



Public Perception of Disability: Promoting Awareness Through Education and Social Interaction

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History Artikel	Abstract
Received: 12, January 2026 Reviced : 18 February 2026 Accepted: 22 April 2026	This study examines public perceptions toward people with disabilities and the critical need to increase awareness for inclusive environments in Indonesia. A descriptive quantitative survey was conducted involving 366 young adult respondents. The instrument's validity and reliability were statistically confirmed ($p < 0.05$). The structured questionnaire focused on social interaction frequency, emotional comfort, perceptions of equal opportunities, and the role of formal education. The results show that while respondents generally demonstrated positive interpersonal attitudes and comfort (42%), a significant portion still perceived systemic inequality in educational and employment opportunities (37%). Most notably, the majority of respondents (67%) considered formal education highly insufficient in promoting disability awareness. These findings highlight the urgent need to strengthen inclusive educational curricula and facilitate meaningful social interactions to bridge the gap between individual acceptance and structural equality.
Keyword Social, Disabilities, Inclusive, Stigma.	

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INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities continue to experience systemic social exclusion despite significant developments in international human rights frameworks. Following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), disability has increasingly been framed within a rights-based paradigm that emphasizes dignity, equality, and full participation in society. The CRPD aims to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights by persons with disabilities. (Mitra & Gao, 2023). Nevertheless, normative progress at the international level has not automatically translated into substantive equality at the societal level. In many communities, disability remains entangled with stigma, discriminatory attitudes, and structural marginalization. Contemporary disability studies conceptualize disability as the interaction between individuals with impairments and social barriers. However, despite this paradigm shift, stigma and deficit-oriented narratives toward persons with disabilities remain deeply embedded in many societies.

The consequences of stigma are multidimensional, affecting educational opportunities, employment access, civic participation, and psychological well-being. At the psychosocial level, persistent exposure to negative labeling may result in internalized stigma, diminished self-worth, and social withdrawal. Families of persons with disabilities may also experience secondary stigma, leading to broader patterns of isolation. These interconnected forms of exclusion generate structural dependency, not as an inherent characteristic of disability, but as a socially produced outcome. Such conditions fundamentally contradict the emancipatory aspirations embedded in contemporary human rights discourse. Within this normative order, persons with disabilities are positioned as deviations from socially sanctioned ideals of functionality.

This positioning legitimizes exclusion and reinforces hierarchical social relations. Stigma therefore operates not only at the interpersonal level but also through latent and structural mechanisms. Latent stigma refers to subtle and often unconscious attitudes or biases that shape everyday interactions toward persons with disabilities, while structural stigma is embedded in societal conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of stigmatized groups. These forms of stigma operate across multiple levels; personal, public, and institutional and contribute to systemic inequities in access to education, employment, healthcare, and participation in public life. Although stigma research has traditionally focused on internalized and interpersonal stigma, growing scholarship highlights structural stigma as a critical yet underexplored dimension that is reproduced through policies, institutional practices, and broader social arrangements (Gurung et al., 2025).

Existing scholarship has made important contributions to understanding disability from theoretical, institutional, and awareness-based perspectives. Lawson and Beckett (2020), for instance, articulate the complementarity between social and human rights models of disability, strengthening the normative foundation for inclusion. However, their work remains largely conceptual and does not fully interrogate how stigma is reproduced in everyday social relations. Research examining public awareness, such as Gafhar Islam (2024), identifies limited understanding of disability issues, yet remains primarily descriptive and insufficiently attentive to the structural reproduction of exclusion.

Although prior research has addressed awareness, theoretical models, and institutional deficiencies, a critical analytical gap persists in examining how social stigma toward persons with disabilities is socially reproduced at the community level and how it generates interconnected structural, economic, and psychosocial consequences. This study seeks to address that gap by conceptualizing stigma as a relational and structural phenomenon embedded within community dynamics.

It analyzes how stigma shapes access to resources, participation, and social recognition, and explores pathways for constructing inclusive social environments that affirm dignity and equal citizenship. By situating disability within broader power relations and normative constructions of social worth, this research aims to advance a more critical and operational understanding of inclusion. In doing so, it contributes to bridging the divide between formal human rights commitments and the lived realities of persons with disabilities, offering a theoretically grounded and socially transformative perspective within contemporary disability studies.

Table 1. Research Gap Analysis on Social Stigma Toward Individuals with Disabilities

Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Key Findings	Identified Limitations	Research Gap Identified	Contribution of the Present Study
Lawson & Beckett (2020)	Social and human rights model of disability	Emphasizes complementarity between social and human rights models;	Primarily theoretical and normative; limited empirical	Lack of empirical exploration of how stigma is	Provides community-level analysis of stigma as a structural

		highlights intersectionality concerns within disability movements	analysis of community-level stigma dynamics	reproduced in everyday social relations	and relational phenomenon
Gafhar Islam (2024)	Public awareness of disability issues in Indonesia	Identifies low public awareness and limited social sensitivity toward disability issues	Descriptive in nature; does not analyze structural consequences of stigma	Insufficient examination of how low awareness translates into systemic exclusion	Examines the multidimensional impacts (social, economic, psychological) of stigma
Lecomte et al. (2024)	Social understanding of disability	Reports significant levels of neglect and abandonment of persons with disabilities	Does not articulate intervention frameworks for inclusive transformation	Absence of integrative framework linking stigma analysis to actionable inclusion strategies	Develops a framework for safe space construction and community-based inclusion strategies

Based on the gaps identified in previous studies, particularly the limited exploration of how disability stigma is reproduced at the community level and its implications for social inclusion, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of public perceptions toward disability in Indonesia. While prior research has highlighted issues of awareness and theoretical frameworks, there remains a need to examine how these perceptions are shaped through everyday social interactions and educational experiences.

RESEARCH METHOD

We conducted a quantitative descriptive with categorical analysis study using an online semi-structured questionnaire designed citizen living in Indonesia. Minors were excluded to avoid potential family influence on their perceptions of disability. A total of 366 valid responses were collected over the period from November 2024 to January 2025. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria specifying that they were not persons with disabilities and not close relatives of individuals with disabilities, to minimize potential bias based on personal experience. The final sample consisted of students, employees, and unemployed young adults between 18 and 45 years old. The aim of this study was to explore how citizen in Indonesia perceive disability and the factors that influence these perceptions, particularly in the context of everyday social interaction and education.

The instrument used in this study was a structured quantitative questionnaire comprising six key sections. Instead of open-ended narratives, the survey utilized closed-ended categorical questions (using Likert-type scales) to objectively measure public perceptions. One final open-ended question was included solely to capture respondents' general associations with the term 'disability'. The structured questions focused on: (1) frequency of interaction with persons with disabilities, (2) emotional comfort level during interactions, (3) belief in equal opportunities in education and employment, (4) frequency of observing discriminatory acts, and (5) perceptions regarding the sufficiency of formal education in fostering disability awareness. The preamble of the questionnaire explicitly outlined the study's purpose and guaranteed respondent anonymity and voluntary participation. Data collection was administered online via Google Forms and disseminated through major social media platforms (WhatsApp and Instagram) to reach the target

demographic. To ensure complete anonymity and encourage candid responses regarding sensitive social perceptions toward disability, the survey deliberately did not shown identifiable demographic data such as gender or specific city of residence. The focus was strictly maintained on their substantive perspectives. All responses were automatically compiled into a secure database for subsequent statistical evaluation."

To ensure the appropriateness of the instrument, a validity test was conducted using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. The results indicated that all structured items in the questionnaire are valid, as the calculated p-values for all items are less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), with correlation coefficients (r) ranging from 0.422 to 0.831. Furthermore, regarding reliability, the Cronbach's Alpha test yielded a score of 0.509. Although this value is below the conventional 0.70 threshold, in the context of this study because the questionnaire items are heterogeneous, measuring distinct and multidimensional descriptive indicators (such as frequency of interaction, emotional comfort, observation of discrimination, and opinions on formal education) rather than a single unified psychological construct. Therefore, the instrument primarily relies on content validity, which was ensured by aligning the questions with previous literature on disability awareness.

Upon completion of the data collection, responses were analyzed using quantitative descriptive with categorical analysis to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and meanings emerging from participants narratives. The analytical process focused on understanding the underlying perceptions, experiences, and social constructions that shape attitudes toward people with disabilities in Indonesia. The quantitative nature of the study allowed for the exploration of nuanced and context-based interpretations rather than statistical generalizations. Therefore, the insights obtained from this quantitative exploration are expected to be highly useful in understanding the everyday realities of how young adults perceive disability. These findings can serve as a valuable reference for educators, policymakers, and inclusion advocates to design more effective awareness programs and educational interventions that promote equality and social acceptance of people with disabilities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 2. Summary Respondents Perceptions Toward Disability

No	Variable	Category	N	Dominant Category	Interpretation
1	Frequency of Encounter	Frequently	69	Occasionally (71%)	Most respondents only occasionally encounter people with disabilities in their daily lives.
		Occasionally	261		
		Not yet, but interested	36		
2	Comfort level in interaction	Very comfortable	30	Comfortable (42%)	Approximately half of the respondents reported feeling comfortable when interacting with persons with disabilities.
		Comfortable	154		
		Neutral	142		
		Uncomfortable	40		

3	Belief in equal opportunities	Agree	138	Disagree (41%)	Many respondent believe that equal opportunities are still lacking
		Neutral	94		
		Disagree	134		
4.	Discrimination to disabilities	Frequently	13	Rarely (76%)	Most respondents reported rarely witnessing discrimination
		Occasionally	76		
		Rarely	277		
5.	Education on disability awareness	Agree	32	Disagree (68%)	Respondent believe that formal education is insufficient regarding disability awareness
		Neutral	89		
		Disagree	245		

Based on the data above, this research reveals a complex pattern between interpersonal attitudes and structural perceptions toward disability. While respondents generally reported moderate exposure and relatively positive interpersonal comfort when interacting with people with disabilities, the findings suggest that positive individual attitudes do not necessarily translate into perceptions of systemic equality. The predominance of occasional interaction indicates that disability remains socially present yet not fully integrated within everyday environments. Limited frequency of contact may reduce opportunities for deeper understanding and normalization of disability within social contexts. The most significant contribution of this research lies in the perception of formal education regarding disability. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the current educational system has not adequately fostered disability awareness. This finding highlights a critical intervention point, emphasizing the urgent need to strengthen inclusive curricula, disability literacy, and experiential learning to bridge the gap between theoretical attitudes and inclusive practices. Overall, the findings suggest that while disability inclusion is progressing at the interpersonal level, it remains stagnant at the structural and institutional levels.

Future efforts should move beyond merely promoting individual acceptance toward fundamentally transforming educational and social systems. The findings across all variables are consistent with studies conducted in other countries, suggesting that limited disability awareness is a global challenge. Previous studies in the literature review that all refer to lack of awareness about disability. Based on the findings education appears as a critical intervention point. Respondents strongly agreed that formal education has not adequately fostered disability awareness., indicating the need for more inclusive education strategies :

1. Curriculum

Curriculum is considered as of the most vital aspect in learning on an education inclusive system result (as seen In the table 3) which shows that most of respondent is disagree about education on disability awareness

Table 3 Respondents perceptions of formal education on disability awareness

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Is it Formal Education was enough teaching about disability?	8%	24%	68%

Curriculum is considered one of the most vital aspects in developing an inclusive education system. As shown in Table 3, most respondents disagreed that formal education has sufficiently taught about disability awareness. This finding suggests that disability-related topics may not yet be adequately integrated into existing curricula. According to Sa'dullah (2023), curriculum planning involves determining educational goals and learning experiences that align with societal needs and development. The principle of relevance emphasizes that curriculum components must be integrated and responsive to social realities. It is interesting to note that 68% of respondents disagreed that formal education has adequately taught about disability. Incorporating disability-focused perspectives into student-centered learning activities can help emphasize key learning objectives related to the care of persons with disabilities (Nethra et al., 2019). This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that public awareness of disability issues in Indonesia remains limited (Novan Ariel, 2023).

2. Facilitate meaningful interaction

Support system can facilitate to meaningful interaction between person with or without disabilities. According to Nany Yuliastuti (2018) physical condition of facilities, particularly the accessibility and quality of facilities as well as socio-demographic backgrounds of the users. These factors determine the use of facilities as a mean to help in developing social interaction

Table 4. Frequency of Respondents encounters with people disabilities

Statement	Frequently	Occasionally	Not yet but interested
How frequently respondents encounter with disabilities in their live.	19%	71%	10%

Social stigma restricts access to civic rights, social participation, and economic opportunities, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities that negatively affect the quality of life and social welfare of persons with disabilities. One factor contributing to this condition is the limited social interaction between persons with disabilities and the wider community (Stuart & Sartorius, 2014). The findings show that most respondents reported only occasionally encounters with people with disabilities indicating that exposure exist but remains limited in everyday social context. While occasional contact may contribute to basic familiarity and reduce social distance. However, such interactions may not necessarily lead to deeper understanding. In line with the Contact Theory, the quality of interaction plays a more significant more than mere frequency, as meaningful and repeated contact is more likely to influence perceptions and social participation positively. One example of an inclusive space can be found in the use of art galleries such as VAG, where individuals with autism are provided opportunities to engage in meaningful social interaction and creative expression. UNESCO (2020) emphasizes that inclusive art education enriches learning experiences and strengthens diversity within society. In this context, art galleries can function as

inclusive environments also facilitate more meaningful social interaction, emotional development, and self-expression for individuals especially autism (Tania, 2025).

3. Policy maker

Policy and management factors are commonly considered as the fundamentals in daily life. The results show that the proportion of respondents who agreed and disagreed differed by only one percent. (see table 5). Most respondent was agree this statement but most of respondent too are disagree with 37%.

Table 5. Respondents Belief in Equal Opportunities for people with disabilities

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Their belief in whether people with disabilities have equal opportunities in education and employment	38%	26%	37%

The results on this theme reveal that only 38% of respondents believed that people with disabilities have equal opportunities in education and employment. This finding indicates that a significant portion of respondents still perceive inequality at the structural level, despite relatively positive interpersonal attitudes reported in other themes. Such perceptions suggest that inclusion may not yet be fully reflected in institutional practices and access to opportunities. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing that inclusive systems require strong structural support. Ashar (2023) explained that regulations, adequate funding, and collaborative teams are fundamental elements for ensuring the quality of inclusive education. Furthermore, several studies have highlighted the importance of having a shared understanding of national inclusive policies among stakeholders to ensure consistent implementation. The lack of perceived equality found in this study may therefore reflect gaps between inclusive policies and their practical execution within educational and employment contexts. In this regard, Charlton's well-known principle "Nothing About Us Without Us" emphasizes that people with disabilities must be actively involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Greater participation of persons with disabilities in policy development can help prevent the continuation of historical patterns of political marginalization (Rohim et al., 2024). These results suggest that improving inclusion requires not only positive social attitudes but also systemic reinforcement through clear policy implementation, institutional commitment, and accessible opportunities. Strengthening inclusive systems may help bridge the gap between social acceptance and the realization of equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

4. Education practitioner

Different forms of practices are usually implemented in inclusive educational settings to promote mastery in learning among children with special needs. Because many instructional approaches are applied in inclusive environments, identifying effective practices becomes essential for supporting meaningful learning experiences for students with disabilities (Abrol, 2023). Students without disabilities, when educated alongside students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, learn to respect diversity, develop meaningful friendships, and participate in socially inclusive environments. They may also strengthen their understanding of academic concepts by supporting peers with disabilities, which can contribute to improved academic achievement. For inclusive

education to be effective, teachers need adequate knowledge and training in pedagogical practices. Inclusive education is supported by several practices, including fostering a growth mindset, encouraging transparency, promoting flexibility, examining authority, and engaging in reflective teaching (Khazanchi & Khazanchi, 2022)

Table 6. Respondents Experiences of discrimination and Comfort in interaction

Statement	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
Their experiences of witnessing or being aware of discrimination against persons with disabilities	4%	20%	76%

Statement	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Neutral	Uncomfortable
The level of comfort they feel when interacting or communicating with people with disabilities	8%	42%	39%	11%

Education practitioner are considered as key actors in facilitating meaningful interaction within educational settings. The findings show that 42% of respondents reported feeling comfortable when interacting with people with disabilities, while the majority also stated that they rarely witnessed discrimination (76%), indicating that educational environments may play an important role in shaping positive social experiences. Through collaborative learning activities and many classroom experiences. These findings related to comfort in interaction and experiences of witnessing discrimination indicate that education practitioners This also relates to the concept of normalization, which means helping students with special needs learn in environments that feel as close to typical as possible. Supported by empathy and motivation, this helps students' overall growth (Rifqah, 2025). The findings show that regular monitoring is important for supporting both academic and social growth of students with special needs. As we know Education practitioners play an important role in addressing major issues in Indonesian education, such as bullying, sexual harassment, and intolerance., and intolerance. Furthermore, education practitioners play an important role as mediators between policy and daily educational practice. Inclusive education policies and regulations can only be effectively implemented when teachers translate them into classroom practices through inclusive pedagogy, communication skills, and collaborative approaches. As illustrated in the shared roles of special education and general education teachers, both groups contribute differently yet complementarily—special education teachers provide disability-specific knowledge and intervention strategies, while general education teachers apply curriculum-based knowledge within mainstream classrooms.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study provides valuable insights into public perceptions of disability, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, to ensure strict anonymity and encourage honest responses regarding sensitive issues such as discrimination, detailed demographic data (e.g., gender and precise age distribution) were deliberately not shown. Consequently, cross-demographic comparisons could not be conducted. Second, the measurement of several key constructs relied on single-item indicators, as presented in Tables 3 through 6. Although this approach allowed for a more concise and accessible questionnaire, it may limit the depth and reliability of the constructs being measured, as complex concepts such as educational adequacy, social interaction, and perceived equality are ideally assessed using multi-item scales. Third, the reliance on self-reported data through an online survey may introduce social desirability bias, where respondents might overstate their positive attitudes toward inclusive practices. Finally, the internal consistency of the instrument (Cronbach's Alpha) was relatively moderated, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of the constructs measured. Future research should consider incorporating demographic variables while maintaining data security, employing multi-item measurement scales to improve reliability, and utilizing mixed-methods approaches to provide a more comprehensive and contextualized understanding of societal stigma.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that public perceptions toward people with disabilities show a complex pattern between positive interpersonal attitudes and persistent structural challenges. While respondents generally expressed comfort in interaction, many still perceived inequality in education and employment opportunities, indicating that inclusion has not been fully realized at the systemic level. The findings emphasize that education plays a critical role in improving disability awareness, particularly through inclusive curricula, meaningful interaction, and strengthened collaboration among education practitioners and policymakers. Overall, this study highlights the importance of moving beyond individual acceptance toward broader structural transformation within educational and social systems. The findings contribute to the understanding of disability inclusion by showing that awareness-building strategies remain essential in creating safer and more inclusive environments. Future research is encouraged to further explore practical intervention models that can enhance awareness and sustainable inclusion in different social contexts.

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