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

London's River Transport represents a unique case of communication and accessibility. This paper examines the interaction between visual and auditory cues in London's waterborne mobility system, highlighting design strategies that balance functional efficiency and aesthetic experience. The study analyzes how signage, soundscapes, and spatial configurations influence user perception, especially in complex urban contexts. The findings suggest that a coordinated multimodal approach improves both navigation and inclusivity, offering insights for future transport design in metropolitan environments.

Keywords: *London, River Transport, Accessibility, Communication, Urban Design.*

London's River Transport: An Analysis of the River Boat Davide N.

Experiencing London inevitably means encountering a double-decker bus—now as emblematic of the city as Big Ben, the iconic red telephone booths, 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 economically, but also historically and culturally. In the contemporary era, technological progress has gone hand in hand with the evolution of communication strategies surrounding these systems (Bogart, 2013).

Over the decades, the transformation of transport modes has not been limited to design or engineering—such as improving sustainability, accessibility, and functionality—but has also involved social and communicative dimensions. These include the redesign of stop maps, visual signage to identify stations, on-board instructions, and enhanced interaction with service personnel (Hu & Xu, 2022).

In a city like London, whose identity is deeply intertwined with its river—the Thames—fluvial transport, though often overlooked, represents one of the oldest and still most efficient ways to cross the city.

This is evidenced by the daily activity of numerous river boats navigating at relatively high speeds—unlike cities such as Paris, where the Seine is used almost exclusively for tourist cruises. On the Thames, one can find both sightseeing boats (river cruises) offering uninterrupted journeys accompanied by live commentary, and commuter boats (river boats) operating as a regular form of urban transit with multiple stops.

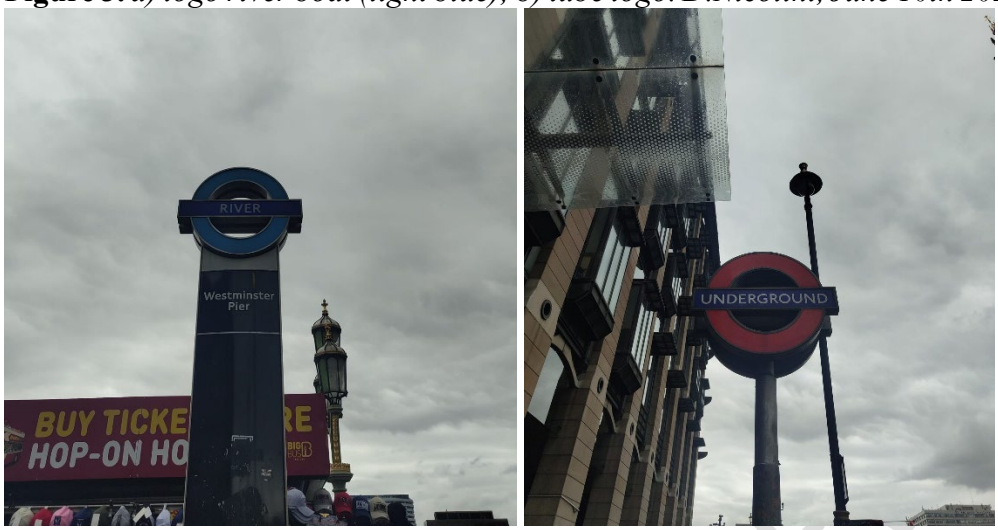
Figure 1. *River Boat. D.Nicolini, June 10th 2025*

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

On board the river boats—modern catamarans painted in light blue and white—one finds a diverse cross-section of London's population: entrepreneurs, office workers, retirees, families, young people, and tourists alike. These groups choose the river as a preferred means of transport, opting for water over congested roads or the underground.

A key indicator of how embedded river transport is in the everyday life of Londoners lies in its visual identity. The logo representing the service mirrors the iconic symbol of the London Underground, differing only in colour—blue instead of red—signalling its integration within the broader transport system while affirming a distinct identity.

Figure 3. *a) logo river boat (light blue); b) tube logo. D.Nicolini, June 10th 2025*



This strong visual continuity serves as a starting point for understanding the equivalence between the two systems. While the Underground is often perceived as the ultimate symbol of London's transport network, in reality, the river service functions as both a complementary and, at times, an alternative mode of transit. Interviews with residents and frequent city users reveal that river transport is often preferred for its speed, convenience, and overall superior user experience.

This contextual information sheds light on the coherence of the entire visual and communicative system: every icon, auditory cue, or visual sign is designed to be remarkably simple, graphically refined, essential, and functional.

The River Bus logo is accompanied by the silhouette of a boat—also in blue—with the bow pointing to the left, in contrast to common graphic conventions in Italy, where such icons typically face right. Users are informed of the presence of a pier through extensive signage, much like what is seen in the Underground network.

Figure 4. *Westminster Pie, D.Nicolini, June 10th 2025*

The platforms are very spacious, completely covered, with seats and are generally made up of several mooring piers (identified by letters) for the same

number of destinations: the sensation is that of being in a normal railway station with numerous platforms.

Figure 5. a,b) Westminster Pier, division of the piers. D.Nicolini, June 10th, 2025

The access ticket can be purchased in several ways: by scanning the QR code found on posters placed on the benches, through the app, from staff members welcoming passengers before boarding, or—most commonly—by using a contactless card and tapping it on the turnstile (a method very similar to that of the Underground).

The graphic design supports users along the entire journey from the road or pedestrian path to the boat in a highly intuitive way: even those who have never used this means of transport can easily understand how it works, thanks to the many maps displayed throughout the pier, which clearly indicate which dock to choose and how to purchase a ticket.

Figure 6. Uber Boat, route map and informational signage, Westminster Pier. D. Nicolini, June 10th, 2025

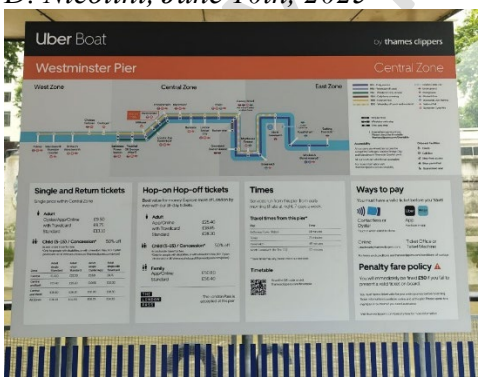
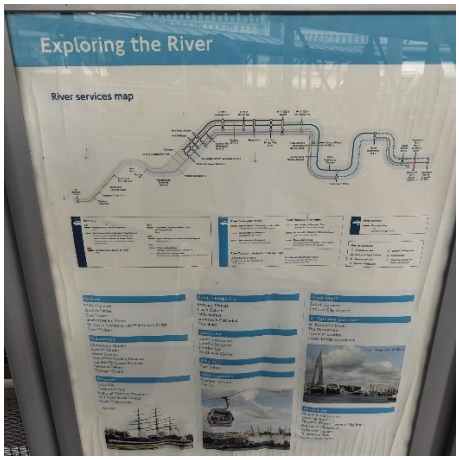


Figure 7. *Graphic information regarding Thames-related services at Westminster Pier and River Boat stops. D. Nicolini, June 10th, 2025*



The electronic display positioned above the access turnstile indicates the expected arrival time of the vessel.

Communication, therefore, is consistent not only in terms of the logo, but in every aspect, with that of the Underground: from a graphic and spatial organisation perspective, it feels like being in a Tube station—only outdoors, along the river.

Once on board, the two crew members count the number of passengers boarding (river boats generally have a capacity of 220 passengers plus 4 crew members) and, in a surprisingly quiet manner, begin the assigned route.

The passenger count ensures that overcrowding—common in other modes of transport—never occurs, making the journey feel calm and relaxing.

The interior space is wide and features ergonomic faux-leather seats, with some rows equipped with tables. All seats are covered, but the large windows on the sides and partially above the main deck provide an almost panoramic view of the outside.

Each row includes a dedicated area for charging smartphones or other devices, while life jackets—according to the instructions displayed on the partition graphics—are located under the seats and along the side compartments.

Figure 8. *a) Uber Boat, Interior detail of the main deck seating with large side windows. D. Nicolini, June 10th, 2025, b) Uber Boet, Faux-leather seats: ergonomic detail. D. Nicolini, June 10th 2025*

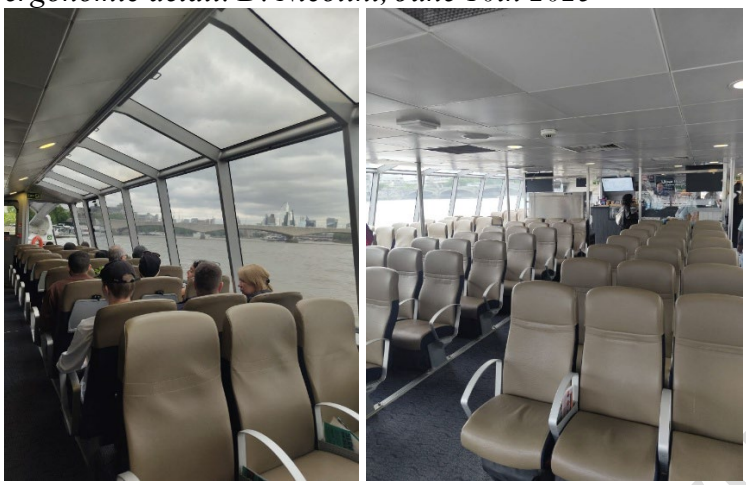
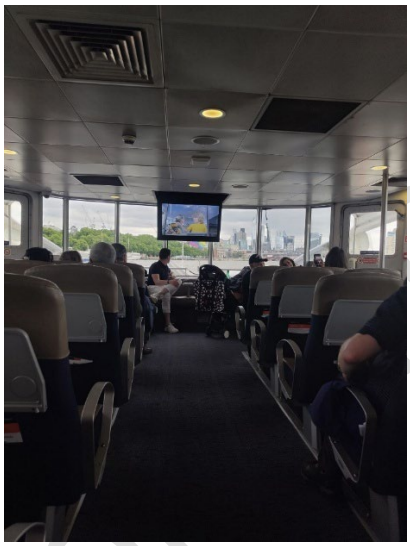


Figure 9. *Uber Boat, Main deck with interior view towards the bow. D. Nicolini, June 10th 2025*



Safety information is clearly displayed and available throughout the deck, while restroom facilities are indicated both on the general layout plans and on the catamaran's bulkheads.

Figure 10. *a,b) Uber Boat, general layout plans posted on the interior bulkheads of the main deck. D. Nicolini, June 10th 2025*

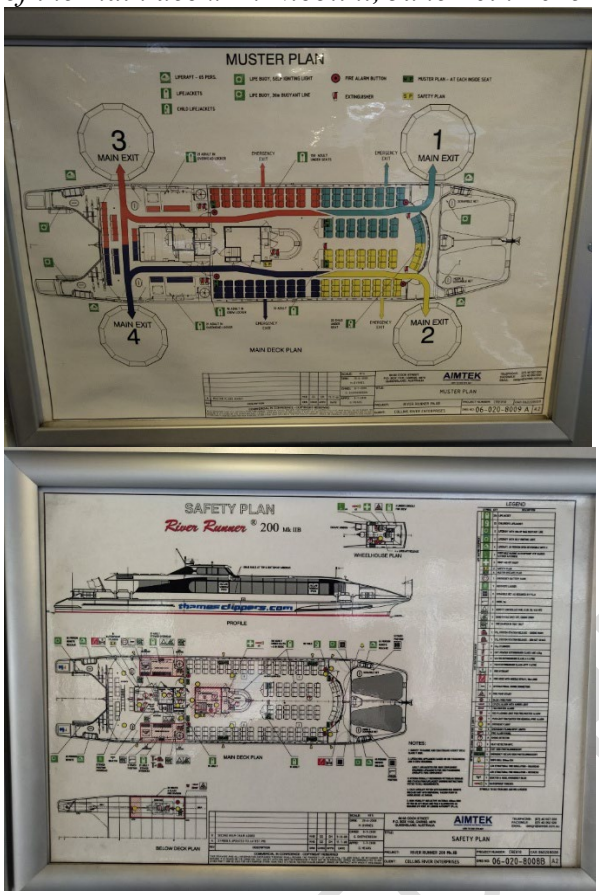
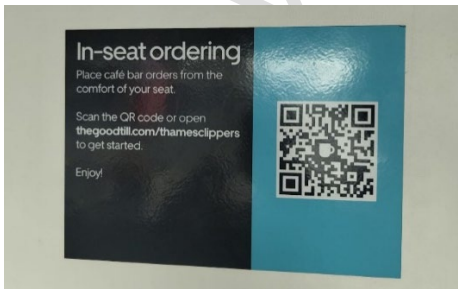


Figure 11. *Uber Boat, infographic on the main deck interior. D. Nicolini, June 10th 2025*



A crew member announces each stop via microphone.

On board, there is a bar that offers both hot and cold beverages, as well as food options. Within the bar area, there is also a dedicated merchandising section where the River Bus logo appears on water bottles, t-shirts, and caps. A LEGO miniature of the boat is also available for purchase.

The intention is clear: to establish river transport as a globally recognized icon, on par with the city's famous taxis, Underground, and most well-known landmarks.

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

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 clearly 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 (Das et al., 2022). 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.

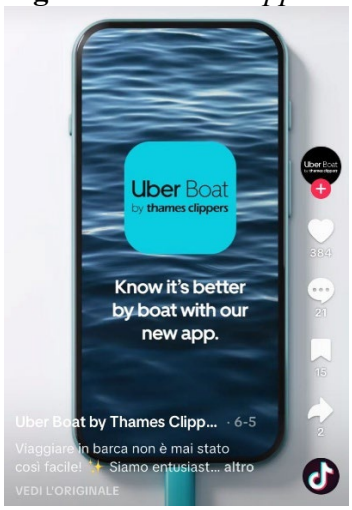
Although it is part of the licensed network of London River Services, the River Bus service operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers does not adopt the Transport for London (TfL) logo, nor other core visual identifiers of the network, such as the Johnston typeface or the official signage colour codes. 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," [1] with partial fare integration but an autonomous visual identity. The presence or absence of official branding thus reflects the structural differences between internally run and concession-based services within the same fluvial network. The case study by Definition Agency (2019), which specifically analyses the visual guidelines applied to the River Bus, shows that the strength of this 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 (Nikolaidou & Papaioannou, 2018), can reduce both informational effectiveness and communicative inclusivity, especially for users outside the privileged target demographic.

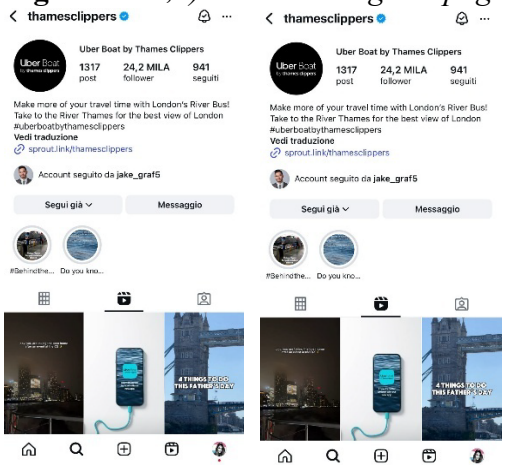
Figure 12. *Screen App River Boat*



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

Figure 13. *a,b) Screen Instagram page thamesclippers*



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. The posts that generate the most interest are generally linked to events or special initiatives, 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.

In conclusion, the digital communication of the River Bus stands as a compelling case study in the construction of urban transport imagery. The attention to detail, visual consistency, and narrative strength of the service have contributed to its positioning as an attractive and alternative mobility option.

Yet, precisely because of the type of audience it targets—selective, urban, and tourist-oriented, with spending power and familiarity with digital platforms—there remains an urgent need to reflect on how to integrate greater functional clarity, genuine interaction, and informational accessibility. Only through such integration can the constructed narrative evolve into a true public infrastructure—capable of including, connecting, and narrating London not just to its privileged users.

Motivating factors, enablers, and obstacles for people with cognitive or motor impairments Massimiliano D.L

Accessible mobility—meaning mobility that is usable by all citizens of the country regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities, economic status, age, gender, or other conditions, and regardless of their place of residence—is a fundamental component of future urban development. At the same time, it

constitutes both a human right, as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), and a legal obligation under the UK Equality Act (2010).

Although Transport for London (TfL) reports that 95% of Londoners live within 400 metres of an accessible bus or Underground stop (TfL, 2024a), only 24 of the 31 publicly used piers on the Thames guarantee step-free boarding under all tidal conditions (Port of London Authority [PLA], 2023). However, Cadogan, London Bridge City, and Wandsworth Riverside Quarter are not accessible to wheelchair users. Depending on the tide, access ramps at these locations may become too steep, posing a safety risk for those using wheelchairs.

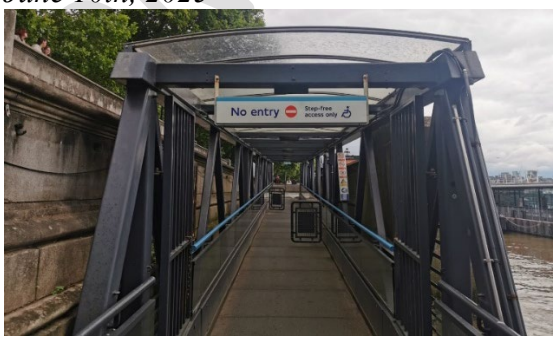
Customer service assistants are available to all passengers at the London Eye, Westminster, Embankment, Bankside, London Bridge, Tower, Canary Wharf, Greenwich, and North Greenwich piers between 10:00 and 18:00.

In the broader context of transitioning toward more inclusive public transport, the fluvial service operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers stands out as a significant case study for the city of London. Historically a physical barrier, the Thames has become a mobility corridor over the past two decades. Nonetheless, the academic literature on accessibility within river transport services remains sparse.

The writing of this contribution is based on my direct experience aboard the Uber Boat, a review of the documentation available on the operator's official website, and an analysis of independent sources such as TripAdvisor, Euan's Guide, and Simply Emma.

Boarding routes are generally step-free; however, tidal variation causes the gradient of access ramps to fluctuate between 4.8% (at high tide) and 9.7% (at low tide), exceeding the recommended maximum slope set by the Equality Act (8%). Onboard, the 320-class vessels offer four wheelchair spaces at the stern and accessible toilets; in contrast, lighter vessels such as the Star, Storm, and Sky Clipper are not equipped with such facilities, forcing some passengers to choose specific sailings.

Figure 14. *Pier access for individuals with mobility impairments, M. Di Lecce, June 10th, 2025*



The data confirm that the onboard experience is generally perceived by disabled users as positive, though not consistent for everyone. The low gradient

of ramps during high tide, the presence of trained staff, and the availability of free tickets for accompanying persons are all highly appreciated features.

On the main deck—as well as in the restroom located externally on the aft outdoor deck—spaces are designed to ensure full manoeuvrability: wide 360° turning areas guarantee complete autonomy, while controlled-slope gangways enable safe boarding and disembarkation for individuals with mobility impairments.

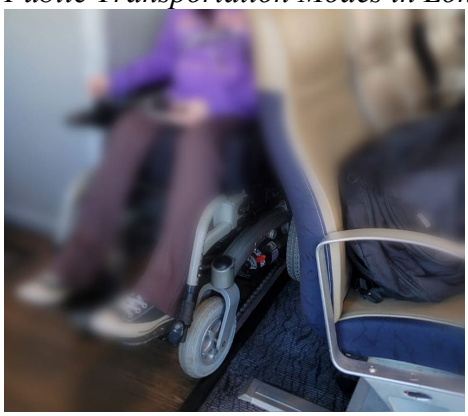
Figure 15. *a,b) The ramp provides safe access for individuals with disabilities., M. Di Lecce, June 10th, 2025*

As for the restroom door, it opens outward and features a thumb-turn lock, meaning it can be closed from the inside by rotating a knob (no key is required). However, a recessed sliding door would be preferable, as it would avoid obstructing the passage of a wheelchair. The accessible sink is wall-mounted but placed in a rather cramped corner.

Figure 16. *a,b,c) The accessible restroom door, sink, and toilet, M. Di Lecce, June 10th, 2025*

The wheelchair space is located toward the stern, next to the door leading to the external deck. However, for safety reasons, wheelchair users are not permitted on the deck.

Figure 17. *The wheelchair space "Simply Emma (2023) Wheelchair Accessible Public Transportation Modes in London".*



Disabled passengers are entitled to a 50% discount on the ticket fare and, if they require the assistance of a companion, may obtain a complimentary ticket.

Anyone holding a Freedom Pass or a 60+ Oyster card will receive a 50% discount. The discount applies to single, hop-on hop-off, and season tickets. It does not apply to return tickets purchased at the pier or to ticket bundles.

If assistance from a companion is required, a complimentary ticket is available at any staffed ticket office. If more than one person is needed for support, customers are asked to contact the Customer Service team at least three working days before travel. Regarding cognitive disabilities, the River Bus operated by Uber Boat by Thames Clippers is part of and supports the Sunflower Lanyard programme. The Sunflower initiative for Hidden Disabilities is an internationally recognised scheme adopted by a growing number of airports, tourist attractions, and accommodation providers.

If a person with a non-visible disability is travelling on the Uber Boat, they may choose to wear a sunflower lanyard, pin, or bracelet to discreetly indicate to the crew that they might need understanding, time, or support. All staff are trained to assist and provide support during the journey. The lanyards—bright green and decorated with a recognisable sunflower design—are entirely optional and signal to staff that a passenger may:

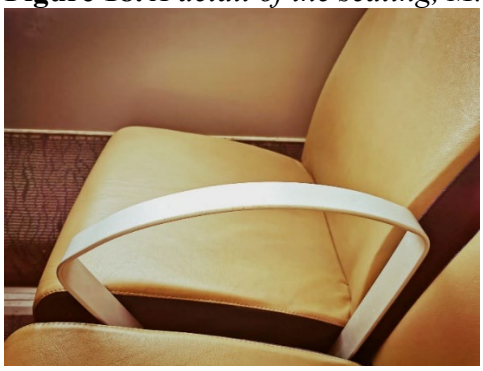
- Need more time to process information or prepare for check-in, boarding, or disembarkation;
- Require clearer verbal instructions, as they may find it difficult to understand facial expressions and/or body language;
- Need assistance reading departure boards or signs;
- Prefer to stay close to family or friends;
- Benefit from more detailed information about what to expect before, during, and after the journey.

Sensory stimuli are carefully calibrated: neutral colours—such as white, beige, and warm shades of brown and green—create a calming environment, reducing sensory overload. Ergonomic and comfortable seating, the absence of

reflective surfaces, minimal noise during navigation, and indirect lighting contribute to a welcoming space for those with heightened sensory sensitivity.

The environment remains predictable, thanks to clear and intuitive pictograms that guide movement both inside and outside the catamaran.

Figure 18. *A detail of the seating, M. Di Lecce, June 10th, 2025*



Conclusions

DANIELA N., DAVIDE N., M.D.L

The observations and data collected on river transport in London highlight effective management of graphic communication aimed at users. The information is transmitted in an extremely clear, direct and functional manner, suggesting an explicit intention to equate, at least from a communicative point of view, the river service to the metropolitan one.The graphic design used for the underground and for the river boats is surprisingly homogeneous: beyond the different colour palettes, the two systems appear substantially aligned in terms of setting and structure. This visual approach helps to generate a unitary perception of the entire public transport network.The experience on board the river boats is distinguished by comfort: the environment is quiet, the noise is limited, and the seats are comfortable and spacious. The information on board, although limited, essentially covers the aspects relating to safety and the layout of the services.

In terms of social media communication, Uber Boat by Thames Clippers builds a refined, relaxing and aesthetically coherent image, designed for a select urban audience, with good familiarity with digital tools. However, this narrative privileges visual identity over information function, leaving essential elements such as accessibility, clear timetables and intermodal connections in the background. The result is a strategy that is more oriented towards branding than public service, capable of attracting but not necessarily including. Although Uber Boat operates under a Transport for London (TfL) license and is listed on the official website among river services, social media communication does not fully reflect this integration: the RiverBus channels remain separate from the institutional ones and the visual identity of TfL—such as logo, fonts or colour codes—is absent. On the contrary, other river services managed directly by TfL, such as the Woolwich ferry, clearly highlight their belonging to the public

network. To make the digital storytelling of the RiverBus truly effective as part of the urban infrastructure, it is necessary to go beyond the aesthetic dimension and promote more accessible, transparent and dialogic communication, capable of involving different users and responding to the real needs of the city.

Despite the progress made in terms of physical accessibility, the Uber Boat by Thames Clippers service still has significant critical issues, especially when compared to other public transport systems such as the London Underground or passenger ferries in Scandinavia. One of the main problems concerns the boarding ramps, whose inclination varies significantly based on the tide level. At certain times, the slope can become extremely steep, as reported by users near Westminster and Greenwich piers, seriously compromising the autonomy of people with motor disabilities. Added to this is the instability of the surfaces near the moorings, often irregular or "wobbly", which require considerable physical effort and constant attention to deal with differences in level and critical passages. A second problematic area is represented by the management of spaces on board. The areas reserved for wheelchairs are frequently located in passageways or peripheral areas, such as central corridors or corners adjacent to the baggage areas. This creates discomfort and a feeling of marginalization, both due to limited comfort and interference with other passenger flows, such as strollers or suitcases. Communication regarding assistance services is also fragmented and not very transparent. It is often unclear whether facilitated access requires prior booking or whether specific procedures are foreseen. Comparison with the TfL Turn-Up-and-Go service highlights a more efficient model, characterised by seamless and less bureaucratic assistance, thanks to consistent communication and greater integration between infrastructure and human support. Similarly, the Norwegian UU-Ferger passenger ferries (Oslo) are a virtuous example, thanks to the design of low-sensory environments and the inclusion of users with both physical and cognitive disabilities. Further comparisons with the London Underground and, in particular, with the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) automated trains highlight a higher level of consistency between accessible design, signage, staff training and assistance for vulnerable users. In light of these observations, it would be desirable for Uber Boat to introduce sensory support tools, such as sensory route maps accessible via apps or simplified brochures, and to provide dedicated areas on board such as “quiet zones”, to offer a more peaceful experience to people with specific sensory profiles, for example on the autism spectrum. The adoption of good practices already tested by TfL and in the inclusive navigation systems of Northern Europe could transform Uber Boat into a model of integrated and personalized accessibility.

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