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SEE WHAT WE'RE SAYING: STRATEGIC ACCOMMODATION IN DEAF/HARD-OF-HEARING CONTENT CREATION

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ABSTRACT

While deaf or hard-of-hearing (d/HoH) content creators are becoming increasingly visible and are often analyzed for content or platform features, their strategic agency for navigating communication as digital citizens is often overlooked. This study seeks to address this gap by applying communication accommodation theory (CAT) to investigate how Indonesian d/HoH content creators actively manage their digital interactions. The study explores current trends or phenomena in d/HoH social media content creation and how communication accommodations occur between creators and their audiences. Qualitative analysis was conducted involving observations of contents from 20 prominent Indonesian d/HoH content creators and interviews with select d/HoH creators and policy makers. Data was categorized through the lens of CAT's constructs, focusing on speaker and listener/audience-focused accommodation strategies. Analysis reveals that d/HoH creators employ strategic convergence to bridge communication gaps with their audience whilst simultaneously utilizing divergence to assert collective identity and cultural pride. The findings challenge disability stereotypes by showcasing d/HoH agency in utilizing and subverting platform features to manage accommodation processes.

Keywords: Communication accommodation, d/HoH, Agency, Content creation

INTRODUCTION

With advancements in new and social media, people with disabilities such as the deaf or hard-of-hearing community (d/HoH) are progressively able to engage with friends, create communities, obtain information, and initiate activism. When d/HoH social media users become more active in their online activities and later dedicate their time as content creators, not only do they engage in the benefits of information sharing within their peers, but they are also subject to extensive communication accommodation processes. This study examines communication accommodation processes between Indonesian d/HoH content creators and their audiences primarily on TikTok and Instagram. d/HoH content creators on social media such as those in Indonesia often garner large followings, making them increasingly sought out as significant opinion leaders. Despite their far-reaching influence and unique circumstances, there is limited



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

research in analyzing the communication adaption processes of their social media interactions and the specific strategies used.

Research distinguishes between the terms “deaf” (small “d”), for those who feel that they are part of the hearing community, and “Deaf” (capital “D”) for who pride themselves on being different from the hearing majority. The authors concur with Sanders (2014) in employing the term “d/HoH” in this study to represent inclusion of both communities. This study will thus explore research questions related to communication accommodation of Indonesian d/HoH content creators, specifically:

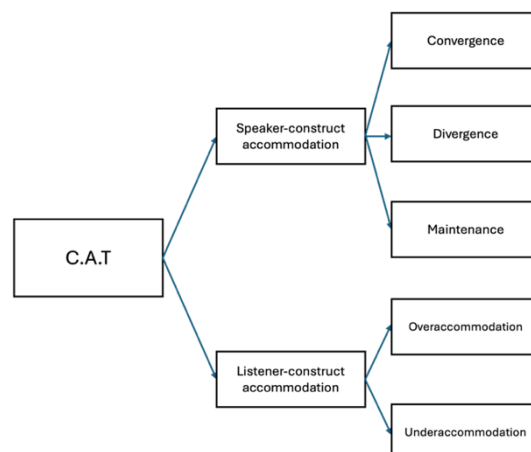
- **RQ1:** what are current trends or phenomena in d/HoH social media content creation?
- **RQ2:** how does communication accommodation occur between d/HoH content creators and their audience in social media?

Communication Accommodation Theory

Research in communication accommodation focuses on the adaptive interpersonal processes in language and communication (Giles et al., 2010). Communication accommodation theory (CAT) analyses interpersonal communication and how it applies into intergroup dynamics and interability communication, including those via social media interactions. CAT involves a wide-ranging framework to predict and explain the adjustments individuals make to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction (Giles & Ogay, 2013). CAT employs several basic concepts and assumptions, in which Gallois (Gallois et al., 2005) mentions several principles, such as how communication reflects both the immediate situation of participants’ interaction and the greater socio-historical context in which it occurs. Communication is therefore not just a referential process of exchanging information, but also involves the negotiation of social identities through the process of accommodation.

Figure 1

Flow Of Communication Accommodation Processes With Reference to the Works Of Giles And Ogay (2013) And Gasiorek (2016)





2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

To define the extent of social distance between them, CAT essentially suggests that individuals apply strategies of convergence, divergence, and maintenance. “Convergence” is defined as a strategy where individuals adapt to each other’s communicative behaviours in terms of a wide range of non-verbal features such as speech rate, pausal phenomena, response latency, vocal intensity, gesture, smiling, gaze, and so on (Giles et al., 1991). The underlying motive for convergence is to gain approval from others, implying that the more similar we are to our conversational partner, the more they are likely to like us, enabling us to gain additional societal goals. “Divergence” refers to the way in which speakers accentuate speech and non-verbal differences between self and the other (Giles & Ogay, 2013). Divergence is the opposite of convergence which is actively done mainly to emphasize distinctiveness, particularly to preserve social identity or a sense of group pride. Another strategy, “maintenance”, involves sticking to one’s style, regardless of the interlocutor’s communication behaviour (Bourhis, 1979, in Giles et al., 1991). Convergence, divergence, and maintenance are not mutually exclusive and can happen simultaneously based on psychological and cultural contexts.

Gasiorek (2016) further defined strategies of convergence and “non-accommodation” through constructs of speaker-focused communicative behaviours as well as listeners’ perceptions of those communicative behaviours. Speaker-focused constructs involve divergence, convergence, and maintenance enacted in part of the speaker, whether exclusively or simultaneously, and through linguistic or psychological terms. Listener-focused constructs are expressed through over- and underaccommodation, commonly found in intergenerational and interability interactions. Overaccommodation is when a communication behaviour overshoots the level of implementation necessary for a meaningful interaction, whereas underaccommodation undershoots the level of implementation desired for a meaningful interaction (Coupland et al., 1988). Studies on CAT continue to expand, with principles of CAT applied also for research on communication mediated by digital technology (Dragojevic et al., 2016; Soliz et al., 2021).

Communication Accommodation in Social Media

Prior research highlights how social media are particularly suitable for analyzing the dynamics of disability interactions because their multimodal features - e.g., video, captions, comments, and direct interactions - allow us to observe accommodation strategies (Bart et al., 2022; Kožuh & Debevc, 2020). Previous studies on d/HoH content creation were more focused on content (Cao et al., 2024, Tang et al., 2023), accessibility (Al-Khazraji et al. 2018; Gibet et al., 2016) and livestreaming practices (Cao et al., 2023). Studies on d/HoH content creation in Indonesia has been limited and mainly emphasizes users’ information-sharing roles (Amalia, 2024; Evelina, 2020).

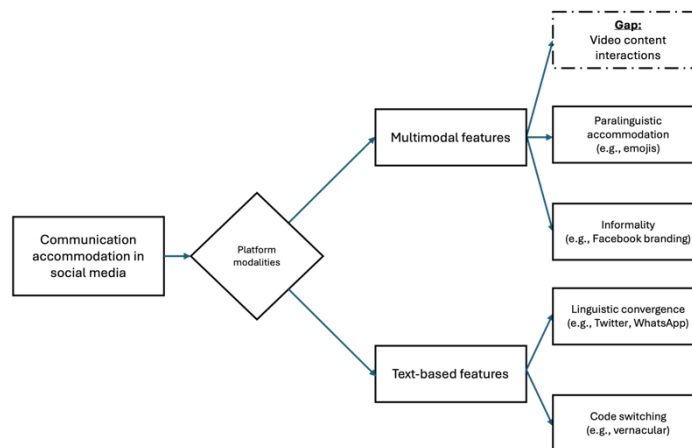
Studies show communication adaptation processes in social media relates to platform features and platform asynchronous interactions. Text-based applications allow its users to adjust their ways of communicating by means of semantic modification, as observed in the study of Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil (2010) in examining datasets of Twitter interactions, highlighting linguistic style accommodation indicated by certain usage of prepositions, conjunctions, and filler words. Gervasio’s (2024) analysis on WhatsApp



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

group conversations among university students in Kenya shows how accommodation occurs through code switching and mixing in usage of vernacular language. Hilte et al's (2022) study on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp conversations among teenagers highlights how convergence occur in adopting the interlocutor's speech features. Boys may adopt a 'less boyish' writing style and likewise, girls adopt a 'less girlish' writing style when interacting with boys.

Figure. 2
Identification of Research Gap in CAT Research



Studies of communication accommodation in multimodal featured platforms demonstrate more nuanced forms of adjustments but still related with lexical interaction. Jeong and Kim's (2023) experiment on product branding on Facebook shows how informal communication (e.g., using first-name basis, abbreviations) and usage of paralinguage (e.g., emojis) were effective in motivating convergence with consumers. Hongchen et al's (2025) examination on recent TikTok migration to Xiaohongshu indicate accommodation processes to bridge cross-cultural interactions by using local expressions. Studies on accommodation processes via platform video content interactions, and particularly with regards to d/HoH content creators, remain scarce.

METHODOLOGY

The initial phase of this of this study involved systematic online observations of social media content produced by 20 prominent Indonesian d/HoH content creators on TikTok and Instagram. Selection criteria for observations were based on the creators' popularity and considering the number of followers, likes, years active, as well as general online and social prominence. Period of content observation was from 1 January to 31 July 2025. Observational data were then organized into emergent thematic categories. Following Braun and Clarke's (2013) suggested steps for thematic analysis, the process involved coding, theme searching, theme, reviewing, defining, naming, and reporting. To examine communication accommodation processes between d/HoH content creators and their non-disabled audience, data were further categorized with regards to prevailing



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

trends in d/HoH content creation and observed accommodation strategies. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with select d/HoH content creators for deeper insight on their living experience in implementing accommodative strategies. Additional interviews with d/HoH policy makers were done to assess the social context of d/HoH content creation and to explore potential implications for policy formulation.

RESULTS

Current Trends of d/HoH Content Creation

To address RQ1 and explore current trends in d/HoH content creation in Indonesia, the research categorized findings based on existing studies such as Cao et al's (2024) on disability and social media. Table 1 shows observations are taken from the timeline feeds of notable Indonesian TikTok and Instagram d/HoH content creators, considering their gender, active years, follower count, likes, and social reputation.

Table 1
Indonesian TikTok and Instagram d/HoH Content Creators by Gender, Active Years, Follower Count, Likes, And Social Reputation Distribution

ID	Platform	Active Years	Followers	Likes
<i>Female</i>				
1	TikTok	5 years	771 k	32.7 m
	Instagram	10 years	290 k	n/a
2	TikTok	4 years	404 k	5.9 m
	Instagram	8 years	112 k	n/a
3	TikTok	4 years	318 k	6.6 m
	Instagram	10 years	27 k	n/a
4	TikTok	5 years	292 k	2.2 m
	Instagram	12 years	69 k	n/a
5	TikTok	3 years	41.8 k	2 m
6	TikTok	5 years	31.8 k	1.1 m
	Instagram	12 years	30.3 k	n/a
7	Instagram	12 years	21.9 k	n/a
8	Instagram	9 years	21.1 k	n/a
9	Instagram	8 years	3.3 k	n/a
<i>Male</i>				
10	TikTok	5 years	130 k	1.7 m
	Instagram	14 years	259 k	n/a
11	TikTok	2 years	75 k	6 m
	Instagram	10 years	4 k	n/a
12	Instagram	10 years	4 k	n/a
	Instagram	12 years	30 k	n/a



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

Table 1

Indonesian TikTok and Instagram d/HoH Content Creators by Gender, Active Years, Follower Count, Likes, And Social Reputation Distribution (Contd.)

13	TikTok	3 years	32 k	193.9 k
	Instagram	7 years	33 k	n/a
14	TikTok	3 years	41 k	2 m
15	Instagram	12 years	15 k	n/a
16	TikTok	2 years	8.3 k	97.2 k
	Instagram	8 years	7.1k	n/a
17	TikTok	1 year	1 k	1 k
	Instagram	13 years	14.5 k	n/a
18	TikTok	2 years	1 k	10 k
	Instagram	12 years	13.2 k	n/a
19	Instagram	9 years	5.8 k	n/a
20	TikTok	5 years	628	306
	Instagram	12 years	5.1 k	n/a

In terms of common trends, Indonesian d/HoH content creation were observed to be mainly focused on sign-language education, advocacy for inclusivity, product endorsement, documentation of daily activities, and social critique. Content on teaching Indonesian Sign Language system (Bisindo) were mainly done through tutorials and interactive contents such as word games, Bisindo for toddlers, sign-picture associations, and other useful expressions for daily interactions. Creators commonly use Bisindo sign language to communicate and emphasize their identity, often complemented by Indonesian subtitles and app-generated dubbing to add clarity.

As d/HoH content creators gain followers and attention, various products and services seek endorsements for them to gain publicity. Many d/HoH contents also showcase routine daily activities, including family and social interactions. Some explain their diagnosis journey, while others demonstrate their skills/hobbies (e.g., performance art, coffee-brewing) and milestones (e.g., grad school, parenting, emphasizing how they live their lives similar to people without disabilities (PWoD). Galvanizing on their rising online presence, d/HoH content creators often express social commentary on misperceptions of sign language and d/HoH. They highlight issues like discriminatory work vacancies and misuse of sign languages by PWoD, with some identifying themselves as activists and commenting on domestic issues.

Communication Accommodation in d/HoH Content Creation

To answer RQ2 and understand the communication accommodation between Indonesian d/HoH content creators and their audience, the study analyzed accommodation strategies based on Gasiorek (2016) and Coupland et al's (1988) constructs of accommodation. Given the multimodal features of TikTok and Instagram, the term "listener" will broadly include the general social media audience.



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

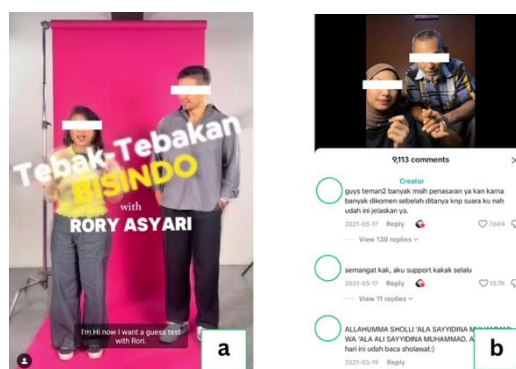
Speaker-construct accommodation

Strategies of convergence done by d/HoH content creators include the use of subtitles, adoption of viral trends, and particular actions such as liking/loving comments. The use of subtitles or closed captions to complement the sign language or perceived less comprehensible communication attempts of the d/HoH creator implies a linguistically convergent behaviour that aims to enhance interpretability between them and the audience; that is, as an adjustment to make their message easier to understand for the PWoD audience. Adoption of viral trends (e.g., dancing to Bruno Mars and Rose's "APT" song) aims to approximate the similarity between d/HoH creators and the audience, by attending to the similarity of their audience via adoption of a phenomena that is familiar for all. d/HoH creators also apply accommodation through personal touches such as giving like/love on comments from the audience. Such actions imply an emotional expression and accommodation strategy to address their audience's feelings.

Divergent communicative behaviours from d/HoH content creators are explicitly observable when they choose to create sign language content with no subtitles and to speak with their less audible authentic voice. Several creators opt to apply these strategies especially when they want to address a rather serious topic, such as critique, social commentary, or personal thought. Such strategies may be understood as interpersonal control, in which d/HoH creators deliberately disempower their audience to reinforce their identity and emphasize impact. They are also employing strategies to manage the discourse, a communicative behaviour that excludes the interlocutors from the conversation (e.g., communicating only in sign language, without subtitles, discussing topics that only persons with d/HoH will understand).

Figure 3

Converge strategies by d/HoH creators on TikTok and Instagram: (a) Using Subtitles and Performing Viral Trends, and (B) Leaving Likes/Loves As A Response To Comments Left by The Audience



As shown in Figure 3, picture (a) exhibits adjustments by the creator to enhance interpretability with the audience by adding graphics and texts. Picture (b) displays the creator's emotional expression through convergence strategies to interact with the audience. In contrast, Figure 4 picture (a) shows how deliberate divergence is done by

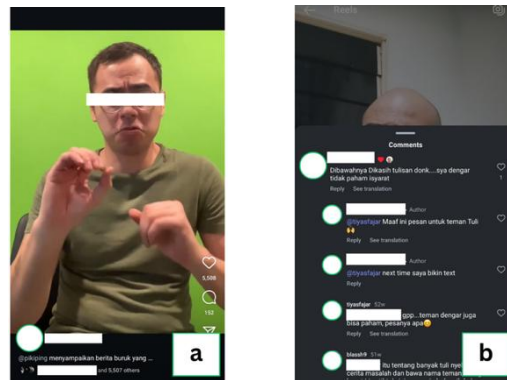


2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

creators to exclude PWoD from the discourse and interact exclusively with the d/HoH community through sign-language without subtitles nor captions. Figure 4 picture (b) illustrates how creators apply simultaneous convergence and maintenance, in which the creator responds to a comment while reasoning why maintenance was necessary.

Figure. 4

Divergence Strategies by d/HoH Creators on TikTok and Instagram: (a) Content Intentionally Not Using Subtitles to Address the d/HoH Community Specifically, and (b) Explaining in Comments Why Maintenance Was Done (“This message is for d/HoH friends”).



The use of authentic voice to communicate simultaneously with sign language implies a maintenance strategy to emphasize their identity as a minority. This may be related to a particularly dominant theme in Indonesian d/HoH advocacy, in which d/HoH individuals prefer to be referred to by the more empowering term “tuli” instead of the polite “tunarungu” in reference to the d/HoH community. “Tunarungu” would roughly translate as ‘hearing impaired’, implying a medical condition or disability of a bodily function. Whereas “tuli” implies the collective identity, culture, and way of alternative communication used by the d/HoH community beyond physical constraints. As such, d/HoH content creators make it their mission to ensure that they continue to raise awareness of this issue, as part of their efforts to correct negative stereotypes towards the d/HoH community.

Listener/audience-construct accommodation

A large portion of the accommodation processes observed shows efforts of convergence in part of the audience when interacting with d/HoH creators, such as use of polite expressions, asking genuine questions, and exerting supportive efforts. Polite expressions are visible from lexical features such as using polite diction and usage of cute emojis or GIFs. Genuine questions about d/HoH-related themes are also forms of accommodative discourse management in which creator and audience are responding to or discussing topics that both sides are familiar with. To the extent that audience exhibits real-time accommodative efforts, some would exert financial capital to support a d/HoH creator’s cause or livestream (e.g., contributing an in-app purchased token of a graphic avatar during a livestream).



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

Figure 5

d/HoH Livestreaming on Tiktok. Picture (a) Audience-Construct Accommodation By Means of Avatar Purchase, (b) Audience Linguistic Convergence In Using Emoji and Supportive Words.

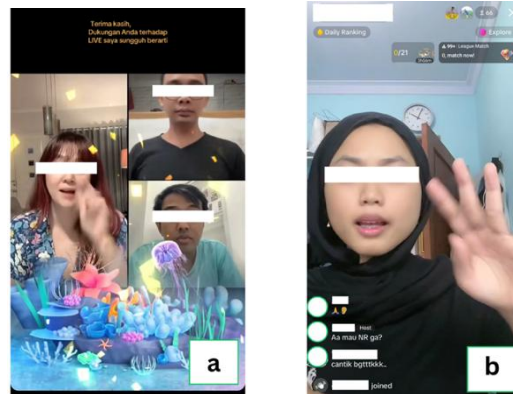
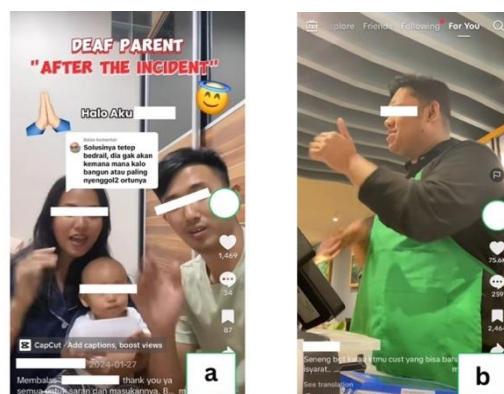


Figure 5 exhibits active audience accommodative efforts. Figure 5 picture (a) shows d/HoH creators enable audience accommodation despite the livestream being a three-way sign-language content without subtitles, implying maintenance by the live streamers. This maintenance effort may also be unintentional due to limitations of in-app features such as the absence of simultaneous sign-language close-captions. Figure 5 picture (b) shows accommodative audience adjustments by paralanguage i.e., emojis.

Figure 6

d/HoH content on TikTok. (a) Unsolicited Advice as Non-Accommodation, and (B) Depictions of Daily Routine E.G., Working as a Barista.



No explicit cases of over- or underaccommodation were observed during data collection. However, cases of perceived unintentional non-accommodation were widely present. This can be seen from incidents such as in Figure 6 picture (a), where non-disabled audiences would offer unsolicited advice to d/HoH creators either in their



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

content or livestream (e.g., comment: *"The solution is to buy a bedrail for your baby, then he won't go anywhere"*). While the audience may believe that they are accommodating and providing solutions, they are perceived as patronizing by the d/HoH creator. This was observable in the said content in which the d/HoH creator made a clarification video addressing the unsolicited advice. Thus, this creator became subject to overaccommodation.

Insights on Accommodation and d/HoH Content Creation

To gain deeper insight into communication accommodation practices among d/HoH content creators, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with both creators and policy makers. Although d/HoH individuals appear open and vocal on social media, initial interactions revealed a degree of apprehension. Building trust required gradual engagement, and the use of a sign language interpreter was essential due to the researchers' limited proficiency in sign language. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified three notable themes: initial reluctance, platform preference, and perceived necessity.

Initial reluctance

Participants expressed that prior to actively making d/HoH content on their platforms, most were not comfortable in being forthcoming of their d/HoH identity due to issues of self-esteem. To do so, they initially created content that featured daily activities that did not disclose their d/HoH identity such as hobbies, holiday footage, and viral trends. It was not until they encountered decisive moments that they decided to reinforce their d/HoH identity. One participant mentions: *"Back then there was a time when people didn't believe I was deaf. I was making dancing videos... and I said I was deaf, but they thought I just wanted to be viral. So I branded myself as a d/HoH advocator, making d/HoH contents."*

Such initial reluctance can be observed in the development of the creator's content. For example, a participant active since 2013 did not publish d/HoH-related content until 2016, in the form of a heartfelt post to commemorate Mother's Day. Starting from early 2022 they became active in producing d/HoH content and advocacy. This accommodation strategy of d/HoH creators gradually changing the way they present themselves is linear with the basic assumptions of CAT as stated by Gallois (Gallois et al., 2005) in which accommodation reflects the immediate situation of their communication (i.e., their social media interactions) and the greater social context in which it occurs (e.g., changing their content as they see that d/HoH content becomes more apparent). It may be considered as a strategy for gradual convergence in expressing their social attitudes and identity.

Platform preference

Participants expressed that not all social media platforms were deemed d/HoH friendly. A participant expresses how they prefer to use a specific application as their main platform. The brand of this application was intentionally redacted to focus more on the platform features rather than the platform itself: *"I think (name of application) is just more fun for me. I can make posts and compile them with popular songs so that they get*



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

more views. There's also the "FYP" feature. If I get more views, my post will be recommended on other people's FYP. I think other apps don't have that kind of feature."

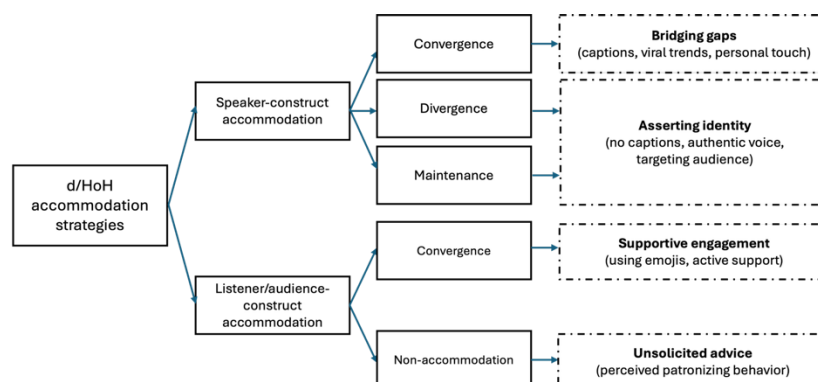
In line with previous studies highlighting how accommodation in social media relates to platform features, it was observed that d/HoH content creation utilized specific features to enhance their accommodation strategies. Notable features are ones that enable textual interpretations of their content (e.g., captions) and asynchronous interactions (e.g., posts, comments). When asked whether they would prefer intelligent features that would enable live translations, a participant expressed how they prefer to use more established features: *"Yes, I heard that they made a sign-language detection app that can interpret our hand gestures. But they are too slow. I don't even think the app is still available... These captions are okay for me. I can also reply on comments when I live stream."*

Perceived necessity

When asked on their considerations in applying divergence strategies such as producing content that did not contain captions, voice, nor sounds and thereby isolating their non-disabled audience, participants responded the necessity to do so in order to convey specific messages for their d/HoH peers. These necessities may be related to the greater social context such as the topic being discussed, or the nature of how d/HoH communication is conducted. A participant that was a public official from the Indonesian National Commission for Disability explained one reason why such accommodative strategies were necessary: *"Not all of our d/HoH friends know how to use Bisindo or proper sign language. When these creators make contents (with no audio like these) it can help in giving them literacy... I think they are a breath of fresh air, as they help us in educating the greater society about disability and the need for inclusivity."*

Figure 7

d/HoH Accommodation Strategies Based on Speaker and Listener/Audience Construct, With Divergence And Maintenance Serving a Similar Purpose



DISCUSSION

This study highlights current trends in d/HoH content creation and how communication accommodation theory may be utilized for analysing interactions



2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

between d/HoH content creators and their audiences on social media platforms. Findings reveal that creators employ strategic convergence to bridge communication gaps, while also utilizing divergence and maintenance to assert collective identity. Further insight from interviews shows that there is a gradual converge in part of d/HoH creators to overcome their initial reluctance in revealing their identity, a preference of platform and its features, and a perceived necessity in divergence strategies. The study also highlights how social media's multimodal features enable unique accommodation processes, from audience convergence through supportive comments to unintentional non-accommodation in seemingly patronizing remarks.

Two key social implications can be drawn. First, these interactions challenge disability stereotypes by showcasing d/HoH agency in digital spaces. d/HoH creators utilize platform features such as captions and audio-visual stitching to manage accommodation processes that enable them to bridge social distance with their audience. At the same time, creators also subvert these platform features to accommodate divergence and maintenance strategies with their audience. It is important to note that whereas divergence is an active, strategic choice, maintenance may function as a passive 'nonevent' (Giles et al., 1991) and both may occur simultaneously. Second, they highlight how platform features have a significant role in enabling accommodation, thus underscoring the need for platforms to prioritize accessibility features to support fluent accommodation processes and equitable participation in digital discourse.

The study provides room for enhanced analysis in future works. While the present study is primarily focused on d/HoH content creators, future research may engage a more diverse participant pool to reflect a broader spectrum of accommodation processes in d/HoH content creation. Despite its limited sample size, the emerging themes observed in this study's cohort of participants contribute meaningfully to ongoing discussions on strategic communication accommodation in social media contexts. The scope of the study may also be expanded to involve accommodation processes along a wider range of platforms. As new media technology evolve, longitudinal cross-platform analysis studies may examine how accommodation processes adapt as platforms features evolve over time. Lastly, further studies should prioritize in building trust and mutual respect with the d/HoH community as well as with sign language interpreters. In this regard, the present study sought to balance online observations with fieldwork, emphasizing genuine and sustained interactions with the d/HoH community as the authors develop the research further.

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2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
November 4-7, Southeast Bangkok University, Bangkok & Amari Hotel, Pattaya, THAILAND

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2025 ANPOR-APCA Annual Conference
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