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Young People's Awareness and Involvement in Aspects of Digital Accessibility

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Abstract

Context and Research Need: The article focuses on the aspects of digital accessibility essential for creating an inclusive and equitable society. With the rapid development of IT, digital accessibility has also become a crucial element in managing modern organizations, which is associated with the need for an aware and well-educated workforce. It is estimated that 1.3 billion people worldwide experience significant disabilities, making the creation of accessible solutions a legal, moral, and business necessity. The article examines the approach of young people to this issue, aiming to identify challenges and educational needs in the field of digital accessibility and universal design.

Objective: The study presents the results of original research aimed at understanding students' perspectives on digital accessibility, identifying their level of awareness, engagement, and knowledge in this area. Additionally, it seeks to determine the factors that could encourage them to act in favor of accessibility for websites and uncover barriers that may inhibit such initiatives.

Methodology: The research was conducted in 2024 among students of the University of Szczecin, Poland, using an anonymous electronic questionnaire. The sample included 369 participants. Data analysis was performed using the chi-square independence test (χ^2).

Findings and Practical Implications: The results showed relatively high sensitivity among students to the needs of people with disabilities. Students are also aware that digital accessi-

bility improves a company's image, creates equal opportunities, and reduces discrimination. However, the findings also confirmed the low level of knowledge and skills in the area of digital accessibility frequently reported in literature. Due to the rapid technological advancements and the increasing demand for accessibility specialists, changes in the education system are recommended to bridge this gap.

Keywords: digital accessibility, inclusiveness, equality of access, survey, information society.

Introduction

In today's highly digitized world, digital accessibility has emerged as one of the key aspects of modern information technology solutions. It pertains to areas focused on creating websites, services, applications, and electronic documents in such a way that they are accessible to the broadest possible audience, regardless of their physical or technical abilities, including people with various forms of disabilities. This issue affects many people, considering the estimates of the World Health Organization (WHO, Disability, 2023), which indicate that 1.3 billion people worldwide experience significant disabilities.

Digital accessibility thus becomes a crucial element in the functioning of modern organizations. Increasingly, it is not only a matter of legal requirements emerging in many countries but also a question of social responsibility and business ethics.

In this context, the awareness of young people (in this article, the term refers specifically to university students), their knowledge, skills, and engagement in aspects of digital accessibility for websites, becomes particularly important. Therefore, this article presents an analysis of the results of recent research, whose primary aim was to answer the following questions:

- What is the sensitivity of the younger generation to the issues faced by people with disabilities and their awareness of the needs of these individuals regarding website accessibility?
- What knowledge do young people have about the criteria a website must meet to be accessible, the costs and time required to ensure digital accessibility, and the legal regulations in this area?

- What are young people's attitudes toward adapting websites to the needs of people with disabilities, and how do they perceive related activities?
- What factors would motivate them to ensure website accessibility, and what do they perceive as the most significant barriers to such actions?

Exploring these issues allows for a better understanding of young people's awareness, preparedness, and level of knowledge regarding digital accessibility, as well as gaining insight into their perspectives, particularly concerning motivation, overcoming obstacles, and taking action in this domain. This, in turn, can serve as a foundation for changes in educational programs so that university graduates entering the labor market are familiar with universal design principles and the need for accessibility, while user experience and WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) standards become a routine part of digital product and service design.

The first part of the article provides a brief literature review, highlighting the issue of education in digital accessibility. The following section presents the results of a survey designed and conducted by the author, which allowed for an assessment of the attitudes of students at a Polish university toward digital accessibility and an analysis of this issue from their perspective. The article concludes with recommendations for continued efforts to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills in digital accessibility, thereby contributing to a more inclusive society.

Literature review

Digital accessibility is a relatively new concept that is entering organizational practice and often presents a significant challenge for companies. Organizations face numerous obstacles that must be overcome, including organizational challenges, uncertainty about the business justification for accessibility, low awareness of the need for such actions, insufficient societal knowledge about the problems faced by people with disabilities and how they can be addressed, and staffing challenges due to a lack of accessibility specialists.

Researchers, as well as numerous institutions, conduct various studies in this area, covering, among other topics:

- Website accessibility (WebAIM, 2021; WebAIM, 2024);
- Benefits of integrating accessibility into software design and development (Bi et al., 2022);
- Attitudes toward and perceptions of digital accessibility among employees (Fisher et al., 2023);
- Changes in digital accessibility in organizations over time (AbilityNet, 2023);
- Methods for transforming companies toward accessibility and tools for ensuring digital accessibility (Level Access, 2023);
- Analysis of requirements during recruitment for positions such as designers, developers, and software testers (Martin et al., 2022);
- Education in digital accessibility (Shinohara et al., 2018; Baker et al., 2020; Ferati & Vogel, 2020; Patel et al., 2020; Jia et al., 2021; Walther & Lander, 2021; Concept3D, 2023; Lewthwaite et al., 2023).

Research in the latter area has shown that formal education insufficiently prepares technology specialists to address accessibility challenges at various stages of software development (Patel et al., 2020; WebAIM, 2021).

An analysis of 14 web development courses at a university in southern Sweden revealed that only two of them addressed accessibility, and even then, only in the context of usability. Instructors admitted they lacked knowledge of standards such as WCAG, and accessibility was not systematically incorporated into the curriculum (Ferati & Vogel, 2020).

Similarly, Walther and Lander (2021) highlighted the insufficient inclusion of accessibility in IT education. They emphasized that teaching accessibility not only prepares students to create more inclusive technologies but also constitutes a key element of strategies aimed at increasing diversity in the technology sector.

The Concept3D report (2023) found that 50% of students believe their universities do not do enough regarding digital accessibility. Additionally, one in two students stated that universities talk about accessibility but do not take concrete actions in this area. Accessibility topics are often marginalized,

undervalued, or treated as optional, resulting in graduates entering the labor market without awareness or understanding of accessibility (Baker et al., 2020; Lewthwaite et al., 2023).

Teach Access (2023) produced a report on the skills gap in accessible technology. Seventy-seven percent of respondents considered it important or very important for their organizations to hire designers and developers with accessibility skills. Over 86% expected demand for accessibility skills to grow. Two-thirds of respondents reported that their products were less accessible than desired. Only 3% stated that nearly all current employees (developers and/or designers) possess sufficient skills to meet company goals, and only 2% reported that their organizations find it easy to recruit candidates with accessibility skills. The analysis also revealed that many technology specialists do not fully recognize the critical importance of accessibility in their professional practice and that employers often do not consider accessibility competencies during recruitment.

Previous research has not considered students' perspectives when placed in the role of entrepreneurs or employers, nor has it analyzed their willingness to ensure a company website's digital accessibility. It also has not collected students' opinions on the barriers they perceive in undertaking such actions.

These facts inspired the author to conduct research aimed at understanding the younger generation's attitudes toward the needs of people with disabilities, particularly regarding digital accessibility, identifying their knowledge in this area, and exploring their approach to accessibility aspects in website development.

Research

The survey questionnaire consisted of 14 substantive questions. These were closed-ended questions with responses on nominal or ordinal (ranking) scales. Additionally, respondents completed a demographic section providing information on gender, field of study, and any disabilities.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, how the results would be used, and how the findings would be disseminated. Before starting

the survey, they could review the definition of digital accessibility provided in the questionnaire. The survey was anonymous and took approximately 5–7 minutes to complete. It was prepared and made available via Google Forms at link <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/18KTnTizy9AX5uD-fnw-Ko9vpYk-BKk86zfgi2uIxRpPY/edit>.

The reliability of the questionnaire was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The value obtained in this study was 0.81, indicating high internal consistency (coherence) of the instrument. The validity of the questionnaire was examined in terms of content validity and face validity through expert consultation, a pilot study, and requests for respondents' feedback on the questions.

To encourage participation, instructors displayed a QR code on a projector or shared the link during classes, allowing students to complete the survey on mobile devices immediately during the session.

The study was conducted between January 9 and March 8, 2024, among students from 10 different fields at the University of Szczecin (Poland), aged 19–24 years. A total of 369 students completed the questionnaire. Women accounted for 54% of respondents. Ninety-three percent were first-year bachelor's or long-cycle master's students, 6% were beginning second-cycle students, and four students were in their second or third year of bachelor's studies. 3.5% of respondents (13 students) reported having a disability. Nearly 28% indicated that a close family member had a disability, with a significantly higher proportion (69%) among students with disabilities (9 out of 13 students with a disability had a family member with a disability).

Results

Slightly over 29% of respondents had never attended any classes, lessons, courses, or workshops dedicated to digital accessibility. Nearly 48% reported having participated in such activities, while the remaining 23% could not recall whether they had ever attended.

It is worth noting that the University of Szczecin, whose students participated in the study, has gradually been integrating accessibility-related content into other courses over the past few years. For some programs, dedicated

courses on accessibility are offered. Students are also encouraged to actively participate in educational projects related to accessibility, providing opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills in this area.

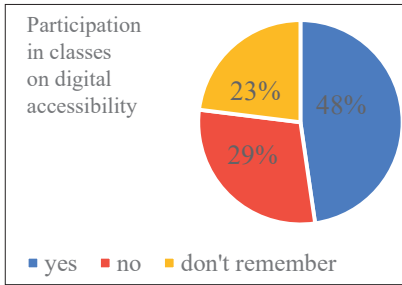


Figure 1. Participation of respondents in digital accessibility classes

Source: Own elaboration.

Seventy-two percent of respondents reported being sensitive to the needs of people with disabilities (of these, 61% were women and 39% were men). Ten percent (33% women and 67% men) indicated that they are not sensitive, while 18% found it difficult to assess their own feelings in this regard, with men representing 63% of this group.

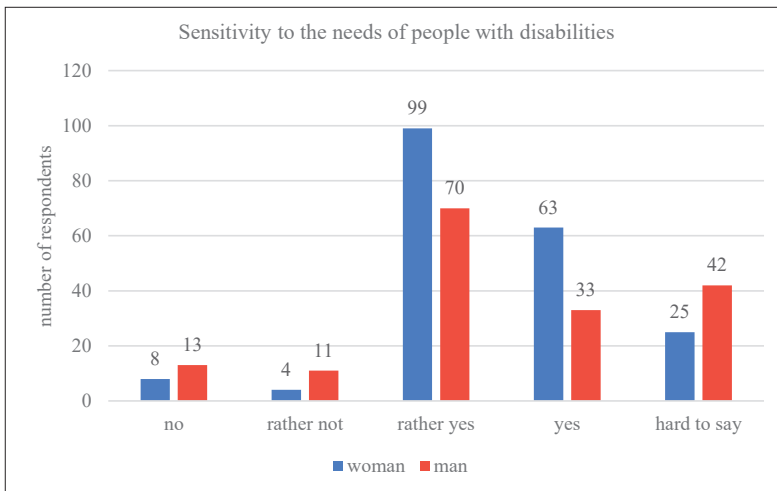


Figure 2. Sensitivity of respondents to the needs of people with disabilities

Source: Own elaboration.

A chi-square (χ^2) test of independence was conducted to examine whether there is a relationship between respondents' gender and their sensitivity to the needs of people with disabilities.

For the chosen significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ and 1 degree of freedom, the critical value χ^2_{α} from the chi-square distribution table is 3.841. The calculated χ^2 statistic was 10.04. Since $\chi^2 > \chi^2_{\alpha}$, there is evidence to suggest that women report being sensitive to the needs of people with disabilities more often than men.

Similarly, a chi-square test was conducted to examine whether respondents' sensitivity to the needs of people with disabilities is related to having a family member with a disability. In this case, the χ^2 statistic was 0.557. Since $\chi^2 < \chi^2_{\alpha}$, there is no evidence to suggest that students with a family member who has a disability are more sensitive to the needs of such individuals than students without a family member with a disability.

Changes in respondents' empathy toward people with disabilities over the past 2–3 years are presented in Figure 3.

Fifty-five percent of respondents reported an increase in their sensitivity to the needs of people with disabilities over the past 2–3 years (12% a slight increase and 43% a significant increase). Forty-two percent of respondents

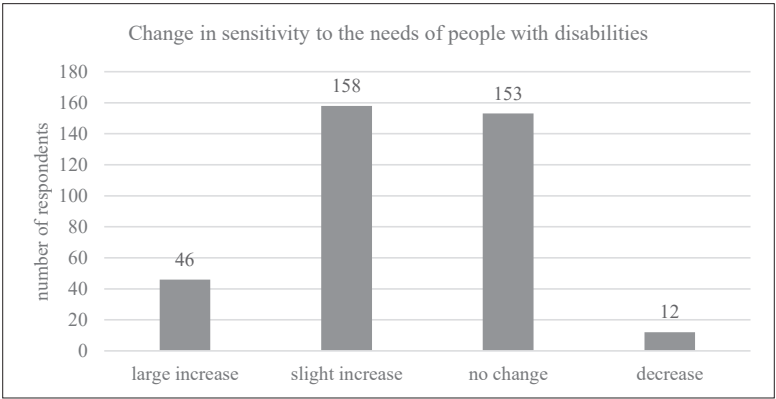


Figure 3. Change in respondents' empathy toward people with disabilities over the last 2–3 years

Source: Own elaboration.

reported no change, while 3% assessed their sensitivity as lower than a few years ago.

Sixty-six percent of respondents stated that they are aware of the needs of people with disabilities regarding website accessibility, 16% indicated that they do not recognize these needs, and 18% found it difficult to provide a clear answer to this question.

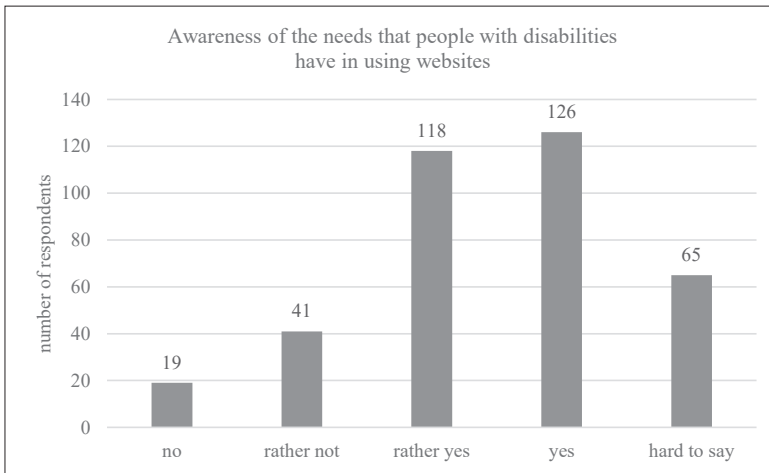


Figure 4. Awareness of the needs that people with disabilities have with regard to the use of websites

Source: Own elaboration.

Twenty percent of the surveyed students reported that they know exactly which criteria a website must meet to be considered digitally accessible. Nearly 46% stated that they are able to name a few basic criteria for an accessible website. Unfortunately, a substantial group (slightly over 34%) admitted that they have no knowledge in this area and have never been interested in it.

The responses to these questions indicate a growing awareness and sensitivity to the needs of people with disabilities, but at the same time, they reveal that a significant gap remains in understanding the specific criteria for digital accessibility. This suggests that education and training in this area could help improve the current situation.

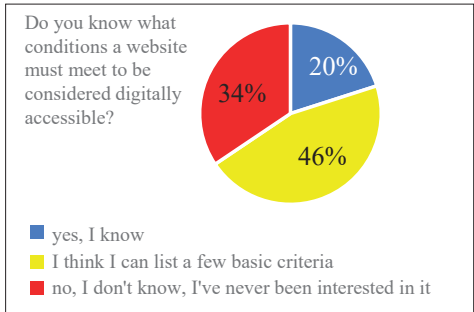


Figure 5. Knowledge of the factors that determine the accessibility of a digital website

Source: Own elaboration.

The next survey question revealed a relatively low level of students’ knowledge regarding legal regulations in Poland concerning the obligation of various entities to ensure digital accessibility of websites.

Table 1. Knowledge of legal regulations regarding the provision of digital accessibility

In Poland, the legal obligation to ensure the digital accessibility of their websites is in place:			
	public institutions	commercial companies	individuals
I think so	269	190	109
I think not	41	97	170
I don't know	59	82	90

Source: Own elaboration.

Seventy-three percent of respondents are convinced that public entities in Poland are obliged to ensure the accessibility of their websites, which is consistent with reality. Eleven percent are mistaken, believing that public entities are not required to do so, and 16% admitted that they do not have knowledge on this subject. More than half of the respondents (51%) believe that Polish law also obliges commercial companies to create digitally accessible websites (which is not the case). A significant group of students (22%) also admitted to lacking knowledge in this area. Many students (30%) are convinced that even private individuals in Poland must ensure the accessibility of their websites, while 24.5% are unsure whether or how the law regulates this area.

Analyzing responses to all three questions together, it turns out that only 14% of respondents (roughly one in seven students) are aware that Polish law obliges only public entities to ensure the digital accessibility of the websites they provide.

The questionnaire also included a question aimed at collecting students' subjective opinions regarding adapting websites to the needs of people with disabilities. The results are presented in Figure 6.

Eighty-seven point three percent of respondents believe that adapting websites to the needs of people with disabilities should be mandatory for all public institutions. Among them, 83% consider that it should also be manda-

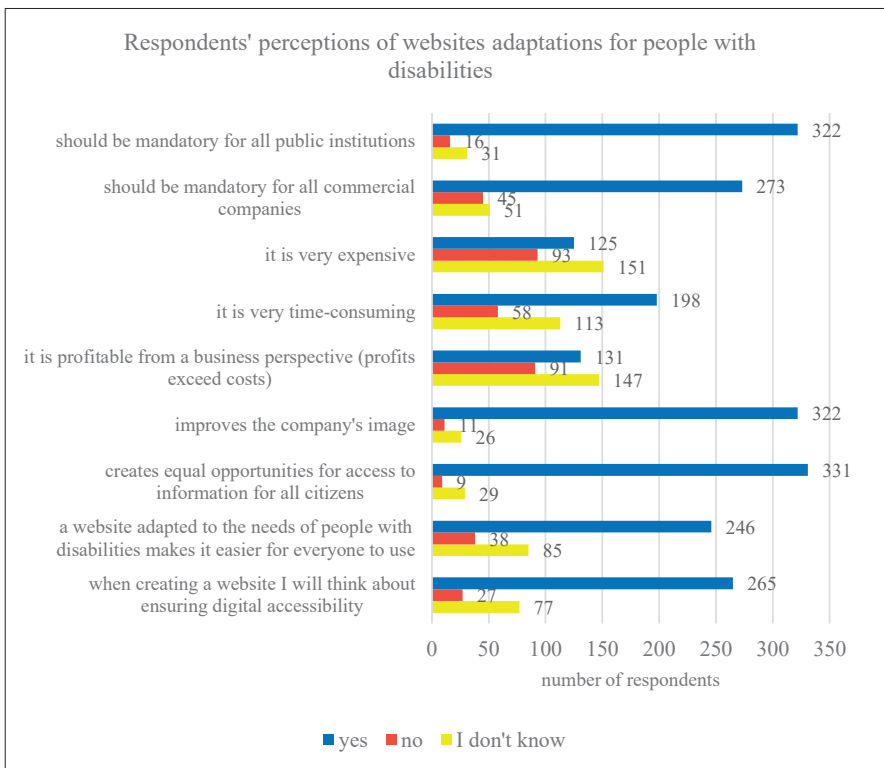


Figure 6. Opinions of respondents on adapting websites to the needs of people with disabilities

Source: Own elaboration.

tory for all commercial companies. Only 4.3% do not expect legal regulations in this area for public entities, and 12.2% for businesses. The proportion of students who had no specific opinion on this matter was 8.4% and 13.8%, respectively.

What is noteworthy is that, on the one hand, students have limited knowledge about the process of creating accessible websites, do not know the accessibility criteria, and state that they are not interested in these issues; on the other hand, they overwhelmingly support the obligation to ensure accessibility, particularly in the public sector, while there is also significant support for extending these requirements to the private sector. The uncertainty among some respondents may indicate a lack of previous opportunities to engage with the topic and reflect on these issues, which also suggests the need for further education and discussion.

Questions related to the costs of implementing digital accessibility proved particularly challenging for students. Almost 41% of students could not assess whether adapting websites to the needs of people with disabilities is a costly process; 34% believe that it is, but a substantial group (25%) considers the costs to be low.

More than 30% of students also had difficulty estimating the time required for such a process. Nearly 54% believe that ensuring website accessibility takes a lot of time, while fewer than 16% hold the opposite view.

A large group of respondents (40%) were also unable to assess whether ensuring digital accessibility is economically profitable. Thirty-five percent believe it is, considering it an economically effective measure, while a substantial portion, 25%, disagreed.

The literature and results from other studies, including those conducted among entrepreneurs, confirm that these are very challenging issues and often critical when deciding whether to invest in website accessibility. Entrepreneurs primarily view business from an economic perspective, evaluating every action in terms of efficiency. Consequently, there is a growing number of analyses and business justifications explaining accessibility initiatives undertaken by companies and communicating them to both employees and the broader environment (PEAT, 2023). These issues are complex and intricate, making them

difficult to measure. Outcomes depend on many factors, and the time required to achieve the expected results is not straightforward to determine.

Students had fewer difficulties assessing the impact of accessibility actions on a company's image. Ninety percent believed that such actions contribute to improving the company's reputation, 7% had no opinion, and 11 respondents (3%) were convinced that there is no connection between these matters.

Responses were similar regarding whether adapting websites to the needs of people with disabilities ensures equal access to information for all citizens. Ninety percent of students agreed, while 8% had no definite opinion. This indicates that most respondents recognize digital accessibility as a key element of equality in information access. However, it is worth noting that significantly fewer respondents – only 67% (with 23% unconvinced) – believe that if a website is accessible, it is also more convenient for everyone to use. Ten percent considered this assumption incorrect. This suggests that for a considerable group of respondents, greater accessibility does not necessarily equate to greater convenience.

Finally, students were asked whether they would consider ensuring digital accessibility if they were to create their own website. Seventy-two percent responded affirmatively, 7% said no, and 21% (77 students) were undecided at the time of the survey. These results indicate a generally positive attitude toward digital accessibility, but they also reveal uncertainty, lack of understanding, and a small group for whom accessibility is clearly not a priority.

When asked about familiarity with the WCAG standard (without testing detailed knowledge, only general awareness of what the term refers to), 70% admitted that they had never heard of it, while 24% said they had some awareness but did not know the details. These results reveal significant gaps in young people's basic knowledge about creating user-friendly websites.

Fifty-one percent of students reported experiencing difficulties using certain websites due to non-intuitive interfaces or lack of digital accessibility, and an additional 8% indicated that such situations occurred fairly often. Twenty-seven percent stated that they had not encountered such problems, and 14% could not recall similar experiences.

Table 2. Problems with website usability

Do you struggle to use certain websites due to their unintuitive interface or lack of digital accessibility?	
yes, often	8%
happens	51%
not	27%
I do not recall	14%

Source: Own elaboration.

At the same time, more than half of the students (54%) reported that they do not use accessibility features when browsing websites, such as increasing font size, changing contrast, or using a screen reader. Thirty-six percent of respondents occasionally use such features, and an additional 7% use them frequently. Three percent of students were unsure whether they use accessibility options, meaning that if they do, it is done unintentionally.

Table 3. Using user-friendly features when browsing websites

Do you use any user-friendly features when browsing websites?	
yes, often	7%
happens	36%
not	54%
I don't know	3%

Source: Own elaboration.

Respondents were also asked to evaluate the digital accessibility of websites. Forty-four percent believed that most websites are digitally accessible, while slightly over 20% disagreed. Nearly 36% of students could not answer this question, stating that they do not pay attention to these aspects.

Fifty percent explicitly stated that they do not know anyone who has difficulty using websites due to their lack of accessibility, while another 25% could not recall if they know such a person. An equal proportion (25%) reported knowing someone in their environment who struggles with using websites because they are not adapted to their needs.

Comparing these responses with the earlier question, where 59% of students admitted having difficulty using certain websites due to a non-intuitive interface or lack of digital accessibility, it can be concluded that a non-intuitive interface poses a greater problem than lack of accessibility. It is important to note that although these concepts are related, a non-intuitive interface does not necessarily indicate a lack of digital accessibility. Difficulties may arise from unclear icons, hidden functions, unpredictable actions, or overly complex processes. While not always equivalent to a lack of accessibility, these issues relate to design, ergonomics, or user understanding. Nevertheless, when designing websites, it is important to aim for an intuitive interface that also meets digital accessibility standards. The analysis of responses also indicates that, according to some students, ensuring digital accessibility can in certain cases negatively affect interface intuitiveness.

In the final part of the survey, students were asked to imagine that they were owners of a private company, which, like most modern businesses, has a website, and then to answer what would motivate them to ensure the website's digital accessibility (Figure 7).

The findings can be considered very optimistic. Fifty-one percent of respondents indicated that any of the proposed factors would motivate them to ensure their company's website is accessible. A deeper analysis reveals the sources of motivation. Legal requirements emerged as the primary factor, which partly confirms the hierarchy of reasons presented by Smith (2013). Students stated (92%) that if something is legally required and failure to comply could result in penalties, they would take action.

Next, respondents cited economic reasons. Ninety percent would willingly take such measures if requested by clients, and 82% if it would differentiate their company from competitors. For 79%, the motivation would be to ensure equal access to products and services for all clients. Students also reported that they would be inclined to ensure website accessibility if they believed it would not be too costly and could be implemented easily (77%). An equally large group (77%) would be motivated by the observation that most companies have accessible websites.

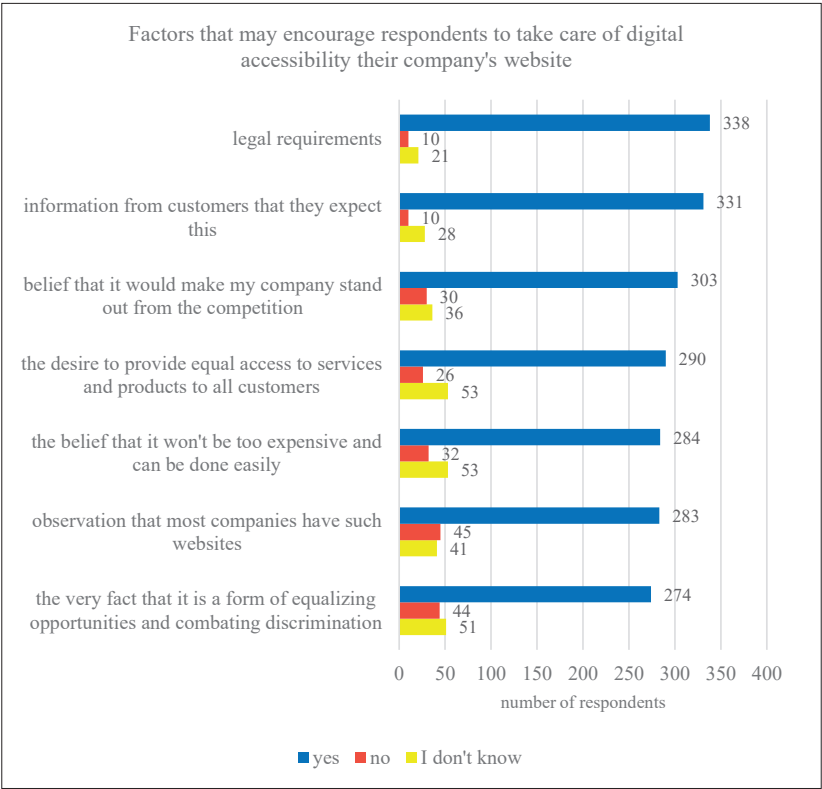


Figure 7. Factors that may prompt to make a company website digitally accessible

Source: Own elaboration.

The least motivating factor turned out to be the notion that providing digital accessibility is a form of equal opportunity and combating discrimination. Nevertheless, 74% indicated that this reason would motivate them to take accessibility measures, which is still a very high proportion.

Respondents who selected “I don’t know” were generally undecided regarding most factors; these are students who have not yet had the opportunity to reflect on these issues and form a definite opinion. Women were predominant in this group.

The final survey question focused on aspects that students might perceive as barriers to implementing a digitally accessible website.

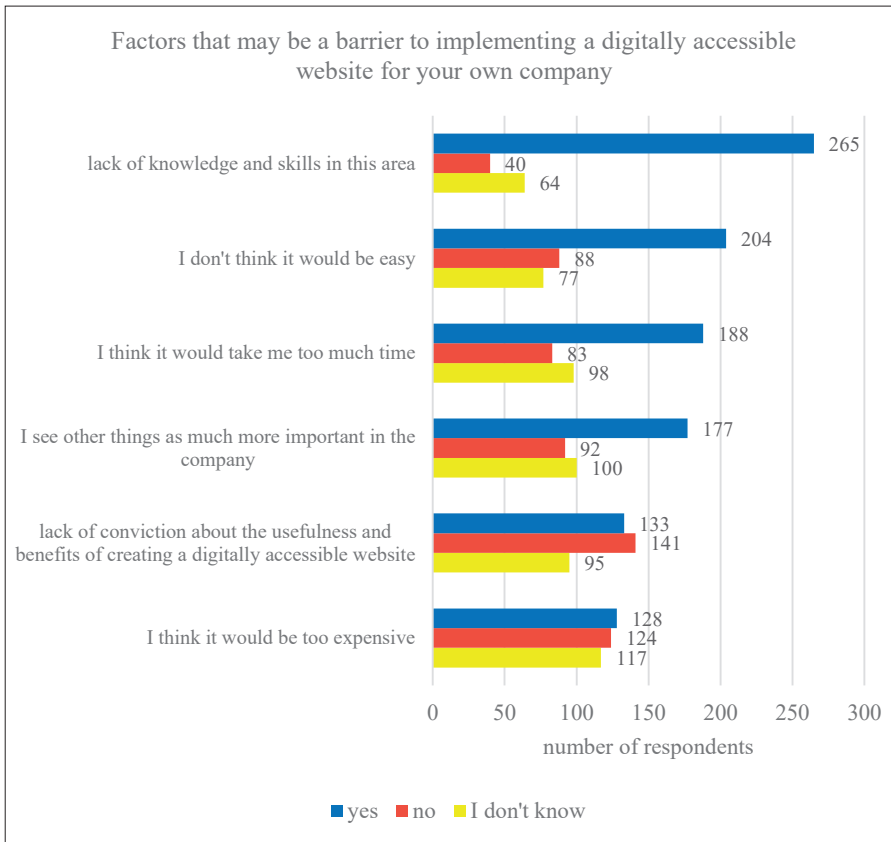


Figure 8. Factors that may be a barrier to implementing a digitally accessible corporate website

Source: Own elaboration.

The largest number of respondents (almost 72%) identified a lack of knowledge and skills as a barrier to designing a website that is accessible to all users and meets WCAG standards. Over half of the students also expressed concerns that it is not an easy task (55%) and that it might take too much time (51%). A significant group (48%) believed that other company priorities could be more important than ensuring website accessibility. Thirty-six percent feared that a lack of conviction about the usefulness and benefits of creating an accessible website could be a barrier. Nearly the same proportion (38%) indicated that this factor would certainly not be an obstacle for them.

The results indicate that students perceive the resources required for ensuring digital accessibility differently, which is also reflected in their responses to earlier questions about costs. Just under 35% believe it could be too expensive, while a similar proportion (slightly over 33%) do not see costs as an issue. Almost 32% had no opinion on this matter.

Conclusions

In summary, the study results indicate a fairly high sensitivity among students to the needs of people with disabilities, although this varies by gender. Women demonstrate the highest levels of empathy in this regard. However, there is also a significant group of students who find it difficult to determine their own feelings. Encouragingly, over half of the respondents reported an increase in sensitivity over the past 2–3 years. Approximately 3% of students reported a decrease in empathy toward people with disabilities, which could represent an interesting research problem for sociologists and psychologists.

Two-thirds of students declared that they are aware of the needs of people with disabilities regarding website accessibility. Yet, only one in five knows the criteria a website must meet to be considered digitally accessible. The study also revealed a very low level of theoretical knowledge regarding the WCAG standard. Students also demonstrated limited knowledge of legal regulations in Poland concerning the obligation of various entities to ensure digital accessibility. Additionally, students admitted to a lack of information about the costs, business viability, and time requirements of the accessibility process. Nevertheless, they strongly believe that accessible websites provide equal opportunities for all citizens to access information and improve a company's image.

The fact that nearly 60% of respondents reported occasional difficulties using certain websites due to non-intuitive interfaces or lack of digital accessibility indicates that there is still much room for improvement. Interestingly, among students with disabilities, this percentage is lower, at 46%. Thus, usability problems largely stem from a lack of user-friendly interfaces and insufficient consideration of user experience during website design. The study also found

that many respondents (42%) use various accessibility features while browsing the internet, confirming the need to analyze user expectations and needs when designing web services.

Asking students to imagine themselves as business owners and to consider the reasons that would motivate them to ensure their company's website is accessible revealed a very optimistic attitude toward accessibility. Any of the suggested reasons could serve as a motivator for the vast majority, with legal requirements ranked highest, followed by business considerations, and finally social reasons, such as the fact that an accessible website helps promote equal opportunities and combat discrimination. The main barriers identified by students when implementing accessible websites were a lack of knowledge and skills, which reinforces the findings and strongly demonstrates the need for broader and more comprehensive education in this area.

The study results provide an assessment of young people's awareness and their perceptions of digital accessibility issues. Additionally, they offer valuable insights for organizations, entrepreneurs, and policymakers that can be useful in developing digital accessibility strategies and, consequently, promoting social inclusion.

Although the study is not representative and does not allow for generalization of the findings, it has an exploratory nature and constitutes an interesting case study of attitudes with elements of opinion research (current perceptions and assessments). The conducted diagnosis, although partial, provides an overview of both young people's approach to accessibility issues and their knowledge in this area. It can serve as a basis for planning actions, particularly in the field of education related to universal design, incorporating user experience into website design, and ensuring user-friendly interfaces.

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