribution rather than limitations. This finding confirms Weick’s (1995) assertion that external narratives shape organizational sensemaking by making certain interpretations more plausible than others.

Importantly, the distribution of frames across outlets helps explain the interview themes that emerged. Theme 1 (media narratives shaping HR perception) is consistent with the overall balance between compassion and empowerment frames, where HR practitioners

reported that exposure to disability stories “shapes” how they feel and evaluate PwD candidates (HR2). Theme 2 (persistent stereotypes and structural barriers) aligns with compassion-heavy coverage in NST and Malay Mail, where disability is repeatedly narrated through vulnerability and care, mirroring HR uncertainty about task assignment and communicative boundaries (HR1; HR3). Meanwhile, Theme 3 (empowerment as strategic inclusion) resonates with empowerment-heavy outlets (FMT and The Star), where training and employment narratives offer HR professionals a legitimacy framework for inclusion aligned with KPIs, CSR, and ESG priorities (HR3; HR5). Taken together, the frame distribution and interview themes demonstrate that media framing does not simply shape attitudes; it interacts with organizational constraints to shape what forms of inclusion appear feasible and defensible.

However, the study also complicates the literature's more optimistic claims regarding empowerment framing. While prior research suggests that empowerment narratives promote long-term structural change (Haller & Ralph, 2006), the interview data reveal that empowerment framing does not automatically resolve organizational anxiety. HR professionals continued to express concerns about infrastructure, cost, and legal responsibility. As HR3 elaborated, *“It's not that we discriminate against OKU. But we don't know if we can handle them... do we provide enough facilities? What we can say, what we can't say? Later legal action can be taken against us.”* This indicates a gap between representational empowerment in media and operational empowerment in practice.

The findings thus extend framing theory by showing that empowerment frames increase inclusion aspirations while simultaneously exposing organizational capacity gaps. Empowerment reframes the question from “Can PwD work?” to “Can our organization support PwD properly?” This shift is analytically significant, as it highlights the limits of framing effects when institutional readiness is lacking. Empowerment framing may normalize inclusion discursively, but without accessible communication systems, clear policies, and managerial competence, inclusion remains conditional.

The strategic dimension of empowerment framing emerges most clearly when considering CSR and ESG discourse. Consistent with Shek-Noble's (2020) findings in Japan, Malaysian HR professionals explicitly linked PwD inclusion to corporate performance indicators. HR5 emphasized, *“Media need to highlight more about disabled people contributing to CSR and ESG strategy then it changes employer perception,”* while HR3 acknowledged, *“One of the reasons we started hiring people with disabilities is because we are trying to reach our KPI for diversity goals.”* These statements empirically substantiate the literature's claim that empowerment framing carries a motivational function, legitimizing inclusion as a strategic rather than philanthropic decision.

Nevertheless, the findings also caution against equating strategic inclusion with substantive inclusion. When PwD hiring is driven primarily by KPIs, there is a risk of symbolic compliance without meaningful workplace transformation. This echoes critiques in disability scholarship regarding performative diversity, where representation improves without addressing deeper communication and accessibility barriers. Thus, empowerment framing is necessary but insufficient unless accompanied by sustained organizational commitment.

Culturally, the persistence of compassion framing must be understood within Malaysia's collectivist communication norms, where empathy, care, and moral responsibility are highly valued (Zainah & Zainuddin, 2020). Emotional storytelling resonates with audiences and aligns with developmental journalism traditions emphasizing social welfare. However,

the integrated findings suggest that prolonged reliance on compassion framing creates ambiguity for organizations. While compassion humanizes PwD, it rarely challenges assumptions about competence or organizational responsibility, reinforcing what Haller and Ralph (2006) describe as the “disability sympathy cycle.”

The findings confirm Malaysian scholarship describing the country as being in a transitional phase between welfare-based and rights-based inclusion (Teng & Joo, 2020). What this study adds is evidence that this transition is not merely discursive but organizationally consequential. Media framing shapes the symbolic conditions under which inclusion becomes thinkable, while HR professionals selectively mobilize these frames based on organizational constraints and strategic priorities. Inclusive employment therefore emerges from the interaction between representation, sensemaking, and structure, rather than from media narratives or policy intent alone.

By integrating content analysis and interview data, this study advances disability communication research by demonstrating how media framing effects are realized within organizational practice. It shows that reframing disability in the media is a critical lever for inclusion, but one that must be aligned with organizational capacity and governance structures to achieve lasting change.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Malaysian online news media frame Persons with Disabilities (PwD) in employment contexts and how these frames shape organizational sensemaking and human resource (HR) practices. By integrating a five-year media content analysis with in-depth interviews among HR professionals, the study demonstrates that media framing is not confined to shaping public opinion alone, but plays a critical role in influencing how organizations interpret disability, assess risk, and operationalize inclusion in practice.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings extend framing theory by empirically linking media discourse to organizational behaviour. While earlier studies have largely conceptualized framing as an agenda-setting or attitudinal mechanism (e.g., Haller & Ralph; Barnes & Mercer), this research shows that frames also function as sensemaking resources within organizations. Building on Entman’s (1993) diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational dimensions, the study illustrates how compassion frames heighten moral awareness but reinforce caution and dependency, whereas empowerment frames provide more actionable cues that legitimize inclusion as feasible and desirable. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that framing effects do not operate in isolation; they are mediated by organizational logics, professional roles, and structural capacity. This advances disability communication scholarship by showing how framing outcomes extend beyond interpretation into institutional decision-making.

Empirically, the study provides longitudinal evidence of Malaysia’s evolving disability discourse between 2020 and 2025. The content analysis reveals a hybrid framing environment in which compassion and empowerment coexist rather than replace one another. Compassion framing was particularly salient during the early pandemic period, when narratives of vulnerability and care dominated public discourse. From 2022 onward, empowerment framing increased, especially in coverage related to skills training, entrepreneurship, and employment initiatives, reflecting broader policy shifts toward recovery, inclusion, and sustainable development. This trajectory aligns with international observations that empowerment narratives gain prominence during periods of reform, while

also highlighting the persistence of culturally resonant emotional storytelling in the Malaysian media landscape.

Crucially, the interview findings show how these media frames are interpreted and negotiated by HR professionals. Compassion narratives generated empathy but also uncertainty, reinforcing risk-averse practices and hesitation around task allocation, communication boundaries, and legal responsibility. Empowerment narratives, by contrast, encouraged capability-oriented perceptions and were more readily mobilized to justify inclusive hiring—particularly when aligned with CSR, ESG, and diversity performance indicators. However, the findings also reveal the limits of empowerment framing: positive attitudes did not automatically translate into confident practice in the absence of accessible infrastructure, clear policies, and organizational readiness. This highlights a critical gap between representational empowerment in media and operational empowerment in workplaces.

Practically, the findings underscore the influential role of media in shaping organizational imaginaries of disability. While compassion-based storytelling remains culturally meaningful, its continued dominance risks sustaining benevolent but restrictive inclusion practices. Greater emphasis on normalized workplace participation, professional competence, and organizational accountability can help shift disability discourse from exceptionality to everyday inclusion. For HR practitioners, the study highlights the need to move beyond affective goodwill toward structured, institutionalized inclusion strategies. Media narratives can support this process, but they must be complemented by clear job design, inclusive communication systems, and managerial training.

At the policy level, the study suggests that inclusive employment outcomes depend on the alignment of media discourse, organizational incentives, and regulatory frameworks. While Malaysia's disability policies articulate strong inclusion goals, their realization hinges on how inclusion is socially understood and operationalized within organizations. Policymakers should therefore engage media institutions and employers in promoting empowerment-oriented narratives that support long-term structural change rather than symbolic compliance.

In sum, this study contributes to disability communication research by demonstrating that media framing shapes organizational sensemaking, not merely public attitudes. The Malaysian case illustrates a transitional inclusion discourse in which compassion and empowerment coexist, reflecting broader tensions between welfare-based and rights-based approaches. By showing how media representations interact with organizational constraints and strategic priorities, the study highlights reframing disability as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for transforming workplace practices and advancing inclusive development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research is fully funded by the UKM Internal Grant, under GGPM-2023-053 titled "Instrumentation of the Communication Inclusivity Index: Identifying Themes and Addressing Barriers Faced by Permanently Disabled (PwD) Employees at Workplace."

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