

The Role of Media in Enhancing Accessibility for Individuals with Disabilities: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. Accessibility has become an increasingly important component of digital communication, yet many media platforms remain insufficiently accessible for individuals with disabilities, limiting equal access to information, education, public services, and social participation. This study systematically reviews the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines and searched peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science (WoS). Fourteen eligible studies published between 2020 and 2025 were included in the final synthesis. The thematic analysis identified six dominant themes: (1) media accessibility and digital participation, (2) digital content and audiovisual accessibility, (3) ICT and assistive digital technologies, (4) media literacy and inclusive education, (5) social media, visibility, and representation, and (6) emerging accessibility issues related to artificial intelligence and accessibility-by-design. Overall, the findings indicate that accessibility has evolved beyond a technical requirement into a strategic communication approach that supports inclusive participation, digital equity, and social inclusion. This review contributes by synthesising fragmented evidence into a comprehensive understanding of accessible media and offers practical recommendations for researchers, policymakers, educators, media practitioners, and technology developers in designing more inclusive communication systems.

Keywords Media accessibility; digital communication; disability; inclusive communication; systematic literature review

Introduction

Digital communication has become an essential component of modern society, influencing how individuals access information, participate in education, engage in employment, and interact within social and public environments. The rapid expansion of digital media has created new opportunities for communication and participation; however, these opportunities remain unevenly distributed, particularly for individuals with disabilities. Despite continuous technological advancement, many digital communication platforms, websites, social media applications, audiovisual services, and online information systems continue to present significant accessibility barriers that restrict equal participation. These barriers are frequently associated with inaccessible interface design, limited compatibility with assistive technologies, inadequate alternative communication formats, and insufficient consideration of diverse user needs during the media development process (Chemnad & Othman, 2024; WHO, 2022).

Media accessibility has consequently become an increasingly important research topic within communication, media, and disability studies. Rather than being viewed solely as a technological issue, accessibility is now recognised as a multidimensional communication process that enables individuals with

disabilities to perceive, understand, navigate, interact with, and contribute to digital communication environments. Accessible media therefore plays an important role in promoting equal access to information, strengthening social participation, and supporting digital inclusion across education, employment, healthcare, and public services. This perspective aligns with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which recognises access to information and communication as a fundamental human right necessary for achieving full and effective participation in society (United Nation, 2006).

Recent studies have examined accessibility from various disciplinary perspectives. Research has investigated accessible social media platforms (Saleem Khasawneh, 2024), audiovisual accessibility services (Arrufat-Pérez-de-zafra et al., 2021; Oncins & Orero, 2021), media literacy among persons with disabilities (Sousa & Costa, 2022), digital participation (Keeley & Bernasconi, 2023), disability representation in communication (Iturregui-Gallardo, 2023), artificial intelligence and accessibility (Chemnad & Othman, 2024; McNally et al., 2024), and accessibility-by-design within digital communication systems (Silva et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that accessibility has become an increasingly interdisciplinary field that integrates communication, information technology, education, human-computer interaction, and disability studies.

Although existing research has generated valuable insights into specific aspects of accessibility, the current body of knowledge remains fragmented across different communication contexts, technological platforms, and disciplinary perspectives. Most previous studies have focused on individual accessibility domains, such as social media, audiovisual translation, educational technologies, or assistive systems, while relatively limited attention has been given to synthesising how media collectively contributes to improving accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Consequently, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the dominant research themes, methodological characteristics, emerging trends, and practical implications that shape contemporary media accessibility research. This fragmentation makes it difficult for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to identify broader patterns that may guide future development of inclusive communication systems.

Unlike previous reviews that concentrate on specific accessibility technologies or individual media platforms, this study provides a comprehensive synthesis of recent evidence concerning the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities across multiple communication contexts. By systematically reviewing peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025, this research integrates findings from communication, media, education, and technology research to develop a broader conceptual understanding of accessible media. Furthermore, the review identifies emerging research directions related to artificial intelligence, accessibility-by-design, digital participation, and inclusive communication, thereby extending current knowledge beyond discipline-specific perspectives.

To achieve these objectives, this study applies the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework to identify, screen, evaluate, and synthesise relevant literature systematically (Page et al., 2021). Specifically, this review addresses two research objectives: (1) to identify the dominant themes concerning the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities, and (2) to synthesise the methodological characteristics, research trends, and practical implications reported in recent accessibility studies. By providing a transparent and comprehensive synthesis of current evidence, this study contributes theoretically to communication and media scholarship while offering practical recommendations for researchers, educators, media practitioners, technology developers, and policymakers seeking to promote more inclusive and accessible digital communication environments.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesise recent evidence regarding the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines to ensure transparency, methodological rigour, and reproducibility throughout the review process (Page et al., 2021). Thematic analysis was subsequently applied to identify, organise, and interpret recurring patterns across the

selected studies, enabling a comprehensive synthesis of current research trends related to media accessibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Formulation of Research Questions

The research questions were formulated using the PICO framework, which is widely applied in systematic literature reviews to develop focused review questions. PICO comprises three key elements: Population (P) or Problem, Interest (I), and Context (Co). In this review, the population refers to individuals with disabilities, the interest focuses on the role of media, and the context concerns accessibility. Based on these three components, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What roles does media play in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities?
2. What recommendations have been proposed in previous studies to improve media accessibility for individuals with disabilities?

Systematic Searching Strategy

The systematic search strategy followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and consisted of four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). This structured process ensured that the selection of studies was conducted systematically, transparently, and consistently, enabling the identification of the most relevant literature addressing the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

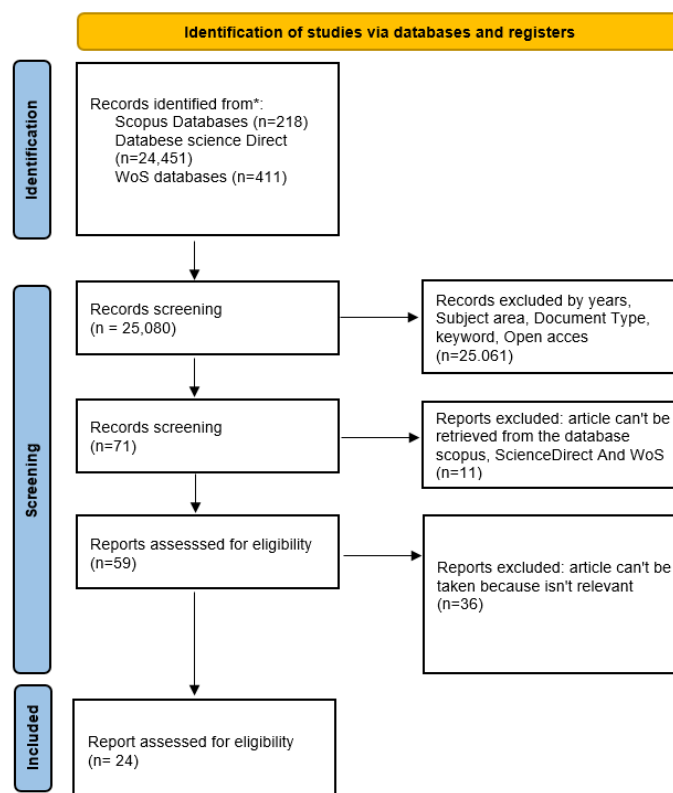


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the study selection process

Identification

The identification stage involved developing search keywords based on the research questions and the PICO framework. Three primary concepts were identified: media, accessibility, and disability. To maximize the retrieval of relevant studies, several synonyms and related terms were incorporated into the search strategy using Boolean operators (AND, OR). The literature search was conducted in three major electronic databases—Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science (WoS)—which were selected because of their

comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications in the social sciences and communication fields. The complete search strings used for each database are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Database

Database	Search Strings
Science Direct	"Media" AND "accessibility" AND "Disability" OR "Disabilities"
Scopus	"Media" AND "Accessibility" AND "Disability" OR "Disabilities"
WoS	TS=("media") AND TS=("accessibility") AND TS=("disability" OR "disabilities")

Source: Created by the author

Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science (WoS) were selected because they are internationally recognized databases that index high-quality peer-reviewed journals across multiple academic disciplines. These databases provide extensive bibliographic coverage and are widely used in systematic literature reviews due to their rigorous indexing standards and comprehensive citation records. The search process across Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science initially identified 25,080 records. These records constituted the preliminary dataset before the application of the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The search process across Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science initially identified 25,080 records. These records constituted the preliminary dataset before the application of the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 2. Scopus database

Inclusion	Exclusion
Article	Book chapters, conference paper, book review others
Between 2020-2025	<2021 and > 2025
Social sciences ; Arts and Humanities Subject Area	Other subject srea
Media; Accesibility; Disabilities;	Other keyword
Journal Source Type	Other source type
All Open Access	Gold; Hybrid gold; Green; Bronze

Table 3. Sciencedirect database

Inclusion	Exlusion
Research Article	Review article, encyclopedia, book chapters
Between 2021-2025	<2021 and > 2025
Social Sciences and Humanities	
Open	Other Publication Title
Publication title	
Social Sciences Subject area	Other Subject Area
Open Access & Open Archive	

Table 4. Web Of Science database

Inclusion	Exlusion
Research Article	Review paper, book chapters, Encyclopedia
Between 2020-2025	<2020 and > 2025
Media, Accesibility, Disabilities	Other Wos Categories
Wos Categories	
Media, Accesibility, Disabilities	Other Research Area
Research area	
Open Access & Open Archive	

Screening

During the screening stage, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to refine the search results. Filters were implemented based on publication year (2020–2025), document type, subject area, keywords, language, and open-access availability. Following this process, 71 records remained. Subsequently, 12 records were excluded because their full texts could not be retrieved, leaving 59 articles for title and abstract screening. A further 35 articles were excluded because they did not directly address the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Consequently, 24 articles proceeded to the eligibility assessment.

Eligibility

The remaining 24 articles were assessed for eligibility through a detailed review of their titles, abstracts, and full texts to ensure their relevance to the objectives of this study. Only studies that directly examined the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities were retained for quality assessment.

Inclusion

The eligible studies were subsequently subjected to an expert quality appraisal. Articles were evaluated based on their methodological rigor, relevance to the research objectives, and overall contribution to the review. Following this assessment, 10 articles were excluded because they demonstrated limited methodological quality or insufficient relevance to the focus of this review. Consequently, 14 articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis.

Selected Articles

Following the quality appraisal process, 14 articles met the predefined inclusion criteria and were selected for the final review. These studies were subsequently examined to identify their publication characteristics, including country of origin, year of publication, research methodology, media type, and disability focus. The descriptive analysis of these characteristics provides an overview of the current state of research on media accessibility for individuals with disabilities before the thematic synthesis is presented.

Figure 2 presents the geographical distribution of the selected studies. The reviewed articles originated from several countries, indicating growing international interest in media accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The distribution also demonstrates that research on this topic has been conducted across diverse geographical contexts, although publications remain concentrated in a limited number of countries. This pattern suggests that media accessibility continues to be an emerging area of research that requires broader international investigation.

Figure 3 illustrates the annual distribution of the selected studies published between 2020 and 2025. The publication trend indicates increasing scholarly attention to media accessibility, particularly following the expansion of digital communication technologies and growing awareness of inclusive communication. Although the number of publications varies across the reviewed period, the overall trend suggests that media accessibility has become an increasingly important topic within communication and disability studies. These characteristics provide the contextual foundation for interpreting the thematic findings presented in the following section.

Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

Following the selection of the eligible studies, data were systematically extracted from each article using a standardized data extraction form. The extracted information included the author(s), year of publication, country of study, research objectives, research methodology, type of media, disability category, and the principal findings related to media accessibility.

The extracted data were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected because it provides a systematic procedure for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns across qualitative evidence. The analysis involved six stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Through this process, six overarching

themes were identified that describe the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

The Findings

The results of this systematic literature review are presented in two main parts. The first part describes the characteristics of the selected studies, including publication year, media type, and thematic role distribution. The second part presents the thematic findings derived from the synthesis of the fourteen selected studies. This structure provides both a descriptive overview of the reviewed literature and an interpretive synthesis of how media contributes to accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

Characteristics of the Selected Studies

A total of fourteen studies published between 2020 and 2025 were included in the final synthesis. The publication trend indicates that scholarly attention to media accessibility has remained consistent across the review period, with the highest number of studies appearing in 2020. As shown in Figure 2, four studies were published in 2020, followed by two studies in 2021, two studies in 2022, three studies in 2023, two studies in 2024, and one study in 2025. This pattern suggests that media accessibility has remained a continuing concern within communication, disability, and digital technology research, while the inclusion of recent studies from 2024 and 2025 indicates growing interest in emerging issues such as artificial intelligence and accessibility-by-design.

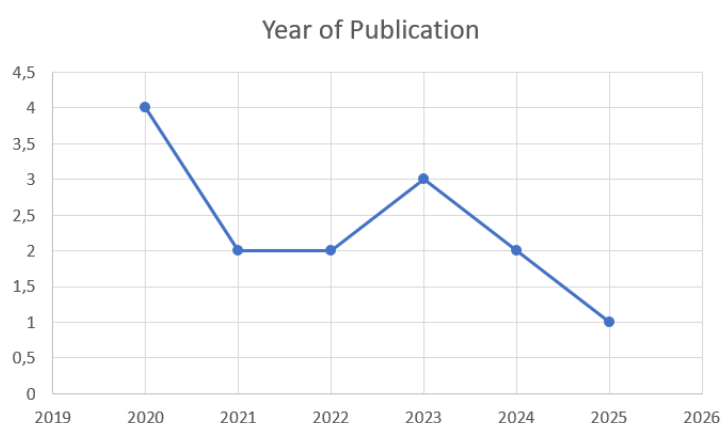


Figure 2. Distribution of selected studies by year of publication.

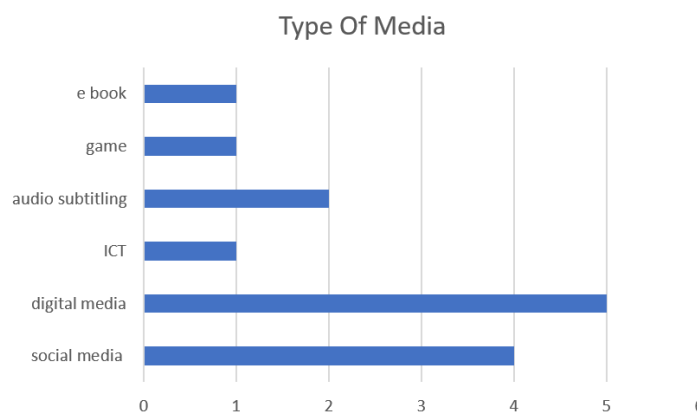


Figure 3. Distribution of selected studies by type of media

The reviewed studies examined several types of media and digital communication environments. As illustrated in Figure 3, digital media represented the most frequently studied category, followed by social media and audio subtitling. Other media types included ICT, games, and e-books. This distribution demonstrates that media accessibility research is no longer limited to conventional accessibility services but has expanded into broader digital communication environments. The prominence of digital media and social media also reflects the increasing importance of online platforms in shaping access to information, communication, and participation for individuals with disabilities.

Figure 4 presents the distribution of thematic roles identified across the reviewed studies. Media accessibility and digital participation emerged as the most frequently represented theme, indicating that most studies examined how accessible media supports users' participation in digital environments. ICT and assistive digital technologies also appeared as a significant theme, reflecting the role of technological systems in supporting accessible communication. Other themes, including digital content and audiovisual accessibility, media literacy and inclusive education, social media visibility and representation, and emerging accessibility issues related to artificial intelligence and accessibility-by-design, demonstrate the multidimensional nature of media accessibility research.

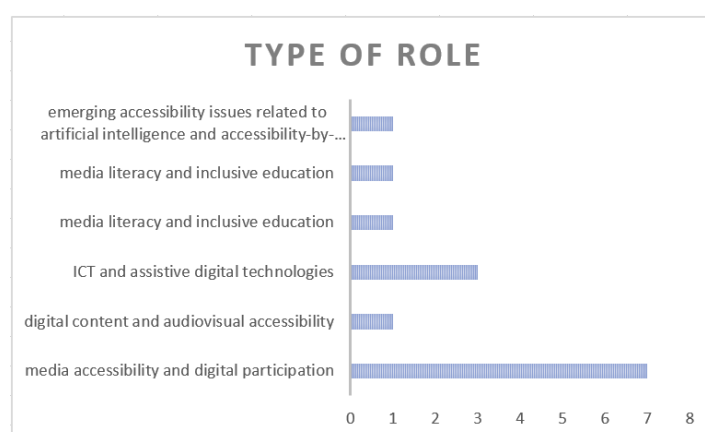


Figure 4. Distribution of thematic categories identified across the reviewed studies.

Overall, the descriptive characteristics of the selected studies indicate that media accessibility is an interdisciplinary research area that spans communication, education, technology, disability studies, and digital media. The reviewed literature shows that accessibility research has shifted from focusing only on technical access toward broader concerns related to participation, representation, literacy, inclusive design, and emerging digital technologies. These descriptive patterns provide the foundation for the thematic synthesis presented in the following section.

Thematic Findings

The thematic analysis identified six major themes describing the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities. These themes emerged through systematic coding and synthesis of the fourteen selected studies and represent the dominant directions of recent research in accessible communication. The identified themes comprise (1) media accessibility and digital participation, (2) digital content and audiovisual accessibility, (3) ICT and assistive digital technologies, (4) media literacy and inclusive education, (5) social media, visibility, and representation, and (6) emerging accessibility issues related to artificial intelligence and accessibility-by-design. Collectively, these themes demonstrate that accessibility research has evolved beyond technological adaptation towards broader issues of communication, participation, inclusion, and user-centred media design.

Media Accessibility and Digital Participation

Media accessibility emerged as the most dominant theme across the reviewed studies, highlighting its

fundamental role in promoting equitable communication and digital participation for individuals with disabilities. Baumgartner et al. (2021) demonstrated that accessible digital media enables individuals with disabilities to communicate more independently, access digital services, and participate actively in everyday social activities. Similarly, Goggin and Ellis (2020) argued that accessibility should be understood not merely as technological accommodation but as a critical communication practice that facilitates social inclusion within increasingly digital societies. Complementing these perspectives, Oncins and Orero (2021) emphasised that media accessibility extends beyond technical compliance by integrating accessible communication services, user-centred design, and inclusive media production. Collectively, these studies indicate that media accessibility has evolved into a strategic communication framework that supports equal participation rather than functioning solely as a technological solution.

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that accessible media contributes directly to improving digital participation across educational, social, and professional contexts. Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) reported that accessible communication technologies significantly enhance educational engagement, interpersonal interaction, and independent participation among individuals with profound and multiple disabilities. Likewise, Khasawneh (2024) found that improving accessibility features within social media platforms substantially increases usability, navigation efficiency, and user satisfaction among individuals with motor disabilities. Bonilla-del-Río et al. (2022) further observed that accessible digital platforms enable people with disabilities to establish professional identities, expand entrepreneurial activities, and strengthen their visibility within online communities. These findings collectively demonstrate that accessibility contributes not only to information access but also to meaningful participation in digital society.

Despite considerable technological advancement, the reviewed studies reveal that significant accessibility barriers continue to limit equal participation in digital communication. Baumgartner et al. (2021) observed that inaccessible interface design frequently restricts independent media use by creating unnecessary communication barriers for individuals with disabilities. Khasawneh (2024) similarly reported that inadequate accessibility features within social media platforms reduce users' ability to interact effectively with digital content despite increasing platform availability. Chemnad and Othman (2024) further argued that many accessibility limitations originate from insufficient integration of accessibility principles during system planning and digital development rather than from technological constraints themselves. These findings suggest that accessibility should be incorporated throughout the entire communication design process rather than introduced only after digital systems have been developed.

Another important finding emerging from the reviewed literature concerns the transition from accessibility as technical compliance towards accessibility as an inclusive communication strategy. Chemnad and Othman (2024) argued that future digital communication should integrate accessibility principles within broader technological ecosystems to ensure sustainable inclusion. Similarly, Silva et al. (2025) proposed the concept of accessibility-by-design, emphasising that accessibility should be embedded from the earliest stages of communication planning, interface development, implementation, and evaluation. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that media accessibility has become a multidimensional communication approach that integrates technology, communication design, user experience, and social inclusion to support equitable participation for individuals with disabilities.

Digital Content and Audiovisual Accessibility

Digital content and audiovisual accessibility emerged as the second dominant theme identified across the reviewed studies, reflecting the growing importance of accessible communication content in contemporary digital environments. Arrufat-Pérez-de-Zafra et al. (2021) demonstrated that audiovisual accessibility services, including subtitles, audio descriptions, and accessible streaming features, substantially improve users' ability to access and understand digital media content. Similarly, Oncins and Orero (2021) argued that accessibility should be embedded within audiovisual communication through the integration of multiple accessibility services capable of accommodating users with diverse sensory needs. Expanding this perspective, Silva et al. (2025) emphasised that digital accessibility should be incorporated from the earliest stages of content development through accessibility-by-design principles rather than implemented as a corrective measure after

digital products have been completed. Collectively, these studies indicate that accessible digital content depends on communication design as much as technological compatibility.

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that accessible digital content requires communication strategies capable of addressing diverse cognitive, sensory, and physical characteristics. Arrufat-Pérez-de-Zafra et al. (2021) reported that combining subtitles, audio descriptions, and accessible audiovisual interfaces significantly enhances users' comprehension and interaction with streaming media. Likewise, Oncins and Orero (2021) highlighted that coordinated accessibility services improve communication quality by enabling users with different accessibility requirements to access identical communication content through alternative presentation formats. These findings demonstrate that accessibility is achieved through the integration of communication design, information organisation, and technological adaptation rather than through isolated accessibility features.

Another important finding concerns the collaborative nature of accessible content development. Silva et al. (2025) proposed that accessibility-by-design encourages accessibility to be incorporated throughout content planning, interface development, implementation, and evaluation, thereby producing more sustainable accessibility outcomes. Oncins and Orero (2021) similarly argued that accessible communication requires close collaboration among media organisations, accessibility professionals, software developers, translators, and content creators throughout the production process. Arrufat-Pérez-de-Zafra et al. (2021) further demonstrated that accessibility services become more effective when technical development is aligned with users' communication needs and media consumption practices. These findings suggest that accessible digital content should be regarded as a continuous communication process that integrates technical innovation with user-centred communication design.

Overall, the reviewed studies demonstrate that digital content accessibility extends beyond compliance with technical accessibility standards. Instead, accessibility increasingly reflects the quality of communication design, information presentation, and user experience across digital media platforms. By integrating accessible communication principles throughout the media development lifecycle, digital content becomes more understandable, usable, and inclusive for individuals with diverse accessibility needs. Consequently, accessible digital content represents a fundamental component of inclusive communication capable of supporting equitable access to information within rapidly evolving digital societies.

ICT and Assistive Digital Technologies

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and assistive digital technologies emerged as another important theme across the reviewed studies, reflecting their growing contribution to accessible communication for individuals with disabilities. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2020) demonstrated that ICT-based learning environments improve educational accessibility by enabling students with disabilities to access information and participate more effectively in learning activities. Similarly, Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) reported that assistive communication technologies support independent interaction, educational engagement, and social participation among individuals with profound and multiple disabilities. Chemnad and Othman (2024) further argued that recent technological developments require accessibility to be systematically integrated into digital ecosystems rather than implemented as isolated technological adaptations. Collectively, these findings indicate that ICT functions not only as a technological resource but also as a communication enabler that supports equitable participation across digital environments.

The reviewed studies consistently emphasise that the effectiveness of ICT depends on its integration with accessible communication design and assistive technologies. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2020) observed that digital educational technologies become more effective when accessibility principles are incorporated into instructional planning and learning platform design. Likewise, Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) highlighted that communication technologies facilitate greater independence when digital interfaces are compatible with users' communication preferences and assistive devices. Chemnad and Othman (2024) similarly suggested that accessibility should be embedded throughout the technological development process to ensure that digital systems remain usable by individuals with diverse accessibility requirements. These findings demonstrate that

technological innovation alone is insufficient unless accompanied by communication strategies that prioritise accessibility and user diversity.

Another important finding concerns the strategic role of ICT in reducing communication barriers across educational, professional, and social contexts. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2020) argued that accessible educational technologies contribute to more equitable learning opportunities by reducing digital exclusion among students with disabilities. Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) further demonstrated that assistive communication technologies improve users' confidence, autonomy, and participation when supported by accessible communication environments. Expanding these perspectives, Chemnad and Othman (2024) emphasised that sustainable accessibility requires collaboration among technology developers, educators, communication specialists, and disability communities throughout system planning and implementation. Together, these studies suggest that ICT contributes to accessibility not merely through technological advancement but through its capacity to facilitate inclusive communication and equal participation.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that ICT and assistive digital technologies have become integral components of contemporary accessible communication. Rather than functioning solely as technical support tools, these technologies increasingly facilitate information access, interpersonal communication, educational participation, and independent engagement across digital environments. The synthesis indicates that future ICT development should continue integrating accessibility principles within communication design, technological innovation, and user-centred development processes to strengthen digital inclusion for individuals with disabilities.

Media Literacy and Inclusive Education

Media literacy emerged as another important theme because it enables individuals with disabilities not only to access digital information but also to participate actively in contemporary communication environments. Sousa and Costa (2022) observed that media literacy research has increasingly recognised the importance of including children and young people with disabilities within digital communication studies, although their representation remains comparatively limited. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2020) similarly demonstrated that accessible educational technologies contribute to developing learners' communication skills by reducing barriers to information access and participation within digital learning environments. These findings collectively indicate that media literacy should be understood as an inclusive communication competency that combines information access, critical understanding of media, and meaningful digital participation.

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that inclusive media literacy depends on accessible educational environments capable of accommodating diverse communication needs. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2020) reported that digital educational resources become more effective when accessibility principles are incorporated into instructional design and learning activities. Likewise, Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) found that accessible communication technologies improve learners' opportunities to interact, collaborate, and participate independently in educational settings, particularly among individuals with profound and multiple disabilities. Sousa and Costa (2022) further argued that media literacy should move beyond technical digital skills by encouraging individuals with disabilities to become active participants in communication processes rather than passive recipients of information. Collectively, these studies suggest that media literacy supports both educational inclusion and broader participation within digital society.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between media literacy and communication empowerment. Sousa and Costa (2022) highlighted that developing critical media literacy enables individuals with disabilities to evaluate digital information, communicate more confidently, and participate more actively in public discourse. Similarly, Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) demonstrated that accessible communication environments strengthen users' confidence by facilitating meaningful interaction and reducing communication dependence on others. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2020) additionally emphasised that educational institutions play a central role in fostering inclusive digital competencies through accessible learning environments and technology-supported communication. These findings demonstrate that media literacy contributes not only to educational achievement but also to communication empowerment and digital citizenship.

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that media literacy represents a fundamental component of inclusive communication because it enables individuals with disabilities to access information, interpret media messages, and participate actively in digital communication environments. Rather than focusing exclusively on technological competence, contemporary media literacy increasingly emphasises critical engagement, accessible communication practices, and equitable participation across educational and social contexts. Consequently, strengthening media literacy should be regarded as an essential strategy for promoting digital inclusion and empowering individuals with disabilities within rapidly evolving media ecosystems.

Social Media, Visibility, and Representation

Social media, visibility, and representation emerged as another important theme, reflecting the expanding role of digital communication platforms in promoting participation among individuals with disabilities. Bonilla-del-Río et al. (2022) demonstrated that social media enables individuals with physical disabilities to establish professional identities, develop entrepreneurial activities, and strengthen their public visibility through digital content creation. Goggin and Ellis (2020) similarly argued that social media has transformed communication practices by providing new opportunities for individuals with disabilities to engage directly in public discourse, community interaction, and digital advocacy. These findings collectively indicate that social media functions not only as a communication platform but also as a mechanism for enhancing social participation and digital inclusion.

Despite these opportunities, the reviewed studies reveal that equal participation in social media remains constrained by accessibility limitations and unequal representation. Khasawneh (2024) reported that insufficient accessibility features continue to reduce the usability of social media platforms among individuals with motor disabilities, thereby limiting independent interaction with digital content. Bonilla-del-Río et al. (2022) further observed that content creators with disabilities often encounter structural barriers that restrict their visibility despite increasing public engagement through digital platforms. Complementing these findings, Iturregui-Gallardo (2023) argued that disability representation should move beyond functional accessibility by recognising diversity, identity, and active participation within contemporary communication environments. These studies suggest that improving accessibility alone is insufficient unless accompanied by more inclusive representation throughout digital media.

The reviewed literature further demonstrates that accessibility and representation constitute complementary dimensions of inclusive communication. Goggin and Ellis (2020) highlighted that accessible communication environments encourage broader participation in online communities while simultaneously challenging traditional assumptions regarding disability and digital engagement. Similarly, Iturregui-Gallardo (2023) emphasised that inclusive media should present individuals with disabilities as active contributors to communication rather than merely as recipients of accessibility services. Overall, these findings indicate that future social media development should integrate accessibility, inclusive representation, and meaningful user participation to support more equitable communication ecosystems.

Overall, the reviewed studies demonstrate that accessible social media contributes to strengthening digital participation, increasing public visibility, and promoting more inclusive communication practices for individuals with disabilities. However, achieving equitable participation requires not only accessible technological features but also communication environments that recognise diversity, reduce stereotypes, and support active representation within digital society. Consequently, accessibility and representation should be considered complementary principles for developing inclusive digital communication.

Emerging Accessibility Issues: Artificial Intelligence and Accessibility-by-Design

The reviewed studies indicate an increasing shift towards emerging technologies as important drivers of accessible communication. Chemnad and Othman (2024) identified artificial intelligence (AI) as one of the fastest-growing areas of accessibility research, demonstrating its potential to improve communication through adaptive interfaces, automated content generation, intelligent assistive technologies, and personalised accessibility services. Expanding this perspective, Silva et al. (2025) proposed the concept of accessibility-by-design, arguing that accessibility should be incorporated from the earliest stages of communication planning, interface development, implementation, and evaluation rather than introduced after digital systems

have been completed. These developments suggest that accessibility research is progressively moving from reactive technological adaptation towards proactive communication design.

Although artificial intelligence offers considerable opportunities for improving accessibility, the reviewed literature also highlights important challenges associated with its implementation. McNally et al. (2024) argued that AI systems may unintentionally reproduce disability-related biases when disability expertise is insufficiently represented during model development, evaluation, and deployment. Chemnad and Othman (2024) similarly emphasised that technological innovation alone cannot guarantee inclusive communication unless accessibility principles remain central throughout the design process. These findings demonstrate that future AI development should integrate technological innovation with ethical considerations, user participation, and inclusive communication practices to ensure equitable accessibility outcomes.

Another important trend concerns the growing adoption of accessibility-by-design as a comprehensive communication strategy. Silva et al. (2025) demonstrated that integrating accessibility throughout the digital development lifecycle produces more sustainable accessibility outcomes than conventional compliance-based approaches. Chemnad and Othman (2024) further suggested that accessibility-by-design encourages interdisciplinary collaboration among communication scholars, designers, educators, software developers, policymakers, and disability communities to ensure that accessibility becomes an integral component of digital innovation. Collectively, these studies indicate that accessibility should be embedded throughout communication planning and technological development rather than treated as an additional technical feature.

Collectively, these emerging trends demonstrate that future accessibility research is shifting from technology-centred perspectives towards human-centred communication approaches that integrate accessibility, inclusion, participation, and digital innovation. The reviewed studies suggest that future research should continue exploring interdisciplinary collaboration among communication scholars, accessibility researchers, technology developers, educators, and policymakers to support sustainable and inclusive digital communication ecosystems (McNally et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2025; Chemnad & Othman, 2024).

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that emerging technologies are reshaping the future direction of media accessibility research. Artificial intelligence, intelligent assistive technologies, and accessibility-by-design collectively represent a transition towards more adaptive, personalised, and user-centred communication systems. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of these innovations depends on maintaining accessibility as a fundamental communication principle while ensuring continuous collaboration among technology developers, communication professionals, policymakers, and disability communities. These findings suggest that future accessibility research should continue exploring interdisciplinary approaches capable of strengthening digital participation, communication equity, and social inclusion within increasingly complex digital environments.

Discussion

Media Accessibility as a Foundation for Inclusive Communication

The findings of this review demonstrate that media accessibility has evolved beyond its traditional role as a technical requirement and is increasingly recognised as a fundamental component of inclusive communication. Across the reviewed studies, accessibility consistently supports equitable access to information, strengthens digital participation, and enables individuals with disabilities to engage more independently in communication environments. Rather than focusing exclusively on technological adaptation, recent research increasingly positions accessibility as an integrated communication strategy that combines accessible media design, user-centred communication, and digital participation. This shift reflects the broader transformation of accessibility from a compliance-oriented approach towards a communication framework that promotes inclusion, participation, and equal opportunities within contemporary digital societies (Goggin & Ellis, 2020; Chemnad & Othman, 2024).

The reviewed studies also demonstrate that accessible communication cannot be achieved solely through technological innovation. Baumgartner et al. (2021) showed that accessible digital media improves users' ability to communicate and participate independently in everyday life, while Oncins and Orero (2021)

emphasised that accessibility requires the integration of communication services, content design, and user experience. Similarly, Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) reported that accessible communication technologies significantly enhance educational participation among individuals with profound and multiple disabilities when supported by inclusive communication practices. Taken together, these findings indicate that accessibility should be understood as an interaction between communication design, technological accessibility, and users' participation rather than as an isolated technological feature.

From a communication perspective, these findings reinforce the view that accessibility constitutes an essential dimension of communication quality rather than an optional component of digital systems. Inclusive communication requires digital media that can be perceived, understood, navigated, and utilised effectively by diverse users with different functional abilities. Consequently, media accessibility should be integrated into communication planning, media production, and digital platform development to ensure that communication environments support equitable participation across increasingly diverse digital societies.

Digital Participation Through Accessible Technologies

Another important finding concerns the relationship between accessible technologies and digital participation. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that digital accessibility extends beyond improving technical access by facilitating meaningful engagement in communication, education, employment, and social interaction. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of accessible educational technologies in reducing learning barriers, whereas Khasawneh (2024) demonstrated that accessible social media features significantly improve users' interaction with digital platforms. These findings suggest that technology functions most effectively when accessibility principles are incorporated throughout communication environments rather than implemented as isolated technological adaptations.

The emergence of assistive technologies further illustrates the growing integration between communication and technological innovation. Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) demonstrated that assistive communication technologies strengthen independent participation among individuals with complex communication needs, while Chemnad and Othman (2024) argued that accessibility should become an integral component of broader digital ecosystems. These perspectives collectively indicate that future communication technologies should prioritise accessibility from the earliest stages of system planning and implementation to maximise equitable participation across digital environments.

These findings also suggest that digital participation depends not only on technological availability but also on communication environments that accommodate diverse user characteristics. Accessible interfaces, adaptive communication systems, and user-centred technological development collectively contribute to reducing participation barriers experienced by individuals with disabilities. Therefore, communication research should increasingly integrate technological innovation with accessibility principles to support more inclusive digital participation.

Media Literacy, Digital Participation, and Disability Inclusion

The reviewed studies also demonstrate a close relationship between media accessibility and media literacy. Rather than functioning as independent concepts, accessibility and media literacy mutually reinforce one another in supporting digital participation among individuals with disabilities. Sousa and Costa (2022) observe that media literacy research continues to underrepresent children and young people with disabilities despite the increasing importance of digital communication in everyday life. This imbalance limits opportunities for developing critical media competencies among disabled users and highlights the need for more inclusive communication education.

Similarly, Keeley and Bernasconi (2023) argue that digital participation requires not only accessible technologies but also educational strategies capable of strengthening users' communication skills and digital confidence. The present findings therefore suggest that accessibility initiatives should extend beyond technological innovation to include accessible educational resources, inclusive pedagogical approaches, and communication practices that empower individuals with disabilities to become active creators, evaluators, and

participants within digital media ecosystems. Such an approach aligns with the broader objective of promoting digital citizenship through equitable communication opportunities.

Representation, Social Inclusion, and Communication Equity

The findings further demonstrate that media accessibility is closely associated with broader issues of social representation and communication equity. While accessible technologies facilitate users' ability to access digital information, equitable participation also depends on how individuals with disabilities are represented within communication environments. The reviewed studies indicate that accessible communication should not be limited to removing technological barriers but should also promote opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate as active communicators, content creators, and contributors within digital society. This perspective expands the concept of accessibility from functional access towards meaningful communication participation and social inclusion (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022; Iturregui-Gallardo, 2023). Several studies further highlight the important role of social media in strengthening visibility and participation among individuals with disabilities. Bonilla-del-Río et al. (2022) demonstrated that digital platforms enable individuals with physical disabilities to establish professional identities, develop entrepreneurial activities, and increase their public visibility through digital content creation. Similarly, Goggin and Ellis (2020) argued that social media has transformed communication by creating opportunities for individuals with disabilities to engage directly in public discourse while simultaneously challenging conventional assumptions regarding disability and participation. These findings suggest that accessible communication environments contribute not only to information dissemination but also to empowering individuals with disabilities to participate more actively within digital communities.

Despite these positive developments, the reviewed studies also indicate that accessibility and representation remain uneven across many digital communication environments. Khasawneh (2024) reported that limited accessibility features continue to reduce independent interaction within social media platforms, whereas Iturregui-Gallardo (2023) emphasised that disability representation often remains insufficient despite improvements in technological accessibility. These findings suggest that communication equity requires simultaneous attention to accessibility, representation, and participation because technological improvements alone cannot fully eliminate social exclusion. Consequently, future communication strategies should integrate inclusive representation with accessible communication practices to ensure that individuals with disabilities are recognised as active participants within digital society.

From a communication perspective, these findings reinforce the importance of integrating accessibility with inclusive representation throughout media production and digital communication. Accessible communication enables individuals with disabilities to participate independently, whereas inclusive representation enhances social recognition, diversity, and communication equity. Therefore, future communication research should increasingly examine how accessibility, representation, and user participation interact to support more inclusive digital communication ecosystems.

Emerging Accessibility Trends and Future Communication

Another significant finding emerging from this review concerns the increasing influence of artificial intelligence and accessibility-by-design on the future development of accessible communication. The reviewed studies indicate that accessibility research is progressively shifting from reactive approaches that modify existing technologies towards proactive strategies that integrate accessibility throughout communication planning and digital innovation. Chemnad and Othman (2024) argued that artificial intelligence provides substantial opportunities for developing adaptive communication systems capable of responding to diverse accessibility needs, while Silva et al. (2025) proposed accessibility-by-design as a sustainable framework for embedding accessibility throughout the entire communication development process.

Although artificial intelligence offers considerable opportunities for improving communication accessibility, the reviewed studies consistently emphasise the importance of maintaining ethical and inclusive development practices. McNally et al. (2024) highlighted that artificial intelligence systems may unintentionally reproduce disability-related biases when accessibility considerations are inadequately

represented during system development and evaluation. Likewise, Chemnad and Othman (2024) argued that technological innovation should always be accompanied by user-centred communication principles to ensure that accessibility remains responsive to the diverse experiences of individuals with disabilities. These findings demonstrate that future accessibility initiatives require interdisciplinary collaboration involving communication scholars, technology developers, educators, policymakers, and disability communities.

The concept of accessibility-by-design represents one of the most important developments identified across the reviewed studies because it positions accessibility as an integral component of communication quality rather than an additional technical feature. Silva et al. (2025) demonstrated that embedding accessibility throughout planning, content creation, interface design, implementation, and evaluation produces more sustainable accessibility outcomes than conventional compliance-oriented approaches. Consequently, accessibility should be incorporated from the earliest stages of communication design to ensure that digital communication environments remain inclusive, adaptive, and responsive to users' diverse needs.

Overall, the reviewed evidence indicates that the future of media accessibility will increasingly depend on the integration of communication theory, technological innovation, inclusive design, and active participation from disability communities. Accessible communication is therefore evolving from a specialised area of digital technology into a comprehensive communication framework capable of supporting digital inclusion, social participation, and communication equity. This evolution highlights the need for future research to adopt more interdisciplinary approaches that strengthen collaboration between communication studies, media research, disability studies, education, and information technology in developing more inclusive digital communication systems.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined the role of media in enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities by synthesising evidence from fourteen peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025. The findings demonstrate that media accessibility has evolved beyond its traditional role as a technical requirement and has become a multidimensional communication framework that supports equitable access to information, digital participation, inclusive communication, and social inclusion. Six interrelated themes were identified, namely media accessibility and digital participation, digital content and audiovisual accessibility, ICT and assistive digital technologies, media literacy and inclusive education, social media, visibility and representation, and emerging accessibility issues related to artificial intelligence and accessibility-by-design. Together, these themes illustrate that accessible communication increasingly depends on the integration of communication design, technological innovation, user-centred development, and inclusive participation.

From a theoretical perspective, this review contributes to communication and media scholarship by integrating previously fragmented accessibility research into a comprehensive conceptual understanding of accessible media. Rather than viewing accessibility solely as a technological adaptation, the findings position accessibility as a strategic communication approach that connects communication quality, digital participation, social representation, and inclusive media practices. This synthesis broadens current perspectives on media accessibility and provides a stronger conceptual foundation for future communication research involving individuals with disabilities.

The findings also offer practical implications for media organisations, educators, technology developers, accessibility professionals, and policymakers. Integrating accessibility principles throughout media planning, content development, interface design, implementation, and evaluation can contribute to more inclusive digital communication environments that enable equitable participation for individuals with diverse accessibility needs. In this context, accessibility should be regarded as a continuous communication process rather than a technical requirement introduced only after digital products have been developed.

Despite providing a comprehensive synthesis of recent studies, this review is limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2020 and 2025 and retrieved from three scientific databases. Future research should expand the evidence base by incorporating additional databases, multilingual publications, and empirical investigations that examine emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence,

adaptive communication systems, and accessibility-by-design across different disability groups and communication contexts. Such research would further strengthen the development of inclusive communication theory and support the creation of more equitable digital media ecosystems.

This review has several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to studies indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect published between 2020 and 2025, which may have excluded relevant studies indexed in other databases or published in different languages. Second, the review focused primarily on journal articles and did not include conference proceedings, books, or grey literature that may provide additional perspectives on media accessibility. Therefore, future research should expand database coverage, incorporate broader publication types, and examine emerging technologies—including artificial intelligence, immersive media, and adaptive communication systems—to further strengthen evidence on accessible and inclusive media communication.

Ultimately, advancing media accessibility requires sustained interdisciplinary collaboration among communication scholars, educators, technology developers, policymakers, and disability communities. Future media development should integrate accessibility principles throughout the entire communication lifecycle—from planning and content creation to implementation and evaluation—to ensure that digital communication environments support equitable participation, social inclusion, and equal access to information for all individuals with disabilities.

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