

Seeing Everyone: How (Digital) Inclusive Brand Communication Affects Trust and Purchase Intentions

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Abstract: Digital accessibility is increasingly essential for participation in digital societies, yet its perception in brand communication remains underexplored. This study conceptualizes inclusive design not only as a technical requirement but as a communicative signal with ethical and strategic implications. It investigates how inclusion of cues influences consumer perceptions and brand-related outcomes. A sequential mixed-methods approach was applied. Study 1 employed qualitative interviews and observations with visually impaired users interacting with Instagram content varying in accessibility features. Results reveal that accessibility is experienced through design, emotional reactions, and symbolic inclusion of cues. Inclusive design enhances trust and recognition, while inaccessible content triggers frustration and exclusion. Building on these insights, Study 2 examines the impact of inclusive versus non-inclusive design on brand image, trust, and purchase intention among sighted consumers.

Keywords: Digital accessibility; Inclusive design; Brand communication; Consumer perception

1. EINLEITUNG/ INTRODUCTION

Digital accessibility has become a key prerequisite for participation in contemporary societies. As everyday life increasingly unfolds in digital environments, ensuring that all users, regardless of physical or cognitive ability, can understand and interact with online content has become an ethical and strategic concern (W3C, nD). Accessibility is no longer confined to the analogue sphere, it is an integral part of how citizens access information, services and brands. To contextualize the scope of this challenge, the WHO defines disability as interaction between personal and contextual factors that may hinder participation (World Health Organization, 2023), while the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB, 2024) reports that over 217 million people live with severe or moderate visual impairments, an additional 253 million with mild impairment. These figures illustrate that accessibility is not a marginal issue, but a collective responsibility.

Digital accessibility gains particular importance in visually dominated communication environments (e.g. Instagram (Marques et al., 2017)). While barriers such as missing alternative texts, low contrast ratios, or symbolic overload are most evident on social media, similar challenges apply across digital marketing. Accessibility thus serves as a benchmark for the inclusivity and ethical quality of digital communication. Beyond its social dimension, accessibility

carries growing strategic and economic relevance. Millennials and GenZ increasingly view inclusivity as a signal of brand responsibility and moral integrity. Up to 40% of GenZ report making purchase decisions based on inclusive campaigns (von Thaden et al., 2023; Montecchi et al., 2024). Brands that integrate inclusion into their communication may achieve profitability gains of up to 21% (Zhechev, 2024).

This highlights that inclusive communication does not only benefit people with disabilities. It also appeals to a broader audience that values empathy and ethical awareness in brand behavior (Boyd et al., 2020; Northey et al., 2020). Accessibility becomes a dual driver: a moral imperative and a competitive differentiator. However, despite its growing relevance, there is limited research on how consumers, both with and without impairment, perceive inclusion in digital communication (Arsel et al., 2022).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

While digital accessibility focuses on ensuring technical usability for people with disabilities through standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, inclusive design involves a broader approach. It represents a value-based approach that embeds empathy, diversity, and user participation from the outset (Haage & Bühler, 2019; Connell et al., 1997).

Studies indicate that inclusivity enhances brand authenticity and trust, strengthening the emotional connection between brand and consumer (Austin & Gaither, 2019; Park & Jiang, 2023). This benefit provides companies with a tangible business case for accessibility, motivating them to invest in inclusive design not merely out of compliance, but as a means of expressing brand integrity and building long-term loyalty. From the perspective of signaling theory (Spence, 1973; Cambier & Poncin, 2020), inclusive design acts as trust-enhancing cue that communicates reliability and moral integrity. When consumers perceive content as inclusive, they attribute higher empathy and authenticity to the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Venable et al., 2005).

Moreover, it fosters a sense of belonging and identification, which strengthens consumer-brand relationships (Hussain et al., 2025; Tuli et al., 2024). Brands that visibly commit to inclusion thus gain an emotional advantage, while those ignoring its risk being perceived as outdated or indifferent (Burgess et al., 2021; Sobande, 2020; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Exclusionary design elicits negative affective responses that weaken consumers' overall brand experience (Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). 83% of Millennials prefer inclusive brands, while 69% avoid those neglecting diversity and accessibility (Accenture, 2018; Zhechev, 2024).

Despite growing awareness of inclusive design, empirical research on how users perceive inclusion in brand communication remains scarce (Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). While prior studies in marketing and human-computer interaction examined technical aspects, subjective and symbolic dimensions of inclusive design are still underexplored (Gkatzola & Papadopoulos, 2024). Existing research tends to treat inclusive design as a compliance issue rather than as a communicative experience that carries social and economic meaning. Consequently, little is known about how users with and without visual impairment interpret inclusion cues in digital brand communication, or how such perceptions translate into brand-related outcomes such as trust, brand image or purchase intention. This ongoing project addresses this gap by

conceptualizing inclusive design as communicative signal that simultaneously fulfills moral and strategic functions and asks:

RQ1 (Exploratory): How do visually impaired users perceive inclusion in digital brand communication, and which design features are experienced as barriers/facilitators?

RQ2 (Confirmatory): How does inclusive (vs non-inclusive) visual design affect brand image, trust, and purchase intention among sighted consumers?

3. METHOD

This project employs a sequential mixed-methods design combining an exploratory qualitative study (Study 1) and a confirmatory experimental study (Study 2). The qualitative phase explores how visually impaired users experience inclusion/ exclusion in digital brand communication, identifying design barriers and inclusion cues. Building on this, the experimental phase tests whether inclusion-driven design elements affect brand-related responses among sighted consumers. Together, both studies integrate user-centered and market-centered perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of accessibility as both a human experience and a strategic communication factor for brands.

Study 1 employed a qualitative, exploratory approach to capture the functional and emotional dimensions of accessibility that are difficult to quantify. Data was collected through participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Participants interacted with a curated Instagram account featuring six posts that systematically varied in accessibility features (e.g., contrast, alt text, typography). Observations documented how participants navigated and interpreted the posts, followed by interviews on perceived inclusion and exclusion cues. Each session lasted 60-80 minutes. The sample comprised seven adults (aged 22–58, 4 female) with varying degrees of visual impairment, recruited via snowball sampling through accessibility networks.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The coding process produced 48 initial codes that were condensed into four overarching themes: (1) Design as Access Barrier, (2) Navigation & Cognitive Load, (3) Emotional & Symbolic Reactions, and (4) Perceived Inclusion Signals.

3.1. Results and Discussion | Study 1

Thematic analysis revealed four core dimensions shaping participants' perception of inclusion and exclusion in digital brand communication.

(1) Design as Access Barrier:

Design emerged as a key determinant of inclusion. Small font sizes, low contrast, and unscalable captions restricted readability and comprehension, highlighting that exclusion often arises from aesthetic design choices. Clear typography, minimal visual noise, and balanced contrast were perceived as markers of inclusivity.

(2) Navigation & Cognitive Load:

Complex layouts and missing structure increased cognitive effort and reduced user engagement. Participants reported that intuitive navigation and simplified interfaces facilitated understanding, while dynamic designs created fatigue and disengagement.

(3) Emotional and Symbolic Reactions:

Inaccessible content triggered frustration and feelings of exclusion, whereas accessible elements such as descriptive alt-texts fostered trust and appreciation. Accessibility was interpreted as a sign of social recognition; brands that design inclusively were perceived as empathetic and respectful.

(4) Perceived Inclusion Signals:

Inclusion was recognized through subtle cues such as tone, clarity, and structure. Participants associated inclusive communication with moral integrity, interpreting it as a signal of brand responsibility.

Findings of Study 1 demonstrate that accessibility is not merely a technical feature, but a communicative signal. Inclusive communication design was further experienced as a sign of acknowledgment: an indication that brands “see” and value all users. Insights from Study 1 informed the development of experimental stimuli for Study 2.

3.2. Research Outlook | Study 2

Building on the insights of Study 1, Study 2 experimentally tests whether inclusive (vs. non-inclusive) visual design elicits more favorable brand evaluations, higher trust, and stronger purchase intentions among sighted consumers. The study employs a between-subjects design in which participants are randomly assigned to one of two visual conditions (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Example of stimulus inclusive vs. non-inclusive visual design

Each participant is exposed to an Instagram post (inclusive versus non-inclusive visual design) about everyday consumer products (e.g., apparel, food). Study 2 examines whether perceived inclusion functions as a mechanism linking visual inclusion to positive brand outcomes.

This connects qualitative evidence on lived experience (Study 1) with quantitative consumer responses (Study 2), integrating user-centered and market-centered perspectives on inclusive communication design and marking the shift from exploring emotional meaning to testing generalizable behavioral effects.

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