

An Inclusive Community of Practice for Cultural Heritage Tourism

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Abstract: Tourist activity has grown to be of extreme importance for a country's economy, notably in several countries like Portugal, where the tourism sector accounts for over 15% of the national GDP. As of this moment, ensuring that our country has conditions to welcome and assist every tourist interested in our cultural heritage tourism while offering equal opportunities in the access information and use of infrastructures, is a priority. The Inclusive Cultural Heritage Tourism project uses assistive technologies, as well as inclusive and educative tools, to enhance inclusive tourism and to raise awareness of the lack of inclusion and accessibility of the deaf community, through regular interaction between deaf and non-deaf communities promoted by a Community of Practice developed for this purpose. One of its major purposes is to inform and educate about sign language. Also, this forum allows both communities to share their difficulties, thoughts, and ideas on matters of inclusion and tourism. This is accomplished through social networks, where a structure of interaction is built to enable the discussion and engagement of all participants in numerous activities. By developing a Community of Practice where everyone can communicate without barriers, we are contributing to the overall goal of the project: to create an environment where deaf and non-deaf individuals have the same opportunities to understand and be understood. The focus is to make cultural heritage venues inclusive and accessible, aiming for the easy access of deaf individuals to information and infrastructures. This, along with our community of practice, developed to assist and welcome every deaf individual, has the potential to offer better conditions to the deaf community, in their right to equal opportunities. Thus, the aim is to ensure that Portugal is able to position itself as a pioneer in inclusive tourism, as well as an up-to-date technological, inclusive, and accessible country for any tourist, local or foreigner, wishing to visit national cultural heritage venues.

Keywords: Inclusive tourism, Assistive technology, Community of Practice, Deaf community

1. Introduction

Deaf people face communication challenges when interacting with non-deaf. The lack of inclusion and accessibility in the access of information and use of infrastructures is a significant barrier to the fulfillment of the deaf community. This happens since these two communities do not share the same mother language, making it harder to understand each other (Oliveira, et al., 2019).

Sign language is still uncommon among the non-deaf community. The tourist sector is one of the most affected areas by the lack of sign language awareness, making access to information exclusive, rather than inclusive. To assist and welcome every tourist, regardless of the mother language, a project was developed to enhance inclusive tourism, by means of assistive and educational tools. The Inclusive Cultural Heritage Tourism project (ICHT) offers the deaf community equal opportunities in access to information and use of infrastructures when visiting Portugal (Escudeiro, N., et al., 2022). This is done through an automatic bidirectional translator using the Virtual Sign technology (Oliveira, et al., 2019), placed in cultural heritage venues, but also through a Community of Practice.

A community of Practice is foreseen as an opportunity to develop inclusive tourism, but also as an opportunity to promote regular interaction between the deaf and non-deaf communities. The intention is to create an online environment where everyone can communicate without barriers.

2. Theoretical Framework

The growing relevance of tourism for a country's economy has led Portugal to find strategies to enhance inclusive tourism. An approach towards inclusive and accessible tourism was created to ensure equal opportunities for every tourist. The ICHT project aims to improve accessibility to Portuguese cultural heritage, raise awareness of sign language and reduce communication barriers (Escudeiro, P., et al., 2022).

To do so, a Community of Practice was developed; the goal is to provide the deaf and non-deaf communities a tool to engage with each other, without communication restraints. This will contribute to the overall goal of the project: to create an online environment where everyone can be understood.

2.1 Principles of a Community of Practice

A Community of Practice is formed voluntarily by a group of people that find a need to explore together ideas, experiences, and difficulties (Mercieca, 2017).

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2022).

This form of social learning is a combination of three defining features, that form a basic structure for all communities of practice (Mercieca, 2017). The first feature is the domain; the domain sets the common identity of the group, its common purpose, and the value of the community for its participants. The second feature is the community; a strong community is what allows people to participate, by sharing experiences, engaging, and interacting with each other. The last feature is practice; practice is the set of ideas, difficulties, experiences, and information that its participants share with each other (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2022). Thus,

When they function well together, these three elements make a community of practice an ideal knowledge structure—a social structure that can assume responsibility for developing and sharing knowledge (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2022).

In the case of the ICHT project, the Community of Practice is based on a forum and social networks, creating not only a structure of shared knowledge but also a structure of interaction and inclusion, that enables the discussion and engagement of all participants in numerous activities. This is made possible by dialogue between different perspectives (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2022) and regular interaction.

2.2 The Approach to Inclusive and Responsible Communities

Inclusive tourism is now more than ever a concern of modern societies. As a “response to social, economic and spatial exclusion in tourism”, inclusive tourism is transforming the touristic sector, commonly “understood and experienced as an exclusive activity”. Groups such as deaf people are often marginalized and not engaged in the benefits of the consumption of tourism, due to the lack of access to information in their first language (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018).

The use of infrastructures and access to information is still far from being inclusive, as it is commonly thought for non-deaf people. As such, communication challenges arise naturally between deaf and non-deaf, due to the lack of knowledge of both written language and sign language, respectively (Oliveira, et al., 2019).

To address this social inequality, a Community of Practice, a structure of shared knowledge, was developed. This is based on social networks that allow for socialization online. It is expected that participants interact with each other daily and contribute to the activities proposed. By creating an online tool, based on regular interaction and communication, accessibility and inclusion can be addressed, reducing communication barriers.

The Community of Practice is also important to promote the work being developed under the frame of the ICHT project; this project aims to raise awareness of sign language and enhance inclusive cultural heritage tourism, by means of sign language courses designed for touristic operators, to better welcome and assist deaf tourists. These courses are made available through the ICHT collaborative platform not only for tourist operators but also for anyone interested in learning the basics of sign language (Escudeiro, P., et al., 2022).

3. Method

The Community of Practice is the development of a virtual community through a forum and social networks, to ensure participants can engage and discuss with each other. This is to be done through different activities, that intend to bring together the deaf and non-deaf communities, to share their difficulties, thoughts, experiences, and ideas on issues of communication challenges and tourism, enabling the dissemination of information.

The methodology of this work and its results will improve and enhance the inclusion of deaf people in tourism, fostering engagement and access to the information within the tourist sector, by means of participant discussion on this subject.

3.1 Objectives

The Community of Practice, within the frame of the ICHT project, aims to enhance the inclusion of deaf tourists, by integrating social networks and online forums to raise awareness of Sign Language, improve access to

information, attract deaf tourists and help them while visiting, and promote easier interaction between deaf and non-deaf people. To better accomplish it, the following specific objectives were followed:

- Create an online environment where every participant can understand and be understood;
- Allow easier access to information;
- Promote equal opportunities for the deaf community;
- Raise awareness and reduce communication barriers;
- Foster engagement and regular interaction between deaf and non-deaf people.

4. Conclusions

The deaf community continues to face inclusion and communication challenges today. These challenges result in a diminished interaction between deaf and non-deaf, affecting everyday life, including the access to tourism. The ICHT project and its Community of Practice aim to enhance inclusion and better and regular interaction between these two communities. To do so, social networks and an online forum are used to raise awareness of sign language, as well as for the dissemination of information, knowledge, and experiences, by reducing communication gaps and misinformation.

The aim of this community is to bring closer both communities, together with touristic operators, by sharing and discussing experiences and ideas in an open way in each one's first language. This will not only boost interaction, but also touristic services that become empowered to offer touristic experiences of higher quality.

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