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Designing and delivering inclusive heritage tours: Good practices for engaging socially excluded audiences

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ABSTRACT

People who experience social exclusion often face barriers to participation in recreation and tourism and tend to have limited engagement with culture and heritage. Yet, both sets of activities have been linked to a range of positive outcomes. This study focuses on heritage tours, a tourism product at the crossroads of culture, tourism and recreation. It examines how heritage tours can be designed and delivered in a way that promotes inclusion: removing barriers, creating a judgement-free environment, fostering inclusive oral communication, and providing an equitable experience for all participants. Addressing a gap in the tourism literature, the paper draws on audience development strategies that have been used in culture and the arts, including product-led and market-led approaches. It analyzes a case study initiative in Edinburgh, Scotland, to explore the effectiveness of its approach and evaluate whether it offers any good practices that can be replicated in other destinations or contexts.

KEYWORDS

inclusion, heritage, exclusion, tours, culture

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1. Introduction

People who experience social exclusion (for example children and adults living in poverty, people with disabilities and those with chronic, terminal or mental illnesses and their carers, people who have substance abuse issues or have experienced incarceration, etc.) tend to face barriers to participation in recreation and tourism, as well as in culture and heritage. Yet, participation in these activities has been shown to produce a number of positive outcomes that would be of particular benefit to these groups. This paper will focus on heritage tours: an activity that occupies the intersection between recreation and tourism on the one hand, and culture and heritage on the other. It will explore how, once the financial barrier to participation has been removed, heritage tours can be designed and delivered to be as inclusive as possible towards a diverse audience. To do so, it will draw on principles and practices in creating judgement-free spaces, inclusive oral communication, and audience development in culture and the arts.

While the tourism literature has addressed issues at the intersection of cultural heritage and social exclusion, it has failed to do so from the perspective of excluded people as tourists or participants. Some of the existing research focuses on the role of excluded communities in shaping how history and heritage are represented: for example Cole (2004) examines the duty of care museums and heritage attractions have to their subject community

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in interpreting 'their' past, using the examples of mining heritage; and Harrison (2010) gives examples of disadvantaged communities using heritage and heritage tours to create an alternative to dominant interpretations of history and to build community. In addition, Gibson et al. (2019) discuss how after disasters, socially disadvantaged groups are often excluded from the decision-making process about the recovery and preservation of their heritage. These examples all place excluded communities largely outside of the heritage experience and while the authors argue they should have a say in how their heritage is presented, they are not themselves the target audience for the experience. This paper places excluded communities at the heart of heritage tourism participation, by exploring how these tourism experiences can be designed and delivered in an inclusive way.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social exclusion and the effects of participating in recreation and culture

Levitas et al. (2007, p. 9) describe social exclusion as a complex and multi-dimensional process, that "involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas". While the authors argue that poverty is a risk factor across all the dimensions of social exclusion, they emphasise that it tends to interact with other dimensions, such as access to public and private services, participation in culture and education, the living environment and health. Deep exclusion refers to exclusion across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, wellbeing and future life chances (Levitas et al., 2007, p. 9).

People who experience social exclusion often face barriers to participation in recreation and tourism and tend to have limited engagement with culture and heritage (Cole & Morgan, 2010; Kastenholz et al., 2015; Little, 2014; Mak et al., 2021). Yet, participation in these activities has been associated with multiple benefits, including a greater level of social inclusion, improvements to physical and mental health, and a deepening of social ties. Social tourism research, in particular, often focuses on the benefits of tourism participation for excluded groups including increased social and cultural capital, a more positive outlook on life, better interpersonal relationships and enhanced wellbeing (McCabe, 2009; Minnaert, 2020; Morgan et al., 2015). In addition, recreation and leisure participation have been shown to produce health benefits. For example, Iwasaki et al. (2010, 2013, 2014) outlined the benefits of participation in leisure and recreation activities for people with mental illness and these activities can help people cope with stress, reduce boredom, heal from trauma, and build positive and meaningful social relationships. Litwiller et al. (2017) similarly found that spending time in community recreation programs and spaces promoted the recovery and social inclusion (i.e. community integration) in individuals with mental illnesses.

When people who are socially excluded experience tourism, they typically do so domestically, at the regional or even local level. Not all definitions of tourism holistically include these activities, for example Becken (2009, p. 32) defines domestic tourism as "all trips over 40 kilometres outside one's usual environment which can be day trips or overnight trips for any given travel purpose". This study, however, includes local recreation experiences into the realm of tourism, in line with the UN Tourism (n.d.) definition:

> Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure.

Participation in culture was found to have positive effects also; Little (2014, p. 2) highlights that cultural activities that build on the interests of young people are a good mechanism through which they can build social capital. In that study, four heterogeneous groups of young people were considered: young carers, the looked after young, the disabled young and those at risk of offending or gang activity. Despite the considerable differences between these groups of young people, they were found to gain similar benefits from having their barriers to participation in culture reduced or removed. Focusing on adult populations, Morse et al. (2015) analyzed the effect of museum outreach activities on those who are in treatment for mental health and substance abuse-related conditions. They concluded that outreach programmes create spaces of conviviality, conversation and friendship, and that the social interactions they provide are key in their role as therapeutic interventions. They also argued that developing new interests is central in recovery because of the sense of pride and increased confidence participants gained after trying something new. Supporting the thesis that participation in cultural activities can be associated with positive health outcomes, Mak et al. (2021) found that going to cultural events (such as the theatre, opera, concerts

or exhibitions) and visiting museums and heritage sites (including visiting a city or town with historic character) was tied to improvements in wellbeing, slower declines in cognition, reduced levels of isolation and loneliness, enhanced social wellbeing in the community and lower mortality rates. These benefits were found among healthy individuals as well as people with mental health problems, dementia, substance use addiction, carers, families living in deprived areas, asylum seekers and isolated adults. This has led to calls to encourage 'social prescribing' – this term refers to enabling primary care services to link with cultural organizations to offer their services as health interventions (Todd et al., 2017). In a similar vein, participation in cultural activities is an element in the recovery-oriented approach to mental health care which emphasises hope, social inclusion, goal-setting and self-management (Victorian Government, Department of Health, 2011).

Specifically focusing on heritage-related cultural activities, Lewis et al. (2018, p. 6) argue that heritage can be instrumental in enhancing social inclusion, developing intercultural dialogue, and shaping the identity of a territory. Grossi et al. (2019) found that that visiting a heritage attraction has significant positive impacts on both wellbeing and cortisol levels. Chauhan and Anand (2023) point out that heritage tours have educational benefits, as they offer an immersive and engaging way to interact with history. In addition, they may have social benefits, as they can help cultivate a sense of identity and belonging among the participants, particularly if they belong to marginalized communities who feel estranged from the heritage activities happening in their area.

2.2. Widening participation in cultural and heritage activities with socially excluded groups

Considering the extensive positive impacts that are associated with engaging in recreational culture and heritage activities, there is a clear incentive to engage in strategies that increase the participation of socially excluded groups. The European Commission (2012) highlights that the first step should be to remove some of the barriers these groups face: recommendations include ensuring access for people with disabilities, removing financial barriers by providing free or discounted tickets, and providing local engagement opportunities for communities who face geographical barriers to participation. Heasman and Atwal (2004) also mention removing barriers and securing access in the context of visitors with disabilities: they conclude that individuals with a disability desire similar experiences to other tourists, although they may require adaptations according to their type and degree of disability. Arguing that physical and communication access are equally important, the Scottish Government (2011) emphasize the need for inclusive communication by sharing information in a way that everybody can understand. Inclusive communication requires a recognition that people understand and express themselves in different ways, while ensuring that service users are getting information and expressing themselves in ways that meet their needs.

While these are all valuable recommendations, they omit the potential psychological barriers that may also be at play for socially excluded audiences. Todd et al. (2017, p. 52) point out that cultural settings like museums can be experienced as "physically intimidating or seen as places for only the highly educated; these perspectives create barriers for everyone, but perhaps more so for socially isolated people". This perceptual barrier can be a big deterrent: Trussell and Mair (2010) point out that socially excluded people are likely to have negative past experiences and may avoid situations that make them feel vulnerable. As a consequence, it is important to make them feel connected and not exposed. Leisure activities are presented as a helpful way to create interactions and form broader connections in a relaxed environment. The authors emphasize the need to create a judgment-free environment that fosters trust. Todd et al. (2017, p. 51) highlight the potential role of facilitators in creating this atmosphere of trust. In their study, they consider this in the context of museum outreach to socially excluded communities, and propose that "facilitators enabled new experiences, learning and social interaction, providing a human element by imparting knowledge and modelling confidence and enthusiasm for learning. The personal characteristics of the facilitators were pivotal in this". Roberts et al. (2011) explore the role of facilitators in an outreach initiative with carers in an art gallery setting, emphasizing the reciprocal exchange of knowledge or information. In their study, gallery staff felt they gained as much knowledge from carer-participants as they had been able to impart, and vice versa. In the context of heritage tours, the facilitators are the tour guides and these guides play different roles to varying degrees according to the people they are working with, namely, leader, educator, host, public relations representative, and conduit (Cruz, 1999). Furthermore, tour guides are expected to respond to the needs and expectations of diverse visitors, including those with special needs and from other cultures (Ham & Weiler, 2000).

2.3. Audience development in the cultural sector

Strategies that aim to widen participation in culture, applied specifically to museums, galleries and performing arts institutions, are referred to as audience development. While these strategies are not commonly applied to heritage tours, the concept is reviewed here to explore whether it can offer insights around

effective strategies that can enhance the inclusivity of this cultural tourism product.

Blackwell and Scaife (2016, p. 61) define audience development as "the varied approaches museums and galleries take to understand and expand their user base. … Such a strategy needs to recognize the barriers, perceived and real, that confront users and non-users". Ayala et al. (2020) distinguish two characteristics of effective audience engagement strategies: community engagement (whereby the institution gets to know its community and collaborates with local social and/or political 'agents'), as well as participatory processes and co-creation. Hayes and Slater (2002) distinguish between two types of audience development: 'mainstream', focusing on existing arts attenders, and 'missionary', focusing on traditional non-attenders. The latter type aims to extend engagement with cultural institutions beyond the "upper education, upper occupation and upper income groups" they tend to attract (Cerquetti, 2016, p. 35). Kawashima (2000) distinguishes between four types: audience education, cultural inclusion, extended marketing and taste cultivation. Audience education aims to improve the enjoyment and understanding of the arts. Cultural inclusion targets groups who are less likely to attend cultural events for social reasons which may be due to a number of factors, such as low incomes or ethnicity. Extended marketing focuses on people who are not yet customers but have high attendance potential. Finally, taste cultivation targets the existing audience but aims to encourage them to participate in different types of cultural activity. In this study, the cultural inclusion perspective of audience development is particularly relevant.

Audience development strategies do not only differ in their intended outcomes, but also in their approach: they can be either product-led or market-led. In a product-led approach, the institution chooses to offer the same product to existing and new audiences, whereas in the market-led approach, the product is adapted to the new audience's needs or expectations. These adaptations can either involve choosing certain products in an institution's cultural offering to present to a specific audience or making changes to its core offer for that audience. A product-led approach starts from the premise that while individuals possess different degrees of cultural competence, they have the same potential for cultural consumption and that cultural products offered will be relevant to most people. A market-led approach, in contrast, starts from the premise that people from different socio-economic backgrounds may not have the same level of cultural competence, therefore barrier removal alone (for example, through discounts or free entry) is not effective and different products must be packaged or devised to appeal to the different segments (Kawashima, 2000; Kawashima, 2006).

Expert opinions are divided as to which approach to audience development is most effective. Bamford (2011, p. 11) argues for a market-led approach, stating that "re-interpreting or re-positioning cultural services, manipulation of both the content (programming) and the context (e.g. location) of the offering, and making cultural activities into social activities have all been proven to work across all groups within society". Durrer and Miles (2009, p. 228) however highlight that market-led approaches have attracted "controversy and accusations of a 'dumbing down' of the arts to the lowest common consumer". Some scholars have viewed the attempt to invite in a new kind of visitor through Disney-style attractions or through more diversified and ethnicity-focused exhibitions, as a new kind of 'edutainment'. The latter criticism of market-led approaches however does not clarify whether they can be helpful in engaging socially excluded audiences with cultural tourism, as it does not reflect the viewpoint of the new audiences that are targeted but rather that of traditional audiences.

The question whether inclusive cultural tourism products – including heritage tours – should adopt market-led or product-led approaches to successfully engage excluded audiences, is not explored in depth in the existing literature. This study will analyze an inclusive heritage tour initiative targeted at excluded audiences in Edinburgh, Scotland, to explore the effectiveness of its approach and evaluate whether it offers any good practices that can be replicated in other destinations or contexts.

3. Case study: The Our Stories, Your City project

In April 2022, the Our Stories, Your City project was launched in Edinburgh, Scotland, as a collaboration between Mercat Tours, the largest walking tour company in Scotland, and the Grassmarket Community Project (GCP), a charity and community center that supports vulnerable people through transitions in their lives and reconnects them to mentoring, social enterprise, training and education. GCP explicitly targets people who experience social exclusion in the broadest sense: the organisation describes itself as "a family of people who have or still do feel isolated and need to share with, learn from and connect to others". The users of GCP are referred to as 'members' who self-refer to join the organization, and their experience of exclusion can be due to a variety of factors, including homelessness and precarious housing, disability, substance abuse, unemployment, former incarceration, experiences with violence, trauma, and many others (GCP, n.d.).

The project's goal was for Mercat tour guides (referred to as 'storytellers') to reconnect vulnerable communities with their city via heritage tours whilst simultaneously supporting local Living Wage jobs during the COVID recovery period. Different tours were offered, including visits to attractions such as Edinburgh Castle, the National Museum of Scotland and the Palace of Holyrood. An accessibility expert was hired to provide advisory services on the project around developing an inclusive and accessible guest experience. The Our Stories, Your City title for the initiative was a reference to VisitScotland's designation of 2022 as the Year of Stories (Mercat Tours, 2023).

The initiative was funded by visitor donations: paying guests on Mercat Tours were offered the opportunity to make a donation towards a tour for GCP members, led by a Mercat storyteller and supported by GCP staff members. In addition, the initiative was awarded a grant from the Scottish Tourism Leadership Programme which is Scotland-wide and supports business and community-led tourism enterprises taking the lead in the sector's COVID-19 recovery, funded by the Scottish Government's £25 million Tourism Taskforce Recovery Plan. The grant allowed for the appointment of a project manager and for setting up the payment platform for visitor donations (Mercat Tours, 2023).

4. Methodology

This exploratory study aimed to evaluate an inclusive heritage tour initiative aimed at socially excluded participants and – if possible – identify good practices in designing and delivering these tours. The research is based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with the different stakeholders who designed, delivered and experienced this program: executives of the organizations that coordinated the initiative (Mercat Tours and GCP), Mercat storytellers who led the tours, GCP members who participated, and the inclusion expert who supported the project. Six interviews were conducted, as well as one focus group with four participants, resulting in 10 respondents:

1. Mercat Tours:
   - Managing Director,
   - two storytellers who led Our Stories, Your City tours.
2. GCP:
   - Managing Director,
   - Service Manager,
   - four members who have each participated in at least one tour.
3. External consultant:
   - Inclusion Expert advising on the project.

Data were collected between January and March 2023. Three interviews were conducted via Teams, three were conducted in person. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The focus group (which lasted 75 minutes) was conducted on GCP premises and took place in one of the activity rooms of its community center. While the researcher and focus group participants occupied a separate table, GCP support staff were present in the room, at a different table, conducting their regular activities. The GCP support staff did not intervene in the focus group, but their presence aimed to reassure the focus group participants by not disrupting the usual routines at the center. This approach was agreed upon with GCP in the spirit of what Dempsey et al. (2016) refer to as sensitive interviewing with vulnerable groups; working collaboratively with influential gatekeepers, researchers are able to ensure the interests of participants in their place of care are protected, while also building rapport and fostering a sense of trust.

Testimonials recorded in this study refer to the first six months of the project, from April until October 2022. During this time, 20 dedicated Our Stories, Your City tours ran, benefiting 300 GCP members.

5. Findings

5.1. Removing barriers and creating a judgement-free environment

To widen the participation in cultural and heritage tourism of socially excluded groups, it is important that some of the barriers to their engagement are removed, whether they be financial, practical or psychological. By offering heritage tours at no cost, the Our Stories, Your City project removed a substantial financial barrier for its participants. In addition, it removed the practical barrier of booking and organizing the visits: this barrier can be substantial as many attractions in Edinburgh require timed tickets that are sold online. The GCP Service Manager highlights how valuable it was to have that barrier removed:

> The feedback we have from our members is that these opportunities are things that they really value because it's hard to organise. You know, if you've got challenges, loads of different things going on, just the step of organizing something like that or figuring out how to access it, is really difficult. So, to have someone organise it breaks down the barrier and I think that's what's the most valuable part about this partnership. It is just there for people to access. They don't have to go out and figure out how to get into Edinburgh Castle. They can just read the bulletin and have that opportunity there.

In addition, Todd et al. (2017) mention that cultural activities can be experienced as intimidating or only the highly educated as certain behaviors are expected that socially excluded people may be less familiar with. By including GCP support staff members on the tours, this psychological barrier was addressed and a sense of familiarity was created, as the GCP Managing Director explains:

> We looked into what prevents people like our members from accessing these attractions, and we identified a few barriers like stigma, low self-esteem, not feeling that they are welcome, not feeling like it is a place they are allowed to go to. "Maybe I will get it trouble, I am not allowed to be touching things". Then there is the language in which these tours are delivered, cost is obviously a factor… this partnership addresses all of that.

Trussell and Mair (2010) highlight that because of the negative experiences socially excluded people have experienced, they may shy away from showing themselves as vulnerable, hence, creating judgement-free environments, where they feel connected but not exposed, is important. This was echoed by the Inclusion Expert who advised on this project who clarifies that as a socially excluded person, it often feels as if society does not grant permission to enjoy certain places. He explains further that creating a sense of genuine welcome is vital in overcoming this:

> When I talk to tourism businesses, I often talk about the welcome. Because with my wheelchair, I am slightly conspicuous [ironic], I can usually tell within the first few seconds whether the visit is going to go well or not. If you don't hide behind the desk, if you step out and you greet me like everybody else, that is fabulous. Because that is not the normal experience when you have a conspicuous difference, whether you are on wheels or you are different like the members of the Grassmarket Community Project. The experience and the emotions are actually the same: they are experiences of rejection, disinterest… some people want rid of you.

Mercat Storyteller 2 comments explicitly about how she aimed to create a judgement-free and genuinely welcoming environment. She explains that for her, it was a useful learning experience to be exposed to people who absorb and engage with information differently, which has made her more mindful in her profession, and aware of the importance of inclusive communication:

> They might have problems with eye contact and maybe they look as if they're distracted and looking around but actually, they might be listening. That's just their way of coping with the situation they're in. And I think it's just helped me be a bit more mindful of things like that, and not to instantly dismiss someone. It does make you think and have an open-mindedness about people with more diverse needs than maybe your average person that that comes on the tour.

The Inclusion Expert emphasises just how much removing the psychological barrier to participation matters in achieving inclusive experiences:

> If you can create those moments when the disability, the social impairment, can be forgotten, then that is magical. You don't want to do it in a condescending way. … But if you can, for just one moment in time, make people forget about their situation so they can enjoy simply enjoy all of the stories like everybody else, that is magical. Because that's not normal to them.

5.2. The role of facilitators and local agents

In the literature, facilitators and local agents were mentioned as parties that can enhance the effectiveness of audience development initiatives. Todd et al. (2017) discuss the role of the facilitators who are usually internal to the cultural organisation. Facilitators direct any learning in the cultural experience, foster social interactions and model an enthusiasm for learning. They emphasise that the characteristics and personality of the facilitator are pivotal in achieving engagement. Roberts et al. (2011) point out that the information exchange between facilitators and participants is often reciprocal.

Both Mercat storytellers interviewed for this study emphasised their personal affinity with the project's goals, and their passion in seeing it reach its desired outcomes. Their genuine commitment was remarked upon by the GCP Service Manager and the GCP participants, and is illustrated by this quote from Storyteller 2:

> I was very, very honoured to be to be asked to do the very first tour. I really got the principles behind what they were trying to do. The idea that there's people living in the city that are not connected to the city, really, they've got no access to the heritage aspect of it. They've got no access to all this culture and history that's around them, that they should be very much part of because they've probably grown up and lived in Edinburgh their whole lives. So, the idea to be able to bring that back to those kinds of vulnerable people was just… I loved the idea. I thought it was great and was really, really keen to get involved.

In addition to internal facilitators, Ayala et al. (2020) suggest that effective engagement of non-traditional audiences also benefits from the involvement of local social agents, such as community groups. The Our Stories, Your City project was a collaboration between a tourism organisation and a community group, in which each partner had a distinct and important role

to play: Mercat Tours delivered the tours, and GCP communicated the offer to its members and provided support during the tours. The GCP Service Manager explains the composition of each tour group:

> We had the tour leader and two members of staff and then 13 individuals that we're supporting. Our members of staff are able to support access, keep people engaged, and their members of staff can focus on giving the information.

A particular strength of the Our Stories, Your City project is that the collaboration between the tourism and community organizations in question was based on strong foundations and a long history of partnership, dating back to 2012. At that time, Mercat Tours bought furniture and upcycled wood items from GCP's woodworking social enterprise, but then started using GCP meeting spaces. Other examples of the longstanding ties between the two organisations include Mercat Tours selling merchandise produced by GCP artisans in its gift shop, while offering four free overnight stays per year to GCP in a rural group accommodation property it owns.

Because the collaboration between Mercat Tours and GCP dates back many years, it has evolved into a deep-rooted partnership, based on shared values and trust.

> The Grassmarket is a friendship and a partnership that we've grown over 10 years now. Community means, in its simplest sense, friendship and support and honesty, and we've always seen that the power of that,

explains the Mercat Tours Managing Director, and adds:

> The reason that we chose them is they are literally physically neighbors to us in the Old Town. But also, there's a real value match. We think the same, we have the same values.

This value match and basis of mutual trust allows for a collaboration whereby each partner can rely on the other for their expertise. Just as Mercat Tours is an expert in storytelling, the GCP is an expert in supporting their members and users so the two parties collaborated to create an experience that maximised the strengths of both. Mercat Storyteller 2 explains that she would always

> touch base with the people that are there from the charity, because they know the people, they've worked with them. They were involved with them much more than you've ever going to be. You're just taking them on one tour. They are with them every single day.

As an example of how that helped her deliver successful tours, she mentioned that GCP would advise on seating arrangements and diffuse tension between some of the participants where needed, so there was no antagonism. The Inclusion Expert supporting the project agrees with this recommendation and adds:

> Don't think you have suddenly got to be an expert in homelessness or disability or diversity, just do something very simple and ask. Assume nothing, just ask what you can do to make the tour amazing.

5.3. Product-led vs. market led approaches

The Mercat Tours respondents in this study strongly felt that a product-led approach was the best way to design and the deliver the tour experience. While the storytellers were aware that the GCP visitors faced certain levels of disadvantage in their lives, they did not want to make any generalizations about their needs or preferences, and approached them with respect for their individuality:

> I very much wanted to keep it as much a normal tour as I would normally do. They're no different to any other visitors that come on the tour. The only thing that will be slightly changed is knowing that they lived more locally, I didn't want to make the presumption that they wouldn't know anything. I didn't want to make it seem like I was being patronizing. (Mercat Storyteller 2)

> I was aware that I was dealing with a group of people who were not visitors. The people of the GCP are every bit as much a part of Edinburgh as I am. And we are aware that they are vulnerable people, each individual in their own right, and they all have their own needs and requirements. Some are more outgoing than others. I was aware of their vulnerability – I keep using that word, it's not at all disrespectful. (Mercat Storyteller 1)

Both storytellers strongly reject that the tastes and preferences of socially-excluded people can be predicted by their socio-economic status. Kolb (2000), when describing cultural audiences, refers to Gans and Bourdieu when describing popular or 'lowbrow' culture: these terms tend to refer to cultural products that are unambiguous and predictable, and that offer entertainment, relaxation and escapism. Mercat Storyteller 2 explicitly addresses the negative stereotypes she feels the Our Stories, Your City project can help overcome:

> I think society can make you think people from that background won't appreciate something like this, and it's not true. There're people out there that might want to engage with this kind of thing and just haven't had the opportunity. It's good to be a part of that and know that you can open those doors or people's eyes.

The Mercat Tours Managing Director agreed that it was paramount for her that the GCP had an experience that was no different to the one paying visitors were receiving, and that the two groups would be treated in

the exact same way. However, she clarifies, that does not mean that adaptations cannot be made to better suit the needs of the GCP group. There is room for co-creation, and in fact, she argues, this is paramount in delivering any tour experience, for any audience:

> Every tour is adapted, depending on the guests or visitors that you have in front of you, where they're from, their language level, their age, their cultural backgrounds.

An example of a change that was made to better serve the GCP group, was to adjust the timing and length of the Our Stories, Your City tours, so that the GCP member and users could be back on time to enjoy the free lunch that is offered daily in the community center.

Another change that was mutually agreed upon, was to include a short break along the tour. Heritage tours tend to be rich in context and content, and the feedback from GCP participants was that a short pause during the tour would be helpful:

> One of the big feedbacks was to have a break to kind of process the information. Because on tours, it's just nonstop facts. A lot of the feedback was suggesting was that if we had like a 10–15 minute break in the middle just to have a recap or just a quiet moment just to kind of process all of that information. We've included that in the tour, and I think that's helped people. (GCP Service Manager)

A similar comment was made by one of the tour participants:

> Yeah, have a break. Cause it's a long walk, so you do need to have a little break. So, you can also come to terms with what you heard and share some of that knowledge, talk about what we have seen so far. (GCP Tour Participant 1)

The external consultant who advised on the inclusivity of the tour design commented that making these small adjustments, without changing the nature of the product on offer, can be a very effective to make the tour product more inclusive:

> Providing equality of experience is not just doing what you always do… it is the small things that make the biggest difference. (Inclusion Expert)

5.4. Impacts on participants

The effectiveness of the Our Stories, Your City initiative depends not only on how it was delivered, but also on what impacts – if any – it had on the participants.

Engaging in cultural activities is linked to increased wellbeing (Mak et al., 2021), and this effect was acknowledged by the GCP participants:

> It's a lot of walking but you are out in the fresh air. I just love doing it. (GCP Participant 3)

> It does make you happy. If you are walking it helps your mental health. (GCP Participant 4)

In addition, participation in recreational and/or cultural activities has been linked to fostering and creating social relationships, building community and reducing loneliness (Iwasaki et al., 2010, 2013, 2014; Litwiller et al., 2017). The social aspect of the tours was indeed important and as well as being an opportunity for strengthening bonds between people who already know each other, the tours were also an opportunity for meeting new people. Mercat Storyteller 2 comments:

> A lot of people go to the GCP for socializing and I think that needs to be stressed. They might be putting themselves out there to meet someone new. Joining a tour with someone they don't know and allow that person to take them around, that's quite a big step for some of these people.

Participating in heritage tourism activities has also been linked to educational benefits and can help spark an interest in the history of an area (Lewis et al., 2018; Chauhan & Anand, 2023). Mercat Storyteller 2 acknowledges that history was not always in the participants' usual sphere of interest:

> People think kind of negatively about history at school. History is kings and battles and dates – at Mercat we put that to one side. We want to tell a different side of history to engage you, to enthral you, to entertain you.

This was confirmed by GCP Participant 2, who credits the Our Stories, Your City experience with changing his perspective:

> Previously I didn't have an interest in history, no, not at all, because I didn't enjoy it in high school. If it wasn't for the tours being made available, I probably just would have continued not to be. It's the way is presented, isn't it – I was really pleasantly surprised. I thought that maybe – I have a cynical mind – that the effort they would put into it for us wouldn't match what they do for tourists, but it was absolutely fantastic. So, from the first one I was kind of caught, you know, it caught my attention, and I wanted to attend each one subsequently. The knowledge that they have is just so valuable. And it's really hard to absorb all of it, actually, if anything, if I go around again, I may take a wee notepad or something.

Morse et al. (2015) highlight another potential positive impact of engagement with culture as participants may discover new interests, which can help build

confidence and can relieve boredom. This effect was indeed noticeable with the GCP participants and two offered suggestions for further tours they would like to participate in, highlighting interests the Our Stories, Your City tour had either sparked or rekindled:

> Definitely the arts. I think that is probably what enthuses me most. I have a background in music, and it is all linked anyway isn't it, the emotion you get from music and from the arts. Whether it'd be galleries, or maybe even theatres, for us to bring it all together like. (GCP Participant 3)

> I would like to go outside Edinburgh and look at the history outside Edinburgh. I would like to go look at old castles. (GCP Participant 4)

The participant testimonials above highlight that the Our Stories, Your City initiative achieved several of the benefits outlined in the literature. This indicates that the tours were effective. This finding is supported by the results of a satisfaction survey that was sent out on three occasions to participants on the tours by the GCP. While the response rate to the survey was low, with only 16 responses in total received, respondents were unanimous that the tours were inclusive. Question three of the survey asked participants to use a Likert scale to indicate their agreement with the statement: "The experience was inclusive and my needs were met". Ten respondents answered that they strongly agreed, and six that they agreed, with no respondents giving a lower score.

6. Discussion

Drawing on the evidence presented in this study, this section of the paper will propose good practices derived from the Our Stories, Your City case study that can benefit other destinations or organizations wanting to design and deliver inclusive heritage tours. Three good practices emerged from the data, and each was given a title that reflects how the respondents in the research worded their recommendations, verbatim:

1. "Do what you do well": This refers to the importance of partnerships, whereby each party contributes their unique strengths to the project and helps it succeed. An intentional and focused collaboration between a tourism business and a community organization that share a value match, provided a strong foundation for positive outcomes.
2. "Don't make it different": This refers to Mercat's strong conviction that a product-led approach was preferable over a market-led approach. While small adaptations were introduced to meet the participants' needs, the core product remained unchanged, with the objective to deliver an equitable experience.
3. "Every tour should be bespoke": This refers to the fact that any learning around inclusive heritage tour practices was framed as important not only for the Our Stories, Your City tours, but rather for all Mercat tours. This shows a broader dedication to a universal design approach to the tour product.

Each of these good practices will now be discussed in more detail.

6.1. Do what you do well

In the Our Stories, Your City project, Mercat Tours and GCP each had distinct and complementary roles, that allowed each organisation to draw upon its unique strengths. This, according to the Mercat Tours Managing Director, was central in making the initiative a success:

> I think what's really important is for the sake of a supposed dignity and respect for everybody involved, do what you do really well, do what you are an expert at. Just do it for this new community, a local association, that community, a vulnerable group. And for us, for example, it's storytelling.

As the tourism partner, Mercat Tours committed to delivering high quality visitor experiences, and as the community partner, GCP committed to communicating the initiative, building trust and creating a judgement-free environment. Trussell and Mair (2010) explain that there can be stigma attached to accessing subsidised resources, and that there can be potential embarrassment in thus admitting to having a certain need. A community partner like GCP can help overcome this. The Inclusion Expert in this study confirmed that tourism businesses cannot be expected to be specialists in homelessness, mental illness or social exclusion, therefore finding a partner with that expertise is vitally important. The shared history between Mercat Tours and GCP added to the strength of the collaboration, as there was already a proven value match between both organizations.

6.2. Don't make it different

While audience development is ambivalent on whether product-led or market-led strategies are better to help excluded audiences engage with cultural institutions, Mercat Tours felt very strongly that a product-led approach was most appropriate. This is illustrated by the following emphatic quote from the Mercat Tours Managing Director:

> I think what is really, really, really important is don't make it different.

This point was also emphasised by Mercat Storyteller 2, for whom much of the value of Our Stories, Your City was in the equity of experience it offered:

> Just give them the tour. That's what they're there for. They're there to get the experience that paying tourists come to have, you know. It might be tempting to try and create a whole different tour, or a whole different product for them, but that's defeating the point, in my opinion, because they're there for the experience of what everyone else gets. They're not asking for special treatment. They want to come on a tour as we do a tour.

This perspective is also expressed by Heasman and Atwal (2004) in the context of accessible tourism: the authors argue that individuals with a disability desire similar experiences to other tourists, with adaptations where needed depending on the nature of their disability, but without changing the core product. While Kawashima (2000) acknowledges that engaging with culture and the arts requires certain skills that socially excluded people may not have been formally or informally taught, product-led strategies do not start from this deficit perspective and assume that everyone has the same potential for cultural consumption. Conway and Devney (2019) propose that 'boundary brokers' can help facilitate this cultural consumption, and in the context of a heritage tour, tour guides are ideally placed to fulfil this role.

6.3. Every tour should be bespoke

Group tours are likely to include participants with different characteristics, such as their background, language comprehension, fitness and interests. Therefore, designing inclusive tours is not just important when working with socially excluded participants, it is a vital skill for any tour, as the Mercat Tours Managing Director explains:

> Whether it's [for] Grassmarket [participants] or not, every tour is bespoke.

While Mercat Tours hired an Inclusion Expert before the Our Stories, Your City project launched, she emphasized that any learning from this service would be applied across the organization's services. This point was reiterated by Mercat Storyteller 2:

> We are trying to make our tours more inclusive to people more widely. Not, as I said, not just for this initiative. Some people, for example if they've got something like autism, things like eye contact might not be a good thing for them. It's just kind of making yourself aware of little signs like that.

These quotes highlight that the organization is adopting an inclusive design approach to its programming. Inclusive design refers to "[t]he design of mainstream products and/or services that are accessible to, and usable by, as many people as reasonably possible … without the need for special adaption or specialised design" (University of Cambridge, n.d.). While the concept has its origins in the 1960s, it emerged in the 1990s as a way of linking social need with design and tackling assumptions about aging, disability and social equality (Clarkson & Coleman, 2015). Tourism businesses that adopt inclusive design principles will not only contribute to more equitable opportunities for all people to engage in their experiences, they will also enhance their potential market reach and profitability.

7. Conclusion

This study has addressed the under-researched concept of inclusive heritage tour design. While participating in leisure and recreation, as well as in heritage and culture, socially excluded groups have reduced opportunities to engage in them or be associated with their multiple benefits. Extant research highlights that in widening participation in recreational and cultural activities, it is important to remove barriers, whether they are financial, infrastructural, informational or psychological. However, in the context of widening participation in culture, there is no agreement in the literature on what is the preferable strategy, although product-led and market-led approaches are proposed as two options.

In this article, the Our Stories, Your City initiative in Edinburgh, Scotland was used as a case study to explore this question from a tourism-specific perspective, in the context of heritage tours. Funded by donations, this initiative was a collaboration between a private tourism business and a not-for-profit community organization. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with different stakeholders in the project (including the participants, tour guides, leaders in both organizations and an external inclusion expert), good practices emerged that enhance our understanding of inclusive heritage tour design. A first good practice highlights that the compatibility of, and the strength of the relationship between, the partners in the initiative can contribute to positive outcomes. When each of the partners offers a unique contribution underpinned by matching values, tour participants are presented with an equitable, high-quality experience in a judgement-free environment. A second good practice is that, with this strong scaffolding in place, the tourism partner may be more likely to opt for a product-led approach that showcases its unique strengths as a facilitator or cultural broker. Socially excluded participants, as highlighted in this study, are not typically seeking a different experience:

they are looking to enjoy the same or a very similar experience to what other participants are receiving. Small adjustments may be helpful, but they do not have to affect the core product, and can be co-created and responsive to specific needs, rather than generalized and based on stereotypes. It is important to note here that this study did not examine a market-led approach and therefore does not aim to discredit or critique it; instead, this paper has aimed to explain why in this case study example, the product-led approach was seen as a preferable practice. Finally, a third good practice is for tourism businesses to adopt inclusive design principles throughout their product offer, rather than to consider them only when working with socially excluded groups. Every group tour is likely to include people with different needs, characteristics and preferences, and therefore, every tour is unique and bespoke. Tour companies and their employees are able to draw on their experiences in serving diverse participants to mindfully enhance inclusion for every experience and guest.

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