

The effect of disabled employees on consumer responses: the moderating role of AI

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aimed to examine how the interaction between AI and employees with disabilities positively influences consumer responses in terms of brand attitude, purchase intention and recommend intention through consumers' identification with all of humanity.

Design/methodology/approach – One survey and seven online experiments were conducted to test whether hiring individuals with disability (absent vs. present) and AI implication (absent vs. present) influence consumers' responses, including consumers' attitude toward the brand, purchase intention and intention to recommend. The data were analyzed using a series of *t*-tests, ANOVA and the PROCESS tool in SPSS.

Findings – Studies 1, 2a, 2b and 2c initially demonstrated that, across various contexts, consumers exhibit greater purchase intentions and higher recommendation intention for companies that employ disabled individuals. Study 3a, 3b and 3c revealed that both positive purchase intentions are mediated by consumers' perceived common human identity. Study 4 provided further evidence for its mediating role and indicated that it is moderated by the implication of AI. Specifically, when consumers encounter scenarios where employees with disabilities work alongside AI, they experience an amplified sense of common human identity, which, in turn, enhances positive consumer responses.

Practical implications – Integrating qualified persons with disabilities into customer service teams, in collaboration with AI-powered systems, can cultivate more favorable consumer attitudes and elicit positive behavioral responses toward the firm.

Originality/value – The authors bridge the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and AI literature in the consumer domain by drawing on the self-categorization theory.

Keywords Artificial intelligence, AI, Diversity equity inclusion (DEI), Common human identity, Disabled employee

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion (collectively known as DEI) have become pervasive in both public dialogues and scholarly discussions (Hassan *et al.*, 2025). Keeping the DEI framework in mind, people with disabilities [1] represent an important group whose needs cannot be ignored. They continue to face challenges in the labor market, such as fewer job opportunities, wage disparities (Beatty *et al.*, 2019), reflecting a serious situation that must be addressed at both corporate and societal levels. Both corporate and societal spheres are witnessing a leading transformative wave – artificial intelligence (AI) (Mo *et al.*, 2024; Zheng *et al.*, 2023). It offers businesses numerous advancements in recruitment and employee management (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2021), as well as enhanced capabilities in understanding customer behavior, prediction and engagement (Mo *et al.*, 2025). The use of AI in marketing is growing rapidly in service interactions (Hao *et al.*, 2025; Zhu *et al.*, 2025), raising DEI-related issues regarding AI. An extensive body of research has studied the positive influence of hiring disabled employees on the aspect of organizations' outcomes (Dwertmann *et al.*, 2023). However, there is limited discussion on the positive impact of disabled employees and AI regarding consumers' responses. It remains unclear whether and how AI might benefit



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disabled employees in the workplace, particularly in terms of consumers' responses (Dwertmann *et al.*, 2023). Investigating this question contributes to the intersectionality of DEI influence. Therefore, we identify and address this research gap by investigating the following question: Can disabled employees offer advantages to businesses from a consumer standpoint and how does AI affect this relationship?

We addressed this research question by examining consumers' "perception of common human identity," which is defined as profound care for all human beings, irrespective of their race, religion, nationality, or life status (McFarland *et al.*, 2012). This research proposes that consumers perceive a higher level of common human identity when they receive products or services from employees with disabilities (vs. without disabilities). This enhanced perception is associated with consumer positive responses, including heightened intentions to purchase, and increased likelihood of recommending the firm's products or services to others. Moreover, we predict that the collaboration between AI and employees with disabilities will strengthen the effects of employee disability on consumer responses.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Hiring disabled individuals and consumers' common human identity

Prior research highlighted that hiring individuals with disabilities is not only a facet of corporate social responsibility (CSR) but also positively affects an organization's reputation (Dwertmann *et al.*, 2023). It is revealed that recruitment of individuals with disabilities is positively related to profitability, competitive advantage and the inclusive workplace culture (Beatty *et al.*, 2019). However, the current literature has predominantly examined the pros and cons of employing individuals with disabilities from an organizational perspective (Dwertmann *et al.*, 2023). Consideration of this matter from the viewpoint of consumers remains notably scarce and our research aims to investigate its impact on consumers' perceptions and responses.

Recruiting individuals with disabilities can be viewed as an embodiment of human integration and collective support within a community (Brieger, 2019), which might activate consumers' perception of a common human identity. The concept of identifying with all humanity, also referred to as common human identity, reflects a sense of belonging to a single human family regardless of race, religion, age, gender, social status and physical conditions (Carlson *et al.*, 2025). This idea is rooted in the social identity, which explains the psychological processes that lead individuals to see themselves as members of a group (i.e. through self-categorization), influencing their thoughts and actions as part of that group (Turner and Reynolds, 2011). Fundamentally, individuals gain a significant part of their identity from their connections to social groups and can define themselves at various levels of social inclusiveness (Hassan *et al.*, 2025). The common human identity originates from the social categorization approach to intergroup behavior (Brieger, 2019). From this perspective, cooperative intergroup interaction among groups can reduce bias by altering members' representations of the memberships from "us" and "them" to a more inclusive "we" (Carlson *et al.*, 2025).

Despite the emphasis on the importance of creating a diverse and inclusive society, there are visible (such as limb damage requiring prosthetics or wheelchairs) and invisible (such as hearing and speech impairments) differences between people with disabilities and those without (Hein and Ansari, 2022). A scenario where individuals with disabilities and those without disabilities work together, in which they gain comparable roles and earn similar salaries in their workplace, effectively disrupts the traditional stereotypical boundaries that separate people with disabilities from those without (Hassan *et al.*, 2025). Such an inclusive work environment enhances the perception among consumers of a common human identity.

According to the social identity theory (Brown, 2000), individuals who align themselves with a group tend to adopt behaviors that favor that group. When this concept is applied to the largest possible group, humanity itself, those who deeply associate with the entire human race,

view every person as a significant and equal member of this “humanity” in-group. As a result, behaviors evolve from prioritizing limited, local interests to promoting unity and concern for all humans (Hassan *et al.*, 2025). Put differently, when consumers recognize their belonging to a common human identity, they start to see themselves as part of this all-human group (Carlson *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, they tend to view service or product providers who are also members of this human community more favorably. This perception often leads to more positive evaluations and a greater likelihood of proactive purchasing behavior from these consumers (Turner and Reynolds, 2011). Therefore, we proposed the following hypotheses:

- H1. Hiring individuals with disabilities is positively associated with consumer responses, such that consumers are more willing to purchase and recommend the services or products provided by the firm.
- H2. Consumers’ perception of common human identity mediates the effect of employing people with disabilities on customers’ willingness to purchase and a higher likelihood of recommending the services or products of the firm.

AI as a moderator of hiring individuals with disabilities – Consumers’ common human identity

AI technologies develop exponentially and have transformed business and even workplace interactions (Mo *et al.*, 2025). For instance, AI systems have been applied during diverse recruitment processes, including screening curriculum vitae, sorting applications and examining employments. Although AI acquires high level of efficiency and accuracy, there still are various forms of AI bias during recruitment procedure such as measurement bias whereas a discriminatory performance metric is used in the AI training data to select potential optimal workforce or representation bias whereas AI hiring systems collect over- or under-representative sample data from the fields (e.g. retrieving male-dominant data patterns and neglecting the female candidates) and incorrectly evaluate the capabilities of certain groups of people. Actually, integrating AI into the recruitment of employees not only affects employees’ trust but also has a consequential influence on consumers’ trust (Ara and Ahmad, 2025). In addition, the trust in the AI HR system would be positively related to the perceived usefulness of AI (Revillod, 2025). In this way, would AI systems amplify fairness or weaken the DEI development? Our research attempts to answer this question and examines whether applying AI would affect consumers’ response to hiring disabled employees.

The advent of AI highlighted its distinction from humans, as AI is a data algorithm-based intelligent entity without vital signs (Mo *et al.*, 2025), while all people, disabled or not, from any part of the world, belong to the human group. When AI enters workplaces, assisting in service and product provision, it activates the commonalities within the human group (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2021) by minimizing the distinctions among diverse groups in the same workplace. For instance, AI compensates for the mobility and communication challenges faced by people with disabilities, thereby enhancing their professional skills and then disabled employees can collaborate with nondisabled colleagues better (Sugiyama *et al.*, 2023). As such, AI application enhances consumers’ perception of common human identity.

Additionally, disabled employees’ efforts were influenced by the use of AI in the workplace (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2021). In other words, AI helps bridge the gap in physical and communicative abilities, spotlighting the professional capabilities of disabled individuals, which are comparable to their nondisabled counterparts. This, in turn, leads to higher company ratings, increased product purchasing tendencies and a greater likelihood of recommending the company and its products to other potential consumers in general. In summary, AI plays a potential role in moderating consumers’ responses to companies employing disabled individuals. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

- H3. AI implication moderates the positive link between hiring disabled individuals and consumers' common human identity, such that it becomes stronger when AI implication is present.

Research design

We have conducted eight studies to examine our propositions. The primary objective of Study 1 was to investigate whether consumers' brand attitudes and intentions to purchase products change when companies hire employees with disabilities in an actual market setting. In Study 1, we specifically examine participants' attitudes toward Jinmailang and Baixiang, two notable instant noodle brands, ranked third and fourth, respectively, in the Chinese instant noodle market (Sun, 2023). Study 2 aimed to evaluate the impact of employing disabled workers on consumer responses through three distinct online experiments. These experiments verified the internal validity by spanning various industries, including a coffee shop (Study 2a), an online business (Study 2b) and a clothing design company (Study 2c). Study 3 tested the mediating role of common human identity in various contexts, including a restaurant (Study 3a), a hotel (Study 3b) and a museum (Study 3c). Moreover, Study 3a considered alternative explanations such as empathy and consumers' anticipated CSR. Previous research suggests that consumers often attribute higher corporate reputation to businesses that demonstrate social responsibility (Dwertmann *et al.*, 2023) and subsequently engage in behaviors beneficial to the company, such as showing increased purchase intention (Dwertmann *et al.*, 2023). Potentially, consumers encountering a service scenario involving servers with physical disabilities may experience heightened empathy and perceive the company as exhibiting significant CSR. Studies 3b and 3c depicted the scenarios where AI is collaborating with employees. In Study 4, we tested the mechanism behind the moderating effect of AI implication on consumers' common human identity, which in turn influences consumer response.

Methods and results

Study 1: whether a company's decision to hire employees with disabilities influences consumer response

Methodology. Study 1 involved a randomized online survey conducted with a national sample of 150 adults on Credamo.com, a professional online survey platform with nearly 50 million users in China. The survey comprised two stages. Initially, the professional survey company would recruit 50 participants randomly (58% female, 20–29-year range median age). The participants were exposed to the two instant noodle brands: Jinmailang and Baixiang, which are ranked third and fourth in the Chinese instant noodle market (Sun, 2023) (see Appendix A for all experimental materials). Subsequently, participants reported their familiarity (Weijters *et al.*, 2013) with and attitudes toward each brand, as well as their potential purchase intentions (Kalwani and Silk, 1982). Each of these assessments was conducted using single-item, 5-point scales that were adapted from prior studies.

In the second stage, 100 additional participants were selected randomly from a pool of individuals who had not participated in the first period (62% female, median age range of 20–29 years). These participants were subsequently assigned to two groups: Jinmailang and Baixiang. We first asked the participants to report their familiarity with either of the brands. Then we chose news items from March 2022 concerning these two brands. In Jinmailang's March 2022 coverage, there was a report announcing the company's plan to unveil a new product line. Additionally, in news from the same period, it was reported that one-third of Baixiang's internal staff comprised individuals with disabilities. Following the presentation of Jinmailang's news to the Jinmailang Group participants and Baixiang's news to the Baixiang Group participants, we then requested these participants to provide feedback on their

familiarity with the brand, their brand attitude, their purchase intention and they also report their willingness to recommend the brand to others (Finn *et al.*, 2009) (Appendix B1).

Results. We first analyzed the participants' general sentiment toward the two instant noodle brands using paired-sample *T*-tests. Essentially, we compared how people perceived the brands Jinmailang and Baixiang in terms of familiarity, brand attitude, and purchase intention (Appendix B1). The participants reported similar familiarity ($M_j = 4.46$, $SD_j = 0.54$; $M_b = 4.56$, $SD_b = 0.50$, Cohen's $d = -0.19$, $t_{(49)} = -1.53$, $p = 0.13$), brand attitude ($M_j = 4.21$, $SD_j = 0.54$; $M_b = 4.37$, $SD_b = 0.59$, Cohen's $d = -0.42$, $t_{(49)} = -1.46$, $p = 0.15$) and purchase intention ($M_j = 4.22$, $SD_j = 0.93$; $M_b = 4.34$, $SD_b = 0.77$, Cohen's $d = -0.21$, $t_{(49)} = -0.72$, $p = 0.47$) toward the two brands. The findings indicate that both brands possess comparable reputations and marketing performance among consumers. Further, they seem to have achieved similar levels of brand recognition, favorability and purchase intention. This suggests a relatively balanced competitive landscape in this market segment, which provided the basis for analysis in the second stage.

In the second stage, the results showed that the two groups of participants still have equivalent familiarity with the two brands ($M_j = 4.44$, $SD_j = 0.54$; $M_b = 4.58$, $SD_b = 0.58$, Cohen's $d = -0.32$, $t_{(98)} = -1.62$, $p = 0.21$). Then we analyzed the participants' brand attitude toward the two brands after being presented with the specified real news, which was released around one and a half years ago, that society may already have forgotten about it after such a long time (Shapiro and Rogers, 2017). The results showed that the participants in the Baixiang group reported better brand attitude ($M_j = 3.96$, $SD_j = 0.51$; $M_b = 4.37$, $SD_b = 0.43$, Cohen's $d = -0.87$, $t_{(98)} = -4.34$, $p < 0.001$), purchase intention ($M_j = 4.24$, $SD_j = 0.77$; $M_b = 4.54$, $SD_b = 0.54$, Cohen's $d = -0.45$, $t_{(98)} = -3.14$, $p < 0.05$) and intention to recommend ($M_j = 3.90$, $SD_j = 0.54$; $M_b = 4.52$, $SD_b = 0.54$, Cohen's $d = -0.90$, $t_{(98)} = -4.47$, $p < 0.001$) as compared to those in the Jinmailang group, supporting H1.

Study 2: Will the effect of a company hiring employees with disabilities be verified across industries?

Methodology (study 2a). We employed a one-factor (hiring individuals with disability: absent vs. present) between-subject design. The sample consisted of 101 [2] participants (67.3% female, 20–29-year-old median age) from China recruited via Credamo.com. The participants were randomly assigned to either condition by the survey platform Credamo.com company.

First, the participants were randomly allocated to one of two scenarios. In these scenarios, it was presumed that the participants were visiting a coffee shop with the intent of buying coffee. They were presented with a description of the coffee shop, accompanied by both an image and a paragraph. The key difference in the scenarios was the portrayal of the baristas: in one version, the baristas were depicted as not using wheelchairs, while in the other, they were shown using wheelchairs. Following this material, the participants were asked to evaluate their awareness of disabled employees' involvement in the coffee shop as a check to ensure that the manipulation was noticed. Additionally, they were requested to express their attitudes toward the coffee shop and to rate their likelihood of both initial purchase and recommendation intention.

For evaluating attitudes toward the coffee shop's brand, we utilized and modified the three-item scale from He *et al.* (2016) ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.40$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$). We also asked the participants to rate their purchase intention and recommend intention with the same scale used in Study 1 (Appendix B1).

Results (study 2a). The participants allocated to the "hiring disabled individuals" condition showed greater awareness of the disability of the employee compared to their counterparts ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.80$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.63$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.22$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.58$, Cohen's $d = 5.91$, $t_{(99)} = -29.61$, $p < 0.001$), indicating successful manipulation.

We analyzed the participants' responses toward the coffee shop after being presented with the corresponding scenarios. The results showed that participants in the condition of hiring individuals with disability reported better attitude ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.49$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.30$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.28$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.47$, Cohen's $d = 0.53$, $t_{(99)} = -2.69$, $p < 0.01$), purchase intention ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.22$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.64$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 3.72$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.03$, Cohen's $d = 0.58$, $t_{(99)} = -2.91$, $p < 0.01$), and recommend intention ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.35$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.71$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.07$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.74$, Cohen's $d = 0.38$, $t_{(99)} = -2.02$, $p < 0.05$) as compared to those in "without hiring disabled individuals" condition. Therefore, H1 was supported.

Methodology (study 2b). This study also utilized a single-factor, between-subject design, focusing on the variable of hiring disabled individuals (absent vs. present). Study 2b specifically explored this context within an online business environment that specializes in selling electronics. The sample consisted of 97 [3] participants from China (59.8% female, 20–29-year-old median age) who were recruited via Credamo.com. The participants were randomly assigned to either condition.

The process followed in Study 2b was similar to that in Study 2a, except for the stimuli materials. In Study 2b, we asked the participants to imagine that they had to purchase a new laptop through an online shop and have a conversation with the online server. In the condition of "hiring disabled individuals," the server was described as hearing-impaired and having 5 years of experience in digital sales. In the counter condition, the server was simply introduced as having 5 years of experience in digital sales. Following this exposure, the participants were asked to evaluate their awareness of disabled employees' involvement in the service as a check to ensure that the manipulation was effective. Additionally, they were requested to express their attitudes toward the online shop and rate their purchase intention and recommend intention with the same scales used in previous studies (Appendix B1).

Results (study 2b). The participants allocated to the "hiring disabled individuals" condition showed greater awareness of the disability of the employee compared to their counterparts ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.54$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.58$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 2.90$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.29$, Cohen's $d = -1.64$, $t_{(95)} = -8.03$, $p < 0.001$), indicating successful manipulation.

We analyzed the participants' responses toward the online shop after being presented with the corresponding scenarios. The results showed that the participants in the "hiring disabled individuals" condition reported better attitude ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.51$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.33$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.22$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.52$, Cohen's $d = -0.67$, $t_{(95)} = -3.27$, $p < 0.01$) and recommend intention ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.40$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.58$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.04$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.87$, Cohen's $d = -1.64$, $t_{(95)} = -2.65$, $p < 0.05$) as compared to those in the "without hiring disabled individuals" condition, supporting Hypothesis 1a and 1c. However, the two groups demonstrated similar levels of purchase intention ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.40$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.57$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.31$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.68$, Cohen's $d = -0.14$, $t_{(95)} = -0.70$, $p = 0.47$).

Methodology (study 2c). A single-factor design was again employed, focusing on the variable of hiring disabled individuals (absent vs. present), within the context of the clothing design industry. This study involved a sample of 100 [4] participants, all of whom were recruited through Credamo.com in China. These participants were randomly allocated to one of the two conditions. Demographically, the median age of the participants was within the 20–29-year age range, and 65% of them were female.

The process followed in Study 2c is similar to that of Studies 2a and 2b, except for the stimuli materials. We asked the participants to imagine that they encountered a cloth brand whose designer uses/does not use a wheelchair. After being exposed to the stimuli, the participants were directed to report their awareness of the employees' physical disability

condition, their attitude toward the brand, purchase intention and recommend intention, with the same measurements used in Studies 1, 2a and 2c ([Appendix B1](#)).

Results (study 2c). The participants allocated to the “hiring disabled individuals” showed greater awareness of the disability of the employee ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.34$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.75$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.96$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.16$, Cohen’s $d = -2.48$, $t_{(98)} = -12.31$, $p < 0.001$), indicating successful manipulation.

We analyzed the participants’ responses toward the cloth brand after being presented with the corresponding scenarios. The results showed that participants in the “hiring disabled individuals” condition reported better attitude ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.42$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.33$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.24$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.38$, Cohen’s $d = -0.51$, $t_{(98)} = -2.54$, $p < 0.05$), and recommend intention ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.20$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.64$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 3.84$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.93$, Cohen’s $d = 0.45$, $t_{(98)} = -2.25$, $p < 0.05$) as compared to those in “without hiring disabled individuals” condition, supporting [Hypothesis 1a](#) and [1c](#). However, the two groups demonstrated similar levels of purchase intention ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.26$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.66$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.16$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.71$, Cohen’s $d = -0.14$, $t_{(98)} = -0.73$, $p = 0.47$).

Study 3: Mediating role of consumers’ common human identity

Methodology (study 3a). We recruited 100 [\[5\]](#) Chinese participants via [Credamo.com](#), with all the participants passing the attention check. The median age fell in the 30–39-year age range, 57% of whom were female.

The study had a two-condition between-subject design: (1) a “without hiring disabled individuals” and (2) a “hiring disabled individuals” condition. The process followed was quite similar to that used in Study 2a, 2b, and 2c, in which, we first instructed the participants to read a scenario and imagine being part of it. In the scenario, they were visiting a restaurant to have dinner. A server welcomed them to the restaurant and helped. We then presented to them the stimulus with either a physically normal server or a server with hearing impairment. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions.

As the scenarios described that consumers have already received service in the restaurant, we measured to what extent they would like to repurchase from this restaurant. Consumer attitudes toward the restaurant ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.70$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$), as well as their intention to purchase and recommend, were assessed using the same scale employed in earlier studies. Additionally, the participants were asked about their perception of common human identity. This was measured through a single item on a 5-point Likert scale, with the statement, “This restaurant gives me a sense of humanity as a united community,” derived and adapted from previous studies ([McFarland et al., 2012](#)). On this scale, 1 represents “Not Agree At All” and 5 represents “Totally Agree.” We measured consumers’ empathy with a one-item scale derived and adapted from a study ([Konrath et al., 2018](#)), and consumers’ perceived CSR with a one-item scale derived and adapted from a study by [Brammer et al. \(2007\)](#) ([Appendix B1](#)).

Results (study 3a). An independent *T*-test conducted on the variable of employee physical condition showed significant differences in participants’ awareness of the employees’ disability status between the two groups ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.27$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.54$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.93$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.15$, Cohen’s $d = -2.58$, $t_{(98)} = -12.77$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, the manipulation of employee physical condition is successful.

We analyzed the participants’ responses to the restaurant after being presented with the corresponding scenarios. The results showed that participants in the condition of hiring disabled individuals reported better attitude ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.67$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.33$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.03$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.82$,

Cohen's $d = -1.03$, $t_{(98)} = -5.11$, $p < 0.001$), purchase intention ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.46$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.50$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.04$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.99$, Cohen's $d = -0.54$, $t_{(98)} = -2.67$, $p < 0.01$) and recommend intention ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.24$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.72$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 3.66$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.00$, Cohen's $d = -0.67$, $t_{(98)} = -3.33$, $p < 0.001$) as compared to those without hiring disabled individuals, thus supporting H1.

We conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS macro with 5,000 resamples. The model used hiring disabled individuals (absent = 0, present = 1) as the independent variable, consumers' common human identity as the mediator, and consumer response (attitude toward the restaurant, purchase intention and recommend intention) as the dependent variables. The results for the indirect effects revealed that the difference in responses for the restaurant hiring disabled individuals and those without was mediated by consumers' common human identity (attitude: $b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI = [0.133, 0.606]; purchase intention: $b = 0.44$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI = [0.203, 0.725]; recommend intention: $b = 0.44$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI = [0.203, 0.725]), such that the consumers facing disabled employees had stronger sense of common human identity, resulting in more positive consumers responses.

Further, when we conducted mediation analysis with consumers' common human identity, empathy and perceived CSR as the parallel mediators, only consumers' common human identity could explain the effect of restaurant hiring disabled individuals (D1: $b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI = [0.078, 0.676]; D2: $b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.026, 0.174]; D3: $b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI = [-0.005, 0.247]).

Methodology (study 3b). We conducted a 2 (hiring disabled individuals: absent vs. present) $\times$ 2 (AI implication: absent vs. present) between-subject experiment in a hotel context. We recruited 240 [6] participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 30.02$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.56$ years; 77.5% female) from Credamo.com. The participants were asked to envision themselves entering a hotel with luggage and encountering a receptionist. In the "hiring disabled individuals" condition, the receptionist sits in a wheelchair to greet guests. While in the condition of "without hiring disabled individuals", the receptionist is without any disability and stands to welcome guests. In the group of "AI implication present," a service robot guides guests to the storeroom to store their luggage. But in the group of "AI implication absent," the human receptionist guides guests to the storeroom to store their luggage. Afterward, participants rated the purchase intention ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.03$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.82) and recommend intention ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.28$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.86; Lee et al., 2008), consumers' common human identity ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 0.74$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.75; McFarland et al., 2012), consumer attitude ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 0.85$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.86; Hagtveldt and Patrick, 2008) and perceived service quality ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 0.82$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.74 ; Tsaur and Lin, 2004) (Appendix B2).

Results (study 3b). The experimental manipulations were successful. Participants significantly perceive hotel employees' disability status ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 6.47$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.75$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.42$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.86$, Cohen's $d = -0.90$, Cohen's $d = 6.24$, $t_{(238)} = -48.16$, $p < 0.001$) and the application of AI ($M_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 6.60$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 0.78$; $M_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 2.75$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 1.61$, Cohen's $d = -3.06$, $t_{(238)} = -23.62$, $p < 0.001$).

Participants have higher purchase intention when AI is involved in service provision ($M_{\text{AI}} = 5.88$, $SD_{\text{AI}} = 0.66$) than when AI was not present ($M_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 5.60$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 0.64$, Cohen's $d = -0.40$, $t_{(238)} = -3.10$, $p < 0.05$), and when hiring individuals with disabilities ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 5.78$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.72$) than those without ($M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 5.41$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.98$, Cohen's $d = -0.43$, $t_{(238)} = -3.32$, $p < 0.001$).

We applied bootstrapping method model 4 to test the mediating effect of consumers' common human identity on the relationship between hiring disabled individuals and consumer purchase intention (index of mediation included zero: $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.05$, $90\%CI = [0.010, 0.199]$) and recommendation intention (index of mediation included zero: $b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.07$, $90\%CI = [0.010, 0.251]$) and supporting [hypothesis 2](#).

Methodology (study 3c). We applied a new museum context and conducted a 2 (hiring disabled individuals: absent vs. present) $\times$ 2 (AI implication: absent vs. present) between-subject experiment. We recruited 240 [7] participants ($M_{age} = 31.20$ years, $SD_{age} = 7.49$ years; 74.6% female) from [Credamo.com](#). The participants were asked to imagine themselves visiting a museum and meeting an assistant who greets guests and distributes brochures. In the "hiring disabled individuals" condition, the assistant' uniform shows that "I am a person with hearing impairment (Deaf), if you need assistance, please press the button on the table. I am glad to help." on his uniform. While in the "without hiring disabled individuals" condition, the assistant is without any disability and wears the normal uniform. In the group with "AI implication present", the assistant wears an AI multilingual translation device. In the group of "AI implication absent", the assistant did not wear any AI device. Afterward, participants rated the purchase intention ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 0.71$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$) and recommend intention ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 0.92$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$; [Lee et al., 2008](#)), consumers' common human identity ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 0.81$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$; [McFarland et al., 2012](#)), consumer attitude ($M = 6.16$, $SD = 0.61$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$; [Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2008](#)), and perceived service quality ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 0.65$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.54$; [Tsaur and Lin, 2004](#); [Appendix B2](#)).

Results (study 3c). The experimental manipulations were successful. It showed that participants significantly perceive different status of employees' disability ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 6.58$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.89$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.66$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.94$, Cohen's $d = -5.37$, $t_{(238)} = -41.51$, $p < 0.001$) and the AI implication ($M_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 5.98$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 1.40$; $M_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 4.43$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 1.92$, Cohen's $d = -0.92$, $t_{(238)} = -7.17$, $p < 0.001$).

Participants have a higher intention to recommend when AI is involved in service provision ($M_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 5.50$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 0.92$) than when AI was not ($M_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 5.23$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 1.06$, Cohen's $d = -0.27$, $t_{(238)} = -2.11$, $p < 0.05$), and when hiring individuals with disability ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 5.94$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.66$) than those without ($M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 5.51$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.84$, Cohen's $d = 0.56$, $t_{(238)} = -4.39$, $p < 0.001$).

The results of bootstrapping model 4 revealed that mediation role of consumers' common human identity was established when the dependent variable was consumers' purchase intention (index of mediation did not include zero: $b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $95\% CI = [0.006, 0.125]$) and recommend intention (index of mediation did not include zero: $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $95\% CI = [0.008, 0.156]$), thus supporting our [hypothesis 2](#).

Study 4: Whether AI moderates consumer behavior

Methodology. This study involved a 2×2 between-subject experimental design in a restaurant context, with two variables: hiring disabled individuals (absent vs. present) and the AI implication (absent vs. present). This setup resulted in four distinct groups. We recruited 200 [8] participants from [Credamo.com](#). The participants were instructed to envision themselves dining in a restaurant. Those in the "AI implication absent" condition were shown an image depicting a typical interior view of a restaurant without any AI elements. Conversely, the participants in the "AI implication present" condition viewed a similar interior scene of the restaurant, but this time, AI robot servers were included to represent the presence of AI technology in the dining experience. The two scenarios were also different in terms of ordering and delivery. In the group with AI presence, the orange juice was served by an AI robot. In contrast, in the group without AI presence, the orange juice was delivered traditionally by a

human waiter. In the “hiring disabled individuals” condition, certain servers had a sign on the back of their uniforms stating: “Hello, I am hearing-impaired. If you require my assistance, please gently pat me on the back.” Additionally, the bartender at the restaurant’s bar was shown as using a wheelchair. In contrast, in the “without hiring disabled individuals” condition, all the servers were persons without any disability. Consumer attitudes toward the restaurant ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.60$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.85$), their intention to purchase and recommend, consumers’ common human identity, empathy, as well as their perceived CSR were assessed using the same scale employed in Study 3.

Results. The manipulations were successful. Participants’ awareness of the employees’ disability status ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.84$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.44$; $M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 1.32$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.74$, Cohen’s $d = -5.31$, $t_{(198)} = -40.94$, $p < 0.001$) and AI implication status ($M_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 4.79$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 0.43$; $M_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 1.53$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 1.00$, Cohen’s $d = -3.87$, $t_{(198)} = -29.92$, $p < 0.001$) are significant.

We conducted a 2 (hiring disabled individuals: absent vs. present) $\times$ 2 (AI implication: absent vs. present) ANOVA on consumers’ common human identity, which showed a marginally significant interaction between hiring disabled individuals and AI implication ($F(1, 196) = 1.62$, $p = 0.10$). Participants were significantly more likely to perceive common human identity when AI was involved in service provision ($M_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 4.2$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication present}} = 0.88$) than when AI was not ($M_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 1.53$, $SD_{\text{AI Implication absent}} = 1.00$, Cohen’s $d = -0.41$, $t_{(198)} = -3.16$, $p < 0.01$), and when hiring disabled individuals ($M_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 4.52$, $SD_{\text{hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.60$) than those without ($M_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 3.46$, $SD_{\text{without hiring disabled individuals}} = 0.97$, Cohen’s $d = -1.21$, $t_{(198)} = -9.33$, $p < 0.001$) (see Figure 2).

We tested the underlying process. Figure 1 proposes a case of moderated mediation, focusing on whether AI implication moderates the effect of hiring individuals with disabilities on consumers’ common human identity, which, in turn, affects consumer response to the firm. Using the bootstrapping method, we found that the indirect effect of employees with disability on consumer attitude via consumers’ common human identity was enhanced when AI was a component of service provision ($b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% $CI = [0.169, 0.489]$) versus without AI interaction ($b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% $CI = [0.104, 0.341]$), indicating the mediating role of consumers’ common human identity. The confidence interval for the index of moderated mediation did not include zero ($b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% $CI = [0.005, 0.253]$), indicating the moderating role of AI implication status, thus supporting H3. The moderated mediation effect was also established when the dependent variable was consumers’ purchase intention (index of moderated mediation did not include zero: $b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% $CI = [0.006, 0.259]$), but it was not supported when the dependent variable was recommendation intention (index of moderated mediation included zero: $b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% $CI = [-0.002, 0.253]$). See summarized findings in Table 1 (see Appendix C for ethical declarations for all studies).

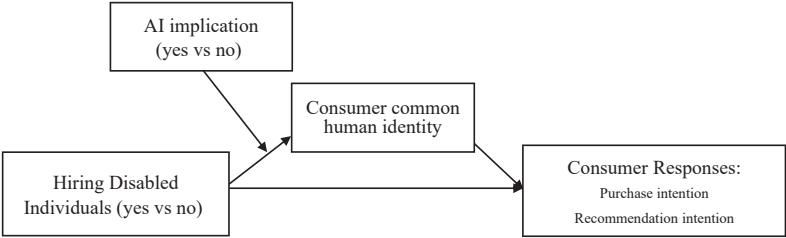


Figure 1. Conceptual framework. Source: Authors’ own work

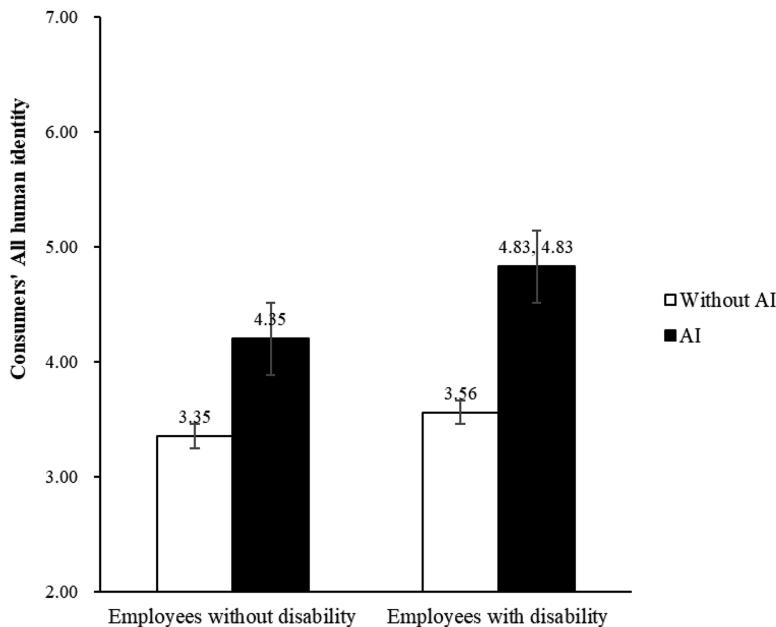


Figure 2. Moderating effect of AI implication in study 4. Source: Authors' own work

General discussion

Theoretical contributions

Our research demonstrates that hiring individuals with disabilities can lead to positive responses from consumers. This is a crucial finding for addressing the apprehensions of employers who are hesitant to hire disabled individuals due to perceived negative consumer attitudes. We observed that customer interactions with employees who have disabilities are associated with more favorable views toward the brand, such as better brand attitude, increased willingness to purchase, and a greater likelihood of recommending the brand or product. Additionally, our research tests propositions in scenarios across various industries and thus supports and extends previous findings with concrete customer-focused data. This study investigates the integration of individuals with disabilities into the workforce, echoing calls from the academic area and governments to discuss and explore how DEI can be effectively implemented in the workplace.

Our research findings also reveal that when consumers receive services from or purchase products made by individuals with disabilities, it strengthens their sense of a common human identity. This enhanced perception leads to more positive reactions toward the company. Consequently, our research identifies a specific mechanism through which the employment of people with disabilities can contribute to favorable corporate outcomes. Drawing from self-categorization theory and social identity theory (Brown, 2000; Carlson *et al.*, 2025; Turner and Reynolds, 2011), we understand that consumers may view receiving services from a person with a disability as an indication of the company's commitment to inclusion. This, in turn, fosters a sense of belonging that encompasses individuals in various conditions as part of their own group.

Our study enriches the domain of ethical research by exploring how disability stigmatization interacts with AI's involvement in the processes of DEI. Prior research has highlighted organizational concerns and, through qualitative analysis, suggested that employing individuals with disabilities could create challenges for both disabled and nondisabled

Table 1. Summary of studies and findings

	Study 1	Study 2a	Study 2b	Study 2c	Study 3a	Study 3b	Study 3c	Study 4
<i>N</i>	100	101	97	100	100	240	240	200
Context	Survey for brands in the field	Coffee shop	Online business	Cloth design	Restaurant	Hotel	Museum	Restaurant
Study design	Survey	one-factor (hiring individuals with disability: absent vs. present) between-subject design	a single-factor, between-subject design, focusing on the variable of hiring disabled individuals (absent vs. present)	a single-factor design was again employed, focusing on the variable of hiring disabled individuals (absent vs. present)	a single-factor design was again employed, focusing on the variable of hiring disabled individuals (absent vs. present)	2 (hiring disabled individuals: absent vs. present) $\times$ 2 (AI implication: absent vs. present) between-subject experiment	2 (hiring disabled individuals: absent vs. present) $\times$ 2 (AI implication: absent vs. present) between-subject experiment	2 $\times$ 2 between-subject experimental design, with two variables: hiring disabled individuals (absent vs. present) and the AI implication (absent vs. present)
IV	Attitude; Purchase intention; Recommendation intention	Purchase intention; Recommendation intention	Purchase intention; Recommendation intention	Purchase intention; Recommendation intention	Purchase intention; Recommendation intention	Purchase intention; Recommendation intention	Purchase intention; Recommendation intention	Purchase intention; Recommendation intention
Mediator	—	—	—	—	Common human identity	Common human identity	Common human identity	Common human identity
Moderator	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	AI application
Findings	H1 supported	H1 supported	H1 supported	H1 supported	H2 supported	H2 supported	H2 supported	H3 supported
Source(s): Authors' own work								

employees in adapting to the working environment (Choudhury Kaul *et al.*, 2022). Our research reveals that the aforementioned challenges could potentially be resolved. Firstly, the acceptance of people with disabilities in society is broadly recognized among consumer groups. Secondly, when AI is integrated into the workplace, the distinctions of consumers' response between employees with disabilities and their nondisabled counterparts become more pronounced due to the human–computer differences introduced by AI. This dynamic provides an opportunity for employees with disabilities to be treated more fairly and objectively at work.

Practical implications

Our study underscores the vital role of AI in promoting DEI development, revealing that as AI becomes more embedded in social activities, it leads to greater support for disabled employees in the workplace. The results show that consumers perceive a higher common human identity from firms that hired disabled employees, leading to a higher likelihood of purchasing and recommending. As positive consumer responses might enhance the company's ability to achieve better financial performance (Dwertmann *et al.*, 2023), our research recommends that organizations promote DEI. According to prior research, there are actionable approaches to develop DEI. From the macro level, the organizations shall include DEI goals in strategic planning and make DEI a core value associated with a company's strategic vision. From the micro level, organizations are encouraged to provide a DEI training program for managers to enhance their leadership styles (Hein and Ansari, 2022) and offer training for all employees to develop knowledge for better collaboration with disabled employees (Sugiyama *et al.*, 2023). In addition, organizations could reconsider the work performance metrics that hinge upon long and lengthy working hours (Jefferies *et al.*, 2022) and ensure fair wages, treatment and opportunities for disabled employees. Managers could also launch grants for workplace adaptation (e.g., modified equipment) and technical aid (e.g. scientific job restructuring, personal assistance) for disabled employees to foster organization's DEI.

Secondly, our research reveals that the AI integration in workplaces with disabled employees has positive impacts for both employees and organizations. It helps to dissolve the barriers of disabilities and strengthens the professional capabilities of all employees. For employees, the inclusion of AI in the workplace can validate their skills and change stereotypes related to disability (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2021). For organizations, AI adoption does more than just remove hindrances to employing disabled individuals. AI implementation can also enhance work productivity and service quality, which can attract a more diverse consumer base (Hein and Ansari, 2022).

Limitations and future research

Firstly, the participants in our studies were from one nation and we encourage future research to include other cultural contexts to enhance the generalization of our propositions. Consequently, future discussions could delve deeper into consumers' responses from different countries. Secondly, as our research conducts experimental studies to test hypotheses and there are methodological limitations such as limited sample size, self-reported measures and controlled experiment settings. Thus, we also call for future research to examine the propositions using field or secondary data from the real business world to enhance the generalization of the findings. Finally, our research does not explore how factors such as the type of AI in work environments, the extent of its integration and the specific usage scenarios might influence consumer acceptance of employees with disabilities. Present academic discourse categorizes AI into various types, such as task-based, analytical and thinking-oriented, each differing in intelligence level and work scope (Hao *et al.*, 2025; Mo *et al.*, 2025; Zhu *et al.*, 2025). Future research could investigate how AI types interact with employees with disabilities across diverse industry work scenarios.

Notes

1. The research focuses on both visible disability (obvious to others and signaled by some kind of visual cue or feature, such as employees who use wheelchairs) and invisible disability (no visual cue or feature that singles out a disability to others, such as employees with hearing impairments), which are commonly distinguished in disability-related literature.
2. We conducted a power analysis by GPower 3.1 using a medium effect size ($f = 0.65$) to determine the sample size needed. A power analysis suggests that approximately 84 cases in total are required to achieve 90% power at an α of 0.05. Study 2a involves 101 participants as the sample size, which is greater than 84.
3. We conducted a power analysis by GPower 3.1 using a medium effect size ($f = 0.65$) to determine the sample size needed. A power analysis suggests that approximately 84 cases in total are required to achieve 90% power at an α of 0.05. Study 2a involves 97 participants and the sample size is greater than 84.
4. A power analysis is conducted by GPower 3.1 with a medium effect size ($f = 0.65$) to determine the sample size needed. A power analysis suggests that approximately 84 cases in total are required to achieve 90% power at an α of 0.05. Study 2c recruited 100 participants and the sample size is greater than 84.
5. We conducted a power analysis by GPower 3.1 using a medium effect size ($f = 0.65$) to determine the sample size needed. A power analysis suggests that approximately 84 cases in total are required to achieve 90% power at an α of 0.05. Study 3a involves 97 participants and the sample size is greater than 84.
6. A power analysis was conducted by GPower 3.1 with a medium effect size ($f = 0.5$) to determine the sample size needed. The results suggest that approximately 45 cases for each condition are needed to achieve 90% power at an α of 0.05. Study 3b recruited 240 participants with cases for each group and the sample size is greater than 45 for each condition.
7. We applied GPower 3.1 with a medium effect size ($f = 0.5$) to determine the sample size needed. According to the result, approximately 45 cases for each condition are needed to achieve 90% power at an α of 0.05. Study 3c recruited 240 participants with 60 cases for each group and the sample size is greater than 45 for each condition.
8. A power analysis was conducted by GPower 3.1 with a medium effect size ($f = 0.5$) to determine the sample size needed. The results suggest that approximately 45 cases for each condition are needed to achieve 90% power at an α of 0.05. Study 4 recruited 200 participants with 50 cases for each group and the sample size is greater than 45 for each condition.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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