

Overview of Best Communication Practices in Inclusive Spaces for People with Disabilities: A Qualitative Study in Portuguese-Speaking Countries

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Abstract: The inclusion of People with Disabilities (PwD) is still a challenge in Portuguese-Speaking Countries (PSC), requiring continuous efforts to ensure their full participation in society. The goal of this study was to identify and understand the best communication practices adopted and recognised by Inclusive Spaces (IS) in PSC, aiming to contribute to the promotion of inclusion of PwD. Using a qualitative approach, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of various IS in Portugal, Brazil and Angola. The results highlighted a set of communication practices applied in different contexts, including inclusive communication, use of social media and sharing of real-life testimonies, as practices that strengthen public engagement and the dissemination of the services offered by IS. Strategies such as the creation of inclusive and accessible content and the use of channels, such as websites and face-to-face events, were highlighted for their ability to increase the visibility of spaces, reach wider audiences, and reinforce their role in society. The findings emphasise the importance of effective communication in strengthening IS and ensuring that their services reach PwD. By outlining a set of good practices, this study provides initial guidelines for improving communication in IS, contributing to the promotion of inclusion of PwD.

1 INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of People with Disabilities (PwD) is still a challenge in Portuguese-Speaking Countries (PSC), requiring continuous efforts to ensure their full participation in society (Bennett, 2020).

PwD, their families and caregivers still face social challenges such as stigma, exclusion, lack of opportunities, difficulties in accessing support, information and accessible resources, as well as physical, digital and communicational barriers in environments that are not adapted to their needs (Hung, et al., 2021, WHO, 2011).

Inclusive spaces for people with disabilities are an asset in promoting their autonomy, digital and social inclusion, and quality of life, as they provide support and help them overcome multiple challenges (Hung et al., 2021).

According to Palatna (2019), an inclusive space is a human environment that provides conditions for the inclusion of all people, in the different domains of society, by eliminating any barriers and considering people's diversities. These environments are designed and adapted to be accessible and usable by all people, regardless of their physical, sensory or cognitive abilities, where PwD can be understood, respected, supported and feel included and integrated in the community, encouraging active social participation, integration, community involvement and a sense of belonging, with equal opportunities - essential factors for the well-being and quality of life of PwD, and without architectural and social barriers. (Rocha Lourenço, Oliveira & Tymoshchuk, 2024; Hung et al., 2021; BDU, 2024).

In this context, inclusive spaces can take different forms and have various purposes, covering a wide range of institutions or organisations that

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promote the inclusion of PwD, including, for example: Disability Support Associations, which offer specific social support and resources; ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and Digital Inclusion Resource Centres, which provide adapted technology and digital training; and Social Inclusion Support Centres, focused on integration and inclusion in community settings. Other settings include, for example, Disability Education and Rehabilitation Cooperatives, which combine education and support services; Medical and Rehabilitation Centres, which offer clinical and therapeutic interventions; and Technology and Innovation Centres, which develop inclusive technological solutions. The diversity of these institutions reflects the multiplicity of approaches and services required to respond to the complex and varied needs of PwD.

As well as eliminating physical and digital barriers and facilitating the overcoming of challenges, these spaces function as support networks that recognise the needs of PwD and their families and caregivers, and offer personalised support, resources and services that facilitate the provision of care and promote the development of skills and autonomy (Rocha Lourenço, Oliveira & Tymoshchuk, 2024). By creating support networks, promoting autonomy, the exchange of knowledge and active participation in society, inclusive spaces play a key role in building a more inclusive society. In this way, they contribute significantly not only to inclusion, but also to improving the autonomy, accessibility, independence and quality of life of PwD (Rocha Lourenço, Oliveira & Tymoshchuk, 2023), allowing them to interact with other people, participate in everyday activities, explore new learning and leisure opportunities, access various sources of information, establish contacts, exchange information and knowledge, and broaden relationships and horizons in the same way as the non-disabled population (Godinho, 1999).

However, for these spaces to effectively fulfil their purpose, it is essential that their services and activities are adequately disseminated, through effective communication practices that ensure the visibility of the services offered, reach PwD, their families and caregivers, and facilitate access to these resources. This promotes their participation and integration into society and increases the impact of these spaces in building a more inclusive society (Rocha Lourenço, Oliveira & Tymoshchuk, 2024).

Communication plays a fundamental role in creating and maintaining inclusive spaces, as it is through communication that information and services reach the target audience (Serrat, 2017). Without

strategic communication, PwD, their families and caregivers may not be aware of the opportunities available to them, limiting their access to resources aimed at improving their quality of life.

Given this, it is clear that it is important to investigate the communication practices that have been adopted and that inclusive spaces consider relevant and impactful.

The goal of this study is to identify and understand the best communication practices adopted by inclusive spaces in PSC, the context in which they are applied and how they can contribute to broadening the reach of these spaces. By understanding this, it is intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the communication approaches adopted, which can help improve the communication strategies of various spaces, ensuring that more PwD are aware of and have access to the resources available, thus strengthening the support network and contributing to the promotion of a more informed and inclusive society.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Approach

This study adopted a qualitative and exploratory approach to understanding communication practices in inclusive spaces.

For this purpose, sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of various inclusive spaces. These interviews provided an in-depth insight into the participants' perspectives, experiences and understanding of this topic.

2.2 Participants

Participants were intentionally selected according to criteria that ensured a diverse and comprehensive representation, including: i) inclusive spaces; and ii) spaces from different sectors (education, health and technology); and iii) spaces from different geographical areas of the PSC Community.

Sixteen participants were interviewed, representing inclusive spaces located in Portugal (13), Brazil (2), and Angola (1). The table below shows the distribution of the participants according to the different types of inclusive spaces represented in the study.

Table 1: Distribution of participants according to the type of inclusive spaces they represent.

Inclusive Space Type	Number of participants
Disability Support Associations	5
Resource Centres for Digital Inclusion	2
ICT Resource Centre	2
Social Inclusion Support Centre	1
Cooperative for the Education and Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities	1
Medical and Rehabilitation Centre	1
Technology and Innovation Centre	1
Telecommunications Company	1
Assistive Technology and Occupational Performance Laboratory	1
Support Product Developer	1

2.3 Instruments

A semi-structured interview script was developed to conduct the interviews with the representatives of each space. This script included seventeen open-ended questions, which allowed in-depth answers to be obtained about the characterisation of the space, the characterisation of the team, the target audience, and the communication strategies adopted.

This instrument was subjected to a pilot test and subsequently refined based on feedback to improve its reliability and validity. The interviews were conducted by the researchers, ensuring consistency in data collection.

2.4 Procedures

Four of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, in the spaces themselves, while the remaining twelve were conducted online. Each interview lasted an average of around an hour.

All participants were informed about the goal of the study and signed an informed consent form, allowing the interview to be recorded for data collection and analysis.

2.5 Data Collection and Analysis

To collect the data, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed. These transcripts were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software, where all the data was managed and coded, based on the following categories: i) characterisation of the space (objectives and services provided); ii) characterisation of the space's team; iii) characterisation of the target audience; iv)

characterisation of the communication strategies, content and media adopted.

The codes were grouped into broader themes and recurring response patterns were identified, providing valuable insights not only into the communication practices adopted, but also into other factors that may influence these practices.

3 RESULTS

For a better understanding of the results relating to communication practices, first the main results relating to the characterisation of spaces in general (goals, services provided, products offered) and their teams and target audiences will be presented.

3.1 Strategic Goals of the Inclusive Spaces Interviewed

The analysis of the interviews revealed that the main strategic goal of inclusive spaces is to support and intervene with PwD. 75% of the spaces highlighted that their main focus is to provide personalised support that fosters autonomy and active participation in society. For example, one of the participants said: *'Our main goal is to create opportunities for PwD to feel included and valued in different contexts of daily life.'*

Other strategic goals identified were: training initiatives for caregivers, professionals and PwD (identified by 50% of spaces); assessment and intervention services (44%); research and development (25%), promotion of the rights of PwD, and development of partnerships (19%).

3.2 Services Provided

The spaces offered a variety of services to support inclusion and accessibility. The most common services included qualification and capacity building (81 per cent), with a focus on promoting autonomy and improving the quality of life of PwD. Other frequently mentioned services were assessment and provision of support devices (56%) and training for professionals and caregivers (50%).

3.3 Team Characterisation

The composition of the teams in the inclusive spaces interviewed reflects an interdisciplinary approach, which is essential to meet the diverse needs of PwDs. The most represented professionals include: special

education teachers (38%), psychologists (31%), and administrative assistants and other support staff, such as general service managers, drivers and assistants (38%). Other professionals include social workers, engineers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, marketing and communication technicians, trainees and rehabilitation nurses.

3.4 Type of Audience

The annual estimate of the different spaces interviewed varies between 25 people and 1100, with the most common range being between 25 and 60 people accompanied per year (by 25 per cent of the participants). The most common type of disability is neurodevelopmental disorders (50 per cent). However, people with amputations, hearing impairment, speech and communication impairment, motor impairment, neuromotor impairment, intellectual or cognitive impairment, visual impairment, congenital diseases or malformations, neurological diseases and sequelae, elderly people, dyslexia and injuries are also assisted.

3.5 Target Audience

The inclusive spaces participating in the study identified multiple target audiences for their communication actions, highlighting the importance of targeting information and actions at different groups that directly or indirectly influence the inclusion of PwDs. Among the main target audiences, the following stand out: PwD (63%), family members and caregivers (50%) ('Our main focus is to reach out to PwD and their caregivers, making sure they know they can count on us for technical support and training'), health and education professionals (44%), the community in general (44%), partner institutions and organisations (31%), and pupils and children (25%).

3.6 Communication Goals

The communication goals that the participants mentioned during the interviews are broad and reflect the need to reach different audiences. Among the most prominent is disseminating the space and the services offered by the spaces (56%) ('our main goal is to let people know that we are here to support and that our services are available'); reaching out to PwD or caregivers/family members (38%); and networking (31%).

3.7 Best Communication Practices

Table 2: Synthesis of the answers to the interview questions on communication strategies and practices.

Topics addressed in the interviews	Communication strategies and practices adopted (answers)
i) strategies or characteristics should have a communication campaign to effectively promote the adoption of an inclusive space	Use a website as a communication tool
	Present real cases/testimonies of real people
	Use appealing communication
	Use inclusive communication
	Use video as communication content
	Use social media to communicate
ii) types of content, media or strategies that participants consider to be most impactful for the public	Presenting real cases/people's testimonies
	Share videos on social media
	Promote training and inclusion programmes
	Use informal communication (word of mouth)
	Sharing their daily work on social media
iii) suggestions of impactful strategies for a campaign to promote an inclusive space	Create appealing and impactful content
	Reaching caregivers
	Organise and participate in dissemination events in schools and organisations
	Use inclusive communication (simple and attractive to everyone)
	Distributing flyers
	Use informal communication (word of mouth)
	Provide up-to-date and detailed information via a website
	Present real cases/testimonies of people
	Use accessibility resources
	Use social media to disseminate information and promote activities and events
	Produce and disseminate promotional videos
	Know the target audience
	Produce and disseminate a television campaign
	Collaboration between spaces
Form partnerships	

Table 2: Synthesis of the answers to the interview questions on communication strategies and practices. (cont.)

<p>iv) communication practices mentioned by the participants in their answers to other questions which, according to them, have proved effective and generated positive results in terms of impact</p>	Use of social media
	Disseminate relevant information through the press
	Send frequent e-mail newsletters
	Use inclusive communication
	Use accessibility resources
	Share the support products available in inclusive spaces on social media
	Provide a link to the website on social media
	Disseminate the work carried out in the inclusive space on social media
	Disseminate the services provided on social media
	Disseminate actions and projects on social media
	Participate in scientific events
	Disseminate to companies and institutions
	Disseminate to schools and universities

At the end of the interviews, the participants were asked three questions in order to survey best communication practices: i) the first, with the goal of understanding what strategies or characteristics a communication campaign should have in order to effectively promote the adoption of an inclusive space; ii) the second, with the goal of identifying what type of content, media or strategies the participants considered to be most impactful for the public; iii) and the third, with the goal of finding out suggestions for impactful strategies for a campaign to promote an inclusive space.

In addition, throughout the interviews, participants mentioned communication practices that have proved effective and generated positive results in terms of impact. The answers to these questions are summarised in Table 2.

This answers made it possible to analyse the strategies already used by inclusive spaces, as well as those that, although not implemented due to resource limitations (time, human or financial resources), are perceived as highly impactful and relevant.

The combination of this information allowed the identification and understanding of the best communication practices in this context, summarised in Table 3, which gives an overview of these practices, the context in which they are applied and a description of their main goals and impacts.

Table 3: Communication best practices identified in interviews with inclusive spaces.

Context	Best-practice	Description
Social Media	Sharing testimonials and real stories	Publish personal stories and real-life experiences to inspire and engage the public.
	Inclusive and accessible communication	Implement accessible communication through clear language and accessibility resources (audio description, subtitles, sign language, etc.).
	Impactful content in diverse formats	Use varied formats and visually appealing content to capture attention.
	Promoting activities, programs, and projects	Disseminate training and inclusion programs, activities, and future projects to keep the public informed and engaged.
	Dissemination of offered services	Inform the public about the services and assistive products available to promote greater understanding and access.
	Providing links to the website	Offer direct links to the official website for more information and resources.
	Displaying available assistive products	Show the assistive products and technologies available to support PwD.
	Sharing relevant news	Share updates and news related to the cause/area to keep followers informed with relevant content.
	Sharing daily work	Show the daily activities and work carried out by the center through illustrative videos.

Table 3: Communication best practices identified in interviews with inclusive spaces. (cont).

Website	Accessibility	Ensure the site is accessible to all, regardless of their abilities, through accessible language and resources (e.g., scalable text, audio description, subtitles, etc.).
	Providing updated and detailed information on services and products	Offer complete, updated descriptions of services and assistive products available for PwD.
	Promoting activities, programs, and projects	Disseminate training and inclusion programs, activities, and future projects to keep the public informed and engaged.
Events and activities	Conducting workshops, lectures, and debates in schools, universities, companies, and institutions	Organize educational events to spread knowledge and raise awareness among different audiences..
	Organizing and participating in community actions	Plan, execute, and engage in events that directly involve the center's community (e.g., picnics, concerts, gatherings).
Flyers, Posters, and Billboards	Distributing flyers, posters, and billboards in strategic locations	Use printed materials to promote events and services, ensuring visibility in physical locations and events.
	Using inclusive and accessible language	Implement accessible communication through clear and inclusive language and/or accessibility resources (e.g., Braille, QR codes linking to audio description or sign language translation).

Table 3: Communication best practices identified in interviews with inclusive spaces. (cont).

Email Marketing	Sending newsletters with news, activities, and events	Regularly send newsletters with information about activities, events, and news, facilitating direct communication with the public.
Press and Media	Dissemination through press (newspapers, radio, TV)	Promote activities and the impact of services through traditional media channels.
Scientific Events	Participation in scientific events	Present and share research results in scientific events (conferences, congresses) to engage experts and stay updated on field advancements.
Informal Communication	“Word-of-mouth” communication	Use “word-of-mouth” strategies to disseminate information about the center’s services.
Partnerships	Dissemination through partner institutions	Collaborate with other organizations to enhance the reach of the center’s services.
Others	Producing promotional or explanatory videos	Create videos that explain services or promote initiatives, sharing them on digital platforms and physical locations (e.g., events, at the center).

4 DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that communication practices in inclusive spaces in Portuguese-speaking countries are diverse and often aimed at multiple target audiences, including people with disabilities (PwD), family members, caregivers, health and education professionals, and the wider community. The identification of best communication practices reflects both the strategies currently adopted and participants' perceptions of which approaches are most effective in reaching and engaging these

audiences. In relation to the study's goals - to identify and understand the best communication practices adopted by inclusive spaces - the findings show that the use of social media, the production of appealing and inclusive content, and the sharing of real case testimonies are considered key strategies for extending the reach and impact of communicative actions. These results are in line with the existing literature, which emphasises the importance of social media and digital communication in promoting social inclusion. Social media offer accessible and widely used platforms that allow for the rapid dissemination of information and direct engagement with diverse audiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

The production of accessible content and the use of accessibility features such as video subtitles, audio transcripts and image descriptions are essential to ensure that information is understood by all people, including those with different types of disabilities. According to the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) (2018), digital accessibility is fundamental for inclusion and full participation in society.

The comparison with other studies reinforces the relevance of using testimonies and personal stories as a way of sensitising and engaging the public. Ferrari et al. (2021) argue that testimonials and personal narratives have a strong emotional impact and can promote public empathy and involvement, increasing awareness of PwD experiences.

Despite the practices already in place, the interviews also pointed to strategies perceived as impactful, but underused due to limitations such as a lack of human resources specialised in communication and time and financial constraints, which make it difficult to adopt more comprehensive and effective strategies. This gap reflects the need for structural support so that spaces can adopt more comprehensive strategies.

The results have significant implications for improving communication practices in inclusive spaces. The good practices identified offer valuable guidelines for other inclusive spaces looking to adapt and improve their communication strategies, which may involve investing in training, and developing digital communication and accessibility skills within teams. In addition, the production of accessible and appealing content, following guidelines such as those established by the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), contributes to more inclusive communication.

Inclusive communication is a communication model where the message is constructed in such a way that it is accessible and understood by all audiences (Machado, 2010). It seeks to represent diversity and

promote equality in the way messages are constructed (Audima, 2024). It focuses on simple, objective and accessible language, using familiar words and short sentences in order to cater for different audiences (Instituto Federal de Santa Catarina, n.d.). On the other hand, accessible communication focuses on eliminating barriers for people with specific disabilities. It focuses on adapting content to make it accessible, using resources such as audio description, subtitles, braille printouts, etc. (Instituto Alana, n.d.; Universidade Federal do Ceará, n.d.).

Collaborations with educational institutions, companies and other organisations can enhance communication initiatives, as suggested by Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2015), who discuss the importance of collaborative networks in the public and non-profit sectors.

As for the study's limitations, we would highlight the limited number of participants and the geographical concentration of the inclusive spaces interviewed, with greater representation from Portugal. This may limit the generalisability of the results to other cultural and socio-economic contexts. Furthermore, although Portugal, Brazil and Angola were represented, the absence of other PHCs, such as Mozambique and Cape Verde, limits the generalisability of the results and a complete understanding of practices across the entire PSC community. It is recommended that future studies expand the sample and include a more balanced representation of PSC in order to enrich the understanding of communication practices in different contexts.

To summarise, communication practices in inclusive spaces play a fundamental role in promoting the social inclusion of people with disabilities. Adopting effective strategies, overcoming challenges and implementing practical recommendations can significantly contribute to extending the reach and impact of these spaces, promoting a more inclusive and informed society.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to identify and understand the best communication practices adopted by inclusive spaces in PSC, exploring how these practices can contribute to expanding their reach and impact. Through qualitative interviews with representatives of various inclusive spaces in Portugal, Brazil and Angola, it was possible to draw up a comprehensive overview of the communication practices implemented and recommended, verifying

that strategies such as using social media, producing appealing and accessible content and sharing real-life testimonies are fundamental to increasing public involvement and disseminating the services offered by PwD, increasing the reach of these spaces and, consequently, the inclusion and quality of life of PwD.

The results made it possible to outline a set of communication practices applied in different contexts, offering a first overview of the approaches used and recommended to promote inclusion. An initial basis has been provided for understanding how communication practices can be applied to strengthen the impact of inclusive spaces. By outlining these practices, this work not only contributes to the promotion of inclusion in PSC, but also offers guidelines that can be adapted to other cultural and institutional contexts.

By implementing good communication strategies, inclusive spaces can better reach out to PwD, their families and caregivers, ensuring that they are aware of available resources and opportunities to participate in society.

This study was based on self-reported interviews, which may introduce biases related to participants' perceptions of their own practices. Future research could therefore complement this information with content analyses of the communications carried out by inclusive spaces and evaluations of the impact of these practices on the target audience. Furthermore, expanding the research to include a wider range of PSC would provide a more comprehensive understanding of communication practices in different cultural and socio-economic contexts. This could lead to the development of more tailored and effective communication strategies that further promote inclusion and accessibility for PwDs globally. In addition, they could deepen and complement the findings of this study by focusing on understanding disabled people's perspectives on the effectiveness of communication practices and identifying possible gaps in current strategies, or comparatively analysing the effectiveness of spaces strategies in different countries or different sectors.

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