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VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF HOW STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES CONSTRUCT ACADEMIC IDENTITY IN PAKISTANI UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the academic identity development of disabled students in Pakistani universities in environments that typically exclude them. The implementation of the HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities has not eliminated the major obstacles preventing students with disabilities from achieving full academic citizenship status. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research gathered data from 19 students with varying disabilities who were studying in higher education at different levels. The study identified five central elements: students' physical and structural barrier management, social isolation experiences, belonging dynamics, faculty relations, identity development methods, and resilience formation processes. Through purposeful self-disclosure, students built academic identities and controlled their participation levels to create networking alternatives as part of their agency. This research enhances knowledge about disabilities in Pakistani university environments and advocates for targeted interventions through faculty training, peer mentoring, and institutional policy modifications to promote academic citizenship acceptance among diverse learners.

Keyword: Disability, Academic Identity, Citizenship, Inclusion, Higher Education, Marginalization, Pakistani Universities

Introduction

Higher education in Pakistan contains numerous obstacles for disabled students, who represent an extremely disadvantaged student population in the national educational system. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) ratification by Pakistan in 2011, together with its resulting policy development, has not eliminated the obstacles impeding students with disabilities from fully participating in their academic pursuits. Current data reveal that the disabled population amounts to roughly 15%, but enrolment in higher education stands at well under 0.5% of the total population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

The Higher Education Commission's "Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan" ([Commission, 2021](#)) represents an important policy step toward inclusivity. Policies related to students with disabilities in Pakistani universities fail to match the actual experiences of these students in Pakistani universities. Research lacks sufficient understanding of how people with disabilities experience higher education while developing their academic personalities in difficult learning environments. Scholars have documented existing structural educational barriers, including inaccessible campuses, unfit learning resources, and a shortage of skilled professors in the field of education. However, further studies are needed to fully understand these journeys.

This study analysed the experiences of students with disabilities at Pakistani universities to fill this knowledge gap. This study investigates how learning-disabled students cognitively interpret educational activities, balance their scholarly identities, and maintain citizenship roles despite university environments that typically push them outside the mainstream. This study used phenomenological analysis to create substantial knowledge about the development of academic identities emerging from marginalised situations.

The findings of this study create opportunities for developing educational systems that better recognise the heterogeneous requirements of students with disabilities. This study promotes students' voices to dismantle traditional deficit views of disability while demonstrating their capability to shape their academic identity regardless of institutional barriers.

This study addresses the following research question:

1. How do students with disabilities interpret and make meaning of their educational experiences in Pakistani universities?
2. What processes do these students engage in to develop a sense of academic belonging or non-belonging?
3. What strategies do they employ to navigate academic citizenship in environments in which they experience marginalisation?
4. How are their academic identities influenced by interactions with peers, faculty, institutional policies, and broader societal attitudes toward disabilities?

Literature Review

Disability Studies in Higher Education Globally

Global scholarly research on disability in higher education has shown significant development, shifting from medical and charity-based approaches to social and rights-based models since 2017 ([Moriña, 2017](#)). Three main hurdles have been found in the educational experience of people with disabilities in different geographical contexts: physical barriers, discriminatory attitudes, and sparse institutional backing ([Grimes et al., 2019](#)). Existing research has examined how students exercise self-agency while devising resistance methods and forming their academic identities ([Cunnah, 2015](#)). The research demonstrates that educational settings may either block or make way for students with disabilities to build positive academic identities through inclusive teaching methods, universal learning designs, and appreciative institutional frameworks that encourage diversity ([Vaccaro et al., 2015](#)).

Academic Identity Construction for Marginalized Groups

Individuals develop their academic identity by merging their perceptions of themselves in educational settings with their perceptions of themselves as learners. Academic identity formation

is more difficult for marginalised students because they endure discrimination and structural barriers. Studies of academic identity development demonstrate that marginalised students engage in complex identity-building activities through strategic performance acts, language and information adjustments, and selective sharing behaviours. Significant evidence shows that educational environments shape these identification processes because inclusive educational spaces lead students to develop more positive academic identities, whereas exclusionary contexts force them to employ protective measures ([Riddell & Weedon, 2014](#)).

Educational Policies for Students with Disabilities in Pakistan

Pakistan has significantly progressed in its disability inclusion policies in education but faces difficulties in implementing these framework strategies in practice. Pakistan's educational policy for students with disabilities is based on three main documents: the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities ([Ministry of Women Development, 2002](#)), Special Citizens Act ([Pakistan, 2008](#)), and HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities ([Commission, 2021](#)). Approved disability policies require accessible infrastructure and offer reasonable accommodations and equal educational possibilities. Existing research shows that the policy's implementation faces significant obstacles because of funding limitations, inadequate awareness levels, and institutional resource distribution problems ([Hameed & Manzoor, 2016, 2019](#)). Educational policies exhibit contradictory patterns by using progressive statements but achieving minimal implementation, thus complicating the educational journey of students.

3.4 Barriers to Inclusion in Pakistani Universities

According to research studies, several obstacles stand in the way of students with disabilities in higher education in Pakistan. Building accommodations in Pakistani universities remain largely out of reach because accessible features, including ramps, elevators, and accessible washrooms, are scarce ([Hameed & Manzoor, 2016, 2019](#)). The implementation of instruction becomes a barrier because teachers use rigid teaching styles, learning content that remains unavailable, and testing practices that neglect diverse student needs. Students encounter social obstacles because peers tend to stigmatise them, isolating them from normal school activities ([Hammad & Singal, 2015](#)). Staff members at educational institutions do not receive proper training in inclusive education; thus, they make discriminatory mistakes by making inappropriate demands and failing to supply valid adjustments ([Muhammad et al., 2024](#); [Waqar et al., 2025](#)). Students face tough environments because of multiple barriers that hinder their academic identity development ([Rajpoot et al., 2021](#)).

Gaps in Current Research on Disability Experiences in Pakistan

The increasing Pakistani interest in disability studies research has

not filled the critical gaps that exist in academia. Research on disability in higher education has mainly examined statistical data on prevalence while analysing policies and identifying institutional barriers, although the lived experiences of students remain understudied ([Singal, 2016](#)). The lack of phenomenological research on students with disabilities who maintain their voices to understand their identity development is evident. Psychological disabilities, including learning disabilities, chronic health conditions, and mental health challenges, receive little scholarly research focus, despite the majority of studies concentrating on visible physical disabilities. This research fills the identified knowledge gaps through an IPA study that examines the personal perspectives and identity development of disabled university students within Pakistani educational institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Social Model of Disability

This investigation follows the social model of disability, which explains that disability develops through a combination of people who have impairments and structural obstacles blocking their social inclusion. Under the social model of disability, scientists recognise that medical approaches which identify disability within the body create problems by positioning disability as a social creation generated by physical barriers combined with attitudinal discrimination and institutional limitations. The analytical framework enables researchers to evaluate how Pakistani higher-education institutions generate disability because of physical limitations within spaces, rigid program structures, and discriminatory cultural traditions. The social model enables researchers to examine how students interact with obstacles through identity-making processes that incorporate their physical impairments ([Shakespeare, 2014](#)).

Identity Formation Theories in Educational Contexts

The analysis draws on theories of identity formation in educational contexts, particularly Wenger's ([1998](#)) communities of practice framework and Gee's ([2000](#)) perspective on identity as recognition. Identity development occurs because students engage in social activities under specific conditions, alongside how society recognises their participation. Students with disabilities face challenges when building their academic identity because they need to find their role in the university and get recognised as legitimate participants despite being treated as outsiders. This study finds out how students manage to feel part of education in settings that do not always accept or understand them positively.

Academic Citizenship Concept

Using academic citizenship, it becomes easier to see what is expected of students with disabilities and how they join the

community at university. Those three things, covered by Macfarlane's (2007), make up academic citizenship: rights as a member, dedication to campus life, and a feeling of belonging on campus. People with disabilities must overcome obstacles to join and oppose discrimination to enjoy equal rights as members of academic communities. Despite these limitations, the framework permits researchers to investigate how marginal students practice citizenship and the ways they use to have more rights and opportunities.

Intersectionality in Disability Studies

Researchers have selected an intersectional perspective for disability identity research because experiences of disability develop through associations between gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical region, as noted by Crenshaw (1991) and Moodley and Graham (2015). To study disability experiences in Pakistan, one needs to use an intersectional approach because of how women's roles, as well as socioeconomic differences, influence education in both cities and rural areas. With the analytical model, researchers can notice the effects of different identity parts that contribute to students' marginalised status in the school environment and still find solutions that lessen the impact of disabilities.

Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Rationale

This research study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)—a Smith et al.'s (2009) framework as its methodological framework. The researchers selected IPA because it studies the development of meaning in people's lives, especially among disabled students in higher education. Before finding common trends among the subjects, the research learned about what happened in each person's life. This strategy gave the researchers a chance to understand the individual academic identity development of disabled students studying at Pakistani universities in depth.

Participant Selection and Demographics

Purposive sampling methods yielded twenty-three participants who represented students with different disability types and academic disciplines at various institutional levels. The participants included both male and female students. The research utilised three inclusion criteria to select participants who (1) considered themselves disabled, (2) were undergraduate or graduate students at Pakistani academic institutions, and (3) had spent at least one educational year at their university. Nineteen participants took part in the research, consisting of seven students with physical disabilities, four with visual impairments, three with hearing impairments, three with learning disabilities, and two with chronic health problems. Ten participants were female and nine were male. The ages of the participants ranged from nineteen to thirty-one years. Four

universities located in the Punjab province included 13 public institution participants and six participants from private institutions.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher gathered primary data by conducting two interview sessions with each participant between September 2024 and January 2025. Participants had two interview sessions which included a primary session lasting between 50 and 70 minutes to discuss education experiences and identity, followed by a second session lasting 45 to 60 minutes to investigate developing concepts and interpret participant responses. Participants had the freedom to choose their preferred language between Urdu and English, as well as their preferred location to be either on campus, online, or in any accessible setting. The participants granted permission to record their interviews which were later transcribed verbatim. The researcher collected additional information through participant-run reflective journals which participants could choose to use, and through notes that recorded observations of context and reflective insights.

Interview Protocol

The researchers built an interview protocol through the research literature and main questions before conducting two practice interviews with disabled students who validated the methodology and question approach. The interview questions in the final protocol addressed six areas, including participants' experiences in university education and their descriptions of student identity, their interactions with faculty, peers, and administrators, academic space inclusion and exclusion, barrier navigation strategies, and future academic plans. Follow-up probes helped participants expand their responses regarding their emotional states and the ways they interpreted experiences while detailing their personal identity impact.

Data Analysis Process

Data analysis followed Smith et al.'s ([2009](#)) six-step IPA process: (1) reading and re-reading transcripts to immerse in participants' accounts; (2) initial noting of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments; (3) developing emergent themes for each transcript; (4) identifying connections across emergent themes within individual cases; (5) moving to the next case and repeating steps 1-4; and (6) identifying patterns across cases. The researcher used NVivo 15 for data organisation and coding. The analyst reviewed each transcript independently before cross-case theme comparisons were made to preserve the idiographic emphasis of IPA. The study concentrated on how participants traced common aspects while also showing dissimilarities in their experiences, primarily exploring how students built and managed their academic identities.

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

The research incorporated multiple ethical measures, such as accessible consent acquisition and anonymity with pseudonyms and detail removal, along with early disclosure of interview questions and support for accessibility requirements and psychological assistance referral systems. As non-disabled educational researchers, the investigators recognised possible power disparities which required continuous professional reflection using a reflexive journal combined with ongoing peer discussion with a research colleague who has a disability and participant member checks to validate the understanding of their experiences.

Findings

Theme 1: Navigating Physical and Structural Barriers

Participants consistently described how physical infrastructure and institutional practices created significant barriers to academic participation. For participants with mobility impairments, inaccessible buildings forced complex daily navigation. Farah, a wheelchair user studying economics, explained, "I have to plan my entire schedule around accessible classrooms. Sometimes, I miss important classes because they are on the third floor with no elevator. It makes me feel like the university wasn't built with people like me in mind." Similarly, Ahmed, who uses crutches, described arriving early to secure accessible seating: "I am always the first one in class and the last to leave. It's the only way I can manage the physical space without drawing attention."

Inaccessible learning materials create additional barriers. Visually impaired students reported the limited availability of screen-reader-compatible materials, while deaf students noted the absence of sign language interpretation. Zainab, a student with a visual impairment, shared: "Most professors distribute PDF handouts that my screen reader cannot process. Every day is a negotiation just to access the basic materials my classmates take for granted." These structural barriers required participants to expend significant time and energy on basic academic access, affecting how they viewed themselves as students: "Half my identity as a student is being a problem-solver, finding workarounds just to do what other students do automatically" (Usman, hearing impaired).

Theme 2: Experiences of Social Isolation and Belonging

The participants' narratives revealed complex experiences of social positioning within academic communities. Many described profound isolation resulting from physical segregation and social exclusion. Sara, a student with cerebral palsy, explained, "Group work is particularly difficult. Students do not choose me for their groups—they see my disability before they see my abilities. I've learned to work alone even though it affects my grades." This exclusion affected students' sense of belonging within academic communities, with several describing themselves as "perpetual outsiders" or

"observers rather than participants" in university life. However, participants disabilities also emphasised joining disability-centred groups or finding one or more individuals who supported them. Sharing her learning struggles with other students made everything better for Mehwish: "We have formed a group where people are free to talk about their strengths and weaknesses without fear of being judged." Such networks provided useful aid and allowed students to create positive views of their academic selves. It was interesting to see that a number of the participants described switching between participating in mainstream activities and separating themselves according to their needs.

Theme 3: Faculty Interactions and Classroom Experiences

The faculty's behaviour and attitudes played a strong role in the students' development of their academic identity. Participants narrated a range of behaviours, from helpful assistance to clear discrimination by faculty members. Positive interactions involved the faculty's ability to adjust their teaching methods without making the course easier. Bilal detailed that the professor of research methods worked harder to explain things and even allowed her students to record the classes: "She recognized my strengths rather than paying attention to my weaknesses, which made a huge difference in my view of myself as a student."

Conversely, there are times when faculty members doubt students' skills or consider accommodations to be special treatment. As someone with a constant health problem, Ayesha said that, during a flare-up, one professor referred to students who got deadline extensions as being dishonest, even though she herself requested that: "It made me feel very embarrassed and doubt if I can thrive in academia." Their interactions greatly determined whether participants felt capable and welcome at school. Some students revealed that they created planned approaches for speaking to faculty, selected a few professors to talk about their special needs, provided documentation in support of their case, and better proved their understanding in classes before asking for any help.

Theme 4: Identity Negotiation Strategies

The participants showed how they managed their school roles in challenging environments. Now, students prefer to carefully reveal their disabilities based on what is happening at the time and what the goals are. Hassan, like many people with an invisible condition, always assesses the advantages and disadvantages before telling people: "At times, I tell everyone in my class about my disability; at other times, I do not mention it." By doing so, participants used their agency when presenting their identity to others.

Using this strategy, disability was portrayed as a source of strengths and new ideas. Being deaf since her childhood, Nadia realized that her experience helped her perform better in school: "Being alert to little details is possible because I am always analysing images and

videos during my work.” Certain participants spoke about using their disability stories in assignments to highlight and prove that their views are valuable in the social sciences and the humanities.

Some participants also took part in ‘strategic assimilation and differentiation’, sometimes trying to blend in by noting their similarities with others and sometimes proudly stating their disability as a key feature of their identity. The ability to change their identity in different school situations demonstrates great flexibility among these students.

Theme 5: Resilience and Self-Advocacy Development

Resilience and self-advocacy skills were important subjects that frequently appeared in the participants’ accounts. They explained how they began not knowing much about their entitlements and later became certain enough to demand what was appropriate for them: “During my first year, I didn’t push back against any of the challenges that came up for me. During my third year, I started reminding administrators who were not following the university’s disability policy with parts of the policy. It was not only about what I practiced in class; it made me change the way I view myself as a student.”

Many students mentioned overcoming continuous obstacles, and most of them saw this as a major element of their identity as learners. Having a learning disability, Sana pointed out, “For me, what matters most about being a student is my will power. Experimenting with different strategies until I get results helps me become more flexible than most of my friends.” Reinterpreting hard times as positive experiences plays a big role in forming a good academic identity.

Most participants mentioned taking care of younger students by guiding them, offering suggestions on how to get around, and providing emotional help. Consequently, the students’ understanding of themselves as learners was enhanced as they viewed themselves as knowledgeable individuals. Imran, who was in his final year and used a wheelchair, said, “Helping new students manage the system has helped me feel better. It changes the challenges I face into something positive and helps me realize I know more than what I studied in my classes.”

Discussion

The Dialectics of Visibility and Invisibility

A central tension emerging from this study is what might be termed the “dialectics of visibility and invisibility” in participants’ academic experiences. Students with disabilities need to decide when their disabilities should be noticeable or hidden in academic settings. Students with disabilities need to decide how their disabilities should be understood as they simultaneously decide when to reveal and conceal their conditions throughout academic collaboration. Several student-participants discussed showing particular disability

characteristics to access required accommodations, yet they took steps to blind others about their other disabilities to prevent discrimination.

This dialectical process reflects what Goffman ([1963](#)) described as "stigma management" but takes on particular significance in academic contexts where intellectual capability is highly valued. The participants measured their decisions based on how the visible aspects of a disability would affect their beliefs about their competence and how they would be interpreted. The students involved in these self-identity choices went beyond reactive behaviour to create active approaches that allowed them to influence their academic images. Blockmans' ([2015](#)) research on disclosure decisions is extended through this study which demonstrates that academic identity formation through visibility management functions as an ongoing process dependent on particular situations.

Institutional Practices and Academic Identity Formation

Studies have shown that institutional rules define what students with disabilities can achieve when developing their academic identities. Universities function as Holland et al. ([1998](#)) term "figured worlds" with established norms and expectations that position students differently based on their conformity to idealized notions of "the university student." University practices, including physical infrastructure choices and accommodation processes, transmit influential messages that define who qualifies as an academic community member.

The administrative treatment of disability fails to recognise its value as diversity, thus causing students to accept low-priority status in academic communities. Students with disabilities experience improved academic identities stemming from legitimate belonging to organisations that prioritise universal design principles alongside accessible participation. This finding aligns with Yosso's ([2005](#)) concept of "institutional barriers" but emphasises how such barriers operate at the level of identity formation, not merely access. Organisational dedication to inclusion must move past adaptive efforts for disabled students to require substantial restructuring of academic space creation and operational approaches.

Agency and Resistance in Academic Citizenship

Participants used several independent mechanisms to establish academic citizenship, regardless of marginalising educational barriers. Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's ([1998](#)) conceptualisation of agency as encompassing iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions, the participants' narratives revealed sophisticated exercises of agency across these domains. The students deployed three distinct types of agency to guide their current conduct: they used their past experiences as a guide for navigation in the present, envisioned alternative educational futures, and made contextual choices relating to rights practices.

This agency was expressed through what [Scott \(1985\)](#) termed "everyday forms of resistance"—small-scale acts challenging normative expectations and practices. Participants who formed disability-specific study groups undertook two parallel actions aimed at transforming university culture through academic success challenges and disability needs resolution. Academic assignments became tools for challenging neutral academic production standards by integrating disability perspectives. The research findings enhance theoretical knowledge of academic citizenship by demonstrating what it means to practise academic citizenship in marginal positions through daily resistance activities.

Comparison with International Contexts

These research findings show similarities along with unique characteristics regarding disability experiences at Pakistani universities when analysed against international academic literature. Students in different settings experience similar patterns of physical accessibility problems, inconsistent faculty support, and the necessity of emotional work to secure appropriate modifications ([Moriña, 2017](#)). Specific unique elements appear in the Pakistan university disability experience. Due to the recent implementation of disability policies, many students must take on pioneering roles to acquire accommodations because previous standards do not exist. Research shows growing awareness of support services for students with disabilities in institutions ([Lombardi et al., 2018](#)). However, Pakistani students have established their own support structures since institutional services are limited or non-existent. Research participants in this study showed a higher level of dependence on peer networks than what international studies revealed, potentially because of the priority Pakistani culture gives to collective support systems. The research implies that achieving disability inclusivity requires complete awareness of universal barriers alongside recognition of particular forms of academic marginalisation which exist in specific cultural settings.

Theoretical Implications for Understanding Marginalized Academic Identities

The findings enhance scholarly knowledge of academic identity creation in restricted academic settings. Research indicates that disabled students build their academic identity through the constant interplay of institutional requirements and personal self-statements. This negotiation process aligns with Holland and Lachicotte's (2007) concept of "improvisation" in identity formation, as students create novel responses to situations in which conventional pathways are blocked.

Theory development benefits from this study because it demonstrates the temporal aspects of the development of marginalised academic identity. The research participants demonstrated academic identity development over time by shifting

from hiding their disabilities to accepting their disabilities as an essential part of their academic identity. Theories of academic identity development must consider age-specific aspects that affect marginalised students, because their academic growth follows unique phases between accommodation and resistance through integration.

Implications and Recommendations

Policy Recommendations for Pakistani Higher Education Institutions

The study recommends multiple policies to enhance accessibility in higher-education institutions throughout Pakistan. University institutions should progress beyond simply achieving the minimum requirements for inclusion by creating specific disability support centres with proper staffing and financial backing. Higher education institutions need dedicated offices to lead the implementation process of the HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities and adjust it to meet their individual demands. Universities need to create step-by-step accommodation procedures which reduce student bureaucratic challenges through standardised confidentiality-protected disclosure practices to maintain uniform support in all departments.

All stages of university operations and planning must incorporate accessibility features during new building design, as well as during renovations of existing facilities and throughout procurement requirements and digital infrastructure development. Prior institutions need to set up systems for tracking inclusion progress through frequent accessibility inspections and disability-specific enrolment and retention data collection accompanied by graduation statistics. Universities need to create special entry routes, together with scholarship schemes targeting students with disabilities, to eliminate past shortcomings and promote university entry.

Practical Interventions for Improving Academic Inclusion

This research demonstrates the various concrete actions universities must take to enhance their inclusion initiatives. The improvement of physical accessibility requires universities to implement ramps along with elevators and accessible washrooms while adapting classroom furniture, and this work must follow student feedback for planning priorities. Universities should create standardised accommodation facilities that offer help with conversion, in addition to assistive device borrowing, student note-taking assistance, and sign language interpretation services.

The development of inclusive assessment options at universities should enable students to express their knowledge through written, oral, or project-based methods without needing additional accommodation requests. New students should benefit from mentorship programs which match them with older scholars who possess similar disabilities because participants highlighted these

natural support systems as vital to their achievement. Universities should establish centres for people with disabilities that provide useful services and social spots to support students in fighting loneliness.

Faculty Development and Awareness Programs

Professors have the biggest impact on students' learning because teaching personnel need special training. All university teaching staff must participate in mandatory disability inclusion training that covers legal needs, accommodation, universal learning requirements, and the correct way to interact with those with disabilities. In training, students with disabilities can help by taking part in chats or sharing their stories, as well as how they learn about disability differently.

Universities should form communities in which teachers can exchange successful strategies for helping students from various backgrounds. Systems should be in place to commend staff who demonstrate outstanding inclusivity in teaching, as this supports teaching development. To help faculty support their students, department chairs and deans need specialised training that targets issues found at the departmental level when individuals show support.

Student Support Mechanisms

The research data show multiple support systems designed for students which solve problems detected among participating students. The initial step for universities should involve creating dedicated orientation programs for disabled students that teach navigation approaches and provide resource and rights knowledge prior to the emergence of academic challenges. Academic advising systems should be upgraded to provide students with disability-specific directions about course selection, reasonable accommodation preparation, and academic development routes which consider diversified completion times.

Workforce preparation services must adjust their methods to resolve the occupational transition challenges experienced by disabled scholars while teaching them how to handle employment disclosure and find internship positions at inclusive disability workplaces. Universities must create official peer note-taker programs that properly reward participants through monetary compensation or academic credit, as students currently organise this arrangement independently. Counselling services should employ personnel trained in disability-oriented psychological support to assist students who need help managing the emotional consequences of discrimination which they experience without professional aid.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Methodological Limitations

Multiple design constraints affect the validity of the research. The

research method IPA accepts a suitable sample size of 19 participants because it focuses on depth rather than breadth. However, this approach limits the generalisation of the findings to the entire population of disabled students at Pakistani universities. Moreover, the research design focuses on students already enrolled in university which precludes understanding of students who were blocked from education or withdrew from their studies because of obstacles. In addition, the inclusion programme attempted to represent various types of disabilities but failed to achieve proper representation of students with intellectual disabilities or psychosocial disabilities, thus potentially overlooking essential aspects of their educational experiences.

The study design hinders a deep understanding of identity development in academia over time because it depends on participants recollecting past events rather than observing them throughout the changes. Even though the researchers employed reflexive techniques, their non-disabled positionality might have shaped both the data collection process and interpretation steps, possibly missing crucial aspects that disability researchers with personal experience could detect.

Transferability Considerations

The transferability of study findings requires the recognition of multiple contextual elements. Most of the study participants came from urban universities which produces results that may not apply to rural institutions because they have restricted resources and limited disability awareness. The study findings might affect different institutional types since public institutions normally require less student-friendly accommodations, yet private universities provide better services that many disabled students cannot afford.

Participants from different academic fields revealed that their experiences differed because the humanities and social sciences usually provided more flexible practices than STEM disciplines, which demonstrates inconsistent adaptation rates between fields of study. The research was conducted during a time when the HEC (2021) guidelines from 2021 were being newly implemented which led to changes in institutional accommodation practices that could affect the observed findings. The unique cultural background of disability in Pakistan which embraces both charitable religious practices for disability care and growing rights-focused approaches, reduces the potential transferability of research findings to situations with different disability perspectives.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study indicates multiple research possibilities that could advance the field in the future. The academic development of students and their navigation approach evolution can be studied better through extensive longitudinal research examining the entire

duration from entry to completion. A comparative research design studying various institutional types, including public and private sectors, urban and rural locations, and specialised and comprehensive institutions, would expose how institutional environments affect the disability experience and identity projects of students.

Research that focuses on studying students with minority disability types, including intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, would fill knowledge gaps about their educational experiences. Moreover, research on the intersection of disability with other identity criteria (gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity) throughout Pakistani educational spaces would foster a better understanding of the aggregated marginalisation effects on students. In addition, participatory action research programs that engage students with disabilities as co-researchers would improve research methods and offer useful recommendations for institutional transformation.

Conclusion

This research tracks the complex ways in which students with disabilities navigate educational environments in Pakistani universities to define their academic identity. The data show that these students must constantly adapt to physical obstacles, institutional systems, and social contexts which exclude them from traditional university student roles. The constraints of their educational environment did not stop participants from developing substantial academic identities through intentional practices of visibility control and disability recontextualization, as well as establishing different spaces for belonging.

This research delivers various significant findings about disability experiences in Pakistani higher education. Student perspectives function as the central approach in this investigation, highlighting the educational realities of marginalised education participants. The research demonstrates advanced identity-building practices that go against traditional deficit models of disabilities because students actively form their academic profiles instead of remaining in assigned slots. By identifying particular institutional practices, this study provides specific guidance which administrators and policymakers can use to enhance academic identity formation.

The research outcomes provide essential knowledge regarding the definition of academic citizenship and university inclusion strategies within Pakistani academic settings. To create meaningful inclusion, universities must address the unnoticeable communication that academic areas use to determine academic ownership by establishing more than merely accessible facilities and procedures. Academic citizenship equality for students with disabilities requires universities to implement changes on four levels: physical structures, policy systems, teaching practices, and social-structural components that accept different learning styles as valid academic community contributions.

This study highlights how developing academic self-identity exists as an active developmental progression which is created by academic structures alongside individual freedom. Academic identity establishment for students with disabilities in Pakistani universities requires them to move toward the centre without relinquishing their fight against educational marginalisation. These pathways demonstrate essential knowledge which benefits disability inclusion efforts while showing how universities should support varied human possibilities at all levels.

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