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The Voice Behind the Stigma: Self-Disclosure and Identity Negotiation of Young Adults with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how young adults with disabilities proactively use self-disclosure as a communication strategy to obtain accommodation and accessibility, resist stigma and stereotypes, and build an empowered social identity of disability. Besides, it aims to shift the theory of self-disclosure from a tool for building relational intimacy to a mechanism for negotiating power and managing stigma in the context of disability. The researcher uses a qualitative approach in which data were collected through in-depth interviews with young adults with sensory disabilities in Yogyakarta. Thematic analysis was conducted to explore the patterns of meaning among research informants. Interviews with deaf informants were facilitated by a sign language interpreter to ensure accessibility in data collection. The findings reveal that self-disclosure is a dynamic process that involves disclosing their disability status to meet accessibility needs and request reasonable accommodations; a way to combat stigma due to stigma and societal stereotypes; and redefining how disability can be understood in their social environment. Self-disclosure, as part of communication practices, functions as a negotiating arena where individual and collective identities related to disability continue to be formed. This study contributes to strengthening people with disabilities to participate actively and equally in society.

Keywords: Communication, identity negotiation, self-disclosure, social model of disability, stigma communication

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INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities are a vulnerable group because they face a variety of complex challenges consisting of economic, social, legal aspects and health-related areas. As shown in studies by Kim et al. (2025) and McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire (2018)

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these barriers limit the participation of people with disabilities in society. Asuman et al. (2021) and Oña et al. (2024) show that people with disabilities often face higher vulnerability to poverty and high unemployment rates. They also face higher living costs and limited access to educational opportunities.

Various studies show that the problems faced by people with disabilities are not specific to one field, but related to various fields (Brown, 2023; Qiu et al., 2023; Siri et al., 2020). In addition, this condition is shaped by discrimination, environmental barriers, economic hardship, and inequalities in access to legal and healthcare services (Japhet et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Martínez-Medina et al., 2022; Velandia et al., 2018). They also experience widespread discrimination and stigma, which significantly impact their limited ability to participate in education (Heryansyah & Hadi, 2023), employment (Mustika et al., 2022; Utami et al., 2025) and public life (Barbareschi et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2025).

In the education context in Indonesia, people with physical and non-physical disabilities still face significant barriers in the university environment (Heryansyah & Hadi, 2023). Hilfi et al. (2023) state that Indonesia is still weak in terms of policies and programs that can reduce barriers to improving the quality of life for people with disabilities. Nugroho and Wardana (2025) show how people with disabilities are often perceived as dependent on others, weak, and in need of pity.

In the field of the workplace, negative stereotypes about the abilities of people with disabilities in the workplace arise due to a lack of access to the formal job market in Indonesia (Utami et al., 2025). Furthermore, Utami et al. (2025) mention that social stigma against people with disabilities has a significant impact on reducing their opportunities to enter the formal job market. Mustika et al. (2022) explain that workers with disabilities in Indonesia are stigmatised and experience discrimination in the workplace. Research by Nisa (2021) and Nursholichah et al. (2024) describes the phenomenon of stigma also experienced by the families of people with disabilities. Nursholichah et al.'s (2024) research in Bengkulu highlights that children with disabilities face double barriers, namely limited facilities and social stigma from both peers and teachers.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

People with disabilities tend to frame social interactions as a continuous negotiation of stigma and communication barriers. According to the research of Lash (2023), individuals must consider two primary risks. First, the positive benefits of self-disclosure, namely obtaining accommodations (social, professional, or physical) and gaining social support. Second, the risks of self-disclosure as an attempt to avoid stigma, negative reactions, rejection, loss of privacy, and having to provide "proof" of disability (Lash, 2023).

Compared to previous studies, this research fills in the gaps in aspects of self-disclosure and identity negotiation in the context of young adults with disabilities by seeking

informants in Yogyakarta. Papalia and Martorell (2024) emphasise that the young adult period is marked by identity exploration and a focus on the self, which is directly relevant to aspects of communication such as self-disclosure, impression management, audience selection, and digital self-presentation. This research problem is also related to stigma against people with disabilities. Stigma, which creates a threat to the identity of people with disabilities, forces them to engage in information management and negotiation.

This study addresses the need for a communication-centred understanding of disability by examining self-disclosure and identity negotiation among young adults with disabilities in Yogyakarta. The study argues that self-disclosure functions not only as interpersonal communication but also as a strategic response to stigma and a mechanism for claiming accessibility, recognition, and social legitimacy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do young adults with disabilities use self-disclosure as a communication strategy to negotiate disability identity in response to stigma and stereotypes?

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach. The research highlights the essential characteristics of the problem of people with disabilities. Research data were collected through in-depth interviews to gather primary data from people with disabilities. Researchers also elaborate on secondary data from various journal articles to strengthen the discussion in this study.

Research informants were young adults with sensory disabilities aged 18–25 years. This age range was chosen based on developmental literature that marks the period of 18–25 as emerging adulthood, a transitional stage and is marked by identity exploration and a focus on the self, thus facilitating an in-depth study of the dynamics of self-disclosure and identity negotiation in various social and communication contexts (Arnett, 2000; Papalia & Martorell, 2024). The informants' details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Data of informants

Informants	Initial of Name	Gender	Age (y)	Type of Disability
1	A1	Male	19	Deaf
2	A2	Female	23	Deaf
3	A3	Male	24	Deaf
4	A4	Male	24	Deaf
5	A5	Male	22	Low Vision

Source: Primary Data, 2025

All informants were higher education students. Researchers collaborated with a sign language interpreter to ensure accessibility in data collection, particularly in in-depth interviews. To analyse data, researchers elaborate on the theories of identity, self-disclosure, and stigma. The framework becomes a basis for developing the conclusion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

All informants reported experiencing communication challenges in their lives, which created barriers to interaction and relationships. These communication challenges are an initial barrier for people with disabilities in self-disclosure. The result of this research suggests several roles for self-disclosure for young adults with disabilities. First, self-disclosure as a proactive strategy for accommodation and accessibility. Second, self-disclosure as a strategy to combat stigma and stereotypes. Third, self-disclosure as a way to build an empowered disability identity

Through self-disclosure, the young adults with disabilities build their identities as people with disabilities who were confident that they communicated differently, especially for the deaf informants. Informants A1 and A2 describe a shift from passing as Goffman's perspective, where individuals with stigmatised attributes attempt to hide or conceal their identity in order to be accepted as members of the group, to becoming more open and courageous (Goffman, 1963; Lash, 2023)

When young adults with disabilities have self-confidence and a sense of competence, they have control over their lives as empowered individuals. This study attempts to go beyond the focus on the stigma of families with disabilities as revealed by Nisa (2021), stigma in the field of the workplace (Mustika et al., 2022; Utami et al., 2025), which further narrows the access of people with disabilities to the formal employment sector.

From the communication theory perspective, this study can broaden the understanding of self-disclosure, which is defined as an individual decision to disclose descriptive, affective, or evaluative information as expressed (Littlejohn et al., 2017). Identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2023) and the social model of disability (Goodley, 2001; Shakespeare, 2013) provide complementary insights. While identity theory emphasises identity verification through social interaction, the social model of disability can explain how social structures can hinder or facilitate this identity verification process. This study further highlights the importance of the young adult phase (Arnett, 2000; Papalia & Martorell, 2024) in understanding the communication of people with disabilities with their social environment. This perspective contributes to the development of inclusive communication beyond the basic assumption that communication is merely a process of information exchange or message transmission. Communication becomes a symbolic and political space where meanings related to ability and equality are constantly negotiated. As part of the communication and interaction process, self-disclosure is a dynamic process for young adults with disabilities. This study

illustrates how dynamics realise inclusive communication in a social environment. The discussion of this study are illustrated in Figure 1.

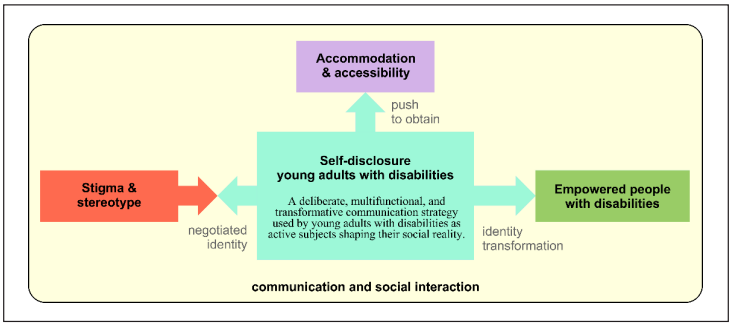

Figure 1. The dynamics towards an inclusive communication environment
Source: Personal Data, 2025

Self-disclosure for young adults with disabilities can be described as a purposeful, multifunctional, and transformative communication strategy. Through self-disclosure, young adults with disabilities become active subjects who shape their social reality. Self-disclosure becomes a means to encourage the surrounding environment to provide support for accessibility and reasonable accommodations. This practice is certainly fraught with risk because young adults with disabilities face stigma and stereotypes. They try to negotiate their identities. Self-disclosure ultimately supports the transformation of the identities of individuals with disabilities into empowered individuals and groups.

CONCLUSION

Based on this study, self-disclosure is used to negotiate the social identity of disability in response to stigma and stereotypes. This study reinforces the thesis that self-disclosure is not a passive communicative practice but rather a planned, multifunctional, and transformative communication practice. Self-disclosure practised by young adults with disabilities represents them as active subjects who shape their social reality, that realise through three stages: (a) Self-disclosure as a proactive strategy to obtain accommodation and accessibility for young adults with disabilities. (b) Self-disclosure as a strategy to combat stigma and stereotypes. (c) Self-disclosure builds the social identity of empowered young adults with disabilities. Young adults with disabilities practice communication mechanisms to deal with stigma through self-disclosure and identity negotiation. Young adults with disabilities build micro-political spaces through social relations to oppose ableist norms through self-disclosure. Communication becomes a political space. Young adults with disabilities strive to take control of their self-definition. This replaces the definition of disability formed by the social environment that contains stigma and stereotypes.

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