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London's River Transport: A Tale of Signs and Sounds

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London is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, where mobility systems contribute to shaping everyday urban experience and perception. This paper investigates the river transport service operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers in London as a designed mobility system in which visual communication, spatial organisation, sound identity, and digital storytelling contribute to user experience construction. Developed within the framework of The Voices of London workshop during the London Festival of Architecture 2025, the research adopts a qualitative and practice-based methodology combining field observation, experiential analysis, visual documentation, and the examination of digital communication platforms. The study analyses the River Bus not only as transport infrastructure, but also as a communicative and perceptual ecosystem where graphics, signage, wayfinding strategies, sensory environments, and social media narratives shape orientation, comfort, and accessibility perception. Particular attention is dedicated to cognitive, sensory, and motor accessibility, interpreted as a communicative and perceptual process rather than exclusively a technical condition. Findings reveal a coherent and recognisable user experience characterised by visual consistency, acoustic comfort, and reduced sensory overload, while also highlighting criticalities related to fragmented accessibility communication and limited informational transparency.

Introduction

Urban mobility in the current context does not constitute only a network created for the movement of people, but also places of communication and perception in which signs, visual languages, sounds, digital interfaces, and spatial organization contribute to the construction of the human urban experience. The use of signage, audio messaging, maps, colours, and wayfinding technology also influences perception and comfort level, but also the comprehension, accessibility, and symbolic value of the mobility service offered. Indeed, it has been within only the recent past that scholars have realized the significance of visual communication, sensory identity, and digital storytelling in public transit.

Nonetheless, the study of urban river transport has remained relatively neglected, particularly the intersection between visual identity, digital communication, sensory engagement, and cognitive accessibility. In particular, the communicative and perceptual dimensions of accessibility are often marginal compared to purely infrastructural or regulatory aspects, despite their central role in understanding, orientation, and the autonomous use of spaces.

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This article originates from the workshop *The Voices of London*, developed during the London Festival of Architecture in June 2025, dedicated to the analysis of the sonic, visual, and communicative identities of London's urban mobility systems through field observation activities, visual documentation, and experiential analysis. Starting from this context, the paper analyses the river transport service operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers in London, considering it not only as a mobility infrastructure, but as an integrated communicative ecosystem in which space, graphics, sounds, sensory environments, and digital communication contribute to the construction of the user experience.

The research focuses in particular on the following questions:

- How does the River Bus construct its visual and communicative identity within the London transport system?
- What role do graphics, wayfinding, and spatial organization play in user orientation?
- How do sonic and sensory elements contribute to the perception of comfort and travel experience?
- How is the river transport experience represented through digital communication and social media?
- What is the relationship between the experience aspect, the brand, and the informative role in communicating the service?
- How do the visual, spatial, and sensory components affect the cognitive and perceptual accessibility of the service?
- What criticalities arise from a communicative perspective in terms of including users who have motor, cognitive, or sensory disabilities?

Literature Review

Research no longer focuses solely on the structural aspect of transportation, but has begun to address the topic of visual communication and how it contributes to creating a more enjoyable experience of the service. Historical and socioeconomic literature have highlighted how transportation development is closely linked to the symbolic and cultural transformation of each city, thus contributing to the development of everyday practices and the urban imaginary itself.[1]

A consolidated line of research focuses on visual communication and wayfinding systems in public transportation environments. Particularly when it comes to the design of signage, maps, and information devices, they are recognized as important components for orientation, spatial readability, and

1. D. Bogart, *The Transportation Revolution in Industrializing Britain: A Survey* (University of California–Irvine, Department of Economics, 2013).

perceived comfort for users, having a direct impact on accessibility and service effectiveness.[2]

At the same time, recent studies have analyzed the role of social media in public transport services, highlighting how digital platforms are increasingly being used to construct narratives of service quality and experience, shaping the perception of the value and safety of urban mobility.[3] However, the available scientific literature still highlights an imbalance between the narrative and aesthetic dimension and the informational function, with a tendency to marginalize operational aspects such as timetables, intermodality, and accessibility.[4]

Despite these contributions, urban river transport remains under-researched, particularly with respect to the integration of visual communication, digital storytelling, spatial design, and accessibility. In this context, the dimensions of cognitive and sensorial accessibility appear largely marginal in the existing literature. This paper addresses this gap, offering an analysis of river transport as a designed mobility system, in which graphics, space, and communication contribute to the construction of the urban experience.

Methodology

The methodology adopted is based on a qualitative, practice-based research approach developed as part of the "The Voices of London" workshop in June 2025, held during the London Festival of Architecture. The workshop focused on the analysis of sound, visual, and communicative identities within London's urban mobility systems through field observation and visual documentation activities.

The study combines direct field observation by Dr. Davide Nicolini and Dr. Massimiliano Di Lecce and experiential analysis on board the riverboat service operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers with a systematic visual and spatial analysis of vessels, piers, signage systems, and onboard graphic artifacts. The photographs featured in this paper are the result of fieldwork by the two researchers. Particular attention was paid to graphic coherence, orientation strategies, sound and sensory stimuli, and the relationship between naval design, user comfort, and communicative clarity. The methodology also includes a qualitative analysis of the service's digital communication ecosystem, including its website, mobile app, and official social media channels. Dr. Daniela Noel examined the service's visual language, narrative positioning, and information hierarchy.

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2. X. Hu, and L. Xu, "How guidance signage design influences passengers' wayfinding performance in metro stations: Case study of a virtual reality experiment," *Transportation Research Record* 2677, no. 1 (2022): 1118-1129.

3. S. Das, N. F. Trisha, I. N. Sener, and M. Walk, *Uses of social media in public transportation (TCRP Synthesis 156)* (Washington DC: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022).

4. A. Nikolaidou, and P. Papaioannou, "Utilizing social media in transport planning and public transit quality: Survey of literature," *Journal of Transportation Engineering, Part A: Systems* 144, no. 4 (2018).

Accessibility was assessed through observation of boarding interfaces, communicative, sensory and spatial accessibility strategies, complemented by analysis of institutional documentation and fieldwork. This integrated approach allows for a critical assessment of river transport as a designed system in which naval architecture, graphic communication, and user experience are structurally interconnected.

London's River Transport: An Analysis of the River Boat

Experiencing London inevitably means encountering a double-decker bus, now an emblematic symbol of the city alongside Big Ben, the iconic red telephone boxes, the black-and-yellow taxis, and the "Tube", the primary backbone of London's transport system. Public transport in England plays a central role not only from an economic perspective, but also from historical and cultural points of view. In the contemporary era, technological progress has gone hand in hand with the evolution of communication strategies related to these systems.[5] Over the decades, the transformation of transport modes has not involved only design or engineering aspects, such as improvements in sustainability, accessibility, and functionality, but has also affected social and communicative dimensions. These include the redesign of stop maps, visual signage for station identification, on-board instructions, and improved interaction with service personnel.[6] In a city such as London, whose identity is deeply connected to its river the Thames, fluvial transport, although often overlooked, represents one of the oldest and still most efficient ways of crossing the city. This is demonstrated by the daily activity of the numerous vessels navigating the river at relatively high speeds (Figure 1), unlike cities such as Paris, where the Seine is used almost exclusively for tourist cruises. Along the Thames, both sightseeing boats (river cruises) (Figure 2), offering uninterrupted routes accompanied by live commentary, and commuter boats (river boats), operating as a genuine urban transport system with multiple stops, coexist.

The photographs included in this contribution were taken by the authors during site visits and direct observation activities conducted in London as part of the research.

5. Bogart, *The Transportation Revolution in Industrializing Britain: A Survey*, 2013.

6. Hu and Xu, "How guidance signage design influences passengers' wayfinding performance in metro stations: Case study of a virtual reality experiment," 2022.

Figure 1. *River Boat*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

Figure 2. *River Cruise*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

Signage and Visual Identity

A key indicator of how deeply river transport is embedded in the everyday life of Londoners lies in its visual identity. The logo representing the service adopts the iconic symbol of the London Underground (Figure 3 a, b), differing only in colour — blue instead of red — thereby signalling its integration within the wider urban transport system while maintaining an autonomous identity.

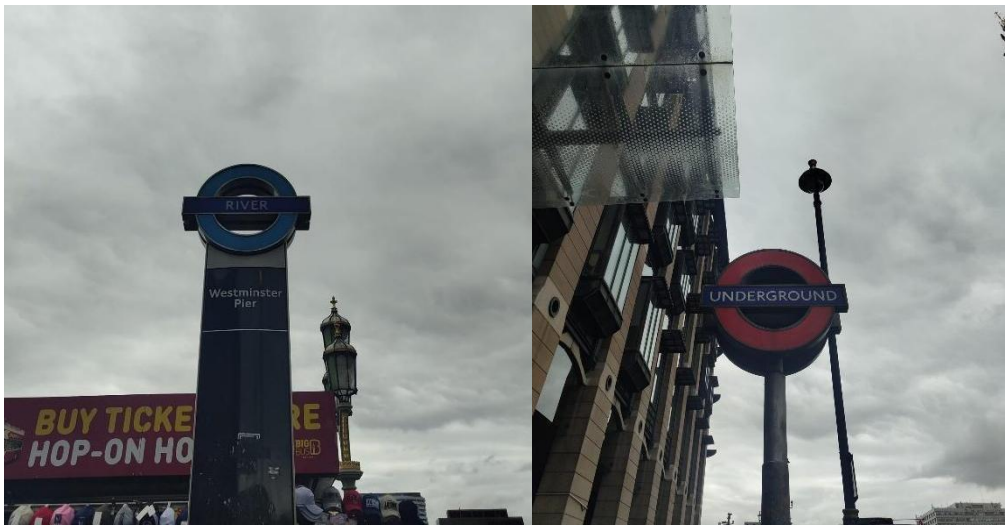

Figure 3. a. *Logo River Boat (light blue)* **b.** *Tube Logo*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

From an analytical perspective, this graphic choice does not merely represent aesthetic continuity, but constitutes a precise communication strategy. The use of shared visual codes allows users to immediately recognise the River Bus as an integral part of London's mobility system. The familiarity of the graphic language reduces the sense of disorientation and simplifies access to the service even for occasional users or tourists. This visual continuity therefore becomes a starting point for understanding the equivalence between the two systems. Although the Underground is often perceived as the ultimate symbol of London mobility, the river service actually performs a complementary and, in some cases, alternative function. Informal interviews with residents and regular city users reveal how transport along the Thames is frequently preferred for its speed, convenience, and overall quality of user experience. This contextual information helps explain the coherence of the entire visual and communicative system: every icon, auditory signal, or graphic element is designed to be extremely simple, graphically refined, essential, and functional. The River Bus logo is accompanied by the silhouette of a boat, also blue, with the bow pointing left, in contrast with graphic conventions commonly found in Italy, where such icons usually face right. Users are informed of the presence of a pier through extensive signage (Figure 4), similarly to what occurs within the Underground network.

Figure 4. *Westminster Pier*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

From a theoretical perspective, this visual organisation recalls the principles of urban wayfinding, according to which an effective orientation system must be intuitive, legible, and coherent throughout all stages of the user journey.[7] The repetition of symbols, colours, and graphic codes contributes to the construction of an environment that is recognisable and easily interpretable.

User Experience and Spatial Organisation

The platforms are very spacious, fully covered (Figure 5), equipped with seating areas, and generally composed of several docking piers (identified by letters) corresponding to the same number of destinations: the sensation is that of being in a conventional railway station with numerous platforms. In this case as well, a precise design intention emerges: transforming river transport into a system perceived as ordinary, accessible, and part of everyday life, avoiding its interpretation solely as a tourist attraction. The presence of shelters, seating, information displays, and guided routes contributes to reinforcing a perception of stability and reliability of the service.

7. P. Arthur, and R. Passini, *Wayfinding: People, Signs, and Architecture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992).

Figure 5. a., b. *Westminster Pier, Division of the Piers*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

Access tickets can be purchased in several ways: by scanning the QR code displayed on posters positioned on benches, through the dedicated application, directly from staff members welcoming passengers before boarding, or most commonly by using a contactless card tapped on the turnstile, following a procedure very similar to that of the Underground. Graphic design accompanies users throughout the entire journey (Figure 6), from the street or pedestrian route to the vessel itself, in an extremely intuitive manner: even those who have never used this means of transport can easily understand how it functions thanks to the numerous maps displayed along the pier, clearly indicating which dock to choose and how to purchase a ticket. The electronic display positioned above the turnstile also indicates the expected arrival time of the vessel.

Figure 6. *Uber Boat, Route Map and Informational Signage, Westminster Pier*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

Figure 7. *Graphic Information Regarding Thames-related Services (See Figure 7) at Westminster Pier and River Boat Stops*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

Direct observation demonstrates how the user experience is constructed through a reduction in perceived complexity. Every informational element is strategically positioned along the route and designed to minimise the time required for comprehension. This approach recalls contemporary theories of experience design applied to urban mobility systems, in which the quality of the experience depends not only on the technical efficiency of the transport mode, but also on the clarity of interactions and the perception of cognitive comfort.

Communication therefore appears coherent not only in terms of the logo, but in every aspect, with that of the Underground: from a graphic and spatial perspective, the experience resembles that of a Tube station, albeit outdoors and along the river.

Comfort, Perception, and Quality of the Journey

Once on board, the two crew members count the number of boarding passengers (river boats generally have a capacity of 220 passengers plus 4 crew members) and, in a surprisingly quiet manner, begin the assigned route. Passenger counting ensures that overcrowding, common in other forms of transport, never occurs, making the journey feel calm and relaxing. The interior space is wide and characterised by ergonomic faux-leather seats (Figure 8), with some rows equipped with tables. All seating areas are covered, while the large side windows and partially glazed upper sections above the main deck offer an almost panoramic external view.

Figure 8. a. *Uber Boat, Interior Detail of the Main Deck Seating with Large Side Windows* **b.** *Uber Boat, Faux-leather Seats: Ergonomic Detail*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

Figure 9. *Uber Boat, Main Deck with Interior View towards the Bow*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

Each row includes a dedicated charging area for smartphones or other devices, while life jackets, according to the instructions displayed within the partition graphics, are positioned beneath the seats and along the side compartments. Safety information

is clearly displayed and available throughout the deck (Figure 10), while restroom facilities are indicated both on the general layout plans and on the catamaran's bulkheads. A crew member announces each stop via microphone. The analysis of the interior environment highlights how comfort is constructed not only through material elements, but also through the perception of control and safety.[8] The continuous presence of information, indications, and visual supports reduces user uncertainty and contributes to generating a relaxed travel experience. Unlike other urban transport systems characterised by high-density crowds, noise, and speed, the River Bus seems to construct a slower and more contemplative experience, in which the urban landscape becomes an integral part of the journey itself. In this sense, the river does not merely represent a mobility infrastructure, but also a perceptual and experiential space.

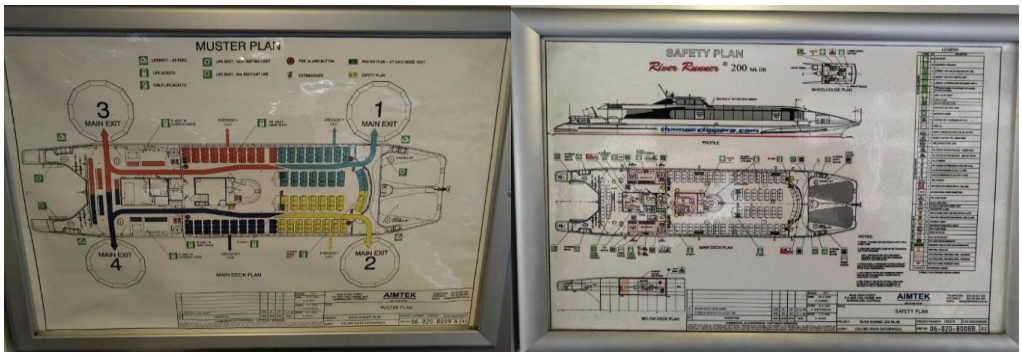

Figure 10. a. b. *Uber Boat, General Layout Plans Posted on the Interior Bulkheads of the Main Deck*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

Figure 11. *Uber Boat, Infographic on the Main Deck Interior*
Source: D. Nicolini, June 10, 2025.

8. L. Dell'Olio, A. Ibeas, and P. Cecín, "Modelling user perception of bus transit quality," *Transport Policy* 17, no. 6 (2010): 388-397.

Sound Identity and Perception of the Experience

Beyond graphic and spatial aspects, the sonic dimension also contributes significantly to the construction of the identity of London's River Bus. During the travel experience, users come into contact with a coordinated series of acoustic elements: voice announcements, turnstile sound signals, crew communications, and the sound of the vessel itself while navigating along the Thames. Unlike other urban transport systems characterised by high levels of noise, sudden braking, overcrowding, and the constant overlap of acoustic signals, the River Bus presents a relatively controlled sound environment perceived as more relaxing. The absence of the metallic noise typically associated with the Underground or London road traffic contributes to generating a greater sense of comfort and perceptual continuity throughout the journey. From an analytical perspective, sound does not perform merely a technical or informational function, but actively contributes to the construction of the overall user experience. Voice announcements are clear, concise, and regularly distributed along the route, reinforcing the perception of safety and control during the journey. The tone of voice adopted by the crew members also appears coherent with the image of the service: calm, recognisable, and easily understandable. This dimension can be interpreted through the concept of soundscape developed by Schafer (1977),[9] according to which every urban environment possesses its own sonic identity capable of influencing the emotional and cognitive perception of individuals. In the case of the River Bus, the acoustic landscape contributes to differentiating the service from other modes of urban transport, transforming the journey not merely into a functional displacement, but also into a slower, quieter, and more contemplative perceptual experience. The sonic identity therefore integrates with the graphic and spatial identity, reinforcing the recognisability of the service and contributing to the construction of a coherent system from both communicative and experiential perspectives.

Merchandising and the Construction of Urban Imagery

On board there is also a bar offering both hot and cold beverages, as well as several food options. Within the bar area, there is a dedicated merchandising section where the River Bus logo appears on water bottles, t-shirts, and caps. It is even possible to purchase a LEGO miniature of the vessel. From a communicative perspective, the presence of merchandising represents a significant element. River transport is not designed solely as a functional service, but also as an identifiable and recognisable experience. The sale of branded objects transforms the River Bus into an exportable and memorable urban symbol, contributing to the construction of a collective imaginary associated with the city of London. The intention therefore appears clear: transforming river transport into a globally recognised icon, alongside London's famous taxis, the Underground, and the city's most well-known landmarks.

9. R. M. Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1977).

Narrative and Positioning of the River Bus within the Digital Urban Landscape

In the stratified landscape of London's transport systems, the River Bus, operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers, presents itself not merely as a means of connection, but as an urban experience that blends comfort, landscape, and visual storytelling. In a city where the Underground forms the backbone of everyday mobility, the communication strategy behind this fluvial service plays a strategic role in positioning it as a desirable, functional, and aesthetically engaging alternative.

The target audience is defined: professionals in the financial and creative sectors, often reimbursed by their companies and commuting to the City or Canary Wharf; tourists in search of a different yet efficient urban experience; students and residents of neighbourhoods such as Greenwich, Battersea, and Woolwich, drawn to a slower and more sustainable form of mobility.

The digital communication reflects these segments with consistency. On its official channels—Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—the River Bus is portrayed as a calm, orderly, and quiet environment from which to view London from a lateral perspective: clean and bright interiors, glimpses of the river, passengers with laptops on their laps or coffee in hand. This narrative construction aligns with what is observed in academic literature, which suggests that social media, in the context of public transport, are increasingly used as tools to generate perceived quality and experiential value of the service.[10] The content is carefully curated, visually consistent, and designed to reinforce the image of urban mobility as not only useful, but also pleasant and compatible with the pace of contemporary city life.

Although it is part of the licensed network of London River Services, the River Bus service operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers does not adopt the Transport for London (TfL) logo, nor other core visual identifiers of the network, such as the Johnston typeface or the official signage colour codes. This is due to its nature as a private operator working under concession: regulated by TfL, but neither owned nor directly managed by it. The distinction becomes clear when compared to services like the Woolwich Ferry, which is fully operated by TfL and prominently features the institutional logo.

According to TfL's official website, Thames Clippers "operates under licence from TfL's London River Services," with partial fare integration but an autonomous visual identity. The presence or absence of official branding thus reflects (see Figure 12) the structural differences between internally run and concession-based services within the same fluvial network. The chromatic and visual identity of transport systems plays a central role in the recognisability and symbolic positioning of mobility services.[11] The case study by Definition Agency (2019),[12] which specifically analyses the visual guidelines applied to the River Bus, shows that the strength of this

10. Das, Trisha, Sener, and Walk, *Uses of social media in public transportation (TCRP Synthesis 156)*, 2022.

11. M. E. Ruggiero, *The Colour of Ships: Communication and Identity* (Italy: University of Genoa, 2018).

12. Definition Agency, *Transport for London – Design guidelines including River Bus timetables and outdoor media* (London: Definition Agency, 2019).

communication lies in its ability to harmonise urban branding with a distinct identity. The service positions itself as part of a coherent ecosystem, yet with its own voice, centred on values such as relaxation, order, and an alternative view of the city.

However, this emphasis on visual aesthetics is accompanied by a number of functional limitations. The communication, while evocative, tends to marginalise practical information: timetables, ticketing methods, accessibility, and intermodal connections are often secondary to the narrative dimension. These details are available through the Uber Boat app but not on the service's social media channels. This imbalance, already documented in academic literature,[13] can reduce both informational effectiveness and communicative inclusivity, especially for users outside the privileged target demographic.

Figure 12. *Screen App River Boat*

With 24,200 followers on Instagram[14] (see Figure 13) and approximately 17,900 on TikTok[15] (data as of June 15, 2025), Uber Boat by Thames Clippers maintains a moderate presence on social media in terms of audience size.

13. Nikolaidou and Papaioannou, "Utilizing social media in transport planning and public transit quality: Survey of literature," 2018.

14. "Uber Boat by Thames Clippers" Instagram profile (2025). https://www.instagram.com/thamesclippers (accessed 15 June 2025, 12:41).

15. "Uber Boat by Thames Clippers" TikTok profile (2025). https://www.tiktok.com/@thamesclippers (accessed 15 June 2025, 12:45).

However, the engagement rate on Instagram remains consistently low, staying below 0.5% throughout the week of June 9-15.

Similarly, performance on TikTok appears to fall short of expectations: the average number of views for the five most recent videos is around 7,070, despite a follower base exceeding 17,000. A comparable trend is observed on Instagram, where video content, often nearly identical to that published on TikTok, has averaged 2,526 views across the last five video posts (as of June 15, 2025).[16]

A later observation records an increase in follower numbers, reaching approximately 26,600 followers on Instagram and 20,209 on TikTok. These data indicate a growth in audience size over time, which can be documented through platform metrics (data as of December 23, 2025).

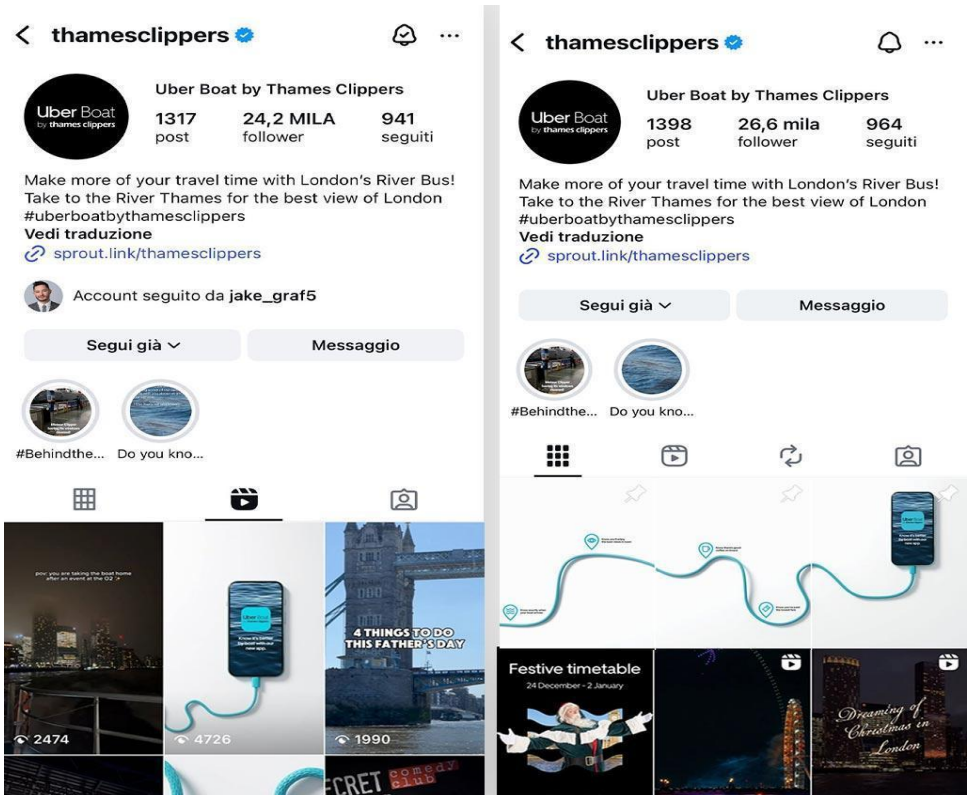

Figure 13. a., b. *Screen Instagram Page Thamesclippers June 2025 and December 2025*

This approach suggests a lack of cross-platform strategy and a weak differentiation of content based on specific target audiences and the communicative characteristics of each social platform, confirming how digital communication increasingly requires platform-specific narrative and relational strategies.[17] The posts that generate the most interest are generally linked to events or special initiatives,

16. Not Just Analytics, *Analysis of Thames Clippers profile* (Not Just Analytics, 2025).

17. S. Bentivegna, and G. Boccia Artieri, *Le teorie delle comunicazioni di massa e la sfida digitale* (Laterza, 2019).

such as those produced for New Year's celebrations or in collaboration with exhibitions and cultural institutions.

There is a clear attention to visual quality, particularly in the aesthetic presentation of the boat's interior and in the use of emotionally evocative footage. However, the overall content offering lacks variety: engaging formats such as interviews or experiential storytelling are absent; calls to action are rare; comments do not foster genuine interaction; and there are no structured tools for listening to or involving the audience.

The quality of the images, music, colours, and stylistic choices signals a medium-to-high target audience, without resorting to overtly luxury codes or an exclusive representation of the service, reinforcing how colour and visual language contribute to the construction of communicative identity.[18] In this sense, aesthetic refinement does not constitute the core message of the communication, but rather supports the broader positioning of the River Bus as a calm, curated, and accessible urban experience.

The experiential tone, by contrast, represents the main axis of communication. Video content frames the journey as a sensory and immersive experience, through urban views, reflections on the water, light effects, and slow-paced shots that foster direct viewer engagement. This dimension is further reinforced by pinned posts that combine iconography and short messages to integrate experiential value with practical benefits: the quality of the view, the availability of onboard services, and the use of the app as a tool to optimise travel time and costs. These aesthetic and narrative strategies contribute to the construction of an emotionally engaging perception of the service, in which visual communication reinforces both experiential value and user identification.[19]

Alongside this, an intimate tone emerges, oriented toward building an empathetic relationship with users. Musical choices contribute to creating a sense of proximity, while highlighted stories dedicated to behind-the-scenes content and interactive features introduce a relational and participatory dimension. This approach humanises the service and strengthens a sense of familiarity, making the experience feel personal and accessible, even in the absence of high levels of quantitative engagement.

With regard to values, the communication clearly foregrounds quality of urban experience, comfort, and calm as alternatives to the frenetic pace of metropolitan transport. The fluvial journey is constructed as an orderly, predictable, and pleasant space, in which technological efficiency, conveyed through the use of the app, punctuality, and fare transparency, integrates with a sensory and visual appreciation of the urban landscape. The content also conveys values of reliability and care, reinforced by an empathetic and non-aggressive tone that privileges proximity and familiarity over intrusive promotional strategies. Overall, the social media presence outlines a coherent value system, addressed to an urban, digitally competent audience that is receptive to an idea of mobility that is both efficient and experiential.

The analysis of content published on Uber Boat by Thames Clippers' social media channels reveals a clearly defined desired target articulated through communication itself. The Instagram page constructs and appeals to an urban

18. Ruggiero, *The Colour of Ships: Communication and Identity*, 2018.

19. S. Ji, and P.-S. Lin, "Aesthetics of Sustainability: Research on the Design Strategies for Emotionally Durable Visual Communication Design," *Sustainability* 14, no. 8 (2022): 4649.

audience that is digitally competent and sensitive to experiential quality rather than to transport functionality alone. The service implicitly addresses users who possess time, economic resources, and familiarity with digital tools, and who recognise value in a form of mobility perceived as orderly, efficient, and pleasant.

The desired target primarily consists of professionals, students, and tourists who inhabit or traverse the city through an experiential lens, for whom travel time is not merely residual but a moment to be inhabited. Through curated imagery, calm atmospheres, and a narrative centred on comfort, views, and well-being, the communication aims to attract users who consciously choose the River Bus not only for convenience, but for value alignment[20].

The social media channels also suggest an aspiration to build a loyal audience that regularly uses both the service and the dedicated app, perceiving it as reliable, cost-effective, and technologically advanced. The objective does not appear to be maximising the overall user base, but rather selecting a specific target capable of recognising itself in the communicated values and reinforcing the image of the River Bus as a qualified urban alternative to the Underground.

In conclusion, the digital communication of the River Bus operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers positions the service as an experiential and carefully curated alternative within London's transport system. Visual consistency, experiential storytelling, and an intimate tone contribute to constructing the journey as a calm, ordered, and pleasurable urban experience rather than a purely functional mode of transport.

However, this narrative emphasis comes at the expense of functional clarity. Practical information related to accessibility, intermodality, and service conditions remains marginal in social media content, reinforcing a selective positioning addressed to a digitally competent, medium-to-high socio-economic audience. While follower growth suggests increasing visibility, low engagement levels indicate limited participatory interaction.

Overall, the River Bus exemplifies how digital storytelling can enhance the perceived value of urban mobility, while also highlighting the need to better balance experiential communication with inclusivity and informational accessibility if the service is to function fully as part of public transport infrastructure.

Motivating Factors, Enablers, and Obstacles for People with Cognitive or Motor Impairments

This section examines accessibility on Uber Boat by Thames Clippers as a communicative, perceptual, and sensory experience. Rather than presenting accessibility only as a list of physical provisions, the analysis considers how passengers with cognitive or motor impairments interpret and use the river transport system through signage, colour, wayfinding cues, acoustic comfort, spatial predictability, sensory perception, staff communication, and cognitive accessibility.

20. Ji, S., and P.-S. Lin. "Aesthetics of Sustainability: Research on the Design Strategies for Emotionally Durable Visual Communication Design." Sustainability 14, no. 8 (2022): 4649.

The section is based on four types of material: direct observation during an Uber Boat journey; official accessibility information provided by Transport for London, the Port of London Authority, and Uber Boat by Thames Clippers; Muldoon's accessibility blog *Simply Emma*,[21] used as an independent user-oriented source; and the interpretation of these materials in relation to communication, perception, and accessibility. This distinction is important because the chapter does not treat all information as equivalent: some data derive from official service documentation, some from direct observation, some from user-oriented accessibility reporting, and some from critical interpretation.

Accessible mobility is a fundamental component of inclusive urban transport. It is also recognised as a human right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and as a legal obligation within the framework of the UK Equality Act.[22] These references provide the legal and ethical background for the discussion, while the following analysis focuses specifically on the Uber Boat by Thames Clippers case.

In this case, accessibility does not emerge as a single or stable condition. It changes according to the pier, the tide, the vessel, the availability of staff, the clarity of information, and the passenger's ability to understand each stage of the journey. From this perspective, access is not only a technical matter. It is also a process of orientation, interpretation, anticipation, and communication.

For passengers with motor impairments, the first question is not simply whether ramps, wheelchair spaces, or accessible facilities exist, but whether these elements can be recognised, reached, and used with confidence. For passengers with cognitive or non-visible disabilities, the journey depends on a related sequence: recognising the correct pier, understanding departure information, interpreting signs, processing verbal instructions, identifying staff support, and anticipating boarding and disembarkation. In both cases, the passenger must read the transport environment before being able to use it.

The pier represents the first communicative threshold of the Uber Boat journey. It is the point where the passenger must locate the correct access route, recognise the boarding area, interpret departure information, and understand how the transition from land to vessel will occur. For a passenger with a cognitive impairment, this space may require the simultaneous interpretation of signs, waiting areas, movement flows, staff indications, and auditory information. For a wheelchair user, the same environment also requires clear information about whether the boarding route is usable under the specific conditions of travel.

21. E. Muldoon, *4 Wheelchair Accessible Public Transportation Modes in London* (Simply Emma, 2023).

22. United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006); Equality Act, *Equality Act 2010.*

Figure 14. *Pier Access for Individuals with Mobility Impairments*
Source: M. Di Lecce, June 10, 2025.

Official accessibility information indicates that much of the Uber Boat network provides step-free access, while some piers present specific limitations because ramp gradients may be affected by tidal conditions.[23] In this respect, tidal variation is not only an infrastructural issue. It also becomes a communicative issue: the passenger must know in advance whether a pier can be used safely and whether assistance may be required. If this information is distributed across websites, staff knowledge, pier conditions, and personal preparation, accessibility depends on the user's ability to connect different sources of information before and during the journey.

23. Transport for London, *About River Bus* (Transport for London, 2025); Thames Clippers, *Accessible travel across London* (Thames Clippers, 2025).

Figure 15. *Ramp and Boarding Route Showing the Transition Between Pier and Vessel*
Source: M. Di Lecce, June 10, 2025.

Staff assistance therefore plays an important role in transforming the service into an understandable sequence of actions. Official service information indicates the presence of customer service assistants at several major piers, including London Eye, Westminster, Embankment, Bankside, London Bridge, Tower, Canary Wharf, Greenwich, and North Greenwich.[24] In this analysis, this assistance should not be understood only as operational support. Staff can clarify where to wait, when to move, how to board, and how to proceed once inside the vessel. For passengers who require additional time, clearer explanations, or reassurance, human mediation becomes part of the communicative infrastructure of the journey.

On board, accessibility is also shaped by the way space is perceived and understood. The main deck functions as the principal accessible area and offers

24. Ibid.

a relatively legible spatial organisation. Wheelchair spaces positioned close to the access route provide a clear destination after boarding and reduce unnecessary movement through the vessel. More broadly, this spatial clarity supports predictability: the passenger can understand where to go, where to remain, and how to move through the immediate environment.

Figure 16. *The Wheelchair Space*
Source: Simply Emma, 2023.

However, some limitations remain relevant because they affect the perceptual quality of the journey. Wheelchair users are not permitted on the external deck for safety reasons.[25] This restriction matters because river transport is not only a means of mobility. It is also a visual and sensory experience of London from the Thames, shaped by open views, natural light, the movement of water, and the relationship between vessel and city. When access to the external deck is restricted, the passenger can still use the service, but may be partly excluded from one of its distinctive perceptual dimensions.

25. Thames Clippers, *Accessible travel across London*, 2025.

Figure 17. *External Deck Area and River-View Experience as Part of the Perceptual Dimension of the Journey*
Source: M. Di Lecce, June 10, 2025.

The accessible restroom similarly shows that accessibility should be assessed through actual use and not only through the presence of facilities. In this analysis, the configuration of the restroom affects the sequence of movement required from a wheelchair user. The issue is therefore not simply whether an accessible toilet exists, but whether its layout supports autonomy, clarity of movement, and ease of use. This example confirms that accessibility depends on the relationship between spatial design, bodily movement, and the passenger's ability to act without unnecessary uncertainty.

Figure 18. a, b, c. *Accessible Restroom Details: Spatial Configuration, Signage, and Door/Lock Elements Affecting Practical Use*
Source: M. Di Lecce, June 10, 2025.

For passengers with cognitive or non-visible disabilities, the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower programme represents one of the clearest examples of accessibility as communication. According to the operator's information, passengers may wear a lanyard, pin, or bracelet to indicate discreetly that they may need additional time, patience, or support.[26] In the Uber Boat context, the sunflower symbol functions as a visual code addressed to staff. It can indicate that a passenger may need clearer verbal instructions, assistance with departure boards or signs, proximity to companions, or more detailed information about what to expect before, during, and after the journey.

This programme is particularly relevant to the paper's focus on signs and sounds. The sunflower symbol does not make the journey accessible by itself. Its value depends on the staff response it activates. If staff recognise the sign and adapt their communication, the passenger may receive slower explanations, more explicit instructions, or reassurance during boarding and disembarkation. In this sense, the programme connects visual recognition, spoken communication, staff awareness, and cognitive accessibility.

The onboard pictograms observed during the journey also contribute to the interpretation of the vessel. They help passengers identify routes, facilities, and expected behaviours within a moving and spatially constrained environment. Their value lies in reducing ambiguity and supporting wayfinding. However, for passengers with cognitive impairments, pictograms may not be sufficient on their own. They may need to be reinforced by verbal confirmation, staff gestures, or repeated information. In the Uber Boat case, wayfinding is therefore produced through the combined effect of spatial layout, visual signs, staff communication,

26. Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, *Hidden Disabilities Sunflower* (2025); Thames Clippers, *Accessible travel across London*, 2025.

and spoken information, in line with broader guidance on accessible and inclusive transport information.[27]

The sensory character of the vessel is also relevant. The observation notes the use of neutral colours, including white, beige, and warm shades of brown and green, together with comfortable seating, indirect lighting, and limited reflective surfaces. In line with guidance on neurodiversity and the built environment, such elements can contribute to reducing negative sensory experiences related to lighting, acoustics, visual complexity, and wayfinding.[28] For passengers with sensory sensitivities, these conditions may reduce perceptual overload and make the journey easier to tolerate than transport environments that are more crowded, enclosed, visually aggressive, or acoustically intense.

Figure 19. *Interior Seating, Neutral Colour Palette, and Calm Visual Environment Observed on Board*
Source: M. Di Lecce, June 10, 2025.

Sound forms another part of the accessibility experience. The Uber Boat journey may be perceived as less enclosed than underground transport because of its visual openness and spatial continuity with the city. At the same time, engine sounds, announcements, passenger density, weather, and the movement of the vessel may affect users differently. Acoustic comfort should therefore not be assumed as a fixed quality of the service. It depends on journey conditions,

27. Department for Transport, *Inclusive Mobility: A Guide to Best Practice on Access to Pedestrian and Transport Infrastructure* (London: Department for Transport, 2021).

28. British Standards Institution – BSI, *PAS 6463:2022 Design for the Mind – Neurodiversity and the Built Environment* (London: BSI, 2022).

passenger density, the clarity of announcements, and the sensory profile of the individual passenger.

An independent user-oriented source, namely Muldoon's accessibility blog *Simply Emma*,[29] is useful because it provides an external perspective on the lived experience of accessibility. In this chapter, this type of source supports the idea that accessibility should be evaluated not only through official provision, but also through how passengers experience boarding, movement, facilities, staff support, information, and comfort. This user-oriented source therefore complements the direct observation and the operator's official information, without replacing academic or institutional evidence.

The motivating factors identified in the Uber Boat case are linked to the qualities that make the journey more legible, calmer, and easier to anticipate: visual openness, a relatively calm interior, staff presence at major piers, step-free access across much of the network, visible pictograms, verbal guidance, spatial clarity, and the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower programme. These elements may make the service more approachable for passengers who find other forms of urban transport too crowded, enclosed, unpredictable, or difficult to interpret.

The main enablers are those elements that help passengers understand and use the service with greater confidence. Step-free access is an enabler when the passenger can identify which pier is usable. A wheelchair space is an enabler when it is easy to locate after boarding. Pictograms are enablers when they are visible and intuitive. Staff assistance is an enabler when it provides clear verbal guidance. The Sunflower programme is an enabler when it leads to an appropriate communicative response from trained staff. In each case, accessibility depends not only on the existence of a provision, but on whether that provision is understandable, perceivable, and usable.

The main obstacles are communicative, perceptual, sensory, and spatial. Tidal variation may make access uncertain. Accessibility differs between piers and vessel classes. Some information may be distributed across websites, pier conditions, staff assistance, and onboard signs rather than being immediately available at the point of use. For passengers with cognitive impairments, unclear signage, insufficient verbal explanation, crowded boarding conditions, excessive noise, or unpredictable transitions may reduce autonomy even when accessible features are present.

Overall, the Uber Boat by Thames Clippers case shows that accessibility in London's river transport is experienced through a sequence of communicative, perceptual, spatial, and sensory encounters. Passengers with motor impairments must interpret piers, boarding routes, vessel entrances, wheelchair spaces, circulation routes, and facilities as usable or problematic. Passengers with cognitive or non-visible disabilities must interpret signs, pictograms, spoken instructions, staff responses, colours, lighting, sound, and the order of the journey. In this sense, accessibility is not reducible to the existence of ramps, toilets, or wheelchair spaces. It is produced when the passenger can read, hear, understand, anticipate, and use the Uber Boat environment with confidence from the pier to disembarkation.

29. Muldoon, *4 Wheelchair Accessible Public Transportation Modes in London*, 2023.

Conclusions

The observations and data collected on river transport in London reveal an effective management of graphic communication directed at users. Information is conveyed in a clear, direct, and functional manner, reflecting an explicit intention to align the communicative dimension of the river service with that of the metropolitan transport system. The graphic design adopted for the Underground and the river boats appears remarkably homogeneous: despite different colour schemes, the two systems are substantially aligned in terms of structure and visual logic. This coherence contributes to the construction of a unified perception of the overall public transport network. The onboard experience of the river boats is characterised by a high level of comfort: the environment is quiet, noise levels are limited, and seating is spacious and comfortable. Onboard information, although selective, adequately covers safety issues and the organisation of services.

With regard to social media communication, Uber Boat by Thames Clippers constructs a refined, relaxing, and aesthetically coherent image, primarily addressed to a selected urban audience with a high level of digital familiarity. However, this narrative approach privileges visual identity over informational function, leaving essential aspects such as accessibility, clear timetables, and intermodal connections in the background. The resulting strategy appears more oriented toward branding than toward public service, capable of attracting interest but not necessarily fostering inclusion. Although Uber Boat operates under a Transport for London (TfL) licence and is listed on the official website among river services, this institutional integration is not fully reflected in its social media communication. River Bus channels remain separate from official TfL platforms, and key elements of TfL's visual identity—such as logo, typography, and colour codes—are absent. In contrast, services directly managed by TfL, such as the Woolwich Ferry, clearly emphasise their belonging to the public network. In order for the digital storytelling of the River Bus to function effectively as part of the urban transport infrastructure, it is therefore necessary to move beyond aesthetic appeal and promote more accessible, transparent, and dialogic communication capable of addressing the real needs of diverse users. Communication regarding assistance services also remains fragmented and insufficiently transparent, particularly in relation to booking procedures and operational protocols.

In light of these findings, it would be desirable for Uber Boat to introduce additional sensory support tools, such as sensory route maps accessible via mobile applications or simplified printed materials, as well as dedicated onboard areas such as quiet zones to provide a more comfortable experience for users with specific sensory profiles, including individuals on the autism spectrum. From this perspective, accessibility should no longer be interpreted solely as regulatory compliance or technical accommodation, but rather as a strategic dimension of urban mobility design. The analysis of motivating factors, enabling conditions, and persistent obstacles experienced by users with cognitive and motor impairments demonstrates that inclusive solutions generate systemic benefits, including greater clarity, higher perceived comfort, improved safety, and stronger trust in public transport services. Given its spatial characteristics

and sensory qualities, river transport is particularly well suited to function as a testing ground for advanced models of cognitive and sensory inclusion capable of influencing future standards in urban mobility design. The adoption of established good practices in accessible transport communication could ultimately transform Uber Boat into a model of integrated and personalised accessibility, not only in terms of designing spaces or access, but also in terms of accessible communication and the study of sounds and colours that respect different user needs.

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