



## Perceived Attitudes of Peers towards Students with Disabilities: An Examination of the Experiences and Social Interactions of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Settings

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### Abstract

This paper examines how disabled students perceive attitudes of their peers, and how such a perception influences their social lives and emotional experience in higher institutions of learning. A quantitative descriptive survey design was employed to gather the data when 150 undergraduate students with different forms of disability were surveyed using a structured questionnaire on their perceptions of peer attitudes, social interaction, accessibility, and emotional impact. The group differences in terms of demographic variables (gender, age, disability type and field of study) were tested by use of descriptive statistics, t-tests and one-way ANOVA. The results suggest a multidimensional trend of experiences, and most participants indicated respectful treatment, peers being ready to learn about disability, and their participation in academic activities, as well as significant cases of exclusion, negative judgments, and reduced expectations. Findings also indicate that the availability of social and academic surroundings, along with institutional provisions to interact with peers, play a major role in determining the sense of belonging and campus community within the students. The paper highlights the importance of specific awareness campaigns, peer support systems, and inclusive campus planning to enhance social inclusion and emotional status of students with disabilities in higher institutions of learning. Policy implications, educator training, and disability-support services are addressed to achieve fairer and more inclusive higher education settings.

**Keywords:** Attitude of Peers; Students with Disabilities; Socialization in Higher Education; Inclusion

### Introduction

The social inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education is a crucial aspect of fostering equitable academic environments. Peer attitudes significantly influence these students' experiences and their social interactions within academic settings. Positive peer perceptions can enhance social participation, belonging, and academic success, while negative attitudes may result in exclusion, isolation, and reduced opportunities for meaningful engagement with peers. Understanding peers' perceived attitudes toward students with disabilities is therefore vital to

improving inclusive practices and support mechanisms in higher education institutions. Research on attitudes toward individuals with disabilities has evolved over decades, initially focusing on societal and familial perspectives and expanding into educational contexts. Early studies highlighted pervasive stigmatization and limited social acceptance. More recent educational research acknowledges that peers' attitudes comprise cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, which jointly impact students with disabilities' social participation and academic experiences. Several studies have emphasized the role of increased exposure to and knowledge about disabilities in promoting more positive peer attitudes and interactions (Luck, 2011; Szumski et al., 2020). Globally, inclusive education policies increasingly support the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream academic settings. International studies reveal that while general attitudes of peers tend to be neutral to positive, variations exist based on cultural, social, and institutional factors. Peer attitudes influence not only academic collaboration but also social acceptance, which is often a predictor of students' mental well-being and retention rates in higher education (Brewer et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Formal and informal peer supports documented in multiple countries highlight the benefits of social inclusion for students with intellectual and other disabilities in tertiary education (ALMUTAIRI, 2023; Carter & McCabe, 2021). Locally, studies examining peer attitudes toward students with disabilities in higher education often report a mixture of acceptance and lingering biases. Exposures to diversity, institutional support, and awareness programs have improved perceptions, yet gaps remain in understanding and interaction quality. Research within universities in the context underscores the need to focus on direct peer experiences and the social challenges students with disabilities face beyond academic accommodations (Saadun et al., 2023; Fatima et al., 2025). Despite evolving inclusive policies, students with disabilities in higher education continue to face significant social barriers stemming from peers' attitudes. These perceived attitudes affect the quality of social interactions, integration, and overall academic experience, often limiting opportunities for full participation and acceptance. There is a pressing need to explore these perceptions in depth to understand their influence on students' social and academic lives within higher education settings. This study is crucial for highlighting the social dimension of inclusion in higher education by focusing on peer perceptions and their impacts on students with disabilities. Insights from this research can inform policies, educator training, and peer-support programs that foster more positive, supportive environments, enhancing social inclusion and academic success. By addressing social barriers, institutions can better facilitate holistic educational experiences and equal opportunities for all students. While numerous studies assess faculty attitudes and institutional policies, there is less comprehensive research explicitly focusing on the perceived attitudes of peers toward students with disabilities and the nuances of social interactions in university contexts. Additionally, many existing studies focus on either the cognitive or affective components of attitudes without integrating the behavioral dimension and situational contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the multi-dimensional peer attitudes and their lived experiences in social interactions. The research questions of the study are: 1. what are the perceived attitudes of peers toward students with disabilities in higher education settings? 2. How do these attitudes affect the social interactions and experiences of students with disabilities? 3. What factors contribute to positive or negative peer attitudes in higher education?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the perceived attitudes of peers toward students with disabilities in higher education.
2. To explore the nature and quality of social interactions experienced by students with disabilities with their peers.

3. To identify factors influencing peer attitudes and social inclusion within university settings.

### **Literature Review**

Recent research continues to underscore the critical influence of peer attitudes on the academic and social experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. Despite progressive policies, students with disabilities remain systematically disadvantaged in social integration compared to their non-disabled peers, with peer attitudes playing a decisive role in either facilitating or hindering their inclusion. Positive peer attitudes foster cooperative interactions and social support, which are essential for these students' well-being and academic success (Brewer et al., 2025). Peer attitudes toward students with disabilities have been widely studied as a major influence on social inclusion and academic engagement. Positive attitudes tend to promote cooperation, acceptance, and supportive peer networks, whereas negative or ambivalent attitudes can lead to social exclusion, marginalization, and lowered self-esteem among students with disabilities. Brewer et al. (2023) found that many students with disabilities perceive their peers' attitudes as mixed, ranging from acceptance to misunderstanding and even discrimination, impacting their social experiences and academic participation. This duality indicates that while progress has been made, stigma and stereotypes persist in higher education settings. Acceptance and social participation have emerged as recurrent themes in contemporary literature. A systematic review highlights the significant impact of peer acceptance and rejection on self-esteem, social skills, and inclusivity, reinforcing that peer attitudes can either enhance or undermine the higher education experience for students with disabilities (Das et al., 2024). This study further advocates for institutional strategies to cultivate positive peer perceptions to improve the overall campus climate (Azmi et al., 2022; Das et al., 2024).

Social interactions between students with disabilities and their peers are complex and influenced by multiple factors beyond attitudes alone. Mursita et al. (2018) explored social interaction patterns in Indonesian universities, revealing that while some students with disabilities experienced active friendships and collaborative learning, others faced barriers such as communication difficulties, social anxiety, and a lack of inclusive opportunities. These findings illustrate that social inclusion requires not only attitudinal shifts but also institutional facilitation of diverse interaction modes. Social interactions form a nuanced aspect of the lived experiences of students with disabilities. Qualitative research from Indonesia illustrates varying patterns of social interaction, ranging from positive, cooperative engagements to challenges rooted in communication barriers and introversion among students with disabilities themselves (Mursita et al., 2018). These findings reveal that peer acceptance is not merely about attitudes but also about overcoming interpersonal and contextual barriers to facilitate meaningful inclusion. Internationally, recent studies investigate factors influencing peer attitudes, including knowledge about disabilities and prior contact with affected individuals (Townsend et al., 2024). These findings align with those of Szumski et al. (2020), who stress that educational interventions promoting disability awareness positively affect typically developing students' attitudes, thereby fostering a supportive academic culture. Similarly, studies in Bangladesh reflect predominantly positive attitudes but also call attention to the need for ongoing efforts to normalize inclusive educational practices (Das et al., 2024). Knowledge about disabilities substantially affects peer attitudes and interactions. A 2024 study showed that college students' attitudes improved significantly following targeted disability awareness programs, which provided factual information and opportunities to engage with students with disabilities. Szumski et al. (2020) corroborate this, emphasizing that exposure and understanding of disabilities reduce fear and

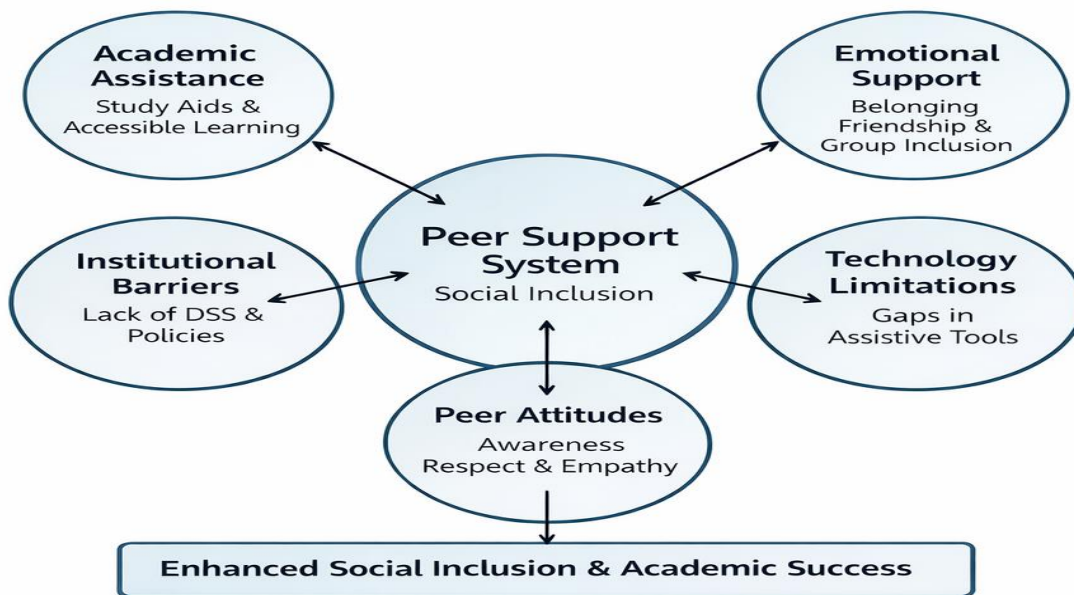
misconceptions, nurturing empathy and positive behavioral intentions among peers. Such findings underscore the critical role of educational interventions in shaping campus cultures.

Globally, research indicates varied peer attitudes based on cultural, social, and policy contexts. For example, international systematic reviews highlight that in countries with established inclusive education policies and active disability advocacy, peer acceptance is higher and social participation more normalized (Das et al., 2024). Conversely, in less inclusive systems or where awareness is lower, students with disabilities often report social isolation and negative peer perceptions. This comparison suggests that cultural values and policy frameworks significantly influence peer attitudes. Studies within specific national contexts have echoed these global trends, while also emphasizing local nuances. Research in Bangladesh, for example, reported generally positive peer attitudes but identified gaps in sustained social engagement and experiential understanding of disabilities, signaling the need for ongoing awareness and inclusion efforts (Das et al., 2024). Local research also points to limited resources and lack of faculty training as barriers to fostering a truly inclusive social environment in universities. Despite increased awareness, students with disabilities continue to encounter attitudinal and structural challenges. Subu et al. (2025) found that negative stereotyping and social distancing by peers remain common obstacles, with some students reporting feelings of invisibility and exclusion, especially in informal social settings such as extracurricular activities. Messiou (2023) further highlights that negative peer sentiments often stem from ignorance or fear, suggesting that peer education programs must address emotional as well as cognitive barriers to inclusion. Despite advances, several studies still report that students with disabilities often face social isolation and limited peer support in university settings. Subu et al. (2025) found that while some students acknowledged supportive relationships, others experienced exclusion or negative perceptions, suggesting that institutional accommodations alone are insufficient without parallel social inclusion efforts. This coexistence of positive and negative experiences highlights persistent gaps in peer acceptance and social integration. Furthermore, ongoing challenges include attitudinal barriers and the lack of structural support to foster peer interactions. Rahmi et al. (2024) emphasizes the pivotal role of typically developing peers in inclusive education, noting that negative sentiments or lack of awareness can undermine social integration efforts. This research advocates for enhanced awareness programs, peer education, and confidence-building practices to improve interaction quality (Rahmi et al., 2024).

Research increasingly emphasizes the importance of peer support systems in enhancing the social and academic experiences of students with disabilities. Carter and McCabe (2021) argue that formal peer mentoring and informal friendship networks contribute to improved social capital and academic resilience. Peer support not only helps reduce isolation but also promotes skill development and confidence, facilitating smoother academic transitions and retention. While much research has focused on attitudes or institutional policies separately, fewer studies integrate the multi-dimensional nature of peer attitudes, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components and their direct impact on social interactions in higher education. Additionally, there is limited research on how intersectional factors such as gender, type of disability, and cultural background influence peer attitudes and interactions. This indicates a critical area for further investigation to develop nuanced support and inclusion strategies. In summary, recent literature reveals a complex interplay between peers' attitudes and social interactions that shape the higher education experiences of students with disabilities. While increased acceptance and positive attitudes have been documented, considerable challenges related to communication, social anxiety, and attitudinal barriers persist. Research highlights the

importance of deliberate institutional strategies to promote awareness, foster peer support networks, and transform campus cultures towards full inclusion.

### Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1:** The Role of Peer Support System in Social Inclusion of students with Visual impairment.

This conceptual framework presents the major elements of a Peer Support system planned to increase the social inclusion and academic achievement of the students with visual impairment. It also points out some of the interrelating factors such as academic support, emotional support, institutional support, and the lack of technology that affect the social inclusion of visually impaired students. The framework shows how peer attitudes contribute to the development of a positive environment such as awareness, respect, and empathy. In sum, the Peer Support System is demonstrated to play a significant role in the final objective of obtaining improved social inclusion and academic outcomes among these students.

### Research methodology

To determine the perceived peer attitude towards students with disabilities and their social and emotional experiences in tertiary institutions, a quantitative descriptive survey design was applied. This design enabled the collection of standardized data of a fairly large sample and statistically comparison across demographic variables. Students with disabilities undertaking the undergraduate courses in institutions of higher learning made up the research population. The target group was selected due to the fact that this group of students is directly exposed to peer attitudes, accessibility to campus and social interactions in their daily academic life. The purposive sampling method was used as a non-probability method of choosing the participants who had recorded a disability and were studying in the selected institution. This would have been an appropriate method since the percentage of students with disabilities was rather low and access had to be direct via disability support or departmental. The sample comprised 150 students with disabilities who took part in filling the questionnaire. They represented a

heterogeneous group of participants based on their gender, age, grade level, and field of study as well as disability, and thus offered the chance to investigate variations in perceived peer attitude.

### Instrument Development

The data were gathered under a structured questionnaire structured into perceived peer attitudes, social interaction, accessibility of academic and social environment and emotional impact. The rating of items was conducted in a Likert-type scale, which made it possible to calculate the mean scores and compare the groups. Content validity was facilitated by the correspondence of the items with the current literature on disability and inclusion and the review of the experts to make sure that all the relevant dimensions were covered. Internal consistency reliability had been determined and overall scale produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.778 which showed acceptable reliability.

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Respondents	No. of Item
0.778	150	30

### Data Collection and Data Analysis

The surveys were administered to suitable students with disabilities via institutional means and through which the student responded voluntarily and anonymously. The respondents were left to fill in the instrument alone giving self-reported information regarding their experiences and perceptions. The demographic data and core variables were summarized by using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations). Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, as a form of inferential statistics, were used to determine the significant differences in perceived peer attitudes between genders, age, grade level, type of disability, and field of study.

### Demographic Analysis

**Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Category	Respondents	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>			
	Male	65	43.3
	Female	85	56.7
<b>Age</b>			
	18-21 years	0	0
	22-25 years	45	30.0
	26-30 years	105	70.0
	Over 30 years	0	0
<b>Grade Level</b>			
	First-year Undergraduate Student	0	0
	Second-year Undergraduate Student	35	23.3
	Third/Final-year Undergraduate Student	115	76.7
	Postgraduate Student	0	0
<b>Type of Disability</b>			
	Physical disability	25	16.7
	Visual impairment	60	40.0
	Hearing impairment	5	3.3

Neuro-divergent (Autism, ADHD, learning disability)	60	40.0
<b>Field of Study</b>		
Humanities	5	3.3
Social Sciences	60	40.0
Natural Sciences and Mathematics	25	16.7
Technological Sciences	50	33.3
Interdisciplinary Studies	10	6.7

**Table 1** shows the demographic profile of the 150 respondents of the 150 people that participated in the study. Gender wise, there was a dissimilarity in favor of the female students (56.7%) than the male students (43.3%) the majority of participants were third or final-year undergraduate students (76.7%), then in second-year undergraduate students (23.3%), and finally no first-year or postgraduate students. When it comes to the type of disability, visual impairment and neuro-divergent disorder (autism, ADHD, and learning disabilities) were of equal prevalence (40%), and then there were physical disabilities (16.7%) and the least represented was hearing impairment (3.3%). Regarding field of study, the greatest percentage of the respondents had enrolled in Social Sciences (40%), Technological Sciences (33.3%), Natural Sciences and Mathematics (16.7%), and smaller proportions of Humanities and Interdisciplinary Studies. Total, the demographic data represent a heterogeneous sample regarding disability type and academic domain, as it offers a full measure to analyze the attitude of peers and the social experience.

## Descriptive Statistics

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Perceived Peer Attitudes, Social interaction, Accessibility and Emotional Impact**

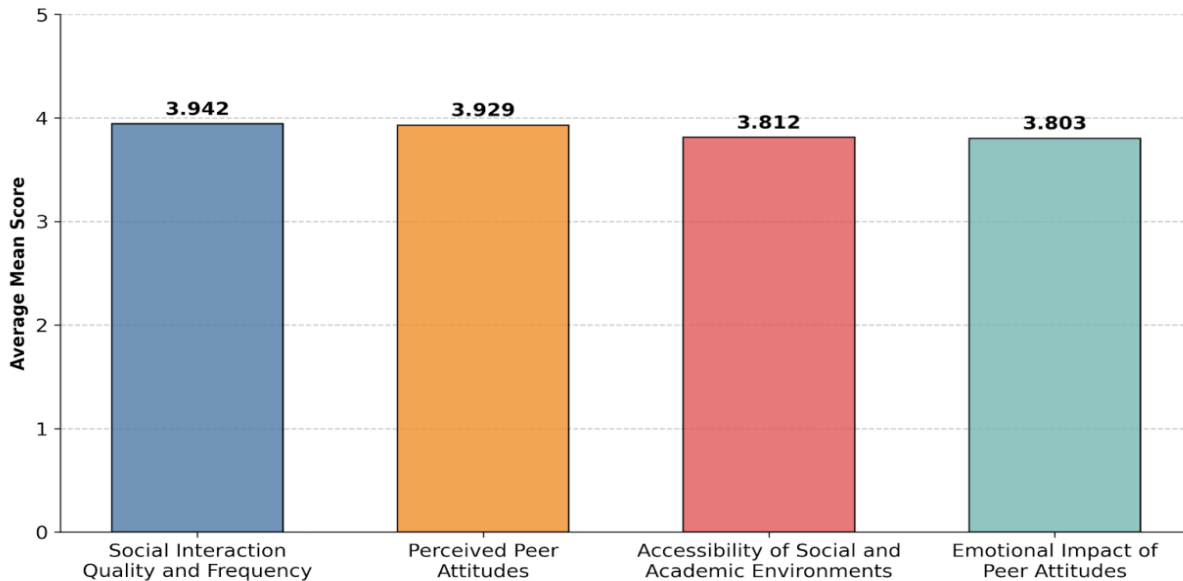
Statements	Mean	S.D.
<b>Section 2: Perceived Peer Attitudes</b>		
I feel that most peers treat me with respect despite my disability.	3.80	.948
I have experienced negative judgments from peers because of my disability.	4.23	.670
Peers generally accept me as an equal member in academic group work.	3.63	1.308
I feel that some peers have lower expectations of my academic abilities because of my disability.	3.63	.755
My peers are willing to learn about my disability if I explain it.	4.30	.460
I have felt ignored or excluded by peers because of my disability.	3.70	.588
I believe most peers understand the challenges I face as a student with a disability.	4.17	.374
I feel confident sharing my disability-related needs with peers.	3.97	.316
<b>Section 3: Social Interaction Quality and Frequency</b>		
I have close friends among my peers who do not have disabilities.	3.83	.639
I regularly participate in informal social gatherings with peers.	4.13	.849
Peer invitations to social events are common for me.	3.83	.639
I feel comfortable initiating social interactions with peers.	4.03	.607
There have been times when I felt socially isolated on campus.	3.80	.912

Peers include me in academic discussions and group projects.	4.20	.751
I find it easy to communicate my needs to peers.	4.03	.549
Some peers avoid socializing with me because of my disability.	3.63	.878
I feel part of the campus community.	4.00	.685
<b>Section 4: Accessibility of Social and Academic Environments</b>		
Campus facilities and social spaces are accessible to me.	3.87	.428
Social activities are planned considering the needs of students with disabilities.	3.87	.428
The university provides sufficient opportunities for me to engage with my peers socially.	3.90	.792
Academic group work is arranged in a way that allows my full participation.	3.80	.478
Peer support is available when I face difficulties related to my disability.	3.13	.620
I have received adequate information about support services for students with disabilities.	4.30	.460
<b>Section 5: Emotional Impact of Peer Attitudes</b>		
Positive peer interactions improve my confidence at university.	4.30	.588
Negative peer attitudes have made me reluctant to participate in class activities.	3.23	1.149
I feel anxious about how my peers perceive my disability.	3.33	1.168
Supportive peers help me cope with academic challenges.	4.20	.478
I sometimes feel lonely due to lack of peer support.	3.40	1.204
Having friends who understand my disability helps reduce my stress.	4.00	.685
Overall, peer attitudes affect my motivation to continue my studies.	4.16	.635

**Table 2** provides the summary of the descriptive statistics of views regarding perceptions of students in 4 areas related to peer attitudes, quality of social interaction, accessibility of the environment and emotional influence of the peer attitudes. Generally, the average scores of most of the items were moderate to high which meant that the students with disabilities had a positive perception. In Section 2 (Perceived Peer Attitudes), the respondents indicated that they believed they are respected by peers ( $M = 3.80$ ) and that they strongly agree with the idea that peers are interested in learning about their disabilities ( $M = 4.30$ ). Nonetheless, comparatively high means of negative experiences, including the experience of negative judgment ( $M = 4.23$ ) and the feeling of being ignored or excluded ( $M = 3.70$ ), indicate that despite the good intentions, cases of prejudice and exclusion still occur. The results of Section 3 (Social Interaction Quality and Frequency) were positive, and the respondents reported that they frequently engage in social events ( $M = 4.13$ ), they were also considered to be included in academic conversations ( $M = 4.20$ ), and they felt part of the campus community ( $M = 4.00$ ). However, the existence of social isolation ( $M = 3.80$ ) and perception of the exclusion of some peers ( $M = 3.63$ ) is evidence of the persistence of social issues. Regarding Section 4 (Accessibility of Social and Academic Environments) respondents generally understood the facilities and social opportunities of the campuses as accessible ( $M \approx 3.803.90$ ). Nonetheless, availability of peer support exhibited a relatively lower mean ( $M = 3.13$ ), which means there may be a seeming gap in informal peer support in spite of sufficient institutional support. Section 5 (Emotional Impact of Peer Attitudes) indicated that positive peer interactions had a strong effect on confidence of students ( $M = 4.30$ ) and motivation to continue studies ( $M = 4.16$ ). Simultaneously, the average scores on the anxiety ( $M = 3.33$ ) and loneliness ( $M = 3.40$ ) are moderate, which means that the emotional vulnerabilities have not been removed. The general results indicate that peer attitudes are mostly

positive but emotional and social barriers continue to influence the experiences of students with disabilities.

### Graphical Representation of the Constructs



**Figure 2:** Graphical Representation of Average Mean Scores of Constructs

This graph shows an average mean score of four constructs associated with social inclusion among students having visual impairment. The measured constructs include; Social Interaction Quality and Frequency (3.942), Perceived Peer Attitudes (3.929), Accessibility of Social and Academic Environments (3.812), and Emotional Impact of Peer Attitudes (3.803). The scores suggest the relative importance of these constructs as the highest mean score was given to Social Interaction Quality and Frequency, which implies that it has the most significant effect on the social inclusion of visually impaired students. The constructs highlight important variables that influence the academic and emotional well-being of these students.

### Inferential Statistics

**Table 3: Independent t-Test on Perceived Peer Attitudes by gender**

Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	65	130.1385	5.47402	148	-1.143	.000
Female	85	131.8824	11.32256			

**Table 3** shows the outcome of an independent samples t-test that used to compare the differences in perceptions of peer attitudes in regard to gender. The mean score of the female respondents (M = 131.88, SD = 11.32) was a bit higher than that of the male respondents (M = 130.14, SD = 5.47). The t-test value shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of male and female students (t = -1.143, p <.05). The result implies that gender is a major factor in the development of the attitude towards students with disabilities by their peers.

Peers attitude seems to be perceived better by female students compared to their male counterparts, this can be attributable to diverse experiences of social life, differences in coping compensations, or patterns of interaction among peers in the higher education environment.

**Table 4: One Way ANOVA of Perceived Peer Attitudes by Demographic Variables**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Age</b>					
Between Groups	21.750	12	1.813	25.468	.000
Within Groups	9.750	137	.071		
Total	31.500	149			
<b>Grade Level</b>					
Between Groups	19.083	12	1.590	28.112	.000
Within Groups	7.750	137	.057		
Total	26.833	149			
<b>Type of Disability</b>					
Between Groups	164.333	12	13.694	48.106	.000
Within Groups	39.000	137	.285		
Total	203.333	149			
<b>Field of Study</b>					
Between Groups	106.250	12	8.854	19.028	.000
Within Groups	63.750	137	.465		
Total	170.000	149			

The results of the one-way ANOVA tests of the differences in the perceived peer attitudes by age, grade level, type of disability, and field of study are reported in Table 4. The results demonstrate statistically significant differences in all the analyzed variables ( $p < .001$ ). The inferences between the age groups were significant ( $F = 25.468$ ), which means that the perception of peer attitudes among students differs depending on age. At the same level, grade level also exhibited a noteworthy impact ( $F = 28.112$ ), which indicates that academic advancement has an impact on the view of peer attitudes and inclusion by students with disabilities. The strongest effect was observed in the type of disability ( $F = 48.106$ ), as it evidenced that students experience and peer relationship are significantly different in the case of different disability types. Moreover, field of study was also highly diverse ( $F = 19.028$ ) signifying that there were disciplinary differences in peer attitudes and practices of social inclusion. In general, these findings indicate that the perceived peer attitudes are not homogenous but strongly dependent on the demographic and academic variables. This reminds of the need to make interventions contextual and specific in order to promote peer awareness and inclusion among diverse student groups.

### **Findings**

This research study has a significant implication on the perceived attitudes of fellow students towards students with disabilities and their social experiences in higher education institutions. All in all, the findings show that the attitude of their peers towards students with disabilities is rated as moderate, especially in respect, interest to learn about disabilities and participation in academic activities. Most of the respondents said that they felt accepted when working in groups, engaging in academic conversations, which is an indication of positive steps toward inclusive peer relationships in universities. Nonetheless, in spite of the positive perceptions, the results

also present the presence of negative experiences. Quite a good number of the students claimed that they have been negatively judged, socially excluded, and even felt unnoticed because of their disabilities. It means that even though acceptance exists, there are still minor types of bias and social distancing in peer relations. In regard to social interaction, the students with disabilities indicated that they participated actively in the social and academic environment, such as making friends with non-disabled students and taking part in informal social events. However, there was still some evidence of social loneliness and rejection by other students, which created the ongoing difficulties in fully integrating socially into campus.

The results concerning accessibility imply that the institutional contexts are mostly favorable, and campus resources and academic provisions tend to allow the participation. Another observation was the fact that students received sufficient information regarding support services. Nevertheless, the availability of peer support was rather lower, which means that the informal peer support could not be as predictable as the institutional one. Emotional influence of peer attitudes proved to be a prominent discovery. The positive peer interactions were identified to provide confidence, motivation, and coping with academic difficulties in students with disabilities. Meanwhile, negative peer attitudes were also related to anxiety, unwillingness to engage in classroom activities, and the feeling of loneliness, which shows the great emotional impact of peer behavior. The analysis of the inferential statistics showed that the difference between genders was significant and that female students perceived peer attitudes more positively as compared to male students. Moreover, there were also great disparities in terms of age, grade level, disability type, and area of study, that is, perceptions of peer attitudes differ depending on the demographic and academic variables. It is worth noting that the disability type had the highest impact, which means that the social experiences of the students depend on the presence of disabilities.

Overall, the results indicate that despite the positive trends of increased inclusivity in the environment of higher education, students with disabilities still experience social and emotional difficulties associated with the attitude of classmates. These findings highlight the importance of using specific awareness campaigns, peer support interventions, as well as inclusion practices to enhance social inclusion, and overall university lives of students with disabilities.

## **Discussions**

The results of the given research show that students with disabilities tend to view peer attitudes as moderately positive, especially in terms of respect, desire to learn about disability, and inclusion in academic activities, but such positive aspects are accompanied by the constant phenomenon of negative judgment, exclusion and reduced expectations. This ambivalent trend is indicative of recent studies which indicate that, despite still being forced to deal with ableist assumptions of competency and participation that restrict their social and educational activities in subtle ways, disabled students tend to experience a sense of personal welcome. In this regard, the current findings confirm current evidence that inclusion in higher education is oftentimes not full, where overt approval even takes a less obvious form of stigma and social exclusion (Gull et al., 2025; Ji et al., 2025; Bartolo et al., 2025; Rath, 2022). The socialization data, revealing a high frequency of engaging in informal events, a close-tie with non-disabled counterparts as well as participation in academic discourse on a regular basis implies that most of the participants have been able to establish meaningful networks within the university. But the fact that the same group reports feeling lonely, avoiding, and socially isolated at the same time suggests a weak sense of belonging that can be easily destroyed in case of inconsistent invitations,

communication, or even joint activities by peers. The most recent qualitative descriptions of disabled college students also underline the fact that attendance at classes and other spaces does not necessarily lead to the establishment of intensive, mutually reciprocal relationships since unspoken restraints on communication patterns, physical landscape, and attitude of peers tend to limit complete involvement. The intensity of these convergent results is that social inclusion needs not just positive attitudes in theory but also ongoing opportunities and competencies to engage in an inclusive manner in a practice (Nisar et al., 2023; Ji et al., 2025; Bartolo et al., 2025; Rath, 2022). Sensations of the facilities, social spaces, and academic arrangements as widely accessible, and the strong awareness of the support services imply that the institutional configurations of inclusion are relatively well established in the analyzed situation. However, the relatively diminished scores on informal peer support are an indication of such a disconnect between the formal accessibility and the social reality of day-to-day life, as previous reports have indicated that universities tend to focus on the provision of procedural accommodations and underestimates the role of relational support and community-building. Recent research points to the fact that more and more students with disabilities are demanding the integration of physical accessibility, the flexibility of teaching and social connectedness and that meaningful inclusion lies more in the relationship between peers and staff than in the provision of formal services. It is based on this that the present results indicate the necessity to supplement the institutional provisions with the purposeful attempt to develop the supportive peer cultures within the classroom setting, residential quarters, and co-curricular areas (Subu et al., 2025; Nisar et al., 2023; Ji et al., 2025; Bartolo et al., 2025).

The positive correlation between positive peer interactions and confidence, motivation, and academic coping ability of students highlights the key importance of peer dynamic in emotional health and academic perseverance in higher education. Simultaneously, the associations between negative peer attitudes and anxiety, fear of attending classes, and loneliness are consistent with the accruing data that unsupportive or hostile campus environments are some of the contributing factors to increased rates of psychological distress in disabled students. Recent surveys of student mental health patterns indicate that disabled and chronically ill students have a cumulative load of academic stress, stigma and social isolation, which may increase the effects of depression and anxiety despite the existence of formal accommodations. The present outcomes hence support the arguments that disability inclusion should be a central mental health and wellbeing concern in universities and not merely a compliance or access matter (Subu et al., 2025; Solís García et al., 2024; Pointon-Haas et al., 2024).

The substantial variation in perceived peer attitudes, by gender, age, grade level, type of disability and field of study, clearly show that not all experiences of inclusion are homogenous but occur through the overlapping and cross-cutting identities and academic situations. The overall better perceptions of women are reported by the female students and correlate with the work that illustrates that gender roles about care, empathy and emotional disclosure have the potential to shape the way in which support is provided and received to and by members of the peer group. Similarly, such powerful effects of disability type and disciplinary area are reminiscent of emerging research that neuro-divergent, sensory, and physical disability is linked to clear patterns of misperception and accommodation, and that there are differences in the collaboration norms, workload arrangements, and awareness of inclusive practice across faculties. Such differences indicate that universal programs cannot be expected to help in solving the unique barriers to different groups of students, which supports the idea of uniqueness and situational sensitivity of strategies to enhance inclusive peer relationships within various

programs and cohorts (Gull et al., 2025; Feraco et al., 2025; Coyle et al., 2025; Bartolo et al., 2025).

Combined, these findings indicate that higher education institutions are shifting to more accommodating of peer cultures, but still have not sorted out the underlying relational and structural dynamics that perpetuate partial inclusion. The simultaneous presence of respect and curiosity with exclusion and low expectations suggests that not all of their peers are knowledgeable, confident, or provided with the opportunities to transform their positive intentions into consistent inclusive behavior. Recent reviews of peer mentoring and co-designed assistance programs indicate that where use of disabled and non-disabled students are involved in the development of activities and norms, participation becomes fairer and stigma is minimized, which provide promising areas of practice which are direct responses to the trends in this study (Solís García et al., 2024; Coyle et al., 2025).

### **Conclusion**

This paper finds out that the attitudes of peers towards students with disabilities in higher education are largely positive but remain ambivalent and even conflicting, with respect and readiness to assist them mixed with instances of negative attitudes and social marginalization. Students with disabilities were found to have a significant experience in participating in academic and social activities and have felt a part of the campus community, but most still felt lonely and anxious with poor levels of peer support, which means that inclusion is not full-body. The findings also indicate that the perceptions about the attitudes of peers differ considerably according to gender, age, grade level, type of disability and field of study and provide evidence that experiences of inclusion are influenced by overlapping individual and academic factors and are not the same across the entire student population. All in all, the research highlights that formal institutional support and facilitating environments, though critical, cannot be considered as the sole factors, and the development of truly inclusive peer cultures and context-specific practices are the key towards supporting the social and emotional well-being of students with disabilities in higher educational settings.

### **Recommendation**

1. Introduce disability-based and structured peer programs (mentoring, co-mentoring circles, inclusive group events) with and without students with disabilities to develop long-term and reciprocal relationships, and minimize social distance.
2. Provide students and faculty with specific, discipline-specific awareness and capacity-building interventions designed to manage differences based on gender, age, disability type, and field of study to ensure the expression of positive attitudes will be shown in regularly inclusive daily behaviors.

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