Disability and the Digital Divide:

An Analysis on the European Union´s Discourse

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Abstract

This paper analyzes in what way the European Union represents persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide. This issue is important as 15% of all citizens of the EU live with some form of disability and many of them face external barriers and exclusion, for example in the accessibility of digital technologies. The EU has promised to fight against the inequality of information and communication technology (ICT) accessibility that persons with disability face, called the digital divide. With the help of a critical discourse analysis, policy documents of the EU are analyzed to see how the Union represents persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide and if it holds up to its promises in fighting exclusion. The key insight of this paper is that the EUs discourse reflects the sociopolitical model, which sees disability as a social construct based on external barriers. Digital technologies are thereby perceived as a tool that can foster the participation of persons with disabilities, while at the same time, the digital divide is seen as a threat to equality. It becomes apparent that the EU presents itself as more inclusive than it is, as economic concerns are regarded as more important than inclusion.

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1. Introduction

87 million people. That's the number of persons in the European Union who live with some form of disability (Europäische Kommission, 2023). Even though they form more than 15% of all EU citizens, persons with disabilities are continuously underrepresented in politics and media and encounter many barriers when trying to participate in society. The rise of information and communication technology (ICT), meaning the infrastructure enabling computing, has raised the hope in many that this would foster the active participation of persons with disabilities in society. Over the last years, however, it has become apparent that ICT not only offers great potential but can also create more barriers. Many devices, applications, or websites are not accessible to persons with disabilities (Ferri, Favalli, 2018). This leads to a divide between people with and without disabilities in the accessibility and usage of ICT, which is called the digital divide (van Dijk, 2020). The digital divide creates inequality and exclusion, from work but also from societal participation. The demographic development suggests that in the immediate future, the population in Europe will continuously grow older on average (Eurostat, 2020). It is to be expected that a big share of these elderly people will experience some form of disability in their life, for example, related to difficulties in hearing or vision. Therefore, the proportion of people with disabilities in the EU is likely to rise in the future. To enable the participation of all people – online and offline – diminishing the digital divide regarding persons with disabilities is central.

For many years the European Union did not perceive this issue as problematic and instead, the EUs discourse on the digital divide rather focused on other socioeconomic characteristics, such as education, income, or gender (Rogers, 2001). In the 1970s the EU introduced its disability policy, mainly focusing on improving the living and working conditions and employment. In the 1980s the activism of persons with disabilities slowly led to an expansion of the EU´s discourse, considering the social and not only vocational inclusion of persons with disabilities (Priestly, 2007). A major change in the perception of persons with disabilities took place through the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The UNCRPD is the first international convention that views persons with disabilities not as "objects" but as human rights subjects, who can make their own decisions as well as act as active members of society (UN, 2023). The EU has adopted the UNCRPD and thereby committed to ensuring that persons with disabilities have equal access to information and communication technologies as people without disabilities (Art. 9, UNCRPD). Since then the EU has adopted several policy documents regarding the digital divide and disability, for example, the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, the European Accessibility Act, and the European Web Accessibility Directive. Since the introduction of the UNCRPD, the EU claims to have adopted and followed a sociopolitical approach to disability. This implies not seeing persons with disabilities as handicapped and "abnormal" who need to be included but instead as normal human beings who get discriminated through barriers in

their environment. The sociopolitical approach, therefore, creates a strong motivation to work against the digital divide and to diminish the barriers persons with a disability encounter to ensure their full participation in society. However, little research has been conducted to find out how the EU´s discourse has changed in the past years regarding the representation of persons with disabilities in the discourse on the digital divide.

In the discourse on the digital divide many scholars, and also EU policy documents, focus on other socioeconomic characteristics like income, education race, or gender but do not look at the digital divide in the context of disability (Rogers, 2001). When following the EUs self-portrayal, it can be assumed that the EUs perception and discourse on disability regarding the digital divide has substantially changed after the adoption of the UNCRPD. However, it has to be analyzed if this is the case or if the EUs claim on which model of disability it represents differs from the reality of its discourse. This is important as the way the concept of disability is constructed and represented in the EU´s discourse on disability regarding the digital divide has an impact on the actions and policies that the EU decides on. Hence, how the EU constructs disability has potential consequences for the inclusion of 15% of the EU population. This is an important knowledge gap as the academic literature has only conducted little research on the EUs discourse in the past years. Filling this knowledge gap is relevant since in Europe the European Union is the main actor in shaping disability policy. The EU has acquired increasing power of governance in the field of disability rights through setting norms, standards, and conventions (Priestly, 2007). The EU is also an important actor in aligning political strategies to diminish the digital divide. Therefore, it is important to analyze the EUs representation of disability in its discourse on the digital divide.

1.1. Research Question

Having this knowledge gap in mind the following research question arises: **In what way does the European Union represent persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide?**

To answer this research question two sub-questions were developed. First, it will be examined **in what way the discourse has changed over the years and if a connection can be established to the introduction of the UNCRPD.** The UNCRPD is commonly referred to as a paradigm change in the perception of disability. Hence, it is interesting to see in which way the construction of disability in the EUs discourse on the digital divide has changed over time. On the one hand, it will be analyzed if and how the perception of disability has officially changed according to the claims of the Union. On the other hand, it will be assessed if these claims hold true and if the EUs official position is reflected in the way persons with disabilities are represented in EU policy documents.

The second sub-question asks **how the concept of disability is constructed and represented in the EUs discourse on the digital divide**. The way in which the Union constructs disability is relevant because the model of disability that the EU follows has consequences for its discourse. This results in different perceptions of persons with disabilities and their needs. Accordingly, this leads to the

identification of different problems persons with disabilities face and subsequently to different ideas on how to solve these issues.

In order to answer the main research question a discourse analysis will be conducted, which will give insights into how meaning is constructed and which power dynamics and ideologies lie beneath it. To do so, first the most important theoretical concepts, in this case, the EU´s discourse on disability and the digital divide, will be explored and an overview of the existing research on this topic will be given. Afterward, the research design, the method of data collection, and the methodological approach will be explained. In the main part of this thesis, the data will be analyzed to provide answers to the previously developed research questions. Finally, the results will be summarized and it will be elaborated on how this thesis has contributed to closing the knowledge gap and what practical implications the obtained insights have.

2. Theory

The aim of this chapter is to outline the theoretical framework as the basis of this thesis. The relevant theoretical concepts that are central to answering the main research question: **In what way does the European Union represent persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide?** will be discussed. To do so, first, the concept of the digital divide will be introduced. Therefore, the meaning of this term, its relevance, and the shifts in discourse over time will be examined. This chapter will then explore how the European Union has discussed the digital divide to this day and its discourse on disability will be outlined. To be able to identify and classify the EUs position in this discourse in the following analysis, three models of disability will be presented and shortly discussed. The similarities and differences between these models will be pointed out as well as the consequences that the adoption of each model has on potential policy-making regarding the digital divide. These models will later serve as the theoretical basis for the analysis. Finally, with the help of the models of disability and the literature background, the key theoretical insights will be summarized and analytical expectations for potential results for the following analysis will be formulated.

2.1. The digital divide

The term "digital divide" emerged in the United States in the 1990s and quickly became more popular. It describes the division between people who have access to and make use of information and communication technology (ICT), such as phones, laptops, and the internet, and those who do not (van Dijk, 2020). The rise of ICT has brought up hope in many that with the help of these new technologies, old inequalities could be overcome. Tsatsou (2021) points out that online interactions through ICT help persons with disabilities to emphasize their qualities as "normal" persons without being directly "revealed" as disabled (Tsatsou, 2021). Additionally, new digital technologies are considered as central to growth and socio-economic development. The European Union for example has pointed ICT out to be central to reaching its Europe 2020 strategy (Bustillos, 2017). However, at the same time, the rise of ICT also produced several concerns. Disability activists argue that the disguise of disability through technology may reinforce the dominant assumption of normality and further reduces the visibility of persons with disabilities (Tsatsou, 2021). Additionally, it has grown an increasing social concern around unequal ICT access for different groups in society. This is arguably relevant because "[u]nequal access to digital technologies brings about unequal participation in society" (van Dijk, 2005, p.15). Therefore, the digital divide can be seen as an indicator of social exclusion.

One of the European Union's core principles is to create and foster equality (EU, 2023). With regard to the digital divide, the EU has the goal to create a society where everyone can create, access, utilize, and share information and knowledge. The discourse on the digital divide in the EU looks at disadvantaged socio-economic groups and tries to diminish the digital divide experienced by these groups. The focus is thereby often on socio-economic characteristics like education, gender, or income. According to Scholz et al. (2017) disability was and is often only mentioned on the side or as part of a listing but is

seldom specifically discussed (Scholz et al. 2017). However, as several scholars point out, it is important to discuss the needs of persons with disabilities with regard to the digital divide for several reasons. Firstly, because of the number of persons with disabilities that are affected by the digital divide. Studies have shown that in all EU countries, more persons without disabilities declared to have internet access than persons with disabilities. In 2012, 73,6% of persons without disabilities declared to have access to the internet while only 52,5% of persons with disabilities claimed to have internet access. This is a gap of more than 20 percent (Scholz et al., 2017). Secondly, it has been shown in research that persons with disabilities are also more likely to be affected by other marginalizing characteristics like low levels of education or income and are therefore potentially disadvantaged in more than one way. Hence, the intersectionality of disability needs to be considered. Additionally, when just listing persons with disabilities as one socio-economic group, all persons with any form of disability are lumped together and their different needs for the accessibility of ICT cannot be differentiated. Scholz et al. (2017) point out that this has become even more important as in the past years the discourse on the digital divide has shifted from issues of access to ICT and the Internet to looking at different usage patterns and skills. It, nevertheless, is important to keep in mind that many persons with disabilities do not only need to be considered in their usage patterns but that many still face difficulties in gaining basic access to ICT and the Internet because many devices and websites are not accessible to them (Scholz et al. 2017). Ferri and Favali (2018) have demonstrated in a study from 2016 that 73% of the participants who lived with some form of disability and therefore have different access needs experienced barriers in more than a quarter of websites that they visited for the first time. According to the scholars, a third experiences such barriers on more than half of the websites (Ferri, Favalli, 2018).

In the past years, the European Union started discussing the digital divide with specific regard to disability, for example in the European Accessibility Act, which regulates the barrier-free accessibility of automatic tellers and communication with emergency services. The aim of this paper is to critically analyze and discuss the EUs discourse on the digital divide with regard to its perception of disability. This is important because the way in which the EU constructs disability in its discourse and the model of disability the EU follows – officially and unofficially – has consequences on its discourse, actions, and policies. Depending on how the EU perceives or constructs disability in its discourse, this results in different perceptions of people with disabilities and their needs. That in turn leads to the identification of different problems persons with disabilities face and accordingly to different ideas and policy measures to solve these issues.

2.2. Models of Disability

There are many definitions of disability, the most prevalent is the definition set up through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. According to this *"[p]ersons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an*

equal basis with others" (UN, 2023). To be able to identify and classify the EUs representation of persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide three models of disability serve as the theoretical framework: the medical view, the economic model, and the sociopolitical model.

2.2.1. The medical model

Historically the oldest model of disability is the moral model, which understands disabilities as the results of sin. Disability from this view is therefore associated with feelings of guilt or shame and, for the individual with a disability, this model is often connected with social exclusion, self-hatred and the feeling to be "wrong". However, this model has lost its importance in the past centuries and decades, especially due to the emergence of modern medicine, which made it possible to diagnose and explain disabilities on a medical level (Kaplan, 2000). The medical view on disability, which was developed during the 19th century, is closely connected with the notion of impairment and illness. It sees disability as a trait located within an individual rather than a construct of the environment and focuses more on the diagnostic than on the consequences that potentially follow from a disability. According to Hahn (1993), individuals with disabilities are often assigned "the sick role" through this model, with which society excuses individuals from regular social obligations as long as they receive medical care to fully recover. Society is willing to help the person with disabilities but sees no responsibility to include them in society but instead is waiting for the individual to be "cured" (Kaplan, 2000). Critics argue that this model does not cover the fact that disabilities are chronic and therefore cannot be cured. The classification, therefore, is criticized for having little practical relevance for policy-making. Policy implications following this view on disability mostly focus on preventing or eradicating disabilities. This is strongly criticized by many as ignorant and neglecting, as it does not help persons who are currently living with some form of disability and because the deconstruction of architectural or environmental barriers is not considered in the policies following this model. Furthermore, people who already live with a disability might interpret this as even threatening for their own right to exist (Hahn, 1993).

Kaplan furthermore identifies the rehabilitation model, which perceives persons with disability as in need of training, therapy, and counseling by rehabilitation professionals to compensate for their "deficiency" caused by the disability (Kaplan, 2000). This view is closely connected to the medical model because it also sees disability as an impairment located in the individual. Therefore, this model in the following will be treated as a part of the medical model.

The medical model of disability sees great importance and many advantages in the new digital technologies. ICT in this model is used for medical reasons, namely in improving and managing the diagnosis, rehabilitation, cure, and prevention of disabilities. Furthermore, these new technologies should help persons with disabilities to overcome their medical constraints and impairments to better manage their daily lives (Tsatsou, 2021).

2.2.2. The economic model

The underlying assumptions of the economic view on disability are quite similar to those of the medical perspective. Disability is seen as an impairment, but the focus of this model is on the physical capabilities of persons, which are equalized with their occupational capacities. The model points out the importance of respect and civil rights of persons with disabilities, but nevertheless, such concerns are subservient to the estimated occupational capabilities of an individual (Retief, Letsosa, 2018). That implies, that disability is seen as the limitations on the amount and kind of work that a person can perform. This leads to framing disability as a matter of a cost-benefit analysis, without considering other factors, which can contribute to a dehumanization of the affected individual (Retief, Letsosa, 2018). Additionally, according to Hahn, this leads to a tendency to treat disability and unemployment as synonyms. From the very beginning, people with disabilities are hardly expected to pursue a profession and are sorted out from potential jobs, without first considering their individual abilities. It is criticized that only applying economic measures does not lead to clear and consistent standards to evaluate the different kinds of capabilities a person possesses. Hahn states, that this model is the most commonly adopted one in public policy in the 1990s and recent studies show that it is still often used by governments as the point of reference to formulate disability policies (Hahn, 1993; Retief, Letsosa, 2018). The policy measures following from this view on disability nowadays mainly focus on promoting the employment of persons with a disability, for example through extra training or incentives for companies to employ persons with disabilities, but without questioning the presumed connection between physical capabilities and job qualification (Hahn, 1993).

This perspective on disability points out the importance of closing the digital divide that affects persons with disabilities and highlights the advantages of ICT. Promoting access and skills to information and communication technologies is seen as vital to foster the employment of persons with disabilities (ILO GBD, Fundación ONCE, n.d.). New digital technologies are believed to bring new jobs and opportunities to persons with disabilities and to facilitate their inclusion in the employment market. For example, it is suggested that remote work can make persons with disabilities suited for a job, that's workplace is otherwise not accessible to them (ILO GBD, Fundación ONCE, n.d.). From this perspective, the impairments of individuals with disabilities can be "balanced out" through digital technologies. Furthermore, it is argued that creating job opportunities for persons with disabilities through the help of ICT is the best way to foster the social inclusion of these individuals (ILO GBDN, Fundación ONCE, n.d.).

2.2.3. The sociopolitical model

The sociopolitical perspective, opposed to the other models, focuses not on the individual but instead mainly on the social and attitudinal environment. The individual´s interactions with their environment regarding disability are seen as socially shaped (Goggin, 2017). This perspective, which came up for the first time in the 1960s and 1970s, therefore rather sees public attitudes as the source for barriers and discrimination that persons with disabilities experience than physical limitations. This implies that the

attitudes of the nondisabled majority are responsible for all types of environmental restraints and discriminations and not, like in the other models, physical capabilities or limitations. Hence, the model sees persons with disabilities as a marginalized minority group that has been object to prejudice and discrimination (Hahn, 1993). That also translates to technology: many devices or applications include barriers and obstacles which hinder their accessibility instead of enabling access for persons with different user needs and preferences. The individual is therefore disabled by the information and communication technology (Macdonald, Clayton, 2013). This shows that the sociopolitical view on disability does not only see advantages and potential in the rise of ICT for the inclusion of persons with disabilities but is also aware of the inequalities that new technologies can create, which are reflected in the digital divide. The discrimination is closely connected with the design of ICT and which consequences for the accessibility a design has. Furthermore, the sociopolitical model of disability also considers new aspects of literacy, inclusive education, and user support as important to reduce digital inequality (Goggin, 2017).

The sociopolitical model is value-based and demands the full inclusion and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities and the guarantee of their human rights. The model attributes the current relative lack of political strength that the representation of interests of persons with disabilities has to the stigmatization that persons with disabilities experience. This leaves them with little chance to fully participate in society and furthermore gives the incentive to individuals with disabilities to deny their status as persons with disabilities and try to gain social acceptance by "passing" as non-disabled. Persons with disabilities are also underrepresented in the research, design, and policy formulation regarding the digital divide. However, full and equal access to information and communication technology is seen as central to achieving equal societal participation of persons with disabilities (Goggin, 2017). The adoption of this model for policy-makers must lead to a fight against discrimination and stigmatization of persons with disabilities, including the digital divide, and policy measures would aim at creating a totally non-discriminatory environment, which is adapted to the needs of everybody (Hahn, 1993).

The term `human rights approach´ is often used as a synonym for the sociopolitical model, but some scholars, like Degener, highlight some important differences. The main critique of the human rights approach to the sociopolitical model is that it fails to acknowledge the reality of pain and suffering in the lives of some persons with disabilities. The human rights model respects this fact and argues that such factors as chronic pain need to be taken into account. Hence, it sees disability not solely as an issue of the environment but instead recognizes that some individuals experience limitations through their bodies (Degener, 2014). Other scholars, like Morris, defend the sociopolitical model and state that separating "impairment" from "disability" is the biggest achievement of the sociopolitical model as it challenges the assumption that the quality of life of persons is not determined by the abilities of their bodies. Hence, this model takes away the focus from the physical or intellectual "impairments" and puts responsibility onto society (Morris, 2001). It is controversial among scholars and activists if the human rights approach should be regarded as a new mode of disability or rather as an evolution of the sociopolitical

model or even just as a synonym. It is important to keep this current discussion in mind but since research is so divided and also because the EU has not officially positioned itself to this new approach, it will not be further regarded in the following analysis.

	Medical model	Economic model	Sociopolitical model
View on disability	As an impairment, physical or cognitive limitation, "sick role"	Physical or cognitive limitation, impairment in employment	Social and attitudinal environment disable the individual
Location of disability	Disability lies within the individual	Disability lies within the individual	Disability is located in the environment
Use of ICT	For diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disabilities	To "balance out" impairments in the context of employment	To provide participation, foster equality

Figure 1 - table: models of disability

2.3. Concluding Remarks and Expectations

In conclusion, even though persons with disabilities are heavily affected by the digital divide, they are consequently underrepresented in the EUs discourse on the digital divide and are often only mentioned as one of several marginalized groups. However, in the past years, the EU has adopted several policies regarding disability in the context of the digital divide. Officially, the EU is committed to following the sociopolitical model of disability through the adoption of the UNCRPD. However, the European Union's discourse on disability is often very deficit oriented, which reflects the medical model of disability (Adam, Kreps, 2009). On the other hand, the discourse on disability as well as on the digital divide shows a focus on economic concerns. This suggests that the EUs representation of disability in its discourse on the digital divide reflects an understanding of persons with disabilities, which fits the economic model of disability instead of the sociopolitical model (Altman, 2001). It is expected that the policy documents show that the EU in reality still often uses the economic model of disability to plan and justify policies regarding the digital divide in the context of disability. It is expected that the EU´s reasoning for fostering the inclusion of persons with disabilities and diminishing the digital divide does not only rely on human rights and social inclusion arguments - like the social model reasoning would do - but is also heavily influenced by economic interests. To be able to verify or falsify these expectations an analysis on the EU´s discourse on the digital divide and disability needs to be conducted.

3. Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the methods that are applied in this thesis and to explain why a critical discourse analysis is best suited for answering the research question. First, the case selection will be explained to justify why analyzing the EUs discourse is relevant. Then, the method of data collection will be discussed including the relevance of the selected policy documents. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated how the collected data will be analyzed and it will be reasoned why the chosen method of data analysis is best suited to answer the research question. Finally, the created coding scheme to conduct the analysis will be presented.

3.1. Case Description

This thesis examines how disability is represented and constructed in the discourse on the digital divide. To do so the European Union was chosen as the case studied because in Europe the EU is the main actor in shaping disability policy. The EU has acquired increasing power of governance in the field of disability rights by setting norms, standards, and conventions (Priestly, 2007). The EU has also become an important actor in aligning political strategies to diminish the digital divide. The European Union is not only important for setting higher standards for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Europe but also in influencing the national policymakers to promote inclusion in every member state. As the key figure and link between international regulations by the UN and national strategies in the member states, the EU´s position is central.

In 2008, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted, which came into force in the European Union in 2011. The UNCRPD is the first international, legally binding instrument setting minimum standards for the rights of persons with disabilities and it is also the first human rights convention to which the EU has become a party (UN, 2023). The convention claims to be a paradigm shift from *"viewing persons with disabilities as "objects" of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as "subjects" with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights […] as well as being active members of society"* (UN, 2023). The convention thereby legally establishes the sociopolitical model of disability. The European Union has recognized the sociopolitical model of disability as the basis for its disability policy (Degener, 2014). So officially and ideologically the EU is promoting and working towards an all-inclusive society, trying to deconstruct external barriers and diminishing discriminatory attitudes and stigmata.

Nevertheless, in its discourse on the digital divide, the EU has adopted a market-oriented approach, which strives towards technological innovation as the main goal (van Dijk, 2008). Even though "participation" and "accessibility" are terms that gain more and more importance in the EUs discourse, the concepts that are most discussed are business and economy. This suggests that the most important motivation for closing the digital divide lies in creating economic benefits and not in fostering social inclusion (Stewart et al., 2006). It needs to be analyzed in which way the EU constructs and represents

disability in its discourse on the digital divide and how the EUs perspective on disability in this discourse has changed, especially considering the paradigm shift, which was introduced by the adoption of the UNCRPD.

3.2. Method of data collection

The analysis will rely on qualitative data in the form of EU policy documents regarding the digital divide and disability. The basis of the analysis will be the European Union's disability strategy plans, most of them presented by the European Commission. The "New European Community Disability Strategy" was adopted in 1996 and is thereby one of the first EU policy papers that discuss the digital divide and disability. The European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 will be included as it was adopted shortly after the United Nations enacted its paradigm shift in the UNCRPD regarding the perception of disability. And finally, the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 will be included as the newest document reflecting the EUs discourse. Additionally, other policy documents regarding the digital divide, like the European Accessibility Act, will be analyzed. These policy documents are suited to conduct the analysis and to answer the research question because with their help the evolution of the EU´s representation of disability in its discourse on the digital divide over time can be reconstructed and categorized. The documents were adopted by the EU before and after the adoption of the UNCRPD, which is expected to have introduced a paradigm shift in the perception of disability. With the analysis of these policy documents it can be identified if and how the EUs discourse has changed and with the help of the more recent policy documents the current construction of disability by the European Union can be identified.

3.3. Method of data analysis

To be able to identify how the European Union represents persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide and which model of disability it thereby follows, the language and formulation used in EU policy documents regarding disability and the digital divide have to be analyzed. The best fitting approach for this is conducting a discourse analysis. Given (2008) defines discourse analyses as "a cluster of related methods for studying language use and its role in social life" (Given, 2008, p. 217). The aim of this method is to analyze texts regarding their unseen meanings and discourses. The core feature of this methodology is that discourse is seen as central to constructing social life. It is assumed that texts are open to interpretation as they can have multiple meanings, which depend on the context they are written in (Given, 2008). The underlying research tradition of this method is constructivism as is believed that there is no objective reality but that the ways in which we understand reality are culturally and historically shaped. Subsequently, knowledge is also socially constructed. From this follows that knowledge and observations of the world have to be critically questioned (Gill, 2000).

One subtype of discourse analyses is the critical discourse analysis, which was developed in the late 1980s and in the context of disability studies was especially influenced by Fairclough, Wodak, and van Dijk. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) explores the relations between discourse and the social, political,

and cultural context. This methodological approach highlights the importance of analyzing text not just by itself but instead in the context that it was written in. It is assumed that discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned. That means that CDA is on the one side shaped by the external social structures and on the other side it has the ability to shape these structures (Jørgensen, Phillips, 2011). The underlying assumption of critical discourse analysis is that discursive practices reflect and reproduce the unequal power dynamics between social groups. The aim of CDA is to reveal the role of discourse in maintaining these unequal power relations and how through those the social world is constructed and perpetuated. Critical discourse analysis is thereby not neutral or apolitical, instead, it takes the side of the disadvantaged minority and aims toward social change (Jørgensen, Phillips, 2011). This methodological approach is seen as fitting for my proposed bachelor thesis as it makes it possible to critically asses in which way the EU represents persons with disabilities and how this representation reproduces and eventually even enforces their discrimination, especially regarding the accessibility of ICT.

To analyze the policy documents regarding the way in which the EU represents persons with disabilities in its discourse, a coding scheme is used. The coding scheme makes it possible to connect the theoretical models with the reality of discourse and thereby enables the structuration and classification of the data collected. With the help of the scheme, it will be possible to identify the model of disability that the EU follows. As stated in the theory section, three models of disability, namely the medical model, the economic model, and the sociopolitical model will be used as the theoretical basis for this classification. The coding scheme will thereby look at the word sense, meaning that synonyms of the keywords are also included in the analysis. The codes and keywords will be created before the analysis, however new insights during the analysis of the policy documents can change and amplify the coding scheme. In the analysis, the existence and frequency of a concept will be considered to be able to determine which model of disability is the dominant one in the EU.

The coding scheme provides three codes for each model, which are all attached to several keywords. The model below pictures roughly the coding scheme, the detailed scheme is added to the Appendix (Appendix B).

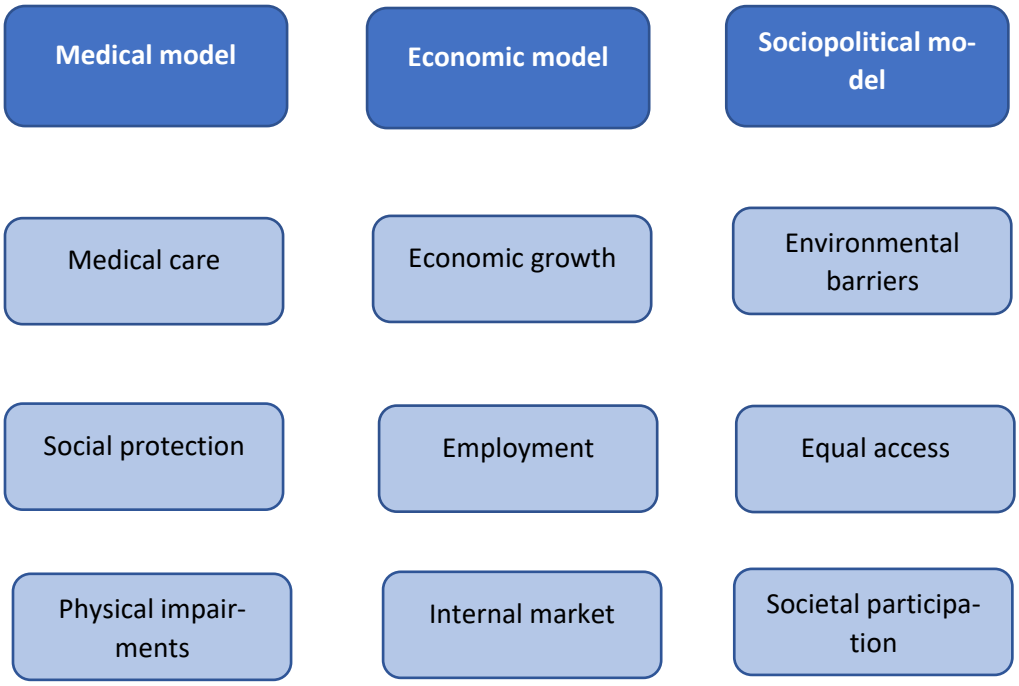

Figure 2: Coding Scheme – models of disability

3.4. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, a critical discourse analysis is the methodological approach, which is most suited to identify how the European Union represents disability in its discourse on the digital divide, as it allows to uncover hidden meanings and to critically assess the EUs discourse. Through the CDA it will be analyzed how the concept of disability is constructed in the EUs discourse and this concept will then be critically questioned. This will be done through the examination of EU policy documents on the digital divide and disability, which serve as the data basis for the following analysis and which will be categorized and analyzed with the help of the created coding scheme, which makes it possible to apply the theoretical models of disability to the reality of discourse.

4. Analysis

The aim of the following chapter is to answer the research question **in what way the European Union represents persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide**. Therefore, the results of the empirical analysis of policy documents of the European Union regarding the digital divide and disability are presented, briefly explaining the key arguments of each document. The results are then interpreted with the help of the theoretical insights on the models of disability and the digital divide to be able to answer the previously stated research questions. Thereby, first the evolution of the EU´s discourse since the 1990s is analyzed, which is followed by an evaluation of the current discourse. The findings of the critical discourse analysis will be outlined with the help of key quotations from the policy documents, showing how the EU represents persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide.

4.1. Evolution of the EUs discourse on disability and the digital divide

Officially, the European Union states that its view on disability has changed after the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Previously, the medical or economic views on disability were applied, which perceive disability primarily as an impairment that needs to be "balanced" out. However, since the introduction of the UNCRPD, the EU claims to follow a sociopolitical view on disability, seeing it rather based in environmental barriers than in the individual (Priestly, 2007). With the help of policy documents from the past decades it will be analyzed **in what way the discourse has changed over the years and if a connection can be established to the introduction of the UNCRPD.**

Interestingly enough, signs of the sociopolitical model of disability can already be identified in early documents of the European Union regarding disability, as in the following excerpt:

> *"Our societies are, in many ways, organised for an "average" citizen without any disability, and, therefore, a great number of citizens are excluded from the rights and opportunities of the vast majority."*(Commission of the European Communities, 1996, p. 3).

This extract shows the recognition that persons with disabilities are facing exclusion from societal participation due to external barriers in their environment. It acknowledges that the world is built in a way that persons with disabilities are hindered by the structure of the environment we live in and that we construct. Furthermore, the paper states that through the remodeling of our societal organization, the barriers and difficulties for persons with disabilities can be reduced significantly. The discourse at that time also acknowledges that the stereotypes that evolve around disability build and reproduce the exclusion and discrimination of persons with disabilities so that prejudices, lack of opportunities, and discrimination reinforce each other (Commission of the European Communities, 1996). All of these are signs of a sociopolitical view because this model locates the problems that persons with disabilities face not in the individuals themselves, but instead in their environment.

Even though the EU presents itself as progressive, the quote above reflects in its wording the underlying assumptions of the medical and economic model of disability: that persons with disabilities have an impairment and therefore deviate from the "norm" (Altmann, 2001). The formulation differentiates between "average" citizens and persons with disabilities, making a difference between what is supposedly "normal" and what is perceived as "unnormal". This, contrary to the sociopolitical model, very much sees the reason for discrimination and exclusion in the individual with disabilities itself because of its supposed "abnormality". Hence, even though here the EU claims to pursue the sociopolitical model, its definitions at that time are often deficit-oriented, which fits both the medical and the economic model (Adam, Kreps, 2009).

When looking at the view on digital technologies in the late 1990s and early 2000s it becomes apparent that the discourse at that time sees a lot of potential in these new developments to foster equal opportunities, including for persons with disabilities. But it is seldom specified in which way exactly ICT is supposed to combat discrimination and exclusion. Digital technologies at that time were not nearly as far developed as they are today and the Union apparently also had not quite found its way to include ICT into its policies, at least regarding its discourse on disability. In its discourse at that time the importance and advantages of the development of digital technologies are frequently mentioned but without specifying in which way exactly persons with disabilities are going to benefit from ICT. Often formulations are used like *"harness positive developments of ICT"* (Commission of the European Communities, 1996) or *"new technologies empower persons with disabilities"* (Commission of the European Communities, 2003) but it does not get more specific. However, also the potential downsides of ICT are already discussed: the risks of the digital divide are pointed out and it is emphasized that disadvantaged people cannot be left behind. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that many persons with disabilities face difficulties accessing and using ICT. The position on the use of digital technologies is reflected in the following excerpt:

> *"Accessible Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) will improve the quality of life of people with disabilities significantly. At the same time, the lack of equal opportunities to access ICT can lead to exclusion"* (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, p. 2).

However, in the discourse at that time, the prospective risks and potential benefits of ICT for persons with disabilities are mainly focusing on employment. It is stated that *"new technologies […] empower people with disabilities and therefore facilitate access to employment"* (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 3). This reflects the central role of employment in the discourse on disability and the digital divide at that time, where employment is seen as the most critical factor for social inclusion (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). It becomes apparent that the EUs representation of disability in its discourse on ICT at that time is contradictory. On the one hand, it is emphasized that:

> *"The EU also sees disability as a social construct. The EU social model of disability stresses the environmental barriers in society which prevent the full participation of people with disabilities in society."* (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 4).

Seeing disability as a social construct is a clear indicator for the EU following the sociopolitical model because this implies that disability is not seen as a trait located within a person, but instead, disability is seen as the barriers posed on the individual from the environment and as something constructed by society (Gogging, 2017). The EU acknowledges the stereotypes that exist around disability and states that disability does not equal a lack of ability and thereby officially commits to the sociopolitical model (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). Nevertheless, as you can see in the quote above, it can be identified that the discourse at that time mainly centers around employment and on how digital technologies can foster employment of persons with disabilities, which strongly points towards the economic model. Even though in the discourse it is often mentioned that ICT will help create equal opportunities, the role of the economy and the importance of the employability of citizens, including persons with disabilities, is always at the center. This also becomes apparent in the formulation of the texts where economy and employment in enumerations are always listed in the first place, followed by participation in cultural, social, and political life (Commission of the European Communities, 2005). Furthermore, it is explicitly stated that "*employment remains the most critical factor for social inclusion"* (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 3). This shows how the EU perceives disability: mainly as a problem of employment. This view on disability is a clear feature of the economic model (Hahn, 1993).

It can be summarized that even before the introduction of the UNCRPD, which is commonly seen as a turning point in the international disability discourse, the EU claimed to follow the sociopolitical view but in fact, many features of the economic model can be identified in its representation of disability (Stewart et al., 2006). This implies that the official positioning of the EU and its actual representation of persons with disabilities are conflicting. It must further be analyzed if this has changed after the introduction of the UNCRPD.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was adopted on 13 December 2006 by the United Nations and opened for signature in 2007 (UN, 2023). It is the first international, legally binding instrument setting minimum standards for the rights of persons with disabilities.

> *"[It] takes to a new height the movement from viewing persons with disabilities as "objects" of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as "subjects" with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society"* (UN, 2023).

This convention is regarded as a paradigm shift by officially introducing the sociopolitical model, which sees disability as a problem of the environment and not as a deficit of the individual (Council of Europe, 2017). The UNCRPD is the first human rights convention to which the EU has become a party, entering into force in the Union on 22 January 2011 (European Commission, 2023). The Union´s policy was heavily influenced by the rights-based approaches elsewhere in the world, but especially by the UN. On the other side, the EU also influenced the UN Convention (Priestly, 2007). Hence, it can be assumed that the convention has not changed the EUs discourse only since 2011 but already since its adoption in 2006.

One of the first documents that the EU adopted after the introduction of the UNCRPD was the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, which is heavily based on the UNCRPD. This is already reflected in the name of the strategy, which is called *"a renewed commitment to a barrier-free Europe*" (European Commission, 2010). The strategy focuses on eliminating barriers and improving the lives of individuals as well as bringing benefits to society and the economy, without burdening the industry (European Commission, 2010). The relevance of the Convention is also shown by the fact that the EU has adopted its definition of disability, instead of developing its own definition.

> *‘"People with disabilities" is taken to include any person with an impairment of a physical, sensory, mental, or intellectual nature who faces obstacles to participation on equal and equally effective terms with all others in all aspects of the life of the community"* (European Commission, 2010, p.21).

Apart from that, it can be observed that the discourse of the EU after the adoption of the UNCRPD changed. In recent years of discourse, it is often emphasized that the aim of the Union is to improve the lives of persons with disabilities and to ensure their integration into society and occupation, as well as their independence and equal participation (Directive (EU) 2019/882). Thereby it is noted that the EUs disability strategy strives for full inclusion in society by fostering non-discrimination, equal treatment, and self-determination (European Parliament, 2020). Additionally, it is stressed that persons with disabilities are discriminated by environmental barriers and that these should be reduced (European Commission, 2021). The emphasis on fostering equality of access and opportunities and the full inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in society as well as the idea that environmental barriers are the main reason for the exclusion of persons with disabilities are indeed reflecting the sociopolitical model, which has these points as its main objectives. To make the world more accessible the EU strives for an "design for all" approach, which underlying assumption is that everyone – persons with and without disabilities – benefit from the reduction of environmental barriers and increased accessibility (Directive (EU) 2019/882).

Regarding the role of digital technologies, it becomes apparent that they play a much bigger role in the newer discourse. Here it is emphasized that:

> *"Accessibility to the built and virtual environments, to information and communication technologies (ICT), goods and services, including transport and infrastructure, is an enabler of rights and a prerequisite for the full participation of persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others."* (European Commission, 2021, p.6).

Thereby the use and usefulness of digital technologies, especially for persons with disabilities, are made much more explicit than in the former years. It is stated that ICT accessibility is not only important for better access to information and services, including transportation, but for example also for political participation through the accessibility of information and polling stations and for increased admission to the judicial system. It is furthermore stressed that not only the accessibility of digital technology must be improved for persons with disabilities but also their digital skills, meaning their abilities and knowledge to use ICT (European Commission, 2021). This debate reflects the current trends in the general discourse on the digital divide, which is shifting more and more from questions of accessibility to matters of digital skills (Rogers, 2001). This emphasis on creating equal access reflects the sociopolitical model to which the EU is officially committed through its adoption of the UNCRPD. The discourse and the wording reflect an awareness of the implications of the sociopolitical model and the language used is much more inclusive and less deficit-oriented than it was in the earlier years of discourse.

However, also in the recent discourse, a strong focus on the economy can be identified. It is argued that increased accessibility through ICT does not only foster social inclusion but makes it possible to pursue economic growth (Directive (EU) 2016/2102). In the European Accessibility Act, which aims to improve the functioning of the internal market for accessible products and services by creating divergent rules in member states it is stressed that *"[a]ccessibility requirements should be introduced in the manner that is least burdensome for the economic operators and the Member States"* (Directive (EU) 2016/2102). Furthermore, the European Parliament states that *"[t]he way disability is addressed has shifted from a purely medical approach to one that focuses on maximum functioning and well-being"* (European Parliament, 2020, p. 2). This formulation and emphasis on "functioning" thereby reflects the economic view, putting employability at the center of disability policies. It is also directly stated that through the closing of the digital divide, the labor market inclusion of persons with disabilities will be fostered (European Commission, 2021). With the help of critical discourse analysis, the prioritization of the EUs interests can be recognized by the choice of words or the order in which they are listed. It is notable that in the current discourse, the economy is often mentioned before society. It is furthermore emphasized that new technologies create occupational opportunities for persons with disabilities – especially through options for remote work (European Commission, 2022). All of this shows that the European Union uses the sociopolitical model in its discourse on the digital divide but still has a big focus on the economy and the internal market.

In summary, a shift in the EU´s representation of disability in its discourse on the digital divide can be identified. In the 1990s the EU claimed to pursue a sociopolitical model but the analysis of the discourse

at that time shows that back then often a deficit-oriented view on disability and a strong focus on employment can be identified. This attitude can be clearly ascribed to the economic model of disability, which puts employment at the center of its policy measures regarding persons with disabilities. After the introduction of the UNCRPD, a notable shift can be identified. It becomes apparent that the words that are chosen in the recent years of discourse are selected more carefully to not be deficit-oriented but instead more inclusive. The way in which the discourse is formulated clearly reflects the sociopolitical model and the EU also officially commits itself to following this model. But even though employment is not seen any more as a central strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, the economic interests of the Union are still very relevant. In the discourse on the digital divide, it is often stressed that digital technologies not only pave the way for more inclusion but that increased accessibility is also relevant for the functioning of the internal market (Directive (EU) 2019/882).

4.2. The EUs representation of disability in its discourse on the digital divide

The presented results on the evolution of the discourse also partly answer the second sub-question of this thesis: **how is the concept of disability constructed and represented in the EUs discourse on the digital divide?** The first thing that comes to attention is that the EU for a long time had no consistent or uniform definition of disability, however, more recent documents all adopt the definition that was established in the UNCRPD. In its discourse, the Union emphasizes that the EUs disability policy strives for full societal inclusion for persons with disabilities and that it bases its policies on the key principles of non-discrimination, self-determination, and equal treatment (European Parliament, 2020). In its discourse, the EU often emphasizes how important the inclusion of persons with disabilities is and that the EU has made it its mission to fight against the discrimination they face. All of this clearly reflects the sociopolitical model, which is concerned with equal accessibility and societal participation. Thereby the importance of ICT for inclusion is highlighted. However, many of the documents regarding disability, like the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, are relatively general and deal with ICT access and the digital divide only as one aspect of inclusion. In these documents, its often highlighted that access to digital technologies is crucial for the inclusion of persons with disabilities without specifying in what way exactly access to ICT can be beneficial. In recent years, since ICT accessibility became more central, some documents, like the European Accessibility Act or the Web Accessibility Directive, are concretely considering the intersection of disability and the digital divide.

Currently, the EU believes that the accessibility of ICT is an enabler of rights and a prerequisite for the full participation of persons with disabilities (European Commission, 2021). The Union also acknowledges the potential dangers of ICT and especially of the digital divide. It recognizes the feasible danger of the digital divide and that persons with disabilities are in a more vulnerable position than other citizens. It is emphasized that disadvantaged citizens, including persons with disabilities, cannot be left behind (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). The EU states in its discourse that:

> *"[a]ccessible Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) will improve the quality of life of people with disabilities significantly. At the same time, the lack of equal opportunities to access ICT can lead to exclusion"* (Commission of the European Communities, 2005).

But, as already discussed earlier, the EU sees mainly the benefits of new digital technologies, for example in enabling participation, especially for political participation, better accessibility of the judicial system, and in creating more on-site and remote services tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities (European Commission, 2021). The EU also sees many advantages in ICT for the labor market inclusion of persons with disabilities. In the discourse also the importance of ICT and ICT accessibility for the functioning of the EUs internal market and the expected economic growth following from it are emphasized. It is believed that digital technologies are an important source of potential growth and that inaccessibility distorts effective competition in the internal market. Thereby, measures promoting accessibility and inclusion should be introduced in the way that is least burdensome for the economy and industry (Directive (EU) 2019/882). In conclusion, it can be stated that the EU sees ICT accessibility as beneficial for fostering the societal and occupational participation of persons with disabilities but also for economic growth and the functioning of the internal market.

In its disability policy, the EU has committed itself to a mainstreaming approach. This implies that the perspective of disability must be included in every stage of the policy process, from design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. In all of these steps, the needs of persons with disabilities must be considered with the goal to create equal opportunities (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). But this also implies that accessibility for persons with disabilities should be considered in all policy measures that potentially affect them. This includes all policies, which deal with ICT and the consequences for society. Because, as the EU itself puts it:

> *"Accessibility – essential for some, and useful for all – is therefore a key driver for the development of a knowledge-based society and makes it possible to pursue economic growth while ensuring social inclusion"* (European Commission, 2021, p.1).

However, when looking at the EU documents that are not specifically concerning disability but instead are concerning digital technologies in a more general sense, for example in the i2010 strategy on a European Information Society for growth and employment (Commission of the European Communities, 2005), the needs of persons with disabilities are insufficiently considered. In the Union´s discourse on the digital divide disability is often only mentioned as one aspect that needs to be considered, often in enumerations with other disadvantaged groups. Hence, here disability and the special environmental barriers that persons with disabilities face are not considered in the way the EU claims to do with its mainstreaming approach. The EU cannot fulfill its own ambitions or promises.

Returning to the original question of how the concept of disability is constructed and represented in the EUs discourse on the digital divide, a mixed picture persists. In its discourse on disability digital

technologies have growing importance and are perceived by the EU as central for combatting discrimination and exclusion and important for fostering societal participation. Thereby, the digital divide, which especially affects persons with disabilities, is seen as a serious problem that needs to be tackled. On the other hand, in its discourse on ICT and digital technologies, disability, and the digital divide do not play a significant role. Instead, the potentials of ICT are outlined but the possible disadvantages and inequalities that can occur are only briefly presented without taking into account the special barriers that persons with disabilities face.

4.3. Concluding Remarks

To conclude this chapter, the key insights into the way the European Union's discourse on disability and the digital divide has changed over the years will be summarized. Additionally, it will be stated which influence the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) had on the evolution of this discourse. Finally, it will be concluded how the concept of disability is constructed and represented in the EUs discourse on the digital divide.

First of all, a change in the EU´s discourse on the digital divide and disability can be identified. In the 1990s and early 2000s the European Union already claimed to pursue the sociopolitical model of disability but a closer look at the discourse, especially at the language and formulations used, shows that the view on disability at that time is often deficit oriented. For example, it is differentiated between "average" citizens and persons with disabilities (Commission of the European Communities, 1996). Furthermore, a strong focus is put on employment as finding occupation for persons with disabilities is seen as the central measure for inclusion. Even though the EU claims to follow the sociopolitical model, the way it talks about disability clearly reflects the economic model because persons with disabilities are seen as "impaired" and "unnormal".

With the adoption of the UNCRPD in 2006, entering into force in 2011, the EU officially committed to the sociopolitical model of disability and acknowledges that it previously has not coherently pursued this model. In the newer documents, the EU is keen on emphasizing that its discourse now reflects the sociopolitical model and indeed an actual change, especially in the language used, can be identified. After the adoption of the UNCRPD, the EU formulates its policies in a lot more sensitive and inclusive way. The words chosen reflect the sociopolitical model as disability is not presented as a problem of the individual but it is instead emphasized that disability is conditioned through environmental barriers and exclusion. Additionally, employment is not seen as the center of inclusion anymore. However, the economic interest of the Union are still very present in its discourse on disability. The problem of the digital divide is not only seen in the exclusion it creates but also in potential distortions of the internal market. It becomes apparent that the EU sees digital technologies as a central tool for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, regarding their societal, political, cultural, and occupational participation. The digital divide must be closed as it is perceived as a serious problem and threat to equality. However, in its discourse on digital technologies in general, persons with disabilities play at most a minor role. In this

discourse, the EU highlights the opportunities that ICT carry for the internal market and the growth potential they offer. But in the general discourse on ICT, the role of such technologies for persons with disabilities is at most discussed alongside with other disadvantaged groups, like persons with low levels of education. Thereby only the supposedly many potentials and the supposedly few dangers of digital technologies are briefly discussed, without taking into account the special barriers that persons with disabilities face.

In conclusion, in its representation of persons with disabilities, the EU has shifted from the economic model of disability to the sociopolitical model. However, a strong focus on economic impact can still be identified. Additionally, the emphasis on the equal rights of persons with disabilities to societal participation and equal opportunities as well as the insight that persons with disabilities are facing external barriers that specifically need to be considered in policymaking have not yet been transferred to other areas of the EUs policy making, including its discourse on new digital technologies.

5. Conclusion

In the final chapter, the research question, which was stated at the very beginning of this paper, will be answered and the key insights will be summarized. Furthermore, the limitations of this research leading to suggestions for future research will be elaborated. Finally, the practical implications of the new insights for the European Union's representation of disability in its discourse on the digital divide will be outlined.

5.1. Answer to research question

The initially posed research question asked **in what way the European Union represents persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide**. It can be concluded that in its discourse on disability, the EU follows mainly the sociopolitical model of disability. This signifies that the Union perceives disability as a social construct and acknowledges that persons with disabilities are facing external barriers and discrimination. In the disability discourse on digital technologies, ICT are perceived as tools with which the societal participation of persons with disabilities can be fostered while at the same time, the dangers of the digital divide between persons with and without disabilities are emphasized. The digital divide is seen as a problem but the chances of ICT are estimated as even higher. The EU highlights that equal opportunities and rights of persons with disabilities can be best achieved through a mainstreaming approach, meaning that the needs of these individuals must be specifically discussed and included in every step of the policy cycle and within all policies of the Union. However, when analyzing the general discourse of the EU on digital technologies it becomes apparent that the Union does not hold up to its promises and is far away from considering the needs of persons with disabilities in all of its policies. Instead, persons with disabilities are not part of the discourse on digital technologies at all. They are only mentioned in enumerations together with other disadvantaged groups that would also require special consideration. Even though in its discourse on disability the EU tries to present itself as very progressive and inclusive, mirroring the sociopolitical model, this is not reflected in its discourse on the digital divide in general as persons with disability are not really represented there. In fact, the space given to persons with disabilities in this discourse is so small that it is not possible to identify which model of disability the EU represents here.

5.2. Limitations of this paper and suggestions for future research

This research has not only demonstrated how the European Union constructs disability, namely following the sociopolitical model of disability, but it has also shown the importance that the Union gives to holding up its own promises and guaranteeing the inclusion of persons with disabilities, which reportedly is not too high.

Regarding the model of disability that the EU represents in its discourse on the digital divide, some scholars previously stated that the EU pretends to follow the sociopolitical model of disability but that in reality the definitions of disability are often deficit-oriented and therefore can be ascribed to the

medical model (Adam, Kreps, 2009). The analysis conducted in this paper can confirm that the EU relatively early stated to follow the sociopolitical model even though it relativized this statement later. This paper also agrees with Adam and Kreps in that the EU in its earlier discourse pursued a deficit-oriented view on disability. However, the view of disability that the EU represented in the 1990s and 2000s is better reflected through the economic model. Because disability is perceived as an "impairment" but the impacts of this "impairment" are mainly connected to questions of occupation and employment. Hence, this paper agrees with Altman and Hahn in that in the 1990s and 2000s the economic model was the dominating approach in public disability policy (Hahn, 1993; Altman, 2001). However, after the adoption of the UNCRPD it can be identified that in its discourse on disability and the digital divide, the EU shifted to the sociopolitical model. Nevertheless, it also holds true what Stewart et al. found out in their research: that the most important motivation for closing the digital divide does not lie in fostering inclusion but in creating economic benefits (Stewart et al., 2006).

In this paper, it was analyzed in which way the EU represents persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide. Because of the limited scope of this analysis and the information provided in the policy documents that were analyzed, it was not differentiated between different forms of disability and the associated barriers that individuals face in the accessibility of ICT. For future research, it would be interesting to assess in which way the EUs representation of persons with physical and intellectual disabilities differ from each other. Additionally, it would be interesting to take a closer look at the EUs approach to handling the demographic development and age-related disabilities. Furthermore, it could be assessed in more detail to which extent the EU is willing to increase the accessibility of ICT when this does not also directly leads to economic benefits. Finally, it would be interesting to not only construe how the EU constructs disability and which promises it makes for inclusion but to assess in what way the EU puts pressure on its member states to follow the sociopolitical model of disability in their national discourses on disability and the digital divide.

5.3. Practical implications

To conclude this thesis, it has to be assessed which practical implications the results of the conducted analysis have for the European Union and its representation of persons with disabilities in its discourse on the digital divide. The EU can be given credit for acknowledging disability as a social construct and for realizing that persons with disabilities are facing discrimination and exclusion through external barriers, also regarding their access to ICT, which results in the digital divide. It is accredited as a good first step that the EU discusses the use and accessibility of digital technologies for persons with disabilities in its discourse on disability, for example in the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. But the Union must come up with more measures and specific policies to fight the digital divide. Thereby it is important that the EU not just follows the sociopolitical model in the words it chooses but also in the action it takes. This includes implementing measures that really foster the inclusion of persons with disabilities without making it dependent on potential economic impacts. The EU

must not only boast about the goal of inclusion but must prove that it will spare no effort or expense to inclusion a reality. This also implies that more persons with disabilities have to be included in the policy-making process. Only if persons with disabilities are politically represented the true representation of their interests can be guaranteed.

As the analysis showed, the EU needs to pay more attention to the special needs of persons with disabilities in its general discourse on ICT. It has promised to pursue a mainstreaming approach and to consider disability in all its policy steps but has yet to fulfill this promise. Persons with disability deserve and require more attention than just being listed as one of several disadvantaged groups. The barriers they face every day in their life must be actively fought. This has to be pursued especially by the European Commission but also by the European Parliament. These organs must actively advocate for equal opportunities and societal participation for persons with disabilities and must do everything in their power to encourage member states to also promote inclusion through national strategies.

Remarks on the language used

In this thesis, I tend to use the term “persons with disabilities”. Some persons might prefer and use other terms. Above all, everyone should be named in their preferred form.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Data collection

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Appendix B: Coding scheme

Model of disability	**Codes**	**Key words**	**Examples**
Medical view	Impairments	Impairments, physical limitations, cognitive limitations, sickness, `abnormal´, `unable`	*"Our societies are, in many ways, organised for an "average" citizen without any disability, and, therefore, a great number of citizens are excluded from the rights and opportunities of the vast majority" (Commission of the European Community, 1996, p. 3)*
	Medical care	Medical treatment, prevention, rehabilitation	
	Social protection	Extra costs, service, assistance,	
Economic view	Economic growth	Growth, innovation, investment, development	*"[N]ew technologies to empower people with disabilities and therefore facilitate access to employment" (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 3)*
	Internal market	Internal market, market stability, transferability	
	Employment	Employment, labor market, occupation, economic benefits, functioning, job opportunities	
Sociopolitical view	Societal participation	Human rights, involvement, social life, values, participation, social inclusion	*Accessibility to the built and virtual environments, to information and communication technologies (ICT), goods and services, including transport and infrastructure, is an enabler of rights and a prerequisite for the full participation of persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others." (European Commission, 2021, p. 6)*
	Equal access	Equal opportunities, equal accessibility,	
	Environmental barriers	External barriers, attitudes, discrimination, stereotypes, barrierfree	

Appendix C: Results of Analysis with ATLAS.ti

Codes	Number of Citations
Medical model	**14**
Impairments	6
Medical care	2
Social protection	7
Economic model	**117**
Economic growth	25
Employment	55
Internal market	44
Sociopolitical model	**171**
Environmental barriers	52
Equal access	84
Societal participation	52

Note: The total number of codes for one model might differ from the combined number of its sub-codes because sometimes the one citation was assigned more than one subcode.