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WOMEN WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITY, SOCIAL MEDIA

AND THE MAKING OF PREFERRED IDENTITY


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Women with Physical Disability, Social Media
And the Making of Preferred Identity

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**DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

# WOMEN WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MAKING OF PREFERRED IDENTITY

By Carmen Yau

## ABSTRACT

Disabled women face challenges in developing their identity due to intersectional oppression and stigmatisation. They are usually stereotyped as infantized daughters, undesired partners, unfit wives and irresponsible mothers. Yet, it is possible that disabled women can exercise their agency with the catalyst of radical sociocultural movements (e.g., crip culture) and social media to make meaningful self-definition and social interactions.

The objectives of this study are to understand the oppressive experience of disabled women and how they make use of social media that facilitate them to subjectively perceive their selves in their preferred manner and their frames of reference. Some concepts and theories are elucidated to build a two-dimension framework for observation and interpretation of their social media experience. Dimension 1 is symbolic resources involved in identity construction in a socio-cultural-technology context. Symbolic resources include cultural symbols, communication modalities and technology affordance. Dimension 2 is the low, medium and high levels of agency in the process of identity construction.

This study exclusively examines women with physical disability. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, this study focusses on how disabled women make use of and interpret symbols to signify their preferred identity in their self-presentation and self-expression. Purposive sampling was conducted. Each participant had three semi-structured interviews at 30 days intervals. In each interview, participants were invited to share three social media posts that they feel best represent them as disabled women. Thematic analysis and further interpretation of the data provided a full picture of the process of identity construction via social media.

The findings reveal the possibilities of social media experience that facilitate disabled women's sense of self as well as their preferred self-presentation and desired social interactions. At the low-level agency, disabled women make use of social media as a stage to perform their social identities and engage in a dialogue with their followers. In doing so, they aim to gain social acceptance as "ordinary" women. At the medium-level agency, they connect with alternative cultures and discourses to push back the boundaries of conventional normality. Disabled women connect different radical sociocultural movements to co-create a favourable sociocultural context for resources and support networks. At the high-level agency, disabled women reflexively post their significant episodes and narrative of their life stories. They further crystalise their personal meanings and wisdom as a redemption of self from negative affective experiences. They purposefully publicize their stories to build social solidarity and their own sub-groups. The findings inform better knowledge of disabled women's agency and suggest the possibilities for future social work practice and research.

# WOMEN WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MAKING OF PREFERRED IDENTITY

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# CHAPTER I: PERSONAL STATEMENT

## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the initiatives of this study. This study begins with how I started to conceptualise the problem of the sexuality of disabled women by reviewing my personal growth as a woman with disabilities. I was born with the number one genetic killer of children under the age of two, Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). Although such a debilitating disability becomes a daily challenge throughout my life, the attitude of my significant others makes a significant impact on my perception of my disability, gender and self.

## 1.2 Being a Forever Child in Family

Since I was born with SMA, my parents and family members took a very different approach to making meaning of my disability. They taught me how to survive and nurtured me as a decent lady. I grew up in a family with both traditional East and modern West culture. My father grew up in a famous Taoist family, and my mother grew up in a modern cotton-business family from Shanghai.

The Yau family, with eight generations of Taoist priests and scholars, raised their children with ancient traditions and scriptures from our ancestors. The Yau family has been serving the Chinese community by conducting religious rituals, hosting prayers and events for deaths, births, and marriages as well as teaching and practice of Taoism. Although I am a daughter who was not supposed to shoulder any family responsibilities, my disability was viewed to be the ancestral karma for divulging the plans of heaven from generation to generation. For this reason, I had the exceptional privilege to learn and assist in these services since childhood.

Since my mother's family runs a successful cotton business in Hong Kong, my cousins were given proper education and high hopes for future success. However, I was not expected to be one of them. I was expected to be forever reliant on my parents and my younger brother. I call my younger brother "gor gor" (meaning big brother). My mother considered that I had to be dependent on my younger brother when they become too old to take care of me. As for my parents, the only way to cope with my disability is to be protective. For example, avoiding all sorts of expectations since childhood, placing caregiving responsibility on my younger brother, and teaching me how the outside world is dangerous, and men (except my father and brother) are predators for sex and benefits.

## 1.3 Being an Undesirable Woman in Intimate Relationships

When I was studying for my bachelor's degree at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, I tried to search for my first job as every young adult did. However, I was not given a job opportunity until a sex hotline call centre offered me a job. Working as a hotline girl, clients approached me

without knowing my disabilities. They treated me as an ordinary girl in a way that I never experience before. At that time, I realised that the adult world never includes disabled women. However, whenever I disclosed my disability, these intimate relationships fell apart as they did not believe disabled women could be sexual too. I managed to date several times, but my ex-boyfriends did not think their families would accept me as a suitable girlfriend. Some of them decided to break up since they could hardly present me to his family and friends as his girlfriend. Although they were serious about our relationship, they rarely had hopes for our future.

In 2003, I started to have a stable relationship with a divorced man with two children from his previous marriage. In the eyes of my ex-boyfriend and his family, I was unable to take up the role of a stepmother for his children and a homemaker for his family. When my ex-boyfriend was away from home, his children had to "babysit" me as a child. I was discouraged from having a child on my own as I was a burden to our family. Our family members perceived us as having casual relationships since no one expected us to reach another milestone like marriage or having children. Throughout the 14 years of struggling in an intimate relationship, I kept being apologetic to my ex-boyfriend, family members and friends, for being a disabled woman who never be able to take up any roles as a partner.

I thought of myself as a failure in womanhood for the rest of my life, so I decided to turn my focus on career development. In my study for my Master of Social Work, I learnt a lot from Foucault, feminism and different social theories. I applied all sorts of communication skills I learnt from social work to the relationship between my ex-boyfriend and his children. However, the more I studied, the more I realised that all my struggles were not individual, but also a structural oppression against disabled people. At the end of my study, I decided that my self-perception as a woman is more important than earning recognition from my ex-boyfriend, family, and friends. In 2017, I decided to break up with my boyfriend.

**1.4 Establishing Crip Sisterhood Online**

After the break-up, I was criticized by my family and friends as too capricious and ungrateful since he was kind enough to accept me and provided all sorts of care that I needed throughout the 14 years. Despite I did not earn any acceptance from them, I started to search for people who might understand me. I made good friends in the Chinese disabled community, but I found we are trapped in the vicious cycle that believing disabled women are destined for failure. In my Chinese community, I could hardly find ways to resist the frustration of being a disabled woman.

To search for an assertive voice that empowers me as a woman with disabilities, I started to engage disability advocates around the world. I found my role models among disabled women. The first person I approached on Facebook was Dr Danielle Sheypuk, a disabled lady who talked about her dating experience in TEDx. I started to exchange stories and thoughts with her and some disabled activists who conduct research, education, and social actions around the world. From surfing on social media, I found disabled women are beautiful fashion models, bold sex advocates, and romantic lovers.

Engaging the online "crip pride community" via Facebook was mind-blowing. When I see my disabled girlfriends expressing their body and sexuality boldly, confidently and assertively, I found myself trying so hard to comply with my loved ones' expectations on how a disabled girl should present themselves decently. We had a lot of interesting conversations and interactions which enhanced our self-reflection. We had organized a "sex bucket list" to invite disabled women to share their fantasies. We had a "hot selfie" campaign to invite our members to share their pictures of their sexual identity as a woman with disabilities. Their selfies and stories become my rock to shape my own beauty, embracing my disabled body, and pursuing my autonomy as a woman. I learned to dress like them, put on make-up like them, and think like them. Most importantly, in my thirties, I started to explore options to express and present myself. Such exploration was supposed to be a developmental milestone in my adolescence.

Looking back to my thirty years of lifetime, I perceived myself as a forever child and a burden to family and friends. My vision and imagination to be a woman were very limited, with no reference from others. I never thought I would be able to negotiate for autonomy and independence in such a discriminative and oppressive environment. However, exchanging experiences with other disabled women echoed my deepest desires and struggles. Because of the recognition and empowerment from my crip sisters, I no longer feel insecure when I face negative comments and disapproval from others.

Besides building my own sexual identity, I am eager to advocate sexuality rights for disabled people in my Chinese community. I started my "Sugar's xxx stories" project to write adult erotic stories based on real-life stories from disabled girls and women. I shared my story and experience in Ted x TinhauWomen in 2018. Although I might be the very few people in the Chinese community, who dares to be so outspoken about sexuality of disabled women, I feel empowered to join the advocacy league online and gather my crip sisters in the community. Advocating for the sexuality of women with disability is my passion and my mission, and hopefully, become my profession.

**CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

**2.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to provide a background to formulate my research question to understand how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. The chapter has been organised in the following way:

In the first part of this chapter, I attempt to connect the "identity problem" of disabled women with structural oppression against their intersectional identity. Extensive research attributes structural oppression as barriers and challenges against disabled women to explore and actualize their preferred identity. I start with a close-up shot to study the "problem" of disabled women regarding their identity development in different stages of life. Then, I give an overview of their microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem to feature the unfavourable sociocultural context that hinders their identity formation and expression. At the end of this part, I take a broader view to study the structural oppression and intersectionality of disabled women.

In the second part of this chapter, I explore how disabled women can potentially strengthen their preferred identity as part of oppression resistance. I start by connecting crip culture with radical sociocultural movements to highlight the importance of subjectivity and solidarity of disabled women. Then, I review some pieces of literature to explore the agency of disabled women on social media. At the end of this part, I highlight the characteristics of disabled "micro-celebrities" as exemplars to suggest what attributes disabled women may need to be authentic in their self-expression and shake the normative stereotype.

In the final section of this chapter, I consolidate the above discussion to suggest how this study may contribute to the social work discipline. I identify several research gaps to formulate the research aims, objectives and questions of this study.

2.2 Identity "Problem" is a Structural Oppression

**2.2.1 The Identity "Problem" Among Disabled Women**

As for disabled women, the core of self-identity is self-acceptance of their disabled body and social acceptance in their social encounters. Gerschick (2000, p. 1264) writes, "bodies are central to achieving recognition as appropriately gendered beings. Bodies operate socially as canvases on which gender is displayed and kinaesthetically as the mechanisms by which it is physically enacted". Disabled women make sense of their self-identity by interpreting the meanings of their body and gender via social interactions. Should disabled women make sense of their upbringing and social experience positively, they develop a positive self-identity as a life celebration of their body, their sexuality and womanhood. However, the existing literature reveals that disabled

women undergo oppressed upbringing and stigmatized social encounters that hinder their identity development. The following is an overview of literature outlining how disabled women face challenges and oppression to validate their preferred identity as part of their development milestones.

*2.2.1.1 Being an "Infantilized" Daughter*

Disabled women usually share a commonality of infantilization, implying that they are not only being treated like infants by their significant others and caregivers, but they also have less sense of autonomy as adults, limiting their sexual expression (Mona, 2003).

First of all, parental attitude makes a significant impact on how disabled women perceive their self and their social expectation of them. Addlakha (2009) pointed out that the gender roles of disabled women are restricted to "daughters" in many Asian families. Parents seldom encourage them to pursue education and career. They consider disabled people incapable of facing fierce competition with non-disabled peers. Furthermore, disabled daughters are expected to be a lifelong burden to the family. In the eye of parents, even if disabled daughters achieve good education or a promising career, they have a very dim chance of having a husband. These disabled girls are being kept at home and depend on their parents; they are restricted in development and rights for mobility, education, and career development. Such restrictions and over-protection from family intensify when they reach adolescence. Disabled women mostly adopt their parents' attitudes rather than take peers and media as references to build their identity. As a result, disabled women are perceived as underdeveloped and incapable to take "conventional adult roles" (Addlakha, 2009, p. 4). As a result, disabled women lack exploration of alternative age-appropriate identities. They are confined to the imposed child roles by their parents.

Secondly, caregiving stress shapes an unfavourable power dynamic that hinders disabled girls to be independent as adult women. Crawford and Ostrove (2003, p. 186) attributed "infantilization" to the perception of the "asexuality" of disabled women. Due to their disabilities, they feel being assumed to be intellectually incompetent. Parents discard disabled women's potential and capacity to take gender roles as sexual partners and mothers in the future (Campbell, 2017). They are treated as infants with condescension and pity for their helplessness and challenges. Due to caregiving stress, the sexuality of disabled women is framed as a luxury and less prioritized need (Kulick & Rydström, 2015). Together, parents and caregivers perceive disabled women as vulnerable infants who in need of protection and care. As a result, disabled women feel lonely and isolated from adult social interactions.

*2.2.1.2 Being an Incapable Intimate Partner*

Sexual identity is one of the developmental challenges for individuals "to express, to explore and to have positively validated" throughout their lives (McKenna, Green, & Smith, 2001, p. 302). When disabled girls reach puberty, they experience a drastic physical change in their bodies. With

the change in their body and progressive growth in their teenage, they encounter additional challenges to reach common psychosocial development milestones as teenagers. In this section, I focus on their challenges in sexual development and their dating experience.

First, disabled women lack learning, exploring, and experimenting experiences to develop their gender identity. Gender identity is which is part of self-perception that encompasses feminine/masculine/non-gender conforming identities and gender expression. Children and adolescents first learn gender scripts from play, modelling, and social interactions. They relate their selves to gender identity, including constructing their gender roles, understanding gender-related conduct, feminine and masculine qualities, power, and social relationships (Bussey, 2011). With constant exploration and experiments to formulate and express themselves sexually, they understand their sexual needs, orientation, and preferences (Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011). Unlike most non-disabled peers who can access media, fashion, and social events from school and the community, disabled people have limited "watching, doing and rehearsing" experiences. Disabled women usually have less opportunity to learn and experiment with their gender identity to gain an understanding of their gender identity. These social learning and modelling are crucial for the development of personal identity and self-esteem at a young age.

Second, disabled women lack dating experience as an important exploration of their sexual identity. In a study comparing disabled women and those without disabilities, disabled women were less likely to have sex, less likely to be married and less likely to have children (Rintala et al., 1997). Regarding the average age at first date, disabled women were most likely 15 months older than those without disabilities (Rintala et al., 1997). They had less satisfaction with the frequency of dating, found it more challenging to attract a dating partner and faced more psychosocial barriers to dating (Rintala et al., 1997). On the whole, disabled teenage girls lack experience in dating and forming intimate relationships.

Consequently, disabled teenage girls lack exploration and socialization in puberty to acquire essential knowledge and skills for psychosexual maturity. Disabled women share the same sexual desires and needs as non-disabled women. Still, their sexual development in terms of body image, sexual self-esteem and sexual/life satisfaction is significantly lower than non-disabled women (Moin, Duvdevany, & Mazor, 2009). They feel anxiety, shame, and other negative feelings towards their puberty and adulthood experiences (Gremo, 2015). With numerous failures and frustration in dating experiences, disabled teenagers consider themselves incapable and downplay their potential role as intimate partners.

*2.2.1.3 Being an Unfit Wife*

Disabled women face hardship and challenges in playing their role as a wife in a marriage. Compared with disabled men, disabled women faced more divorce and separation in marriage (Addlakha, 2009). Their lived experience in marriage creates another hurdle for disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity as a wife.

First, disabled wives usually have a higher chance of mistreatment and an imbalance of power in marriage. Numerous studies indicated disabled women have a higher prevalence of interpersonal violence (Hughes, Bellis, & Jones, 2012; Krnjacki, Emerson, Llewellyn, & Kavanagh, 2016; Ruiz-Pérez, Pastor-Moreno, Escribà-Agüir, & Maroto-Navarro, 2018). Comparing disabled women with those able-bodied, disabled women are 40% more likely to be abused and have a longer period of abuse (Salthouse, 2016). The average interpersonal abuse experience is approximately one to twenty years (Thiara et al., 2011). Caregiving stress is a significant factor that contributed to a high risk of partner violence against them (Salwen, Gray, & Mona, 2016); other contributing factors include a low level of education, poverty and unemployment (Krnjacki et al., 2016) as well as unmet needs of partners and dissatisfactory relationship (Copel, 2006; Salwen et al., 2016). The main reason for staying in the abusive relationship is not only because they chose to remain in the marriage, but also because they were dependent on their partners for financial support and caregiving (Nosek, Foley, Hughes, & Howland, 2001; Young, Nosek, Howland, Chanpong, & Rintala, 1997). Partner violence against disabled women is diverse and disability-oriented (Hasan, Muhaddes, Camellia, Selim, & Rashid, 2014; Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2018). Disabled women experience all types of violence (i.e. physical, emotional, sexual and financial), particularly disability-specific violence such as hostile comments and humiliation of their disabilities and dysfunctions, absence or excessive use of medical devices/exercises and other forced sexual activities in exchange for help. (Nosek et al., 2001).

Second, disabled wives are less respected or consented to sexual relationships. Numerous studies reported that disabled women have a higher risk of sexual violence (e.g. sexual harassment and rape) (Barrett, Day, Roche, & Carlson, 2009; Brown, Peña, & Rankin, 2017; Brownridge, 2006; Hasan et al., 2014). They are more vulnerable to exploitation in intimate relationships (Sonali, 2017). They engage in high-risk and unconsented sexual activities, mainly due to their misunderstanding of intimacy and sexuality.

Together, an unequal intimate relationship is harmful to the well-being and self-identity of disabled women. Unpleasant and violent interactions with partners harm their physical well-being (e.g. bruises, STD, unwanted pregnancy) and psychological well-being (e.g. depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms and suicidal thoughts etc.) (Bonomi, Nichols, Kammes, & Green, 2018). These negative intimate relationships may further distort their self-perception and self-worth (Ogińska-Bulik, 2016). Kearney (2001, p. 276) described battered disabled women as "shrinking of self" as they choose to position themselves low in the relationship to preserve the intimate relationship and family. Disabled women tend to stay in unsatisfactory marriage to fulfil social and cultural expectations to be "normal" women.

*2.2.1.4 Being an "Irresponsible" Mother*

In today's society, motherhood is still the core of women's identity. Motherhood is often a legitimate path for women to gain a sense of femininity and ordinariness.

In one way, motherhood offers disabled women to claim their femininity and competence as ordinary women. In Yang (2018)'s book *Disability Identity and Marriage in Rural China*, disabled women depend on fertility to secure their family status and satisfaction in their marriage. By becoming a mother, disabled women gain a sense of achievement and redemption of their disability identity. Although disability may limit them to perform their caregiving role, they often develop creative and practical solutions to perform their role (Malacrida, 2009). For example, they bring children to enclosed playgrounds so that their children will not be lost. They may make adaptations to their power wheelchair so that their children can ride along with them with fun and pride. Disabled mothers have their own interpretation of motherhood. Their own parenting style tends to nurture and cooperate with children as teamwork. However, in Malacrida (2009)'s study, interviewed disabled mothers constantly face stigmas and judgement as they find themselves never able to measure up to the standard of a good mother.

Nevertheless, motherhood is more like a "double-edged form of legitimacy" for disabled women (Frederick, Leyva, & Lavin, 2019, p. 163). Frederick et al. (2019) summarised the rigid stereotype of a "good mother" includes dependent on their bread-winning husband, providing unpaid caregiving and housekeeping, monitoring children's education and development, and providing care for senior family members (e.g., mother-in-law). Disabled mothers are often criticized for turning the family dynamic "upside-down". At the same time, children are presumed to be their mother's caregivers (Frederick et al., 2019). Also, some of them face serious challenges to their parental rights in a family court. In a custody dispute, her former partner may use her disability against her in the process of divorce (Frederick et al., 2019). Disabled mothers often being regarded as bad mothers due to their incapacity to give care and protection, their selfishness for passing their disability to children, and their incompetence to maintain the parent-child dynamic.

As a result, some disabled mothers face stress to fulfil the good mother social expectation. They over-compensate to be intensive mothering and over-emphasise their independence and competence to perform their mother role to perfection. In sum, the social expectation and stereotypes deny disabled women to play their mother role as other inadequate non-normative mothers (e.g., underprivileged mothers, single mothers).

Together, Section 2.2.1 covers how disabled women face challenges in validating their preferred identity across different stages of life. The above literature overview illustrates that disabled women face challenges in developing their self-identity as disability stigma and gender stereotypes are embedded in their social context. Further, these challenges and hurdles in identity development are commonly shared among disabled women. In my view, these challenges are not individual problems of disabled women. These challenges are commonly shared among disabled women. This "identity problem" is a structural political issue that should be addressed in social work research and practice. The next section will further discuss the structural oppression against disabled women through the lens of the ecological system.

**2.2.2 Structural Oppression in Disabled Women's Ecology**

This section examines the impact of structural oppression on hurdling disabled women to construct their identities. With Bronfenbrenner (1979)'s ecological system as the framework, I illustrate how structural oppression is deeply rooted in the everyday life of disabled women. More specifically, I categorise these hurdles within the context of microsystem (i.e. family and friends), exosystem (i.e. social facilities and services) and macrosystem (i.e. ableism and heteropatriarchy).

*2.2.2.1 The Microsystem: Stigmatisation & Regulations from Significant Others*

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the microsystem refers to significant others who directly impact one's everyday life. Disabled women usually comply with their significant others' expectations and stereotypes. Significant others include parents, family members and friends.

Parents and family members are often the primary sources to learn social stereotypes and stigma. Vaidya (2015) pointed out that disability is often viewed negatively as karma or punishment of their parents and family members in some cultures and histories. Partners and spouses are other sources of conveying the stereotype of disabled women.

Friends are usually friendly and supportive, but some research also indicated that they also face stigma by association. Goldstein and Johnson (1997) explained how significant others have to face all sorts of stigmatisation due to their association with disabled people. Not all significant others would positively cope with stigmatisations related to labels like "sympathy-related qualities"(Goldstein & Johnson, 1997, p. 497). These stigmas led to a sense of inferiority and low self-worth among their significant others.

*2.2.2.2 The Exosystem: Discourse in Spatial Representations*

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the exosystem includes shareholders of the society who provide social services, entertainment and even public spaces or commercial venues. These social settings and facilities may not directly involve disabled women. However, these stakeholders may impact their social integration and quality of life as adult women. This section focuses on three areas: 1) Social Services & Institutions; 2) Accessibility of Gendered Places; 3) Mass Media & Digital Media.

2.2.2.2.1 Social Services & Institutions

Service services and institutions establish the "facts" and normativity to evaluate people. They use science and religion to set normative attitudes and legitimacy to guide people to pursue and

control their desires, attitudes, behaviours, and choice of a partner. As Foucault criticised, informal agencies (e.g., families and friends) and formal social agencies (e.g. schools and hospitals) are "vehicles of control" to put knowledge and power in social practices (Foucault, 1979). Institutional setting and social service shaped a stigmatized context for disabled women in three ways: 1) Shaping the biased perception and practice of disabled bodies; 2) Creating control and surveillance in the name of rehabilitation; 3) Inaccessibility of women's services for disabled women.

First, social and health services shape the perception and practice of the bodies of disabled women. Physical appearance and body have rigid social norms and expectations. These normative attitude pushes women to fit into the dominant norm as "normal", such as dressing up, putting on makeup, dieting or even surgical procedures. In an anthropology book *Venus on Wheels*, Frank (2000) reported how Diane DeVries, a woman born without arms and legs, was being constructed and treated negatively in hospital settings. It is a common practice among women with limb deficiencies that they are required to undergo material restoration through prostheses. As Frank (2000) commented, these medical practices reinforce the discrimination of disabled female bodies as damaged ones. This practice becomes an unpleasant and shameful experience among disabled women. This experience makes them loathe their body, their disability and their selves.

In a study on rehabilitation experience among women who acquired disability in middle age, respondents found medical consultations and services disempowering (Crooks & Chouinard, 2006). These consultations failed to facilitate them and their significant others to understand and adapt to the respondents' changed health conditions. Also, they considered health professionals to be authoritative and over-power their autonomy and decision-making in their rehabilitation journey. They found helping professionals often threaten them as if their assistance would be withdrawn if they return to the workplace. Should they wish to continue to have medical care and social support, they needed to "stay disabled" and dependent on others (Crooks & Chouinard, 2006). The discouraging attitude also hurdles disabled women to resume their gender roles and identities before acquiring disability. Together, disabled women experience profound discrimination and judgement of their disabled bodies. The judgement and practice of the disabled female body further hamper the body-esteem and self-identity among disabled women (Crooks & Chouinard, 2006).

Second, social services create control and surveillance in the name of rehabilitation and professional intervention. Disabled women are perceived as deviant in their shape, size, proportion, and appearance and become targets to be discriminated against (Garland-Thomson, 2005). Foucault made a metaphor named "panopticon", the classic architectural design of prison-like power. People are being separated but visible in "cells" under a central tower of monitor. Although they are uncertain if they are being monitored by the central tower literally, they become self-disciplined and conduct "internal monitoring" by each other (Gutting & Oksala, 2018).

Service users living in institutional settings faced various challenges in sexual expression. Bentrott and Margrett (2011) adopted an ecological perspective and pointed out that an institution's guides and rules limit individuals' behaviours and freedom. In such a disability-centred environment, family members, formal caregivers and administrators of service providers disapprove of service users' sexual expressions and social needs. Since disabled people receive these punitive responses and negative judgment from others, they consider their sexual expressions offensive and unacceptable. Bentrott and Margrett (2011) criticised those institutions often take an authoritarian approach to control the behaviours and decision-making of service users. They intend to gain efficiency and meet the desires of their family members, but not of their service users. As a result, the sexual expressions of service users are usually framed as "behavioural problems". Sexual expressions are being prohibited and punished instead of recognising their needs and rights. Brodwin and Frederick (2010) pointed out that disability reinforces the image of dependency of disabled women and diminishes their feelings related to their womanhood as if they are not whole persons.

Third, the absence and inaccessibility of women's services (e.g. gynaecology and family planning services) hamper the health and well-being of disabled women. The inaccessibility of women's services further cultivates the normative attitude to exclude and devalue the rights of disabled women (Crooks & Chouinard, 2006). Inaccessibility to healthcare includes lacking universal design of the clinic environment and facilities, and financial and informational barriers (Anderson & Kitchin, 2000). The problem of these inaccessible clinics is the assumption that disabled people are "asexual" and do not need a consultation, assessment, and treatment. Relevant services are partially available for disabled people. Thus, health professionals may receive minimal equality training to gain their sensitivity and competence to support people with different forms of disability (Anderson & Kitchin, 2000). These inaccessible healthcare settings further marginalise and exclude disabled women to experience and form their lives as ordinary women.

2.2.2.2.2 Accessibility of Gendered Places

Social environments are another source of discourse representation on disability (Kitchin, Blades, & Golledge, 1997). Inaccessibility and how the built environment is designed by/for non-disabled individuals dictate how disabled people are presented in an unfriendly manner. Although universal design for all is emerging over the few decades, the built environment of gendered places (e.g. lingerie shops, salons and other femininized places) reinforces the stigma and social exclusion of disabled women. In general, the inaccessibility of gendered places makes two impacts on disabled women: 1) the Construction of gender identity; 2) the Exclusion of Socialization & Social Groups.

First, gendered places imply places that are closely related to the construction of gender identity. Disabled women reported that inaccessible and disability-unfriendly social infrastructure including transportation, accessibility of shopping malls and places for socialization. These inaccessibility creates a sense of bias that disabled women are dependent on others and do not

need these gendered places (Sonali, 2017). The accessibility of these venues is crucial as these places help disabled women to acquire the valued attributes for their identity. These places give a sense of our self-identity and our belonging to a special social group.

Second, the inaccessibility of gendered places hinders disabled women to pursue desired socialization. Butler (1999) pointed out that inaccessible places for sexual minorities create tension and challenges for disabled women to interact and socialise with their lesbian peers and potential partners. As they are being excluded in these venues, they consider themselves have no place in the lesbian community. This situation is challenging for disabled women to maintain a positive sense of their selves and their gender/sexual preferences. In a similar vein, Anderson and Kitchin (2000) stated that disabled people regularly experience rejection and isolation from social activities due to the inaccessibility of social places (e.g., pubs and night parties). Due to the lack of social integration experience, disabled women have limited experience in establishing and negotiating intimate relationships. Their effort to participate in adult social events would turn to frustration, and eventually become withdrawn from these social occasions (Shakespeare, 2014). In sum, the inaccessibility of gendered places creates barriers to social interactions (e.g. courtship) and segregation of a social group. These places give a sense of our self-identity and our belonging to a special social group. These places provide opportunities for disabled women to interact with others in a specific context and agenda.


2.2.2.2.3 Mass Media

According to Couldry (2012), the definition of media implies a package of symbolic contents for production, dissemination and circulation. Media is often used to educate and socialise us to understand the meanings, values and social rituals (Couldry, 2012). In this part, I study how mass media shape our culture and ideology of disabled women.

In general, mass media is regulated by the authority and structure agents such as government, education or religious sectors. Mass media includes newspapers, magazines, television and radio. The media reinforce oppressive discourse to discriminate against people with diversities and deepen stigma related to age, gender, fat and deviant bodies (Anderson-Fye & Brewis, 2017). Although government and media producers try to distribute positive images of disabled people, mass media still fail to shake the normative discourse on disabled people. Advertisements, promotion clips and reality television shows illustrate their impact on the culture and ideology of our society.

The first example is advertisements. Advertisements are mostly designed to portray traditional gender ideology and stereotypes. Advertisements also enhance social comparison between idealistic characters and the audience to motivate shopping behaviours. In the social comparison process, audiences like disabled women have lower body image, self-esteem, and a negative impact on their self-identities  (Parsons, Reichl, & Pedersen, 2017). Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women and disabled people implies they are unfit to meet societal

standards and further marginalises them as not beautiful or "good enough to sell"  (Parsons et al., 2017).

The second example is the promotion video. Promotions of positive disabled exemplars have been a popular intervention in to fight against stereotyping and prejudice. Kallman (2017) conducted intervention research to show that these promotion interventions had reverse impacts, such as increasing negative attitudes toward people with disability. The result is attributed to the lack of authenticity of these disabled exemplars.

The third example is the British documentary series, *The Undateables*, which archives the dating service for disabled people. Although the documentary raised social awareness and understanding of the desires and challenges of disabled people, some viewers and disability advocates criticised the programme that it exaggerates the struggles and challenges of the protagonists  (Boross & Reijnders, 2019). Instead of broadening spaces for disabled people to pursue intimate relationships, the documentary evoked more criticism and hostile condemnation to stress disabled people and their families (Boross & Reijnders, 2019).

*2.2.2.3 The Macrosystem: Intersectionality of Disabled Women & Structural Oppression*

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a macrosystem refers to the overarching culture and ideology that impact society. Disabled people are theoretically 'framed in medicalised, apolitical, and individualist terms' (Shuttleworth & Mona, 2002). Due to the intersectionality of disabled women, they faced a "double burden of gender and disability-based oppression" (Addlakha, 2009, p. 3).  According to a systematic review conducted by Campbell (2017), disabled women face a long history of intersectional oppression. Intersectional oppression against disabled women has closely related to two discourses: 1) The discourse of ableism; 2) The Discourse of heteropatriarchy.

2.2.2.3.1 The Discourse of Ableism

In this study, the term "ableism" and "disablism" are interchangeable to denote a presumption that normative people with abled bodies are superior while disabled people are inferior and incompetent. Disabled women are perceived as 'medical anomalies, helpless victims, and a lifelong burden on family and society' (Addlakha, 2009).

According to Campbell (2009), disablism is a series of assumptions and social practices that reinforce the unequal status and treatment of disabled people. For instance, providing interventions and monitoring in the rehabilitation setting, assimilating disabled people into a normative "able-bodied" society, and providing compensation and protection for the vulnerable.

Disablism implies a normative attitude of negative values, unequal practices, and rigid social orders to maltreat disabled people (Campbell, 2009). On the other hand, disabled people live in the disablism imagination as they take for granted to live in the "reality".

Disablism is deeply rooted in stereotypes, discrimination, and social interactions among disabled people. The disabled body has a prevalent history of being medicalised and framed to be a non-normative deviant body under medical discourse. According to Willock (2013), under the patriarchal ideology of medicalisation and health, hospitals and institutions are one of the most common spaces to represent the medical discourse and oppression against disabled people. For example, healthcare research and services for contraception and mainstream gynaecology for disabled women are very limited as the discourse privileges women without disability. As a result, disabled women face challenges in obtaining adequate healthcare information and services (Willock, 2013). Taken together, disablism transform disabled women into objects with a damaged and undesirable body for observation and treatment. Such ideology further shapes both formal agents (i.e. hospitals, and institutions) and informal agents (i.e. family and friends) to have full control and neglect the value and autonomy of disabled women.

The sexuality of disabled people is claimed to be deeply rooted in the oppression of disabled people (Addlakha, 2009; Yau, 2019). The sexuality of disabled people is theoretically 'framed in medicalised, apolitical, and individualist terms' (Shuttleworth & Mona, 2002). Disabled women are viewed as biological defects and inadequate caregivers of their offspring. They would probably need care for themselves. As a result, they were being controlled to avoid the risks of being sexually active. Their reproductive rights are highly restricted, including being forced to undergo an abortion and control their fertility (Balen & Crawshaw, 2006). Stories about rehabilitation consultation shared in Crawford and Ostrove (2003)'s study illustrates how helping professional give inadequate recommendation on the marriage of disabled women. Rehabilitation professionals would doubt the reciprocal relationship in the marriage of disabled women. Disabled women were assumed to be dependent on their husbands and would probably divorce at last (Crawford & Ostrove, 2003).


2.2.2.3.2 The Discourse of heteropatriarchy

Heteropatriarchy is defined as a framework for all men and women to evaluate their values and hierarchy according to their gender. People perceive and evaluate themselves and others through the lens of dominant presumptions of binary gender identity and heterosexual orientation.

First, heteropatriarchy dictates a rigid portrait of the ideal, healthy, and beautiful bodies of women. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature pointing out that disabled women are being devalued as asexual, dependent, in need of care and culturally disapproved of taking the gender role (Addlakha, 2009; Crawford & Ostrove, 2003; Vaidya, 2015).

As Addlakha (2009) mentioned, sexuality is the core of self and social acceptance. In the eyes of disabled women, able-bodied women have the legitimacy to claim the beauty of their bodies and pursue an exhilarating intimate relationship. However, their disability excludes them to explore their sexuality as if their sexual development does not lie in their destiny. Their significant others convince disabled women that they are expected to reject their disabled bodies and sexuality. They sense the negative attitude toward their unfit body and feel that people would find them sexually disgusting (Campbell, 2017; Moin et al., 2009). Such an impression further internalises and makes a negative impact on their sexual self-esteem and self-perception.

Second, heteropatriarchy implies the assumption that heterosexuality is normative, prescribed and privileged. Both men and women evaluate reproduction as the ultimate goal of sex and intimate relationships. Disabled women are being desexualised and framed as incapable of engaging in sex in a reciprocal manner (Willock, 2013). Disabled women learn from societal attitudes and feel denial and shame about their bodies and sexual needs. Likewise, Shildrick (2009) stated that the sexuality and sexual expressions of disabled women are socially constructed as 'dangerous'. Regulatory obstacles are placed in the way of those who interact with them (e.g. parents, carers, educators, and health professionals). For example, Ashley X, a '6-year-old female with severe static encephalopathy, had high dose oestrogen therapy to stop her growth. A hysterectomy to prevent periods, and removal of her breast buds with the result that, whatever the intention, she will remain permanently childlike and asexual' (Baxter, 2008, p. 563). These obstacles act to hinder disabled women's sexual development and engagement in sexual activities.

### 2.2.3 Conclusive Remarks: "Identity Problem" is a Structural Oppression

In this section, I intended to connect the "identity problem" of disabled women to structural oppression against their intersectional identity. As discussed in the previous section, disabled women face various challenges in strengthening their preferred identity in their everyday life.

First, disabled women may not acquire significant lived experiences to facilitate their psychosocial development. Section 2.2.1 covers oppressive social experiences among disabled women that lead to delays in their psychosocial development. Biased social interactions create a sense of inferiority complex in their identity development throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Since childhood, disabled women are often being "infantized" and asexualised by their parents and family. In their adolescence, disabled women are not encouraged to gender and sexual expression like their peers. In their adulthood, disabled women are usually stigmatized as unfit wives or bad mothers. As a result, when these psychosocial issues are not resolved at these life stages, disabled women may fixate on a particular identity as if they would persistently focus on their earlier development challenges. To strengthen their preferred identity, disabled women have to explore ways to earn social recognition and preferred social encounters to validate their preferred self-identity as adult women.

Second, disability is socially constructed with stigmatisation and prejudice. Section 2.2.2 suggests that disabled women regularly face different forms of discrimination due to their intersectionality of gender and disability. The oppression hinders the development of disabled women and positions them in an unfavourable social dynamic. The negative stereotype of disability is normalised in the oppressive treatment of disabled women. They face neglect, rejection, and revulsion across their microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Disabled women themselves internalise these maltreatment and unequal social practices. As a result, disabled women feel incompetent, unprepared, and insecure to strengthen their preferred identity. Disabled women struggle to live fulfilling lives and achieve their full potential as adult women.

## 2.3 Essential Keys to Resist Oppression

In the 1970s, Paul Willis's book *Profane Culture* describes how marginalized people (i.e. The motorbike boys and the hippies) construct and express their preferred identity and develop their profane cultures. The motorbike boys transformed the suppressed working-class themes into rough bold masculinity. At the same time, the hippies altered the middle-class tradition to bohemian aesthetics and spiritual freedom. The development of profane culture depends on marginalized people who wish to break the vicious cycle of an oppressive ideology. Crip culture, a radical sociocultural change similar to Paul Willis's profane culture, provides alternative meanings and social orders for disabled women to legitimize their oppressed identities.

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes crip culture has a close connection to subjectivity and critical thinking among disabled people. In this section, I intend to connect how crip culture can be a radical sociocultural movement that facilitates disabled women to gain their subjectivity and agency to resist structural oppression. Literature over the past few decades has provided important information on how an oppressive group (like disabled women) explore ways to express their preferred self as well as promote social change as part of their oppression resistance. First, crip culture helps disabled women to build their subjectivity and critical thinking on the normative stigma (See Section 2.3.1). Secondly, crip culture nurtures a sense of solidarity and collective identity (See Section 2.3.2). Thirdly, crip culture helps to promote a radical sociocultural context with the help of technology (See Section 2.3.3).

### 2.3.1 Subjectivity: Critical Thinking Against Oppressive Stigma

Crip culture helps disabled women to question the normative stigma of their womanhood and disability. Since the 1970s, the stigmatised ideology of disability began to shake as the disability rights movement, and "crip" culture has grown. More writings and literature have a significant change from a medical model to view disability as a pathological health condition to a social model to view disability as a form of diversity. The word "crip" carries the historical weight of the predominant lens to construct disabled people negatively. The meaning of "crip" is equivalent to "handicapped", "monster", and other relevant stigmas and discrimination on disability (Bone, 2017). The cultural symbol "disability" had a drastic change to form the concept of disability pride

(aka "crip pride"). Disabled people positively unfold the meaning of disability with pride, similar to other minority groups (e.g. gay pride and black pride).

A large and growing body of literature has a closer study on how disabled people gain their subjectivity and critical thinking on their oppressed experience and social class. Scholars like Snow and Anderson (1987) stated that unprivileged social groups face numerous hurdles in exploring their self-identity due to intersectional oppression and stigmatization. People like disabled women face identity dilemmas and are ranked low due to the system of stratification. They may not easily reconcile social identities and personal identities for different reasons, such as limited resources and opportunities. Still, members of unprivileged social groups desire to earn self-worth as a basic human need (Snow & Anderson, 1987). They use various tactics to construct, negotiate, and compromise with specific individuals or social groups to gain support and social acceptance. Disabled women may take a similar routine to explore and strengthen their preferred identity.

McDonald, Keys, and Balcazar (2007) generalised the response of disabled people as two different ways to cope with such oppression. The first response is accepting their social position since they do not earn enough control in daily life. They agree with the dominant norm and perceive themselves as lack of capability and self-worth. The second response is questioning and resisting the dominant norm, which classifies them as a marginalised class in terms of their disabilities. As for disabled women, questioning the normative stigma is essential to retrieve their self-worth and re-interpret the meaning of their womanhood and disability. Refusing to accept their prescribed social position and being categorized as a marginalized class is the key to resisting oppression against their intersectionality.

Freire (2016) suggested two steps to resist such oppression in two ways. First, oppressed people need to gain critical thinking on the dominant discourse which internalized their self-identity. Second, they need to formulate strategies to negotiate unpleasant experiences. Freire (2016) further emphasised the importance of building a sense of authentic self and self-efficacy to fight against discrimination, marginalisation and oppression. It is essential for disabled women to have a sense of self-efficacy so that they stop internalizing stigma into their self-identity.

In sum, subjectivity is a principal determining factor to facilitate disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity as part of their oppression resistance. Subjectivity helps disabled women make sense of their oppressed experiences and social encounters in their preferred manner. The key is their critical thinking on their lived experience, their social position as well as awareness of their social class. Yet, subjectivity is not only about an individual's capacity and reflexivity. Critical thinking about their identity and oppression requires an assertive sociocultural context and a sense of solidarity so that disabled women could validate their lived experience with their peers.

**2.3.2 Solidarity: Collective Identity to Build Identity Politics**

Besides building a sense of subjectivity, disabled women need a sense of solidarity to validate their lived experiences with their peers. In general, a sense of solidarity helps disabled women to resist structural oppression and strengthen their preferred identity in three ways.

First, a sense of solidarity helps to challenge and deconstruct the negative discourse of disability collectively. In crip culture, disabled people are encouraged to deconstruct and question any forms of discourse on disability. The goal of deconstruction is to break the structural oppression and leverage the privileges of living with a disability. A good example is a new concept of "abstract organism". As Guldin (2000) reports, although some disabled people are diagnosed with loss of sensation due to spinal cord injuries or other medical implications, some of them reported erotic sensations and organisms from other parts of their bodies and minds. In other words, medical discourse and ablism may stigmatize and downplay the sexuality of some disabled people. However, disabled people can authentically interpret their sexuality by sharing and validating their personal experiences with others. The sense of solidarity helps disabled people to de-stigmatize their disability and sexuality.

Second, a sense of solidarity helps to reclaim disability as a viable identity that should be acknowledged and celebrated. As Siebers (2012, p. 47) states, the sexuality of disabled people is currently having "different conceptions of the erotic body, new sexual temporalities, and a variety of gender and sexed identities". Instead of subverting disability stigma, more disabled people are packaging their disability as a sex advantage (Guldin, 2000; Kaufman, Silverberg, & Odette, 2007; O'Toole, 2000; Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, & Davies, 1996). A remarkable example is the promotion of sex advantages for disabled people. Connie Panzarino, a disabled lesbian, joined a pride parade wearing a sign that stated, "Trached[1] dykes[2] eat pussy all night without coming up for air" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 212).

Third, a sense of solidarity helps to build a safe and assertive sociocultural context for disabled women to act as a changemaker. Crip culture accentuates disabled women as actors to resist intersectional oppression collectively. The Crip community help disabled people to reposition the meanings and social orders of disability. Members of disability communities are advocates to claim their disability identity. Their disability identities have been denied and stigmatised. They aim to gain self-determination to reclaim their disability identity (Buckingham, 2008a).

On whole, a sense of solidarity depends on the exchange of lived experiences and collective actions among disabled women. Disabled women not only acknowledge the structural

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[1] Trached implies people who is mechanical ventilated and received a tracheostomy, a medical procedure to create an opening on the neck to insert a breathing tube into one's windpipe.

[2] Dykes is a slang implying lesbian

oppression against their disability identity. The exchange of collective experience facilitates them to recognize their disability and impairment as the core of body and identity politics (Jenks, 2019).

### 2.3.3 Technology as the Catalyst of Profane Culture Against Oppression

Further to the book *Profane Culture,* Willis (1978) emphasized technology as the catalyst of profane culture that promotes radical sociocultural change for oppressed people to explore and express their preferred identity. Radio and music in the 1970s were crucial information communication technology and cultural modality in curating the motorbike boys' and hippies' cultures. By circulating their music and lifestyle, oppressed people gain their subjectivity in questioning the profound oppression in their everyday life. Thus, oppressed people circulate their narratives and preferred lifestyles to promote radical sociocultural change through music on the radio. As for today's world, profane culture may depend on information and communication technology and social media. In general, the following are some features of social media.

First, social media is broadly defined as a computer/smartphone-mediated technology platform that allows users to exchange information and communication. According to  Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media can be classified into four types: 1) Collaborative Projects (e.g., Wikipedia); 2) Blogs and Contents Distribution (e.g. YouTube); 3) Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook and Instagram); 4) Virtual Game and Virtual World (e.g. online role-playing games and *Second Life*).

Second, social media is a window to the bigger world so that we are not living in our geographical community. With the increased access to social media, the nature of communication is no longer limited to time and geographic distance. For instance, remote communication (e.g. phone calls, spontaneous communication apps, e-conferencing). Jurgenson (2012) coined the term "augmented co-reality" to describe how social media becomes an extension of everyday life. People are presenting themselves on social media to update their status, post selfies, and connect with friends and family members across time and space. Social media allows us to interact with people from different cultures and explore alternatives to experience and explore different social experiences.

Third, social media is a new context for social interactions as people no longer require face-to-face engagement. As Hardey (2002) described, self-identity is an interplay between the offline embodied self and multiple online virtual selves. Individuals continuously construct and negotiate their online/offline identities and their relationship with others in the digital space. With the emergence of smartphones, the modern world is digitally and technologically mediated (Lupton, 2015).

In the light of the rapid development of digital technology and smartphone, there has been an increasing interest and debate on social media as an emerging technological context. In Section 2.3.3.1, I focus on how social media can be beneficial for disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity as well as the rise of crip culture. In Section 2.3.3.2, I highlight some literature discussing how social media can continue to be oppressive against disabled women. In the conclusion of this section, I address the research gap in the debate and highlight why the agency of disabled women is crucial in today's socio-cultural-technology context.

*2.3.3.1 Social Media: Technology for Radical Sociocultural Change*

A growing body of literature has investigated how disabled women present themselves and interact with others on social media in their desired manner. In general, there are two themes: 1) Mediated Self-Presentation with Disembodiment; 2) Building Virtual Communities Among Disabled Women.

2.3.3.1.1 Mediated Self-Presentation with Disembodiment

Social media is cyberspace for disabled women to generate their content with multimedia (e.g. text, images and video). They have the freedom to generate and control their self-disclosure via social media. According to Furr, Carreiro, and McArthur (2016), disabled people take three approaches to disability disclosure: open, secure and limited approach. In the open approach, disabled people fully disclose their disability regularly, for example, in the disability group. In the secure approach, disabled people selectively and purposefully disclose specific information and experience related to their disability. They usually choose a closed and secure group audience. In the limited approach, disabled people choose to safeguard all information and disclosure of their disabilities. They may choose the limited approach, especially when they feel insecure about being judged by others, say in a public forum. The following are two examples illustrate how social media facilitate disabled women to mediate their self-presentation:

The first example is *Second Life,* which is prevalent in the Western disability community. Haraway (1994) found that disabled people minimise the limitation of their organic characteristics by re-constructing their self-identities and re-crafting their bodies in a virtual platform like *Second Life*. Users are allowed to customise their avatars and engage in all sorts of social activities, including shopping, leisure, and sexual interactions. In a study on the psychological impact of *Second Life*, users with disabilities are motivated to engage in a world for better self-discovery, leisure, socialisation, and equality. Users have a higher quality of life, better self-esteem, and other positive psychological outcomes (Kleban & Kaye, 2015).

The second example is dating platforms. Some studies have begun to investigate how disabled people construct their identities on dating platforms. Disabled people can decide how and when to disclose their disability during the relationship formation for courtship (Saltes, 2013;

Theodorou & Mavrou, 2017). Disabled people strategically select, package, and control personal information disclosure in terms of their photos, descriptions, and background. Their self-presentation strategies are closely related to how they deal with existing stigmatisation and social rejections and a sense of self (Saltes, 2013). Although their overall online dating experience was a mixture of frustration and satisfaction, online dating is advantageous for disabled people. Benefits include extending broader social connections with others, privacy and anonymity, effective communication and an open environment with more acceptance of disability (Saltes, 2013). Since the sexuality of disabled people is being stigmatized and delegitimized by dominant discourse in daily life, they tend to use social media to express their marginalized sexuality (Hall, 2018).

### 2.3.3.1.2 Building Virtual Communities

Social media facilitate disabled women to participate and build their own social groups to share their interests, knowledge and resources. A typical virtual community of disabled women is the *GimpGirl Community (GGC)* in *Second Life.* Jennifer Cole and her female peers with disabilities created inclusive cyberspace for disabled women around the world. The shared mission of the *GimpGirls is* to resist the structural norms and build their own women-centred and disability-friendly space (Cole, Nolan, Seko, Mancuso, & Ospina, 2011). *GimGirls* come from all paths, but they shared "a sense of commonality, acceptance, and empowerment" (Cole et al., 2011, p. 1168). In general, building virtual communities facilitate disabled people in two ways:

First, social media enhance the social participation of disabled people. Some scholars like Caron and Hemsley address how augmentative and alternative communication technology help people with severe disabilities to utilise their social media experience for communication and networking purposes. Disabled people consider social media as a helpful and crucial tool for communication (J. Caron & Light, 2016; Hynan, Murray, & Goldbart, 2014). Instead of drafting a post, they can simplify the communication task by retweeting a post, sharing a photo or merely "liking" others' posts (J. G. Caron & Light, 2017). Thus, disabled people not only use social media to maintain interaction with current relationships, but they also expand their social support network and exchange information with their disabled peers (J. Caron & Light, 2015, 2016; J. G. Caron & Light, 2017).

Second, social media helps to build the social capital of disabled people. Ineland, Gelfgren, and Cocq (2019) pointed out that belonging to these online social groups helps users increase their social capital. By exploring and choosing alternative social groups, social network sites serve as a "free zone" for disabled people to freely socialize with people outside their original premises. Social participation in these social pages can also enhance their visibility in their preferred social group and society.

In a systematic review, social media communities are beneficial for friendship building, information exchange, and collective identity construction (Sweet, LeBlanc, Stough, & Sweany, 2019). For friendship building, disabled people prefer Facebook for communication and networking as it is "ease of use, security, safety, visibility, and usage by family and friends" (Sweet et al., 2019, p. 3). They take the initiatives to contact others and make new friends who share common interests. For information exchange, disabled people review comments and information from social media pages and forums to learn more about their disability, health management, and even purchase rehab aids and recreation information. They share web links, pictures and videos to report and distribute news. For the formation of collective identity, disabled people use these semi-closed environments to construct their own value and identities. By generating or sharing their posts, they establish their own community culture and values, and most importantly, form a collective identity to question the oppression and power structure in their everyday life.

### 2.3.3.2 Threats and Continuous Battle in Social Media

It is well established from a variety of studies that social media can be beneficial for disabled women to construct and express their preferred selves. However, some studies have postulated that social media is a mirror of the oppressive world. Social media contains a diversity of voices from different stakeholders and society members. Oppression on social media is invasive as we may continue to embed our normative stigma in interactive communication, self-expression and cultural cultivation on social media (Buckingham, 2008b). Unlike mass media regulated by authorities, social media is more self-regulated by individuals. The agency and resistance of disabled people depend on their digital literacy and calibre (Buckingham, 2008b).

A meme is a typical example of a self-regulated digital battle of oppression and resistance among disabled people. A meme is a highly circulated image conveying a humorous or sarcastic message. In a discourse analysis on disability memes, the researcher claimed the production and circulation of memes as a "battle" of online disability discourse between people who hold oppressive attitudes toward disability and disabled people. (Theodorou & Mavrou, 2017).

As for memes from those who hold oppressive attitudes toward disability, three types of memes were prejudiced and sarcastic about disability. The first type of meme echoes the charity model to call for compassion for the sufferings and struggles of disabled people. The second type of meme is "inspirational porn" to sell the persistence and positivism of disabled people. The third type of meme is sarcastic and criticises the welfare and equality of disabled people. These memes are shaming and stigmatising disabled people as social burdens. Although these memes are packaged with a sense of humour and fun, these memes reinforce discrimination and biased ideology in digital media (Theodorou & Mavrou, 2017).

As for memes from disabled people, they create and share their "counter-memes". They constructed these memes as a "culture-jamming strategy" to re-construct cultural meaning or convey a new ideology in a well-received manner (Hadley, 2016, p. 679). These "counter-memes"

not only serve as a resistance against the stereotypes, but these memes and culture-jamming products are also cultivated their own culture and messages to the world. These counter-memes are creative and sarcastic to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions about disabled people (Hadley, 2016).

**2.3.4 The Agency of "Micro-celebrities" as Success Exemplars**

To sum up the above two sections, there is a growing body of literature that recognizes the advantages and disadvantages of social media on self-expression among disabled people. Section 2.3.3.1 showcased the potential of social media that facilitates disabled women to strengthen their preferred selves. However, Section 2.3.3.2 raised the threats of social media that may be equally oppressive to disabled women.

From my point of view, social media is a more self-regulated, self-mediated and self-initiated context. The agency of disabled women is the key to making meaningful self-definition and social interactions via social media. A number of studies related to disabled "micro-celebrities" are insightful to help me understand how disabled women can explore and express their preferred selves via social media. To me, these "micro-celebrities" are exemplars of disabled people who are being assertive and authentic about their selves, most importantly, shaking the oppression and normative stereotype against them. The literature on disabled "micro-celebrities" helps me to understand the essential characteristics of disabled women need to acquire should they wish to strengthen their preferred identity. In general, there are three main characteristics of these "micro-celebrities" as follows:

First, these disabled "micro-celebrities" tell their stories as a method for self-branding (Ellcessor, 2018). Some active disabled users on social media gradually become a "micro-celebrity" to present their lives and opinions on disability. Ellcessor (2018) pointed out that these disabled "micro-celebrity" strategically project their daily life as per their desired presentation of disability. Although they may not intentionally fight against the stigma that devalues disability, they tended to construct their lives and self-identify as authentically exceptional to mainstream audiences. Guldin (2000) shared, that a female disabled participant identified herself as a slut. Guldin interpreted her "slut" self-identification as "enabling her to challenge the cultural de-sexualization of her body as well as that of her parents who told her that someday a man would love her enough to sleep with her despite the disability" (p. 237).

Second, these disabled "micro-celebrities" use social media to earn exceptional social experiences to go around these barriers and oppression. Ineland et al. (2019) noted that these active disabled twitterers shared their lived experiences with disability. They reached out to advocacy organizations, media, and other power authorities. They usually combine their personal experience and their frame as a "micro-celebrity" to reach their disability community and broader audience. It turned out that these "micro-celebrity" were challenging the dominant discourse and negotiating the established power structure (Ineland et al., 2019). Social media

facilitates disabled women to have the freedom to express themselves, not only for personal expression but also to promote disability advocacy and social change (Hemsley, Palmer, Dann, & Balandin, 2018).

Third, these disabled "micro-celebrities" find ways to challenge the dominant ideology and oppression against their preferred identity. These "micro-celebrities" continuously rebuff and unfold the dominant norm of sexuality by examining the idea of the aesthetic body and the denotation of orgasms. A similar idea is supported by Siebers (2012, p. 47) noted, that disabled people hold "different conceptions of the erotic body, new sexual temporalities, and a variety of gender and sexed identities". Taken together, disabled people face various challenges and barriers, but they are still able to express their sexuality in different forms and live healthy, adventurous and satisfying sexual lives.

Together, the characteristics of these disabled "micro-celebrities" may illustrate how disabled women can strengthen their preferred identity via social media. However, one of the most significant current discussions in social media is that social media is like a double-edged sword. Social media can be beneficial or a threat to disabled women. Disabled women face multiple barriers to developing their self-identity in their daily lives at home, in institutions, and in both physical and virtual contexts. Much of the research up to now has been descriptive but it is unclear how disabled women people can exercise their agency to resist oppression and strengthen their preferred identity via social media. It is still not known whether consistent positive social media experiences can facilitate disabled women to build the essential qualities to strengthen their preferred identity as part of their resistance against oppression.

## 2.4 Formulating Research Goal

The objective of this section is to formulate the research goal of this study from the literature review. In the pages that follow, I attempt to formulate the research goal according to the existing literature. Section 2.4.1 is a critical reflection that connects the existing literature to the current social work practice and research. In Section 2.4.2, I further identify the current research needs by highlighting the recommended research area of the existing literature. Based on the critical reflection and current research needs, I feature the significance of this study (Section 2.4.3) and formulate my research question (Section 2.4.4).

## 2.4.2 Reflection of Existing Literature

### 2.4.1.1 Identified Research Gap in Existing Literature

Extensive research has shown that disabled women face structural oppression due to their intersectionality. Oppression resistance is a continuing interest among disabled women. Social

media is an increasingly important area that needs critical attention to explore how disabled women can strengthen their preferred selves. The following is the outline of the existing literature and some unanswered questions in relation to the research topic.

In Section 2.2, the existing literature describes the causal relationship between structural oppression and stigmatized identity among disabled women. Disabled women face structural oppression when they explore and develop their preferred identity through their life stages. Disabled women often face social segregation and stigmatization to explore their potential identities in a biased social context. The ideologies of ableism and heteropatriarchy are embedded in their daily life. From my perspective, the "identity problem" is not an individual issue. It is structural oppression against disabled women. Disabled women is a group of people being oppressed and rejected by the dominant discourse and social system. To strengthen their preferred identity, age-appropriate social relationships and social encounters are keys to a mature self-identity. Disabled women need to acquire preferred social experiences to make desired meanings of their body, gender, and self-identity.

In Section 2.3, I discussed how social media may facilitate oppressed people to co-construct a more favourable context for their marginalized identity. It has conclusively been shown that crip culture and social media have a close connection with the construction and expression of preferred self-identity among disabled women. Social media is potentially a catalyst for disabled women to strengthen their oppressed identities. Yet, the old, stigma-oriented attitude exists parallelly with the new positive views, even in the technology context. To date, a number of studies have indicated that subjectivity and solidarity are the key factors in facilitating disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity. Disabled women may not fully conform to the stigmatised ideology to define their selves negatively. Disabled "micro-celebrities" are exemplars to suggest what are the key qualities that facilitate disabled women to strengthen their preferred selves against structural oppression.

Together, the existing literature described the structural oppression against disabled women due to their intersectionality. Although extensive research has been carried out to explore the potential and threats of social media as a potential platform for disabled women, there are several issues understudied as follows:

First, the agency of disabled women on social media has received scant attention in the research literature. Benford and Hare (2015) pointed out that there is a lack of understanding of how individuals do digital-mediated self-presentation and social interactions via social media. It is now well established from a variety of studies, that disabled women exercise their agency differently in the socio-cultural-technology context. Yet, there are limited studies to explore the agency of disabled women to initiate and mediate their self-presentation and expression. For instance, how disabled women utilize the socio-cultural-technology features in social media to signify their preferred identity through storytelling as well as cultivate an open and affirmative sociocultural context. This study is set to understand how disabled women mediate technology and multimedia to construct their self-presentation and co-construct a preferred sociocultural context.

Second, there has been no detailed investigation on how active and constant social media engagement may facilitate disabled women to build the essential qualities to resist normative stigma and strengthen their preferred selves. Numerous scholars acknowledged that digital media and online communication welter us with different knowledge, cultures, religions, beliefs, values and lifestyles. Ellis and Kent (2011) pointed out that digital media provides individuals with an open space to construct their selves through narratives, interact with their desired social groups, and create their own social community. However, the is a lack of understanding of how disabled women learn, participate and lead their desired social groups to gain their subjectivity and solidarity via technology.

Third, most studies in the field have only either focused on offline context or online context (i.e. online dating, gaming). Gottschalk and Whitmer (2013, p. 328) state, "since what happens online does not stay online; we must constantly resolve the tensions between the infinity of interactional opportunities our online life provides us, and the offline consequences of enjoying them". As technology becomes prominent in our daily life, limited literature help to understand the self-narratives and social interactions in the interconnected online/offline world. Considering that social media profiles are mediated self-presentation between the online and offline world, this study takes social media as the integration of the online and offline world to understand how online and offline social interactions intertwined to make a positive impact on the preferred identity of disabled women.

*2.4.2.2 Recommended Research Areas from Existing Literature*

First, future studies should focus on the subjectivity of disabled women to make meaning of their disability assertively. Bowker and Tuffin (2002) point out that it is time for studies related to disability to shift from non-disabled subjectivity to disability subjectivity. Instead of perceiving disabled women's identity from a non-abled perspective, this study emphasizes the subjectivity of disabled women to explore the meanings of disability and gender. This view is supported by Coleman-Fountain and Mclaughlin (2013) who write that self-identity and embodiment usually assume disabled people are trapped in the notions of sympathy and disablism. The authors suggest future studies should explore how disabled people make sense of their disabled bodies in a productive manner, rather than assuming that disability is a barrier. To view disability in an assertive manner, this study explores how disabled women creatively and assertively express their preferred identity.

Second, future studies should focus on the agency of disabled women to deal with stigma as well as express their preferred selves in a more comprehensive sociocultural context. Agmon, Sa'ar, and Araten-Bergman (2016) suggest that studies on the agency of disabled people should look into a more comprehensive socio-cultural context. Scholars need to take power and social structure into account for the agency of disabled people. Under the complex socio-cultural context, disabled women formulate their agency to unpackage the stigma of disability and

impaired bodies. Disabled women may exercise their agency to deal with stigmatization, universal assumptions and cultural constructions. For instance, the normative ideology, different radical sociocultural movements as well as their own sub-groups.

## 2.4.1 Critical Reflection of Social Work Practice & Research

*2.4.1.1 Criticism of Oppressive Practice in Social Work*

My first reflection is the oppressive social work practice. Disabled women experience oppression and rejection from families and institutions. oppressive practice in social work continues to stigmatize disabled women. According to a systematic review of sexual expression and activity of people with disability, most research on disabled people takes a "problem-saturated" approach (M. Campbell, 2017). Disabled people are being positioned as inferior to face challenges in overcoming disability stigma and oppression in their lifelong development. Most research focuses on their "problem", which leads to recommendations in education, intervention, and advocacy for a person with disabilities (M. Campbell, 2017). Limited studies look at how disabled women as a group of people who have rich experience and life skills resist the discourse and oppression. It is necessary to "shift the gaze of contemporary scholarship away from the spotlight on disability to a more nuanced exploration of epistemologies and ontologies of disablism" (F. K. Campbell, 2009, p. 3). With these stigmatized social work practices, disabled women are locked into the vicious cycle of structural oppression and never-ending interventions and rehabilitation. Although social work practice aims to "help" disabled women, their problem-oriented research and practice may only imply an endless succession of the "law of causality" in the stigmatized ideology.

The heart of social work is anti-oppressive practice. The stigmatized culture of disability is constituted in social work practice. Our current social work practice underpins the oppression and alienation of disabled women. Mona, Cameron, and Cordes (2017, p. 1000) criticised the current psychological studies, professional training, and practices that fail to "fully embrace disability as a multifaceted and diverse identity". When social work practice is led by medical and social models, social workers continue to confine disabled people as "service users" who need rehabilitation and intervention. Social workers play a crucial role as authority and institute to help, monitor and protect disabled people. As for disabled women, their stigma and stereotypes as "vulnerable" and "incapable" are being justified and taken for granted in the rehabilitation and social work practice. Disabled women are a group of people being segregated and being "outlined" due to their "problem".

To promote anti-oppressive practice in social work, understanding disability in a cultural context is vital. Cordes, Syme, Mona, Coble-Temple, and Cameron (2017) pointed out that helping professionals should see disability in a cultural context instead of taking the medical approach.

When helping professionals see disability as a cultural identity, they gain a better understanding of the strength and value of disabled people. With this approach, helping professionals and researchers can facilitate disabled people to pursue a better quality of life in a more disability-affirming approach.

*2.5.1.3 Urging Needs of Social Work Practice in Technology*

The second reflection is the necessity to bridge social work practice in a technology context. Considering that we are living in a technology-saturated world today, social media is an alternative platform for disabled women to explore their self-identity by posting photos and stories to gain social recognition and acceptance. Based on the existing literature, the key to facilitating disabled women strengthen their preferred identity is subjectivity, solidarity and agency in the technology context. Most literature suggested how disabled women can turn to be "micro-celebrities" who can assertively express their selves and shake the normative stereotype and stigma against them. The current literature may suggest that active engagement on social media may help disabled women to acquire those essential qualities like "micro-celebrities" to resist oppression and express their selves authentically. However, far too little attention has been paid to suggest what and how social workers can do to facilitate disabled women's social media experience. It is essential to explore the potential of social media as a platform for social work practice in the digital age.

Nevertheless, the current social work profession takes a vigilant approach to technology and social media. Social media policy and ethical guides are developed among social work professional bodies around the work over the past two decades. In 2013, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) published ethics and practice guidelines on social media and ICT. In 2017, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the Association of Social Work Boards, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), and the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA) collaborated to publish a consensus guide on social work practice. The publication *Technology Standards in Social Work Practice* emphasize social workers to be *"familiar with the prevailing practice, regulation, accreditation, and ethical standards on the use of technology"* (NASW et al., 2017, p. 44). In 2018, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) also developed a social media policy to prevent potential risks and unethical issues in technology-mediated practice. These guides and professional standards help to address the contemporary professionalism and ethical issues of social work practice in social work practice. However, these guides and conservative approaches have failed to suggest the leading position and role of social work in technology and social media.

**2.4.2 Research Significance**

This study set out to understand how disabled women explore and express their preferred roles, aspiration, and expressions in a more open and affirmative social-cultural-technology context. In this study, the findings should make two contributions to the social work research and practice: 1) The Lens of Culture in Social Work Practice; 2) Bridging to Socio-Cultural-Technology Context.

*2.5.2.1 The Lens of Culture in Social Work Practice*

The first contribution of this study is to understand how the lens of culture guide us to understand the disabled community. In this study, I take a "disability affirmative" approach to understand how disabled women learn, use and interpret their disability and self-identity in their preferred manner. This study may help reflect how social constitution influences the self-conception of disabled women. It also helps us understand how disabled women reflect their attitudes on their bodies, competence, and potential as women.

This study helps to gain the competence of researchers and practitioners. First, this study helps to gain cultural sensitivity in social work practice. Instead of fixing "problems" in the stigmatized discourse, today's social workers should gain sensitivity and scepticism to examine the cultural ideology lying in their practice. Besides interrogating the ideology and ontology in social work practice, social workers nurture disability-affirmative culture. For example, needs assessment, intervention plan, and the manifestation of crip culture in their social work practice. Social work practice provides a crucial pre-condition to building disability-affirmative ideology through professional services and collective consensus.

When helping professionals see disability as a cultural identity, they gain a better understanding of the strength and value of people with disabilities. Social workers need a re-focused theoretical framework to support people with disabilities (Beaulaurier & Taylor, 2001). Social workers need to raise their cultural sensitivity to make positive and affirmative meanings of disability in their casework, support group programmes and daily operation in their institutions. For individual casework, workers aim to enhance clients' subjectivity and self-efficacy by recognizing their capacity and responsibility to take action to manage their situation (Beaulaurier & Taylor, 2001). For organisational work, workers help people with disabilities to take self-determination when working with different health disciplines. Workers also play an intermediary role between professionals, organizations and people with disabilities. Social workers could raise consciousness and promote a consensus among health and medical professionals (Beaulaurier & Taylor, 2001). For advocacy, workers reach out to the disability community as a facilitator and culture curators to channel the voice of people with disabilities to the community (Beaulaurier & Taylor, 2001). With a better understanding of the growing crip culture and other rights groups, social workers equip better cultural competence to make professional judgement and practice in their helping relationships with people with disabilities.

*3.5.2.2 Bridging to Socio-Cultural-Technology Context*

This study provides a better understanding of how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. In general, this study helps to meet the following two urging needs related to social work practice in technology:

The first need is to enhance digital literacy among social workers. McInroy (2019) stated the necessity of including digital literacy in social work education and listed five technology competencies in social work practice: 1) Continue Engagement with ICT; 2) Online Professionalism; 3) Risk and opportunity assessment; 4) Application of professional ethics and 5) ICT integration into practice. Social work practitioners need to familiarize themselves with the daily activities of their service users on social media. Better understanding and familiarity with service users' online social life facilitate practitioners to plan and innovate ICT-mediated practice.

The second need is to explore social work practice in a technology context. existing social work practice on social media lacks the conceptualization of social media use (Chan & Holosko, 2016). There is a knowledge gap in social work practice to understand the relationships between interventions and social media. Although these online interventions show a positive impact, social media's functionalities and affordance are worth further exploration. Social media is a common and useful context for social work practice, such as engagement of potential service users, need assessment, communication, intervention, and programme evaluation (Chan & Holosko, 2016).

This study helps to suggest and conceptualize how social media can be useful in social work practice. At the micro and meso level in the technology context, practitioners need better knowledge of the social media experience of disabled women. A better understanding of their social media experience helps researchers strategically interact with their target groups, engaging in the radical sociocultural movement (e.g. crip culture) via social media. Thus, social workers should understand how social media can facilitate self-understanding, subjectivity and solidarity among disabled women. At the macro level in the technology context, social workers can promote radical sociocultural change via technology. As mentioned, the rise and fall of profane cultures are closely related to the revolution of technology and the participation of group members. The rapid development and invasion of social media can enhance the participation of disabled women and alleviate radical cultural change. A social worker can cultivate and promote an assertive and diverse sociocultural context. For instance, translating and localizing radical sociocultural movements, digital advocacy by raising the voices of service users through digital storytelling, and more interaction and engagement with the public.

## 2.4.3 Research Aims & Objectives

Based on the literature review in the previous chapter, I explained how dominant discourse oppresses disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity. Both ablism and heterosexual

patriarchy embed in their everyday lives with stigmas and oppression against disabled women. As a result, disabled women face challenges in exploring and developing their preferred identity. Yet, the discussion on structural oppression against disabled women leads me to raise the question of how marginalized people resist social oppression and own their authentic voices as a resistance. By connecting the relationship between radical sociocultural movements and technology, I raised several examples of how disabled women are expressing their selves differently via social media. In the previous chapter, I inferred those disabled women do strengthen their preferred identity through their spontaneous social media experience.

My inference from the existing literature is that disabled women do acquire rewarding social experiences via social media that strengthen their preferred identity. Yet, they have no intention to present and express themselves via social media to promote their self-identity as a specific goal. In my point of view, their social media experiences do not have a direct "cause-effect" relationship with their preferred identity. It is not the goal of this study to validate their actions on social media as purposeful strategies to promote their preferred self-identity. As for disabled women, social media experience is an important component in our everyday life and plays an impactful role in self-identity. In view of all that has been mentioned so far, the following are the research aim, objectives and questions of this study.

The research aim is to describe the focus of this study and what it seeks to achieve. In this study, the research aims to understand how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. With a better understanding of the agency of disabled women in the socio-cultural-technology context, this study helps to gain a cultural lens in our social work research and practice. Thus, this study is insightful to explore future social work practice in information and communication technology (ICT) context.

The research objectives are practical and actionable to translate the research aims to lower-level objectives. In this study, there are two research objectives. First, the research is designed to understand how disabled women narrate and mediate their preferred selves via social media in terms of their self-presentation and positive social interactions. Second, this study seeks to understand how active and constant social media experience can facilitate disabled women to acquire the qualities to resist normative stigma and oppression.

The research question is to take a formulaic approach to convert the research objectives into a question format. In this study, I convert the two research objectives into two questions:

1) how disabled women make use of social media features to narrate and mediate their preferred self-presentation?

2) How disabled women exercise their agency to acquire positive social encounters and validate their preferred identity?

**2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter provided a literature overview on the identity formation and expression of disabled women. First, disabled women face structural oppression to develop and explore their self-identity as adult women, sexual partners, wives or mothers (See Section 2.2). Second, social media can be a catalyst to facilitate the agency of disabled women. Positive social media experience may facilitate their subjectivity, solidarity and use of technology to resist social oppression (See Section 2.3). Third, I further identified the research gaps and needs of current social work research and practice and proposed the research significance of this study. In this chapter, I stated my research aims, objective and question of this study (See Section 2.4). In the next chapter, I develop a theoretical lens to guide my observation and interpretation of disabled women's social media experiences that are beneficial to their preferred selves.

# CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## 3.1 Introduction

As for disabled women, social media experience is an important component in our everyday life and plays an impactful role in self-identity. My interest is to understand disabled women's social media experiences that facilitate them to subjectively perceive their selves in their preferred manner and their frames of reference. In this chapter, I start with a discussion on the dialogical relationship between structure and individual agency. The prelude offers some important insights into understanding how disabled women may exercise their agency under the oppressive structure, particularly in the digital era (See Section 3.2). In the following sections, I develop a theoretical framework to understand the characteristics of symbols in sociocultural, communication and technological contexts (See Section 3.3). Thus, I further explore how the agency can be observed at low, medium and high levels (See Section 3.4). In the final section, I build the operational framework to observe and understand the social media experience among disabled women (See Section 3.4).

## 3.2 Prelude: Dynamic between Structure & Individual Agency

### 3.2.1 Introduction of the dynamic structured and individual Agency

Disabled women make sense of their selves not only from their desires and aspiration, but different social contexts may also influence the degree of their self-construction and self-expression. Similar to the concept of the "looking-glass" self, the self is a product of perceived judgement from others via social interaction (Cooley, 1983). In the end, we make a judgement on others' perception, which leads to pride, shame, or other emotional reactions. As for disabled women, disability plays a crucial role in how they make sense of their selves through social interactions. The "looking-glass" self emerges with a sense of inferiority and shame when they conceptualize their gender and disability are being perceived and treated in their everyday interactions and institution experiences. When stigma and structural oppression continues in their daily lives, disabled women integrate these stigmas into their self-identity and guide their behaviours, thoughts and feelings. The meaning of self among disabled women constitutes the discourse of gender and disability. To understand how disabled women make sense of their self-identity, it is crucial to draw attention to how disabled women exercise their agency in their everyday life as structural oppression is embedded in their social encounters.

Discussion on the dynamic between social structure and the individual agency has a long history. It is necessary here to clarify what is meant by social structure and individual agency. First, the social structure does not presuppose a social force that fully governs a set of homogeneous orders and patterns of a social world. Social structure is "the regular, orderly patterns of social life

(including inequalities of wealth, power and prestige) are viewed as the outcomes of the collaborative interactions of real people in real situations" (Dennis & Martin, 2007, p. 303). Social structure is a negotiated pattern that depends on group members to interpret and share collective values and rituals. The social structure of a group depends on how group members cooperate as part of the negotiation to keep the social world on-going in an orderly pattern.

Second, individual agency is the power and capacity of an individual (i.e as an agent) to implement a plan to reach a specific goal (Slack & Wise, 2015). An agent can access intermediaries (i.e. tools, technology or others) to enhance one's agency to act for a goal. In this study, my focus is to understand disabled women, as an agent, exercises their agency through social media (as intermediaries) to strengthen their preferred identity.

A large and growing body of literature has investigated how social media makes an impact on the dynamic of social structure and individual agency. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to encompass the entire discussion on structure and agency, I selected several theories and concepts to feature how self-identity is interrelated with social structure and individual agency in the social media context.

### 3.2.2 Agency in Oppressive Social Context

Considering the fact that social media has become progressively ubiquitous in our daily life, social media is like a performing stage where disabled women express their selves and interact with others. I find Goffman's dramaturgy helpful in understanding how disabled women create their preferred self-representation on social media. Goffman's concept of "impression management" describes how individuals use "props" and "frames" to shape their audiences' impressions and perceptions of their selves. Goffman's work hypotheses individuals purposefully create and display different "props" to manage their impression of others. For instance, social media posts are "episodes" that which disabled women are doing their impression management to shape their followers' perception of them. Social media, in this case, serves as a front stage where disabled women upload their well-crafted selfies and edited posts to give the best possible impression of self. They shape their self on social media to gain social popularity and validation of their preferred self (e.g. getting likes and positive comments from followers).

As for the dynamic between social structure and individual agency, Goffman's work highlighted the impact of social structure on an individual's impression management, particularly for people living with stigma. When individuals shape their impression of self for their audience, they perform in a "general and fixed fashion…define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). In different "frames", we adapt to our roles and act appropriately to fit in with different social expectations. The meaning of things and social interaction patterns are deprived of social norms and discourse. Disability prescribes a rigid "frame" with stereotyped attributes and social categories of disabled women. They are excluded in some social categories and attributes by default. Consequently, disability is a dominating

"frame" that restricts disabled women to explore alternative plots to signify their preferred identity.

Thus, Goffman's later work on spoiled identity addresses the minimal agency of people with "spoiled identities" in an oppressive social context. Individuals with "spoiled identity" (i.e. disabled women) lack the resources to resist these stigma and oppressive social interactions. These individuals are mostly living in a closed, authoritative and institutional social context (Goffman, 1965). Self-identity of these individuals is diminished by a "series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of self", which are designed to turn them into inmates for institutional control (Goffman, 1961, p. 14). Self-identity of disabled women is being spoiled as they may not have the resources and favourable social context to explore alternative semiotic meanings of their disability.

In sum, disabled women have a low level of agency as their self-identity complies with normative meanings and social orders across social interactions. Goffman's work speculates that disabled women have low agency and capacity to resist the discourse and normative social practice. Disabled women learn the societal ideology and stigmatized meanings of their identity. It turns out to be a "frame" that guide disabled women to improvise in their daily life. Stigmatization of disability may result in a spoiled identity and negative self-definition. Together, disabled women learn, follow, and mound the normative meanings and social discourse in their given sociocultural context.


### 3.2.3 Agency in Contemporary Cultural Context

In today's world, social structure is not only about the social context with rigid social rules and social expectations for disabled women. The emerging information and communication technology enhances flexible engagement and coordination in social relationships across time and space. Instead of constituting self-identity to normative discourse, individuals are reflexive to make sense of their self-identity from their lived experience and diversified social encounters. The meaning of "social structure" and 'culture' are used interchangeably to imply specific shared assumptions and an internal system of meanings within a social group. Social media not only provides a wider social network for disabled women to explore the alternative sociocultural context, but social media also provides the freedom to choose and co-create their preferred sociocultural context to legitimize their preferred self. Gidden's work helps me gain a better understanding of the agency of disabled women in today's sociocultural context.

First, Giddens (1991)'s concept of disembedding mechanisms suggests that individuals no longer follow the traditional system of values to think and behave. Individuals are relieved from the traditional system of value and social structures (e.g., family, education, and religion). Instead of following the history and traditional value system, individuals face ambiguity to make sense of self-identity in a particular sociocultural context. Individuals explore their personal and social meanings to make sense of their selves as a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991).

In today's world, disabled women face numerous hurdles in exploring their self-identity due to intersectional oppression and stigmatization. Still, they can earn self-worth by exploring alternative meanings of their disability and gender. To conceptualize the sense of self, personal narratives are essential for a reflexive self-project. Reflection of lived experience facilitates disabled women to question and challenge the imposed discourse and stigma. They have self-autonomy and the agency to resist the stigmatization and structural oppression against their social group.

Second, Giddens (1991) suggested that social structure is dual as rules and resources within a social system require its members to sustain and practice. His concept of duality of structure implies social structure can be served as a medium or an outcome.

As a medium, group members follow existing social practices and group rituals as "memory traces" of the social structure (Giddens, 1991). These memory traces can be tradition, belief and knowledge of a social system that guide individuals to behave in a specific pattern and rationale. As a medium, social structure can be rules and resources of authority that control individuals' behaviours and judgement. Social structure can also be a resource of meaning to infer individuals' lived experiences. For example, the meaning of womanhood and disability is interpreted from contextualized experiences. Normative meanings of womanhood and disability guide how disabled women interpret, evaluate, and respond to their lived experiences.

As an outcome, the social structure depends on its members (who act as agents) to continuously shape and practice their social order. Every action of an individual is a reproduction and transformation of social orders within a social system. Giddens (1991)'s idea of "reflexive monitoring" means individuals have reflexivity to monitor their actions as well as their social order. Social structure is an outcome attributed to how individuals engage and rationalize their actions to be a new social practice of their social system. As for disabled women, even a small action may alter their social orders in the future. They are agents who own a dialectic control to behave differently and continuously to produce or reproduce their social structure.

In sum, Giddens' work indicates that social structure and individual agency are reciprocal impactful in a social system. Meaning-making and expression of preferred self depend on the reciprocal relationship between individuals and sociocultural context. The signification of self-identity not only depends on the established symbolic meanings embedded in social situations, but it also depends on the interpretation to create and re-create meanings in ongoing social interactions. Taken together, disabled women have autonomy and agency to follow or shape social practices as a shifting social structure. Their self-identity is not fully bounded in social structure as they are agents to produce or re-produce rules and resources of their social system. Should disabled women intend to actualize their preferred self, they need to be reflexive and act in their everyday life to change the existing social order. When their consistent actions integrate into common practice and group rituals, they cultivate a favourable sociocultural context to legitimize their preferred self.

**3.2.4 Agency in Technology-saturated Context**

In the technology-saturated era, individuals have greater control to construct and express their technology-mediated self creatively without body and physical boundaries. Social media diversify an individual's sociocultural context without space and time constraints. To date, a number of studies have conclusively confirmed the positive impact of technology and social media on the individual agency to strengthen their preferred self, instead of complying with the social structure. I found Robison's "cyber self-ing" insightful as her work characterizes how individuals create their avatars with desired "props" and "frames" to express their authentic self. They build their own "cyber society" in a technology-saturated context. Technology and digital media become the catalyst for the transformation of the meaning of community and self-identity. Technology provides another dimension in the dynamic of social structure and individual agency. Social media is part of the mediation of self-presentation and communication where disabled women have higher control to actualize their preferred self. However, technology and social media can potentially be another regulation of individual agency.

To better understand the mechanisms of social media and its effects on individual agency, I refer to Slack and Wise (2015)'s work on reviewing the relationship between agency and technology. They defined "technology agency" as a process and a relationship in which technology is treated as an intermediary channel through which users' motivation, power and actions are achieved. In this study, social media is an intermediary designated and mediated by disabled women to strengthen their preferred self as an expected result. Disabled women, as agents, are the mediators to step between different intermediaries involved and proactively negotiate with them to settle conflicts and reach their goals. My study aims to understand how disabled women mediate social media to strengthen their preferred identity as their goals.

Based on Slack and Wise (2015)'s concepts of "translation", "delegation" and "prescription", the following is my elaboration on the relationship between technology and agency. First, "translation" implies the agent shapes and translates different intermediaries into a coherent language (Slack & Wise, 2015). In this study, social media is the translation pivot through which disabled women synchronise text, graphics and other multimedia in a post to cohesively express their preferred identity.

Second, "delegation" implies that human delegates tasks to technologies to perform tasks on their behalf (Slack & Wise, 2015). In this study, we can see how disabled women delegate some of their tasks on strengthening their preferred identity to social media. For instance, to distribute their selfies and news to their significant others, collect newsfeeds and debate social activism and women's movements, and send and receive messages from their followers.

Third, "prescription" explains how the technology prescribes tasks back to users so that users need to acquire knowledge and skills to work in its practice (Slack & Wise, 2015). For example, disabled women learn to complete specific tasks to make a post on Instagram: to take and edit a photo, choose some hashtags and captions, and elaborate on their attitudes and values that they embed in the post. The in-build features of social media shape their users' self-presentation and

communication practices. Thus, the concept of "prescription" includes the prescribed expectation; if you make a post on social media, you are expected to draw your followers' attention and endorsement. In some sense, your posts make you feel like you need to coherently live your life as a justification for your social media posts.

Together, both Robinson's "cyber self-ing" and Slack & Wise's technological agency help me have a better understanding of the interrelation of social structure and individual agency in a technology context. In this study, social media is perceived as a pivot of "translation", "delegation" and "prescription" for disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity.

### 3.2.5 Conclusive Remarks: Dialogical Relationship of Social Structure & Agency

In this prelude, I selected several academic works as theoretical underpinnings to elaborate on how disabled women make meaning and present their preferred identity via social media, despite they are living in an oppressive social context.

Goffman's dramaturgy provides me with a metaphorical elucidation of disabled women's impression management via social media. His work enriches the discussion on how stigma limits disabled women explore alternative meanings and social encounters to actualize their preferred self (See Section 3.2.2). Yet, Gidden's work on "disembedding mechanism" and duality of social structure highlights how disabled women can explore preferred cultural resources to make meanings of their self and reflexively shape social orders for a more preferred sociocultural context to legitimize their preferred identity (See Section 3.2.3). Both Robinson's "cyber self-ing" and Slack & Wise's work on "technology agency" highlights social media as a double-edged sword in the dynamic of social structure and individual agency (See Section 3.2.4). Social media facilitate disabled women to actualize the emancipated version of self in their preferred sociocultural context, but the feature of social media also shapes their self-presentation and social practice.

This study is set to understand how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. This prelude helps me understand the dialogical relationship between social structure and individual agency in a social-cultural-technology context. In summary, disabled women symbolize their self-identity by interpreting symbols in their impression management and social interaction. The key of this chapter is to build two lenses to guide how I understand disabled women's self-presentation and social interaction on social media. The first lens is a "what" perspective to feature the characteristics of symbols as the basic constituent of self-identity (See Section 3.3). The second lens is the "how" perspective to address disabled women's different levels of agency that strengthen their preferred identity (See Section 3.4).

**3.3 Features of Symbols: The Basic Constituent of Self-identity**

To make meanings of self, individuals create and interpret a range of symbols with meanings to signify their valued characteristics and attributes (e.g., their strengths, motives, and traits). Symbols can be a sign, an object, and an action that signify a shared meaning within a social group. Thus, symbols are being mediated and exchanged in a specific pattern for communication purposes. In this section, I focus on the characteristics of symbols in sociocultural context (See Section 3.3.1), communication context (See Section 3.3.2) and technological context (See Section 3.3.3).

**3.3.1 Symbols in Sociocultural Context**

In sociocultural context, symbols are referred as cultural symbols. Cultural symbols are symbols with cultural meanings and values which commonly shared by a particular social group. People attach meanings to symbols to signify their self-identity and to be understood in social interactions. Cultural symbols can be interpreted from both psychological and social perspectives. From psychology perspective, cultural symbols reflect individuals' motivations, perceptions, and different personal features that shape human conduct. From social perspective, cultural symbols indicate individuals' social status and roles, sociocultural prescriptions of identities as well as power dynamics in social relationships. The following are the three characteristics of cultural symbols:

First, cultural symbols convey meanings and characteristics of self-identity in impression management. Cultural symbols have two types of information to convey: 1) the information an actor "gives"; 2) the information an actor "gives off" (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). The information an actor "gives" are the cultural symbols we consciously use to convey a specific meaning, such as a red dress, lipsticks, language, use of words, and non-verbal cues. In contrast, the information an actor "gives off" refers to signs that the actor unconsciously emits, specifically related to the environmental surroundings and background to present their desired self. For example, a dark bedroom implies a person's private space.

Second, cultural symbols depend on the interpretation of an individual to define and share the meanings of their acts and things with others. every meaning-making in self-presentation and social interaction shifts the social pattern and structure of a social group. Individuals are the interpreters and mediators to package their ideas and thoughts in the process of signification and interaction. According to Blumer (1969), the interpretation process includes two steps. The first step is self-indication of things which the individual is acting with and its meaning. The self-indication process is a mental process that the individual is interacting with himself with symbols. The second step is the interpretation of meanings in social situations. The individual selects, reviews, and modifies the meanings of symbols in the light of the social situation. Their every meaning-making of symbols aims to trigger peers' insights to share and follow the new meanings.

In other words, meanings of things are assigned and adapted through an interpretative process that which individuals constantly define, relocate and realign these meanings of things in their social environment.

Third, cultural symbols rely on historic and current cultural norms within a social group as symbolic resources. To use symbols to signify self in social interactions, individuals refer to a specific set of symbolic meanings and ideologies embedded in their culture. For example, arts, music, novels and films. Zittoun (2017)'s work on "cultural elements" highlights the importance of symbolic resources for meaning-making and interpretation of symbols. Individuals make meaning and interpretation with symbolic resources through reflections of personal experience, particularly when they face life challenges. For example, broken-up couples may find their self connected to sad love songs. Symbolic resources may help them connect "how they feel" as well as their value and direction of life in the future (Zittoun, 2007). Yet, a new meaning of symbols emerges and evolves according to the social interactions within the social group. When a specific symbolic resource no longer resonates with an expected social reaction in a social group, the symbolic resources will be outdated and decayed in their sociocultural context.

To conclude this section on symbols in sociocultural context, cultural symbols have three characteristics. First, cultural symbols carry specific meanings within a social group. Second, cultural symbols depend on the interpretation of the individual. Third, cultural symbols rely on symbolic resources to be referred to and co-created.  Symbolic resources are not only to be referred to as a set of shared meanings and interaction patterns, but symbolic resources also depend on individuals co-create and circulate in their social group. In this study, "cultural symbol" is broadly defined as a collection of meanings and practices of symbols that disabled women share, practise and interpret in a particular fashion to signify their preferred identity.


### 3.3.2 Symbols in Communication Context


In communication context, symbols are referred to as communication modalities. These communication modalities are being mediated for exchange in an organized manner through our five senses. In our physical daily life, symbols may solely depend on physical communication modalities. For example, how we see colours, listen to music, and speak with words as well as different tactile senses. On social media, symbols are technology-mediated and transmitted through text, photos and other multimedia in their profiles and social interaction. In this section, I feature the characteristics of two communication modalities: text and images.

*3.3.2.1 Text as Linguistic modality*

As for text on social media, language is still a typical communication modality. They can be blogs, narratives or even hashtags or social media challenges. Language provides a consensus pattern for communication purposes, it is also fully elastic for re-interpretation and re-creation of novel meanings to an individual. Language has two characteristics as symbols in communication context: "meaning" and "sense".

As for meaning, language is culturally constructed and shared in a given social group. Saussure (1983) emphasised that language implies the connection of the social structure. At the same time, speech implies the individual's action and agency. However, language reinforces the social structure and the normative patterns of every day and how social relationships should be organized in the traditional social order. His work theorises how language signifies the social structure to inform our thoughts, speeches and actions. In a society, the meanings of symbols are stabilized by dictionaries, historic references, genres and other menus and systems of language. These meanings are negotiated and prominent in the culture when they are exercised and exchanged within a social group. Language signifies the social structure to inform our thoughts, speeches and actions.

For instance, meanings of vocabulary provide a judgmental framework of good and bad. According to marking theory, the markedness relationship depends on the symbols with an opposition (e.g. man/woman, able-bodied/disabled) (Mertz & Parmentier, 1985). For example, the generic meaning of human includes "able-bodied" as the specified unmarked and "disabled" as the specified marked. The unmarked symbol (e.g. "the able-bodied") usually stands for the normative and presumed feature. In contrast, the marked symbol (e.g. "the disabled") stands for deviance and less favourable. On social media, the selection and use of language allow users to connect a specific social structure and its normative social order within a specific social group. The presumed value and meaning of things are profoundly embedded in language that directs followers to comprehend users' symbols in a particular manner.

As for sense, language is created by an individual when he/she conceptualizes their sociocultural experiences (e.g. actions, feelings and thoughts). Vygotsky (1962)'s work to entails the connection of psychological cognition and language. Individuals have the emotional urge to connect words and language with their personal experiences and meaningfulness. Language on social media underlines individuals' originality and creativity for communication within a specific social group. Language on social media is fully elastic for creativity and originality. They can be slang, hashtags, or some specific nicknames for authentic self-expression.

*3.3.2.2 Photos & Videos as Imagery Modalities*

As for images and videos on social media, imagery modalities (i.e. graphic and video) are common for online communication. Images can be selfies and snapshots as well as photomontage (i.e.

images edited and created with photo apps/software), and even memes (i.e. a humorous image which is widely shared on social media). L. Robinson (2007)'s work on "cyber-self-ing" helps me suggest how disabled women can use visual images to signify their preferred self. There are three characteristics of imagery modalities: disembodiment, hyperbolization and a combination of material and non-material symbols.

As for disembodiment, imagery modalities facilitate individuals to control their embodied cues and use media-based cues to signify their preferred self. Disabled women escape from the sense of physical embodiment and gain a sense of control of their cues in impression management. In offline social interactions, disabled women are unable to avoid embodied cues to project how others evaluate them. For example, they can hardly change their body shape, their disability or medical aids. When it comes to social media, disabled women have more control to formulate their media-based cues. For example, a decision on the photo shooting angle or literately applying stickers to cover undesired embodied cues.

As for hyperbolization, imagery modalities allow disabled women to engender and underline desired symbols to signify their preferred self with a cyber-body. L. Robinson (2007) used gaming and avatars as examples to illustrate the plasticity of the cyber-body. The concept of cyber-body implies the virtual construction of the body as a "simulated body" with desired symbols and engender markers. In social media, disabled women can playfully consume desired symbols to signify their multifaceted, fragmented and creative self. Disabled women can create their visual images according to their desires and the features of their "inner self". They can engender their body with gender markers (e.g. breasts, muscles) as a way to reclaim their corporeality of the body.

The third characteristic of imagery modalities is a combination of material and non-material symbols. According to Mingers and Willcocks (2014), information and communication technology (ICT) denotes a specific set of semiotic practices to intertwine material and non-material symbols in the process of signification and interaction. For material symbols, a physical item is a constitutive element to convey a specific message (e.g. lipstick, high heels or curvy long hair). On the other hand, non-material symbols are repeatedly interpreted and re-interpreted in the process of cognitive significations. For example, the brightness, colour tone as well as angle of these photos are mediated to convey a visual message. Both material and non-material symbols have a variety of features and styles to create a coherent and effective message.

### 3.3.3 Symbols in Technological Context

In technology context, symbols are referred to as technology affordance of social media that is applied when disabled women create their posts and communicate with their followers. I borrow Gibson's concept the "affordance" to accentuate how technology is being used purposefully

among disabled women to strengthen their preferred self. Gibson (1977) defines the concept of "affordance" as the properties of an object to be used to achieve a specific purpose for its users. In general, technology affordance has three characteristics: self-representation on social media profiles, socialization via online communication tools and mass communication.

First, technology affordances related to self-representation involves how disabled women make their posts on social media profile. For example, privacy setting, making a spontaneous or scheduled update, sharing newsfeeds as well as retrieving and re-posting the previous post. Wagner, Vollmar, and Wagner (2014) listed some technology affordances of social media that are potentially useful for impression management: 1) Reviewability: users retrieve and review archived contents in chronological order so that users can connect their posts to see a bigger picture of their narratives; 2) Visibility: users create posts to make their experiences (e.g. their feelings, thoughts, events and insights) to be known by a broad social network; 3) Editability: users interpret and re-interpret their posts for in-depth self-expression and communication with others; 4) Association: users make connections with individuals, social groups or a specific social network. In this study, I look at how these technology affordances (i.e. reviewability, editability, visibility, and association) facilitate disabled women to strengthen their preferred self by shaping their self-representation on social media.

Second, technology affordance related to communication and socialization involves how disabled women connect with others and desired social groups to pursue meaningful social interactions. Online communication with followers includes receiving/giving likes and comments, and receiving/sending messages via inbox. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) allows disabled women to have more control over the communication pace and content. For instance, disabled women can seek immediate support from their support network. On the other hand, they can take time to carefully craft their responses and dialogues via CMC. On the other hand, socialization with desired social groups includes adding new friends from a forum and interacting with group members via comments in a forum. Besides expanding social networks, they acquire information and resources to strengthen their preferred self. Disabled women can access their desired social group and socialize with group members.

Third, technology related to mass communication via social media includes publicly posting selfies and comments in forums and using hashtags to contribute personal messages in a social media campaign. Papacharissi (2011) listed numerous examples of social media features that are beneficial for mass communication. Some disabled women may find it difficult to articulate a debate on issues, they can express their stance by publicly liking or commenting on the relevant newsfeed.

## 3.4 Levels of Agency

In the Prelude, I elucidated how several theories help me understand how disabled women's impression management do to shape their followers' perceptions of their self-identity. The interpretation of symbols underlines individual agency for preferred self-validation and meaningful social interactions. The meaning of "culture" entails a collection of meanings and practices of symbols that needs to be shared, practised and interpreted in a particular fashion among a group of members. Should disabled women wish to signify their preferred self, they need to understand their "frames" and design their plots within their sociocultural context. In other words, it is the agency of disabled women to plan and design their plots to signify their preferred identity. From my perspective, disabled women have the agency to plan and negotiate with their audience to set a favourable "frame" for their desired plots.

It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by "agency" before building a lens to understand the agency of disabled women to strengthen their preferred self within a sociocultural context. In broad terms, "agency" can be defined as the capacity and power of an individual to implement a play to reach a specific goal as an agent. In terms of the agency to strengthen one's preferred identity, I found Abrams (1999)'s work on women's agency helpful to enrich my definition of "self-agency" to feature how disabled women select, define and change their sociocultural context to strengthen one's preferred identity. Abrams (1999) elaborates three distinctive elements of self-agency: 1) Self-autonomy: the self attentively selects and adopts a preferred social norm and internalises the norm as the substance of self-identity; 2) Self-definition: the self understands and determines one's nature and qualities; 3) Self-direction: the self organises one's plan to implement their goals. As for disabled women, precedent meanings and stigmas shape our perception of self and our social interaction, symbols are not subjugation to overpower disabled women's agency to construct, challenge and change the biased "frame" to pursue their preferred self. Although disabled women's agency depends on the sociocultural context that they are living in, they have some degree of capacity to understand the barriers and potentials of their sociocultural context and make plans to actualize their preferred identity.

This section aims to build a lens to systematically understand how disabled women exercise their agency for desired impression management. From my perspective, McAdam's work on "Actor, Agent and Author" is inspiring and help me feature disabled women's low, medium and high level of agency and their dynamic with social structure McAdams (2013) describes the distinctive relationship and use of culture across these three layers of self (i.e. Actor, Agent and Author). For each section of the three levels of agency, I will first summarize McAdam's work to feature the interrelationship between the self and culture. Then, I further connect Abrams (1999)'s terms of self-autonomy, self-definition and self-direction to explicate self-agency at the low, medium and high levels of agency.

### 3.4.1. Low Level of Agency: Self-identity as an Actor to Play Prescribed Roles

At the low level of agency, the focus of self is to act as a social actor in a given social context. Individuals' agency as an actor is to regulate their social performance according to normative culture. Culture is the social discourse that provides normative scripts, performance benchmarks and behavioural rules (McAdams, 2013). Through social observation, individuals attribute and categorize their self into social groups or normative stereotypes. For example, mothers follow the expectation and normative script of a "good" mother to provide adequate childcare and parenting for their children. The self aims to strive for social acceptance and social status in interpersonal relationships and social groups (McAdams, 2013).

In whole, self-agency at the low level of agency is low in terms of self-autonomy, self-definition and self-direction. As for self-autonomy, disabled women have low self-reliance against social norms as they internalize social norms into their self-identities. They construct and express their preferred identity as their self is prescribed by everyday discourse. As for self-definition, disabled women have low originality of self-definition as the self is a replica of constituted social roles and normative stereotypes. The source of self-definition depends on their prescribed roles and normative scripts. As for self-direction, disabled women concede to the social norm and have low motivation to resist and transform social stereotypes and oppression.

To strengthen their preferred identity at the low level of agency, disabled women need to develop and demonstrate stereotyped skills and traits of their preferred social roles. The preferred self is strengthened when they can perform their desired social roles and gain a sense of social acceptance.


**3.4.2 Medium Level of Agency: Self-identity as a Surrogate to Prioritize Self-projects**

At the medium level of agency, the focus of self as a surrogate is to explore their identity projects to actualise their potential self. Individuals make sense of who they are at present and who they want to be in the future (McAdams, 2013). For example, teenage girls set their identity goals related to their gender and sexual identity. They set their identity goals to learn makeup, fashion and various gender expressions by referencing desired social groups and their idols as "attractive women". They participate in social events (e.g. shopping for a party dress, attending a speed dating event) and join social groups to claim their "womanhood" (e.g. joining a cheerleader team in school or joining dance school). Across different stages of life, the agent self constantly explores and commits various life projects to actualize their potential self. The self aims to gain a sense of self-efficacy when they actualize their potential identities.

Culture implies different sets of shared meanings, group rituals, and collective characteristics of a social group. For instance, the meanings, life agenda and collective identity characteristics of female athletes and beauty pageants are distinctive. In some situated sociocultural contexts, some potential identities may have a higher chance to be validated. Yet, disabled women may set less priority and commit to some identities that are less likely to be validated. The meaning of

culture at the medium level of agency implies disabled women's exploration and experimentation in a network of contextualized social structures.

In whole, self-agency at the medium level of agency is moderate in terms of self-autonomy, self-definition and self-direction. As for self-autonomy, individuals have medium self-reliance against social norms. Disabled women do not fully internalize social norms into their self-identity. They explore favourable sociocultural contexts to implement their identity plans. They have some level of self-control and selection in choosing their preferred meanings and sociocultural context.

As for self-definition, the degree of originality of self-definition is medium. Disabled women select a collection of characteristics that are commonly shared in a specific social group to signify their preferred self as a reference. They have selection criteria for these social groups but do not explore much about the originality of the preferred self.

As for self-direction, the degree of resistance and transformation are medium. Disabled women have the intention to resist the stereotype and normative expectations of their given social roles. Yet, the self-direction is to transverse across a network of sociocultural contexts to explore the potential sociocultural context for their preferred self. To me, the resistance and transformation are limited to their self, but not the society.

To strengthen their preferred identity at the medium level of agency, disabled women explore opportunities and favourable sociocultural contexts to implement their identity projects. The preferred self is potential identities that contain a realm of personal goals, values and hopes. Disabled women serve as a surrogate and an investor to search for a favourable sociocultural context that facilitates them to legitimize their potential identities. Their preferred self is strengthened when they can implement their potential identities within a favourable social context.

### 3.4.3 High Level of Agency: Self-identity as an Author to Define their Autobiographical Self

At the high level of agency, the focus of self as an author is to construct an autobiographical self by integrating their lived experiences. Individuals act as authors to tell their stories by integrating and inferencing thematic episodes in a specific sequence and framework (McAdams, 2013). Across different stages of life, individuals continue to construct and re-construct their authentic self through autobiographical reasoning. The self aims to create a sense of continuity, coherence and authenticity of self (McAdams, 2013).

Culture at the medium level of agency serves as a menu of images, metaphors and stories for individuals to construct and express authentic meanings for self. When disabled women tell their story by making meanings of their significant episodes, they extract novel meanings of self . By

sharing their stories, they construct their own socio-cultural context to legitimize their authentic self.

In whole, self-agency at the high level of agency is elevated in terms of self-autonomy, self-definition and self-direction.  Disabled women have high agency to construct and express their preferred identity as their self is built on their co-constructed subculture.

As for self-autonomy, disabled women have high self-reliance against social norms. They gain a sense of self-reliance by reflecting reflect their principles and values for self, instead of internalising social norms and traditional virtue into their self-identity.

As for self-definition, disabled women define their authentic self by making sense and meanings of their self-sentiment and lived experiences. They are the ones who define their self by extracting personal meanings from storytelling. They are the ones who create novel symbols with original meanings to signify their authentic self.

As for self-direction, disabled women assertively resist the biased norm and oppression, particular during their reflection on negative affective experiences. Redemption of self is a manifestation of their self. By signifying their redemptive self, disabled women aim to connect their own sub-groups. Their resistance aims to transform their self and advocate for all.

To strengthen their preferred identity at the high level of agency, disabled women aim to construct an authentic identity through telling their self-defining stories. Through telling and re-telling their self-defining stories, disabled women gain insights to conceptualize authentic meanings of self in the past, present, and future. Some of them may have negative affective experiences (e.g. being stigmatized) due to their sensitive identities. Yet, they may extract redemptive meanings to highlight their resilience and dedication to their oppressed identities. The process of redemption empowers disabled women to search for hope and a more positive self-identity despite these setbacks. The preferred self is strengthened when individuals can construct an integrated and authentic self within their own-cultivated sociocultural context.


**3.5 Pulling the Threads Together: Shaping an Operational Framework**

In this section, I aim to summarize the above sections to shape an operational framework to guide me to observe and interpret how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. The operational framework indicates a "what" question that focuses on symbols and a "how" question related to disabled women's agency.

Section 3.3 helps me to answer the "what" question related to symbols. The section gave an overview of how symbols are being constructed, mediated and practised for signification and interpretation.  Based on the concepts and theories in Section 3.3, I developed Dimension I

Symbolic Resources to understand how disabled women use symbols as building blocks to construct and express their preferred self (See Section 3.5.1).

Section 3.4 helps me to answer the "how" question. McAdams's work inspired me to develop Dimension II to understand different levels of agency when disabled women aim to strengthen their preferred identity. (See Section 3.5.2).

### 3.5.1 Dimension I: Symbolic Resources as Building Blocks of Self-Identity

For the "what" question, my focus is on what symbolic resources they choose to build their self-identity via social media. In this study, symbolic resources can be divided into cultural symbols, communication modalities, and technology affordances.

*3.5.1.1 Cultural Symbols*

The first category is cultural symbols. Cultural symbols are defined as signs with cultural meanings and values commonly shared by a specific social group. These cultural symbols are either shared among a group or created by individuals to convey meanings of their preferred self.

Based on the discussion in Section 3.3.1, I study how cultural symbols are being created and interpreted for impression management in a sociocultural context. I will look into three elements of cultural symbols applied by disabled women: 1) Meanings of Symbols: symbolic meanings of a symbol that disabled women wish to convey and share; 2) Interpretation of Symbols: interpretation from disabled women to signify their preferred self.; 3) Resource of Symbols: symbolic resources that disabled women learn from normative culture, or a sub-culture of a group, or originate from disabled women.

In this study, I focus on how disabled women make use of a menu of cultural symbols, scripts and metaphors to form their preferred impressions of self. For instance, disabled women may use a pair of high heels to signify meanings to signify their preferred self. The symbolic meanings of a pair of high heels can be womanhood or sexuality. Yet, the symbol of high heels needs disabled women's interpretation to elaborate on how it signifies womanhood and sexuality. They may have to refer to social norms or personal experiences as symbolic resources of the high heels.

*3.5.1.2 Communication Modalities*

The second category is communication modalities. The concept of communication modalities is related to how media are used for self-expression and communication. Communication

modalities on social media can be text, graphics, videos, music, animation and other multimedia. In this study, I focus on language (i.e. text) and visual/audio images (i.e. images or videos).

For text, I study the use of language in terms of genre, tone and allusion. Text on social media can also be hashtags and hypertext (i.e. text with hyperlinks for further references). Two main focuses to understand the use of text: 1) Linguistic Meanings: how the linguistic meanings are being culturally constructed and shared within a social group; 2) Sense: how personal experienced is conceptualized and embedded in their use of language. Different languages and the use of words may have a variety of features and styles. I study how disabled women use different language, genres and tones to create a coherent and effective text to signify their preferred self.

For visual images, I study the use of photos, graphics, and video. Photos can be selfies and snapshots as well as photomontage (i.e. images edited and created with photo apps/software), and even memes (i.e. a humorous image which is widely shared on social media). Three focus on imagery modalities are 1) Disembodiment: how disabled women control their embodied cues to signify their preferred self or to hide their undesired cues (e.g. the angle, distance of photo taking or putting on stickers to cover undesired part); 2) Hyperbolization: how disabled women underline desired symbols or to engender their images (e.g. photo editing of their face or body features); 3) Combination of material/non-material symbols: to manipulate both material and non-material symbols to convey a visual message (e.g. tunning brightness or colour tone of a specific item). In this study, I look into how these photos or videos are being captured and edited in the process of signifying their preferred self.

### 3.5.1.3 Technology Affordance

The third category is Technology Affordance. I borrow Gibson's concept the "affordance" to accentuate how technology is being used that facilitates disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity. I will focus on three elements of technology affordance: 1) Self-presentation in Profile: how disabled women use different techniques for their profile posts for reviewability, editability, visibility, and association purposes (e.g. privacy setting, making a spontaneous or scheduled update, retrieving and re-posting the previous post.); 2) Communication and socialization: how disabled women make use of communication tools (e.g. receiving/sending likes, comments or messages via in-box). Thus, I also explore how disabled women connect and interact with followers and online social groups via social media (e.g. joining forums, adding new friends); 3) Mass-communication: how they intended to interject their personal messages and self-expression into the mainstream online media (e.g. publicly posting selfies and comments in forums, using hashtags to contribute personal messages in a social media campaign). In this study, my main focus is to identify the technology affordance of social media that facilitates their self-presentation, communication and socialization and mass communication.

To conclude the operational framework of Dimension 1, Table 1 features how symbols are featured in sociocultural, communication and technology context.

Table 1 Summary on Dimension 1 on Symbols

| Elements | Features |
|---|---|
| Cultural Symbols | ➢ Meanings of Symbols: symbolic meanings of a symbol that disabled women wish to convey and share;<br>➢ Interpretation of Symbols: Interpretation of symbols from disabled women to signify their preferred self;<br>➢ Resource of Symbols: symbolic resources where disabled women learn from normative culture, or a sub-culture of a group, or originate from disabled women. |
| Communication Modalities | The use of text<br><br>➢ Linguistic Meanings: the linguistic meanings are being culturally constructed and shared within a social group;<br>➢ Sense: personal experience is conceptualized and embedded in their use of language.<br><br>The use of Imagery<br><br>➢ Disembodiment: Control of their embodied cues;<br>➢ Hyperbolization: Emphasis on desired symbols;<br>➢ Combination of material/non-material symbols: Integration of both material and non-material symbols to convey a visual message. |
| Technology Affordance | ➢ Self-presentation in Profile: technology feature applied in profiling for reviewability, editability, visibility, and association purposes<br>➢ Communication and socialization: communication and socialization features are applied to interact with followers and social groups.<br>➢ Mass-communication: mass-communication and publicity technique to contribute to the mainstream online media. |

## 3.5.2 Dimension II: Levels of Agency Navigating in Social Media

For the "how" question, my focus is on the agency of disabled women when they strengthen their preferred self via social media. I find McAdam's work on "Actor, Agent and Author" inspirational

for developing the research framework with some testable propositions. I modify his work to be three levels of agency to analyse and interpret disabled women's agency in a systematic manner.

### 3.5.2.1 Low Level of Agency

At the low level of agency, disabled women focus on performing their prescribed social identities. At the low level of agency, disabled women aim to acquire and demonstrate essential knowledge, skills and calibre on social media as part of their social performances. They depend on normative culture to guide their social performance as well as self-evaluation. They gain a sense of self-esteem when they can gain social acceptance as well as enhancement of social status.

### 3.5.2.2 Medium Level of Agency

At the medium level of agency, disabled women focus on exploring potential identities to the actualization of their ambition and personal values. Disabled women aim to explore a favourable sociocultural context within a desired social group to legitimize their potential identities. To actualize these preferred identity, they plan to coordinate resources and actions for identity exploration and experiments. On social media, disabled women purposefully interact with others and particular users to claim their desired membership in a desired social group. By drawing commonality of their desired social group, disabled women signify their preferred self with the characteristics and values of their desired social group. Disabled women gain their sense of self-efficacy by constructing preferred identity on social media as goal-attainment of their values.

### 3.5.2.3 High Level of Agency

At the high level of agency, disabled women focus on constructing an integrated identity by making meaning from their past, present and future. Disabled women purposefully assemble significant episodes to construct a self-defining story. Storytelling on social media may facilitate them to redeem their oppressed self from negative emotional experiences. Also, the telling and re-telling of their stories facilitate them to construct a coherent, integrated and authentic self. They gain a sense of self-authenticity when they can construct a meaningful self of the past, present, and future.

To sum up the characteristics of the low, medium and high levels of agency, Table 2 features how disabled women exercise their three levels of agency to strengthen their preferred self.

Table 2 Summary of Low, Medium and High Level of Agency

| Levels of Agency | Low Level of Agency | Medium Level of Agency | High Level of Agency |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Self is… | Social identities with stereotyped traits, calibre and characteristics. | Potential identities that reflect personal goals, ambitions and values. | Integrated and authentic identity constructed in self-defining stories. |
| Use of Culture | Normative culture serves as a benchmark of one's social performance | A network of social groups with distinctive sets of meanings, scripts and rituals for individuals to explore and select. | A menu of self-defined and authentically interpreted meanings metaphors to share with others. |
| Self-Autonomy: The agency to be self-reliant against the internalization of social norms into self-identity. | low self-reliance and disabled women internalize normative discourse into their self-identity. | Moderate self-reliance as disabled women do not fully internalize social norms into their self-identity. Yet, they internalize stereotypes of a social group. | High self-reliance as disabled women reflect their principles and values for self, instead of internalising social norms and traditional virtue into self. |
| Self-Definition: The agency to define self originally and authentically. | Low originality of self-definition as the self is a replica of normative social roles. They define their self as constituted social roles and normative stereotypes. | Medium originality of self-definition as disabled women select a collection of characteristics that are commonly shared among members of a specific social group. | High originality of self-definition as disabled women defines their self by extracting personal meanings from reflecting on lived experiences. |
| Self-Direction: The agency to resist stigma and oppression and direct social change for self and others | Low motivation to resist social stereotypes and oppression. Disabled women have no intention to transform the oppressive sociocultural environment. | Moderate motivation as disabled women intend to discard the stereotype and normative expectations of their given social roles. They explore a less oppressive sociocultural environment for their identity projects. | High motivation to direct social change for their self and others. Disabled women assertively resist the biased norm and oppression related to one's social group. |

| Strategy to Strengthen their Preferred Self | To acquire essential knowledge and skills to perform their social identities; To earn self-esteem when they gain social acceptance. | To explore and prioritize identity projects to actualize potential identities; To earn self-efficacy when they experiment and actualize their potential identities. | To integrate and interpret significant episodes to construct an authentic and coherent self in one's preferred manner; To earn self-continuity and authenticity when they can integrate their self of the past, present and future. |
|---|---|---|---|

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to build a theoretical framework to guide me to observe and interpret how disabled women may strengthen their preferred identity via social media. Given all that has been mentioned so far, the operational framework is formulated for further observation and investigation. The framework involves two dimensions to understand disabled women preferred self-presentation and expression via social media. The first dimension is the characteristics of symbols. The second dimension is to see different levels of agency. The following are the research questions under these two dimensions:

Dimension I: Characteristics of Symbols

➢ Cultural Symbols: The meanings of symbols which are being learnt, used and interpreted by the protagonist to signify her self-identity (e.g. the colour pink signifies femininity, a pair of high heels signifies sexuality);
➢ Communication Modalities: The means by which the information is transmitted between the protagonist and her social media followers. (e.g. text, image, video);
➢ Technical Affordance: The technical features on social media are used (e.g. receiving/giving comments, adding net friends).

Dimension II: Level of Agency

➢ Low level: Performing social identities to fit in with stereotypes and social norms (e.g., showcasing one's pre-defined social role as a housewife);
➢ Medium level: Exploring and experimenting with alternative identities to actualise values and beliefs (e.g., highlighting personal growth and development as an entrepreneur and designer);

➢ High level: Creating an integrated identity to express novel meanings and strengthen the trajectory of self (e.g., creating a redemptive self with novel meanings to signify one's identity as a woman with disabilities).

This chapter developed the above operational framework to help me delimitate my research area and the scope of my study. In the next chapter, I continue to shape this study in an operational and researchable manner. This framework serves as the blueprint of my choice of research design as well as plans for data collection and analysis procedures.

# CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced a series of identity theories in symbolic interactionism. I formulated the research framework to guide my study to understand how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media.

This chapter illustrates the method of research based on the epistemology and research framework. In the first section, I start with introducing the epistemology. In the second section, I introduce my sampling method and selection of informants. In the third section, I introduce my data collection method and data analysis process. In the last section, I discuss ethical issues related to social media research.

## 4.2 The Epistemology & Theoretical Underpinning

## 4.2.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a common epistemology in qualitative interpretative research. As influenced by pragmatism, the concept of "truth" and meaning lies in the subjective interpretation of the people instead of having an "objective" reality for discovery (Benzies & Allen, 2001, p. xiii). Symbolic interactionists aim to understand how their target group make meaning and knowledge of the world through social interactions as well as their ways to behave and cope with the "world".

In this study, I selected symbolic interactionism as the epistemology. The term "symbolic interactionism", coined by Herbert Blumer, implies individuals use symbols for meaningful interactions to themselves, others and the world (Blumer, 1969). Meanings of symbols are assigned and adapted through an interpretative process that individuals constantly define, relocate and realign these meanings of symbols in their social environment. The term "symbol" implies the abstract semiotic meaning attached to social objects (e.g. things, people and behaviour). Symbols convey specific meanings for individuals and their social groups. These shared semiotic meanings become common sense to guide individuals behave in different social situations. The term "interaction" implies the inner interaction of the self, including communicating, checking and transforming meanings in a social context.

In symbolic interactionism, self-identity is a practice of signification. Self-identity is a "*symbolically mediated, semantic-referential, personally valued attributes and emotions that are invoked to distinguish self from other in moral/essential terms*" (Shaw, 1994, p. 85). Individuals are agents who mediate symbols in their interactions to meet their socioemotional needs and social functioning. Individuals create and interpret a range of symbols to signify the characteristics of their self-identity. For example, their strengths, motives, traits. These characteristics of self are

interpreted in their tastes, lifestyles, social groups as well as their intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions (Shaw, 1994). On the other hand, self-identity depends on how individuals reflect, evaluate and express their self in the interaction. In symbolic interactionism, three theories are closely related to this study as follows:

First, according to the salience of hierarchy theory, individuals manage their multiple role identities according to the social situations. The prominence and commitment of identity depend on how individuals define the social situation and social expectations (Stryker, 1968, 1991, 2008). As for disabled women, their commitment of preferred identity depends on the social situation and social expectations. Should their preferred identity fits in social expectation, there is a higher chance to commit to their preferred identity.

Second, according to identity control theory, individual have to manage their control system in the process of identity verification (Peter J. Burke, 1997). To manage their control system, individual need to build a set of identity standard to construct the meanings of self in a situation. Then, they need to estimate the sociocultural context of a social situation to tailor their self-expression. At the end, they reflect others' feedback as an appraisal of identity verification. As for disabled women, it is necessary to verify their preferred identity by acquiring positive judgement from others. Should they fail to do so, their preferred identity is not being actualized.

Third, according to the social exchange theory, individuals calculate the potential rewards and projected payoffs to actualize their identities in social interaction (McCall & Simmons, 1978). The social exchange theory hypothesizes that individuals commit to social relationships which provide role support to actualize and verify their self-identities. As for disabled women, they make a careful calculation on the rewards and payoffs to actualize their preferred identity. To strengthen their preferred identity, they search for role support and resources for the reward/payoff balance.

Together, this study aims to understand how disabled women construct their positive self-identity via social media in terms of how they make use of symbols and their interpretative process of their behaviours in social context. The research question focuses on the process of how disabled women interpret and share meanings to interact with others rather than searching for objective picture of reality. The core of this study is the process of their interpretation and behaviour on social media as a dynamic process in social life. For instance, how they share and make use of symbols and shared meanings in the social interaction via social media.

### 4.2.2 Case Study

The selection of research method for this study is case study approach. The method of case study can be categorised as "exploratory', "explanatory" and "descriptive" according to the nature of the study (Yin, 2018).

The nature of this study is a descriptive case study as it aims to portray how disabled women construct their identity in social media. This study is a theoretically informed case study based on symbolic interactionism identity theories. In the epistemological perspective, this study aims to explore a concept rather than testing a hypothesis. In this study, the purpose is discovery-oriented to understand how disabled women construct their positive self-identity via social media. This study is to understand, interpret and gain insight to how they experience a phenomenon. To gain understanding of their behaviours and experiences, qualitative research is a rigorous research method for this study.

The nature of this study matches the characteristics of a case study in many ways. First, the objective of this study is to observe a phenomenon of how they construct their identity via social media. Second, as one of the characteristics of case study, this research aims to study "a case", which is bounded by space and time (Hancock, 2006; Simons, 2014).  Third, case study emphases on engaging members of the target population and value their language and culture as the generation of knowledge (Simons, 2009, 2014). As for this study, participants' subjective perception of the world and their lived experience are the nutshell of this study.

As the key instrument in the conduct of study, researcher depends on face to face interaction with participants through interviews, observation and analysis on artifacts such as posts, photos and other documents (Kuper, Reeves, & Levinson, 2008).  Through these interactions, researcher gain an in-depth understanding of the complex lived experience of disabled women. These collected data require further analysis and interpretation to identify significant themes of the phenomenon as well as generalize results to a wider population of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**4.3 Sampling & Selection of Informants**

**4.3.1 Defining Target Population & Criteria**

Clear sampling procedure for qualitative research enhance its coherence, transparency, impact and trustworthiness (Robinson, 2014). The purpose of setting inclusion and exclusion criteria is to allow cases to be legitimately sampled for the research (Robinson, 2014). In this study, the target population is disabled women in Hong Kong. At this stage, both inclusion and exclusion criteria are crucial. Inclusion criteria specifies the participants possess attribute to qualify for the research while exclusion criteria help to stipulate attributes which may disqualify a case for the research. See Table 3 for the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 3 Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

| Criteria | Details |
| --- | --- |

| Inclusion Criteria | ➢ Age 18 or above female and;<br>➢ Living in Hong Kong<br>➢ Acquire physically disabled with restricted mobility (e.g. walk with aids, wheelchair or power wheelchair)<br>➢ Actively posting in social media to talk about gender and sexuality topics;<br>➢ Willing to share posts from social media for research purposes. |
|---|---|
| Exclusion Criteria | ➢ Other forms of disabilities and impairments (e.g. visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual challenged etc.)<br>➢ Show impairment on cognitive functioning (i.e. unable to narrate their stories and experiences in social media) |

### 4.3.2 Sampling Strategy: Extreme Case Sampling

The consideration of selecting suitable sampling strategy is that I am studying how disabled women construct their positive self-identity via social media. The objective of this study is to identify the keys and patterns of successful cases who are being unique and efficacious among disabled women, rather than understanding the general experience of the target population. Among different purposive sampling strategies, extreme case sampling is selected to focus on unique cases as they are able to provide notable experiences. Their experience are able to provide significant insights into the phenomenon (Robinson, 2014).

Taleb (2010) described extreme deviant cases as "black swans", weighting the importance and value of "outliners" in the target population. Extreme cases subvert our ways of reasoning and developing new knowledge by generalization. In the late eighteenth century, European believed all swans were white and "whiteness" was one of the features of "swans". However, when they discovered the species of black swan in Australia, the idea of "swans" no longer necessarily "white" due to the existence of black swans (Taleb, 2010). Inductive reasoning may lead us mistakenly generalize the results to the full picture of the target population and neglects significance of "rare" cases (Lybeck, 2017). Furthermore, instead of depending on inductive reasoning upon the normal symmetrical distribution of the population, Taleb (2010) argued that such reasoning approach can only inform us what the majority of population does as well as what has already happened. Should we simply look at the "monotone" behaviour of the target population, such declaration of fact does not lead us better exploration for potential solutions and understanding of unexpected incidents (Chichilnisky, 2010). In this study, extreme case sampling is a way of selecting the "black swans" among disabled women as these "black swans" have successful experience and unique perspective on constructing their self-identity positively via social media.

In similar vein, Patton (2015) pointed out that quantitative study strives for generalization by emphasising statistical probability and sampling representativeness, but qualitative study should

strives for in-depth understanding of the target group by studying information-rich cases. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding on the research question rather than empirical generalizations. On the other hand, Gallo and Lee (2015) suggested qualitative researchers should choose "good informants" when selecting purposive sampling. Researchers should carefully select participants who are enthusiastic about the project so that they can provide specific and critical information to address the research questions. Good informants should be able to provide important information on their thoughts and behaviours in such phenomenon. They share the critical characteristics of the target population to enhance the richness and depth of information to answer the research questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

### 4.3.3 Sample Sourcing & Selection of Informants

In this study, the objective is to understand how disabled women construct their self-identity via social media. Therefore, extreme representative cases in this study should be obviously outstanding in the disability community. They are outspoken about their self-identity as a disabled woman and active members in the disability community. They are regularly in touch with the core discussion of self-identity via social media. According to Morse (1998), a good informant not only acquires the necessary knowledge and experience in the relationship of the research topic, but also able to answer questions to reflect and articulate critical experience and comments (Morse, 1998).

Two sampling sources in this study were organizations and self-help groups in Hong Kong rehab field as well as popular Facebook pages among disabled people in Hong Kong. For self-help groups in Hong Kong, I seek recommendation from four relevant organizations (i.e. Association of Disabled women Hong Kong, Rehabilitation Alliance Hong Kong, Hong Kong Federation of Handicapped Youth and Direction Association for The Handicapped). For popular Facebook pages among Hong Kong disabled group, three Facebook pages (i.e. 無障礙討論區(香港), 歡樂電輪, 輪椅共融快訊) were selected according to the nature of the Facebook page as well as the number and combination of members.

### 4.3.4 Background of the Selected Informants

From January to June 2020, I observed and interviewed three local Chinese women with physical disabilities, Sam, Tanya and Helen, to understand their experiences when using social media. Based on the inclusion criteria in my methodology, all three protagonists were active members of the disability community. They were all outspoken regarding disability and gender issues in both traditional and social media. Three protagonists had different forms and levels of disability. These are the background of three protagonists:

<u>Sam</u>

Sam (Age: 35-40) has a genetic disease called peroneal myoatrophy. She walks with the aid of leg braces. After she graduated from a secondary technical school, she participated voluntarily in disability advocacy with various self-help groups. This involved lobbying politicians and interacting with various stakeholders in the disability community. Sam is a housewife and is married to a man with disabilities. A domestic helper takes care of her husband as he requires constant care around the clock. She "came out" as bisexual and gender-fluid on her Facebook page.

Sam actively joined different Facebook pages and groups. In 2016, she co-founded a Facebook group called "Love Unbounded" with friends to provide a safe space for bi-sexual advocacy and mutual support. Also, she actively participated in sex advocacy for disabled people. In 2016, Sam was an active member of the Facebook group "Love has no disability", which was hosted by the Hong Kong Women Christian Council. In 2016, she represented the Facebook group as part of Taiwan Pride's annual parade, speaking at a workshop as a bi-sexual person with disabilities. In 2019, Sam joined the Facebook group "Si-nai Union". (Hereafter referred to as the "Housewives Union"). The Housewives Union was founded by a group of feminists and housewives to raise public awareness regarding unpaid caregivers, the stigma of being a housewife, and to increase social and political participation among its members. In 2019, Sam and some other group members organised a photography exhibition titled "Resistances • Female Body". The exhibit displayed images of their naked bodies to symbolise their anger and concern regarding sexual violence in the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement (Hereafter referred to as the "Anti-ELAB Movement").

**Tanya**

Tanya (Age: 40-45) became physically disabled after a traffic accident on Valentine's Day in the late 1990s. She has been using a manual wheelchair ever since. Before the accident, she was a graphic designer who just completed her higher education in France. She accepted the severity of her injuries and that she was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. She underwent a rehabilitation journey and learnt to live an independent life on her own. She has a partner but is not planning to get married. She also started her own design company. In 2005, she joined an association dedicated to supporting spinal cord injury survivors and their family members. She is the chairperson of the association that promoted disability inclusion and employment rights and opportunities for those with disabilities. In addition, she works as a corporate trainer with a social enterprise for disabled people. In 2013, she was appointed to the Women's Commission of Hong Kong SAR. In 2016, she was chosen to be a Rehab Life Driver and named by the Regeneration Society as one of its Top Ten Regeneration Warriors. Over the past decade, she has contributed commentary and other articles related to disability advocacy to newspaper, magazine and various media. Tanya's story was modified to be one of the episodes of "A Wall-less World", a popular television docudrama series. This docudrama series cover stories of disabled people regarding their emotional ups and downs. In 2017, she started to speak about the sexuality of

disabled women publicly. She also publicly spoke about being sexually harassed due to her sex advocacy work.

**<u>Helen</u>**

Helen (Age 20-25) has a genetic disease called spinal muscular atrophy, which is characterised by severe muscle weakness and wasting. She is unable to move her body and legs and lives in a near quadriplegic condition. Helen has had a major operation for scoliosis and has experienced joint contractures. Before the release of a new drug Spinraza in 2018, her life expectancy was short, and her condition was seen as a terminal illness. Helen uses a power wheelchair and requires intensive care from her elderly grandmother and family members due to her condition. However, she managed to complete her secondary school education and works as a telephone receptionist. She lives with family members in public housing. She shared her dating experiences with a former boyfriend with the newspapers. Helen is one of the sixty-seven hosts of WeTV, an online TV channel run and hosted by disabled people in Hong Kong. As a host, she holds open and candid discussions of the issues faced by disabled people. Helen is an active member of various self-help organisations in the disability community. In 2020, she was appointed secretary of the executive board of the Association of Disabled Women Hong Kong.

**4.3.5 Evaluation in Sampling**

As for a qualitative study, good sampling requires well planning and implementation to ensure the overall sample strategy is coherent and achievable to the research aims. Should the sampling is stated explicitly and systematically, the validity of the study will be enhanced in terms of sensitivity to context, rigour, transparency, coherence and impact (O. C. Robinson, 2014).

For sensitivity to context, clear definition of target population helped to ensure the study is located with a specific context. In this study, the sub-group of women with physical disabilities were identified so that I could conduct the study within a specific culture of a group and prevent unwarranted generalisation.

For rigour, it is about the adequacy of the sample if the sample provide sufficient information for study. Instead of looking into sample size matter, important decisions on sampling in this study is clearly stated. For example, the consideration of inclusion and exclusion criteria to make sure samples coherence to the research topic. Choice of extreme case sampling helped to ensure informants can provide in-depth information and insights for comprehensive analysis.

For transparency, the procedure of sampling is described explicitly so that the sampling can be repeated and audited. For example, sampling sourcing was clearly explained rather than selecting samples within my personal network. The selection of extreme cases was clearly justified to minimize my personal favouritism.

For coherence, the sampling procedure is carefully designed to maximise its coherence to the theoretical framework and research aims. For example, extreme cases were selected as they had rich experience in narrating their self-identity in social media.

For impact, O. C. Robinson (2014) explained that it is important to indicate to what extend this study can contribute. Sample in this study is closely related to the theoretical framework and research objective. The sample were able to provide information for further analysis to answer the research question.

In the process of data collection and analysis, disabled women are perceived as "expert" of the research topic who share their perception, interpretation and interaction to their specific social context (Patton, 2015). Data collection in this study was participant-oriented to facilitate participants to interpret their perception and experience in social life. As for data analysis, the purpose is to identify specific themes and patterns of their behaviour. To be more specific, the data collection and analysis of this study is to understand their process and experiences in constructing positive self-identity via social media.

## 4.4 Data Collection: The Design of Interviews

The aim of this study is to understand how the informants construct their self-identity via social media in terms of their symbolic resources and levels of agency.

### 4.4.1 Introduction of Semi-structured Interviews

Qualitative interview is a common use of data collection in different disciplinary. Interviews can be loosely categorised as unstructured, semi-structured and structured, depending the epistemology of researcher and research question (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Structured interview is usually used for hypothesis testing and analysis in quantitative approach while the other two types aim to explore the perception of reality and experience of participants to gain better understanding. In this study, a series of predetermined open questions were drafted to address the research topic. Individual interviews allow researcher to co-create the meaning with interviewees by reconstructing their experiences in constructing self via social media (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

In this study, semi-structured interview was selected to facilitate informants to share their perception of the phenomena in terms of how they construct their self-identity in social media. Such thick description of phenomena also allows researcher to interpret and analyse to conceptualise and theorise knowledge from the meanings and experiences shared by interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview approach not only allows researcher to have follow-up questions, but also builds rapport to facilitate interviewees'

disclosure (Wengraf, 2001). To ensure all participants receive the same types of stimuli and questions, an interview guide was drafted to ensure standard procedures and probing questions.

In each interview, I invited them to choose three social media posts as best representing their self-identity as a disabled woman. I asked them to discuss these selected posts from several perspectives. For example, how they conceived their initial ideas to make these three posts; the process behind creating the three posts; and the way they interacted with their followers. They all agreed that their selected posts and interview responses could be quoted in this study, and that their social media activities would be observed for verification and analysis. Besides using these selected social media posts as the core discussion topics for the interviews, I provided a preliminary overview of my own observations of the selected posts for clarification and feedback. This allowed me to double-check the accuracy of how I had interpreted their social media posts.

Table 4 Design of Interview

| Part | Details | Questions |
|---|---|---|
| Introduction | interviewer has an overview of the findings and seek interviewees' further comments and feedback | Please give me some feedback/comments on my observation and findings |
| Posts Sharing Session | Protagonists are invited to choose three posts from their Facebook, which they feel best describe them as a woman with disabilities. These posts can be selfies or sharing of personal stories, music, videos and different multimedia material that represent their self-identity. | Please choose three posts from your social media as the best representation of your self-identity as a woman with disabilities.

In each post, please describe your process of producing the post? What is your intention? What you want to do/tell in this post? Why? |
| Conclusive Remarks | Interviewer focuses on their experience in social media rather than their opinions. Then, interviewer will focus on making sense or making meaning of the experience in constructing their positive self-identity via social media. It requires the interviewees to look at the factors in relations of their construction of self-identity via social media. | How you describe your experience in social media? Any challenges and drawbacks? Other comments? |

**4.4.2 Introduction of Three-interviews Series**

The purpose of these interviews is to collect the process of "self-identity construction" of these informants. Seidman (2006) suggested a "three-interview series": orientation interview, midterm interview and debriefing interview. The "three-interview series" helps to collect rich data from informants' experience and to explore the meaning of their lived experience. Seidman (2006)'s "three-interview series" helps to benefit this study in three ways.

First, three separated interviews were designed as a series with a focus on the research topic. Each interview were approximately ninety minutes so that interviewees had enough time to reconstruct and reflect their experiences (Seidman, 2006).

Second, the spacing of each interview was 30 days apart. Interview intervals provided sufficient time and space for interviewee and interviewers to gain their understanding and insights on the research topic. Each interview set a foundation for the next interview as well as providing an interactive dialogue between interviewer and interviewees.

Third, the interview spacing facilitates researcher to build relationship with interviewees positively over the two to three weeks' time (Seidman, 2006). The nature and sequence of the interviews facilitated the balance for interviewees to share their experience openly as well as for interviewers to work with an interview structure.

To conclude the data collection of this study, all protagonists were observed and interviewed three times from January to June 2020. Regarding the details of each interview, the time and place for the interviews were agreed by telephone and emails, and all interviews were conducted in their own home or an interview room in the University as per their wishes.

I conducted three individual interviews with each protagonist by telephone, respectively. A total of nine interviews were conducted with the three protagonists: Sam, Tanya and Helen. I interviewed Sam three times over the phone: on 19 February 2020 (an 80-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese), on 25 March 2020 (a 60-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese), and 25 April 2020 (a 52-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese). I conducted three interviews with Tanya: on 20 February 2020 (a 60-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese), on 21 March 2020 (a 105-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese), and 24 April 2020 (a 110-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese). I also did three interviews with Helen: on 18 February 2020 (a 100-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese), on 22 March 2020 (a 140-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese), and 20 April 2020 (a 95-minute audio recording, transcribed in Chinese). Interviews were conducted in Cantonese, audiotaped with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

I also used instant messaging applications like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp to follow up and clarify some points discussed in the interviews. These instant messaging applications allowed me to engage in a regular and more informal dialogue with the protagonists. This form of communication enabled the protagonists to provide additional relevant information that was outside the scope of the interviews.

### 4.4.3 Evaluation on Data Collection

In symbolic interactionism, researcher's understanding and interpretation of the shared meanings of the target population are influential in the research process and outcome. For instance, priori assumptions and past experience of researcher shape their perception and understanding of their target population. Data collection method like interview is a co-creation of reality between the subjective perceptions of researcher and their participants. Also, the data analysis is a process of a researcher to construct and interpret their understanding and observation of participants' meanings and experiences.

Seidman (2006)'s three-interview series was carefully designed to enhance the structure and process of the data collection in this research. Firstly, the design of the structure minimized the influence of interviewers throughout the interview process. The structure and purpose of each three interviews were carefully designed so that both interviewer and interviewees could maintain a focus as a systematic exploration on the research topic. Also, the time between these interviews allowed them to maintain openness in the conversation as well as maintaining the logic and picture of the research topic. Second, the length of interview was approximately 90 minutes so that participants could have sufficient time to reconstruct and reflect their experiences.

Second, the design of interview enhanced the trustworthiness of the study. Open questions and focus of each interview facilitated protagonists to share their experience in their context. Across the three interviews, interviewer could check with the protagonists on the accuracy and consistency of their experiences and information. Also, I could take time to connect experiences from different informants as well as to seek the comments and feedback of them on each other. Overall, the design of the three interviews structure allowed me to have a clear picture of how informants conceptualize and make meaning of their experience.

### 4.5 Data Analysis: The Process of Thematic Analysis

### 4.5.1 Introduction of Thematic Analysis

As for a descriptive study, the common methodology of data analysis for qualitative research is thematic analysis and content analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Content analysis is inapplicable in this study as the philosophical stance is limited and its goal is to explore unknown phenomenon, while thematic analysis can be applied by broader philosophical stances like realism and constructionism (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thus, thematic analysis emphases on interpretation of the data and re-organising the identified components into patterns and themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In general, thematic analysis can be either data-driven or theory-driven. In this study, theory-driven thematic analysis is conducted according the theoretical framework in the previous chapter.

Since the philosophical stance of this study is constructionism, the analysis process emphasis on interpreting interviewee's perception of reality, their attitude and lived experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Deductive approach will be applied in coding as I am interested in analysing the data related to the existing theoretical framework.

In this study, thematic analysis is selected as it fits the social constructionist epistemology. In general, thematic analysis not only facilitates researchers to organise flexibly and interpret these themes, but also to illustrate the interconnectivity between themes for reporting purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is often being criticised as lack of clear guidelines and reporting in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure the thematic analysis in this study is methodologically sound, this study modified Braun & Clarke's (2006) process of thematic analysis. The process will be divided into six phases: 1) Immersing in Transcribed Data; 2) Categorising Units into Levels of Agency; 3) Generating Potential Themes & Codes of Symbolic Resources; 4) Generating a Thematic Map with Potential Themes; 5) Reporting for Analysis.

### 4.5.2 Phase I: Immersing in Transcribed Data

Nine audio recordings from the interviewees were fully transcribed, including feedback from the interviewer and interviewees. All non-verbal response including pause, hesitation and laughter were noted. Since some interviewees had difficulties in speaking due to their health condition, I listened to the records repeatedly to double-check the transcriptions to ensure its precisions. For example, simple deletion of missing words that make significant difference in the meaning of the utterance. Also, I noted non-verbal meaning to ensure the originality of the sentences. For example, laughters and pauses between sentences.

In the beginning of this phase, I read the interview text as a whole. Before formal coding process takes off, I read and re-read the transcribed data to gain better depth and breadth of it. Braun and Clarke (2006) used the word "immersion" to suggest researcher should repeatedly reading it to search for initial ideas of meanings and patterns. At this read and re-reading process, I read the interview transcripts as a whole to gain an initial impression. To be more specific, I took notes and short phrases on the margin of transcript as memo of different ideas and key points. I get an impression on what the text talking about, how these posts are correlated to the self-identity of the informant, how they would like to present themselves on social media.

In the middle of this phase, I extracted the relevant utterance of each post from the whole interview. Each extracted part of utterance of a post was studied as "a unit" of episode. In whole, each protagonists have nine units. I further study each unit in different perspectives. I repeated reading the unit as an independent unit to identify the flow and changes of the interview. Since each protagonist shared three posts which represent their experience in constructing her self-identity via social media. I focused on comparing the three posts to the whole in the interview and their connection between these post as the whole impression. I created a descriptive profile

of three informants to present an overview impression, highlight of the nine selected posts and their connections in between and as a whole.

When I had a general picture of the ideas, I active re-read them to break down the whole text into meaning units. For each unit, I highlighted the text and small paragraphs according to the ideas and key points. At the end of this phase, I created protagonists' profiles to archive their posts and important utterances. Also, I recorded my impression and preliminary interpretation of each post and the characteristics of each protagonist. These protagonists' profiles set the ground for further identification of possible meaning and patterns.

### 4.5.3 Phase II: Categorising Units into Levels of Agency

The purpose of this phase was to identify features and significant patterns from the data in a systematic manner. The aims of coding the data was to identify particular features to answer the research question. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the framework for investigation involves two dimensions: 1) to identify the type of symbolic resources involved in the identity construction; 2) to portray the levels of agency in the process of identity construction.

In this phase, the focus was to categorise twenty-seven posts into low, medium and high-level in Dimension 1. I first drafted a "codebook" to set the criteria and examples to ensure all posts are analysis in a consistent manner. With this "codebook", I studied the data thoroughly and ensured equal attention are given to each post and relevant utterance from the data. Each post and utterance were read and made notes according to the criteria on low, medium and high level of agency. To illustrate how each post was be marked, an example of "getting married" is given to demonstrate the rationale behind the coding process.

Table 5 Sub-sections of Discussion on Facebook Post under Framework

| Criteria in Codebook<br><br>Levels of Agency | Examples of the Facebook Post About "Getting Married" | Rationale |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Low Level of Agency:<br><br>➢ Performed conventional social roles to manage audience's impressions;<br>➢ Adopted culture as a reference of the norm to guide their traits and roles as self-expressions;<br>➢ Aimed to strive for self and social acceptance | My mother always says, it is important for a girl to get married before they reach to thirty years old. I don't want to be a spinster. A spinster is useless as a woman. | "Getting married" is a social expectation. She is urged to do so as a prescribed gender performance |

| Medium Level of Agency:<br><br>➢ Selected and explored potential identities as experiments;<br>➢ Negotiate with others to co-create a favourable socio-cultural context;<br>➢ Aimed to gain a sense of self-efficacy as goal-attainment of their values.<br>➢ Selected and explored potential identities as experiments;<br>➢ Negotiate with others to co-create a favourable socio-cultural context;<br>➢ Aimed to gain a sense of self-efficacy as goal-attainment of their values. | I know the chance of "getting married" is dim for disabled people like me. However, I can still be a wonderful wife if I have an understanding and supportive husband. | "Getting married" is a way to meet her goal. Being a wife is an alternative identity she wishes to pursue. Also, she addresses the potential resources and role support to actualise her ideal role as a wife. |
|---|---|---|
| High Level of Agency:<br><br>➢ Constructed an authentic identity through autobiographical reasoning and assembled significant episodes;<br>➢ Interpreted and shared the novel meanings of specific stories;<br>➢ Aimed to create a sense of self-continuity and authenticity | I think the meaning of "getting married" means "you love me and also my disabilities". I had a relationship before. We broke up. I realise that true love is a person who loves me and my disability. | "Getting married" is a re-defined meaning made by the participant after reviewing her previous relationship. |

At the end of this phase, all posts were categorised according to the "codebook". I wrote "episode overview report" to mark the rationale behind categorising each unit to the specific level of agency. I may re-read and re-categorise these units until the rationale of each unit explain the agency of the protagonists and connect to the criteria. In sum, a total of twenty-seven social media posts were analysed and categorised into three levels of agency: low (4 posts), medium (14 posts), and high (9 posts).

Table 6 Posts Categorised by Different Levels

| Levels Agency | Helen | Sam | Tanya | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low level agency | Helen Post 7 | Sam Post 4<br>Sam Post 7<br>Sam Post 9 | | 4 |
| Medium level agency | Helen Post 2<br>Helen Post 3<br>Helen Post 4<br>Helen Post 5<br>Helen Post 9 | Sam Post 1<br>Sam Post 2<br>Sam Post 3<br>Sam Post 5<br>Sam Post 8 | Tanya Post 3<br>Tanya Post 6<br>Tanya Post 8<br>Tanya Post 9 | 14 |

| High level agency | Helen Post 1 | Sam Post 6 | Tanya Post 1 | 9 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Helen Post 6 | | Tanya Post 2 | |
| | Helen Post 8 | | Tanya Post 4 | |
| | | | Tanya Post 5 | |
| | | | Tanya Post 7 | |

**4.5.4 Phase III: Generating Potential Themes & Codes of Symbolic Resources**

In this phase, I focused on the dimension II in my research framework. In dimension II, symbolic resources include cultural symbols, communication modalities and technology. I studied the symbolic resources of each level of agency. I generated initial codes and potential themes of each symbolic resources. I categorized these initial codes and extract them to potential themes. Relevant codes were collated, combined, and compared to form a broader scope of themes. Each code was given names, brief descriptions, and examples to ensure the meaning from the data set remained.

To facilitate creativity and flexibility, I used tables or post-it papers to organize these codes into different levels of themes in terms of main themes and subthemes. When new themes emerged when some initial codes did not fit in the main themes and subthemes. At the end of this phase, connections across the initial codes, sub-themes and main themes were developed for next phase.

**4.5.5 Phase IV: Generating a Thematic Map with Potential Themes**

This phase aims to organize themes to ensure these potential themes are connected as a map as well as connected to the data set. Two tasks were completed in this phase.

The first task was to review the extracted codes and data of each theme. There were three kinds of decision I made: 1) Discard potential themes which did not have solid data as proof; 2) Extract new themes to combine similar themes to identify its significance; 3) Breakdown themes to identify the distinctions between the extracted codes. The goal of first task was to create a coherent pattern of the themes.

At the end of the first task, I studied the validity of themes to ensure the thematic map can accurately reflect the full picture of the data set to respond to the theoretical framework. Re-reading of the entire data was essential to ascertain the connection of themes and data set. Also, I re-read the data for additional codes to ensure missing data in the first initial coding phase were included. In the process of re-reading, I highlighted the significant quotes from protagonists' utterances for next phase.

Table 7 Theme Map of Cultural Symbols Across Levels of Agency

| Levels | Low Level of Agency | Medium Level of Agency | High Level of Agency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Script/ behaviours | Activities are mostly related to their social identity (e.g. grocery shopping, cooking meals and sharing handbags) | ➢ Social scripts are main imitation and experimentation of preferred identity (e.g. bi-sexual identity, designers, adult roles) <br> ➢ These preferred identity are closely related to daily oppression (e.g. gender patriarchy, heterosexism and ableism) | ➢ Reconceptualizing concepts and symbols by making sense from their experiences. <br> ➢ New interpretation and meanings of important concepts (e.g. "disability aesthetics", "ethic of care" and caregiving relationship, "quality of life" of disabled women); <br> ➢ They also constructed authentic identities (e.g. second mom, big sister, sexual appealing disabled women) |
| People | Supporting actors in daily life (e.g. husband, girlfriend etc) | Two types of people: <br><br> ➢ People closely related to power to negotiate for favourable cultural context (e.g. potential employers, caregivers); <br> ➢ People who serve as allies who provide support and resources, they need for identity exploration | People involved in significant episodes to facilitate their reflection of self and life experiences (e.g. grownup brother, aging parents) |

| | | (e.g. friends who help to do makeup). | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Outfit/Body features | Limited to available outfits or items (i.e. some items are unable to use due to their disabilities and limitation) | Explore different outfits (i.e. which may not try before) to signify their alternative identity, particularly on gender and sexual identities. (e.g. business suits, semi-nudity) | Choose specific items with authentic meanings of their body features and outfit as their signature of self (e.g. high heels, off-shoulder white dress) |

The second task in this phase was to refine the thematic map to become a whole "story" as an analysis to respond to the research question. Refinement of themes included collating extracted data for each theme, re-naming and defining each theme to identify its significance and correlation between themes. I reviewed the essence of these subthemes and its connection with their main theme. I wrote these themes to identify a specific aspect of the analysis and remain coherence and consistency. I also refined the structure of the thematic map to demonstrate the hierarchy and connection of meanings. I repeatedly reviewed and refined the themes until I could clearly describe the points of each theme and explain the scope of analysis.

### 4.5.7 Phase V: Reporting for Analysis

At the final phase, I wrote a complete detailed story with vivid examples from extracted data and present the analysis logically and coherently for my readers. Although it is a scholarly report, I tried to present and package it as a story which is concise, logical, interesting. To demonstrate the validity of my analysis, I provided sufficient support from extracted data to illustrate the significances of the themes. Despite the complexity of structure of the analysis, I tried to clearly present the analysis clearly to set a solid ground to make further argument to the research question.

### 4.5.8 Evaluation on Data Analysis

To ensure the thematic analysis in this study is methodologically and theoretically sound, a checklist was used to evaluate the quality of the thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis should be evaluated in five perspectives: 1) Transcription; 2) Coding; 3) Analysis; 4) Sufficient Time; 5) Reporting.

For transcription, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested researcher should ensure the transcript is detailed and accurate in a reasonable level. In the process of transcription, I repeated listened to the records repeatedly to check and revise the transcripts. Words and non-verbal cues are noted and check to ensure the coherences of protagonists' utterance. For some uncertain utterance, I also replay them to the protagonists in their next interview or via WhatsApp to seek their clarification.

For coding, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that the process should be comprehensive by giving equal attention to all data throughout the coding process. Segment data should be collated to ensure the themes are consistent and distinctive. In this thematic analysis, each unit was studied independently and separated in a sufficient timetable. Each unit was given attention to go through the coding process. Also, re-reading of "codebook" between each units helped me to analysis the data consistently. Should I found the "codebook" fail to give concrete guideline in some ambiguous situation, I enriched and finetuned the criteria and definitions in the "codebook" to address these ambiguity. Also, I returned to the previous units to do recoding according to the revised "codebook" to ensure all coding of the twenty-seven units are consistent and distinctive.

For analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that analysis should be closely connected and illustrate how data are being interpreted. Analysis should deliver a sound analytical reasoning and illustration of segment data as supporting its claims. In this study, the generation of codes and themes were like knitting a scarf. The process of analysis illustrated how I extracted codes from utterance, joined the similar ones and identified the distinctive ones, generated them to themes. The knitting of the thematic map shows the threads and connections between themes with examples and quotes from utterance. The result chapter clearly demonstrate how the themes and raw data are connected and interpreted clearly.

For sufficient time, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that researcher needs to provide sufficient time and effort for each phase before proceeding to the next phase. In each phase, I spent sufficient time on my analysis from level to level. I set a clear delivery task for each phase to complete. For example, "protagonists' profile" in phase I, "episode overview report" in phase II and "Theme Map" in phase IV. These deliverable outputs ensure these phases reached satisfactory level for the next phase.

For reporting, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that researcher needs to explicate and consistently illustrate how the report related to the epistemological position. Instead of passively let the themes to emerge, the process of analysis should illustrate how researcher actively making sense and interpreting the data. In this study, I followed symbolic interactionism to study how disabled women learn and interpret symbols to communicate with others via social media. In the lens of symbolic interactionism, I formulated two dimension to understand and interpret the agency of disabled women and the symbolic resources they applied via social media.

## 4.6 Ethical Considerations

### 4.6.1 Confidentiality & Use of Facebook Posts

Over decades, the use of visual methods and digital media in internet in qualitative research has become popular as it is a more accessible medium for informants to involve and participate in the research (Boxall & Ralph, 2009). However, the use of digital media and visual images raises ethical concerns.

As for this study, I acquired ethical approval from Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HSESC Ref No.: HSEARS20200117003). I also provided information sheet and informed consent to the participants. The information and consent included background information of the research, outline of the interviews, potential harms, voluntary opt-in/out participation, privacy protection, use of data for research and publication, contact details and complain procedure.

It is possible that data may contain identifiable user details and personal attributes in social media reach. In this study, informants were invited to select their posts and photos in Facebook to share their experience in constructing their self-identity via social media. These self-published posts on their personal Facebook are not expected to be used for research purpose. These posts may be photos related to their personal lives as well as their significant others. However, when they shared their posts in the interview, these materials were not only for data analysis and elaboration of their actual experience, but also will be part of in the result chapter for publication. For this reason, further ethical measures in methodology were taken into consideration.

For ethical measures, it is important to declare the use of data collected from the interview. As for their photos and Facebook posts, they were reminded to protect confidentiality of self and others. Informants were encouraged to choose photos that do not include people who do not involve in this study. Protection of personal privacy of others was also stressed to ensure they have the consent from the person in the post. The use of selected Facebook posts were explained to participants as for illustration and samples in the result chapter. Any information which may associate to their personal identity remain undisclosed to protect their confidentiality. Participants signed a written consent before participation. Also, their participation were completely voluntary, and they were told that their information were being stored for three years.

### 4.6.2 Researcher Role Confusion as an Insider

Taylor (2011) raised ethical concerns on insider research, particularly pre-existing relationship with informants and members of the target community. First, pre-existing relationships may create a sense of role confusion. As an insider, I managed to earn the trust and rapport with informants due to long engagement and close connection in the disabled community. Informants may be more willing to share their personal feelings as seeing me as a friend rather than a

researcher. For this reason, distancing and clarification of my researcher role during interview is crucial. Informants should aware that they are providing information to me as a researcher.

Also, proper arrangement of interview enhances their acknowledgement of the nature of the interview, the use of findings as well as how the results can benefit their life (Blythe, Wilkes, Jackson, & Halcomb, 2013). For this reason, I needed to be sensitive to explain the studying in the beginning and the debriefing phase. Managing informants' expectations could be accomplished by stating the aims and use of the research study, the uniqueness and significance of this research. I took the initiative to understand and acknowledge their expectations so that I could minimize the gap of expectation (Taylor, 2011).

**4.7 Conclusion**

In the lens of symbolic interactionism, the purpose of this study is to understand how disabled women use symbolic resources and exercise their agency. The design and process of sampling, data collection and thematic analysis are described and explained. Furthermore, I reviewed my position on this research as a researcher and an insider of the disability community. At the end of this chapter, I evaluate the methodology of this study. In the next chapter, I report the findings to understand and interpret their motivation and actions to strengthen their preferred identity via social media.

The purpose of following three chapters is to provide an overview of the episodes and social media texts reflecting different agency levels. I organised the data and interviews to understand how disabled women construct their self-identity via social media. A three-level agency framework was used to understand how disabled women construct their self-identities on social media in a systematic manner.

**CHAPTER V: THE MAKING OF DISABILITY IDENTITY**

**5.1 Overview: Episodes Reflecting Low-Level Agency**

Among the twenty-seven posts from the three protagonists, three posts from Sam and one from Helen were categorised as having low-level agency. The key theme behind Sam's three posts was her social identity as a housewife. Three posts were about her daily life as a housewife, such as routine grocery shopping (Sam Post 7 and 9) and cooking meals (Sam Post 4).

As for Helen, only one post was categorised as reflecting low-level agency. According to Helen, We TV had asked her to participate in a Facebook challenge called "What's in my bag" (Helen Post 7). In this video, the hosts shared the items in their handbags with the audience. Helen and her girlfriend, who also has disabilities, discussed several lifestyle issues of interest to disabled women.

Table 8 Four Posts Categorised as Having Low-Level Agency

| Posts | Post Name | Post Description and Purpose |
|---|---|---|
| Sam Post 4 | Sweating in the Kitchen | ➤ A photograph taken while preparing dinner in a hot kitchen with her husband, who is also disabled. |
| Sam Post 7 | Grocery Shopping | ➤ A photograph taken while shopping for groceries. |
| Sam Post 9 | Urgent Shopper | ➤ Highlighting an incident related to stress as a homemaker. After carrying a bag of rice home, her husband immediately asked her to return to the supermarket to purchase something else. |
| Helen Post 7 | What's in My Bag | ➤ To share an episode from WeTV (i.e. an online channel), which she hosted with a friend with disabilities. In this video, they accepted a Facebook challenge to share with viewers the items in their handbags. |

**5.2 Showcasing Knowledge and Skills to Perform Pre-defined Social Identities**

In these four posts, Sam and Helen demonstrated their efforts to fit in with social norms. In Helen Post 7, Helen discussed being asked by an online channel to "talk about their handbags like any [other or non-disabled] women who accepted the Facebook challenge".

Sam followed the conventional social script to evaluate her performance as a housewife. She claimed herself being "good" when she considered herself capable to perform the conventional

social script. On the other hand, she found herself incompetent when she failed to perform the conventional social script. These three posts from Sam showcased her capacity to "play the role" of housewife by completing housekeeping duties, such as grocery shopping (Sam Post 7 and 9) and cooking meals (Sam Post 4). Sam reinforced the idea of being a housewife by performing this social role according to conventional stereotypes.

> Sam: When I got married, I had to be a home cook. I started by knowing nothing about cooking. I was a terrible cook...I am getting better now. In the past, I had no improvement. [Now], I have made some progress. I hope I'll be better in the future. I hope I can have a better performance in the kitchen. I like cooking, and I want to perform better by making delicious meals for my family. In general, I hope my followers see my growth and how I gained confidence. When I got married, I felt dreadful and had very low self-confidence. Now, I want to get over the past and embrace the best things in life.

Sam pointed out that she lacked the knowledge and skills to perform her social identity as a housewife when she got married. For instance, being a housewife traditionally requires certain skills such as cleaning and cooking. However, Sam claimed that she had no housekeeping skills as her family seldom expected her to learn and do so. She said, "When I first got married, I didn't know how to cook, and I knew nothing about cooking.... because my mother prohibited me from stepping [foot] in the kitchen. Also, my younger brother was more like my big brother. He cooked me meals." Sam failed to acquire these "wifely qualities" because her family did not expect her to become "someone's wife" in the future. In other words, Sam grew up without the prospect of a housewife.

Sam explained that she went through a steep learning curve to learn the essential skills to perform this role.

According to the above findings, we can infer that both Sam and Helen made an effort to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to perform their social identities according to the conventional social scripts.

## 5.3 Applying Conventional Cultural Symbols to Perform "Self" in Everyday Life

In episodes reflecting low-level agency, both Helen and Sam adopted normative social scripts, props, and cultural contexts to cultivate a sense of sameness as "ordinary" women. They used social media as a stage to "perform" in a "soap opera" where they performed their "assigned" social roles in everyday life. In Helen Post 7, Helen interacted with her friend in a "girl talk". The Facebook challenge and their handbags served as props to signify their sameness as women. Sam specifically presented her daily interactions with her husband as that of a supporting actor (Sam Post 4, 7 and 9). She set the scene at typical symbolic venues for a housewife, such as a supermarket (Sam Post 7, 9) and a kitchen (Sam Post 4). Sam also used common props like rice,

groceries (Sam Post 7), and the dinner table (Sam Post 4) to signify her identity as a housewife. Although Helen and Sam both demonstrated their use of cultural symbols to perform in their "soap opera", there is a significant difference in the availability of these cultural symbols between Helen and Sam.

Sam used these habitual routines in her housewife role, which are often taken for granted, to better understand both the concept of womanhood and what it means to belong to a cultural group such as housewives. Sam used the normative expectation of a housewife to guide her behaviour (Sam Post 9). While she was frustrated after carrying a bag of rice home, Sam returned to the supermarket as her husband requested. She considered this act as signifying her "full devotion to her duty" and to show that she met the expectation of "a good housewife".

> Sam: I want to remind myself every day that what I am doing. Whenever I have time, I will post and let people know who I am. Numerous followers simply added me and read my profile, but they did not know who I am. Therefore, I took these photos to inform those who wanted to know me.

Sam used these snapshots of her work in the kitchen (Sam Post 4) and the supermarket (Sam 7) as infographic records to record her daily routine.



Figure 1 Cooking a meal in a hot kitchen (Sam Post 4)

As for Helen, she heavily emphasised the tropes of conventional culture despite being unable to fit in. Helen highlighted the "handbag" as a crucial cultural symbol of womanhood. Due to her disability and the design of her wheelchair, she could not carry a handbag like non-disabled women. Her two assumptions illustrate her desire to "perform" with this unavailable symbol. She

said, "If I were an able-bodied woman, I guess I would spend a lot of time picking and matching with bags." Helen accepted that she could not use certain cultural symbols for their intended purpose due to her disabilities.

> Helen: Should there be a new design of handbag, say, I could hang it on my wheelchair, I would go crazy for pretty and stylish handbags. I would spend lots of time picking and matching my handbags. I would be thrilled doing so. Handbags are fashion items like clothing and shoes. I would feel so good as I could put on something fashionable.

Helen placed a heavy emphasis on the cultural symbols available to her to signify her identity. She elaborated, "It is just a bag. I guess clothing is more important as I can pick some fashionable ones. Handbags are less important than fashion outfits. That's the reason why I don't invest too much time and effort on handbags."

Furthermore, she thought of ways to deal with this discrepancy with equanimity. She mentioned, "Since I am a woman with disabilities, I save my time and effort. As for a handbag, I just look at its practical use."

In general, we can see both Helen and Sam learnt, copied and reinforced the socio-cultural knowledge and practice of womanhood. Sam followed the conventional social script to direct her behaviour and daily life. Her posts presented the recurrent and predictable routines of a stereotypical housewife, such as grocery shopping (Sam Post 7 and 9) and cooking meals (Sam Post 4). On the contrary, Helen was unable to perform this role with the conventional cultural props and scripts. She said this was unavoidable due to her disabilities.


5.4 Highlighting the Positive Elements of an Assigned "Sick Role"

Both Helen and Sam showed two approaches to deal with their assigned "sick role". First, they minimised the negative side of the "sick role" by emphasising that their daily life was not significantly impacted by their disability. They both mentioned their similarity to non-disabled people. Sam said, "You must accept yourself and your disabilities. When you fully accept yourself, then you can perceive yourself as an ordinary woman. Then, you can build your identity with confidence."

> Sam: My disability is so easily seen as you can see from the way I hold my phone. I believe people would understand when they look at my photos. Well…what I want to say is that it's ok to be disabled. It doesn't bother me. In the past, my net-friends said that I'm optimistic and confident when they saw my pictures. They realised that my disability doesn't bother me much. What I want to say is that I am ok despite my disability. I want to tell them, as a non-disabled individual, why must they fixate on so many things in life? I don't get too attached to things. After all, we are just human.

Although Helen faced physical constraints to living independently, she shared her "Bring-your-own-fork" post as a symbol of her independent social life in the Facebook challenge (Helen Post 7).

> Helen: I always bring a fork when I go out. It's because my hands are not strong enough to use chopsticks. If the restaurant doesn't have a fork; then I can eat with my own fork. Maybe ordinary people would think tableware is just something very minor for a meal. But it is a big deal for me. I may face a lot of trouble when I can't use the tableware provided by the restaurant. In the video of the Facebook challenge, I wanted to tell people about our needs. Well, we have no significant differences to ordinary people. We have some minor differences, say a fork. We also bring a handbag like those ordinary women…with all the necessary items…and also a small difference."

Second, Helen and Sam emphasised the good side of the "sick role" by highlighting the positive labels attributed to disabled people, for example, being optimistic or a motivational figure for others. They revealed their positive attitude by sharing their struggles and pain in a humorous manner. In Helen Post 7, she said, "Had a stretch tonight. My shoulder revived finally😭 , and I can endure for two more weeks." In her statement, she used "a stretch" and the emoji "😭" to signify her pain. Yet, she also used the word "revive", a slang term commonly used by disabled people to complain about muscle pain and stiffness in a humorous fashion. In a similar vein, Sam made use of her everyday challenges to motivate and inspire others. In Sam Post 4, she used several hashtags such as "#something called persistence, #I'm crazy, and #Crazy is Sam's name" to describe her dogged persistence.

> Sam: My friends see my…optimism and positivism. Their description of me matches my character. Look, my legs are disabled, my muscles are degenerating, and I'm still cooking meals. The whole idea was an absurd madness. People may assume that I wallow in self-pity. However, I don't get bothered by my disabilities. At least I can cook meals despite all challenges. The uniqueness of this post is that I demonstrated how I overcome all my challenges to play my role as a housewife. A lot of people assumed that we are dependent on others…or maybe we lack the confidence to believe that we can make it. However, this picture tells people that despite our limitations, we can overcome our physical challenges as long as we try. There's always a way to overcome…[problems] if you keep trying. Just keep doing what you can do.

> Sam: You need to have faith in yourself, then you will have confidence. With your self-confidence, you can take actions to prove to others that you can do it. You must accept your disabilities and explore what you can do within your limitations. Also, you can explore the remaining strengths you have despite your disabilities. Should I give up everything just because I am unable to do [something] with my disabilities. I will live a boring and meaningless life. For this reason, I think the most important [thing] is to find the worth and value in yourself.

The above finding suggested that disability stigma and inspirational positivism are two sides of the same coin. Helen and Sam showed how to balance the negative and positive meanings of the "sick role".


5.5 Gaining Social Acceptance and Status in the Community

In episodes reflecting low-level agency, Helen and Sam aimed to gain social acceptance and status in their interpersonal relationships by using cultural symbols and responding to comments. Both of them stressed that Facebook was a crucial platform as the majority of their social media followers were on that platform. Helen said, "Most of my friends are on Facebook. That's why I prefer to post it here." Sam believed maintaining her current pool of followers was crucial since they had witnessed her growth over a decade. She considered them old friends who truly understood and cared about her.

> Sam: I have been using…Facebook for 7 to 9 years now. I have lots of friends following me from my Yahoo blog to Facebook. These friends love my Facebook and say that they love to read my posts every day. Therefore, whenever I have time, I'll post on Facebook to let them know. After all, they have been following me for more than a decade.

First, both Sam and Helen used symbols to increase their acceptance and raise their status among their peers. In Helen Post 7, she shared a video produced with WeTV, a popular online channel with the disability community. Showcasing her collaboration with other stakeholders gave her a sense that she was representing the disabled community. On the other hand, Sam purposefully used "#Fried pork chops with yoghurt" to emphasise her sufficient knowledge in cooking. She and Helen also demonstrated their connections with different disability groups and stakeholders to show they were insiders within the community. Sam purposefully used text to describe her photos for her friends with visual impairment (Sam Post 7). Providing visual descriptions was a gesture to facilitate integration among people with different types of disabilities. Sam explained, "Why did I write 'a trolley in the picture'? I need to emphasise the trolley because I have a group of brothers with visual impairments. They can't see these photos visually. That's why I have to make notes as visual descriptions of these pictures. I purposefully design this for them."

> Sam: I wanted them to realise that disabled women can take care of their families. I can do what an ordinary housewife does. There is no difference between a woman with disabilities and an ordinary woman when they take care of their husband. She is just a woman. There's no point to label her disability as she can do what ordinary people do."

a.       Grocery items with a visual description (Sam Post 7)

Second, Helen and Sam emphasised receiving and replying comments. According to their statements, this was important for two reasons. The first was to collect feedback from their followers. Sam considered positive comments and "likes" as an indicator to measure her "stage" performance as a housewife. She said, "Everyone replied positively. They concerned about me standing for a long time in the kitchen." In Helen Post 7, Helen received a comment from a friend with disabilities calling her a "KOL" (i.e. a Key Opinion Leader). This positive comment affirmed her social status within the disability community.

The second purpose of "receiving and giving comments" was to facilitate learning from others as well as stimulating them to think further. Helen explained, "The more I discuss with others, the more I come up with good ideas. When I posted it, I didn't think deeply." Sam echoed Helen's reasons for sharing such posts.

> Sam: They asked curiously in their comments. They said, "I want to eat too." And I replied, "Sure, I'll make it for you." That's the way I engage in conversations with my housewife friends. Having a dialogue with them is terrific. Talking about food is a good entry point for dialogues.

The above findings provide further support to infer that Helen and Sam made an effort to communicate with their followers in the hope of gaining social acceptance and status in their interpersonal relationships.

## 5.6 Concluding Remarks: "I am the Birthday Girl."

When it comes to low-level agency, strengthening one's preferred identity is about gaining acceptance for one's disabilities while also gaining more confidence. Based on my findings and observations of episodes reflecting low-level agency, I have drawn inferences about how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. Overall, the three strategies are as follows:

Firstly, disabled women exhibit their potential and capacity to play stereotypical social identities to signify their sameness to non-disabled women.

In Section 5.2.1, Helen and Sam showed their ability to assume stereotypical social identities. I have inferred that disabled women lack learning experience to acquire necessary knowledge and skills as their families do not expect them to perform these social identities in the future. When they have to take up these social identities in adulthood, they find it challenging to adapt and perform these social roles. By displaying their ability to play these social identities, disabled women aim to regain social acceptance as "any ordinary woman".

In Section 5.2.2, they used conventional cultural symbols and available social scripts to signify their sameness as other non-disabled women. They both played different social roles, followed stereotypical scripts, and performed with conventional symbols and supporting actors.

According to my observations and findings in Section 5.2.2, disabled women may find that some cultural symbols and scripts are beyond their reach due to their physical constraints. They might fail to perform as an "ordinary woman" and they cope with this situation by using various cognitive defence mechanisms. In addition, they fully utilise the remaining and available cultural symbols to signify their social identities as ordinary women. Disabled women make use of social media to broadcast various aspects of their everyday life. The way they perform their social identities on social media may be closely related to Goffman's dramaturgical self. (This will be explored further in the discussion chapter.)

As for the second strategy, disabled women promote the positive side of the "sick role". In Section 5.2.3, Helen and Sam fully accepted the conventional social script of their "sick role" due to their disabilities. They both made strong statements that "disability is not that horrible."

This finding unexpectedly suggests that disabled women may not entirely reject their assigned "sick role". They accept the social script to play "sick" and perform like a character in an inspirational movie. Disabled women make use of social media as a platform to play the positive

and inspirational sides of the "sick role". Instead of embracing the negative side and the stigma of the "sick role", disabled women demonstrate their persistence and positivism to earn more social acceptance.

As for the third strategy, disabled women communicate with their followers and members of their community for social acceptance and status. In Section 5.2.4, Helen and Sam discussed how they communicated with their followers and its ultimate purpose.

My inference from these findings in Section 5.2.4 is that disabled women make use of social media as a stage to perform their social identities and to engage in a dialogue with their followers. In doing so, they aim to gain social acceptance as "ordinary" women. When they display their disability identities, they aim to gain social status as a pioneer in the disability community. It is possible that gaining social acceptance and status in their interpersonal relationships bolsters their self-acceptance and self-esteem. Disabled women collect the guidance and encouragements through these conversations with their followers. With their followers' guidance, they slowly master the skills to perform their social identities. This learning process is closely related to Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding which will be discussed in the next chapter.

At the end of this section, I would like to use a metaphor to conclude my analysis and inferences about low-level agency. When it comes to low-level agency, the disabled women in this study are "Birthday Girls" who receive and appreciate all the gifts they receive. They accept and perform pre-assigned social roles whether they like them or not. They never turn down any "presents" as these pre-assigned social identities have been taken-for-granted. They have learned to play their pre-assigned and given social identities. They take conventional social scripts and the available props as presumption. The narratives and the images they share are like dramaturgical scenes and storylines reflecting their social identities. They apply symbolic resources for impression management to gain a sense of self-acceptance. As a "Birthday Girl", disabled women perform and showcase their strengths and the best part of their pre-assigned self as a celebration of life.

# CHAPTER VI: THE MAKING OF INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY

## 6.1 Overview: Episodes Reflecting Medium-Level Agency

From the twenty-seven posts from three protagonists, fourteen posts were categorised as having medium-level agency. There were five posts from Sam, five from Helen, and four from Tanya. There were two main themes among these fourteen posts: identity exploration and experimentation and co-constructing favourable socio-cultural context.

Table 9 Fourteen posts categorised as Medium-Level agency

| Posts | Post Name | Post Description and Purpose |
|---|---|---|
| Sam Post 1 | Gender of the Day: "Missy" | ➢ To select and explore the preferred identity ("missy") as her gender identity of the day;<br>➢ To identify herself as a gender-fluid individual who refuses to confine herself to conventional gender stereotypes. |
| Sam Post 2 | Topless Protest | ➢ To resist social pressure and the stigma attached to the sexuality of disabled people;<br>➢ A semi-naked selfie with activism hashtags imitating her "housewife feminists" Facebook peers advocating for sex rights for the disabled. |
| Sam Post 3 | Look at My Makeup | ➢ To resist the normative stigma that disabled women are "filthy";<br>➢ A selfie with make-up done by her friend to signify her concern about her appearance as an "ordinary woman";<br>➢ To identify the support and resources from her friend and husband. She prioritised her developmental goals to learn how to put on make-up. |
| Sam Post 5 | Sanitary Napkins | ➢ To share the difficulty of panic-buying sanitary napkins during the COVID-19 pandemic imitating a commonly shared script among her peers from the "housewives Union" Facebook group;<br>➢ To display her alternative script of a masculine self as she showed herself as a gender-fluid individual;<br>➢ To enhance communication and friendship with her housewives' social circle. |
| Sam Post 8 | Missy's Favourite Mask | ➢ To resist the normative stigma on disabled women as "filthy";<br>➢ To explore an alternative social script as "kong-girl" as a character of her feminine self "missy"; |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | ➢ To explore the meaning of an "exquisite attitude" towards her appearance and life. |
| Helen Post 2 | A Day in Auto-play Mode | ➢ To select an alternate meaning and script when "being unattended by core-caregiver" by showcasing her routine with different friends and social gatherings;<br>➢ To replace the original script to remain housebound and the conventional stigma of disabled people having a narrow social network;<br>➢ To welcome more friends to enrich her social life as an independent individual. |
| Helen Post 3 | WFH is real work | ➢ To express anger in a tense caregiving relationship while she worked from home during the pandemic;<br>➢ To criticise how disability stigma, infantilisation, and the low expectations of disabled people hinder her job performance and development;<br>➢ To indicate her desire for the resources to gain autonomy and an adequate caregiving relationship. |
| Helen Post 4 | Rethink Inequality at Work | ➢ To express her disagreement with the conventional social context and the stigma and barriers she faces when pursuing employment;<br>➢ To associate a Korean movie defying gender patriarchy with her belief in equality |
| Helen Post 5 | Kpop's Love Fantasy | ➢ To use her status as a fangirl of a Korean pop band as a metaphor to express her desires for an intimate relationship;<br>➢ To delineate the alternative identity as "a girl brave enough to love again" but who is not ready to pursue this in the short term. |
| Helen Post 9 | I can cook too! | ➢ To explore her ability to cook as a characteristic of her preferred identity as a "wife";<br>➢ To identify resources and the possibility of constructing a favourable social context for her identity exploration. |
| Tanya Post 3 | Different Kind of Christmas | ➢ To replace the conventional social script that disabled people only care about their own welfare. She showed her support for Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB Movement;<br>➢ To gain a sense of autonomy by setting her Christmas routine and choosing an outfit for gender expression. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Tanya Post 6 | Fix Each other's Crown | ➢ To tag 100 friends to participate in a Facebook challenge with a feminist catchphrase on sisterhood;<br>➢ To co-create an assertive social context to gain social recognition of her "woman identity" in women's circles. |
| Tanya Post 8 | My designer's Tee | ➢ To resist the stigma that disabled people are dependent on government welfare and are only concerned with disability topics;<br>➢ To illustrate how she puts a high priority on exploring an alternative identity as a designer with a mission. |
| Tanya Post 9 | Appreciate Your Talents | ➢ To share her media coverage related to the careers of disabled people to publicly appeal for equal treatment and a friendly employment environment for disabled people;<br>➢ To explore a new "executive businesswoman" identity instead of simply being a motivational figure for disabled people. |

## 6.2 Segregating a "Private Space" From the Public Sphere

In episodes reflecting medium-level agency, the three protagonists chose different privacy settings for their social media posts based on their specific needs. Helen has an account on Facebook and Instagram. Sam has accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Tanya intended to have different social media accounts for her specific identities and followers. On Facebook, Tanya has one page for her design business, one for her as a public figure, and a personal page for her friends and family. Her Instagram started as a private account for her close friends. However, she switched her Instagram account to public mode as her followers from Facebook began to add her on Instagram. She tried to set up a new account on Instagram for private use. However, the Instagram detects and suggests potential friends who they may know in person. In Tanya's case, her followers found her new personal account and requested to follow as well. For this reason, Tanya gave up on having a new personal account.

> Tanya: I set up another account, but in the end, I prefer to post here. (laugh). In the beginning, I wanted to set up a new account for my personal posts. It was more about my private life. However, everyone added my new account (sigh) so I gave up. I don't use that account anymore.

For sensitive topics, such as her semi-naked selfie, Sam purposefully used Instagram due to Facebook's restriction on nudity (Sam Post 2). She divides her followers into two groups: loyal and general followers on Facebook and her young and close friends on Instagram. Sam considers Instagram as a favourable socio-cultural context as her followers were younger and open. She posted Sam Post 3 on both Facebook and Instagram. She said, "I posted it on Facebook first. Then,

I re-posted it on Instagram for a group of young friends. They are at least ten years younger than me. I posted to them as I thought they might like the lace top."

Tanya preferred to use Instagram Stories for two reasons. First, the content on Instagram Stories is only available for 24 hours. Second, she can control the privacy settings so that her posts are seen by only a specific group of followers (Tanya Post 8). Tanya said, "Every time I did something very personal, I posted it as an Instagram story. If I don't want it to be too public, I post it as an Instagram story. When I don't want to be viewed by everyone, then I post it on Instagram Stories." She also mentioned about setting the accessibility of her followers. She explained, "When I don't want to be viewed by a specific group of people, then I'll post it on Instagram Stories. Say, political issues, joining a march [or]protest. I don't want my family to interfere with me. Since I want the freedom to express myself, I won't let them see these posts."

After listening to Tanya's reasons, Helen echoed this her view in relation to Instagram Stories.

> Helen: The feature of the Instagram story is terrific. It is only available for 24 hours. The post is just available for a day, and it will be gone tomorrow. So for some people, should they wish to keep their posts untraceable, they choose to use Instagram Stories. That's why a lot of people like to use it as a glimpse of their life. I love this feature. I use it to interact with my friends. Posting an Instagram story is just like a flash to be known by others. If I want the post to be official and memorial, I'll post it on the Instagram page.

This result shows that the protagonists use different accounts on different social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. They also segregate their social media platforms into a "public sphere" and a "private space". For the "public sphere", the three protagonists indicated that Facebook was the dominant platform as they kept most of their social connections on Facebook. For a "private space" on other social media platforms, they perceived this space as "closed" and private for a specific group of significant others.

## 6.3 Immediate Responding to Everyday Oppression

Helen and Sam both used social media to "own their voice" by expressing their disagreement with disability stigma and oppression. For instance, Sam shared her frustration with panic-buying (Sam Post 5).

> Sam: I want to become a person who devotes her life to paint with colours. Just like I find friends to put on makeup for me, I want to present the best part of me. I am

married, and I have a sex life. It doesn't mean that we have a standard plan to follow. I just think we live our lives with limitless possibilities.

Helen was angry over an incident related to her caregiver (Helen Post 3). Due to the severity of her disabilities, she found it difficult to be independent and autonomous as she depended on others for many daily tasks. To maintain harmony in the relationship with her caregivers, Helen avoided explicitly expressing her disagreement and anger in her daily interactions with them. However, she chose to express her anger on social media as a way to own her voice.

> Helen: I may not get so mad if it was not related to my work. I am a very easy-going person. I would say, "(sigh) I'm happy to get up from the bed if you help me, but if you do not offer help, then I have to stay in bed all day." However, I had something important to do that day. That's the reason I was so mad. At that moment, I asked myself why I had to beg for help, just to get up from bed. Getting up is something so minor, but I don't have my autonomy, and I can't do it on my own. At the end of my post, I stated that I was mad at myself. I depend on others for such little things. Although my statement sounded like an impulsive rebuttal, it reflected the humblest ambition that I wish to be more independent. The intention to write this post was to express my feelings.

On the other hand, Helen carefully managed her level of self-disclosure to finetune the focus of her message. She believed that revealing that her father is her primary caregiver would entail a long explanation and would digress from the subject of the post (Helen Post 3). Furthermore, disclosing the identity of her caregiver might lead to another confrontation. Therefore, she chose to keep her caregiver's identity anonymous.

> Helen: There is a saying that "family shames must not be spread abroad". Sometimes it's just too complicated and sensitive. I seldom talk about these issues in social media. Disabled women require additional caregiving tasks due to their biological features. For example, putting on a bra, having menstruation. It's kind of….embarrassing…..when you need a man to handle these tasks. I don't want to tell others. It's not my intention, but I have no choice. When no one can help, I have to depend on my father. Sometimes my father would feel overwhelmed as he had to standby at home around the clock. That day, I was emotional and mad. I called him many times, and he knew that I urgently need to go to the toilet. He knew that I had to get up early for work the next day morning. However, he just ignored me. I was mad at him, and I was also mad at myself. I felt terrible for him as I rely on him for extensive care.

Since she considered the tension was unresolved, she carefully selected the information to disclose in her post to raise awareness about her caregiver. She said, "Maybe they would pay attention to similar scenarios in the future. She also wanted to share this caregiving tension with others.

Helen: I don't want to describe this caregiving tension as an isolated incident. Every one of us may experience similar situations. Their caregivers might be someone else, maybe not a father. In this post, I want to generalise this incident as a reference for everyone.

Overall, Helen found it challenging to gain respect and autonomy in the caregiving relationship with her family members. However, she expressed her disagreement, her anger, and her persistence not to give up in the power struggle with her caregivers.

## 6.4 Elaborating Unusual Views

In episodes reflecting medium-level agency, the protagonists intended to express uncommon views and feelings which were different to their common self-expression in their every day lives. They selected different genres and language to elaborate their unusual views. Three types of genres were identified: earnest, humorous and ambiguous.

In the posts deemed as being earnest, the protagonists conveyed a sense of seriousness and gave weight to their statements. They tended to use written Chinese to cultivate a sense of formality. In Sam Post 2, Sam stated her stance firmly: "Failed to challenge Facebook. Half-naked photos will be released on IG from now on." Helen also used written Chinese in her posts on caregiving tension (Helen Post 3) and her inner desire for an intimate relationship (Helen Post 5). Helen explained, "I prefer to use words to express myself. When I share my sadness, using written Chinese can better convey my inner feelings." Both Helen and Sam chose this "earnest genre" for posts with a strong emotional component.

Some posts were humorous to gain likability and creativity of self-expression and to let go the fear of rigid judgement about their unusual narratives. Helen and Sam used sarcasm and self-deprecating humour as a self-defence tactic to minimise their fear of being criticised. For example, Helen intended to explore her potential to be a wife by shopping for a hotpot dinner (Helen Post 2) and through her first cooking experience (Helen Post 9). She jokingly called herself a "good wife" (Helen Post 9). In Helen Post 2, Helen used the term "autoplay", which is a common gaming term, to describe her day without a caregiver in a more playful manner.

In a similar vein, Sam studied the meaning of different slang terms to convey a specific perspective on a sensitive issue. In Sam Post 2, she used "double may" to describe her curvy body in a positive fashion, as she thought the phrase was popular among young adults. She thought the word "hooter" was an old-fashioned way to erotise a curvaceous body.

Sam: The young generation know the meaning of "double may." Since I wanted to engage the young ones, I chose their use of words. That's why I wrote "double may".

Also, the word "hooter" is a bit vulgar. Since I didn't want people to misunderstand my meaning, I didn't use that word.

Some of Helen and Tanya's posts were ambiguous when they thought they might be socially undesirable or sensitive. They considered that ambiguity served as a "disguise" to allow them to express themselves. Insiders and close friends were the only people who could understand this ambiguous genre.

Helen: I write my posts ambiguously as if I'm the only person who understands or some very close friends know the incident. For the general public, they won't understand. I don't want them to know my initial meanings. I don't want them to know that I'm talking about a crush on a guy. I don't want people to gossip about me. Some people are very annoying. (laughs).

Helen used her status as a K-pop fangirl as a metaphor for her desire for an intimate relationship. She used a sketch in a notebook, her heart shape drawings, and lyrics from a Korean pop band to signify her teenage desire for romance.

Helen: It was more like a spiritual…or maybe a platonic love. I have a sense of inferiority. I believe people prefer an abled bodied girl to someone in a wheelchair. That's why I adore Jin-young (i.e. the Korean pop star). I no longer feel empty in my heart. I think of him all the time, and I miss him all day long. But I don't dare to express my love for someone in my everyday life. To me, I dare to express my crush on a Korean pop idol openly. It's ok to let people know how much I fancy him. But if my crush is someone in my life, I don't dare to let anyone know. I would keep it a secret.

It is surprising that the three protagonists purposefully chose different genres to present their unusual views for multiple purposes. They were earnest when they made their statements firmly. They chose to use humour as a self-protection mechanism when experimenting with alternative identities. What is surprising to me is that they considered the genre of ambiguity as a tactic to conceal their inner feelings.

## 6.5 Identifying with Alternative Cultures

A recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense amongst all protagonists that they borrowed from alternative cultures to enrich their narratives on social media. Helen made references to Korean popular culture in her posts, highlighting things such as movies, (Helen Post 4) pop music, and pop stars (Helen Post 5). Sam used terms and concepts from her feminist Facebook group (Sam Post 5). Meanwhile, Tanya used alternative types of discourse to address different issues in her posts, such as design professionalism (Tanya Post 8) and feminist culture in Facebook

challenges (Tanya Post 6). As a method to co-create an inter-subjective reality with favourable social orders and meanings, two themes were identified: 1) searching for alternative cultures; 2) scrutinising these alternative cultures.

In the interviews with the three protagonists, all of them shared how they searched for alternative cultures as symbolic resources of their posts. Helen mentioned Korean movies (Helen Post 4) and Korean music (Helen Post 5) as the symbolic resources of her posts. She echoed the movie's criticism of gender patriarchy and drew parallels with the challenges she faced in her own career.

> Helen: This movie encourages women to be confident regardless of their ability. To me, I associate it with disabled women. The message of the post is that we need to believe in ourselves and have self-confidence. Be bold to present our strengths. Because of the word "nü" (i.e. female in Chinese), this movie talks about how men dominate and stigmatise women in the workplace. I associated this scenario with my personal life and my job. In my post, I reflected how I was being doubted because of my identity as a woman with disabilities.

While Sam shared her experience in searching and joining Facebook pages in the interviews, her actions was like an act of "window shopping" to explore alternative cultural resources for her posts. She referred to terms and concepts from Facebook pages related to sex rights for disabled people (Sam Post 2), non-binary gender (Sam Post 1 and 8), and feminism (Sam Post 5). On the other hand, Tanya's symbolic resources included the Facebook challenge (Tanya Post 6), business entrepreneurship (Tanya Post 9), and Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB Movement (Tanya Post 3 and 8).

> Tanya: Facebook is more about my work. I have different accounts to serve different purposes. I found this Facebook challenge suits one of my advocacy topics. Since I wanted to express my view on womanhood, I accepted the challenge as I agreed with its message. It is not something extraordinary, but I think it can be an encouragement for mutual support among women. Usually, my posts cover different advocacy topics…and I thought it was time to talk about womanhood. I don't have to wait until March 8 (i.e. International Women's Day) to talk about womanhood. I can express myself as a woman anytime. As a woman with disabilities, I am a member of the women's community. I wanted to convey this message in the post.

Besides searching for alternative cultures, Tanya scrutinised these alternative cultures as an observer. Tanya explained how she did "homework" when she was researching a new topic for her advocacy work. In Tanya Post 9, it was her first attempt to promote the career development of disabled people. Besides studying similar coverage in the traditional and social media, she studied the feedback from the general public posted in online forums and other online platforms.

> Tanya: I wanted to receive more comments. I went to the magazine's website to read the comments on my article. The website was a public platform, and most of its readers were strangers to me. I guess it was good to know the feedback from the general

public. It turned out most of the feedback was positive. No negative comments caught my attention. I study these comments whenever I advocate for an issue in public, for example, cinema accessibility, flight services, or driving policies for disabled people. I study the comments from the magazine website and Facebook, including criticism as well. As for this article, there was no criticism. I guess people just perceived it as a motivational article.

Tanya said studying these comments helped her to understand the general opinion and attitude of the general public. She also valued any negative comments as her friends on social media might not explicitly express any disagreement with her posts.

Tanya: I will seriously consider these negative comments, but I don't get upset. However, I will try to understand and analyse why these people would say [these negative comments]. I will evaluate how their speech may reflect the opinion and attitude of the society as a whole. For example, I made a post on drivers with disabilities. A lot of people said, "Wow, how come disabled people can drive? She definitely will hit someone. Or "Wow, a woman who drives. Blah, blah, blah". I can see how the society perceives disabled people and women. [Even though] you receive a lot of compliments and likes every day...there's still a group of people who have a very different attitude to you. Their comments help me to understand how I can educate the society.

Together, these results provide important insight into the search and identification of alternative cultures among the three protagonists. The protagonists benefitted from this "window shopping" of alternative cultures as they no longer took their own culture and social order for granted. As elaborated in Section 5.3.2, they expressed their disagreement with the norms of their the conventional culture and signaled their refusal to comply with its expectations. They were exploring alternative cultures to replace their conventional one as a means to resist stigmatisation and oppression.

6.6 Connecting to a Broader Political Discourse Using Selfies and Hashtags

Tanya and Sam both used a specific approach on social media to promote their message: selfies combined with activism hashtags. For example, hashtags like #bodyautonomy, #sexdisability (Sam Post 2), #hopeforhongkong, #prayforhongkong🙏 (Tanya Post 3), and the "Fix each other's crown" challenge (Tanya Post 6).

In Tanya Post 6, she used the template of the Facebook challenge. She purposefully enhanced the selfie with photo editing apps by adding specific cultural symbols such as lighting of the photograph, makeup beauty effects, smiley emojis, and her signature. In Tanya Post 8, she posted

images of the t-shirts she designs to showcase both her creative skills as well as her support for Hong Kong's pro-democracy faction, the so-called "yellow ribbon". In her t-shirt designs, she used sticky notes and the quote "*If You Can't Be Kind*, Be Quiet" as artistic motifs. From her point of view, these selfies encapsulate her support for the Anti-ELAB Movement as a designer.

Another significant example was the "half-naked" or revealing selfie in Sam Post 2. From Sam's perspective, the close-up of her breasts served to signify her boldness to break taboos regarding sexuality. Sam purposefully displayed her half-naked body, her husband's wheelchair and their bed in the selfie. These features signified their marriage and sex life. She used the activism hashtags #bodyautonomy and #sexdisability to heighten the message of this selfie. Sam described it as a "slap in the face" to their friends who often embarrassed her and her husband in social gatherings. These friends often asked them about their sex life as they assumed her husband was unable to be sexually active. Sam said, "These posts helped me a lot as I no longer needed to explain so much. Also, I don't have to face so many embarrassing questions." According to Sam, her half-naked selfie was a "bomb" to break the taboo in the disabled community as no one dared to do this before.

> Sam: Everyone knows that my husband is quadriplegic. They are curious about how we do "that thing". I just want them to realise that disabled people like us have sexual needs regardless of their mobility. As for my husband, he may not respond to these questions. However, I purposefully post these photos to encourage my followers to make an association with our sex life. We are no different from ordinary people. We can do "that thing" too. People assumed that we couldn't do it because of our disabilities. However, we can do it! We have sexual needs too!

Sam strongly emphasised in the interview that the target group for this particular selfie was disabled people.

> Sam: I don't mean to ask my disabled friends to take selfies like mine, because they are ["like prisoners"] and under the surveillance of their parents. Another reason is that they were like me in the past…I worried that people would label me. I was not brave enough to do so. By posting these photos, I wish to encourage [disabled people] to express themselves. It doesn't mean that they have to take similar selfies like mine. I want to encourage them to "come out" and face their real selves."

Sam also appeared to be speaking to the parents of disabled people in these posts.

> Sam: I want them to realise that it is not only Sam who needs sex, but a lot of disabled people also have sexual needs too. It's an emotional need. I aimed to use this post to speak to some of my followers and net-friends. They are parents of disabled people. I hope they realise the truth after reading my post…Their children need to go on dates too. Parents should not stop them.

In episodes reflecting medium-level agency, Tanya and Sam used selfies combined with activism hashtags and a Facebook challenge template as a form of political demonstration. They adapted these schemes with personalised statements to re-interpret these campaigns. Sam used several cultural symbols to signify her sex life to break the taboo around the topic. Tanya and Sam used selfies as a medium to protest against and challenge these taboos.

## 6.7 Using Alternative Scripts to Express Different Views

All of the protagonists used alternative scripts of different identities to express their divergent views. In her interview, Tanya said her preferred identity was "diversified and multifaceted". Tanya selected the persona of "entrepreneur designer" with a social mission to explore her identity in response to the Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong (Tanya Post 8).

> Tanya: I blended my identities as a woman with disabilities and a designer. What I wanted to say is that my designs are not only aimed at serving my clients; my designs aim to bring a sense of social solidarity. It's closely connected to my disability as well as my profession as a designer.

> Tanya: What you try to present on Facebook is the self who you want to be perceived as. The self that you admire. My post is a reminder of that self, my beliefs and values. Sometimes we may forget ourselves in such a busy, chaotic life. These posts are self-motivational." Tanya concluded, "I describe myself…[as]…a woman who pursues beauty and happiness in life. Maybe you ask, do my photos fantasise my life? I guess…maybe yes. These posts may only convey my attitude on some specific days. Say, within ten days, I have three days with a positive attitude, another three days without thinking about it, and another three days being laid-back. However, it is good to post on Facebook. These posts remind me that at least, I had three days feeling good about myself. Maybe it's a reminder of what I can choose to be in the next ten days. It's also a reminder that I should not be affected by others.

Helen described her preferred identity as a girl who "loves and dares to try". She needed to overcome barriers and doubts from her family to explore her gender expression and career development. In Helen Post 3, Helen described her "adult" identity as a transformation from her teenage identity. She emphasised that her adult identity was that of a responsible adult who took her job seriously.

> Helen: When I was studying in school, should I fail to submit my homework by deadlines due to caregiving issues, I would simply report the incident to my teacher without handing in my homework. I would not feel bad even I underdue my homework because my teachers were understanding. However, I entered the workforce and started to work as an adult. I can't be so laid-back because I'm no longer in school. I made a drastic

change.  I was so mad because I am no longer a school kid. I am an adult now! I have to be responsible. I am mad because my family members don't treat me as an adult.

Sam explored her alternative identity as a gender-fluid feminist housewife (Sam Post 5). To indicate her gender-fluid identity, she used hashtags to identify and inform her followers of "My gender of the day". She used the hashtag #missy (Sam Post 1 and 8) to indicate her femininity and the hashtag #geek for her masculinity. She said, "these hashtags are important as my followers will change their lens to see me. When I use #missy, they will adjust and avoid calling or greeting me as a man."

As for her identity as a feminist housewife, Sam copied the common script of members of the Facebook group "Housewives Union". For example, Sam called her husband as "wife" (Sam Post 5) and "that dude" (Sam Post 9). In Sam Post 2, she copied the common practices and genres used by protestors when tackling issues such as body politics. For example, the half-naked body, faceless selfies, and posting on Instagram. By combining the hashtags "#bodyautonomy and #sexdisability", she underlined her intersectional identity to address the sexuality of disabled women. Sam shared her journey as she went from doubt to observation to imitation.

> Sam: In the past, we only talked about policies for disabled people. We talked about equality and inclusion. My advocacy work was limited to meetings. I never dare to do such a bold act in my life. I just worried that people would not accept me. I just did my advocacy on policy [issues] without involving in my personal life. I wouldn't talk about sex with anyone. I wouldn't share these pictures publicly like how I do now. I was afraid that people would not accept that disabled people can talk about sex. I feared that people would label me and criticize me by saying, "You are disabled. You should not touch on taboos around disabled people and sex.".

Despite these concerns and doubts regarding the social acceptance of her sexual expression, Sam also discussed how observing the posts of other sex advocates on Facebook empowered her. She said, "No one told me that we could talk about it…until I met you guys. I realised that I could talk about it. I found you guys brave and bold to speak about it."

In episodes reflecting medium-level agency, all of the protagonists experimented with alternative social scripts and props. While the protagonists criticize the stigma and oppression rooted in the conventional culture, they took alternative culture to experimented with different scripts. For example, Tanya criticised the normative impression that disabled people were apathetic when it came to politics; she took the alternative script as a professional designer with social responsibility to state her political stance and contribute in the Anti-ELAB Movement. Furthermore, imitation was a common tactic when experimenting with alternative identities. Imitation was particularly significant in Sam's posts. She imitated the language and actions of active sex advocates in the disability community and active members in her "Housewives Union" Facebook group.

6.8 Mixing and Matching Symbols as a "Selfie Puzzle"

Among the selfies reflecting medium-level agency, Tanya and Sam used social media as a "fitting room" to "try on" different cultural symbols. In general, three themes were identified: the exploration of outfits; the use of distance in selfies; and the use of photo editing apps.

First, Tanya and Sam discussed the use of outfits to signify their alternative identities. Tanya and Sam experimented with unfamiliar cultural symbols which were usually unavailable in their everyday lives. For example, a business outfit (Tanya Post 9), a feminine outfit (Sam Post 1, 3 and Tanya Post 3), and the use of makeup (Sam Post 3).

Tanya used different outfits to signify her alternative identities, particularly new genres and fashion styles. For example, skirts with plaid patterns (Tanya Post 3), executive business attire (Tanya Post 9), and a designer t-shirt (Tanya Post 8). In Tanya Post 3, she wanted to present herself as a person who enjoyed Christmas and cared for the community. She also wanted to highlight that she had the autonomy and mobility for a busy day of celebration and social participation. She shared her search for a "wearable" plaid skirt for a Christmas party in the interview.

> Tanya: I recently became fond of plaid skirts. I found lots of these skirts in a shop. I bought all of those in my size without trying them on in their fitting room. I had to bring them home to try them on. If I can't wear them, I'll return them to the shop. I tried them on the night before Christmas Eve. Eventually, I was only able to wear one of them. I had to return the other two dresses as I could not fit in to them. For the skirt I could wear, I wore it all day for various gatherings.

In Tanya Post 9, Tanya wanted to present herself in the media as a female business executive, instead of someone who had fought hard for an employment opportunity. To present herself as a business executive, she purposefully searched for and dressed in a business suit.

> Tanya: In my past, I seldom talked about career development and entrepreneurship in the media. Since I wanted to present myself as an entrepreneur, I purposefully dressed up this way. I had no idea what I should wear as an executive. In the past, I might wear smart casual clothes when I talked about employment opportunities for disabled people. In this magazine interview, I intended to convey a sense of maturity as an experienced business executive.

Second, Sam used distance to direct her viewer's attention in the selfies she posted. Selfies can be roughly categorised into three types: a closeup headshot, a half-body picture or a full-body image. In her interview, Sam discussed her attempts to show her bi-sexual identity. Sometimes, she highlighted her femininity by using gendered symbols in her selfies. For example, her experimentation with makeup and a lace top (Sam Post 3). She said, "I intended to dress up like a decent daughter for my mother [for] Chinese New Year. I invited my friend to put on my makeup for me. Also, I picked this lace top for the family dinner."

Another example was Sam Post 1. According to Sam, she purposefully posted two selfies in one post to show her bi-sexual identity. She considered the closeup of her with a leather jacket and a short hairstyle as signifying her masculinity. On the other hand, the full-body selfie with a dress signified her femininity.

> Sam: When you look at the closeup headshot, people will think, "Um….you are a boy." But when they see my full-body shot, it's like "bam!". You will see my dress. Then you will realise that I'm a girl. I'm masculine and feminine. The purpose of posting two selfies in one post is to create a contrast. I purposefully made a very close headshot to give my followers a surprise…in the next selfie. That's the way I express my bi-sexual identity. I have both masculinity and femininity in me.



Figure 2 Closeup and full-length selfies to signify Sam's bi-sexual identity (Sam Post 1)

Third, Tanya and Sam used photo-editing apps to finetune their selfies. Sam used Meitu (i.e. a photo-editing app) to accentuate her feminine characteristics when she chose to experiment with her feminine identity (Sam Post 3 and 8). For instance, she minimised the black circles under her eyes and altered some redness around her nose (caused by an allergy) to look better.

Meanwhile, Tanya used in-app photo-editing features to finetune the colour and lighting of her selfies posted on social media. For example, she used a warm-light filter and the colour pink for her Christmas selfie (Tanya Post 3). In addition, she changed the colour tone and added stickers to another post (Tanya Post 8). Tanya used pastel colours, pink and black to emphasise her gender and sexual expression (Tanya Post 3). To bring a joyful and optimistic message to their photos, the protagonists used bright and warm light as well as bright colours like yellow (Tanya Post 9). Referring to Tanya Post 6 and 9, Tanya mentioned several times that she used photo-editing apps carefully to avoid the appearance of overediting. For example, making her skin appear too smooth or light would blur her facial features and create a sense of "fakeness". However, she often used these apps to tweak flaws like pimples and uneven skin tone. Tanya

discussed in her interview how she searched for an "editable" selfie to participate in the Facebook challenge (Tanya Post 6).

> Tanya: I found this 'editable' selfie for the challenge; at least I was not wearing a mask. However, my makeup was too light, and the lighting was a bit grey and dim. Therefore, I wanted to give it some colour. I started by adding some eyeshadow, adding some eyelashes to highlight my femininity. I didn't want to pick a picture randomly. I wanted to present myself as if I had dressed up...properly. I wanted to highlight my femininity by adding more makeup and colour to the selfie. Also, since the background of the selfie looked grey, I added some smiley stickers. It was just a featured photo frame from Facebook. I thought the picture was not colourful enough, so I wrote my name on it. (laugh) Then, it was good to go.

The findings in this section are closely connected to the imitation and alternative scripts suggested in the previous section. Tanya and Sam demonstrated how they "tried on" alternative cultural symbols in selfies. These alternative cultural symbols could involve physical items or photo-edited features. One interesting finding is that Tanya and Sam both used photo-editing apps to add fashionable makeup to their selfies. While doing so physically would have required specific cosmetics products, time, and skill, Tanya and Sam used photo-editing apps to keep up with these trends at a minimal cost and without learning new complex techniques.

## 6.9 Adding Net-friends as Collaborators

Both Tanya and Sam acquired new net-friends using their Facebook page and other online social platforms. The purpose of adding net-friends can be broken down into two reasons. First, Sam wished to have more friends who would understand and respect her personal life. While she valued her old friends and loyal followers, she wanted to have friends who would be more vocal and positive about her changes, particularly her bi-sexual identity and sex life. Sam said, "I feel more confident about myself as I gained the understanding and recognition of my net-friends. More friends began to realise that my husband and I are not sexually abstinent."

Tanya echoed the importance of having net-friends to participate in her "identity project" as an entrepreneur and a designer (Tanya Post 8). Instead of looking for support from her existing social network, Tanya worked with these collaborators to launch a new platform as an actualisation of her identity as an entrepreneur and a designer. She said, "That's what I want to do in the future. I previously discussed with my partners.... [that] maybe we will organise an exhibition."

> Tanya: I collaborated with some designers to set up an online platform to showcase our designs related to the Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong. We uploaded our work on the platform for two reasons. First, it is for business revenue. However, we don't have many... expectations in the long run. We simply want to utilise our free time to do something meaningful. Second, we wish to bring more collaborators [together] through

the platform. These partners are a group of collaborators I recently engaged with. I didn't engage my old friends and peers in this project.

In sum, Tanya and Sam considered that adding net-friends was an effective tactic to make a significant change in their social life. Sam believed these net-friends helped her to co-create an assertive and positive social context for her sexual expression as a woman with disabilities. Tanya was able to meet new collaborators who shared their business and design experience with her.

## 6.10 Tagging Friends in a Facebook Challenge to Form an Alliance

In Tanya Post 6, Tanya used "receive/give tags" to mobilise her friends in a joint effort regarding a Facebook challenge. Tanya demonstrated the use of "tagging" to bring her friends together in an alliance to raise the awareness of disabled women contributing to these women's movements. After being tagged by a friend, she decided to join the Facebook challenge by posting a selfie and tagging a hundred of her friends on social media.

> Tanya: In the past, I rarely interacted with others, no matter how good their messages are. However, I wanted to link up with my friends in a joint effort. It was about solidarity. I wanted to show my appreciation of them and motivate them to take action. The challenge required 100 tags, but posting it on social media could involve more than a hundred people. I believe more people would see my challenge post. In this post, I wanted to demonstrate that I am also a member of the women's community. When someone received my tag, I hope they would recognise and treat me as a member of the women's circle. This campaign made an impact on my self-presentation on social media and my social life.

When I shared my findings regarding Tanya Post 6 with Sam and Helen, they replied that they received a tag from other friends regarding the same Facebook challenge. Sam and Helen took different approaches in response to the "Fix each other's crown" challenge. Helen simply ignored the challenge though she received the tag twice.

> Helen: To me, it is more like an endless loop. You receive a tag, and you need to tag so many people. I'm happy to be tagged by friends because they recognised me as a woman and as a friend. However, I didn't accept the challenge as I didn't have a selfie to post. I just didn't want to take the [time] to do it.

On the other hand, Sam was tagged by a leader of the "Housewives Union" Facebook group. She accepted the challenge and added a personal statement identifying herself as a bi-sexual housewife. Sam also used photo-editing apps, similar to what Tanya did in her post regarding the challenge. Also, Sam added a pair of rainbow hearts to her cheeks in her selfie to show that she was a "a member of a sexual minority".

Sam explained that she had to accept the challenge for two reasons. First, it was to show that she was an active member of the "Housewives Union" Facebook group. She said, "Because we are close friends, and we are a team." Second, she wanted to take this opportunity to challenge the gender stereotypes associated with housewives.

> Sam: Disabled women are members of the housewives' community. Also, there are different types of disabled women. Disabled women may have different gender identities and sexual preferences. I wanted to present myself as an interactional woman with disabilities; in other words, I have different identities. I wanted to say that the world should not be binary and rigid. We should enrich our imagination of gender. I wanted to express myself as a gender nonconforming woman with disabilities.

In this finding, an inconsistency was identified among Tanya, Sam and Helen. Tanya and Sam intended to reinforce the message that disabled women should be included in women's community and their movements. Both Tanya and Sam believed participating in the Facebook challenge and tagging their friends was a way to build alliances. They intended to actualise their preferred identity as active members of the women's community. Furthermore, Sam enriched her interpretation of the challenge and blended her bi-sexual identity into the movement. On the contrary, Helen did not participate though she was invited twice.

There are two possible explanations for this inconsistency. The first possible explanation is the existence of different viewpoints regarding womanhood and female identity across different age groups. Helen is a young adult as her age is about 20-25 while the age of Tanya and Sam are nearly 40 and above. As a young adult, Helen was more preoccupied with teenage and young adult issues such as expanding her social network and making friends (Helen Post 2), dating, being a fangirl (Helen Post 5), and parental tensions related to their recognition of her adult identity (Helen Post 3 and 4).

On the contrary, both Tanya and Sam are adults. They both meet the normative criteria regarding what constitutes womanhood, such as having a stable, intimate relationship and having their own family. It seems that they were in the stage of gaining recognition for meeting these developmental milestones. They also had a more specific social group which they wanted to blend in with. For this reason, they were more intent in co-creating an assertive sociocultural context for their exploration of womanhood.

The second possible explanation involves their habit of taking selfies. Helen said the reason she seldom took selfies is because she could not raise her hands to do so. Also, she had a different attitude on presenting her disabilities in selfies. She said, "If I need a selfie for a profile picture, I do not wish to have a picture which reveals my wheelchair. If I need to present the best part or the most attractive side of me, I don't want to be shown in my wheelchair (laugh)." As for Tanya and Sam, taking selfies was an everyday routine. Sam took selfies after showers and during her daily activities, as mentioned in Section 5.3.2. For Tanya, taking selfies was a ritual, and she installed phone holders in places such as on her make-up vanity, in her living room, and in her car to facilitate this. She said, "Taking selfies is my habit. Whenever I get in my car and before I

turn on the engine, I love to take some selfies first. It is like a ritual before the journey begins." Based on these observations and interviews, these two protagonists were more resourceful when it came to pick a suitable selfie to participate in the Facebook challenge. They were also equipped with the necessary photo taking and editing skills to fulfil the requirements of these Facebook challenges.

## 6.11 Synchronising Posts to Expand Follower Coverage

All of the protagonists applied the technique of "social media synchronisation" (i.e. a technical feature to sync all social media accounts in one social media platform) to cross post across all their social media accounts and platforms to expand their followers (Helen Post 5, Sam Post 3, Tanya Post 3 and 9). Tanya aimed to talk to potential employers in Tanya Post 9 to invite job opportunities while discussing flexible work arrangements and friendly accessible work environments for disabled people.

> Tanya: I would like to say that disabled women have a career. They have their lifestyle. They face challenges. When we romanticise disabled people, sometimes I might do the same unconsciously, it hinders people from talking about their difficulties. On the contrary, I don't recommend people to over-emphasise their challenges as if pleading for compassion. All I want is a realistic and disability-friendly environment where our capabilities are being recognised and we are treated fairly. We are not begging for anything. In my post, I made a delicate balance between promoting our strengths and addressing our challenges.

This finding indicates that all of the protagonists may use "synchronisation" to gain publicity and increase the view rate of their posts. This finding seems to contradict my findings in Section 5.3.1. In Section 5.3.1, the protagonists made segregation of their social media accounts to create a "semi-private space". This discrepancy could be attributed to their readiness to share with others and the nature of their posts. First, all of the protagonists synchronised some of their posts when they were confident enough to share their post with a broader group of followers. The purpose of synchronisation was to spread their message in the hope of engaging more stakeholders to co-create a favourable sociocultural context. When they were not ready to embrace a broader social context, they used their privacy settings to limit the dissemination of their posts. Second, the nature of the posts may be another crucial factor. For posts related to their personal lives and sensitive topics, all of the protagonists tended to keep these private or limit who could access them. For example, Helen Post 5 was about being a fangirl of a Korean pop star. Sam Post 3 was about her makeup and the lace outfit. From their perspective, these posts were more likely to be accepted by their followers. For posts like Tanya Post 9, it involved media coverage which had already been published elsewhere. Therefore, Tanya would have considered that there was no point hiding this post.

6.12 Reacting to Misunderstandings by Handling Comments

All of the protagonists evaluated their followers' comprehension of their posts and reacted to misunderstandings in three ways: checking the view rate, reviewing the emoji responses, and responding to comments and direct messages.

First, Tanya checked the number of views her media coverage generated in Tanya Post 9. In Tanya Post 9, she posted an exclusive interview with her in *Recruit* magazine where she discussed career development for disabled people. Instead of looking to see if her followers "liked" her post, she was more concerned if her followers clicked the hyperlink to read the article. Tanya said, "I checked if anyone hit the link to read the article. The system reported that not many people clicked to read the article." In that case, she thought her followers might not be fully receiving her message.

Second, since these posts were not all positive, Helen and Sam studied the variety of "emoji response" (i.e. like, love, care, laugh, shocked, sad, anger) to measure their followers' comprehension of each post. When Helen shared her frustration and anger over caregiving (Helen Post 3), she expected to receive specific emoji responses from her followers to show their compassion. She said, "I saw a lot of people giving me "sad" and "shocked" emojis. I guess they understood the incident and showed sympathy."

Third, Helen and Sam gave friendly replies to feedback from followers with similar backgrounds. Helen remembered, "There were three comments, two of them came from disabled women. Their reply conveyed a distinctive sense of resonance."

In a similar situation in Tanya Post 8, Tanya evaluated her followers' recognition of her t-shirt design instead of her own appearance.

Tanya: I usually post my daily selfies on social media. At first, I was worried that people might misunderstand my posts. However, my attempt to showcase my designs and t-shirts was well-received. They replied positively, saying "wow, this design is good". What made me happy was not receiving praise about how pretty my shirt was or asking me where to buy it. Most feedback was recognition of my design…I want people to see my design instead of my face.

Sam also placed a strong emphasis on receiving and giving comments as a channel for communication with her followers.

Sam: As long as they are willing to ask questions, then I have achieved my purpose for the post. At least they raise a question so that I can engage them in a dialogue. Having a dialogue is my way of practicing my belief. All I want to achieve is to gain their understanding.

These results indicate that all of the protagonists were more concerned with their followers' comprehension of their posts instead of gaining their acceptance and endorsement. As the protagonists presented an "unusual" voice and alternative identities in their posts, they were keen to check their followers' comprehension and understanding. Most importantly, they wanted to deal with any misunderstandings and establish a dialogue with their followers.

## 6.13 Prioritising Plans on Preferred identity According to Positive Comments

All protagonists used their followers' feedback as a way to guide their future growth and development. Helen was motivated to develop her culinary skills. She said, "I'm happy. (laughs) Someone wanted to try my food. Some close friends asked me when I can cook for them as well." (Helen Post 9).

Sam prioritised her goals related to gender and sexual expression. These goals aimed to actualise her belief that disabled women had an equal right to pursue beauty (Sam Post 1, 2, 3 and 8). Sam invited her friend to help her put on makeup as an experiment (Sam Post 3). Since she received compliments from her followers, she decided to learn how to put on makeup on her own.

> Sam: They said, "Wow, it's good. You look pretty." Since they never saw me putting on makeup, they never saw the other side of me. It's good to know that they responded positively and realised that Sam likes to do makeup too.

Also, Sam recalled how her followers' comments encouraged her to post more revealing selfies in the future. She explained, "Since everyone gave me positive feedback, I gained some confidence to believe that my direction is right. Also, when I was able to answer people's questions and doubts, I felt good about myself."

Based on the above findings and my own observation, the protagonists valued encouraging comments and responses from their followers. They paid special attention to posts which their followers shown great interest in contributing and participating in their identity exploration. For example, some followers expressed eagerness to join social gatherings in the future. Some followers shown an interest in tasting their food. Tanya's follower gave comments and intended to purchase one of her designer t-shirts.

## 6.14 Identifying Success Keys and Resources from Recording Personal Development

All of the protagonists recorded their identity exploration and experimentation by making posts on social media. They kept these records on social media so that they could track and review

their identity experiments. These records allowed them to identify two critical success factors of exploration: favourable conditions and keypersons who may provide resources and support in these exploration.

First, the identification of favourable conditions allowed Tanya and Helen to gain more opportunities for exploration and experimentation. As for Tanya, she considered online platforms a favourable and low-costing platform for her continual development as a designer.

> Tanya: I am a designer, and I want to have my work showcased on social media. It's a low-cost platform. The cost of my work is the time I invest in the drawing. I posted my work on social media. Maybe someone might copy my work, but it's ok. The time I invested is minimal. I'll be happy if there are orders. However, all I want is to do it without pressure. It's more like self-entertainment.

Another example of the identification of a favourable condition was Helen Post 9. Helen had never cooked before she had this experience in her friend's home. She attributed this lack of experience to discouragement from her family. She said, "My family members never let me cook at home. They will blame me for causing so much trouble as they have to move all the cookery tools from the kitchen to the living room." Helen pointed out that Helen Post 9 was an essential archive as "before, I thought I had no chance at all. But now I realise that it is possible." In Helen Post 9, she archived her first cooking experience. She also identified possible resources and favourable social contexts, which would allow her to continue her exploration.

> Helen: I was so happy that I could try to cook a meal. Because I never had such an opportunity before. I felt so envious when I saw some disabled women could cook on their own. I wanted to try so badly. That's why I was so happy for my first experiment. I had to post it to mark this memorable moment. I always want to try to cook. I believe cooking is an important quality to be a good wife. I never had a chance to cook, but now I tried, at least once. I posted it hoping I could try again. Although such an opportunity is rare, I can explore it with my friend at her home. We recorded the joy of our first experience to be a chef.

Helen also pointed out the importance of recording her daily routine in Post 2 as these posts raised the possibility of her attending more social gatherings. She said, "My family members saw me as [more] reliable when they saw my posts. They thought I had a lot of arrangements and appointments with friends. That's why they let me go out on my own."

Second, all of the protagonists identified key persons who provided support and resources in their identity exploration and experimentation. Sam mentioned that her husband acted as an advisor and supporter (Sam Post 2 and 3). Sam also mentioned her friend who helped her with makeup and selecting feminine outfits (Sam Post 3). She also talked about how she started to seek help from her domestic helper.

Sam: Because of my disabilities, I don't want to bother others. I don't want to be a burden to others. In the past, I preferred to wear something simple, say a t-shirt or a one-piece dress. I just avoided asking for help from others. Recently, just like this dress with a belt. I slowly learnt to seek help from my helper to put this dress on. I tell myself, it's ok to ask for help. Gradually, I accepted...that sometimes I need some help as well.

Helen mentioned her friend, her therapist, board gamers in café she visited regularly, and family members as her support network (Helen Post 2). Helen also listed several goals for the future. For example, she wants to become independent (Helen Post 2), to improve her job performance (Helen Post 3), and to cook with friends (Helen Post 9). When she talked about caregiver stress in Helen Post 3, she said, "I wish to stay in [my] job. In the future, I wish to have a paid caregiver who can provide full-time care and avoid similar problems re-occurring." Across these goals, Helen found the key to success was to get a fulltime domestic helper so that she could gain independence and autonomy.

Based on the above findings and my own observations, the protagonists made posts of their experiences regarding their identity exploration and experimentation as records on social media. They reviewed these posts and identified favourable condition and key persons to enhance positive and rewarding experience.

## 6.15 Demonstrating Future Possibilities and Welcoming More Support and Resources

All of the protagonists showcased their preferred socio-cultural environment and invited more resources to sustain their exploration of the activities highlighted in their posts. For example, Helen wanted to present herself as a friendly and popular "social butterfly" (Helen Post 2). Therefore, she purposefully posted about her social life and her vast network of friends. For example, she posted about social gatherings, possible lunch locations, and her interests in boardgames to welcome more friends to arrange social gatherings with her in the future. This constant effort in highlighting her social life on social media increased her ability to invite more friends to social gatherings and gain support in the future.

Helen: Disabled people can have lots of friends. I'm grateful that I have some friends who are willing to let me visit in their homes. I seldom complain that I have nowhere to go. These posts aim to leave an impression to others that I have lots of friends. In this post, I was with this group of friends. In another post, I was with someone else. People who noticed my Facebook think that I have a lot of good friends.

In a similar vein, Tanya made use of her gender expression and active social life as a demonstration of her independence to resume her social life after her accident (Tanya Post 3).

Tanya: When I became a woman with disabilities, I realised that this identity is stigmatised as sick, filthy, and ugly. Disabled women are a group of women who are

neglected easily. They are not recognised as a group of women. In my early days as a woman with disabilities, I could hardly handle this identity as I couldn't wear these feminine clothing. I realised that my girlfriends no longer invited me to join their ladies' parties. They no longer think I'm "one of the girls". They presumably excluded me from joining their ladies' nights. They thought, "(Sigh) She is so inconvenient. She can't make it anyway. It's better not to ask her and avoid hurting her feelings".

Tanya said it was her intention to consistently showcase her social activities on social media to facilitate her integration of women's community. Tanya wished to inspire her followers to expand their understanding of her availability for future social engagements.

Tanya: I purposefully matched this set of outfits for gatherings and events of the day. I wanted to tell my followers that disabled women should have their own fashion and dress sense. Also, we are available for parties and events. This outfit is to indicate that I'm a member of women's community. We can go to a ladies' night together. I want to expand my "world" [so] that I am free to participate and join any women's activity.

As for Sam, she believed that archiving her development goals was a way to motivate her to acquire the necessary skills for her potential identities. For example, Sam planned to post her makeup pictures on social media in the future as a record of her personal growth.

Sam: I want to tell people that although my hands don't function well, I make an effort to… do makeup by myself. I will show them my pictures as I am going to practice again and again. I wish to do more in the future. I already set my goal to learn to put on makeup with my clumsy hands. I will try to explore different looks and makeup styles. I feel good to give myself challenges to develop better.

The archive of her constant exploration and experimentation regarding gender and sexual identity helped Sam to gain a better understanding of her improvement and personal growth.

Sam: Over the past few years of reflection and reconstruction of my self-identity, I slowly see myself as a pretty woman. In the future, I will become assertive about my beauty. I hope people will see my beauty. This pursuit of beauty is a practice of my belief that disabled people are beautiful. We make efforts to be presentable. Unlike the stigma, disabled people are not filthy. They are capable of doing anything, even if they have disabilities. I am emphasising that we have the right to be beautiful and make our own lifestyle choices. I can choose the way I live my life instead of being labelled.

In sum, all of the protagonists used social media to archive and showcase their progress in terms of exploring and experimenting with their potential identities. These archives helped them to welcome more resources and social support for the actualisation of their potential identities and belief.

## 6.16 Concluding Remarks: "I am a Shopaholic"

In episodes reflecting medium-level agency, the three protagonists described their preferred identity as "the self I can become". When it comes to medium-level agency, their preferred identity has two essential characteristics: having the courage to transform themselves and the ability to diversify their identity. The idea of strengthening one's preferred identity implies the intention to co-create a favourable socio-cultural context for identity exploration and experimentation. From these identity explorations and experimentations, disabled women earn a sense of self-efficacy as they create a safe space to explore and prioritise potential identities.

Based on my findings and observations of episodes reflecting medium-level agency, I have drawn some inferences about how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. My four inferences of the strategies they used are as follows:

For the first strategy, disabled women segregate their social media presence by creating a "semi-private space" to own their voice and desires. The findings in Section 5.3.1 to 5.3.3 illustrate how the protagonists expressed their inner feelings and thoughts in a "semi-private space" by segregating their social media accounts. In their "semi-private space", they criticized the challenges, stigma and discrimination in their everyday life.

In Section 5.3.1, the protagonists created a "semi-private space" by segregating their social media accounts for different purposes. I infer that disabled women may use this segregation to build a semi-private space. Disabled women use different social media accounts to segregate their social space for private and public use. In their daily life and public cyberspace, they are confined to conventional culture contexts and pre-assigned social identities. They copy normative opinions and scripts to conceal their personal opinions.

In Section 5.3.2, the protagonists criticised the stigma and discrimination they face in their daily lives in these "semi-private spaces". Disabled women may face various barriers and discrimination in their daily lives. While they are in this semi-private cyberspace, disabled women assume this area to be a zone of privacy and autonomy. They free themselves from these normative social scripts that dominate their everyday lives. In this semi-private environment, they assume this area to be a zone of privacy and autonomy where they are relieved from assuming their daily social roles. This semi-private environment is more like a walled private realm. They can "stretch their arms and legs" to express their personal opinions on sensitive topics and social taboos.

In Section 5.3.3, the protagonists creatively formulated and packaged their message to gain the understanding and acceptance of their followers. They selected various genres of posts to present their "unusual" message to gain the understanding and acceptance of their followers. Based on the variety of genres of these posts, the flexible use of genre is likely to be one of the significant characteristics of the episodes reflecting medium-level agency. This finding indicates

that disabled women are using various genres in their posts to package their "unusual" message to gain the understanding and acceptance of their followers. In every post, they creatively formulate and package their message to expand their sociocultural boundaries for identity exploration and experimentation.

As for the second strategy, disabled women actively search for alternative cultures and relevant social groups to diversify their current socio-cultural context.

In Section 5.3.4, the protagonists demonstrated how they search and screen for alternative cultures. They joined Facebook groups and reviewed comments from netizens in public social media spaces. It is possible that disabled women actively search and identify alternative cultures. These alternative cultures provide the possibility to shake off the established social order of their everyday lives. The search for alternative cultures gives them the energy and impetus to re-think the current socio-cultural context.

The findings in Section 5.3.5 to 5.3.7 are examples of their tactics to connect with alternative cultures to challenge the boundaries, stigma and discrimination they face. For example, using selfies and activism hashtags (See Section 5.3.5), imitating alternative scripts of advocacy leaders (See Section 5.3.6), and mixing and matching alternative symbols as a "selfie puzzle" (See Section 5.3.7).

In Section 5.3.5, the protagonists purposefully combined selfies and activism hashtags. Disabled women may choose to use selfies and activism hashtags as they are self-explanatory. They borrow these political discourse markers to discuss sensitive topics and taboos. In general, disabled women use activism hashtags and Facebook challenges to create a new socio-cultural dimension as an open space for their alternative identities. Disabled women gain a sense of empowerment to challenge the established social order and boundaries in their daily lives. Further discussion on using of social media as a tool to resist oppression will be discussed in the discussion chapter.

In Section 5.3.6, the protagonists imitated alternative scripts which they observed and learnt from advocacy leaders and members of alternative cultures. It is possible that disabled women start their identity exploration by observing and imitating. This observation allows disabled women to learn as a process of social learning. Disabled women imitate how these people act and in turn they learn how to better express themselves, respond to criticism, and gain more power in their relationships. They learn to re-position themselves in these social orders and interact with others with alternative social scripts.

In Section 5.3.7, the protagonists demonstrated how they "mix and match" alternative symbols in their selfies as a "puzzle". These findings suggest that disabled women make use of social media as a "fitting room" to try on different cultural symbols to signify alternative identities. These alternative cultural symbols are like puzzle pieces that allow them to mix and match when it comes to identity exploration and experimentation. They can use physical items like fashionable clothes as well as applying different photographical and editing techniques.

Furthermore, these photo-editing apps provide a series of features, such as makeup beauty effects, stickers and colour filters. Disabled women can use these apps to shape and creatively explore their self-presentation. This inference will be closely related to the concept of embodiment explored in the discussion chapter.

As for the third strategy, disabled women manage their social network in many ways to co-create a favourable socio-cultural context and co-ordinate resources and support for identity exploration.

The findings in Section 5.3.8 to 5.3.12 are examples of the ways they engage supporters and allies. For example, adding net-friends as collaborators (See Section 5.3.8), tagging friends to participate in social media challenges (See Section 5.3.9), synchronising their posts across different accounts to engage their followers (See Section 5.3.10), giving and receiving comments to handle misunderstandings (See Section 5.3.11), and prioritising their potential identities according to followers' comments (See Section 5.3.12).

In Section 5.3.8, the protagonists added net-friends as collaborators. It seems that disabled women need to identify and engage new friends who share their vision and mission. These net-friends co-create a favourable social context; they provide resources, knowledge and support to help disabled women to explore and experiment potential identities.

In Section 5.3.9, Tanya and Sam tagged friends to participate in social media challenges, but Helen did not. Based on the inconsistency of this finding, I consider these social media challenges to be a user-friendly and user-directed tool. These social media challenges serve as viral trends to draw their followers' attention. Furthermore, these social media challenges embed a degree of difficulty and risk to encourage those who accept the challenge to take risks to articulate underrepresented voices. These challenges provide standard templates to guide their participants when posting online. However, these challenges provide some room for personalisation when it comes to both style and message. Instead of having the pressure to be outstanding among the participants of the challenge, disabled women follow these templates as social rituals to communicate and connect to a specific social group. The acts of nomination and tagging help them mobilise their significant others and friends, and allow them to synergise their advocacy to a broader and favourable socio-cultural context. Overall, these social media challenges are closely related to enhancing social credibility, solidarity, and rituals between disabled women and their social group. This inference will be further elaborated in the discussion chapter.

In Section 5.3.10, the protagonists synchronised their posts across different social media accounts to engage their followers. This finding might be contradicted by the first strategy. The discrepancy in making a "semi-private space" and synchronisation is possible in that disabled women have the flexibility to control the publicity and privacy of their posts as the need arises. Disabled women can experiment at the beginning by exploring their potential identities in the private sphere. When they gain enough confidence for further experimentation and actualisation of these potential identities, they choose to sync their posts across their social media accounts

to gain access to more resources. By synchronising their posts, disabled women can speak directly to their significant others, stakeholders and peers within their community in the hope of motivating them to think differently about the social orders and oppression.

The findings in Section 5.3.11 and 5.3.12 illustrate the use of comments. In Section 5.3.11, the protagonists received and gave comments to deal with misunderstandings among their followers. They also illustrated how they prioritised their potential identities according to followers' comments (See Section 5.3.12).

There are two inferences made related to the use of comments. It seems possible that disabled women measure the comprehension and understanding of their followers to evaluate whether their alternative messages and potential identities are well-conveyed. Receiving and giving comments is a friendly and safe space for them to gain mutual understanding with their significant others and followers.

On the other hand, these results suggest that receiving these comments is the first line of screening and assessing potential identities. They review these dialogues to decide whether they would like to include these potential identities in their personal development plans. Disabled women use these messages and feedback to make a "Yes/No" decision on these potential identities. By reviewing their followers' feedback, they decide whether they want to include these potential identities in their future agenda or discard them.

As for the fourth strategy, disabled women record their experiments with identity exploration to identify key success factors.

In Section 5.3.13, the protagonists archived their exploration and experimentation to identify key success factors. It is possible that disabled women archive their identity exploration and experimentation. These archives help them promote consistent self-presentation and attempts at change. Disabled women identify key success factors and highlight their potential for personal growth. This archive not only empowers their voice for change but facilitates the acquisition of more support and resources for identity exploration and experimentation. Most importantly, disabled women gain the confidence to explore and experiment with potential identities.

In Section 5.3.14, the protagonists showcased their progress in identity exploration to welcome more resources and social support. The archive of these posts may allow them to promote a consistent but different self-image. By consistently showcasing their attempts and trials of alternative identities, disabled women exhibit these experiments as digital traces to record their challenges and growth. Archiving these attempts allows disabled women to showcase their potential and encourages their followers to provide more support and resources for their identity exploration and experimentation. By archiving these trials, disabled women gain the confidence to explore potential identities.

At the end of this section, I would like to use a metaphor to wrap up my analysis and inferences regarding medium-level agency. Disabled women are "shopaholics" who visit numerous shops

and "try on" different brands of dresses in various fitting rooms. They no longer follow stereotyped identities, and they are keen to explore new possibilities and alternative cultures, which we can refer to here as "window shopping". They borrow from alternative cultures to question "established" values and pre-assigned identities. They connect with alternative cultures and discourses to push back the boundaries of conventional normality. Disabled women significantly demonstrate a range of applications regarding symbolic resources to co-create a favourable sociocultural context to gain access to more resources and alternative identities. Their narratives and selfies are like a face puzzle which borrows from different alternative discourses and symbols in an act of exploration and experimentation. Furthermore, they demonstrate how they explore alternative cultures and create alliances with others through technology. As "shopaholics", disabled women aim to explore, experiment, and prioritise their alternative identities. In their eyes, social media is a easily accessible "fitting room" for identity exploration and experimentation.

# CHAPTER VII: THE MAKING OF AHTHENTIC IDENTITY

## 7.1 Overview: Episodes Reflecting High-Level Agency

Among the twenty-seven posts from the protagonists, nine posts were categorised as having high-level agency. In this section, the concept of "authentic identity" implies that the protagonist articulates a themed history of herself to re-create an integrated identity of her past, present and future. The definition of "authentic identity" in this chapter uses the concept of an integrated self-identity with core substance of self across time. All of the protagonists demonstrated a solid autobiographical reasoning to build their authentic identity, such as "second mom" (Sam Post 6) or "big sister" (Helen Post 6). Regarding Tanya's posts reflecting high-level agency, she discussed how she purposefully selected significant episodes to create authentic meanings of her life. These significant episodes allowed her to discuss her understanding of disability aesthetics as well as to display the contented lifestyle of a confident woman in a wheelchair (Tanya Post 1, 2, 4 and 7).

Table 10 Nine Posts Categorised as High-Level agency

| Posts | Post Name | Post **Description and Purpose** |
|---|---|---|
| Sam Post 6 | Be His Second Mom | ➤ To record the significant episode of committing to being "the second mom" as the family dynamic changed after her nephew was born;<br>➤ To gain ownership of her actions and to show her commitment to take care of her ageing parents as an adult daughter. |
| Helen Post 1 | Life and Death with Dignity | ➤ To explore her understanding of personal autonomy and "euthanasia" as a woman with severe disabilities.<br>➤ To enrich the debate on "euthanasia" by sharing her voice with disabled people. |
| Helen Post 6 | The Spirit of Kinship | ➤ To record the significant episode of her younger brother taking a caregiving role;<br>➤ To integrate her story and relationship with her siblings.<br>➤ To further explore the integrated identity as the "big sister";<br>➤ To re-define the meaning of "care" as she provided financial support and mentorship for her siblings. |
| Helen Post 8 | Be My Own Dream Girl | ➤ To share her journey in striving for self-autonomy regarding gender expression;<br>➤ To explore the "pursuit of beauty" in a disabled body. |
| Tanya Post 1 | Dress in White | ➤ To illustrate how she constructed a "true sexy self" with authentic symbols for a photo-shoot in a studio;<br>➤ To present herself as an exemplary woman on wheelchair with |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | confidence and self-love. |
| Tanya Post 2 | Work at Night | ➢ To present the "true sexy self" at home with her own sexual symbols;<br>➢ To give meaning to the idea of self-love and "work-life balance". |
| Tanya Post 4 | Valentine's Gift for Home Office | ➢ To give meaning to "work from home" and dating as a woman with disabilities;<br>➢ To use novel symbols (e.g. sofa, foot massager, wheelchair) to signify self-love and a good quality of life. |
| Tanya Post 5 | My Mask Fashion Diary | ➢ To demonstrate the "independent life during the pandemic" of a person with disabilities;<br>➢ To re-conceptualise the meaning of masks and autonomy with a daily selfie with colourful masks titled the "mask fashion dairy". |
| Tanya Post 7 | Beyoutiful | ➢ To present the "sexy self" with sexual symbols;<br>➢ To use the hashtag "beyoutiful" to discuss her philosophy of self-love and appreciation. |

## 7.2 Integrating and Re-organising Life Stories to Create Authentic Meanings

Instead of using conventional culture or alternative ones, all of the protagonists reviewed their personal experience and created their authentic meanings and how life, people and the world should be organized in a particular order and value (Hereafter referred to as the "order of things"). By reviewing these nine posts reflecting high-level agency, four themes related to authentic meanings were identified: the ethics of care (Helen Post 6, Sam Post 6); personal autonomy (Helen Post 1, Tanya Post 5); disability aesthetics (Helen Post 8, Tanya Post 1); and self-love (Tanya Post 2, 4, 7).

For the ethics of care, Helen and Sam discussed what this meant within their family (Helen Post 6, Sam Post 6). Both of them were the eldest daughter in the family. However, they were not expected to care for, or contribute to, the family as might be expected from a person in their position due to their disabilities. However, Helen and Sam reiterated the importance of assuming their roles and responsibilities for the family as a woman with disabilities. Helen said, "Although I'm a woman with disabilities, I grew up and now [I am] capable of taking up the caregiver role to support my family. I am doing what an elder sister should do." Sam took ownership of her caregiver role as a wife and an adult daughter.

Sam: A lot of disabled women are…[in] my situation. We need to take care of our family of origin after marriage. Also, the care that disabled women provide to people is diverse. Even [though] some of us are single; they still have to take care of their family as well as people who may not be biologically related to them.

Regarding personal autonomy, Helen and Tanya reconceptualised the meaning of personal autonomy despite their disabilities. In Helen Post 1, Helen stated that her independence and personal autonomy should not be exploited due to her disabilities. She discussed the "proper" social order regarding personal autonomy for "a quadriplegic person".

Helen: I believe everyone should be able to take charge of their life. No one should follow someone's routine to live their life, no matter if they are healthy or disabled. When everyone takes charge of their destiny, why must disabled people follow their caregiver's itinerary? It is unacceptable that I have to follow my caregiver's routine just because I am dependent on them. I want to gain my autonomy whenever I have a chance to take charge.

Both Helen and Tanya explored the meaning of disability aesthetics. Tanya specifically discussed the beauty of women in a wheelchair.

For self-love, Tanya elaborated the meaning of self-love as a woman with disabilities. For instance, work-life balance (Tanya Post 2 and 4), enjoying life with pleasure (Tanya Post 4 and 7), as well as self-acceptance and appreciation (Tanya Post 1, 2 and 7). Tanya set out her specific "order of things" regarding her philosophy of life. She said, "No matter how busy I am, I am still very concerned about my body and beauty. Beauty and work must balance as the pursuit of beauty is included in my work and life." Tanya's understanding of self-love as a woman with disabilities is "to love and to be loved". This meaning implies self-acceptance of her disabilities.

Tanya: When love comes to a woman with disabilities, she may think it's unbelievable. A lot of disabled women shared their doubts with me. Therefore, I think it requires a process of self-acceptance before you engage in an intimate relationship. Only when you accept your disabilities, then you can love and be loved by someone.

All of the protagonists took the opportunity to re-organise and re-conceptualise meanings and the "order of things" when they posted on social media. The above four themes reflect that the protagonists were being stigmatised and exploited by normative culture. Instead of making choices in terms of conventional culture and its alternatives, the protagonists integrated their past, present and future to generate their own meanings and "order of things".

## 7.3 Integration of Authentic Self from Telling Their Stories

All of the protagonists integrated significant episodes when they reviewed and told their stories on social media. The process of storytelling facilitated the protagonists to create an authentic identity which brought a sense of coherence and continuity of self. They created an authentic self by integrating their life stories and experiences. For example, the "second mom" (Sam Post 6), the caring "big sister" (Helen Post 6), "the ideal self" (Helen Posts 8), and the "lady on wheels" (Tanya Post 1, 4 and 7). Helen and Tanya described this constant integration of self as "moulding" their self-identities. Helen described the preferred self as "the self who I dream to become, the self I love and the self I am satisfied with." Tanya described her preferred identity as "a piece of art that is worth appreciating".

> Tanya: If I hide myself and am unwilling to disclose myself to others then no one understands you. Then, you are just an illusional fantasy. But when I boldly disclose myself: This is me, and this is my identity as a woman with disabilities. I have my own view of women. It's essential to have the boldness to express my distinctiveness. I wish to be free to express my unique self without concern about other's judgement.

Among the nine posts reflecting high-level agency, a significant theme of redemption was identified. These redemptive self-identities were mostly related to gender and sexual expression. This idea applied particularly to the "lady on wheels" (Tanya Post 1,4 and 7) and "dare to change/the dream of me" (Helen Post 8) posts. As for redemption as a form of self-identity, all of the protagonists articulated a transformation: from negative affective experiences to those resulting in positive outcomes and growth.

As for the negative affective experiences, Tanya and Helen shared a number of experiences. Two themes were identified: frustration with de-sexualisation and "punishment" for their gender/sexual expression.

First, Tanya and Helen mentioned their frustration in being de-sexualised due to caregiving issues. Helen shared how she was being de-sexualised by her caregivers.

> Helen: They cut my hair boyishly short. My hair was so short, and my hair could stick up. As a girl, you want to be pretty with long hair. It's ok for a boy to have a short haircut and they just need minimal care for their hair. People won't think boys with such a low-maintenance haircut strange, but they find it strange for a girl to have a short haircut. Most people think girls should have long hair. This gender stereotype is deeply rooted in my mind. For me, as a girl, I hate to have such a short haircut. I don't want to look like a tomboy or a nun. I don't want to do so just because it's a convenience for my caregivers. I just believe that because I'm a girl, I can't have such a short hairstyle.

Tanya echoed Helen's view by sharing her own de-sexualisation experience when she was in the hospital after the car accident. She described her rehabilitation experience in the hospital as an identity crisis where she "was greatly confused in her gender identity."

> Tanya: While I was in the hospital after the accident, my hair was shaved because of the wound. It is also because bald heads were convenient for care in the hospital. I was being dressed in unisex patient clothes. Also, I felt that my woman's body was no longer private and personal. People like nurses and doctors, even they were women as well, would come to examine my body anytime. I no longer felt that my body was private as it used to be. After being discharged from the hospital, I realised that I had limited options for outfits. I could only wear t-shirts, loosely fit pants, oversize shoes. I guess it was a process that I had to go through in my recovery. I was unable to take care of myself. I was being put in diapers. My head was shaved. When I was in hospital, they mistakenly sent me to the male ward. They thought I was a boy. That was my first experience of being mistreated as a male.

Second, Tanya and Helen shared multiple scenarios which they were being "punished" for their gender and sexual expression. Helen mentioned several examples of caregiver conflict.

> Helen: When I tried to negotiate for a better haircut, my caregiver blamed me as they wanted me to cut my hair shorter and shorter. Or when I wanted to have smooth, soft hair, I asked for conditioner when my caregiver was washing my hair. However, my caregiver complained, "Don't give me extra work to do. Don't be so demanding. I washed your hair, and it's good enough that, at least, you no longer find your hair itchy."

Tanya recalled several scenarios when her female peers were criticising her for being "dressed inappropriately".

> Tanya: Every time I do the same thing which I used to do before I became disabled, say dress up with sexy clothing, there's always someone challenging me. They would say, "Wow, what's wrong with you? You are a woman with disabilities, and you shouldn't wear short pants." I was given a lesson because of my identity as a woman with disabilities. Imagine there are so many girls wearing these hot pants, but we are not allowed to wear them. If I wear them, people will stare at me, especially those old-fashioned conservative women. I had that experience before. The way they stared would make you feel awkward. (laugh) My female friends also criticised me for wearing a lowcut top. She said, "Since you are in a wheelchair, you should not wear such a lowcut top. We can directly see your "part" from our high angle. You should avoid these embarrassments and put yourself on your best behaviour since you are in a wheelchair." I just didn't accept that. Why can non-disabled women wear lowcut tops, but I was given a lesson? Therefore, I fought back, saying, "I think it's ok. I show off my tights with my miniskirt. Wearing a lowcut top is my way to look sexy." I refused to be prohibited from expressing myself.

According to Tanya, she considered these "punishments" implied that she was "damaged goods". She felt her friends considered her gender expression was inappropriate and unacceptable due to her disabilities. In her interview, she expressed strong disagreement that disabled women were not allowed to be sexually appealing.

> Tanya: The message "what are you asking for?" was a heavily stigmatised statement. First, they assumed that I should not be attractive as it is too dangerous for a girl on wheelchair like me. Then, they mocked you. They said, "Do you still think that you are sexually appealing as you were before the accident, or as hot as an able-bodied woman?" I had that hurtful experience before. They just stopped, stared at you...conveying the message in silence: "It's so absurd that you still think that you can attract a man or [that] you will be loved." And that...message...was so strong. I was so surprised.

Second, despite Tanya and Helen encountering numerous negative affective experiences regarding gender and sexual expression, they managed to transfer their experiences into a redemptive self. In general, the protagonists raised three types of positive outcomes in the interviews: recovery, ownership, and learning new knowledge and skills.

Tanya recalled her recovery of her gender expression in hospital.

> Tanya: All I wished for was to be able to take care of myself again. When I become independent, I can make myself pretty again. When I was at home or in the hospital, I enjoyed painting my nails and putting on makeup. Though no one may notice my appearance, I was so satisfied with my beauty tasks. I brought some skincare products, grew my hair, and went shopping for clothes that I could express myself again.

Helen and Tanya both took ownership of their behaviour. Helen said, "I have autonomy in my appearance to make choices for myself. Although I still have a short haircut, at least it's no longer a tomboy look. I can choose to wear some girly tops too." Tanya also took ownership of her sexual expression.

> Tanya: It's ok to show off my thighs even if I am a woman with disabilities...as long as it's on my own terms. It was not a wardrobe malfunction. Why can't I have the right like other women? Disabled women can be sexy and sexually appealing too. What I wear is none of their business. Everyone is unique and has their preferences. I believe there must be someone who finds us attractive. Maybe you could call them devotees (i.e. people with a disability fetish). However, we just want to express ourselves freely. It doesn't imply that we are looking to attract someone. I just think our body has our unique aesthetic. Woman have their unique beauty regardless of their shape and size, height, age and disabilities.

These findings indicated that the protagonists created a redemptive self from articulating a transformation process that went from negative experiences to subsequently good experiences.

These negative experiences involved being stigmatised, segregated, and "punished". At the end of their narratives, their redemptive self implied  recovery, ownership and acquiring new knowledge and skills.

## 7.4 Fabricating of Novel Symbols: Assembling Authentic Meanings Using Artefacts

All of the protagonists assembled their authentic meanings with existing artefacts (i.e. an artefact is a carrier, which is an essential component in the construction of a cultural symbol, to serve as a "vehicle" to carry and deliver semiotic meanings in our daily communication) as a creation of novel symbols. Sam assembled the meaning of "the second mom" with her nephew and ageing parents (Sam Post 6). In Helen Post 8, Helen assembled her meaning of the "pursuit of beauty" with several specific fashion items.

> Helen: To me, the pursuit of beauty is…wearing contact lenses, having a stylish haircut, wearing my favourite earrings, choosing my favourite clothes. I am happy as I am the one in charge. I match them before I go out. That's the way I can be the self I love.

Tanya demonstrated how she re-conceptualised and re-packaged two novel meanings with existing symbols: high heels and her wheelchair. In Tanya Post 1, she impregnated the artefacts of high heels and the wheelchair with the concept of disability aesthetics.

In Tanya Post 1, she re-packaged the cultural symbol of high heels to illustrate her disability aesthetics. High heels, as an existing artefact, are a unique symbol of her redemptive self after the accident.

> Tanya: I find high heels could beautify the shape of our feet. Some people think it's only pretty when you stand up straight in high heels. However, I found high heels could make my legs look slender even when I sit in a wheelchair. It's also a sense of body aesthetics. When I became disabled, I could hardly accept my body with disabilities. Recently, I think differently. Thick shoulders and sinewy arms are different forms of aesthetics. And for our feet, they look bruised and swollen due to poor blood circulation. However, we can convey beauty, as well. Our legs are less muscular and slim….and when we sit in a wheelchair; high heels reshape our legs. The above is my personal view on disability aesthetics. My post demonstrated how I appreciate the beauty of my identity as a woman with disabilities. This post (i.e. Tanya Post 1), to some extent, is conveying my statement about high heels. Maybe you think that I can't walk, my feet are deformed, but I can still wear high heels beautifully. High heels convey our unique aesthetics. Yes, I'm a woman with disabilities, and our bodies are glowing with our unique beauty.

Figure 3 Signifying disability aesthetics with novel symbols (Tanya Post 1)

On the other hand, Tanya re-conceptualised the meaning of the wheelchair. From her perspective, the wheelchair was part of her body (Tanya Post 1) and a signature of her self-identity (Tanya Post 4).

> Tanya: Most people see a wheelchair as a tool. To me, a wheelchair is like part of my body. I assemble my wheelchair into the whole of me. Say, my wheelchair is in white, and I matched my dress in white. In this photo-shoot, I want to present my genuine self. This photo conveys my acceptance that I depend on my wheelchair like my feet. I won't ignore my wheelchair. I matched my wheelchair with my outfit as a whole. It was a coincidence that the colour of my dress was the same as my wheelchair. (laugh) But I find this coincidence helped me to signify the connection of my wheelchair and my body.

In Tanya Post 4, she purposefully included her wheelchair in the selfie even though she was on her sofa.

> Tanya: I didn't want to take my wheelchair away. Because some people on social media do not know me in person, they might be strangers who do not know that I depend on a wheelchair. Also, I wanted to identify myself as a wheelchair user. I think it's essential.

This finding showed that the protagonists combined their novel meanings with existing artefacts to create new cultural symbols to signify their authentic self. They re-conceptualised and re-packaged these existing cultural artefacts with their own meanings which might only be understood by people who shared a similar background.

## 7.5 Making Consistent Use of Novel Symbols With Instagram Stories

In Tanya Post 5, Tanya shared a folder of fourteen Instagram Stories to illustrate how she create the novel symbol "colourful mask" and convey her authentic message about autonomy and quality of life for disabled women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The folder of these fourteen Instagram Stories was a record of how Tanya consistently used the novel symbol to convey a specific message throughout the month. First, Tanya had a novel idea regarding personal autonomy to resist disability stigmatisation during the pandemic.

> Tanya: Because people think that we shouldn't go out. (laugh) Disabled people are expected to be less active during this critical pandemic. However, I just don't want to be bothered (laugh). I just felt our disabled peers should not be stereotyped. The more people discourage me, the more I want to be free to do so. I understand that no one wants to catch the virus. I just believe, as long as I take protective measures, I should have my freedom.

Second, she assembled her novel meanings regarding quality of life during the pandemic using colourful masks. According to her, choosing masks with different colours was an act of enjoyment and self-appreciation during the pandemic.

> Tanya: When you wear a mask, it is your second layer of skin. It is your other face. It's fun to see masks as a fashion accessory or a makeup item. You may not be able to change your makeup style every day, but you can have different masks every day to match your mood.

Third, she posted selfies with colourful masks every day (i.e. in her car or at the doorstep of home). She used thirteen hashtags as a way to assign novel meanings to her colourful masks as well as to bookmark her experiments. For example, #fightcoviddiary, #defeatpandemicofourtimes, #ifyoucantstayhomestaysafe, and #fightagainstcovid19. Posting these daily "mask selfies" implied a consistent pair-up between masks and her meaning of personal autonomy during the pandemic. She purposefully posted them as an Instagram story every day as an experiment; they also gave her followers a glimpse of her daily life during the pandemic.

> Tanya: I had an idea. I wanted to record my everyday life during the pandemic. I posted a daily selfie with a mask and noted what I did that day. Most of the selfies were taken when I was in the car. Some of them were taken at home. I wanted to showcase different masks of the day like a series of "mask fashion" as a diary of my life with masks.

Figure 4 A folder showing the "mask diary" (Tanya Post 5)

Fourth, when she was ready to present the whole idea, she published them as an album titled "Mask Fashion/Diary of Masks".

> Tanya: I used an Instagram story to record every day's mask for some reason. (sigh). Not everyone could view my stories. My posts on Instagram Stories were only accessible among my friends. Now, I published them as a "highlight" for public viewing because I was ready to present the whole idea.

Tanya Post 5 provided rich information on the process of making consistent usage of the novel symbol "mask". Tanya also combined hashtags and other cultural symbols (i.e. taking selfies in the car or in the mirror at the doorstep of her home) to enrich Tanya's semiotic meanings of the novel symbol "mask". The symbol became commonly shared and understood among Tanya's followers. The practice of taking a daily "mask selfie" was more like a repetitive and consistent use of the novel symbol, like knitting thread together. Also, creating an Instagram Stories album helped Tanya to identify and modify the usage of these novel symbols, as if it were "a user menu" with useful templates.

## 7.6 Freezing the Moment: Crafted Selfies

Tanya took selfies to "freeze the moment" and create a self-portrait conveying authentic meanings (Tanya Post 2, 4, 5 and 7). Her selfies contained two essential elements: the use of novel symbols; and craftmanship through the use of photo-editing apps.

First, Tanya chose novel symbols to signify her authentic identities. She chose cultural symbols (e.g. a pair of high heels) which carried personal meanings instead of choosing commonly used symbols (e.g. a pair of flat shoes she wore every day). Tanya said, "I consider this selfie different from the 'me' in my daily life. You see, my high heels were positioned on the floor instead of the footrests." Tanya purposefully designed this image of self with novel symbols, such as an off-the-shoulder designer dress, high heels, and makeup. These novel symbols carried strong personal meaning, but they were rarely used in daily life.

> Tanya: I find it difficult to wear these items in my daily life. In this photo shoot, I want to wear something unique to signify my true self. I don't have to be bothered by the practical restrictions of these outfits due to my disabilities. For instance, I don't have to put my feet on the wheelchair footrests. I am free to wear high heels without wearing stockings. I can wear an off-the-shoulder dress. I don't have to worry about my movements on the wheelchair as I don't have to move around. I can focus on expressing and presenting the self that I love most.

Together with her pose in the wheelchair and her smile signifying her confidence, Tanya described herself as "sitting gracefully in a wheelchair". In this photo, she wanted to convey the image of disabled women.

> Tanya: When I took this photo, I genuinely felt that disabled women are beautiful. They can convey their best part of the self. They can love what they do. It's closely related to autonomy and self-love. For me, I love to wear a white dress. Maybe you think it's so wrong to dress this way, but I disagree. Yes, I have my lifestyle, my autonomy. I have my self-expression. It's a realisation of my belief in autonomy.

In Tanya Post 4, she assembled the symbols with novel meanings. She was sitting on a sofa to signify her comfortable home. The foot massager (i.e. the Valentine's Day gift) signified her love life. Her laptop signified her work at home. Her wheelchair signified her disability. The combination of all these novel symbols conveyed her love of life and her work-life balance.

Second, Tanya demonstrated her craftmanship by using photo-editing apps to edit her selfies to create a self-portrait. She adjusted the colour tone and lighting of these selfies to "bright" (Tanya Post 5), "warm" (Tanya Post 4), and "dim" (Tanya Post 2). She flexibly used different genres of photographs to convey a specific mood and atmosphere.

In Tanya Post 4, she purposefully used a tripod and Bluetooth device to take this selfie. Besides taking the trouble to use the tripod, she took additional effort when it came to photo editing.

Tanya said, "If I didn't edit the photo, you would find more flaws from the photo (laugh)." She edited the photo to cut out personal clutter on the sofa and other unnecessary items such as "the toilet door, the cables and some sundries". She also blurred the background of the picture to direct her viewers' eyes to her and these novel symbols. She highlighted the pink colour of her massager to give weight to it as the centrepiece of the picture.



| The use of novel symbols | Essential Elements Of Self-Portrait | The use of photo-editing apps |
|---|---|---|
| Dolls - home | | Cut out personal clutter on the sofa and other items |
| Smile - happy | | Blurred the background |
| Notebook - work | | Highlighted the pink colour of her massager |
| Sofa – comfortable | | |
| Massager – Boyfriend's gift | | |
| Wheelchair – disability | | Added warm color filter |
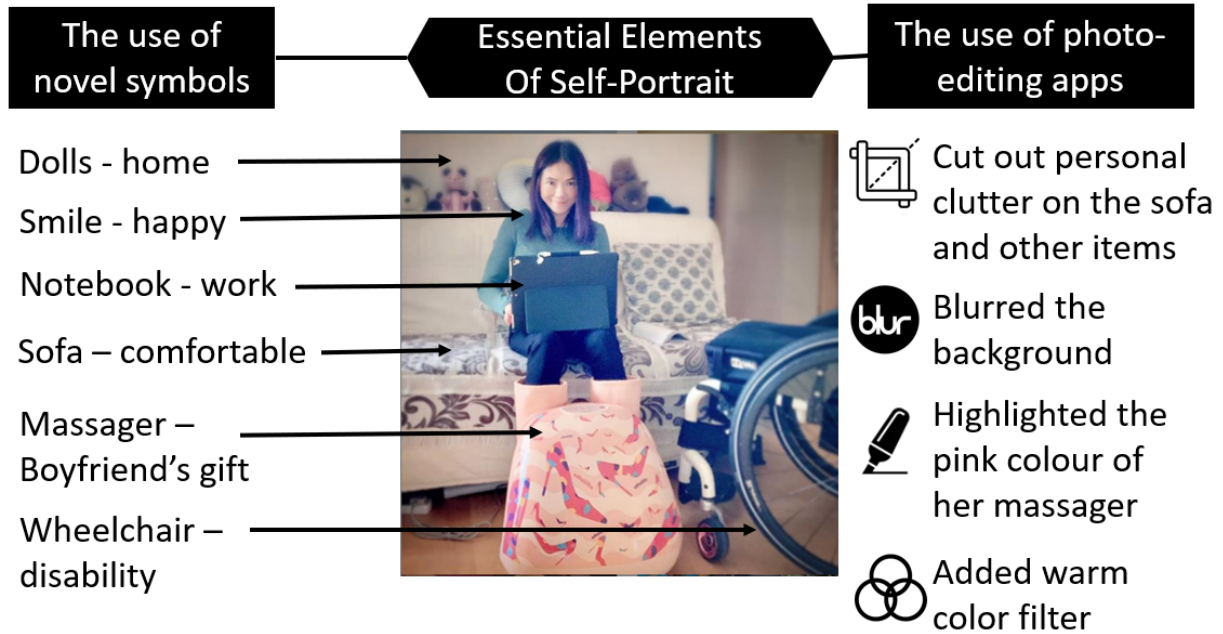
Figure 5 Displaying a Valentine's Day gift in her home office (Tanya Post 4)

In Tanya Post 7, she added a sticker and the hashtag "beyoutiful" on her revealing selfie. The purpose of this editing was to manage the level of sexual expression. As she explained, "I just didn't want to be too flirty as my followers, my clients (laugh) may not appreciate it. Again, I just wanted to avoid being too revealing." In this post, she purposefully added the hashtag #beyoutiful to this selfie. The hashtag aimed to explain the message of the post.

> Tanya: I saw someone conveying a similar concept with a different way of spelling it. As far as I remember, it didn't have "be you" in it. But when I searched for the suggested hashtag in IG, I chose this one as it includes "beyou" in the hashtag. The previous one emphasised beauty, and you can barely see the "be you" in the hashtag. I preferred this one because my message in this post was to emphasise "beyou" rather than "beautiful".

These findings suggest that Tanya creatively crafted her selfies with novel symbols to signify her authentic self. These selfies were carefully formulated and fully manipulated self-portraits rather than realistic snapshots of her daily life. Tanya Post 1, 4 and 7 were self-portraits where she presented the conceptual image of herself as a "sexy and confident" disabled woman.

## 7.7 Creating her own "Personal Magazine"

In episodes reflecting high-level agency, Tanya and Sam usually used text and photographs to create a "personal magazine". Helen posts her diary on Facebook. For each diary entry, Helen wrote "Post of the Day" as the heading of the post. Helen's diary was mostly related to her independent lifestyle as a woman with severe disabilities. She shared her thoughts on caregiving issues (Helen Posts 1, 6) and autonomy (Helen Post 1 and 8).

Tanya purposefully chose Instagram as her "personal magazine" as its grid layout allowed her to curate her posts with images. This is effective in helping Tanya and her followers to connect her posts with a specific theme.

> Tanya: I love to post on Instagram. Instagram is for my personal expression…my private life and my selfies. For example, I have a mask after a shower. All along, Instagram is more photo-oriented. Once you click in, you can see all your photos listed. Its grid view makes it easier to express yourself. As for Facebook, it's a list view. The personal posts would be mixed in with your shared posts. It's hard to generate an overview of your personal posts. It's hard to give an image of yourself on Facebook. That's why I prefer Instagram.

For instance, gender and sexual identity were common themes in Tanya's posts (Tanya Post 1, 2,4 and 7).

> Tanya: I wanted to state that disabled women can be very feminine, can be sexy, can be…beautiful, can…[express] self-love. These are all the values I have held for years. On social media, I wish to convey our feminine beauty. We can also take care of our skin and body…We can self-appreciate our beauty and so on. Although to some extent, people may see our limitations, it doesn't hinder our beauty. I mean, we have our own beauty of the body.

Based on the interviews and my observations of Tanya and Helen, one can see that they used social media as a "personal magazine". The "personal magazine" created a personal brand to convey their identity and distinctiveness. These self-branded profiles brought together both their self-perception and their authenticity.

## 7.8 Building Sub-groups for an Authentic Culture

All of the protagonists demonstrated their efforts to build their own sub-group culture with potential followers who shared their vision. In general, three ways were identified: to create a segregated "sub-group" cultural context; to receive and give likes among a specific group of followers; to establish a conversation with potential sub-group peers.

First, all of the protagonists took a strong stance in their posts and established a segregated "sub-group" cultural context. Helen described her post on euthanasia as a "monologue" (Helen Post 1).

> Helen: This post is more like a monologue as I asked people not to lecture me at the end of my post. Therefore, not many people commented or mentioned this post. I know they would probably have expressed their sympathy and made pleasant remarks. It's always easier said than done. I guess they would probably have asked me to be optimistic. They think I'm tough. Although I'm optimistic most of the time, I do have moments of frustration. It's impossible to be 100% optimistic.

In Sam Post 6, she did not consider the comments when she decided to take up a caregiving role for her nephew. This purpose of this post was simply to inform her followers about the family dynamics of a woman with disabilities.

> Sam: In this post, numerous people asked me not to overstress myself. They tried to persuade me to think of alternate solutions. I know they care about me, but I have the responsibility and faith that I want to stand for. I appreciate their concerns, but I will not follow their suggestions.

In a similar vein, Tanya stated, "I guess they like it, but I don't care how they think. To me, it's just my personal statement. I love the way I dress. I don't find any problem with my outfits."

Second, Tanya was more concerned about receiving and giving "likes" from two specific groups of followers. The first group of followers were those who had shown the potential to become a member of her sub-group culture. Tanya said, "Some girls like my selfies. We often like each other's selfies. She also likes to share her sexy selfies…maybe a see-through top. I appreciate girls doing so. These girls are exceptional, but it's good that we can appreciate each other."

The second group of followers were those who could provide "credentials" of their authentic selves. Tanya considered Tanya Post 7 successfully signified her sexual attractiveness as she received "likes" from male followers.

> Tanya: I am more confident to say that I'm sexually appealing to men. There are not many comments (laugh). Only two men liked my post. Their likes…were a sense of recognition…they realised that I am sexy. My photos are usually conservative, but

these photos helped them to realise that I can be an elegant lady. People can realise that I can be open and sexual too.

Third, Tanya and Helen emphasised receiving and giving comments and direct messages with potential members of their sub-group culture. Tanya believes communication on social media serves as a private social environment where she can interact with her peers. When the protagonists' posts involved sensitive topics in particular (e.g. gender and sexual expression), these interactions required more privacy.

> Tanya: In our ordinary social occasions, maybe you can see my beauty, but you won't express it directly. Yes, maybe you will praise me in person, but it's odd to do so in a public social context. However, when you are surfing on social media, it's more relaxing and [it's] personal time. Social media is more like a casual and personal social environment. He sees you are pretty, and then he simply presses "like". Or maybe when he sees the other side of you, he may respond directly. From my perspective, we are more interactive on social media.

Receiving and giving comments was a common communication tool to engage those who shared similar backgrounds. For instance, Helen felt encouraged when a disabled peer echoed her thoughts on euthanasia (Helen Post 1). She said, "A disabled friend shared her thoughts. It's good to see my post encouraged others to have the courage to share their opinions." Helen shared a story about her younger brother in Helen Post 6. She replied positively to the respondent, who was also a sister with disabilities.

> Helen: There was a disabled girl with a similar background who replied to me. She was also a sister in the family. She said my post struck a chord with her. As an elder sister with disabilities, we had similar experiences with our siblings. We shared our feelings, and that…resonance made us have a special bond.

On the other hand, Tanya said that engaging in conversations with their peers via direct messaging was crucial. It helped to build her sub-culture with potential peers as they may collaborate and contribute to her sub-culture. She recalled, "These two respondents were photographers. One of them sent me private messages. He invited me to have a photo shoot. (laugh) Yes, I was happy about that too." Overall, Tanya considered direct messaging to be a private and informal dialogue with potential members of their sub-culture.

> Tanya: When we are surfing on the Internet, it is mostly our personal time. People are more likely to read these posts as an individual in a private and closed setting. When they see the other side of me, maybe some males will be sexually attracted [to me], and they might be interested in chatting.

The results indicate that the protagonists targeted communication with potential members of their sub-group culture via receiving and giving likes, comments, and direct messages. These communication tools allowed them to gauge the understanding and acceptance of their

followers. Furthermore, these interactions became "credentials" in their sub-group culture. Having a dialogue with potential members allowed them to create a sense of fellowship.

## 7.9 Identifying Collective Culture Gaps From Social Media Feeds

Tanya and Helen both discussed how they used social media to observe and track cultural trends and developments within the disability community. For instance, Helen found a friend with disabilities who shared news coverage on euthanasia on Facebook (Helen Post 1). After reading the media coverage, she decided to enrich the discourse by sharing her own views. She thought that the discourse of euthanasia was characterised by ableism and was dominated by people "who do not fully understand" disability.

> Helen: I wanted to draw public awareness to euthanasia. In this debate, people usually take the moral high ground to talk about ethics and discourage people from dying with dignity. However, I wanted them to hear the genuine thoughts of a person with disabilities.

Meanwhile, Tanya emphasised the importance of expressing her sexuality on social media to remove the stigma of disabled women.

> Tanya: I hate being forced to conform to the stereotype of disabled women. We were prohibited from expressing ourselves freely. It's dehumanising to deprive us of our humanity. I believe that we can enjoy life as well. Our enjoyment of life and self-love should not be exploited because of our identity as a woman with disabilities.

Tanya actively observed global trends regarding disabled culture from her social media feeds. She also tracked popular hashtags to update her "toolbox" for her posts. In Tanya's interview, Tanya shared her observation of social media regarding the use of hashtags related to women on wheelchair (e.g. #womenonwheels). She considered that most exemplars were from the western trend. For this reason, she wanted to present herself as an exemplar in Asia.

> Tanya: Because I always read newsfeed on social media. That's why I think I can post my picture up there. I met numerous girls in wheelchairs who were keen to present their beauty on social media. However, most of them were Westerners. There are few of them from Taiwan, but it's uncommon in Asia. I guess disabled women face more barriers and stereotypes in Asia. That's my observation. We, the Asian girls in wheelchairs, should be bold to express our femininity like those girls. That's my intention. Not only disabled women should be expressive of their beauty; every one of us around the world should embrace our unique aesthetics. That's the idea I had when I made this post.

She chose a white dress to present herself as an Asian woman in a wheelchair. She said, "Well…I am an Asian…and I just find an Asian girl wearing a white dress in a wheelchair to be beautiful. I just found they matched perfectly. That's what I think (laugh)."

This result demonstrated how Tanya and Helen actively trace the evolution of trends in their collective culture through their social media feeds. They critically observed and identified gaps and barriers within their collective culture. Furthermore, they enriched and directed this debate within their own culture (i.e. the disability community).

## 7.10 Blending in With Conventional Culture Using Hashtags

In Tanya's posts, a total of 61 hashtags were used in four posts. Four types of hashtags were identified according to their nature and use. The first type involved 47 common buzzwords such as #whitedress, #lovehighheels (Tanya Post 1), #beforesleepactivity (Tanya Post 2), #homeofficeideas, #workandrelax (Tanya Post 4), and #Sundayrelax (Tanya Post 7).

The second type involved seven hashtags commonly shared within the disability community such as #wheelchairgirl, #prettyonwheels (Tanya Post 1), #happyonwheels, and #wheelchairlife (Tanya Post 4). The third type involved seven hashtags used with collaborators and product brands such as #mingpaomagazine (Tanya Post 1), #osim, and #footmassager (Tanya Post 4).

Tanya explained her rationale for using these hashtags.

> Tanya: I love to use hashtags. It's because I want more people to see my posts when they search for these hashtags—for example, #wheelchairwoman. Based on what I know, when you search #wheelchairwoman, somebody will see many pictures with these hashtags in their result. Therefore, I wish to be in one of these pictures representing the hashtag #wheelchairwoman. I want more people to see my picture when they search for these hashtags.

According to Tanya, cultural leadership involves the consistent sharing of her stories to make the "unknown" acknowledged by the wider community. She said, "I need to construct our values on social media. I made an effort to promote my advocacy on media. However, the general public doesn't change much. To me, I want to construct our own identity as a recognition of our existence." In Tanya's interview, she criticized that the general public knew very little about disability and equality. For this reason, her posts on social media was a way to raise the public awareness and understanding of disabled people.

> Tanya: I just felt that it's an "education" when more diverse voices are raised. When something becomes familiar, we gain a better understanding of things and we expand our vision. For example, young men falling for older women was a taboo in the past.

When these couples become more and more [common], we find it more acceptable as it's not a big deal. Therefore, to some extent, it's an education.

Another example is trans people. When more trans people are coming out, you will be less discriminatory to these people. To some extent, when their identity is acknowledged, their stories expand our horizons and enrich our knowledge. They provide us with a new lens to see things from different angles. That's the education I intend to do.

Based on Tanya's use of hashtags, she demonstrated how she intends to distribute her authentic self and culture within the disability community. She also aims to blend in with mainstream culture by increasing the view rate of her posts. To achieve this, Tanya has taken on the role of an exemplar and cultural leader to facilitate the evolution of disability culture. Instead of reiterating conventional cultural norms, Tanya aims to interject her authentic culture into the mainstream culture.

## 7.11 Concluding Remarks: "I am a Jewel Maker"

In episodes reflecting high-level agency, the protagonists described preferred identity with two characteristics: an integrated self and a sense of authenticity. Based on my findings and observations on episodes reflecting high-level agency, I would like to draw some inferences about how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. According to the findings below, I make inferences on how they strengthen their preferred identity using three strategies:

For the first strategy, disabled women strengthen their preferred identity by building an authentic cultural context in the process of reviewing their life stories and creating a redemptive sense of self from negative affective experiences.

In Section 5.4.1, all of the protagonists demonstrated how they conducted autobiographical reasoning to integrate their life stories from the past, present and future. The protagonists created their novel meaning and orders of things as well as authentic identities in the process of integrating and reviewing their themed stories. They posted on social media to create a narrative to share their subjective world as an indigenous member of the disability community.

Disabled women may use these posts to review and re-organise significant life episodes in a positive and assertive manner. They integrate their self-identity cohesively by making sense of their past, present and future. The integrated self enables them to deal with different challenges and identity crises throughout their lives. The integration of significant episodes and authentic identity is closely related to Gidden's concept of the "reflexive project of the self", which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Also, self-reflection before telling their story on social media enables disabled women to take ownership of their voice and actions. In other words, disabled women make use of social media

as a space to construct their own cultural context with their own meanings and order of things. Their posts on social media are a narrative where they share their subjective world as an indigenous member of the disability community. With their own meaning and orders of things, disabled women built an authentic cultural context for their sub-group.

In Section 5.4.2, the process of making their posts often entailed a process of redemption where they share their earnest desires and genuine emotions while behaving coherently with their heart. Based on the findings and observations, it is possible that disabled women may share their stories on social media as a process of redemption. By reviewing their negative affective experience, they take ownership of their actions to gain a sense of self-efficacy.

As for the second strategy, disabled women create their own novel symbols to signify their authentic self in carefully crafted self-portraits via selfies.

In Section 5.4.3, the protagonists presented their creation of novel symbols by repackaging existing cultural artefacts, such as wheelchairs and high heels, with their own personal meanings. It is possible that disabled women creatively re-package these existing cultural artefacts with their authentic meanings. These re-packaged symbols become their own signatures of self-identity. These novel symbols convey a sense of assertiveness and empowerment.

In Section 5.4.4, the "masks diary" in Tanya Post 5 illustrated the importance of consistently using of novel symbols. Tanya made use of an "Instagram Story Album" to convey her message consistently. Tanya Post 5 has several implications. First, it is possible that disabled women make use of daily posts to help them focus on the here-and-now. The practice of posting daily helps disabled women to organise their thoughts and make sure their goals and aspirations on kept on track. Second, they can use the technology affordance of an "IG Story Album" to help them mark and easily recall their significant moments. Creating an album may help them polish their ideas and message more vigorously.

In Section 5.4.5, Tanya also demonstrated the use of selfies as crafted self-portraits to capture the self in a particular moment. She shared how she overcome the physical constraints in her daily life to creatively use authentic symbols in a photo shoot. It is possible that disabled women may take selfies as a dedicated craftmanship of self-portraits. They created their novel symbols to signify their authentic self. They take selfies to capture significant personal moments as an act of self-observation. The practice of taking selfies is likely to help disabled women increase their self-awareness and self-appreciation. Taking these selfies is a way to explore depictions of their self-identities, including the former self, the transitional self, the hoped self, the metaphorical self, and even an imagined self. In sum, disabled women can use selfies as a tool for self-expression as the self "who I want you to see". Disabled women store and edit selfies to facilitate the formulation of a solid and vigorous self-presentation.

As for the third strategy, disabled women act as catalysts for the constructive evolvement of collective culture in their own community and the wider mainstream culture. They provide critical thinking to energise and update their disability culture as cultural leaders. The findings in Section

5.4.6 and 5.4.9 provide examples on how the protagonists interacted with disability culture and mainstream culture.

In Section 5.4.6, the protagonists created their own "personal magazines" to share their posts with their peers. It is possible that through the repetitive creation of posts on social media, disabled women establish a series of coherent and consistent personality traits with their own vision and mission. A collage of photographs and diary entries may help them to define and to build their authentic identity for self-branding purpose. Disabled women create their own "personal magazine" to present their authentic self-identity and novel meanings. Their "personal magazine" is one self-branding strategy to formulate a well-curated sense of self-presentation. They strategically disseminate their "personal magazine" to build their own sub-group culture with potential members. As for my inference, sharing their authentic stories and self-identities is closely related to the outsider witness technique in narrative practice. Further discussion will follow in the discussion chapter.

In Section 5.4.7 Tanya and Helen identified and engaged potential members of her sub-group culture by receiving and giving comments. It is possible that disabled women may use these communication tools to identify, engage and share their ideas and lifestyle with potential members. They use social media to form a subculture within the disability community. By giving likes and having positive interactions with potential members, they build a sense of collectiveness for their subculture.

In Section 5.4.8, the protagonists traced the origins of certain trends within their culture in the disability community. They identify gaps in their community culture and seek to enrich the discourse by sharing their culture as a sub-group. These findings raise the possibility that disabled women are acting as cultural leaders in the disability community. From following the trend and development of their disability culture, they provide critical thinking to energise and update their disability culture.

In Section 5.4.9, Tanya used hashtags to share her stories with the community via social media to provide direction, new meanings, and inspiration. It is possible that using hashtags may be one strategy that disabled women use to blend their culture into the wider community and mainstream culture. They learn, share and lead this "cultural revolution".

At the end of this section, I would like to use a metaphor to wrap up my analysis and inferences about high-level agency. Regarding high-level agency, disabled women are like "Jewel Makers" who focus on the creation of cultural symbols to reinvigorate the collective culture of their community. In general, this involves three phases: the excavation of the authentic self and meanings; the fabrication of meanings and artefacts, and the trial production of novel symbols. They reflexively post on social media to capture the significant episodes and narrative of their life stories. They further crystalise their personal meanings and wisdom from negative affective experiences like oysters creating "pearls" by coating the speck that has irritated them so painfully. They further assemble these "pearls" with other artefacts as if they were making "a pearl ring" that they then post on social media. Their selfies resemble a carefully crafted self-

portrait assembled with novel meanings. They also use different technologies for self-branding and to build their sub-group culture with their peers. Furthermore, they make use of social media to distribute and promote their sub-group culture.

# CHAPTER VIII OVERALL EXPERIENCE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

8.1 Revisiting the Hegemonic Oppression

## 8.1.1 Disabled women Vs. Women with Able-bodied

It is human nature to gain self-understanding and self-actualisation. It is also an urge to make their inner self coherent in their social interactions as self-verification. Both disabled women and those without disabilities may exercise similar agency on social media to explore their preferred identity.

A typical illustration of the difference between disabled women and those without disabilities is their gender and sexual expression. For normative able-bodied women, they may choose different gendered cultural symbols to signify their gender identity (e.g. make-up and fashion accessories) and sexual identity (e.g. a pair of high heels). They may also use alternative cultural symbols to explore their potential identities and imitating observing outstanding exemplars from alternative culture. For example, they may construct and express their sexual identity by imitating the dressing and make-up of a famous movie star or iconic idol like Marilyn Monroe. They may also post selfies with these gendered symbols on social media for archive and retrieval. Furthermore, they may also interact with their followers through comments and inbox messages to gain social acceptance and support.

Comparing disabled women to most able-bodied women, disabled women face multiple socio-cultural barriers to develop and explore their preferred identity. However, their identical behaviours may have different meanings and intentions. Disabled women have specific intentions and motivations to exercise their agency. Their agency aims to strengthen their preferred identity and resist the hegemonic oppression in their everyday life.

## 8.1.2 A Typical Example of Oppression Against Disabled women

As I have pointed out earlier, disabled women face numerous challenges in developing and performing their self-identity in a stigmatised socio-cultural context. To illustrate how hegemonic oppression hinders the construction and expression of self-identity among disabled women, I provide an example of menstruation stories among the three protagonists.

Both Helen and Sam identified the significant role of their mothers in their experience in learning, choosing, and using menstruation napkins. Their mothers were authoritative in providing limited knowledge and room for them to learn and use menstruation napkins. Sam described her mother never talk about menstruation in her teenage. When Sam had her first period, she screamed in panic and smeared her blood all over the toilet. Her mother just came in to demonstrate the use of a napkin without giving her any talk or supervision. Since then, she followed her mother's

choice when she purchased napkins after marriage. She never heard of any knowledge on hygiene and self-care during menstruation. Sam attributed her lack of knowledge and inattentive attitude on menstruation napkins to her mother's pessimistic attitude.

In a similar vein, Helen pointed out that her mother took over the handling tasks such as purchasing and applying menstruation napkins. She tried to purchase her preferred brand and explained her choice to her mother. However, her mother complained her choice whenever her mother changed her napkin. After our discussion on this issue, Helen described it as a power struggle between her and her mother. Helen considered her mother took this opportunity to claim her authority of womanhood as if she knew nothing about womanhood. Both Helen and Sam considered their menstruation story were significant examples to illustrate the oppression and power struggle in their everyday life. However, both of them expressed no intention to take further initiatives to learn independently and negotiate with their mothers on menstruation issues. They chose to follow their mothers and attributed the situation to "this is how the life of the disabled is".

As for my inference, Helen and Sam's interactions with their mothers on menstruation issues may have a negative impact on how they perceived their mothers' discrediting attitude on them. Since their mothers responded negatively, they may consider themselves inferior and incapable of taking the role as an adult woman. They internalised these stigmas, low expectation, and a sense of inferiority into their self-perception.

Menstruation is a common source of negative experience and stigmatisation among women. For disabled women, these experiences hamper their self-esteem, self-efficacy and emotions to explore and develop their self-identity as a woman with disabilities. Both ableism and patriarchy are deeply rooted in the stigmatisation, discrimination and oppression against disabled women to explore and signify their self-identity.

## 8.2 The Management of Social Network

As for their positive experience in strengthening their self-identity via social media, three important themes were identified. First, the management of their social network and followers is crucial across all three levels of agency. (These details will be elaborated on in the discussion chapter). All protagonists demonstrated how they built a supportive and disability-assertive social support network. These followers and net-friends gave them a sense of being understood, accepted, and supported. Sam shared a typical example of how her followers responded positively when "a strange man stared at her because of her awkward way of walking".

> Sam: They encouraged me positively and made me relieved. The best thing about social media is that I can share things on social media, particularly things that I don't know how to speak out. When you do, they give you diverse opinions and support to back you up. I felt much better as I could share with them.

## 8.3 The Never-ending Journey of Authorship

Second, all of the protagonists mentioned the time and effort involved in social media authorship. Formulating a post was a journey from the "unknown" to the "known". Helen described the process of posting as "starting from scratch" as it took time to create and present herself on social media. Sam described it as "a long, anxious but joyful experience".

> Sam: It is a necessity to take a long time to dwell on the thoughts of the construction and presentation of self. In this dwelling process, I take time to type or to take a good picture for the post. It's anxious because you always worry about how people interpret your post. You don't know how they will respond...or they may laugh at you or criticise you. That's why I'm anxious. It's joyful because once you have completed the construction of self, you will have a sense of achievement.

## 8.4 The Reviewability of Posts

Third, the reviewability of social media was a significant factor across the interviews with all three protagonists. Sam said revisiting her previous posts helped her gain confidence, especially when "I feel inferior and defeated". Tanya pointed out, "Revisiting these posts helped me to overcome the criticism I faced every day. These posts and pictures remind me of my past, and I believe I'm getting better nowadays. I gained a sense of self-appreciation."

## 8.5 Challenges Related to Social Media

As for the challenges they face, all of the protagonists did not mention the challenges and drawbacks in strengthening their preferred identity via social media. However, I would like to explore the considerations that went into abandoning a planned post which seemed crucial to one preferred identity. Only Tanya shared her thoughts on this experience. Tanya wanted to make a post criticising ableism in everyday life. She listed several examples of how people ignored her privacy and did not respect her body. For example, people took her octopus card to "help" her with the parking meter. A man held her shoulder while he "helped" her to exit the elevator. She said she wanted to share her views on this subject on social media. However, she lost the urge and impulse to post as it "took too long time to find a picture to post". She gave up as she did not find a suitable picture to convey her message.

Another common theme regarding the challenges faced when posting on social media was regarding surveillance. All of the protagonists raised the issue of surveillance of their significant others, disabled peers, and followers. Helen pointed out, "I chose to express appreciation instead of making complaints. If I complain, I might upset someone." In a similar vein, Tanya raised her experience and concern regarding feedback from her disabled peers. She worried that her peers would consider her to be a "show-off". She elaborated, "Some disabled women commented negatively behind my back. They said, 'You can wear this dress'. I can't because my disabilities

are more prominent than yours.' I am so surprised that they criticised me." However, my interpretation of Tanya's concerns was more related to her dealing with the jealousy of her peers. She also faced criticism about her representativeness of the disabled community as she was "less disabled and was an able-bodied person before". Tanya also mentioned the pressure to self-censor herself to avoid any misunderstandings among her followers.

> Tanya: It's easy to be misunderstood when these followers don't know you in person. They simply make a judgement on you based on…maybe just a sentence of your statement or on your media coverage. Therefore, these strangers simply know you via social media; they have a different impression of me, which might be a fallacy.

## 8.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I organised the data to understand how the protagonists exercised their agency on social media to enhance their preferred self-identity via social media. After studying the twenty-seven episodes reflecting different levels of agency, we can see that the protagonists demonstrated creativity and initiative in applying different symbolic resources to social media. I would like to recall the three metaphors I have used to highlight the significant findings and my inferences across these three levels of agency.

When it comes to low-level agency, disabled women are "Birthday Girls". They showcase their strengths to perform their pre-assigned social identities (See concluding remarks in Section 1). For low-level agency, strengthening their preferred identity implies that disabled women play pre-assigned social identities and the "sick role" positively.

I have inferred that disabled women have developed three strategies to gain a sense of self-acceptance and social acceptance. First, they exhibit their potential and capacity to play stereotypical social identities like housewives to signify their sameness to "ordinary" or non-disabled women. Second, they promote the positive side of the "sick role" instead of rejecting these pre-assigned identities, for example, highlighting their positivism, optimism, and persistence. Third, they communicate with followers and members of their community to raise their social acceptance and status in their social groups.

At medium-level agency, disabled women are "shopaholics" who proactively search and explore alternative identities. Disabled women co-create a favourable socio-cultural context to gain access to more resources and to facilitate identity exploration (See concluding remarks in Section 2). At medium-level agency, strengthening their preferred identity carries the intention to co-create a favourable socio-cultural context for identity exploration and experimentation. From this identity exploration and experimentation, disabled women earn a sense of self-efficacy as they create a safe space to explore and prioritise potential identities.

I also infer that disabled women have developed four strategies to gain a sense of self-efficacy to explore their alternative identities. First, disabled women segregate their social media to create a "semi-private space" to own their voice and desires. Second, they actively search for alternative cultures and relevant social groups to blend in with their current socio-cultural context. They use different tactics to connect with alternative cultures such as using activism hashtags, imitating advocacy leaders and "trying on" alternative symbols in selfies like a face puzzle. Third, disabled women manage their social network in many ways to co-create a favourable socio-cultural context and co-ordinate resources and support for identity exploration. For example, adding net-friends, tagging friends, synchronising their posts, giving and receiving comments to deal with misunderstandings, and prioritising their potential identities according to followers' comments. Four, they archive their experiments with identity exploration to identify success keys as they prioritise their plans for personal development.

When it comes to high-level agency, disabled women are "Jewel Makers" who undergo the process of polish and mosaic to display their authentic self-identity on social media. They also use different technologies for self-branding and to build their sub-group culture with their peers (See concluding remarks in Section 3). At high-level agency, strengthening their preferred identity implies that disabled women review and integrate their stories and experience to build an authentic self-identity. Also, strengthening their preferred identity is related to building and sharing their sub-group culture to foster their culture in the community.

I have inferred that disabled women have developed three strategies to gain a sense of authenticity and a trajectory of self. First, disabled women build their authentic cultural context in the process of integrating their life stories with the redemption of self. Second, they create novel symbols to signify their authentic self in selfies with carefully crafted self-portraits. The craftmanship used when posting a selfie helps them "freeze" significant moments of self. These selfies are also carefully designed and edited to formulate a solid and vigorous self-presentation. Third, they act as catalysts for the constructive evolution of collective culture in their community and mainstream culture. For example, promoting their "personal magazine", identifying, and engaging potential members of their sub-group, as well as using hashtags to share their sub-group culture with the wider community.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on these inferences using Goffman's dramaturgy. These preferred identities are also closely related to Gidden's "reflexive project of the self". I will further discuss the use and nature of symbol resources across three levels of agency. I will highlight my inferences on their strategies to strengthen their preferred identity via social media to suggest their potential implications for social work practice.

# CHAPTER IX: INTERPRETATION OF RIPPLE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The study's main goal was to understand how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. In my previous chapter, I reported my findings and my interpretation of how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity in low, medium and high-level of agency. At low-level agency disabled women may use conventional symbols to signify their prescribed identity and highlight the positive side of "sick role". At medium-level agency, disabled women may select alternative symbols to respond to the oppression and stigma embedded in their everyday life. Also, they may explore alternative identities and invite more support and resources for future identity experimentation. At high-level agency, disabled women may create novel symbols to signify their authentic self. By modifying and sharing self-portraits, disabled women may create their own sub-group and alter the existing social-cultural context.

The findings in this study illustrate how disabled women may ride on the social-cultural-technology context of social media to construct, present, and express their preferred self in social interactions. Three types of symbolic resources (i.e. cultural symbols, communication modalities and technology features) have distinctive impacts to fulfil these intentions though the protagonists may not have a clear rationale for using a certain symbolic resource on social media.

As for my interpretation of the results, the use of symbolic resources is possible to fulfil three intentions: 1) To de-stigmatize disability identity: they reconstruct the meaning and social orders of disability; 2) To claims desired intersectional identity: they select their desired collective identities and membership of desired social groups; 3) To construct narrative identity: they claims ownership and authenticity from telling their stories to redeem their self from negative affective experiences. In this section, I focus on these three intentions to illustrate how relevant symbolic resources were used and may contribute to strengthening their preferred self on social media.

## 9.1 De-stigmatization of Disability Identity

Based on the findings related to low level of agency, the theme of strengthening preferred identity among disabled women is de-stigmatization of disability. Several symbolic resources (e.g., immediate snapshots and the creation of hashtags) were applied and may attribute to strengthening preferred identity among disabled women.

### 9.1.1 Immediate Snapshots for Credentials

The first strategy to de-stigmatize disability is to exhibit their potential and capacity to play gender-stereotyped social identities and signify their "sameness" to non-disabled women. According to the findings, disabled women showcase knowledge and skills to perform pre-defined social identities. Thus, disabled women apply conventional cultural symbols to perform "self" in everyday life. Immediate snapshots were taken as infographics and records of their social identities.

As for my interpretation, an immediate snapshot may help disabled women and people who lack the self-esteem to express their self to build credentials and confidence to claim their desired identities. According to Barry, Doucette, Loflin, Rivera-Hudson, and Herrington (2017), compared to those with higher self-esteem, individuals with low self-esteem are more willing to post their immediate selfies and disclose their self on social media. Based on some research on immediate snapshots, it is possible that immediate snapshot has three possible impacts on de-stigmatizing disability identities among disabled women as follows:

*9.1.1.1 Gain a sense of empowerment for disabled women*

Immediate snapshots facilitate disabled women to share their lived experiences like putting someone in their shoes. The idea of "see it from my eyes" may gain a sense of empowerment for disabled women. As Pittman and Reich (2016) have explained, our cognition implicitly takes imagery modalities into account rather than textual modality. These snapshots are imagery vision of the way we see things through our eyes. These graphical modalities indicate the "realism heuristic" and convey messages and sentiment than text modalities (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Instead of making an argument or narratives on the "sameness" to non-disabled women, these immediate snapshots allow disabled women to let their audience see "things" through their eyes and camera.

In a similar vein, immediate snapshots give a sense of "here-and-now" credential. As Georgakopoulou (2019, p. 108) explained, "it is an ingenious bringing together of immersing ourselves in the immediacy of the here-and-now daily experience at the same time as being able to share it." in my interpretation, immediate snapshots facilitate disabled women to make an immediate solid meaning of "here-and-now" self.

*9.1.1.2 Establish credentials to claim their preferred identity*

Immediate snapshots may help disabled women to establish credentials to claim their preferred identity. The immediate post of these exceptional events is narratives in real-time, which implies the most "actual" and "real" sentiment of self. According to a study on taking selfies in world events like Primavera Sound and Barcelona Games, Cornelio and Roig (2018) pointed out the impact of immediacy in posting selfies on social media. The immediate selfie serves to justify the exceptional moment (e.g. a selfie at the event venue) and a testimony to capture a memorable

moment (Cornelio & Roig, 2018). For instance, Sam shared her challenges and others' doubts about her capacity in being a housewife. She regularly posted snapshots of her groceries and cooking to showcase her persistence to learn and perform her desired identity as "a good wife". As she mentioned, her intention was not to impress her followers with presentable and delicious meals. She intended to post immediate snapshots to convince her followers to acknowledge her effort in the "doing" moment. Still, the progress and effort to play the housewife role was verified. To her, these immediate snapshots were proof that she could be a wife with poor cookery skills. Yet, she was still a housewife. In other words, these snapshots are her testimony as a housewife.

*9.1.1.3 Enhances communication and connection with others*

Immediate snapshot enhances communication and connection with others. In my findings, sharing immediate snapshots helped Sam to get immediate social support and resources.

Pera, Quinton, and Baima (2020) have reported that the older generation shares photos for social bonding and interaction. Thus, photo sharing helps distribute their stories and everyday challenges (e.g. having an accident, or household getting out of order etc) so that they can access more support and resources for solutions (Pera et al., 2020). Besides communication with others through immediate snapshots, my findings indicate that disabled women showcased their skills and experience on "how" their disability may not hurdle their capacity to play normative gender roles.

## 9.1.2 Creative hashtags to Reconstruct "Sick Roles"

As for the second strategy, disabled women promote the positive side of the prescribed "sick role". In Chapter V, Sam demonstrated her creative use of hashtags to highlighting the positive elements of an assigned "sick role". Instead of reiterating existing conventional meanings of disabilities, Sam and Helen presented the positive side of "sick role" by sharing their creative solutions in their everyday life. For example, Helen's "bring-your-own-fork" and Sam's hashtags with sarcasm and humour.

As for my interpretation, the core of the second strategy to repackage the "disability" symbol is the creative use of words and hashtags. Disabled women play with words creatively to re-packaging "disability" with their desired meanings. Although they may not have a clear rationale for making creative hashtags to reconstruct disability symbols. The use of creative hashtags may make a significant attribute to packaging their disability identity in two ways as follows:

*9.1.2.1 Shift the disability discourse from stigma to positive meanings*

Fun creation of hashtags helps shift the disability discourse from stigma to positive meanings within the community of disabled women. My interpretation of creative hashtags is inspired by a study on a hashtag circulated on a Facebook page on fitness for disabled people (Mitchell et al., 2019). Mitchell et al. (2019) stated physical activities among people with disabilities are traditionally stigmatized as "rehabilitation". The hashtag #amputeefitness promoted participants with disabilities to adopt an active and healthier lifestyle and aesthetics with diversities (e.g. having fitness activity, body-building, healthy diets and self-care) (Mitchell et al., 2019). The circulation of images with the hashtag #amputeefitness on social media not only shifted disability discourse from medical model to social model, but the circulation of hashtags was also inspirational to members of the disability community (Mitchell et al., 2019). As a result, the positive fitness discourse promoted self-efficacy and body image among disabled participants (Mitchell et al., 2019).

As my study suggests, the sense of playfulness in creating hashtags facilitates disabled women to express themselves without the boundaries of stigmatized discourse. When they do not necessarily convey to the existing discourse in their messages, they are free to narrate the positive side of "sick role".

*9.1.2.2 Circulate Group messages to protect their disability identity as a threatened identity*

The co-creation and exchange of hashtags allow disabled women to circulate group messages to protect their disability identity as a threatened identity. This interpretation is inspired by a study on the creative use of hashtags among a group of queer members in response to a mass shooting in a Pride celebration (i.e. the Orlando shooting). According to Jenkins, Zaher, Tikkanen, and Ford (2019), queer members created and circulated short texts and hashtags to respond to threats and prejudice against their salient and threatened identity. The use of creativity in language aims for three goals: 1) Identity (Re)construction: Redefined and shared their collective identity in a positive way (e.g. #DefyHateWithLove, #KeepKissing); 2) Community Building: Set boundaries between ingroup and outgroup so that ingroup members gained a sense of solidity (e.g. #OrlandoShooting memorial at #Stonewall; #WeAreOrlando); 3) Resistance: Seek collective responses to threats to their stigmatized identity (e.g.# I donated to support #OrlandoShooting victims via @gofundme Prayers are great but let's help with $$$ too.) (Jenkins et al., 2019).

As for my findings, it is possible that the use of creative hashtags not only help disabled women to de-stigmatize their disability identity in similar ways. Through the creation of hashtags,

disabled women creatively repackage their disability identity with their desired meanings. With these creative hashtags, disabled women co-create their desired meanings of disability with their disabled peers through interactions. Ultimately, these creative hashtags help disabled women to build their desired discourse of disability as a shared meaning within their peer group. When these desired meanings are accepted and shared by the group, these hashtags can be a way to resist the stigmatized discourse of disabilities as an outgroup culture. Together, creative hashtags help disabled women build an ingroup and outgroup boundaries with their disabled peers. By co-creating desired meanings of disability, they gain a sense of solidarity among their disabled peers to resist the stigmatized discourse of disability.

## 9.2 Mosaic of Intersectional Identity

Based on the findings related to medium level of agency, the theme of strengthening preferred identity among disabled women is to explore and experiment with alternative identities. Protagonists no longer followed prescribed identity nor complied with the normative ideology. Alternate symbols were selected to signify the non- "taken-for-granted" identities that others may not acknowledge. Instead of signifying the normative self in social situations, protagonists chose to signify their intersectional identity.

My interpretation of the findings at medium level is that disabled women express the "other side of me" which may not be socially accepted in their daily life. For example, they express their self with alternative meanings of disability, womanhood, and sexuality. Due to the intersectional identity of women and disability, disabled women claim their desired collective identities and relevant membership of desired social groups. By claiming these multiple collective identities, disabled women assemble their intersectional identity.

### 9.2.1 Building a Safe Environment for Sensitive Self Disclosure

*9.2.2.1.1 Ephemerality to Gain Control of self-presentation*
In my interpretation, ephemerality plays a crucial role in gaining a sense of control and security for self-presentation among disabled women. Ephemerality is a crucial social media feature to minimise the reach and accessibility of sensitive posts. Ephemerality is defined as a category of technology affordance which allows content accessible for a limited time and archived in the administration folder. For instance, setting privacy to limit a specific group of significant others to view. In my findings, protagonists chose ephemerality mode (i.e. Instagram's Story mode) to set time limit as well. With these social media affordances related to privacy, social media serves

as a personal "sovereign" for disabled women to escape from the dominant discourse and significant others who serves as informal control agents in daily life.

Some previous studies have explained how a sense of control over self-presentation may help disabled people strengthen their preferred identity. First, the sense of control helps disabled people feel secure and protected from being humiliated. Hu, Zhao, and Huang (2015) have pointed out that disabled people wish to have control over their online self-presentation. On the virtual platform, Chinese people with disabilities could escape from their disability identity and constructed their online identity with more authenticity (Hu et al., 2015). The controlling of self-presentation on social media facilitate disabled individuals to feel protected from risks like being humiliated (Hu et al., 2015).

Second, ephemerality reduces the pressure on impression management. According to Choi, Williams, and Kim (2020)'s work on the impact of ephemerality and permanence on self-presentation on social media, ephemeral mode limits accessibility and privacy and reduces the pressure on impression management (Choi et al., 2020). For this reason, ephemeral posts alleviate the social and emotional pressure on their self-presentation. Furthermore, followers' feedback on ephemeral posts is confidential. Users may feel less social pressure to negotiate with others in a public setting (Choi et al., 2020).

Together, it is possible that ephemerality changes the conventional identity verification practice among social media users. Ephemerality may a sense of privacy and autonomy to facilitate disabled women touch on sensitive issues and social taboos without the necessity for social approval from their significant others. In face-to-face social situations, individuals need to negotiate and evaluate others' feedbacks to conclude their success/failure in verifying their identity. However, identity verification on social media may lie on the initiative to post and the effort of presenting it. Followers' acknowledgement and feedback are comparatively less important than they are in a face-to-face context. Furthermore, feedbacks on ephemeral posts are confidential to users. The confidential interaction creates space and room for users to weigh and take useful feedbacks into account.

*9.2.2.1.2 Holistic Self-disclosure in Disguise*

When disabled women build their safe semi-private environment on social media, they may express their self holistically as they do not confine to the normative cultural context. Yet, my interpretation of the findings suggests that several symbolic resources may serve as a disguise when they touch on sensitive self-disclosure. For example, a sarcastic and humorous genre with emojis and photo manipulation for confidentiality. These symbolic resources have different implications to facilitate sensitive self-disclosure among disabled women.

First, these disguise helps to express emotions as a non-verbal cue. Sarcastic and humour gene with emojis in narratives is prominent when protagonists were experimenting with their alternative identities. Sarcastic genre and emoji help disabled women package their message to gain openness to legitimize their sensitive self-disclosure.

Boutet, LeBlanc, Chamberland, and Collin (2021)'s study on emojis explains how emoji is useful for emotional communication and social attribution. According to Boutet et al. (2021), emojis serve as nonverbal cues (i.e. facial expression) in online communication. Emojis facilitate readers to interpret the author's emotional state from the text. Thus, the application of different affective emojis (i.e. positive, negative and neutral) in digital interaction gains a sense of warmth and intimate connection (Boutet et al., 2021). Communication with emojis helps reduce anonymity in online communication as emojis convey the author's character and traits.

As for my interpretation of the findings, emoji is similar to body language and tone of voice in online interactions. As for sensitive self-disclosure, emojis convey a particular tone for negotiation purposes. Emoji serve as part of the agency tool for negotiation in online interactions. When emojis (e.g. a smiley face covering their eyes, upside-down face, face with tears) are applied in negotiation, they may convey a sense of self-sarcasm or a strategy of passive aggression.

Second, disguise also helps to hide part of their undesirable self-disclosure. Photo manipulation for confidentiality is prominent when disabled women touch on sensitive or undesirable self-disclosure. For example, Sam's faceless semi-nude selfies. Helen also shared her intention to exclude her wheelchair in her selfies. As for my interpretation, their intention of photo manipulation is also a disguise strategy. These manipulated selfies are likely to be posted, curated and displayed on social media as experimentation for further self-construction, storytelling and social networking with a particular cultural/social group.

There are two research may help to answer why these photo manipulations facilitate sensitive self-disclosure. The first possibility is photo manipulation provide a sense of anonymity. Vivienne and Burgess (2013) reported that queer digital storytellers manipulated their photographs to balance the tension between expressing their self and protecting the privacy of themselves and their significant others. Individuals used technology affordance and photo manipulation (i.e. photo editing) to present and express their sexual and gender identity on social media (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013). It is possible that Sam's faceless semi-nude selfie is a balance between sensitive sexual expression and protection of herself and her husband.

The second possibility is that photo manipulation help disabled people to express themselves holistically without confining to their "taken-for-granted" identity. D. Z. Davis and Chansiri (2019) have stated that participants might not reflect their physical body and known social identity in their online identity construction process. They mostly reflected their holistic self in their online

identity. The authors have claimed that gaining authenticity in their self-identity is empowering. People with disabilities take this opportunity to challenge the assumption and perceived expectations of their disability. This study helps to explain why Helen's intention to exclude her wheelchair in selfies. In my perspective, exclusion of undesired disability symbols may help disabled women to express themselves different to their routine.

*9.2.2.1.3 Validation of Sensitive Lived Experiences*

Based on my findings, it is likely that sensitive self-disclosure helps disabled women to validate their sensitive lived experiences with themselves and others. The process of narrating their lived experience on social media has two interpretations.

First, validation of sensitive lived experiences facilitates disabled women to recognize their feelings, confirm their thoughts and experiences and establish their stance and value. Litchman et al. (2019) have studied 125 blogs to understand what these disabled women blog in their journey of pregnancy and motherhood. In their blog, they not only shared their challenges (e.g. need a larger wheelchair to accommodate the weight of their growing baby, further mobility challenge), inaccessible barriers (e.g. healthcare facilities and services, standard baby products lack of universal design), and stigmatized ideology among significant others (e.g. unmet emotional and social needs from partner and family members) (Litchman et al., 2019). Yet, these bloggers shared their dedication and determination to actualize their motherhood. In their blogs, they shared creative solutions and acknowledge tailored information (e.g. labour position for wheelchair users) and support from their followers (Litchman et al., 2019). It is possible that validation of sensitive lived experience helps disabled women have a ground for their voices instead of conveying normative scripts.

Second, validation of sensitive lived experiences on social media may help disabled women to connect and validate their experiences with others, particularly those who can associate their experiences. According to Andalibi and Forte (2018), sensitive disclosure on social media depends on four perspectives. The first perspective is personal factors including the need for social support, emotional responses during the protagonist' process of remembrance and their control of identity narratives. The second perspective is related to their followers. For instance, the protagonist may project the responses of their followers. Should the protagonist prefer to avoid unwanted interactions (e.g. being criticised, being gossiped), they may prefer not to disclose. The third perspective is related to the affordance of the social media platform. For example, asynchronous communication on social media allows protagonists to have sufficient time and space to formulate their messages. The fourth perspective is related to the source of support from their social network. The protagonist may consider disclosing when they foresee their social network may provide immediate support.

It is possible that sensitive self-disclosure on social media may meet the emotional and social needs of disabled women. By segregating their sensitive post from a group of followers, disabled women connect with other followers for social support and resources. Instead of presenting their sensitive issues in a help-seeking inferior manner, disabled women may choose to showcase their attempts to overcome these challenges. By managing the degree of self-disclosure, disabled women aim to access more social support and resources to overcome hurdles and legitimize their preferred identity.

### 9.2.2 Consumption of Profane Culture with Hashtags & Selfies

At medium level of agency, activism hashtags and social media challenges are prominent in protagonists' posts. They were used to connect alternative cultures as consumption of a specific culture. Alternative symbols were consumed with different profane cultures (i.e. women/feminism or disability culture). Symbols were experimented with to facilitate disabled women to acquire new skills by imitating cultural exemplars. Also, they claimed their membership of a desired social group by imitating group rituals. These alternative cultural symbols were being consumed as their personal statement and protest to fight against stigma and oppression.

As for my interpretation, these activism hashtags and social media challenges serve as symbolic portals to connect a culture of a specific group. As mentioned in chapter two, disabled women often themselves "not qualified" to claim their womanhood and desired membership as they are often excluded from these social groups due to their intersectionality. Disabled women select multiple cultural sources to signify their collective identities. By compiling multiple collective identities through consumption, disabled women assemble them to become their intersectional identities.

*9.2.2.1 Articulate Narratives with the Power of Social Movements*

Consumption of social movement props like activism hashtags and social media challenges facilitates disabled women to explore, learn and quote alternative profane cultures in their posts. Consumption of activism hashtags and social media challenges do not facilitate them to explore their common experiences, but also connect them with the power of social movements. The circulation of social movements on social media facilitates disabled women to be critical thinkers. Along with the social movement theme, disabled women examine taken-for-granted culture and pre-conception of their self-identity. The process of consumption may facilitate disabled women to explore their alternate voices.

Through the consumption of activism hashtags and social media challenges, disabled women legitimize their preferred identity in a specific cultural context. Disabled women can articulate and share a similar experience in a standardized format to connect the political context. These activism hashtags and social media challenges are user-friendly prompts for consumption. According to Clark (2016) 's research on the hashtag #WhyIStayed related to domestic violence among women, the hashtag provided a specific narrative framework for survivors to articulate their narratives in a persuasive manner and standardized format. By sharing and circulating these hashtag narratives, individuals participated and performed collective actions of a social movement. Thus, Clark (2016) considered these feminist hashtags are drama scripts to facilitate narrators to deconstruct normative discourse and shape alternative possibilities of self in a socio-political context.

Clark (2016)'s study helps to explain Tanya' post with Facebook Challenge "Fix each other's Crown". Tanya' not only used the challenge template. She imitated the typical format of the challenge: copy the template, post a "presentable" selfie, and tag 100 friends. In Tanya's case, she used the challenge to connect her gender identity with a socio-political context. However, one unanticipated finding was that the three protagonists responded differently to the social media challenge "Fix each other's crown". Tanya participated in the original version of "Fix each other's crown", which was in English. After some time, local feminists of the "Si-nai Union" Facebook group translated the challenge to Chinese modified to "C9" (aka "si-nai", a slang to name housewives). Helen withstood the "Fix each other's crown" as she felt overwhelmed with these "never-ending" challenges.

As for my interpretation, the discrepancy of participation among the three protagonists may relate to the language and culture gap of these social media challenges. Based on my observation, protagonists may face challenges in comprehending and consuming the contents in English. Thus, there may be a cultural gap in these challenges. For example, the "crown" in the "Fix each other's crown" challenge may have a different implication for Asian women. Translation and localization of these challenges are crucial for consumption.

*9.2.2.2 Identity Puzzle with Hidden Symbols in Selfies*

According to findings, selfies at the medium-level agency were an "identity lab" for experiments with alternative identities. Selfies were "changing room" to try on "alternative symbols" as identity exploration and experimentation. Protagonists imitated members of desired social groups and experiment with alternative cultural symbols to explore their potential identities.

My findings suggest that selfie is a useful tool to signify intersectional identities. Barker and Rodriguez (2019) have reported that women with intersectional identities (e.g. race, sexual

minorities) have higher motivation to take a selfie. Their selfies were used to participate in online activism as a personal statement in political contexts. These marginalized women tended to use selfies for self-representation and interactions with a wider social network via social media. By taking and posting selfies, it is possible that, women with interactional identities can enact their social identities and claim their membership across different social groups. It is possible that selfies signifying collective identities help intersectional women (like disabled women) form their identities.

There are two points in my interpretation of the findings to explain why these selfies may help disabled women strengthen their preferred identity. First, "a picture is worth a thousand words". These selfies with activism hashtags can be a personal statement. For example, Tanya's design t-shirts with pro-democracy symbols and Sam's semi-naked selfies with disability hashtags. Their boldness in selfies is a strong and clear personal statement on controversial topics.

Second, disabled women can embed their "hidden" symbols to interact with a specific social group. Comparing to a textual modality with linguistic meanings and rigid structure, symbolic meanings in image modality are more subtle and flexible. Disabled women can make use of imagery modalities to express their sensitive and controversial identities. For instance, when Sam participated in the "housewife" social media challenge (a localized version of "Fix each other's crown"), she purposefully edited her selfie with two rainbow stickers on her cheeks. She explained that the rainbow stickers are specific symbols for her "ingroup" followers as she was subtly expressing her sexuality as a bi-sexual housewife.

### 9.2.3 Congregation of Desired Social Group

At medium-level agency, protagonists applied a wide range of technology affordance are significantly impactful to congregate and to obtain relevant support from desired social groups among disabled women.

First, some technology affordances are useful for communication and social interaction with two groups of followers. For known and existing friends on social media, protagonists focused on the emoji feedback and comment to evaluate the comprehension of followers. Receiving emojis feedback was a parameter to evaluate followers' acceptance and comprehension of their alternatives. It is similar to Neubaum and Krämer (2017)'s claims that the infrastructure of online communication eases users' effort and task to express their opinions and arguments. By simply liking or sharing a political post on social media, users indicate their stance. Protagonists handled misunderstandings and negotiated for social support with followers through comments and inbox messages.

For net-friends and members from a desired social group, protagonists actively engaged in various Facebook pages and online forums related to their desired social groups (See Section 5.3.4). They actively searched for preferred social groups and made friends with groupmates. Protagonists perceived these net friends were more likely to support them as they shared the vision within the social group. Besides adding net-friends, protagonists engaged potential supporters by tagging them to form an ally. On the other hand, they identified and collected social resources from potential supporters. These net friends acquired specific knowledge and skills which were not available in the current social network.

Second, some symbolic resources are impactful to crowdsource for support and resources for identity exploration and experimentation. For cultural symbols and the use of photos and text in blogs, protagonists showcased their possibilities and success keys to play their preferred identity. For technology affordance, protagonists selected synchronization so that their followers across different social media platforms could access their pledge.

As a whole, the congregation of desired social groups not only facilitate disabled women to claim their collective identities, interaction and communication with the desired group help disabled women strengthen their preferred identity in three ways as below.

*9.2.3.1 Social Learning through Engaging Desired Social Groups*

Congregation of the desired social group meet the psychosocial development and needs of disabled women. According to my findings, it is interesting to note that social media facilitates disabled women to break through the geographical and time constraints and access to essential support and resources for identity experimentation. These resources may not be available in their existing social network. On social media, interacting and communicating with the desired social group may help disabled women acquire support and resources to facilitate their desired psychosocial development. These extended social networks via social media may enable disabled women to use desired symbols to interact with others as experiments to build their age-appropriate or oppressed identities.

Three studies have explained how engaging in desired social groups may facilitate psychosocial development among disabled women. First, a systematic review confirmed that social networking site (SNS) facilitates psychosocial development among adolescents and young adults (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2013). According to this systematic review, SNSs facilitate adolescents' psychosocial development. These online communication technologies are likely to influence their peer relationships and parent-child relationships s (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2013). These online interactions with peers help to sync with their identity development s (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2013)

Second, according to a research on social media use of a group of adolescents with cerebral palsy, they overcame physical social context constraints to interact with their youth peers and participate in their age-appropriate leisure (J. G. Caron & Light, 2017). The study has indicated that online communication and peer relationships enhanced the personal growth of adolescents with cerebral palsy.

Third, Brunner, Palmer, Togher, and Hemsley (2019) interviewed thirteen adults with traumatic brain injury on their social media experience. All interviewees expressed enjoyment of having control of their agency and control of social relationships on social media. The sense of self-efficacy includes owning the freedom to express their preferred traits (e.g. humour), gaining a sense of belonging with a particular social group, participating in activities with friends and a broader social network (Brunner et al., 2019).

*9.2.3.2 Claim Desired Membership with Fewer Requirements*

As for my interpretation, social media facilitates users to shuttle between preferred social groups. As a group dynamic, the hierarchy of superordinate and subordinate is blurred, and group members are collaborators. To pursue social connectedness and intimacy in social relationships, users are free to join and leave social groups as long as users follow the group policies and etiquette. The superordinate members of these online groups are more like an administer to host the online page. Also, the boundaries between social groups are blurred. Individuals can join multiple social groups with similar interests. Individuals may not commit to a specific group. Newcomers can play different roles and positions in these social groups (e.g., observer, participants, commentator). Members do not have an obligation to be committed or loyal to a specific group. Users can shuffle around different social groups to gain a sense of connectedness and valued social relationships.

Congregation of a desired social group on social media facilitate disabled women to engage their desired social groups with less required identity assets and credentials. According to Côté (1996), identity assets equip individuals to negotiate and achieve goals across different social situations strategically. Identity assets can be categorized into tangible and intangible types. Tangible identity assets are "socially acknowledged" credentials such as education, career achievements, and individual deportment (e.g. body attractiveness, aesthetics and speech accents) (Côté, 1996). These credentials serve as a "ticket" for identity exploration and commitment. Tangible identity assets also imply individuals' capacity to engage specific social groups (Côté, 1996). Intangible identity assets are psychological and cognitive capacity such as ego strength, self-efficacy, social perspective-taking, cognitive flexibility and complexity and other character attributes (Côté, 1996). Intangible identity assets also equip individuals with vitalities and the capacity to negotiate various life challenges and pursue opportunities.

Based on previous literature and my findings, social oppression and stigma limit the development and prospects of disabled women. Disabled women often lack tangible identity assets (e.g., education credentials, financial strength and career development, and body fitness). This deficiency of tangible identity assets may lead to a sense of incompetence and social segregation. However, social media minimise the barriers of tangible identity assets to claim a membership of a desired social group. Disabled women can use technology to minimize the acquisition of knowledge and language (i.e. search engine, translation features). Furthermore, the social group dynamic on social media is less closed and hierarchical. As for intangible identity assets, social media provide a rich social learning opportunity for disabled women to nurture their psychological and cognitive capabilities. On the other hand, through social media, disabled women have access to the resources and support from the desired group to actualize their preferred identity.

*9.2.3.3 Crowdsource Support & Resources from Extended Social Network*

Disabled women aim to crowdsource for social support and resources from social relationships. As Putnam (1995) have categorized, social relationships can be defined as strong and weak ties. For strong ties, bonding social capitals refer to contented emotional resources and intimate relationships from family and close friends (Putnam, 1995). For weak ties, bridging social capital refers to resources and heterogeneous information from interpersonal relationships at work or with strangers (Putnam, 1995).

My findings suggest that disabled women, similar to some oppressed women, make use of social media to enrich their bridging social capital. According to a study on social capital, women in patriarchal collective societies can take advantage of social media to extend their existing bonding social capital (Ali Aksar, Danaee, Maqsood, & Firdaus, 2020). With the benefits of social media, marginalized women can socialize outside their close circles and gain bridging social capital (Ali Aksar et al., 2020). With social media, women have an open platform for self-construction and self-expression. Through extending social connections and networks with similar goals and interests, women gain better social skills and emotional bonding (Ali Aksar et al., 2020).

Two studies have indicated that online communication and networking are crucial for identity support and resources. First, disabled women can learn and seek emotional and informational support from peers who shared their experiences. Peterson-Besse, Knoll, and Horner-Johnson (2019) have reported that the internet network was beneficial to pregnant disabled women. Disabled women faced unmet needs from family and healthcare professions to deal with the pressure and uncertainty during pregnancy (e.g., postpartum depression, low birthweight babies). Online communication with other women who shared the experience provided

meaningful emotional and informational support on disability, pregnancy, and childbirth (Peterson-Besse et al., 2019).

Second, the congregation of online disabled communities may help disabled women to gain a sense of social participation and self-worth. Lee and Cho (2019) have reported that disabled people could acquire emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support from social networking sites and online communities. Online communities gave them opportunities to interact with others which they had lacked offline (Lee & Cho, 2019). These online communities on social media expanded their social network and interaction (e.g., meeting new people). Informational and instrumental support facilitated people with disabilities to explore more lived experiences (e.g., travelling with a wheelchair, information on accessible transportation and accommodation). Also, emotional and appraisal support from others enhanced their self-esteem and self-efficacy (Lee & Cho, 2019). Active participation and rewarding social interaction increased positive self-evaluation among people with disabilities. Together, participation in an online community brought a sense of self-worth and competence (Lee & Cho, 2019).

Together, the congregation of a desired social group helps disabled women to acquire knowledge and resources to explore their preferred identity as well as to overcome challenges in playing their preferred identity.

## 9.3 Celebration of Authentic Identity

Based on the findings related to high level of agency in the previous chapter, the theme of strengthening preferred identity among disabled women is to set keystone of the integrated and narrative self.

Several symbolic resources were applied to facilitate disabled women to claim ownership and authenticity of self from telling their stories to redeem their self from negative affective experiences and oppressions. Furthermore, disabled women prosume novel symbols to signify their authentic self. Through the process of self-symbolization, disabled women build their own sub-cultural group and act as changemakers to vitalize the mainstream culture.

### 9.3.1 Prosumption & Hyperbolism in Selfies

According to my findings, selfie practice as a self-portrait has two features. First, the prosumption of novel symbols in self-portrait is a process of hyperbolism and self-symbolization. In my findings, protagonists prosumed novel symbols to signify their authentic self. Protagonists combined their meanings to artefacts as a fabrication of novel symbols. In my finding,

protagonists used fashion, colourful masks and other novel symbols to hyperbolise their self in selfies. Through consistent use of novel symbols in their selfies, protagonists hyperbolised with novel symbols in their self-portraits.

Second, photo modification is applied in the process of hyperbolism. Disabled women manage their desired and undesired cues in self-portraits. For instance, Sam and Tanya applied photo-editing apps to shape their facial features and other imagery elements to convey specific meanings of their messages. Protagonists applied various photo-shooting and editing techniques in their imagery self-representation practices. For example, taking close-up selfies to full-length selfies, finetuning skin and facial features, putting on make-up, tuning light and colour saturation and adding stickers. Together, prosumption and hyperbolism in selfies are beneficial for disabled women in two ways.

*9.3.1.1 Hyperbolize desired Self in Selfies*

In the process of creating their self-portraits, disabled women creatively use symbols to signify their self-sentiments, personal traits and personal competencies. My interpretation is inspired by Tembeck (2016)'s study on selfies among women in the process of hospitalization and treatment. Tembeck (2016) highlighted how selfie-takers hyperbolized illness and gender symbols in a series of hashtag #HospitalGlam as self-representational practices. In her study, hospital corridors, waiting room, assessment tools were hyperbolized with femininity, aesthetics and beauty in their selfies. These selfies in diagnosis, cautionary and treatment sessions convey their first-person lens to documentary their subjective experiences of illness. Some studies may provide explanation on how making selfies facilitates self-reflexivity.

Thus, taking and modifying selfies facilitate disabled women to reflect their traits and promote the "valuable side" of their authentic self. A systematic review helps to explain my findings on why protagonists' authentic but modified selfies enhanced their mental health. The systematic review has studied the association of posting modified photos on Facebook and users' mental health and personality (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017). Twomey and O'Reilly (2017) summarized the debate on the impact of photo modification on users by differentiating the type of self-presentation and its impact on users' mental health. According to the systematic review, authentic/positive self-presentation implies a positive reflection of one's traits and personal competencies (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017). Authentic self-presentation is consistently related to high self-esteem and perceived social support. Authentic self-presentation on Facebook is related to self-promotion, honesty, better control of impression management and authenticity (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017).

On the other hand, some studies have criticised photo modification by studying inauthentic self-presentation on social media (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017). Inauthentic self-presentation implies an unrealistic presentation of the ideal self. These inauthentic self-presentations are consistently related to low self-esteem, high levels of social anxiety, higher neuroticism and narcissism (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017). Together, the impact of photo modification on users' mental health depends on their agency and motivation. Attempts for authenticity in self-presentation enhance positive mental health and vice versa.

*9.3.1.2 Internalization of Desired Self*

The process of self-symbolization and photo modification helps disabled women to internalize their desired self. photo modifications facilitate disabled women to integrate their self-identities in their preferred manner. In an experimental study on selective self-presentation on social media, Gonzales and Hancock (2008) pointed out that photo modification helps users to integrate their preferred self and social self on social media. The modifications of body/face features and adding additional props (e.g., make-up frame and stickers) help them create and maintain an online persona. Photo modification facilitates disabled women to hyperbolise their authentic self; it helps them explore alternative self-presentation and identity work at low cost (i.e. effort on fitness and diet, resources, and skills for make-up).

Another research had explained how self-presentation on social media helps internalize their preferred identity. According to Choi et al. (2020), self-presentation on social media help individuals internalize their behaviours and characters as they attain their preferred identity. The self-symbolizing process reinforces individuals' commitment and salience of their preferred identity. Choi et al. (2020) pointed out that when individuals construct their identity on social media, they undergo a series of self-symbolizing activities. First, individuals strive to acquire tangible or intangible symbols of their preferred identity in the identity construction phase (Choi et al., 2020). individuals formulate their self-presentation on social media (Choi et al., 2020).

On the other hand, individuals reach their identity goal when others acknowledge their preferred identity via social media. Since they reach their identity goal, they are less concerned about their followers' feedback and judgement (Choi et al., 2020). Users present the identity in these permanence posts as a permanent and verified portrayed self (Choi et al., 2020). The public self-presentation creates social pressure on users as they need to be consistent and committed to the presented identity (Choi et al., 2020).

In this regard, self-symbolizing on social media is self-driven attainment of preferred identity but not social-driven by relationships and situations. From my perspective, disabled women long face social segregation and stigma. It is possible that self-objectification helps them to take a distance

to observe and rework their self-presentation. Through social learning and observation on social media, they make use of photo modification to re-create their self and use the common gendered symbols to redeem their womanhood and gender identity.

To sum up the above, my findings suggest that disabled women strengthen their preferred identity through self-symbolization and photo modification. Selfie is more like a self-selected and self-manipulated portrait of self. In the process of self-symbolization and photo modification, disabled women gain more self-acceptance and self-gratification. They creatively play with text and images to embed their personal meanings into their self-representation. They observe their self through mirrors and cameras; applied photo-shooting and editing technique to convey their self-sentiments; post it on social media as a self-portrait. As for my interpretation, these skills facilitate their "ongoing" reflexive project of self. They are creative and playful to explore their self and celebrate their authenticity. The process of selfies may enhance their subjective well-being in terms of an evaluation of self-sentiments in events, life satisfaction, fulfilment and achievements across their lifespan.


### 9.3.2 Self-Documentary: Facilitation of Identity Coherence & Ownership

At high level of agency, self-documentary is crucial for storytelling and the construction of narrative self among disabled women. Several symbolic resources are essential for self-documentary use.

First, technology features that involve archiving and retrieving posts are crucial for self-documentary. These features include creating a folder for a series of thematic posts. The filing features help disabled women tell a story in chronological order.

Second, hashtags as identity bookmarks elaborate the "cause-and-effect" relationship between significant incidence, self-sentiment, and specific self-identity. Disabled women make use of identity bookmarks to construct and re-construct their thematic stories. These media traces of different self-identities help disabled women anticipate and extend their narrative possibilities in the future.

Third, a collage of photos on the Facebook wall serves as a showcase of self. Protagonists tended to choose permanence mode for their narrative posts to build a collage of photographic posts. These permanent posts are being showcased as one of the featured posts in the user's profile. Protagonists also mentioned that a collage of posts in their profiles helped to integrate and convey themselves as a whole.

*9.3.2.1 Capture Significant Moments for Self-Reflexivity & Reminiscence*

These findings suggest that selfies are useful to capture significant episodes and unique outcomes for self-documentary. As Vivienne and Burgess (2013) stated, individuals reflect on their life events when they take and post these photographs of significant moments. It also facilitates self-reflexivity as immediacy enhances disabled women to make sense of their emotional sentiments.

A study on digital photography among older people helps to explain why these capture of significant moments may help disabled women reflect and frame their self-sentiment in their desired manner. Pera et al. (2020) pointed out that sharing photos on social media facilitates users to reflect, represent and transform their sentiments and experience. The act of sharing photos helps users gain self-acceptance, self-efficacy and self-appreciation by interpreting their purpose of life and personal growth with their photos (Pera et al., 2020). Thus, the technology affordance (i.e. archiving/retrieving, a collage of photos in profile, a folder of Instagram Stories) facilitates individuals to create an autobiographical memory for narrative self (Pera et al., 2020).

In general, some studies help to explain why capturing significant moments help disabled women strengthen their preferred identity. First, capturing significant moments may facilitate disabled women to make sense of their experiences and self-sentiments. Huppatz (2009) has reported how grassroot women identified their gender privilege at the workplace. Grassroot women may often face oppression and unequal treatment at work due to their socioeconomic status and gender. Yet, the reflection of these oppressed experiences at work helped participants explore the meaning of being a woman at the workplace. They identified their gender identity as a unique privilege at work (Huppatz, 2009).

Second, capturing these significant moments help to build desirable self-defining memories. According to Diefenbach and Christoforakos (2017), these self-selected selfies and posts focus on promoting and disclosing one's strength, achievement, capacity and desirable traits. However, these self-selected promotional presentations do not aim to gain social acceptance and peers' appreciation. These self-promotion posts fulfil the psychological needs (e.g., self-appreciation, self-esteem and confidence) and social interaction needs (e.g. self-expression and communication, maintain existing relationships and building desired relationships). These self-presentations promote a sense of "self-staging" that users take the dominant role to own their intended image on social media (Diefenbach & Christoforakos, 2017, p. 8).

Thus, the process of constructing a self-promoting post facilitate disabled women to do the "identity work" to build their self-esteem. Mehdizadeh (2010) pointed out that for people with

lower self-esteem, making self-promotion posts involve selecting a presentable photo, describing their desirable features and projecting their preferred self. Ultimately, the habitual self-promotion generates a sense of actualization of the preferred self as well as a better evaluation of self (Mehdizadeh, 2010). It is possible that disabled women slowly build a pattern of self-appreciation when they repetitively make a self-promotional post on social media.

In sum, capturing these significant moments facilitates disabled women to make meaning to their life to gradually become a theme of their overall life experience. it is possible that capturing significant moments helps disabled women to store desired self-defining episodes to become the theme in their self-narratives and evaluation of self.

*9.3.2.2 Minimize Conflicts between Multiple Identities Development*

Based on the findings at high-level agency, identity hashtag not only helps the protagonists to organize different storylines of their identities, but identity hashtag also helps to integrate their identities along the timeline or the offline/online context. For example, Sam's "second mom" identity not only indicated a new start of the storyline of her being an adult daughter in her family of origin. The "second mom" identity enhanced her to integrate her past experiences of being rejected by her parents into her current role as a family carer. Another typical example is Tanya's "lady on wheels" (Tanya Post 1, 4 and 7). The identity of "lady on wheels" not only connect her able-bodied self before the accident and her current disabled self in a wheelchair. Together, identity hashtag helps to identify and categorize the posts to avoid contradictions in context and self-presentation on social media.

The idea that identity hashtags help minimize identity conflict is inspired by a study of a group of young adults who deleted old posts on social media to minimize embarrassment from identity conflicts. Brandtzaeg and Lüders (2018) reported that some young adult participants felt embarrassed of their selfies and posts of their teenage days. They faced an identity conflict as they considered this old self-presentation was outdated. They considered these old self-presentations may contradict their present self and caused a sense of embarrassment and confusion for their followers. For example, a user may change their opinion or their self-presentation across time, particularly among teenagers and young adults. As Brandtzaeg and Lüders (2018) explained, these identity conflicts emerge when multiple selves on social media are contradictory in terms of time and content. Brandtzaeg and Lüders (2018) have suggested that further study should look at how individuals cope with time/context collapse in their social media practice. My findings may suggest that identity hashtags can be a solution to identity conflicts. Instead of deciding which identities to delete or remain on social media, identity

hashtag helps users like disabled women to integrate their diverse identities along their digital footprint on social media.

Another research on the integration of lived experiences on social media helps to explain how identity hashtags can help to gain coherence of self-identity. As Carlsen and Pitsis (2020) have suggested, individuals integrate their lived experience to create four types of coherence: 1) Temporal Coherence: Chronological coherence along with the storyline; 2) Causal Coherence: a logical cause-and-effect relationship of events and the sense of self. Individuals able to elaborate their past shape today's self; 3) Thematic coherence: an overarching theme and meaning reveal from the story; 4) Cultural Coherence: the meaning and "order of things" is coherent with the cultural context of the story. As for my findings on identity hashtags, self-documentary with identity hashtag helps to archive and retrieve a thematic storyline. Identity hashtag helps to gain coherence of when, why and what identity emerges and evolves across time. Also, identity hashtag entails cultural background of their narratives to minimize the cultural awkwardness and challenges in legitimizing diverse identities.

### 9.3.2.3 Reinforce Positive Self-evaluation and Ownership from Media Trace

My idea of a collage of posts on social media is similar to the concept of "wall posts" as described by Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008). The authors stated that the "wall posts" is visualized enumerated descriptions of self in their profile. Their participants preferred the dense layout of profile photos as a self-statement. Thus, their selection of photos to collage was associated with consumption and prosumption of culture. My interpretation of a collage of permanent selfies is that disabled women curate their self-presentation as "wall posts". In my perspective, the "wall posts" is a collection of consumption and prosumption of culture, which synergizes to signify their lifestyle, values and self-narratives. There are several reasons why a collage of selfies is helpful to generate an integrated self with a positive conclusion.

According to Humphreys's book *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life,* a collage of photographic posts facilitates "reckoning" which means people review and evaluate their lived experience archived on social media (Humphreys, 2018, p. 138). I summarised Humphreys' three reasons why "wall posts" enhance the integration of self with a positive judgement:

First, the indexicality and symbolic modality of these photographic posts help users to draw the connections between these posts (Humphreys, 2018). The symbolic indexicality carries culture, values and lived experiences to help users conceptualize their progression to integrate their preferred self.

Second, a collage of photographic posts is a landscape of multiple selves in progression (Humphreys, 2018). A collage of posts shows different themes and trends as if the landscape of self. Overall, a collage of posts provides "media traces" on their identity projects. Thus, the sense of incompleteness allows users to continue to infer, re-state and evaluate their identity projects (Humphreys, 2018, p. 148).

Third, a collage of permanence posts facilitates reconciliation and reinterpretation of our self (Humphreys, 2018). Humphreys (2018) raised that "active engagement of previous posts" is an essential social media feature for reconciliation. Although my findings do not identify this social media feature, I can relate how a collage of permanent pictures is a seed for future re-engagement. It is likely that these posts may have different interpretations and reflection across time. Yet, these permanent posts are the digital footprints that enable users to connect their self from the past, present and future.

Another study helps to explain why having a media trace facilitates disabled women to make meaning and gain a sense of ownership of their self-identity. Carlsen and Pitsis (2020) have suggested that when individuals can identify their accomplishments and contribution to others, they tend to make positive meanings of their lived experiences. The meaning-making process reinforces them to gain a sense of ownership in their struggles and personal growth.

Furthermore, Carlsen and Pitsis (2020) stated that media traces can become compiled narratives about the lessons they learnt from their stories. According to the authors, individuals contribute their wisdom to their audience by sharing their compiled narratives as a fable.

In sum, disabled women tend to tell impressive stories about their self on social media. Impressive stories are not an exhibition of how "good" disabled women could perform in everyday life. Impressive stories are more about a journey of personal growth. To tell an impressive story, disabled women need to make sense of their experiences and to extract the essence of their self. For example, their valuable and personally meaningful traits and character. Self-documentary is glimpses of life and a testimony of their preferred self. These posts are not aimed at social acceptance, but as a testimony to gain a sense of self-reliance, self-assurance, and self-appreciation.


### 9.3.3 Redemption with Coherent Positive Resolution

As for my interpretation of the findings, Blogs and video are crucial communication modalities for redemptive storytelling. Video features the time-based of storytelling so that disabled women present the autobiography reasoning in their plot. Although Helen expressed her lack of ability and skills to do video shooting and editing, she considered video was the most efficient medium for presentation and communication with followers. Helen considered video is an effective medium for storytelling and to convey non-verbal expression (e.g., her interaction with her

mother, lifestyle, and journey for gender expression). From her view, video contains visual and audio elements to minimize the cognition tasks and communication.

### 9.3.3.1 Facilitate Explorative Narrative Processing

First, disabled women take the opportunity to go through a "narrative identity processing" as described by numerous scholars (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McNay, 1999; Pals, 2006). Disabled women constantly narrate and interpret their episodic memories of significant affections (i.e. both happy, anger, sad and other emotions) into a themed life story as a whole. As mentioned previously, disabled women often faced various oppression in their daily life. The most common theme of their narratives on social media is self-redemption after reflecting on previous life challenges.

According to Pals (2006, p. 1081), exploratory narrative processing is defined as "the active, engaged effort on the part of the narrator to explore, reflect on, or analyse a difficult experience with an openness to learning from it and incorporating a sense of change into the life story". Previous research has suggested that exploratory narrative processing is beneficial to strengthening preferred identity in several ways. First, exploratory narrative processing gains openness and tolerance to cope with the negative thoughts and ambiguity from negative experiences (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Labouvie-Vief, Diehl, Jain, & Zhang, 2007).

Second, explorative narrative processing facilitates the maturity and commitment of their self-identity (Pals, 2006). It helps people make authentic meanings of their challenging experiences and positively embrace challenges (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005).

Third, explorative narrative processing facilitates personal growth and self-transformation (King, 2016; Pals, 2006). The explorative narrative processing facilitates disabled women to redeem their self as part of their personal growth and transformation.

In this study, the protagonists shared redemptive stories and resolutions on social media. For instance, Helen emphasised her adult identity to fight for independent living and equal caregiving relationships. Sam blended her bi-sexual identity with her housewife identity. Tanya recovered her professional and sexual identity after the accident. In the protagonists' interviews, they presented their redemptive self as part of their personal growth. In every opportunity to make a post on social media, they understood the "self" better in the transformation progress. They took this opportunity to express who they were becoming via social media. They had more time to curate their content on social media. They could carefully think of how the content should be presented and how it may change their followers' perceptions.

*9.3.3.2 Subjective Positioning for Redemption*

Early research has emphasised the positive value of anonymity when they study the authenticity of online identity in the context of Web 1.0 (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 1999; Poletti & Rak, 2014). Hogan (2013) has considered social media practice changes as anonymity is no longer valued. As sociologist Gary Marx (1999) has stated, anonymity facilitates users to take risks in games and serve as self-protection when engaging in sensitive topics. However, the value of anonymity is less impactful in the era of Web 2.0. The ideology and digital practice in Web 2.0 are banning anonymity as it may cause integrity issues and antisocial behaviours (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 1999; Teich, Frankel, Kling, & Lee, 1999).

Together, the disinhibition effect facilitates disabled women to strengthen their identity in three ways. First, my findings illustrate how the disinhibition effect leads to pseudonymity on social media. Pseudonymity is defined as a negotiation process between the online and offline self to control and contextualise their online self and communication (Beech, 2008; Cover, 2012; Light, 2014). As for this study, pseudonymity is the heart of authentic identity. It allows users to contextualise and create their self-identity as an intertwined self of online and offline self (Hogan, 2013). Pseudonym encourages users to construct a unique name and script to contextualise their self-identity as part of the identity play to distant their physical public self. Also, pseudonym spares space for disabled women to make sense of their challenging oppressive experiences.

According to Newark (2014), a disinhibition effect is helpful for identity formation as individuals are given opportunities to reflect on how they perceive and present themselves from time to time. Indecision is a state of exploration in ambiguity with no social and cultural preoccupation. They have an opportunity to construct their identity. An indecision state is an essential state for identity work. Individuals can re-process information and re-formulate the rationale of choosing a particular identity from alternatives (Newark, 2014).

Second, the disinhibition effect provides an opportunity for disabled women to organize their multiple identities along the hierarchy of salience. Whenever disabled women create a post on social media, they could select their identity for the post. Individuals do not have to commit to the preoccupied discourse and social script of a disabled body. Instead of unconsciously picking the most prominent identity, starting with a blank page gains the flexibility and organization to arrange multiple identities.

Third, the disinhibition effect allows disabled women to narrate their stories as protagonists. They have control over how the story is to be told and the meanings of these stories. As a result, the disinhibition effect facilitates disabled women to re-connect their negative affective experience and re-produce redemptive meanings from these experiences. Also, disabled women

narrate their very own stories and subjective experience. The disinhibition effect enhances the authenticity of self when disabled women narrate on social media.

Based on my finding, social media facilitates subjective positioning among women with disabilities. Instead of conveying prescribed stigma of disabilities and projected expectations from significant others, subjective positioning enables disabled women to learn, interpret and create alternative meanings of their disabilities and gender. In this study, subjective positioning catalyzes the process of strengthening the preferred identity of disabled women in two pathways: narrative identity processing and coherent positive resolution.

*9.3.3.3 Promote Coherent Positive Resolution*

My other significant finding is the redemptive self with coherent positive resolutions. Pals (2006) has defined coherent positive resolution as "the construction of a coherent and complete story of a difficult event that ends positively, conveying a sense of emotional resolution or closure". The author has stated that "coherent positive closure" not only enhance the coherence of a person's narratives; it also facilitates a person to resolve negative experience positively. Coherent positive resolution facilitates disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity in two ways: strengthening subjective well-being and enhance their ego-resilience.

As for subjective well-being, some studies have stated that coherent positive closure is associated with subjective and physical well-being (Pals, 2006), positive affections and life satisfaction (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). According to a research conducted by McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman (2001), a high density of redemption in life stories correlates to high subjective well-being. They tend to construct a coherent story of a negative experience with positive closure. Cohesive positive closure implies management of contamination. It avoids these negative experiences to continuously impact how they construct these adverse experiences in their self-defining memory (Pals, 2006). The author has suggested that people who reach a coherent positive closure implies that they move on emotionally and restore the positivism and hope for their life.

For ego-resilience, some studies also have shown that coherent positive resolution is associated with ego-resilience (Pals, 2006; Schwartz, Michael, & Rapkin, 2017; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). According to Pals (2006), the process of having a coherent positive closure facilitates people to adapt positively to challenges and life crisis. Coherent positive closure facilitates them to gain better resilience to face future challenges, resulting in finding positive meanings in challenges and higher life satisfaction (Jefferson A. Singer, King, Green, & Barr, 2002; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). The pattern of having coherent positive resolutions creates positive self-defining memories of these crises, restores positive emotions and psychological well-being, and, most

importantly, facilitates life satisfaction (Pals, 2006; J. A. Singer & Salovey, 1993; Waters & Fivush, 2015).

### 9.3.4 Self-Branding: Co-creation of Assertive Sociocultural Context

As part of the celebration of an authentic self, my interpretation of the finding is that disabled women brand themselves in social media. Their self-disclosure on social media is not simply a broadcast of self, these storytelling aims to engage followers to form their own sub-group as well as interjecting their narratives in the mainstream culture via social media.

Three types of symbolic resources are useful for the self-branding purpose. The first type is about photographic communication. Text in graphics and visual images (both selfies and video) are organized for communication, showcase and circulation purposes. As Cornelio and Roig (2018) have pointed out that a selfie is a form of communication modality embedded with personal stories for social media circulation. Selfie contains both contextual and conversational features for online personae, for example, having descriptive captions, hashtags and other hypertext so that these selfies become communicative objects on social media (Cornelio & Roig, 2018).

The second type of symbolic resource is the interaction with a particular group of friends and followers. As my finding stated, protagonists were less likely to review the likes and feedback in the light of social acceptance. They were less likely to seek social acceptance from the majority of their followers. On contrary, they studied the feedbacks and inbox messages to identify potential members of their own sub-culture. As Tanya shared, she paid attention and liked her followers' posts when they did similar selfie practice as a sexual expression. She emphasized mutual liking of each others' appealing selfies was an act of mutual support.

Thus, private messages with followers who express recognition and support to their authentic self were crucial. According to Sam and Tanya, private messages were not for social acceptance and negotiation, they aimed to communicate with those who may help them validate and actualize their preferred identity. As Tanya mentioned, she felt happy when a male follower complimented her sexual attraction as he had unanticipated her sexuality before. She also expressed her joy in making friends with this male follower and had a series of photo shooting in his studio.

The third symbolic resource related to self-branding is the use of hashtags to enhance the visibility of social media posts. Besides identity hashtags, protagonists like Tanya used hashtags to link with disability hashtags, company brands and a magazine. According to Tanya, her purpose was to blend into the mainstream culture as public education. My interpretation of Tanya's act

is that these hashtags may raise the searchability of their post as search engines may draw their posts when users search common words.

Together, it is possible that the above symbolic resources for self-branding help disabled women strengthen their preferred identity in three ways.

*9.3.4.1 Build Intimacy and Closeness by Forming a Sub-culture*

My findings suggest that disabled women have more control over managing their social relationships. Instead of striving for a higher hierarchy and dominant position in social relationships, disabled women rank and weigh the position and impact of their followers. For followers who criticise and threaten their preferred identity, they could ignore them or even block them on social media. On the other hand, they give weight to followers and net-friends who may give a sense of intimacy and closeness.

As interpersonal dynamic on social media is more self-centric and self-oriented, disabled women gain a sense of closeness and intimacy by choosing whom they connect to. As Quinn and Oldmeadow (2013) have described, the emergence of smartphones and social networking sites creates a "martini effect" in social relationships among users. Smartphones enable users to stay connected and interact with significant others like family and friends. In my findings, the "martini effect" is no longer bound to already-established relationships and social groups.

As for my interpretation, social relationships on social media have turned from collectivism to individualism. For collectivism, individuals set social norms and make decisions for the benefit of the group rather than an individual member. Members demonstrate loyalty and commitment to the group by following group rituals as an exchange of mutual support. For individualism, self-autonomy, independence, and self-reliance are highly valued. Members prioritize their own benefits rather than the group. The shift from collectivism to individualism changes the dynamic within a social group and across social groups on social media. Instead of negotiating for support and resources from existing social relationships, disabled women can pursue support and resources from followers who share their vision.

*9.3.4.2 Gain a Sense of Assertiveness with Enhanced Self-esteem*

Social interaction with sub-group members helps disabled women gain a sense of assertiveness with enhanced self-esteem. According to Krause, Baum, Baumann, and Krasnova (2021), social media users earn their self-esteem through social comparison, interaction and reflection. For users like disabled women, they observe and compare their peers' newsfeeds and interactions with their own. When they find some similarities with their newsfeed and interactions, they may

evaluate their social performance positively. The positive evaluation may raise a sense of self-esteem and assertiveness of their self-expression.

A possible explanation is that disabled women validate their lived experiences and claim their authentic but threatened identities. According to a study on a social group of disabled queers, Miller (2017) stated that disabled queers faced social segregation due to the stigma associated with disability and queer identities. Social media served as a low-risk environment with an escape route for them to share their experience, build close relationships with peers, and minimize the risk of being rejected. Finding their peers with similar experiences not only facilitated a sense of social acceptance and support, but the exchange of narratives and interaction also reinforced a sense of belonging and membership (Miller, 2017). Online experience in representing their self in a sub-group prepared them to be more comfortable and confident to present their disability and queer identity in a broader social context (i.e. offline or other social situations) (Miller, 2017).

### 9.3.4.3 Legitimize Preferred identity by Build Group Rituals & Common Practice

Self-branding also facilitates disabled women to co-create a positive and assertive sociocultural context to legitimize their preferred identity. Through social interactions with sub-group members, disabled women share and reinforce their desired meanings and "order of things" with their peers. These shared meanings and "order of things" are embedded in the interactions and gradually become their group rituals and common practice. Two studies help to explain how disabled women can legitimize their preferred identity by building group rituals and common practices.

First, when disabled women find their peers share their desired symbolic meanings and self-expressions (e.g. following and copying their behaviours), they gain a sense of satisfaction from mutual learning with their peers. Reynolds, Driver, and Bennett (2018) have reported the power of mutual learning and the co-creation of group rituals on social media. In a weight-loss intervention for people with traumatic brain injury, the authors suggested that mutual learning in a Facebook Group promotes participants behavioural change to lose weight (Reynolds et al., 2018). The mutual learning and co-creation of group rituals depend on participants' initiative to provide mutual support, sharing experience and resources, and commitment for change (e.g. update each other's status, share challenges and success) (Reynolds et al., 2018).

Disabled women may take the initiative to share their desired symbolic meanings and order of things with their peers. By showing and demonstrating their acts, they are inviting their peers to follow and copy their practice. When their peers follow and imitate their expression of preferred identity, they have a chance of mutual learning to reinforce their desired self-expression.

Second, building group rituals facilitate disabled women to gain a sense of social connectedness to take collective actions for desired social change. According to Chong, Zhang, Mak, and Pang (2015), online communities are the valuable social capital of social connectedness, instrumental support and collective actions. LGBT individuals often find online communities to instil a sense of group membership (Chong et al., 2015). Connection with the online LGBT community enhances individuals to build their sexual and gender identities. Members in the community communicate with their peers for mutual support and exchange of information, enhancing access to resources to solve similar challenges in their everyday lives (Chong et al., 2015). They also generate collective actions to shake the normative ideology. Online community provides valuable social capital such as positive group connectedness, re-appraisal of stigma and nurture preferred group value (Chong et al., 2015). Through the exchange of meanings and group rituals, they cultivate the desired meanings and social orders in their social-cultural context.

In sum, this section elaborated how social media can be a social-cultural-technology context for disabled women to construct, present, and express their preferred self in social interactions. Disabled women utilise symbolic resources on social media to strengthen their preferred identity in three ways: 1) To de-stigmatize their disability identity: disabled women try to expand meanings of disability from stigmas and stereotypes; 2) To exploration of their intersectional identity: disabled women consume specific culture to signify their desired collective identities and membership of desired social groups; 3) To celebrate their authentic identity: they build novel cultural symbols to signify their authentic self through storytelling.

This section focuses on potential strategies and actions which disabled women may do to strengthen their preferred identity in actions. The above discussion meets the first research objective to understand how disabled women narrate and mediate their preferred self via social media in terms of their self-presentation and positive social interactions. However, this section does not fully achieve the two research objectives in this study. Further elaboration and inference are needed to explain how disabled women acquire some essential competence and qualities from social media to strengthen their preferred identity.

# CHAPTER X: QUALITIES FOR THE MAKING OF PREFERRED IDENTITY

The study goal is to understand how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. As stated in Chapter Two, the second research objective is to understand how active and constant social media experience can facilitate disabled women to acquire the qualities to resist normative stigma and oppression.

To further elaborate how disabled women acquire the essential competence and qualities from social media, this section focuses on elaborating how disabled women acquire 1) Cultural Humility; 2) Wisdom of Life and 3) Identity Politics Competence.

## 10.1 Cultural Humility

The idea of "cultural competence" is inspired by the findings related to consumption and prosumption of self. From my perspective, disabled women acquire cultural competence to signify their preferred identity flexibly and creatively across different sociocultural contexts. Disabled women not only have the critical thinking of the oppressive ideology on online/offline environment, but they are also capable to signify their preferred self and communicate with others from different cultural contexts.

Two scholarly works help to build the concept of "cultural humility" in this study. According to Alizadeh and Chavan (2016), cultural competence (or intercultural competence) is defined as the ability to work and interact effectively and appropriately with others in different cultural contexts. However, the concept of cultural competence does not include self-reflection and connection of diverse cultures.

The work of Foronda (2019)'s on cultural humility provides a more comprehensive definition that relates to self-reflection. According to (Foronda, 2019), cultural humility is defined as a life-long commitment to reflect and critically think about learning and connecting their own cultural beliefs and self-identities. When it comes to critical thinking, "cultural humility" also includes an examination of the imbalanced power dynamics between different cultures and how we can build a partnership with others to make a significant change.

I modified Foronda (2019)'s on cultural humility and Alizadeh and Chavan (2016), ' four dimensions of cultural competence (i.e. cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skills for communication and cultural desire) to elaborate how cultural humility is an essential quality for disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity.

### 10.1.1 Cultural Awareness To Identify The Ideology

"Cultural awareness" is defined as an individual awareness and sensitivity to identify the ideology behind the discourse in our online/offline context (Alizadeh & Chavan, 2016). There are two inferences related to "cultural awareness".

First, disabled women can intricate how ideology guides our expected behaviours, dictates our social interactions, promotes shared values as a vicious cycle. Cultural awareness is beneficial to disabled women in two ways. First, disabled women build critical thinking to question the taken-for-granted ideology instead of being impetuous to follow the stigmatized norm. In my interpretation, disabled women can expand their preferred identity from stigma and stereotype.

Second, cultural awareness help disabled women to raise their sensitivity to evaluate the legitimacy of specific identity across different cultural context. They may keep their preferred identity discreet when they foresee treats in the current socio-cultural context. In other words, cultural awareness facilitates disabled women to identify appropriate and suitable cultural contexts to legitimize their preferred identity.

### 10.1.2 Cultural Knowledge: A Broad Understanding Of Culture Landscape

"Cultural knowledge" is defined as the acquisition of knowledge and information about different cultures (Alizadeh & Chavan, 2016). Cultural knowledge includes the language and rituals of the group as well as the landscape of different cultures.

My inference of the finding is that cultural knowledge should not be merely an in-depth understanding and internalization of a specific culture. Cultural knowledge should include a sense of open-mindedness to absorb diverse discourse and ideology. To me, cultural knowledge is an awareness to avoid belief polarization and an unbalanced consumption of information. The nutshell of cultural knowledge is to facilitate disabled women to keep an open mind to construct their knowledge and understanding with diverse voices from different sociocultural groups. Cultural knowledge implies the balance between ideology heterogeneity and homogeneity when disabled women consume information via social media.

For instance, social media provides rich information and updates on the sex rights of people with disabilities. Disabled women may learn and internalize crip culture and feminist culture. A sound cultural knowledge implies disabled women not only look at sexual liberation and body positivism, but they also understand the protective ideology of dating and interpersonal violence against disabled women.

### 10.1.3 Cultural Skills for Communication

"Cultural skills for communication" is defined as the ability to interact with others across different cultural contexts effectively (Alizadeh & Chavan, 2016). Appropriate cultural communication includes cultural-appropriate behaviours and expressions, accurate understanding and definition of the situation across different cultural contexts and accomplishing one's goals in communication (Alizadeh & Chavan, 2016).

On the other hand, "cultural skills for communication" includes essential personality traits to face cultural ambiguity and ideology conflicts. For instance, open-mindedness, non-judgemental and empathy. These personality characteristics enable disabled women to effectively and appropriately interact with others across different cultural contexts.

For disabled women, "cultural skills for communication" implies how they accurately define and make sense of their social situations and strategically interact with others to accomplish their goals. For example, when they receive a criticising comment on their posts on social media, they can have a sense of open-mindedness to make sense of these opposite comments. Instead of "fight back" or block the person, disabled women should demonstrate their ability to respond to people with different values appropriately. They can also make sensible decisions to handle criticisms.

### 10.1.4 Cultural Desire to Diversify Semiotic Meanings of Symbols

"Cultural desire" is defined as motivation to explore, engage and participate in culture to diversify culture and ideology in our community (Alizadeh & Chavan, 2016). In my inference, "cultural desires" has two types of desires.

First, disabled women desire to enrich their menu of semiotic meanings of symbols and symbolic resources so that their self-identity is no longer confined to a "sick role". Through self-narrative on social media, disabled women share their lived experiences, their values and beliefs, and their solutions to solve everyday challenges. These shared and exchanging experiences give disabled women a window to explore what life would be with different meanings, social orders and cultures. They can flexibly make different meanings of their disability and symbols to signify their self across social situations. Disabled women build a menu of meanings to interpret their disability, gender and other crucial characteristics of self.

Second, disabled women desire to be heard and seen as a token of cultural contribution. My study suggests that disabled women make use of the diverse culture and ideologies on social media as fertile soil for consumption and prosumption of self-identities. They become consumers and prosumers to build their desired semiotic meanings and symbols to signify their self in a specific cultural context. Disabled women deconstruct and reconstruct the meaning of disability

and their stigmatized "sick role". They select collective symbols for consumption and signify their collective identity and desired membership. Also, they create novel symbols to signify their authentic and redemptive self. On social media, disabled women are not passive learners; they are active members who share their stories and thoughts to diversify our mainstream culture.

## 10.2 Wisdom of Life

My idea of "wisdom of life" is inspired by the findings that disabled women share their significant episodes on social media. I name these significant episodes and unique outcomes as the "breadcrumbs", like the children story of *Hansel and Gretel*. In my study, significant episodes and unique outcomes are essential "breadcrumbs" as building blocks of self-identity. Disabled women mark their journey in the woods by breaking off pieces of bread to leave a trail so that they can follow the trail home and not get lost. These "breadcrumbs" may not independently convey a full self-presentation, but these "breadcrumbs" build the authentic self in vertical and horizontal development.

For vertical development, these "breadcrumbs" facilitate disabled women to continuously create the "substance" of their preferred identity. Disabled women make these "breadcrumbs" to construct a strong, authentic, and themed story against oppression and normative ideology.

For horizontal development, these "breadcrumbs" facilitate the connection of the self from the past to the anticipated future, the trajectory of self. When Sam introduced her new identity as "the second mom", she decided to take up caregiving responsibility for her family of origin. Yet, she did not have a concrete idea of being "a second mom". After her announcement on social media, she started to post her pictures with her nephew with the new hashtag "#secondmom" as a way to make meaning of this identity.

In sum, these "breadcrumbs" are like "bank-savings", archiving their everyday lives, significant episodes, and unique outcomes. The "savings" of storied posts plays a crucial role as building blocks for individuals to connect and frame a thematic story, making meanings and hope for the future. Disabled women make these "breadcrumbs" not only for redemption purpose, but also to continue to coherent their narratives to fight against upcoming oppressive challenges. Yet, my interpretation may not fully cover the quality and competence of disabled women in terms of their narratives.

Some scholars like Giddens, McAdams and Côté have suggested that reflexivity of self through narratives helps individuals to "invest" in "who they are" exploring alternatives and goal setting with a higher agency. Identity "investment" helps individuals establish a coherent self, diverse psychosocial and behavioural repertoires and social networks. it is possible that through dialectic

and reflexive narratives on social media, disabled women extract wisdom of life to face unexpected challenges and the ever-changing society.

According to Ferrari and Weststrate (2013)'s book *The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom,* "personal wisdom" is defined as knowledge and capacity to reflect rigorously, plan proactively, and evaluate positively one's journey of ups and downs. The editors outlined the "Berlin Wisdom Model" to elaborate on five components of personal wisdom: factual knowledge of self, procedural knowledge, lifespan contextualism, relativism, and uncertainty. As the editors stated, insights and tactics for self-reflection on lived experiences, particularly those threatening ones and those inconsistent with their usual narratives, are essential to developing personal wisdom. I incorporate McAdam's work on narrative identity and the Berlin wisdom model to elaborate the qualities of the wisdom of life as an essential competence for disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity.

### 10.2.1 Solid Knowledge of Self & Lifespan with Ownership

In my definition, "knowledge of self and lifespan" depends on a comprehensive and extensive collection of significant episodes and lived experiences. My definition is adapted from two concepts from the Berlin wisdom model.

First, "knowledge of self" implies a collection of episodes serves as a "saving" for autobiographical reasoning when disabled women make sense of their self. According to Ferrari and Weststrate (2013), "factual knowledge of self" implies self-knowledge in terms of their traits and characteristics, their growth, their failure and achievements, their relationships with others.

With a bountiful saving and supply of episodes, disabled women have sufficient episodic materials to develop a thematic story to define their self. They can effectively and creatively join relevant episodes to narrate a preferred story about their self. "Knowledge of self" is not only about understanding of self and their life course, but also include in-depth insight into their inner strengths, genuine aspirations, and neglected resources to actualize their preferred self.

Second, the concept of "knowledge of lifespan" is similar to the Berlin model's "lifespan contextualism". According to Ferrari and Weststrate (2013), "lifespan contextualism" implies understanding the context of their life and the ever-changing relationships between people and the environment.

This knowledge facilitates them to gain a sense of ownership of their life. When disabled women have an overall picture of their ups and downs across their lifespan. "Knowledge of lifespan"

facilitates disabled women to have a higher tolerance to ambiguity and uncertainty of life. They can see interrelations between different domains of life (i.e. education, family and friends, career and work etc.) across their lifetime. For instance, they can perceive some of the current significant others (e.g. colleagues or friends) may become passengers in their life. The frustration of unanticipated challenges and failure are lessons to success in the future. In my perspective, accumulating experience of oppression may lead to despair and withdrawal of preferred identity. Yet, my findings suggest these preoccupied experiences can be motivation and determination for life change. Thus, "knowledge of lifespan" may archive unique outcomes that can help disabled women to interpret their stories differently.

## 10.2.2 Wide-ranging & Effective "Know-how" for Autonomy

The concept of "know-how" knowledge is elicited from the two scholarly works. According to Ferrari and Weststrate (2013), "procedural knowledge" is defined as practical knowledge and strategies to handle challenges and accomplish goals in life.

On the other hand, according to McAdams' work, challenging situations may arouse negative emotions. These negative emotions may influence the individual's self-sentiment and further contaminate their judgement and perception of self. In other words, management of contamination is a key factor in the transition of self-redemption (McAdams et al., 2001). As for my interpretation, the know-how knowledge includes two directions of strategic planning.

First, the "know-how-to-cope" knowledge facilitates disabled women to deal with difficult situations and threats to their preferred identity. It is possible that the "know-how-to-cope" knowledge facilitate the process of self-redemption. The "know-how-to-cope" knowledge includes emotional regulation, coping with stressful scenarios with humour, seeking support and resources from their desired social groups. Based on my interpretation of the findings, emotional regulation is particularly important to protect their threatened but preferred identity. For disabled women, criticism from others may cause negative affections and a sense of inferiority. Emotional regulation facilitates them to manage these negative affections and minimize their impact on their self-perception.

Second, the "know-how" knowledge includes strategic planning to accomplish their self-directed goals as self-actualization. In my perspective, the "know-how" for self-actualization includes tactful self-expression, social and communication skills for congregation and formation of desired social groups as well as crowdsourcing strategies. This "know-how" knowledge enables disabled women's autonomy to direct their journey of self-actualization.

## 10.2.3 Rigorous Autobiographical Reasoning

"Rigorous autobiographical reasoning" is the cognitive ability to conceptualize their identity from their actions and lived experience. This cognitive ability facilitates disabled women to unearth their authenticity and personal value instead of conveying normative script and stereotypes. According to the Berlin wisdom model, "relativism" implies an acknowledgement of culture and value diversity among people from all walks (Ferrari & Weststrate, 2013). It is possible that "relativism" may facilitate individuals to reinforce their non-normative beliefs and value of self. Yet, this concept does not fully interpret "rigorous autobiographical reasoning".

The concept of "rigorous autobiographical reasoning" is inspired by Michael White's "landscape of actions" and "landscape of identity". According to White (2007), individuals travel the landscape of actions and landscape of identity in their narratives. In the landscape of actions, individuals make sense of their concrete experiences and events. The landscape of actions helps to scaffold individuals to conceptualize their identity. On the other hand, the landscape of identity provides a theme and value of the individual to give meaning to their actions and events.

In my inference, "rigorous autobiographical reasoning" involves inductive and deductive autobiography reasoning. Disabled women build their authentic self from selecting and concluding their significant episodes. On the other hand, their identity gives them a thematic framework to interpret their experiences. "Rigorous autobiographical reasoning" not only enhance coherence and consistent interpretation of events and identities but is equally important, it helps disabled women hold several values to direct their identity projects. "Rigorous autobiographical reasoning" enhances disabled women's fluidity and creativity of their identities. They are open to new experiences and new emerging identities.

## 10.3 Identity Politics Competence

The concept of "Identity Politics Competence" implies the knowledge and skills to map and implement an individual political agenda by building a coalition of support, lobbying new ideas in a persuasive and marketing manner, and pursuing social change for all. Based on my findings, I can see disabled women may apply various strategies related to identity politics via social media. Disabled women experience compounded and overlapping forms of oppression due to their intersectionality. Through storytelling via social media, disabled women readdress oppression and desire to strengthen their preferred identity. My inference of their strategies to co-construct a preferred socio-cultural context is a form of identity politics movement.

I conceived my concept from two scholarly works. First, according to Detjen' team, the model of political competence includes three types of cognitive qualities (i.e. political knowledge, political

judgement and capacity for political action), and most importantly, attitude and motivation (Detjen et al., 2012, as cited in Grobshäuser & Weisseno, 2020). Second, according to Han and Kim (2020), the political competence of helping professionals has four dimensions: political knowledge, political efficacy, political interaction and political activity (Han & Kim, 2020). I modified the above models of political competence to elaborate on the three essential qualities of "Identity Politics Competence" in the social media context.

### 10.3.1 Political Vision & Altruism

The idea of "political vision and altruism" first incorporated Detjen et al.'s concept on altruism attitude and motivation to make a social change (Detjen et al., 2012, as cited in Grobshäuser & Weisseno, 2020). Political vision also includes Han and Kim (2020) 's concept of political efficacy. An individual with political vision should be assertive and proud of their self-identity and own a self-efficacy to make impactful change for all.

There is two inference of my findings related to "political vision and altruism". First, disabled women may express themselves as a resistance to political oppression. As de Zúñiga, Barnidge, and Scherman (2017) have stated, individuals can create public or semi-public profiles as a social or political identity on social media. With this public identity, individuals make connections with other profiles and stakeholders of the society (de Zúñiga et al., 2017). These public profiles are online personae to navigate public connections and expansion of bridging social capital. These online public personae help them to engage in public affairs and engage a semi-public dialogue within their social network. In other words, they can make use of these online public personae to convert their value and belief into political statements and actions (de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Second, disabled women cultivate their preferred social-cultural context for themselves and their group members. Similar to Raun and Christensen-Strynø (2021) 's study, intersectional women like Julie Vu (i.e. a transgender Youtuber) and Madeline Stuart (i.e. a model and a disability advocate with Down's syndrome) use social media for self-presentation, self-branding and identity politics. Their journey starts with creating authentic storytelling in their posts, raising visibility and followers, and promoting their "personalized" social-cultural context. In other words, disabled women are not only building their own "personal sovereign", they are co-constructing a preferred context for themselves and their peers.

### 10.3.2 Political knowledge and Judgement

"Political knowledge and judgement" is defined similarly as concepts of Detjen et al. Political knowledge include political history, stakeholders' interests and controversies (Detjen et al., 2012, as cited in Grobshäuser & Weisseno, 2020). Political judgement is defined as critical thinking and systematic analysis (Han & Kim, 2020).

My inferences on "political knowledge and judgement" are closely related to the impact of social media algorithms. There are two inferences of the findings related to political knowledge and judgement. First, "political knowledge" implies disabled women gain their political knowledge through social media. Social media users like disabled women can learn from a juxtaposition of proprietor content (i.e., original content from an author or source from a web page). This proprietor content serves as resources for users to learn and prosume as their user-generated content (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). Users like disabled women can actively explore and receive the latest news and public opinion on specific issues (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). They can gain a broad understanding of the political history of disability and women. Through learning from the political history of both communities, disabled women can connect to their intersectional identity.

Second, "political judgement" implies disabled women can contribute their critical thinking and judgement with a panoramic view of the political landscape. Through observing and participating in the latest debate on a specific issue, disabled women have more space to construct and reflect their socio-cultural environment. Should they identify biased coverage and oppressive trends, they can proactively counterbalance the distribution and discourse of the issues. My findings suggest that disabled women address the loopholes of political debates like euthanasia, independent living in a pandemic context. Disabled women observe how their social group members respond to controversial issues and their behavioural patterns. For example, users can see who liked a particular post or their comments on a specific issue. The algorithm facilitates users to imitate and adopt the ideology and lifestyle of their preferred social groups. In sum, disabled women build their political knowledge and judgement through social media.

In sum, disabled women develop different lens to review their lives and challenges in everyday life. They gain the essential critical thinking to examine stigma and oppression in their everyday life. The algorithm provides valuable information and news to stimulate them to think critically about their oppressive socio-cultural context and taken-for-granted values. Instead of conveying the conventional oppressed "reality", the algorithm helps disabled women realise that the oppressive reality is not universal. On the other hand, the algorithm helps them realize "parallel universes" with an alternative ethical line of desirable/undesirable behaviours. The algorithm facilitates disabled women to examine and reset the line between desirable/undesirable behaviours in a political context. They also learn new knowledge and skills to make their oppressed identity legitimate to express and communicate with others.

### 10.3.3 Political Action Skills

"Political action skills" is defined as the capacity for political organization and communication. In general, it includes the cognitive skills for articulation, argumentation, negotiation, and decision making (Detjen et al., 2012, as cited in Grobshäuser & Weisseno, 2020).

On the other hand, Han and Kim (2020) had a more comprehensive description of action skills. First, action skills involve interaction skills like networking with shareholders, negotiation, and lobbying skills. Second, action skills involve organizing political activities, such as demonstrating political leadership, assertive commentary and announcement, mobilizing others participation and political advocacy.

There are two inferences of my findings related to "political action skills". First, "political action skills" involves the cognitive ability to articulate and argue. However, my findings may suggest that "political action skills" include strategic self-expression on social media. For instance, the selection and creation of hashtags, genes in content, photo modification of selfies and snapshots. "Political action skills" should include the cognitive and technical skills to use information and communication technology (ICT) and relevant digital tools.

Second, "political action skills" involves networking skills as well as leadership skills. in my perspective, my findings illustrate how disabled women network and mobilize followers and social groups to participate in political activities, such as tagging people in social media challenges, negotiating with followers through receiving and giving likes, comments, and private messages. Furthermore, it is possible that authentic expressions may synergize political discussions against sexism and ableism. For example, Helen's view on euthanasia and challenges with caregivers raised the echoes from her disability peers. Protagonists' gender and sexual expression may change the de-sexualization of disabled women. Overall, "political action skills" is not only about their self-expression but also related to how they lobby their messages to the mainstream culture and political movements.

# CHAPTER XI: THEORETICAL & PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

## 11.1 Theoretical Implications

The present study raises the possibility that social media makes a significant impact on the agency of disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity. The findings describe how a group of oppressed people (like disabled women) strengthen and verify their identities in the social-cultural-technological context (i.e. social media). In Chapter Three, I selected some concepts and theories to build the research framework. Some of the issues emerging from this finding relate specifically to two theoretical implications: 1) Alternative Identity verification in symbolic interactionism; 2) Goffman's dramaturgy in digital context

### 11.1.1 Alternative Identity Verification in Symbolic Interactionism

As discussed in Chapter Four, symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical underpinning of this study. Self-identity is a practice of signification and validation. Three identity theories were discussed to elaborate the practice of signification and validation: 1) Salience of hierarchy theory; 2) Identity Control Theory; 3) Social Exchange Theory. Individuals as agents to mediate and interpret symbols to signify their valued characteristics of self. Self-identity also depends on how individuals acquire social recognition and positive feedback in a given social situation as identity-validation (See Section 4.2.2). Together, symbolic interactionism addresses the multiplicity of identity management in social interaction context.

In this study, the combination of findings provides some interesting insights as theoretical implication in symbolic interactionism. Disabled women mediate symbols strategically and cultivating a favourable sociocultural context in their identity management.

For symbols, disabled women de-stigmatize and construct the meanings and "order of things" related to their disability and womanhood. Furthermore, disabled women expand their menu of symbols to signify their preferred identity through consumption and prosumption. The creative use of digital photography and text help them to hyperbolize their preferred identity.

For identity validation, disabled women make use of social media to shape and cultivate their social-cultural context for desired social interactions. Disabled women take a dominant position to manage their interpersonal relationships, crowdsourcing for resources as well as diversifying the normative culture. These strategies shape an open, self-assertive, and promoting social context to facilitate their identity verification.

In summary, this study helps to explain how marginalized people (e.g., disabled women) mediate symbols and validate their oppressed but valuable identity in social-cultural-technology context. There is three interesting points related to identity management among marginalized people: 1) Salience & Co-existence of Oppressed Identities; 2) Identity Control on Social Media; 3) Crowdsourcing for Role Support & Social Exchange.

### 11.1.1.1 Salience & Co-existence of Oppressed Identities

The first theoretical implication is that commitment and salience of identities does not simply depend on given social situations and normative social expectations. According to Salience of hierarchy theory, the salience of role-identity depends on social situations. For those role-identities with higher legitimacy for expression, they have higher salience and commitment (Stryker, 2008). For stigmatized identities, the theory hypothesizes that these role-identities have less chance to be salient and committed.

My findings suggest that oppressed and marginalized identities may have a higher commitment. Salience of oppressed identity may depend on their attempts and readiness to redeem their self from negative affective experiences. Disabled women may find their gender and sexual identities are social taboos. However, instead of giving lower salience to their sensitive identities, they may take higher control of the presentation and distribution of sensitive self-expression on social media.

Furthermore, social media may lessen the necessity of controlling the hierarchy of salience among multiple role identities. On social media, multiple identities are presented simultaneously without time and space restrictions. Individuals can navigate their multiple identities in a respective social context. For instance, Facebook for a public self, LinkedIn for a professional self and Instagram for a personal self. Thus, an online community may serve as a segregated social space for a particular identity or a specific social group.

### 11.1.1.2 Identity Control on Social Media

The second theoretical implication is that the mechanism of identity verification does not simply depend on social recognition and positive feedback from others in the given social situations. According to identity control theory, individuals manage their control system by setting an identity standard to characterize their preferred self. Then, they evaluate their sociocultural context to plan their actions to gain positive feedback from others as identity verification (Burke, 1991). The theory assumes identity verification depends on individuals' control and strategic actions to meet their identity standard and acquire positive feedback from others. For oppressed individuals like disabled women, the theory assumes they face various hurdles to verify their

preferred identity in a biased social context.

My findings suggest that, on social media, the mechanism of identity verification is not only about setting identity standard and strategic planning according to a given social situation.  On social media, identity verification is not necessary to be acknowledged by others. For example, having "likes" emoji feedbacks and positive comments from followers. Disabled women may apply different distribution and privacy settings to minimise their verification concerns. In my perspective, sensitive identity can be verified by the action of ephemeral posting (i.e. post in Instagram Story mode with limited availability). It is possible that the act of "posting" is a token of self-acknowledgement. Together, identity verification in social media context is not about acknowledgement from others, but it is about self-acknowledgement.

Thus, online communication helps disabled women minimise the pressure to acquire positive feedback to verify their preferred identity. For instance, receiving feedbacks in a semi-private context (i.e. public comments on the post) and private context (i.e. private messages via inbox messengers). Different communication channels give disabled women more control to interact and negotiate with others, particularly those who give positive feedback and support.

### 11.1.1.3 Crowdsourcing for Role Support & Social Exchange

The third theoretical implication is that social media transform the way we exchange role support and the calculation of the reward/payoff to legitimize preferred identity. According to social exchange theory, individuals calculate rewards and costs to seek "profits" when they enact a role identity in a situation to realize their ideal self. an individual respond favourably to the others in the situation as well as the social network when they make a "profit" (i.e. role cost is lower than "role reward" or equivalent) (McCall & Simmons, 1978). For disabled women, the theory hypothesizes that the role cost to legitimize their preferred but stigmatized identity is much higher as they project the role support from social network is low.

My findings suggest that oppressed people like disabled women can proactively explore role support to explore and actualize their self-identities. In my perspective, social media may extend the pool of social relationships and interactions.

First, disabled women assign positions and roles to their followers for identity legitimacy at "lower cost". Disabled women weigh their relationship and membership in specific social groups. For example, a congregation of a desired social group or co-constructing a sub-cultural group. Instead of handling the criticism and antagonistic attitude of their existing peers, disabled women may choose to engage in specific social groups for identity verification.

Second, disabled women exercise "crowdsourcing" as an effective and fast-paced strategy to get

sufficient support to legitimize their preferred identity. Instead of negotiating and exchanging with an existing social group, disabled women pipe support sufficiently through social networking and crowdsourcing, particularly for knowledge and skills unavailable in their offline social network. Social media intensifies the "martini" effect to facilitate disabled women to commit to their desired social groups and online communities.

## 11.1.2 Digital Dramaturgy

Although Goffman lived in a pre-digital era, his dramaturgy is still applicable in this study. Social media is like a theatre where disabled women can manage their performance of self. This study suggests that disabled women have more control to manipulate their impression management. Disabled women can 1) Self-define their symbols as props; 2) Self-direct their script to play; 3) Self-select their audience.

### 11.1.2.1 The Props: Self-defined Meanings of symbols

Goffman's dramaturgy hypothesizes that individuals signify their self through the use of props. Improvisation and role performance depend on the shared symbolic meanings of available props. Thus, individuals invest their "props" as identity projects to actualize their preferred identity. For example, non-disabled women can modify their body figures and appearance through diet, fitness and make-up. As for disabled women, disability is a stigmatized prop as well as a hurdle for them to invest in their identity projects.

My findings suggest that the props to signify the self are self-selected and self-defined. Their physical body and appearance are less crucial in self-presentation on social media. Due to the reduced cue-setting and disinhibition effect on social media, disabled women can strategically select desired props and meanings in their self-presentation.

In my perspective, photography (i.e. snapshots and selfies) has two implications regarding the management of props. First, photography facilitates disabled women to manage the meaning of props. Immediate snapshots help disabled women to de-stigmatize their disability (See Section 6.2.1.1). Consumption of profane culture helps disabled women to share the collective meaning of disability and womanhood (See Section 6.2.2.3). Prosumption and hyperbolism of self-portraits facilitate disabled women to construct their authentic meanings and novel symbols (See Section 6.2.3.1). Together, disabled women can shape and co-construct desired meanings of disability and womanhood via social media.

Second, photography on social media also lessens the investment of props and identity projects. The "looking glass" self-concept suggests that the body is a crucial cue for individuals to imagine how others perceive and judge their appearance. Unlike in offline environments, disabled women have more control to manage and select their cues in self-presentation on social media. For instance, photo modification helps to highlight desired symbols and hide undesired symbols. It is possible that photo modification features (e.g. makeup filters and stickers) can help disabled women to use desired but unavailable props to signify their preferred identity.

### 11.1.2.2 The Script: Self-directed Social Interactions

Goffman's dramaturgy suggests that individuals improvise according to the social frame and normative script of their prescribed role. As dramaturgy hypothesize, scripts of disabled women have limited their sick role.

My findings suggest that the sick role is not the only script for disabled women to play. On contrary, social media allow disabled women to script their desired version of stories and reality. Social media is a performing stage for disabled women to script, direct and act in their play to actualize their preferred self.

First, disabled women are in a subjective position to direct and script their desired version of the story. For example, they highlight the positive meanings of their disability identity. Disabled women explore profane culture to play collective scripts to signify their intersectional identities. Thus, redemption with coherent positive resolutions also facilitates disabled women to break through the vicious cycle of the sick role (See Section 6.2.3.3).

Second, disabled women cultivate their social media profiles like a backdrop of their play. Self-documentary with significant episodes, unique outcomes and assertive narratives build a tailored context for their desired script. Social media profile is more like a backdrop where disabled women can set their reality with desired meanings and "order of things". They can explore alternative storylines in a self-defined time, space, meanings and orders of things.

### 11.1.1.3 The Audience: Self-selected "Specific Others"

According to Goffman's dramaturgy, "generalized others" and "audience" mirror the normative ideology of the society. "Generalized others" also "mirror" individuals' self-perception. For disabled women, it is challenging to negotiate with the "generalized others". They may face criticism and disapproval should they perform their preferred play.

According to the findings, disabled women build their own "audience" to perform their preferred identity. Instead of protesting the phantom "generalized others" and normative ideology, disabled women choose their audience and ideology for their desired performance of self.

My study suggests that social media shake the power dynamic between disabled women and their "audience" in two ways. First, social media connects disabled women with an ever-increasing number of "others" and diverse ideologies. Online communities and social groups multiply the number of "others" as well as diversify the ideology of their sociocultural context.

Second, social media helps disabled women to select "specific others" (e.g. their followers, online communities) to be their "audience". For instance, disabled women build a safe segregated platform for sensitive self-disclosure. Thus, disabled women can select a specific group of others for a congregation or build their own sub-group.

## 11.2 Practical Implications

The findings inspired me to put forward a possible solution and recommendation for social work practice. The findings of this study report the agency of disabled women on how they strengthen their preferred identity via social media. Social media provides a social-cultural-technology context for disabled women to de-stigmatize their disabled identity (See Section 6.2.1), assemble their intersectional identity (See Section 6.2.2) and construct their authentic identity (See Section 6.2.3). Thus, the findings identify several potential challenges and unmet needs of disabled women when they strengthen their preferred identity via social media.

As my inference of the findings, disabled women require three essential qualities as the keys to strengthening their identity. For instance, cultural humility facilitates disabled women to acquire cultural knowledge and sensitivity to adapt various cultural contexts to legitimize their preferred identity (See Section 6.3.1). Wisdom of life provides them rich and solid "storage" of lived experience to enhance their autonomy and ownership of self (See Section 6.3.2). Last but not least, identity politics competence equips disabled women with political knowledge, judgement and action skills.

In my perspective, disabled women do not merely develop these qualities through social media experience. It is possible that social work practitioners may have a role to play at the micro, mezzo and macro level to cultivate a "nurturing and promoting" environment for disabled women.

## 11.2.1 Micro Level: Capacity Building & Critical Thinking

At micro-level, social workers can aim for capacity building of disabled women in terms of transferring knowledge and skills as well as nurturing the essential qualities.

*11.2.1.1 Capacity Building on Digital Literacy & Digital Storytelling*

As for first capacity building, social work practitioners can focus on two types of knowledge and skills: digital literacy and critical thinking. First, social work practitioners can equip disabled women with digital literacy and the use of social media. For example, using translation feature, search relevant information, check with recommended feeds, hiding and blocking specific followers to gain space for sensitive self-narratives.

Second, the findings may suggest that disabled women may lack media production skills for creative self-presentation and expression. In my perspective, protagonists like Helen and Tanya faced challenges in taking selfies due to their physical restrictions and disability. Based on my observation of their videos on social media, three protagonists tended to depend on a third party (e.g., a reporter or a producer) to co-create their narratives in video production. They tended to be interviewees and let an "expert" took complete control of the editing and production.

It is possible that disabled women require the knowledge and skills of digital storytelling. Organizing media production workshops and storytelling programs may enhance their production skills, self-documentary, and digital storytelling. These workshops may expand their impression and involvement of the production. Besides being the narrator in front of a camera, disabled women can explore different natures and styles of storytelling and self-documentary (e.g. a vlog).

*11.2.1.2 Nurturing Critical Thinking*

As for the second capacity building, social work practitioners can facilitate their critical thinking on normative discourse and gain a sense of autonomy, ownership, and authenticity.

The first critical thinking is cultural humility. Social workers can help disabled women to be culturally aware and reflective of normative discourse. Cultural humility is not only about being sensitive to diverse cultures but also about open-mindedness to balance ideology heterogeneity and homogeneity in social media. Social work practitioners can facilitate disabled women to scrutinize diverse cultures and deal with its embedded power dynamic. For example, a social worker can help disabled women to recognize oppressive ideology and be prepared to deal with various criticism and cyber-bullying (if it occurs).

The second critical thinking is related to their wisdom of life, social work practitioners can facilitate disabled women to gain their self-reflexivity. For example, to help connect self-defining lived experiences conceptualize their authentic identity. On the other hand, social work practitioners can facilitate disabled women to strengthen and protect their salient but threatened identities. Instead of allowing oppressed experiences to threaten their sensitive identities, social work practitioners can help disabled women to use their threatened identities to give meaning to these oppressed experiences.

## 11.2.2 Mezzo Level: Building Online Community

At mezzo-level, social workers can focus on building an online community for disabled women. My findings suggest that disabled women not only need a suitable and assertive sociocultural context to legitimize their preferred identity, but they also need support and resources to explore and actualize their preferred identity. At mezzo level, social work practitioners an set two goals for community building as follows.

### 11.2.2.1 Co-creation of a Desired Sociocultural Context

Through building an online community for disabled women, social workers and group members can co-create and share an assertive value and meanings of disability and womanhood. For example, building body positivism and disability aesthetics. By exchanging and co-constructing these values and meanings, social work practitioners can cultivate an open, positive and safe environment with disabled women. The value of an online community of disabled women is to build a self-assertive and safe sociocultural context to legitimize their preferred identity.

### 11.2.2.2 Reinforcement of Mutual Support & Resources

My findings indicate that disabled women require support and resources to explore and actualize their preferred identity. Having an online community among disabled women may facilitate mutual support to verify their preferred identity. Furthermore, sharing their lived experience and information may serve as instrumental support for disabled women. For example, information on adaptive fashion styling and make-up kits with universal design.

## 11.2.3 Macro Level: Political Participation & Citizenship

At macro-level, social workers can enhance political participation and citizenship among disabled women in two ways. First, social workers should help to bridge the cultural and language gap of

global radical movements. Secondly, social worker can help publicize the voices of disabled women as part of raising public awareness and advocacy.

### 11.2.3.1 Bridging cultural and language gap of Profane Culture

This study identifies the cultural and language gap when disabled women connect to the global profane culture and social movements. It is possible that social work practitioners can help with the localization of these profane cultures and social movements. Localization tasks include adapting English terms with local slangs and local cultural artefacts (e.g., using "si-nai" or C9 to replace the concept of "crown" and "princess" in English context). These bridging tasks facilitate disabled women to consume and participate as a collective action of a disabled/women community.

### 11.2.3.2 Promoting Identity Politics of Disabled Women

My findings suggest that disabled women construct their novel symbols to signify their authentic self. In my perspective, they can contribute their authentic and alternative meanings of disability and womanhood to expand the normative ideology as the raising of profane culture. Social work practitioners can help to distribute and lobby their alternative meanings to the community. Distribution strategies can be organizing digital storytelling campaigns, creating campaign hashtags for circulation.

# CHAPTER XII: THE EPILOGUE

## 12.1 Interpretative Paradigm & Hermeneutics

This study aims to understand how disabled women strengthen their preferred identity via social media. This section describes the dialogical hermeneutic circles conducted in this study.

In the book, *The Hermeneutic tradition: from Ast to Ricoeur*, Ormiston and Schrift (1990) has introduced four scholars' work on hermeneutics: Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and Heidegger. Schleiermacher characterizes hermeneutics as "the art of interpretation" (Ormiston & Schrift, 1990). The art of interpretation does not only address the risk of misunderstanding and prejudice. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is a multifaceted interpretation of discourse: 1) Grammatical: the meanings emerge from language and its linguistic structures; 2) Psychological: the meanings of the creator's mind which expressed with styles (Ormiston & Schrift, 1990).

H.-G. Gadamer (2006) has described hermeneutics as "the art of understanding". Interpreter requires a certain time to understand an unambiguous meaning of something through a process of learning, comprehension, and explication. The art of understanding is about possessing the knowledge and being able to explain with theoretical justification (H.-G. Gadamer, 2006).

Heidegger stated that hermeneutics in human research depends on the sense of being (i.e. "facticity"). The sense of self and others are bound by structures of "being-in-the-world" (Ormiston & Schrift, 1990). Our experience and understanding of self and others are conditioned as "fore-structure" of understanding, which help us preliminarily interpret upcoming experiences and phenomena. Heidegger suggests that individuals are compelled to follow the hermeneutic circle to understand and interpret their experiences. Individuals start with understanding things with reference and fore-understanding (the parts) (Ormiston & Schrift, 1990). Then they expand their understanding by connecting it to the larger order of things in the world (the whole) (Ormiston & Schrift, 1990).

According to George (2020)'s work, the hermeneutical circle emphasises the "circularity" of understanding and interpretation. Through learning from bits and pieces, interpreters enrich their understanding and renew their interpretation with more possible meanings and experiences.

## 12.2 Researcher's Position & Reflexivity

## 12.2.1 Researchers' Position as An Insider

In this study, I am also a member of the community as an insider. Kanuha (2000) has pointed out that insider issue is emerging in social work research and practice as we need to work closely with the target population.

Insiders like me possess commonality and experience with the target population (Blythe et al., 2013). Researchers' position and relationship with the target population are influential to the data collection and analysis (Blythe et al., 2013). There are several concerns on insider research, such as making assumptions before data analysis, emotional issues, and handling informants' expectations (Blythe et al., 2013).

There are several advantages when a researcher is an insider of the target community. Having an equal relationship between researcher and informants facilitates rapport building and mutual trust between researcher and informants (O'Connor, 2004). Since researchers have a better understanding of informants' culture and language, they tend to disclose more with insider researchers (Rooney, 2005). As a result, insider researcher collects and interprets deeper meanings of the data (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Also, Insider researcher has cultural competence to interact with the target community and have long engagement in the community to theorize their community.

## 12.2.2 Multiple Levels of Reflexivity

In most qualitative research, researchers are the tool of the research process. As Carminati (2018) has stated, interpretivism research prioritizes how individuals perceive the world, experience their lives, behave to interact with others and society. Interpretivism research focuses on studying narratives of the target group to co-create meanings of their social and cultural contexts (Carminati, 2018). For instance, setting research questions, building a research framework, collecting and analysing data and conceptualizing knowledge (Carminati, 2018).

Reflexivity helps researchers to reflect on how their roles and belief direct the practice of research. Apart from projecting our knowledge of the world, our position and role in society impacted how we do our research in terms of how we relate to our participants and society, our mission and our vision to change society (Gouldner, 2004).

According to Flick (2009), reflexivity is a concept of acknowledging researchers' pre-existing assumptions that may influence the construction of "reality" in research. Their personal experience and perception of the world influence how they ask questions, collect and interpret data, and reach a discussion and conclusion. Researchers' subjective experience in the research

process influences their impression of the research topic and the direction of the discussion (Flick, 2009).

According to Haynes (2012), reflexivity is a cornerstone of qualitative research. Researchers need to build a habit of being critical, sensitive, and self-aware on how they project their beliefs and perceptions of the world in their practice research. Reflection is only a looking glass for researchers to observe their way of doing research. Reflexivity includes questioning our research practice in the hope of raising awareness on how our presumption may influence our interpretation of reality (Haynes, 2012). Reflexivity is more than reflections on the process and output of the research as it includes multiple layers of reflections and emphasis on researchers' epistemology (how knowledge is produced), ontology (how research involve in knowledge) and methodology (i.e. the process of producing knowledge) (Haynes, 2012).

In this study, the reflection of personal preconception is crucial as it affects how I relate to my informants, the study process, and the study itself. To review my pre-assumptions on this research project, reflexivity is used to ask myself how I projected my values and preconceptions on it. Haynes (2012) has constructed a "Multiple Levels of Reflexivity" to guide researchers to reflect their preconceptions and impact on the study. The eight levels of reflexivity include Theoretical Reflexivity, Methodological Reflexivity, Ontological Reflexivity, Cultural Reflexivity, Social Reflexivity, Political Reflexivity, Emotional Reflexivity, Subjective Reflexivity. This section categorises them into three layers of reflexivity: 1) The Layer of Knowledge Building; 2) The Layer of Socio-cultural Experience; 3) The Layer of Subjectivity and Emotions.

12.2.2.1 The Layer of Knowledge Building

For the layer of knowledge building, there are three components: 1) Theoretical Reflexivity; 2) Methodological Reflexivity; 3) Ontological Reflexivity.

For "Theoretical Reflexivity", researchers study how their theoretical understanding and assumptions would project in the process of study and how their experience in the study becomes new knowledge (Haynes, 2012). In this study, I reviewed different theories to gain insight from the existing knowledge. The initiative of this research started when I studied feminism. Crip theory provided me with inspiration on how disabled women recognise their unique identities from theoretical perspectives.

On the other hand, I agree with Morris (1992)'s claim that disabled women are "double disadvantaged" in disability research. These disability research were being perceived from male perspectives. Also, non-disabled researchers may perceive them through the lens of ableism. I considered these research and theories to be part of what we have already known in the lens of

non-disabled people as the normative and dominative view. For this reason, I intended to shape my study to explore the issues in the eyes of women with disabilities. In my study, I gained new knowledge to bridge my understanding to theories and social work practice.

For "Methodological Reflexivity", I reviewed the research process, including sampling, data collection and analysis. Although it is not easy to find disabled women who have such a specific experience, I have disabled peers and ex-clients I know and served in the past. I tried my best to be friendly and caring as an active member of the community. When I communicated with them, I avoided using any jargon and intentionally project myself as a disabled peer to balance the power relationship.

For "Ontological Reflexivity", questioning the impact of my ontology position on this study seems complicated as I have some personal opinions due to my personal experience in social media. I am a social worker and activist fighting for women rights. I attribute the challenges of self-expression of disabled women to structural oppression, stereotyping and other issues related to human rights. My history informs me to perceive disabled women as active agents resisting oppressions in their everyday life. In the recruitment of participants, I intended to include women with different levels of mobility, such as wheelchair users and people who use walking aids. Including participants with different mobility levels provide me with a new angle to enrich my understanding of the target population.

12.2.2.2 The Layer of Socio-cultural Experience

As for the layer of socio-cultural experience, there are two components: 1) Social Reflexivity; 2) Cultural Reflexivity.

For "Social Reflexivity", my lived experience and the nature of my physical disabilities allows me to have in-depth and first-hand experience of being stigmatized as a woman with disabilities. While I discuss research reflexivity, it is necessary to include the impact of my identity as an insider of the target community. Also, my social experience as a woman with disabilities positions me to be unique to understand and interpret my study.

As mentioned above, non-disabled researchers may not fully understand a person with disabilities, even they might be caregivers or family members of the disabled. The discrepancy is because we have unequal power relationships and different life paths, but also because they could hardly understand and fit in the culture in the disabled community. No matter how hard the disabled participants try to share their struggles and concerns, they (and myself) often feel being alienated "from the product of research, from the research process, from other research subjects, and one's self" (Morris, 1992). Disabled women may still be framed as helpless and

dependent clients who need help from social services. For this reason, I think it is my mission to have their subjective reality and concern shown under the spotlight of my work.

## Cultural Reflexivity

In this layer, a researcher needs to be aware of how the dominant discourse and culture might be applied in interpreting data (Haynes, 2012). As for myself, I am an active member of the disabled community which I have a historical, social and ideological affiliation. I grew up in the disability community since I was a child. Such life experience facilitates me to have a solid understanding of how the disability culture and community evolve from time to time.

## 12.2.2.3 The Layer of Emotions and Subjectivity

As for the layer of Subjectivity and Emotions, there are two key concepts: 1) Emotional Reflexivity; 2) Subjective Reflexivity.

As for "Emotional Reflexivity", researchers examine how they feel about the participants and research (Haynes, 2012). As a close peer of my participants, I have a strong connection with their sharing. When they shared their despair and struggle, I may easily show my personal feelings, affecting their ongoing expression. Instead of showing empathy and sharing my feelings, I engaged them as a caring peer who wishes to listen to them, but not a mentor who give them guides.

Since I am born and raised in the disabled community, I speak in their language. I am familiar with the culture and values of the disability community. Despite I may have different beliefs and interpretations of gender roles, I understand the challenges against disabled women express themselves freely. I understand how eager a disabled woman wish to be seen as an "ordinary woman".

Kanuha (2000) has suggested that an insider researcher like me should distance from the informants and community during data collection. Distancing in the data collection phase facilitates me to keep my own experience and perception aside so that informants can authentically share their perception of the "reality". Particularly for insiders who have intense emotional and social connections with informants like me, distancing allow me to minimize my influence on informants' point of view. Furthermore, distancing can facilitate a "thick" description of the phenomenon as informants have more space to share their lived experiences authentically.

As for "Subjective Reflexivity", I examine how researchers effectively take the subject or object role in the research. As a researcher to study women with disabilities, I, myself, is disabled, a woman, and earning a lot of precious experiences on social media. As mentioned in the previous section, I am also an insider of the community of women with disabilities. It is unavoidable that I make influence the research process. No matter how I diligently work to manage my influence in the process, researcher subjectivity should not be decried due to the approach and nature of qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Researchers' subjectivity in this qualitative research is crucial as an instrument to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the research. Such intersubjectivity that I co-create with my informants will form a shared lens to understand the "reality". In this study, my subjectivity is necessary as I take the role of a human instrument to draw the full picture of the research interest. However, to avoid my subjectivity that may overpower the research process, I will take a few measures in my research practice.

During data collection, informants may assume my understanding of their statement as I am an insider. They might simply omit some crucial information as I share their lived experience. Probing questions can facilitate informants to clarify their information. For example, "If you were talking to a non-disabled researcher, can you explain what you mean by....?", "can you give me an example to illustrate your point?". These probing questions help protagonists elaborate their meaning with their own words (Blythe et al., 2013). Such measure can raise the credibility of the research to enhance readers' understanding of the lived experience of such a specific community.

During data analysis, my lived experience and prior knowledge of the phenomenon may influence the analysis and interpretation of the data. I not only write my point of view in my research diary so that I can identify my bias and understand how researcher and informants co-create the perception of the study topic (Blythe et al., 2013).

## 12.3 Research Evaluation
### 12.3.1 The Qualitative vs Quantitative Studies Debate

Over decades, the evaluation debate between qualitative and quantitative approaches has shifted to discussing interpretivism and positivism paradigms. More positivists may choose qualitative or mixed methods. The quantitative approach is the positivism tradition to discover human's patterns and correlations between behaviours and their characteristics. Positivism paradigm values representativeness, validity, internal validity, and generalizability and other consensus parameters. As for the interpretivism paradigm, these terms are not applicable in a similar manner. Interpretivism may choose the qualitative approach to understand and describe human's lived experiences and their subjective perception. Creswell and Miller (2000) have argued that the critical choice between interpretivism and positivism depends on researchers' epistemology and philosophical rationale. According to their epistemology, they choose a

different set of "languages" to conduct and evaluate their research. Together, the evaluation of interpretivism research is problematic for two reasons.

### 12.3.1.1 Evaluation Criteria of Qualitative Studies

Creswell and Miller (2000) have pointed out that evaluation parameters of qualitative studies should have different definitions and vocabulary apart from the quantitative ones. However, quality criteria on qualitative research lack consensus definition (Buus & Perron, 2019; FitzPatrick, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).

Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 289–332) have listed the concepts of "credibility," "transferability," "dependability," and "confirmability" as essential evaluation criteria.

Tong et al. (2007) have developed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) by compiling thirty-two items into three domains: "research team and reflexivity", "study design", and "data analysis and reporting" (pp.349). Tracy (2010) has suggested eight markers of qualitative quality across different paradigms, including "worthy topic", "rich rigour", "sincerity", "credibility", "resonance", "significant contribution", "ethics", and "meaningful coherence" (pp. 837).

Korstjens and Moser (2017) have consolidated the work from Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Sim and Sharp (1998). Korstjens and Moser (2017, p. 120) have suggested five standard parameters to evaluate qualitative studies: "confirmability and dependability", "transferability", "reliability", "credibility", and "reflexivity".

FitzPatrick (2019) has pointed out that it is challenging to reach a consensus on qualitative studies' validity and evaluation criteria. Although the interpretivism paradigm is often synonymously related to the qualitative approach, the evaluation criteria of qualitative studies may not be fully applicable to the characteristics and hermeneutics of the interpretative paradigm.

### 12.3.1.2 Characteristic of Interpretive Studies for Evaluation

Interpretative research depends on researchers as a tool for data collection and analysis. Researchers apply their observational and interpersonal skills in data collection. Also, researchers interpret data by gaining personal insights, knowledge and lived experiences. Interpretation includes participants' subjective social experience and extension to understand their social

context. Researchers' inferences depend on their reflexivity and awareness of personal biases and pre-conceptions. Based on the characteristic of interpretive research, several evaluation criteria of the qualitative approach are selected and elaborated to evaluate this study as an interpretative study.

## 12.3.2 Generalizability

*12.3.2.1 Introduction of Generalizability*

In this study, the concept of generalization is similar to transferability. Generalisation is taken into consideration in the research design phase in terms of identifying an appropriate theoretical framework to answer the "how" or "why" research questions (Yin, 2018). However, the board definition of generalisation is criticized for being biased and inherently acquired to quantitative nature, such as statistical generalization (Carminati, 2018).

In the light of the interpretivism paradigm, generalisability emphasize the understanding of human behaviours rather than the prediction and generalization of cause-effect relationship. Interpretative research emphasizes the hermeneutics and inter-subjective perception of the word between researchers and their target group (Carminati, 2018). The purpose of interpretive research is to explore meanings and lived experience to gain an in-depth understanding of their actions and their "world". For this reason, some scholars reconceptualized the meaning of generalizability in interpretative research.

First, Williams (2000) has introduced the concept of "moderatum generalisations" to evaluate interpretive studies. Moderatum generalization is defined as cultural consistency in the social-cultural context. To be more specific, researchers understand and make own generalisation in the interpretation of target groups' action and utterance.

As for this study, I demonstrated my understanding and familiarity with the social-cultural context of women with disabilities. Besides being an insider of the community, I can interpret their actions and utterance in their "language".

Second, Carminati (2018) has introduced the concept of "Theoretical Generalizability". Instead of making predictions on human behaviours, interpretative research aims to understand the research topic and interpret findings to gain theoretical knowledge. In this sense, generalisation does not depend on the representativeness of data and sampling strategies. Theoretical generalization entails the potential extrapolation of findings connects to theories. As for this study, I demonstrated how I interpret my understanding of the findings to gain insights on identity theories.

*12.3.2.2 Application of Generalizability Strategies*

To gain generalizability in this study, the process of interpretation gives "thick descriptions" so that readers can connect these information and the experiences of participants. Simons (2014) has suggested four ways to build knowledge and gain recognition from the context: Naturalistic Generalization, Situated Generalization, Concept and Process Generalization.

First, "Naturalistic Generalization" is defined as a thick description of the events (i.e. time, place, background) and voices of participants so that readers can discern the similarity and dissimilarity to their own experiences (Simons, 2014). In Chapter Five Result, I provided rich descriptions and examples of how the three protagonists conveyed their thoughts and actions (e.g. summaries of their posts, photos, and quotes).

Second, "Situated Generalization" is defined as evaluating how findings inform professional practice (Simons, 2014). In the Chapter Six Discussion, I shared how my findings inform social work practice by gaining insights on professional ideology and potential technology-mediated practice.

Third, "Concept and Process Generalization" is defined as the making-sense process from analysing and interpreting findings to connect to concepts as a whole(Simons, 2014). Researchers may generalize their findings to cognitive understanding and knowledge (Simons, 2014). In the Chapter Six Discussion, I indicated how my findings could be generalized and connect to identity theories. Thus, I also indicated that my findings might connect people with stigma and how individuals signify their self on social media.

## 12.3.3 Rigor

*12.3.3.1 Introduction of Rigor*

The positivism paradigm values the reliability and validity of the quantitative approach to ensure the findings can accurately correspond to the "reality". Considering the bedrock of the interpretivism paradigm is the interpretative understanding of researchers, rigour implies the clearance, adequacy and consistency of researchers' subjective interpretation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In other words, the interpretivism paradigm values rigour to evaluate the credibility and trustworthiness of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Rigour is closely related to two common concepts (i.e. credibility and trustworthiness) when qualitative research is being evaluated. Credibility is defined as the clarification and transparency

of data analysis. Korstjens and Moser (2017) have pointed out that credibility depends on whether the researcher can accurately understand and interpret participants' subjective viewpoints and social context. Thus, the analysis and interpretation of results should include insights from the data itself rather than the researcher's imagination (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Trustworthiness is defined as how researchers demonstrate their inference is logical and believable (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Trustworthiness does not only look at researchers' engagement and time invested. Trustworthiness is related to how data is being collected, analysed and interpreted consistently in a logical manner (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Thus, trustworthiness is related to the co-creation and intersubjectivity between researchers and their participants. Researchers need participants' feedback on their understanding and interpretation as well.

De Witt and Ploeg (2006) have proposed that rigour in interpretive studies have five elements: 1) Balanced Integration: researchers integrate the voices of participants and philosophical concepts to build knowledge in their interpretation; 2) Openness is the accountability and consistency of decision making in the process of the study. For instance, decisions on sampling strategies, data collection and analysis; 3) Concreteness: how the findings can be interpreted for professional practice; 4) Resonance: how readers can connect to the findings; 5) Actualization: the potential of the findings can be realized in the future.

### 12.3.3.2 Application of Rigor Strategies

Korstjens and Moser (2017) have suggested three strategies to enhance rigour in interpretative research. First, "prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation" are defined as sufficient time and presence for observation and engagement with participants. By investing sufficient time in the field, researchers get familiar with the social-cultural context of the study topic. Also, researchers can build trust and connection with the target group. As for this study, I grew up in the disability community with the protagonists. I know them for nearly a decade. Also, we have numerous common friends and online social groups. For this reason, I can observe their activities on their profile and their interactions with others and online communities.

Second, "Triangulation and member check" is defined as data collection and checking across time, space or person (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). In this study, I conducted three interviews with each protagonist with a one-month interval. Also, I shared my observation and preliminary findings with the protagonists as a briefing in each interview. Sharing and my observation and preliminary findings with them help to enrich my understanding. Also, their feedback on other protagonists' posts helps co-create the understanding and interpretation of the findings.

## 12.4 Limitations

There are several limitations identified during the development of the study. First, the interview design for data collection mainly focused on selecting the posts most representable of their identity as women with disabilities. The posts (i.e. analysing unit) were mainly successful ones to provide information on what the protagonists did. Still, there were several ambiguities in the findings of their agency on social media. For instance, how they manage their self-disclosure on sensitive issues and self-promotion. The data collection did not fully cover their social connections with others, such as posting group photos and tagging their friends and their interactions with online communities. Also, the data collection did not cover how protagonists handle cyberbullying and unfriendly encounters on social media.

Second, this study focused on how disabled women initiate and navigate their self in the social-cultural-technological context on social media. This study did not cover how the infrastructure of social media (i.e. algorithm) may impact the perception and presentation of self on social media. For example, the algorithm may create an echo chamber. Social media provide repeated interaction and information sources in similar tendencies and attitudes. Such selective and repeated exposures may lead to confirmation bias and polarized opinions (Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). However, the findings of this study inspired me to highlight the importance of ideology heterogeneity and homogeneity on social media. My findings did not help answer how disabled women can flexibly switch between ideology heterogeneity and homogeneity.

Another note of caution is the remarkable difference between the protagonists. Tanya's social media practice and narrative themes were significantly different to Helen and Sam. For example, she shared most of her posts on Instagram. Features of Instagram may prescribe how Tanya modify her posts and search for recommended hashtags. There are several possibilities of the discrepancy, such as Tanya's educational background, professional occupation, and more significantly, her experience and perception of disabilities.

Both Helen and Sam were born with genetic disorders, and Tanya acquired spinal cord injuries after a car accident. Tanya talked about disability in terms of a loss: a loss of physical functions, and most importantly, a loss of her normative identity as a healthy, professional and attractive woman. In the literature dealing with survivors of spinal cord injuries, "going back to the former self" is well known and described (Agmon et al., 2016). Tanya's motives and narrative were about reclaiming her former identity, resuming her former social lifestyle, returning to the women's cycle. As for Helen and Sam, they grew with disability and did not have the taste of being an "able-bodied" woman. Their narratives were about personal growth, positively living with disability, and striving for equality.

The onset of disability may make a significant difference in how they perceive their disability identity and gender identity. As for Tanya, her disability identity was still in the progress of discovering while her gender identity was well-developed. Her points of reference were her former experience as a non-disabled woman. As for Helen and Sam, their disability identity was fixed while their gender identity was in learning progress. Their points of reference were the social norms and stereotypes of conventional gender roles. Different meanings these protagonists gave to disability, and the status of their identity development did make a significant difference in their agency and social interactions on social media.

## 12.5 Recommendation for Future Research

There are several gaps in the knowledge around the social-cultural-technological context in social media. First, future research can further study the social media experience of people with disabilities. Particularly on the negative impact of self-construction and self-presentation via social media. For example, social comparisons with desired social groups may create a sense of inadequacy and inferiority of their body/appearance. Online communication may cause a sense of social segregation and fear of missing out. Sharing over-modified selfies and fantasized narratives may also create unhealthy self-centeredness and narcissism. Furthermore, social media algorithm and echo chambers may lead to opinion polarization and close-mindedness.

Second, further studies can look at the self-construction and self-presentation of different groups of people with disabilities. The findings of this study suggest that people who acquire disabilities in adulthood may explore possibilities to retrieve their "pre-disabled" identities. Previous social media posts before the acquisition of disability may have been helpful or harmful to their narrative identities.

Third, this study mainly focuses on disabled women strengthening their preferred identity via social media. My findings suggested that the women's movement helps disabled women to signify their collective identity. Also, disabled women proactively disclose their challenges and promote their self for crowdsourcing support and resources. Disability stigma hampers gender identity and femininity among women with disabilities; it may equally hamper the masculinity and gender identity among men with disabilities. It is possible that some of my findings may applicable to males with disabilities. However, they may apply different strategies to strengthening their preferred identity.

## 12.6 Conclusion

In the journey of understanding, learning and interpretation in this study, the song "This is Me" from the movie "The Greatest Showman" often flashed in my mind. The song is a manifesto of oppressed people accepting their "awkwardness" and embracing their journey towards becoming the person they want to be with pride. Some lyrics of the song echoes the unspoken messages of the disabled women interviewed in this study:

> "*I am not a stranger to the dark*
> *Hide away, they say*
> *'Cause we don't want your broken parts*
> *I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars*
> *Run away, they say*
> *No one'll love you as you are*
>
> *But I won't let them break me down to dust*
> *I know that there's a place for us*
> *For we are glorious*" (Gracey, 2017)

To conclude, this study illustrates the agency of disabled women to strengthen their preferred identity as well as owning their own sociocultural context. As inspired by H. G. Gadamer (1996)'s analogy of "game", disabled women create their social media posts and profiles as a "mini-world" with their preferred meanings, ideology, time and space. Disabled women not only strengthening their preferred identity via social media. Their social media activities and profile can make an impact on shifting the meaning and social order of disability, women and any individuals who are being oppressed. When more people build their "mini-worlds" to continuously reinforce and share authentic meanings and preferred social orders with others, it is possible that we can shake oppression against people with diversities.

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