

Disability & Society

ISSN: 0968-7599 (Print) 1360-0508 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cdso20

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To cite this article: Beatriz Morim, Ana R. Pinho & João Manuel de Oliveira (09 Jul 2026): Reframing disability: an exploratory study of ableism in language and its implications in Portugal, Disability & Society, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2026.2698957

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2026.2698957

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Published online: 09 Jul 2026.

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DISABILITY & SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2026.2698957

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Reframing disability: an exploratory study of ableism in language and its implications in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Disability models shape public perceptions and societal responses toward people with disabilities, often reinforcing ableist attitudes that marginalize them. A notable gap in literature exists regarding ableism's impact on language. This study aimed to understand the effects of ableism in language within Portuguese society. The research involved 10 people with disabilities, living in Portugal for over 10 years. Using a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive design, data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews and analyzed following the recommendations of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke, revealing three main themes: (1) narratives of impairment; (2) effects of disability; and (3) combating disability. The main conclusions point out to participants' acknowledgment of ableist language and its negative outcomes. However, participants prioritized addressing practical issues like accessibility and discrimination. The study suggests that a shift towards a social understanding of disability, alongside greater accessibility and technological access, is critical for true inclusion.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 February 2025
Accepted 24 June 2026

KEYWORDS
Disability; people with disabilities; ableism; ableist language; disability language; discrimination

Points of interest

- The study found that everyday expressions in Portuguese society often reflect and reinforce biased ideas about disability, portraying it as a personal tragedy or deficiency.
- While language matters, people with disabilities prioritized issues such as physical accessibility, social inclusion, and discrimination in daily life.
- Assistive tools like screen readers and mobility devices were seen as helpful, but cost and availability can still restrict their impact.
- Participants described barriers in public spaces, education, and employment that prevent full participation, highlighting the need for inclusive infrastructure and policies.
- The findings support a shift from viewing disability as a problem to recognizing it as a natural variation in human experience, requiring respect and accommodation.
- The study calls for broader societal transformation—beyond language reform—to address deep-rooted inequalities and promote equal rights for people with disabilities.

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Introduction

The role of language in shaping public perception is a crucial concern (Oliver 1994; Shakespeare 1994). Language is not merely descriptive but performative (Butler 1990): it constructs realities (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and often reinforces dominant power structures and dominant narratives (Fairclough 2013). Ableism – systematic discrimination based on assumptions of disabled people's 'lesser' abilities (Bogart and Dunn 2019; Bottema-Beutel et al. 2021; Campbell 2014; Da Silva and Hubbard 2024; Liu and Shibata 2021) – is embedded in everyday language, contributing to their portrayal as inferior (Cherney 2011; Wolbring 2008) and sustaining existing power dynamics (Platteel 2003). As an ideology, ableism privileges the non-disabled body as the 'corporeal standard' (Campbell 2014; Goodley 2014). This ideological elevation of the non-disabled form drives disablism, which refers to the concrete, systematic prejudice, discrimination, and structural disadvantages imposed on disabled people (Goodley 2014). In short, ableism provides the underlying ideology, while disablism is its active manifestation – visible in inaccessible environments, institutional neglect, and prejudicial language. Language therefore not only reflects social views on disability but helps shape and maintain the power structures that uphold both ableism and disablism.

Despite global efforts to address ableism, the topic remains underexplored, particularly in its connection to language (Bogart and Dunn 2019; Bottema-Beutel et al. 2021; Cherney 2011; Liu and Shibata 2021). To address these issues, this article reviews key disability models and debates on disability-related language, situates them within the Portuguese cultural, social, and political context, and presents empirical findings on ableist language. Through a comprehensive analysis of ableist language, this article aims to uncover the subtleties of ableism in Portugal, offering valuable insights into cultural and societal perceptions, thinking and attitudes towards disability, also exploring how people with disabilities experience and interpret these linguistic forms.

Models of disability and disability language

The dominant model of disability in a society greatly affects how people with disabilities are treated, such as their legal rights, access to education, employment, and media portrayal (Durham and Ramcharan 2018; Smart 2009). It also shapes self-concept and can either reinforce or challenge social stigma (Smart 2004). By examining specific cases, like those in Portugal, we can see how different models influence policy and practices, highlighting the need for tailored approaches that fit different social contexts.

One of the oldest models, the moral model, regarded disability as a consequence of sin or something requiring charity (Henderson and Bryan 2011; Solomon 2012). The model reflected a perception of disability as inferior and pitiable (Solomon 2012), using derogatory terms such as 'moron', 'cripple', 'gimp' and 'imbecile' (McClure 2007; Olkin 2017). Some of these terms originated as early as the ninth century but did not become widely stigmatized until the seventeenth century (Olkin 2017).

The term 'medical model' was originally coined by psychiatrist Thomas Szasz in 1956 to critique the medicalization of mental health (Szasz 1956, cited by Hogan 2019). However, it was Oliver (1983) who introduced and adapted the concept to the field of disability studies, using the 'medical model' as a counterpoint to the emerging social model and describing the pathologization of various structural and bodily conditions during the 1970s (Begelman 1971; Oliver 1983; Williams 2001). Widely recognized and accepted, the medical model of disability views disability as a flaw in an individual's physiological or psychological functioning, caused by factors like environment, genetics, or lifestyle, which prevents the person from being fully functional (Olkin 1999). Finkelstein (1980) and Oliver (1989) argued that capitalism played a significant role in promoting this model, as people with disabilities were deemed unsuitable for industrial work and burdensome to society. Henceforth, the idea of an individual deemed as able became the ideal worker. The focus of this model is on eliminating disabilities, improving physical conditions, and facilitating rehabilitation to help individuals adjust to their situations and environments. Additionally, there is an expectation that people with disabilities will take on the roles of patients or learners, guided by healthcare professionals (Olkin 1999). As a result, people with disabilities are often led to a passive and dependent existence, with medical or rehabilitative interventions seen as the only means of adaptation (Hughes 2000; Oliver 1990). This approach often portrays disability as a 'personal tragedy' (Thomas and Woods 2003), regarded as objectively bad, a pitiable condition (Carlson 2010), as people with disabilities are responsible for any outcomes resulting from their perceived or actual limitations (Barnes 2018). The medical model focuses on diagnosing and categorizing conditions, often using clinical terms like 'the blind', 'the mentally ill', 'the retarded', or 'deaf-mutes', defining individuals by their impairments (Dunn 2015; Smart 2009). Some scholars argue that the medical model is a contemporary adaptation of the moral model, shifting the blame for disability from sin to personal failings, and transferring authority over disabled lives from priests to doctors (Mackelprang et al. 2009; Smart 2004). This model is central for the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps (ICIDH), published in 1980 by the World Health Organization (WHO 1980) and differentiates between three concepts: impairment (loss or abnormal functioning), disability (difficulty in performing a 'normal' activity due to

impairment), and handicap (disadvantage in carrying out tasks considered normal due to impairment or disability). However, the definition presents a narrow view by focusing on normalcy and maintaining a causal relationship between impairment, disability, and handicap (Fontes 2016). This approach treats the disadvantages experienced by individuals as politically and culturally neutral, ignoring the impact of social factors on impairment (Armstrong 1983; Kasser and Lytle 2005), reinforcing ideas of normalization and the segregation of individuals with disabilities (Bunbury 2019; Shakespeare 2013a), which led to significant criticism from disability organizations shortly after its publication (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1990, 1996).

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the social model of disability emerged from individuals with disabilities as they challenged the constraints of the medical model of disability (D'Alessio 2011; Shapiro 1993). This model was spearheaded by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) (Shakespeare 2013a), which played a crucial role in transforming disability from an individual medical concern to a broader sociopolitical issue. The social model distinguishes 'impairment', which is seen as individual and private, from 'disability', which is viewed as structural and public, resulting from societal barriers and attitudes that prevent full participation in society (Shakespeare 2013a; UPIAS 1975). The social model advocates for the removal of these barriers, the implementation of anti-discrimination laws, and the promotion of independent living to address social oppression (Shakespeare 2013a). This perspective has underpinned the disability rights movement, seeking to combat discrimination and promote inclusivity through legal, cultural, and political means (Hahn 1985; Oliver 2004). While the model has played a crucial role in advancing equal rights, it has faced criticism for overlooking the physical experiences and limitations associated with disabilities, as not all challenges faced by them are due to social conditions (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999; Crow 1996; French 1993; Galvin 2003; Morris 1991; Shakespeare 2013a; Shakespeare and Watson 2001). Advocates of the social model, however, assert that focusing on the social construction of disability does not negate the bodily experiences or the effects of disabilities on individuals' lives. Instead, it aims to shift the excessive focus on biological aspects, that absolves society of its role in perpetuating exclusion (Shakespeare 2013a).

Historically, disability studies have primarily focused on Global North contexts, particularly within Critical Disability Studies (CDS), which emerged from the social model of disability to critique ableism, biomedicalization, and normative assumptions. More recently, both Medical and Disability Anthropology and a growing body of Global South Disability Studies have expanded this focus by examining disability within diverse sociocultural, political, and historical contexts (Brocco 2024). Scholars working within Disability Studies have developed decolonial, intersectional, and context-specific frameworks that foreground local epistemologies, colonial legacies, and structural inequalities

shaping disabled lives across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East (Grech and Soldatic 2016). At the same time, anthropological research has highlighted the interplay between global narratives and situated practices, revealing diverse lived experiences and understandings of non-normative bodies (Brocco 2024). Together, these contributions challenge the dominance of Euro-American foundations and enrich understandings of disability by emphasizing the importance of local knowledge systems and context-specific realities, reinforcing the view that disability is not merely a biological condition but is socially constructed through sociocultural norms, infrastructures, and discourses through which disability is understood, represented, and experienced (Brocco 2024).

In terms of language, the social model shifts attention away from the individual deficit, allowing different linguistic strategies to emerge. A well-documented transatlantic divergence exists in disability-related terminology, shaped by distinct political and activist traditions. In the United States, person-first language (e.g. 'person with a disability') has been widely institutionalized through clinical, educational, and professional guidelines, particularly those promoted by the American Psychological Association (APA 2012; Dunn and Andrews 2015). This approach reflects an effort to counteract stigma by emphasizing personhood over impairment (Wright 1983, 1991). While person-first language has contributed significantly to advancing equal rights, it has also been criticised for sometimes feeling unnatural and for not aligning with the preferences of some disabled individuals, particularly when applied rigidly to identity terms that are widely reclaimed within the community (Andrews, Powell, and Ayers 2022; Dunn and Andrews 2015). Critics further argue that an exclusive focus on person-first language may unintentionally distance individuals from their disability and contribute to internalized ableism (Andrews 2019; Botha, Hanlon, and Williams 2023; Gernsbacher 2017), raising the question of whether it represents an appropriate correction or an overcorrection. In contrast, in the United Kingdom, identity-first language (e.g. 'disabled people') is more prevalent and aligns with the political foundations of the social model of disability, which positions disability as a structural and societal issue rather than an individual deficit. Within this context, identity-first terminology is widely used and understood as a form of cultural and political self-definition, recognising disability as integral to lived experience (Brown 2011; Brueggemann 2013; Cabinet Office 2021; Dunn and Andrews 2015). Identity-first language has also been associated with perspectives such as the diversity model, which frames disability as a neutral and natural aspect of human diversity (Andrews 2017; Olkin and Pledger 2003). This has supported its use within the disability community, particularly among groups such as the Deaf community, where 'Deaf' is understood as a cultural identity (Forber-Pratt, Mueller, and Andrews 2019). It is also seen by some as more effective in challenging ableism and reinforcing disability pride (Pineo 2022; Vivanti 2020).

Within this debate, identity-first language has often been advanced by disability scholars and individuals who identify as disabled, whereas person-first language, although originally introduced by people with disabilities, has frequently been more strongly promoted by those without direct experience of disability (Titchkosky 2001). However, it is important to distinguish identity-first language from objectifying forms of expression that reduce individuals solely to their disability.

Together, these linguistic traditions illustrate how disability terminology is embedded in broader cultural and political contexts. Overall, person-first and identity-first languages remain the most widely discussed and contested approaches within disability language, varying considerably among people with disabilities. Both aim to promote respect and acceptance, but the debate between them can sometimes overshadow broader goals of social inclusion and equality (Shakespeare 2013b).

Besides, there are different ways to talk about disabilities, and not all fit into clear categories (Marks 1999). One unclear type is called 'apologetic naming', which uses positive terms like 'physically challenged' to focus on strengths and reframe challenges. This approach often minimizes differences between people with disabilities and those without, emphasizing that everyone has strengths and challenges. Kamenetsky and Sadowski (2020) found that person-first and apologetic naming did not lead to more positive views of disability. In contrast, negative language (e.g. 'crippled' or 'mad') led to the most negative reactions. These findings suggest that eliminating negative terms and encouraging the use of empowering defiant self-naming by people with disabilities may be more effective in reducing negative stereotypes.

Euphemisms are another concern relating to disability language. Terms like 'differently abled', 'physically challenged' and 'special needs' are used as supposedly less offensive alternatives to 'disability' (Hojati 2012). However, these terms, created and often preferred by people without disabilities and parents of children with disabilities, are criticized by the disability community for being shallow and condescending (Andrews 2019).

Disability terminology evolves with cultural shifts and preferences, yet identity challenges persist within the disability community (Andrews 2019).

Disability in Portugal

In Portuguese society, disability has been conceived as a pathology, reduced to physical incapacity and associated with a fatalistic narrative of personal tragedy, similar to the medical model previously described. The difficulties faced by people with disabilities in daily life are often seen as a natural result of their limitations. This perspective has contributed to the image of them as being passive and dependent. This view influenced social policies that, due to being poorly defined, inadequately implemented, or distorted, have

perpetuated the oppression and socioeconomic situation of people with disabilities in Portugal (Fontes 2016).

Historically, before the nineteenth century, disability was often associated with poverty, and there were no specialized institutions. Portuguese society, influenced by a strong Judeo-Christian morality, treated disability as a matter of charity, with families and religious institutions taking most of the care. In the nineteenth century, a more medicalized view of disability began to emerge, leading to the creation of institutions that segregated these individuals. These changes occurred more slowly in Portugal than in other Western countries due to specific social, cultural, and political factors, such as the state's reluctance to take responsibility and the prolonged influence of the Inquisition. Specifically, the Inquisition (1536–1821) deeply institutionalized a Judeo-Christian moral framework that interpreted disability either as a divine test or a consequence of sin. This historical legacy solidified the 'moral model' of disability and established a long-standing 'culture of charity,' where the care of people with disabilities was seen as a religious duty of families and the *Misericórdias* (popular Portuguese charitable institutions) rather than a secular state responsibility. This paradigm persisted for centuries, delaying the transition to medical and social models compared to other Western nations. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were some advances in the education for people with disabilities, but the subsequent dictatorship halted this progress, maintaining the association between disability and charity. After the restoration of democracy in 1974, Portugal entered a new era in terms of disability policies, marked by the legal recognition of the rights of people with disabilities in the Portuguese Constitution, although the pace of change remained slower than in other Western countries (Fontes 2016).

In response to these political and cultural changes in Portuguese society, the Movement of People with Disabilities in Portugal was an important catalyst, raising awareness of the reality of people with disabilities and advocating for their human and citizenship rights. Initially, the movement significantly influenced the government in setting political agendas for disability. However, with the stabilization of the democratic regime, governments became progressively less receptive to the demands of people with disabilities organizations. The movement faced two main challenges in its attempt to influence government policies: first, in translating government agendas into real disability policies, and second, in the implementation of these policies after their approval (Fontes 2016).

Although progress has been made, the policies implemented to date have failed to overcome the barriers that prevent the full integration and participation of this community in Portuguese society, thus perpetuating the cycle of social exclusion (Fontes 2016). An example of the ongoing challenges highlighting the deep-rooted ableism that persists in Portuguese society is the forced sterilization of people with disabilities, a practice that reflects a biopolitical control over non-normative bodies (Foucault 1978) that continues to be allowed in Portugal,

even for minors (European Parliament 2023). Here, individuals with disabilities are still seen as dependent and in need of charity rather than equal participants in society. Suggesting that for true progress, a cultural change that dismantles the cultural and psychological barriers that perpetuate ableism, is required, shifting the view of disability as a limitation to recognizing it as a key aspect of human diversity.

Research process

Objectives

Contextually, there is a significant gap in the literature on ableism and its influence on language (Bogart and Dunn 2019; Bottema-Beutel et al. 2021; Cherney 2011; Liu and Shibata 2021), especially in relation to the lived experiences of people with disabilities and qualitative research on ableism in everyday contexts. Additionally, the importance of disability-related language is gaining recognition (Andrews, Powell, and Ayers 2022; Botha, Hanlon, and Williams 2023; Dunn 2015; Grech, Koller, and Olley 2023; Oliver 1996; Vivanti 2020), prompting questions about which terms should be used by individuals without disabilities versus those with disabilities and which phrases are appropriate or should be avoided (Dunn and Andrews 2015). While disability studies are expanding globally, research in Portugal remains limited and scarce (Fontes 2016). Therefore, the main objective of this investigation is to understand the effects that ableism has in language, within Portuguese society, from the perspective of people with disabilities.

Participants, design and materials

The selection criteria for the participation in the study included: having a recognized disability; having the ability to verbally express their perceptions; voluntarily consenting to participate in the study; and living in Portugal for more than 10 years. The participants were 10 persons with disabilities, aged between 25 and 68 years. Six participants identified as men and four as women. Concerning the self-declared disability type, five participants referred to as blind, and the others mentioned low vision, cerebral palsy, fibromyalgia, dwarfism, and paraplegia. Regarding educational level, one participant presented 9th grade, four participants the 12th grade, four participants a bachelor's degree, and one person presented a master's degree.

A qualitative approach was adopted, with an exploratory and descriptive design. The sampling method was non-probabilistic, using a convenience-based technique that relied on proximity contacts, and the contact with associations and support groups for people with disabilities, as well as a snowball sampling technique, where initial participants identified and recommended other relevant individuals, thereby facilitating the recruitment process (Marôco 2021).

Semi-structured individual interviews were chosen to collect data, to allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives without being restricted to predefined options. This interview structure is commonly used in exploratory and descriptive studies. In semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions guide the study's theme and allow for in-depth dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee (Mathers, Fox, and Hunn 2000). The interview guide, consisting of 14 open-ended questions, was developed based on research objectives and literature review on the topic. The questions covered dimensions such as the daily life with disability, adverse uses of language for people with disabilities, reflections on the impact of ableist language, and suggestions for respectful language. Relevant sociodemographic information was also inquired, such as age, gender, self-declared disability type, and educational background.

The present research was submitted to the Ethics Committee of ISCTE-IUL and was approved, with the final report number 24/2024. Voluntary and informed participation was ensured, along with anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected, as well as the right to debriefing for the participants in the present study.

Data collection

The participants were contacted and invited to an individual interview with the aim of sharing their personal experiences and opinions on the topic under study. The scheduling of the interview was done according to the availability of those involved, with each session lasting an average of 1 h and conducted online to ensure the comfort and safety of the interviewees. Informed consent was provided to the participants through a document sent the day before the interview, explaining the study's objectives, procedures, benefits, and risks, as well as the rights and responsibilities of the participants. On the day of the interview, it was confirmed that the participants had read or acknowledged the informed consent, and permission was requested to record the audio and video of the session. At the end of the interview, a debriefing was sent.

Finally, the data collected was transcribed and analyzed to identify themes and patterns through thematic analysis.

Data analysis

In this study, a thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for analyzing qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a flexible and reflexive approach that allows for a rich and detailed exploration of patterns and meanings within the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). The analysis adhered to a six-phase process based on Braun and Clarke (2022) guidelines, systematically

identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes in relation to the research questions. This approach facilitated a thorough and multifaceted interpretation of the data, emphasizing both explicit and implicit meanings, and allowing for a rich understanding of the complexities within the dataset.

Results

At the centre of the thematic structure is the overarching analytical concept of *deconstructing disability*, from which three main themes and their associated codes emerge. The first theme, **narratives of impairment**, concerns the dominant ways impairment is framed in society. These narratives include the conception of *impairment as a tragedy*, which positions disabled people within deficit-oriented discourses. They also involve *negative internalisation*, whereby individuals absorb stigmatising or limiting societal attitudes, and the use of *euphemisms*, which attempt to soften or obscure impairment-related language. Additionally, the code *language is secondary* reflects the belief that discourse plays a minor role, despite its influence on social perceptions of disability. The second theme, **effects of disability**, refers to the social, cultural, and structural consequences that shape disabled people's everyday experiences. Key elements include *discrimination in society*, which reinforces exclusion and unequal treatment, and persistent *accessibility issues*, which limit participation across various environments. This theme also encompasses the ways individuals navigate these barriers, captured in the code *dealing with discrimination*. The third theme, **combating disability**, highlights perspectives and actions aimed at challenging disabling norms and structures. This includes recognizing *positive aspects of impairment*, which counters dominant deficit-framed narratives, and promoting *less discriminatory views on disability* that support more inclusive social attitudes. The theme also attends to the *impact of technology*, acknowledging its role in reducing barriers, enhancing autonomy, and reshaping the relationship between impairment and participation. Together, these themes illustrate how disability can be critically deconstructed through attending to narratives, social effects, and transformative possibilities. The following provides a detailed description and analysis of these results:

Narratives of impairment

The following four codes emerged from the data: 'impairment as a tragedy', 'negative internalization', 'euphemisms' and 'language is secondary' of the 'narratives of impairment' theme. The theme examines the broader societal narratives that often frame impairment in harmful ways, and the impact these narratives have as experienced and understood by people with disabilities.

The 'impairment as a tragedy' code focuses on how the social construction of impairment as a personal tragedy influences language and how it can manifest through ableist language in daily interactions. This code reflects a synthesis of perspectives derived from all interview questions, with particular emphasis on experiences of disability, language use, and perceptions of capability – for instance, in response to the question: 'Could you describe the type of disability you have and how it affects you (in daily life, in interactions with others, such as family, friends, or society)?'. Participants hold the underlying belief that society views people with disabilities as incapable of leading fulfilling lives, which frames (living with) an impairment as a personal tragedy, often influenced by individuals' limited personal experience with disability or lack of interaction with people who have disabilities. P10 reflects on how this view shaped his own mindset before his accident that resulted in his paralysis: '*Back then, even my own perspective – since I didn't know anyone in a wheelchair – was that when someone has an accident, their life is over.*' Participants' reports reveal that the moral and medical models of disability remain deeply rooted in Portuguese society, where conservative values frame impairment as personal tragedy and creating two opposing views, one of pity and another of exaggerated admiration.

The 'negative internalization' code shows how participants, both through their own experiences and those they have heard from others, are affected by the language used. This was especially triggered by reflections on the question *'Do you believe this type of language contributes to stigma or discrimination against people with disabilities? How does that make you feel?'*. The emotional harm comes from how society's ableism is built into language, shaping public perceptions of disability as a tragedy and influencing how individuals with disabilities perceive themselves, as the language used around disability reinforces detrimental narratives that these individuals internalize. An example of the code follows: '*It affected us because we already had low self-esteem, we were already weakened by our disability and then hearing that from other people really affected our quality of life, our way of looking at the world, at other people.*' [P4]

Regarding the code 'euphemisms' it is observed how the term 'invisual' – a word used in the Portuguese context to name blind people – is understood by the blind and low vision participants as a softer alternative to 'blind', a perception that emerged specifically in response to questions about disability-related terminology. The influence of religious values on the perceptions of disability, discussed in the code 'impairment as a tragedy', is evident in the term 'blind', with biblical associations tied to notions of 'beggars' or 'pitiful'. Shaped by historical and religious factors, 'blind' retains negative connotations, particularly among older generations in Portuguese society. The use of 'invisual' emerged as an attempt to avoid these associations and prevent

offense, as one participant noted: '(…) the word invisual, I think, was invented precisely to distinguish the blind of today from the blind of antiquity. I think that was the objective.' [P2]. Yet, despite its link to ableist views rooted in moral judgment and outdated beliefs, participants generally preferred 'blind'. This may be because they choose to embrace 'blind' as part of their identity, or because many see the term 'invisual' as poorly constructed or, in their words, 'invisible'. This highlights the importance of consulting and respecting group preferences when introducing alternative disability terminologies.

In contrast, the 'language is secondary' code shows how most participants expressed that language and/or specific terminologies is not their primary concern. This code emerged notably during discussions prompted by questions addressing how disability-related language is interpreted and evaluated, and whether inclusive terminology can help combat ableism. Participants emphasized that language is constantly evolving, making debates over specific terms less relevant. What mattered more was usage, since any term can become derogatory: 'For example, 'special person' was once an inclusive term, but now it's frowned upon. Why? Not because people changed their perspective, but because that term began to be used as an insult.' [P10]. While many saw linguistic change as inevitable, others stressed that daily challenges of impairment make concerns over terminology secondary, highlighting the need for concrete actions to foster inclusion. Their narratives show that, although language has negative impacts and preferences exist for some, it is not yet seen as a priority, largely because institutional needs remain unmet. This underscores the deeper necessity of cultural and political shifts away from moral and medical models towards a social model, essential for addressing disability more effectively.

Effects of disability

In the theme 'effects of disability', three codes emerged: 'discrimination in society,' 'accessibility issues', and 'dealing with discrimination.' This theme analyzes the ways in which people with disabilities experience a society that disables them – whether through structural barriers, social attitudes, or institutional neglect. These codes were primarily shaped by responses to the question: *'Could you describe the type of disability you have and how it affects you (in daily life, in interactions with others, such as family, friends, or society)?'*.

The 'discrimination in society' code reveals various experiences of discrimination faced by people with disabilities. Participants discussed workplace ableism, particularly in job-seeking, as one reported:

> (…) whenever I went to an interview, I faced looks that said: 'No, we can't hire her because she's not capable' or 'What are you doing here?' That's when I started to understand that up until then, I had a relatively good experience in society, but now I had a disability, and I shouldn't forget that. [P8].

They also highlighted policy neglect, such as the failure of public television to provide mandated accessibility features, like dubbing of foreign languages for visually impaired individuals, especially during major news events like wars. Despite available technology, a lack of action continues to exclude individuals with disabilities from fully participating in media consumption. Attitudinal discrimination was also highlighted, where people without disabilities offer unsolicited help based on assumptions, often reinforcing ableist stereotypes. The narratives suggest that this type of 'help' tends to make them feel treated as passive recipients. Rather than asking for their preferences, people without disabilities project the kind of aid they believe they would want if they were people with disabilities themselves (Mogendorff 2016), wishing to do the 'good' (Dunn 2019). To this issue, P6 points out: '*Treat others as you would like to be treated, and this is completely wrong because we are all different. The idea should be: treat others as they would like to be treated, not as you would.*' Family and relational dynamics were also described as challenging, with feelings of invisibility and exclusion further exacerbated when others avoided engaging with them directly or spoke about them rather than to them, intensifying their social isolation. These issues reflect the prevailing difficulties of navigating society while being perceived and treated as 'less than' others. This underscores a pressing need for cultural change in how Portuguese society views disability, fostering a collective effort to ensure the full inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of society.

The code 'accessibility issues' became evident, as it exposes the architectural and physical barriers that participants report to encounter while navigating public spaces. These challenges stem from poor accessibility, including sidewalks obstructed by improperly placed garbage bins, uneven surfaces, and inconsistent signage, all of which complicate daily navigation. This is especially true for participants who are blind or use wheelchairs, as they are often forced into the roadway due to insufficient space or poor sidewalk accommodation. Here, a larger systemic problem in Portugal becomes obvious, where the built environment is not adequately designed to include people with disabilities. Despite existing laws promoting accessibility, public spaces remain largely inaccessible, limiting mobility and preventing full participation in everyday activities. The following is an example:

> (…) especially in Portugal things are not adapted, or most things are not adapted for people who move around in a wheelchair. So, I encounter some challenges in my day-to-day life, especially in older cities, which are sometimes difficult to overcome and only with the help of other people can I manage to enter restaurants and other establishments. [P10]

Related to all the above discussed, the code 'dealing with discrimination' identifies how people with disabilities attribute a significance of understanding how to deal with and/or respond to challenges that come with disability,

which shows that anticipating these circumstances is crucial for managing stress for themselves. Also, humor is said to be used as a tool to cope with their 'disability' and surroundings, as it helps normalize their impairment, makes social interactions more comfortable and serves as a means of educating others. It was possible to understand that participants often attribute the responsibility for navigating disability to themselves, feeling that they must find solutions rather than expecting society to change. Reflecting a belief that societal barriers are unlikely to disappear, leaving individuals with disabilities with no choice but to adapt. Coping with these circumstances emerges as a form of resilience, agency, and a desire for acceptance, in a world that remains largely unaccommodating:

> (…) when these behaviors happen every day in our lives, it's a bit like the issue with traffic. If I already know that this is going to happen, what makes more sense is to plan how I will respond when it does. This allows – this is essentially a tool that helps us act less emotionally and in a smarter way, as I was saying earlier, in a more rational way that creates fewer problems for ourselves and others, making day-to-day life more peaceful. [P6]

Combating disability

Finally, the following codes emerged: 'positive aspects of impairment', 'less discriminatory views on disability', and 'impact of technology' that underpin the identification of the 'combating disability' theme. This theme seeks to illustrate the various levels – individual, societal, and technological – at which disability, all the social impediments, are being mitigated. These codes primarily derived from participants' responses to questions aimed at eliciting their experience and perceptions of disability, exemplified by: 'What does disability mean to you? What does it represent?'

The 'positive aspects of impairment' code highlights that living with an impairment is not the tragedy that Portuguese culture and society often portray it to be. Impairment was said to have brought advantages or heightened abilities that others without it might not have. Despite the obstacles associated with impairment and disability, individuals often lead independent lives, cultivating a proactive attitude towards managing their impairment and confronting and overcoming a world that oftentimes does not conform to them. Elements of their discourse about 'disability' align with both the social model and the diversity model of disability, reflecting more contemporary frameworks. The following is an example: '*Everyone is different, everyone is the same, as the saying goes. So, I don't see disability as anything special, nothing serious, nothing to be set aside.*' [P2]

The code 'less discriminatory views on disability' highlights the positive shift in society's perception of disability. Although deeply rooted moral and medical models are still embedded in Portuguese culture, attitudes and

actions toward people with disabilities seem to have improved significantly compared to just a few years ago, when older generations with disabilities shared stories about often remaining hidden at home and even attracting negative attention and judgment by leaving the house. This change could be driven by the emergence of a new generation and evolving perspectives on disability, leading to a more social understanding: '*I believe that in younger cities, where there is youth, there is a new mentality*.' [P7]

The 'impact of technology' code emerged as a key aspect, underscoring the critical role that technological advancements play in the lives of people with disabilities. Technology is seen as something that facilitates and improves their routines, particularly through advancements in assistive technologies. These innovations were seen as significantly enhancing their independence, empowering them to engage more fully with the world. Reflecting a broader importance, as to invest in the technological realm. Technology, by bridging the gap between individuals and the built environment, helps mitigate some of the physical and social barriers that people with disabilities encounter. Even if the Portuguese culture is already slowly changing to a social view, as pointed in the previous code, the narratives express a desire for a society where not only the social challenges are solved but also a deeper need for an understanding of the individual experiences and challenges faced. Therefore, technology emerges as a tool that could bring us closer to a biopsychosocial view of disability, as a healthy integration of both disability and impairment for people with disabilities in Portuguese society. The following is an example:

> The part about computers, the internet, talking cell phones, etc. All of that has brought us many advantages. For example, with a computer, I can read a book, I can write, I can listen to music, I can go online and do research, etc., etc. The computer is a fundamental tool for us. Back in those days, none of that existed. [P2]

Discussion

As highlighted in the literature review, the dominant model of disability within a society significantly affects people with disabilities (Durham and Ramcharan 2018; Smart 2009), shaping public perceptions and societal responses (Smart 2009). The thematic code 'impairment as a tragedy' indicates that both the moral and medical models remain prevalent in Portuguese society. Historically, the Judeo-Christian moral framework portrayed disability as moral or spiritual failing, reinforcing pity and charity (Fontes 2016). By the nineteenth century, this perspective shifted toward medicalization, with institutions segregating people with disabilities and professionals assuming authority over their lives (Fontes 2016).

These models became embedded in everyday thinking and interactions (Guevara 2021), reinforcing the 'individual model' that locates disability within the body or psychology, sustaining stereotypes (Oliver 2009) and

depoliticizing disability (Shakespeare 1994; 2013b). By framing disability as a personal tragedy, systemic oppression and disablism are obscured (Campbell 2014), while accomplishments are ideologically cast as 'admirable', justifying rehabilitation or charity rather than dismantling barriers. This aligns with participants' accounts, which show persistent perceptions of incapacity among people without disabilities, often rooted in limited contact or knowledge. Crow (1996) notes that impairment is commonly seen as tragedy, generating fear and privileging medical solutions, undermining disability rights and ignoring social influences. Research confirms that knowledge and contact are decisive in shaping attitudes (Hong, Kwon, and Jeon 2014; Vuong and Palmer 2024; Wang et al. 2021), with greater exposure fostering acceptance and recognition of capabilities. Conversely, unfamiliarity sustains fear and negative stereotypes, compounded by outdated models (Driessen 2002; Mogendorff 2016; Shakespeare 1994).

This was evident in language, where ableist terms reflected contradictory views – pity and admiration – mirroring society's low expectations (Mogendorff 2016). The findings highlight the enduring influence of the individual model, framing disability as defect or cure, and reinforcing otherness while overlooking inherent value and strengths (Guevara 2021).

In this context, the findings related to the code 'negative internalization' suggest that such societal perceptions may lead individuals to internalize ableist expressions, particularly during vulnerable moments, resulting in diminished self-esteem and increased feelings of isolation. The results highlight how societal framing, which often views impairment as unattractive and undesirable (Oliver 2009), is shown to not only impact how others perceive people with disabilities but also how people with disabilities perceive themselves. They may internalize the 'personal tragedy' viewpoint of their existence (Harpur 2009; Oliver 2009), a process that can lead to the adoption of negative stereotypes and the erosion of self-worth and confidence (St. Pierre and Peers 2016), often reducing their lived experiences to one-dimensional stories of loss, overcoming and tragedy (Smart 2009). Scholars like Garland-Thomson (1999) have emphasized that, in response to these harmful narratives, there has been significant resistance focused on celebrating the strength, joy, and empowerment of living in a disabled body. This body of literature highlights the importance of shifting the discourse away from viewing disability as a personal tragedy and instead recognizing the value and agency of people with disabilities.

While this resistance exists, the findings related to the code 'euphemisms' reveal that blind and low vision participants prefer the term 'blind' to describe their impairment. These findings align with the pre-existing literature, as many blind and low vision individuals choose identity-first language (Bickford 2004; National Federation of the Blind 1993; Sharif, McCall, and Bolante 2022). This may represent an effort to reclaim the negative associations often linked

to the term 'blind', viewing it as a core aspect of one's identity and a source of pride (Andrews 2017; Forber-Pratt, Mueller, and Andrews 2019; Gill 1995; Sue and Sue 1999). Alternatively, it may also serve as a way to challenge euphemistic alternatives to 'blind', a stance likely rooted in identity-first language, as many participants equated the term 'invisual' with being 'invisible'. The discussion surrounding disability terminology underscores the critical need for research into the language preferences of individuals with disabilities, as current efforts remain insufficient (Grech, Koller, and Olley 2023; Oliver 1996).

Despite these findings – highlighting both the negative impact of ableist language on participants' self-perception and a preference for specific terminologies – participants generally do not consider language and terminology to be an immediate priority, as reflected in the code 'language is secondary.' This perspective can be understood within a broader context: mainstream views often attribute challenges solely to impairment, overlooking the social dimensions of disability (Crow 1996). In consequence, the findings presented in the analysis of the codes 'discrimination in society' and 'accessibility issues' highlight the pervasive challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in various facets of society. Critically, the perception that language is secondary must be analyzed not as a simple devaluation of linguistic efforts, but as a pragmatic prioritization response to acute, persistent structural disablism (Goodley 2014). The participants' focus on mitigating material and institutional barriers directly reflects the foundational tenet of the social model, which defines disability as the systematic disadvantage and restriction of activity imposed by a non-accommodating society (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation 1975). When fundamental requirements for safety, mobility, and economic participation remain critically unmet, the immediate political urgency is logically directed towards combating these material forms of structural oppression, thereby placing the struggle against systemic barriers above rhetorical consistency.

Through the 'discrimination in society' code, participants reported workplace ableism, including discriminatory attitudes in job interviews and employment, reinforcing exclusion. This aligns with research showing that, despite legal protections, people with disabilities continue to face high rates of employment discrimination, failures to accommodate, and unlawful discharges, contributing to lower labor force participation (McMahon and Shaw 2005). These findings underscore the need for inclusive recruitment and retention practices (Lindsay et al. 2023).

In Portugal, the disability rights framework has evolved significantly since the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2009, marking a formal commitment to equality in employment (Pinto 2018; United Nations n.d). Measures such as quota laws and targeted programs have improved employability: between

2015 and 2020, employment among people with disabilities rose by 7.6 percentage points (p.p.), surpassing growth among non-disabled peers (+5.4 p.p.), narrowing disparities until 2022 (Pinto et al. 2023). Yet integration difficulties remain, particularly for women with disabilities, whose unemployment rates are disproportionately high (+23.8%) (Pinto et al. 2023). Participants' accounts reveal persistent neglect in translating government agendas into effective policies, highlighting an 'implementation gap' between Portugal's formal commitments and lived realities (Fontes 2016; Pinto 2018). This gap reflects ableist assumptions embedded in state institutions, sustaining structural disablism (Goodley 2014). The contradiction is starkly illustrated by the continued legality of forced sterilization of people with disabilities, including minors (European Parliament 2023). Theoretically, this persistence can be analyzed through the lens of biopolitics (Foucault 1978). Forced sterilization represents a manifestation of 'biopower' – the state's regulatory control over bodies to manage population 'quality' and enforce normative standards of biological fitness. By legally sanctioning the control of disabled people's reproductive systems, the state reinforces the idea that some bodies are 'lesser' and should not be reproduced, effectively exercising a form of 'biopolitical' exclusion. This practice designates individuals with disabilities as passive subjects of state intervention rather than autonomous citizens, illustrating how ableism is not just an attitude but a structural mechanism of power that determines which lives and bodies are deemed worthy of full self-determination (Campbell 2009; Foucault 1978). Such practices violate fundamental rights to autonomy and personhood, exposing the persistence of institutionalized ableism. The coexistence of a rights-based framework with discriminatory legislation demonstrates profound political inertia, where formalized rights fail to displace entrenched cultural and institutional valorization of non-disabled life (Campbell 2014). Effective policy translation is thus obstructed by political unwillingness to dismantle these ideological foundations (Fontes 2016).

Attitudinal discrimination, another key theme, illustrates the unsolicited assistance offered by people without disabilities when interacting with people with disabilities, as noted by the participants. This reinforces ableist stereotypes and deprives people with disabilities of autonomy, as found in Mogendorff's (2016) and Dunn's (2019) work, which demonstrates a need for a cultural shift towards more respectful and individualized interactions that recognize and uphold the autonomy of people with disabilities. The analysis of 'accessibility issues' also highlights the physical barriers that people with disabilities regularly confront in navigating public spaces. Participants describe the infrastructural inadequacies that restrict their mobility and prevent full societal participation. These findings are consistent with the research of Kapsalis et al. (2022), which documents the detrimental effects of poorly designed urban environments on individuals using mobility aids. Similarly, other studies reveal that individuals with visual impairments encounter

significant obstacles due to a lack of accessible wayfinding solutions and inadequate information presentation, intensifying their isolation in public spaces (El-Taher et al. 2021; Park and Chowdhury 2018).

The findings of the code 'dealing with discrimination' show that people with disabilities recognize the importance of understanding how to handle these challenges, as this helps them manage stress responses. Additionally, it was found that individuals with disabilities use humor as a coping mechanism to manage stress and adapt to their conditions (Burkhead, Ebener, and Marini 1996; Umucu and Lee 2020). Disability humor can debunk stereotypes and enhance the well-being and quality of life for individuals with disabilities (Venkatesan 2022), and it serves as an advocacy tool, challenging exclusionary practices in education and policy, and shifting mainstream perspectives on disabled people (Anesi 2018). For instance, exposure to humorous media about disabilities can improve attitudes toward people with disabilities, making employers more likely to have positive perceptions and consider hiring them (Anesi 2018; Smedema, Ebener, and Grist-Gordon 2012). However, the complexities surrounding humor and disability require careful consideration, as it can empower people with disabilities to share their experiences and dismantle stereotypes, yet al.so risk demeaning them (Coogan and Mallett 2013; Venkatesan 2022).

Regarding the 'positive aspects of impairment' code, the results emphasize that living with disability can offer advantages not experienced by those without disabilities. This aligns with research suggesting that disability should not be automatically associated with suffering or negativity (Andrews et al. 2019; Dunn 2015; 2019). Additionally, certain conditions are associated with increased creativity or intellectual abilities, suggesting that disabilities can contribute valuable qualities to society. However, resources are often allocated in a generalized way to eliminate impairments, without considering the unique experiences and perspectives of those living with them (Crow 1996).

As for the results of the code 'less discriminatory views on disability', a positive shift in society's perception of disability was observed, with the possibility of being driven by younger generations challenging dated views in favor of more inclusive attitudes. The literature indicates that younger individuals tend to hold more positive attitudes (Domagała-Zyśk 2021; Goreczny et al. 2011; Yazbeck, Mcvilly, and Parmenter 2004), likely due to school initiatives and training programs that focus on reducing stereotypes, and, in contrast, the older generations often maintain more traditional beliefs, that can lead to negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities (Goreczny et al. 2011).

The 'impact of technology' highlights the transformative role of technological advancements in enhancing independence and quality of life for people with disabilities. Information Technology solutions such as speech recognition promote autonomy (Nikitchenko et al. 2021), while smart home technologies

improve participation and environmental control (Jamwal et al. 2022; Siegel and Dorner 2017). Quality of Life Technologies support both physical and cognitive functions (Kanade 2012), and Assistive Living Technologies foster perceived independence, empowerment, and security (Dam et al. 2023). Yet, despite these benefits, challenges of access and usability remain. As Agree (2014) emphasizes, affordability, user-friendliness, and accessibility are essential for realizing technology's full potential. Without addressing these barriers, disparities in access risk exacerbating existing inequalities in healthcare and social participation (Wise 2012).

Conclusion

This study has explored how ableism is embedded in language and affects the lived experiences of people with disabilities in Portuguese society. The findings reveal that ableist perceptions, rooted in the moral and medical models of disability, continue to dominate societal thinking, framing disability as a personal tragedy and reinforcing narratives of pity that burden individuals with the task of adapting to societal norms. This framing negatively impacts self-perception, sustaining views of disability as inherently undesirable. Yet, participants emphasized that accessibility and discrimination remain more pressing concerns than language reform, reflecting a broader cultural context where the social model of disability is underdeveloped and ableism continues to shape attitudes and interactions. Signs of progress, particularly among younger generations, are evident but insufficient to overcome deeply ingrained negative perceptions. Moreover, while assistive technologies hold transformative potential for independence and participation, challenges of affordability, usability, and access persist, risking the reinforcement of inequalities. Overall, the participants' experiences underscore the need for deeper cultural change that addresses both impairment-related challenges and the structural ableism embedded in Portuguese society. While demographic variation (e.g. age, gender, education level) did not produce significant divergence in thematic content, impairment type did influence certain responses – particularly in relation to identity and physical accessibility issues. Future research could benefit from a more targeted comparative analysis across disability types to further explore these nuances.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through the grant 2022.06211.PTDC and through national funds (UID/50/2025).

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