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Cognitive Accessibility in Digital Spaces: A Comprehensive Exploration

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1 Introduction

Digital inclusivity extends far beyond traditional accessibility measures. This analysis examines how different digital platforms approach cognitive accessibility, focusing on user experience, design principles, and inclusive communication strategies.

2 Positive Example: Duolingo Language Learning Platform

2.1 Linguistic Simplification

Duolingo demonstrates exceptional cognitive accessibility through its deliberate approach to language presentation. The platform excels by systematically using simplified sentence structures that make learning intuitive and approachable. Clear, direct instructions replace complex explanations, ensuring that users of all cognitive abilities can navigate the learning experience with confidence. By minimizing technical vocabulary and creating progressive complexity in learning modules, Duolingo transforms language learning into an accessible and engaging journey.

2.2 Visual Design Philosophy

The website employs a minimalist design strategy that prioritizes user comprehension through careful visual considerations. Abundant white space plays a crucial role in reducing cognitive load, allowing users to focus on essential information without feeling overwhelmed. Consistent color coding provides intuitive visual cues that help users understand different learning states and progress. Large, clear typography ensures readability, while thoughtfully designed iconography transcends linguistic barriers, creating a universal visual language that speaks to users regardless of their cognitive processing capabilities.

2.3 Interactive Learning Mechanisms

Cognitive accessibility is further enhanced through innovative interactive design that transforms learning into an engaging, supportive experience. The platform utilizes gamified learning experiences that make cognitive processing feel like play rather than work. Immediate, constructive feedback provides users with real-time understanding of their progress, reducing anxiety and supporting continuous learning. Visual and auditory learning cues cater to different cognitive processing styles, while adaptive difficulty levels ensure that each user can learn at their own pace and comfort level.

2.4 Accessibility Features

Duolingo's commitment to inclusive design is evident in its comprehensive accessibility features. The platform offers adjustable text sizes, allowing users to customize their visual experience according to their specific needs. A high-contrast mode provides additional visual support for users with different visual processing capabilities. Robust screen reader compatibility ensures that the platform is accessible to users with various cognitive and visual abilities. Multilingual support with simplified language options further demonstrates the platform's dedication to creating an inclusive learning environment.

3 Another Positive Example: Khan Academy - Educational Platform

3.1 Holistic Cognitive Accessibility Design

Khan Academy represents another exemplary model of cognitive accessibility in digital learning environments. The platform fundamentally reimagines educational content delivery by creating a learning experience that accommodates diverse cognitive processing abilities. Its approach goes beyond traditional educational platforms by breaking down complex concepts into digestible, manageable learning modules that support users with varying cognitive capabilities.

3.2 Adaptive Learning Strategies

The platform's most notable cognitive accessibility feature is its adaptive learning technology. Khan Academy creates personalized learning pathways that adjust in real-time based on user performance and comprehension. This dynamic approach reduces cognitive stress by ensuring that users are consistently challenged at an appropriate level. The system provides immediate feedback and explanations, breaking down complex concepts into step-by-step guided learning experiences that support different cognitive processing speeds and styles.

3.3 Multisensory Content Presentation

Khan Academy distinguishes itself through its multisensory approach to content delivery. Educational materials are presented through multiple channels - written explanations, video tutorials, interactive exercises, and visual diagrams. This diversity ensures that users with different learning preferences and cognitive processing styles can engage with content in ways that feel most comfortable and intuitive. The platform's commitment to creating multiple entry points for understanding demonstrates a deep understanding of cognitive diversity.

3.4 Supportive Interface Design

The platform's interface design prioritizes cognitive clarity and reduced mental load. Clean, uncluttered layouts with consistent color schemes and intuitive navigation minimize cognitive effort required to access learning resources. Large, readable typography, ample white space, and clear visual hierarchies guide users through learning materials without overwhelming their cognitive processing capabilities. Interactive elements are designed with clear affordances, making it easy for users to understand how to engage with different learning tools.

4 Challenging Example: LinkedIn Professional Networking Platform

4.1 Language Complexity Barriers

LinkedIn presents significant cognitive accessibility challenges through its complex communication approach. The platform extensively uses professional jargon that creates substantial barriers for users with diverse cognitive abilities. Complex sentence structures dominate the interface, assuming

an advanced level of professional knowledge that excludes many potential users. The information density overwhelms users, requiring significant cognitive effort to navigate and understand the platform's various features and interactions.

4.2 Design Complexity

The platform struggles with cognitive accessibility through a fundamentally cluttered interface design. Multiple competing visual elements vie for user attention, creating a disorienting experience that challenges effective information processing. Inconsistent navigation patterns force users to constantly relearn interaction methods, increasing cognitive load. The minimal utilization of white space further compounds the cognitive challenge, making it difficult for users to distinguish between different types of information and interaction points.

4.3 Interactive Challenges

Key interaction barriers within the platform create significant obstacles for users with diverse cognitive abilities. The profile creation process involves multiple complex steps that can feel overwhelming and intimidating. Icons often lack clear meaning, requiring additional cognitive effort to interpret and understand. Networking mechanisms involve intricate social interactions that demand high levels of social and cognitive processing. Multilayered menu systems create additional complexity, forcing users to navigate through numerous options to complete simple tasks.

4.4 Limited Accessibility Support

Accessibility features on LinkedIn appear predominantly superficial, offering minimal support for users with diverse cognitive needs. Basic screen reader support provides only fundamental access, falling short of creating a truly inclusive experience. Text size adjustments are limited, restricting users' ability to customize their visual experience. High-contrast options are minimal, failing to adequately support users with visual processing challenges. The platform demonstrates a comprehensive lack of comprehensive cognitive load management strategies.

5 Another Challenging Example: Spotify - Music Streaming Platform

5.1 Cognitive Overload in Music Discovery

Spotify presents significant cognitive accessibility challenges in its approach to music discovery and platform navigation. The platform's complex recommendation algorithms and extensive music library create an overwhelming experience that can be particularly challenging for users with cognitive processing difficulties. The sheer volume of content and multiple interaction pathways demand high levels of cognitive engagement to effectively explore and enjoy music.

5.2 Complex Navigation and Interaction

The platform's navigation system involves intricate interactions that can be cognitively demanding. Multiple nested menus, complex playlist creation processes, and sophisticated recommendation al-

gorithms require users to engage in complex decision-making processes. Switching between different views - library, search, recommendations, and social features - involves cognitive task-switching that can be exhausting for users with limited cognitive processing capacity.

5.3 Information Density and Visual Complexity

Spotify's interface suffers from significant information density challenges. Album art, track listings, playlist recommendations, and social features compete for user attention, creating a visually cluttered environment. The platform's dark mode and complex color gradients can make information hierarchy difficult to discern, adding additional cognitive load to the user experience. Tiny touch targets and densely packed information sections further complicate user interaction.

5.4 Limited Accessibility Customization

The platform provides minimal customization options for users with diverse cognitive needs. While basic accessibility features exist, they fall short of creating a truly inclusive experience. Text size adjustments are limited, and high-contrast modes are rudimentary. The platform lacks comprehensive support for users who require more extensive cognitive accessibility accommodations, such as simplified interfaces or reduced visual stimulation modes.

6 Methodology for Improvement

6.1 Language Simplification Strategies

Effective cognitive accessibility requires a fundamental reimagining of communication approaches. Organizations must prioritize replacing complex terminology with clear, direct language that speaks to all users. Utilizing active voice creates more immediate and comprehensible communication. Developing step-by-step instructions breaks down complex processes into manageable cognitive chunks. Eliminating industry-specific jargon ensures that information remains accessible to a broader audience.

6.2 Design Principles

Designing for cognitive accessibility demands a holistic approach to visual communication. Maximizing white space allows users to process information without feeling overwhelmed. Consistent color schemes provide intuitive visual navigation, reducing cognitive effort required to understand different interface elements. Clear visual hierarchies guide users' attention naturally, supporting more efficient information processing. Predictable navigation patterns create a sense of familiarity and reduce the cognitive load associated with learning new interface interactions.

6.3 Interactive Design

Creating cognitively accessible interactive experiences requires thoughtful, user-centered design. Intuitive user flows should guide users naturally through complex processes. Providing clear, immediate feedback supports continuous learning and reduces user anxiety. Designing progressive complexity allows users to engage with increasingly sophisticated features at their own pace. Offering multiple interaction methods acknowledges the diversity of cognitive processing styles.

6.4 Continuous Improvement

Cognitive accessibility is an ongoing journey of understanding and adaptation. Organizations must regularly conduct comprehensive user experience research that includes diverse cognitive perspectives. Actively involving users with varied cognitive abilities in design processes ensures more inclusive digital experiences. Implementing adaptive learning mechanisms allows platforms to respond dynamically to user needs. Creating flexible, customizable interfaces empowers users to tailor their digital experiences.

7 Conclusion

Cognitive accessibility is not a checkbox but a comprehensive design philosophy. By prioritizing user comprehension, simplifying interactions, and creating inclusive digital experiences, platforms can transform how individuals with diverse cognitive abilities engage with digital content.