# Perceived Authenticity on the Royal Mile

## Research Summary

"It is quite lovely...bits of it." – Oscar Wilde

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the increase in the number of visitors to the city, most of whom visit the Royal Mile, has resulted in a wide range of concerns being expressed by stakeholders, the media and local community groups. Examples of concerns raised include damage to the historic fabric, traffic congestion and pollution, over-concentration of pedestrians in certain areas, the strain on local services, the impact on local communities of unregulated short-term holiday rentals, and the effect of tourism on the retail environment. [1] These issues are sometimes summarised with the thought that the Royal Mile is losing, or in fact has lost, its 'authenticity'.

The aim of this research, carried out in partnership with the University of Wageningen, is to understand the drivers of the perceived authenticity of the Royal Mile, as well as the potential threats to that authenticity, through research among visitors to the area, as well as with shop assistants. Based on this research, Edinburgh World Heritage has set out a series of recommendations in this report that may serve to enhance the Royal Mile as an outstanding resource for both residents and visitors.

## 2. Four key conclusions

2.1 This new research confirms that the historic built environment of the Royal Mile, including its buildings, setted streets, wynds and closes, is by far the most important driver of its perceived authenticity. Footfall to the Royal Mile is driven by its historic character, as well as the visitor attractions – not by the retail offer as it currently stands. This underlines the crucial importance of the ongoing high-quality conservation and maintenance of buildings and public realm in the area, as well as the need for sensitive, high quality new development if required.

2.2 Our research also indicates that the Royal Mile is losing its local character. Other research cited below indicates that authenticity is enhanced through the presence of a vibrant residential population. Our survey shows that visitors to the Royal Mile associate their visit more with attributes such as 'being surrounded by foreigners' than with 'hearing local Scottish accents'. This suggest that the Royal Mile is at risk of becoming a tourist ghetto, which will certainly detract from its long-term appeal, and economic potential.

2.3 When asked to name aspects of the Royal Mile which are not authentic, the overwhelming majority of comments concerned the retail sector, more specifically the gift and souvenir shops which dominate the landscape. Additionally, our research among shop assistants suggests that visitors' desire to purchase high quality, authentic Scottish products is being frustrated by businesses which sell lower-quality mass produced items, and who 'push the boundaries' in terms of claims concerning Scottish production. This represents both a threat, in terms of visitor satisfaction, but also an opportunity for the city, and for Scottish producers.

2.4 Visitors from different countries react to the Royal Mile in different ways to the question of what is not authentic. For example, more Italian and Scottish visitors named the gift and souvenir shops as not authentic compared to Chinese visitors. However, Chinese visitors are more troubled by rubbish on the street, traffic congestion, and building works/new development in and around the Royal Mile.

## 3. The concept of authenticity

The academic literature on this subject is immense, so what follows can only be the briefest of summaries of concepts relevant to our study of the Royal Mile.

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[1] One typical example is an Old Town Community Council report from November 2017 entitled 'Our Streets'.

Dean MacCannell, of the University of California at Berkeley, has highlighted that tourists seek to visit places that are socially, historically and culturally important. Authentic experiences are seen as opportunities to be briefly part of the 'real life' of visited places. Authenticity is therefore enhanced by the presence of the local community. However, due to the use of travel products and services such as guided tours, experiences can only remain at a superficial level. MacCannell calls this 'staged authenticity'[2].

Erik Cohen of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, suggests that this phenomenon of 'staged authenticity' is a product of 'commodification'. Various local products and experiences such as local and ethnic arts, costumes, rituals, and food are exclusively promoted or produced for tourists. This process can result in the loss of the meaning of cultural products and can appear fake, mass produced and staged.[3]

More recently, Deepak Chhabra of Arizona State University argues that nothing is inherently authentic, therefore 'satisfaction with heritage tourism relies not on the actual sense of authenticity but rather on tourists' perceived authenticity'[4].

Stephen Harwood, of the University of Edinburgh Business School, highlights the change in the Royal Mile as perceived by local residents, from being at the heart of the city 'where everything happened' to being like 'Disneyland'. One typical respondent in Dr. Harwood's research makes the following comment: 'most of us locals find this very distasteful and giving the wrong impression'.[5]

## 4.     Research into the impact of tourism

A recent focus of academic research has been around the impact of tourism on historic urban environments.

For example, Cristina Garcia-Hernandez, of the University of Oviedo, comments that in cities such as Venice, Prague, and San Sebastian, the rapid growth of tourism has resulted in a process of 'touristification', which she defines as 'a change in urban forms and functions that derives from the implementation and growth of tourism activity'. Some of the consequences of this process are landscapes becoming 'banalised' and 'homogenised'. For example, merchandise in San Sebastian are commercialised for tourists needs, while typical food, drinks and the Euskera language are lost[6].

Paola Minoia, of the University of Helsinki, has researched the situation in Venice and has concluded that due to the boom in tourism in the city, traditional activities such as fishing or the production of local handcrafts are rarely practiced in the lagoon and city centre[7].

Veronika Dumbrovska, of the Charles University, Prague, has examined the situation in Prague. Here residents typically complain that products sold on the Royal Way are now 'kitsch' and inauthentic. Many respondents saw this as an insult to the rich Czech cultural heritage[8].

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[2] MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *American journal of Sociology*, *79*(3), 589-603.
[3] Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of tourism research*, *15*(3), 371-386.
[4] Chhabra, D. (2012). Authenticity of the objectively authentic. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *39*(1), 499-502.
[5] Harwood, S. A., & El-Manstrly, D. (2012). 'Authenticity': a familiar word but what are the implications for a destination if it is a popular tourism destination as well as a UNESCO World Heritage site?
[6] García-Hernández, M., de la Calle-Vaquero, M., & Yubero, C. (2017). Cultural heritage and urban tourism: Historic city centres under pressure. *Sustainability*, *9*(8), 1346.
[7] Minoia, P. (2017). Venice reshaped? Tourist gentrification and sense of place. In *Tourism in the City* (pp. 261-274). Springer, Cham.
[8] Dumbrovská, V. (2017). Urban tourism development in Prague: from tourist mecca to tourist ghetto. In *Tourism in the City* (pp. 275-283). Springer, Cham.

## 5.    The role of the local community

Various researchers suggest that involving residents as stakeholders in sustainable tourism planning and heritage management can empower communities, and lead to better solutions. Locals in their own environment are more aware of what would work, within local conditions, and what would not. Erick Byrd, of UNC Greensboro, has researched several case studies, one of which involved analysis of stakeholder participation in Selma, North Carolina. Here, town managers and planners involved business owners, residents and local officials in plans to revitalise the downtown retail area. The process was considered a major success, the revitalisation occurred as planned and this success was partially because of the involvement of different stakeholders and community representatives from the beginning[9].

## 6.    Historical context

The long succession of five separate streets which joins Edinburgh Castle to the Palace of Holyroodhouse, and which became known (from the early 20th century) as the Royal Mile, is one of the most celebrated urban thoroughfares to be found anywhere in the world[10]. The spectacular topography is one reason for this, with its densely built-up spur of rock descending steadily to the east, as well as the exceptional wealth of 16th and 17th century houses built for nobles as well as tenements fronting the main streets. The significance of the Royal Mile to the city of Edinburgh has been observed since at least the 16th century, and was central to the inscription of the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh as a World Heritage Site in 1995.[11]

The Royal Mile was also, before the construction of the New Town, central to the city's economy. Trade shaped this part of the city from the outset, with the Lawnmarket and High Street forming one long European-style market place. It was also, from at least the 16th century, a street of shops. The earliest 16th century tenements, such as John Knox House, and Moubray House, both incorporated shopfronts on the ground floor, and this became a pattern for future development. Luckenbooths were also a feature of the Royal Mile until well into the 19th century, though a large number were demolished in 1817, together with the Old Tolbooth.

The gradual decline of the Old Town, including many buildings on and around the Royal Mile, commenced as the city's upper and middle classes moved to the expanding New Towns to the north. This was recognised, with concerted efforts during the second half of the 19th century through the Improvement Acts which sought to improve conditions, with varying degrees of success. This continued through the inter-war period and into the post-war era, with the rebuilding of tenements by architect Robert Hurd, and the construction of new buildings, such as the Basil Spence blocks on the Canongate. In some cases, the community was moved wholesale out of the Old Town to new housing. The effort from the 1980s onward focused on the social and physical regeneration of the area, using social housing as a key means of anchoring in a residential population.

The most recent chapter in the history of the Royal Mile concerns the rise of short-term holiday rentals, triggered by the boom in mass tourism and the success of platforms such as Airbnb. Within the Old Town, there are currently 821 flats listed by via Airbnb, 82% of which are entire homes.[12] Combined with other platforms, this is likely to take the number to well over 1,000.

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[9] Byrd, E. T. (2007). Stakeholders in sustainable tourism development and their roles: applying stakeholder theory to sustainable tourism development. Tourism Review, 62(2), 6-13.

[10] The use of the phrase 'Royal Mile' seems to be more recent, and was first used descriptively by W. M. Gilbert in his reference to Edinburgh's 'Castle and Palace and the royal mile between', and was further popularised as the title of a guidebook, published in 1920. Thus, the use of the phrase has been associated from the moment it was coined, as a promotional term to encourage tourism.

[11] City of Edinburgh Old and New Towns – Nomination for World Heritage Status, Historic Scotland, 1995.

[12] Inside Airbnb data for from July 2019.

## 7.        Methodology

A survey of 515 visitors to the Royal Mile was conducted over two periods: October – November 2018 and May – June 2019. Individuals were approached at various points on the Royal Mile and asked to complete a simple questionnaire.

A range of demographic information was gathered, in addition to answers to a specific set of questions concerning the Royal Mile. Several open-ended questions were also included concerning perceptions of authenticity. Representative samples by nationality were secured including Chinese, British, American, German, French, Italian and Spanish visitors.

Additionally, interviews with 44 shop assistants were conducted in November – December 2018. The format for these interviews had two parts: shop assistants were first asked a series of specific questions about the shop and their customers. Then, a qualitative discussion was added in order to probe more sensitive issues such as quality, provenance of products and the culture of business practice.

## 8.     Nationality

The largest nationality group within the research was Chinese (19%) followed by remainder of UK, US, Scotland, Spain and Germany.

These data are not representative of overall trends in the nationality of visitors to Edinburgh, but reflect a bias to ensure a measurable base of Chinese visitors.
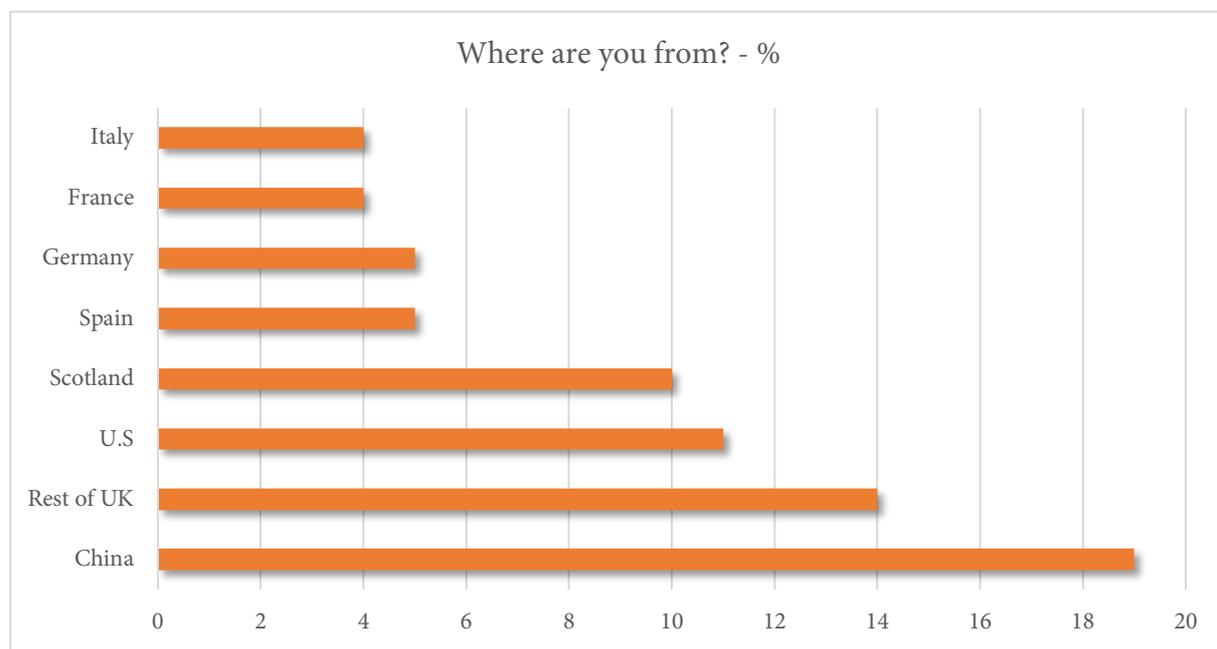


## 9.     Main findings

### 9.1     Main drivers of perceived authenticity

When asked 'what is authentic about the Royal Mile' as an open-ended question, the overwhelming majority of visitors mentioned 'buildings' and 'architecture' (44%) followed by 'old and historic' (9%). Other attributes associated with the authenticity of the area were the setted (cobbled) street (5%),

pipers (3%) and Scottish pubs (2%). There were no significant differences in the response to this question across age, gender, or country of origin.
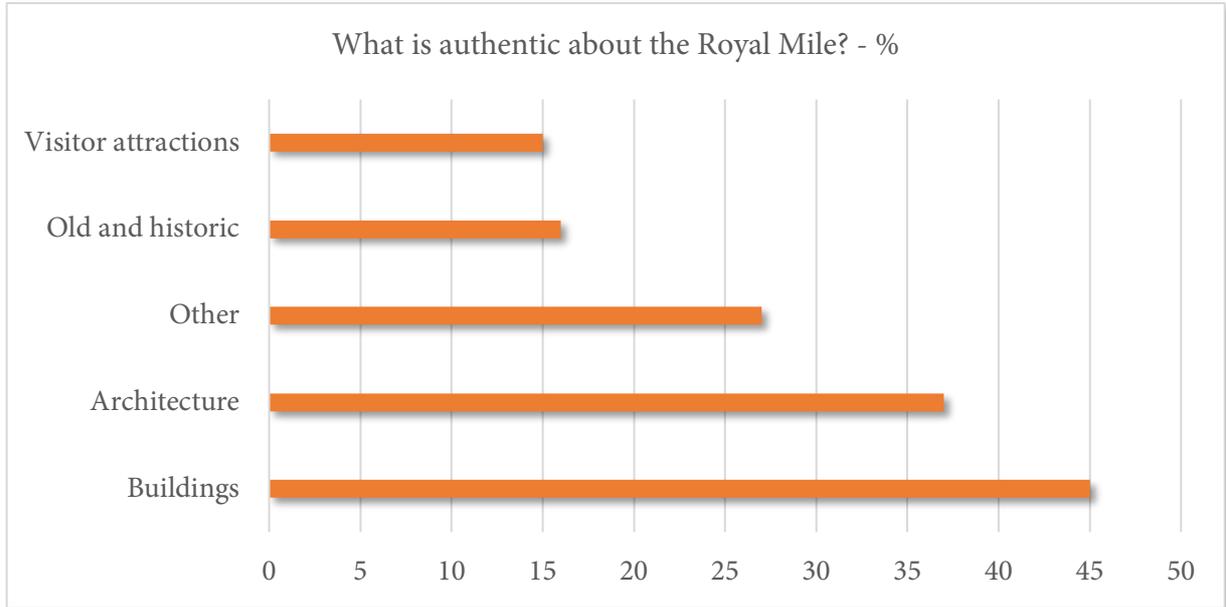


## 9.2 Drivers of footfall to the Royal Mile

70% of respondents interviewed were visiting the Royal Mile either for the architecture, history, or for a specific visitor attraction. Only 7% of respondents were visiting the area for the shops.
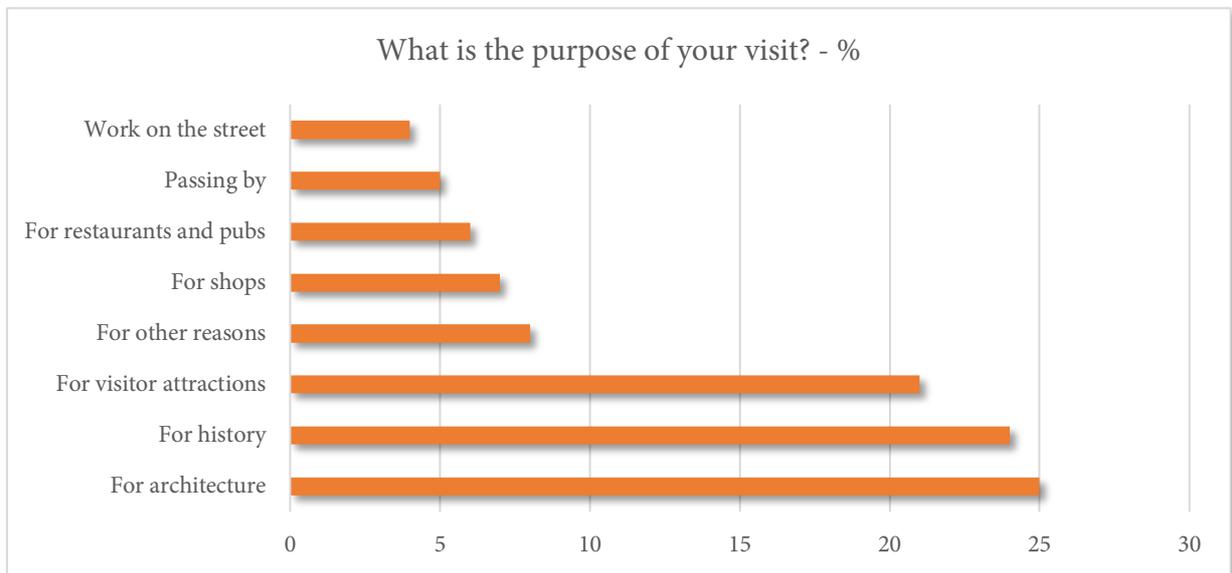


## 9.3 Amenity of the Royal Mile

Respondents were asked to rate a number of attributes on a scale of 1 to 5 associated with the Royal Mile. This data suggests that the area is strongly associated with both visitor attractions and being able to see examples of Scottish architecture.

**On the Royal Mile I can... - %**
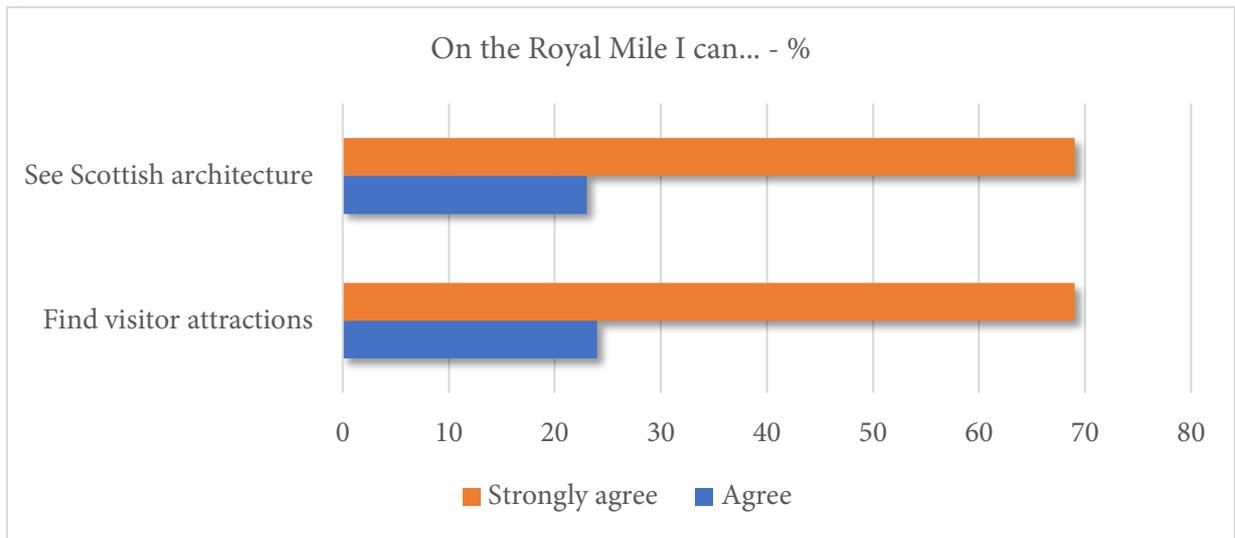


### 9.4 Were visitor expectations met?

Visitors were asked whether they agreed with the statement that 'my expectations of the Royal Mile were met'. Overall, 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

**My expectation of the RM was met - %**
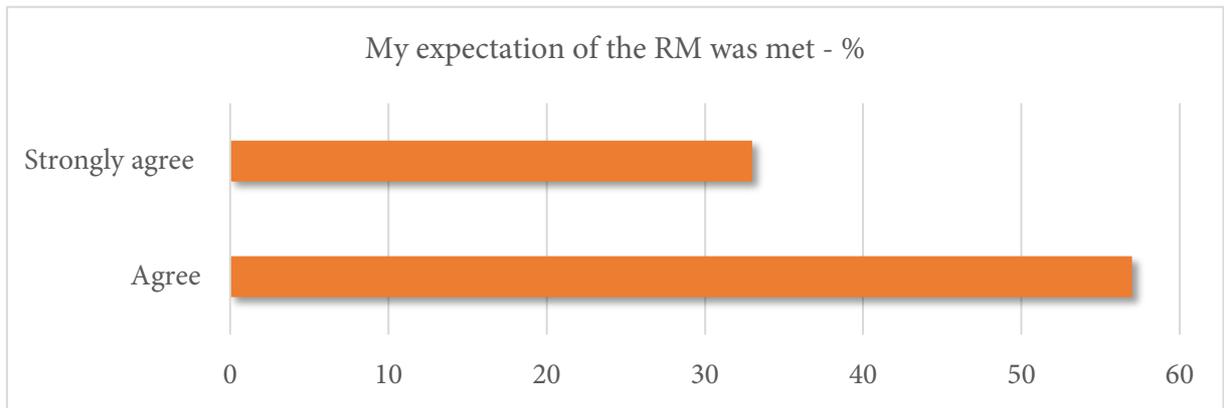


### 9.5 Erosion of local character

The local character of the Royal Mile is being eroded. The Royal Mile is associated in respondents' minds more with characteristics such as 'a place to find visitor attractions', and 'be surrounded by foreigners' than as a place to 'hear Scottish accents', 'recognise locals', or 'see shops used by locals'.

## On the Royal Mile I can... 5-point scale

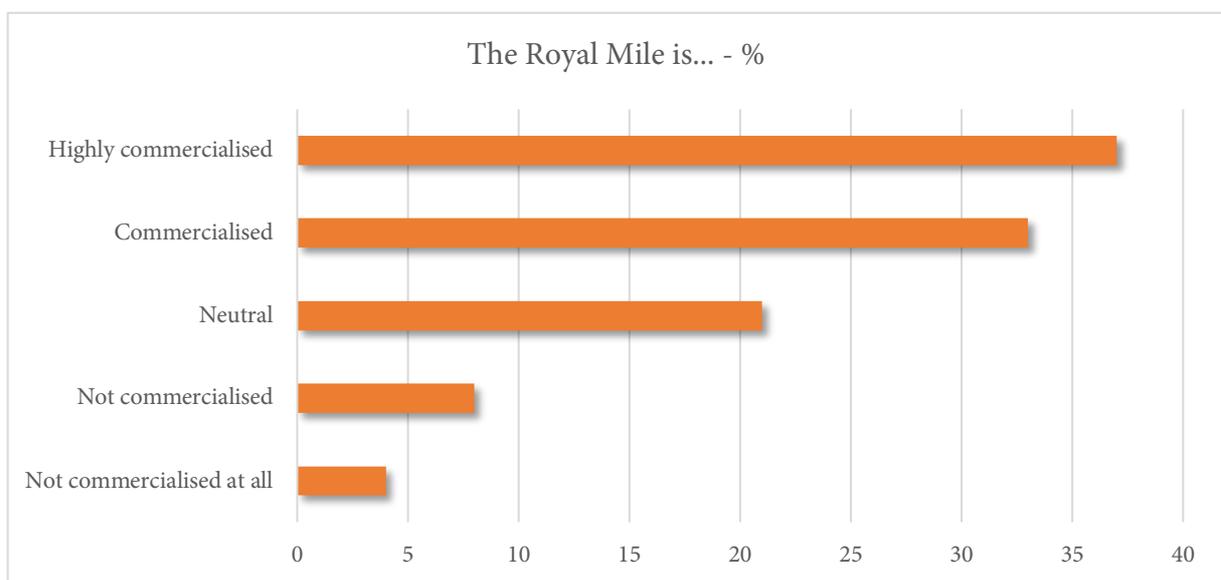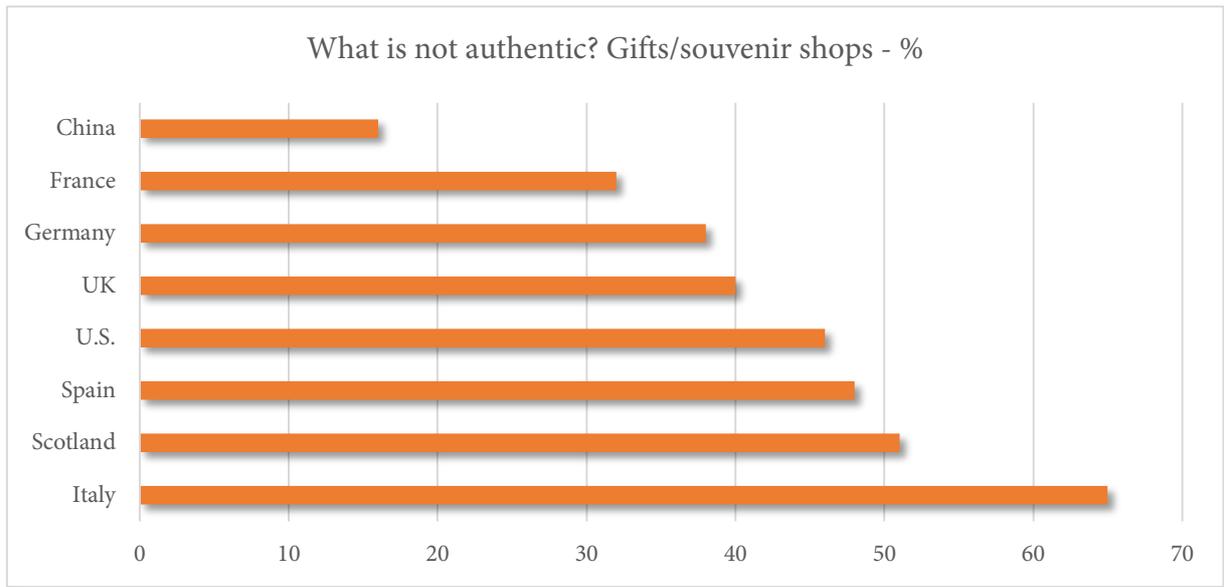| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| See shops for locals | 3.0 |
| Recognise locals | 3.0 |
| Hear Scottish accents | 3.45 |
| Find local gift shops | 3.9 |
| Find Scottish Pubs | 4.1 |
| See Scottish Architecture | 4.6 |
| Be surrounded by foreigners | 4.3 |
| Find visitor attractions | 4.6 |
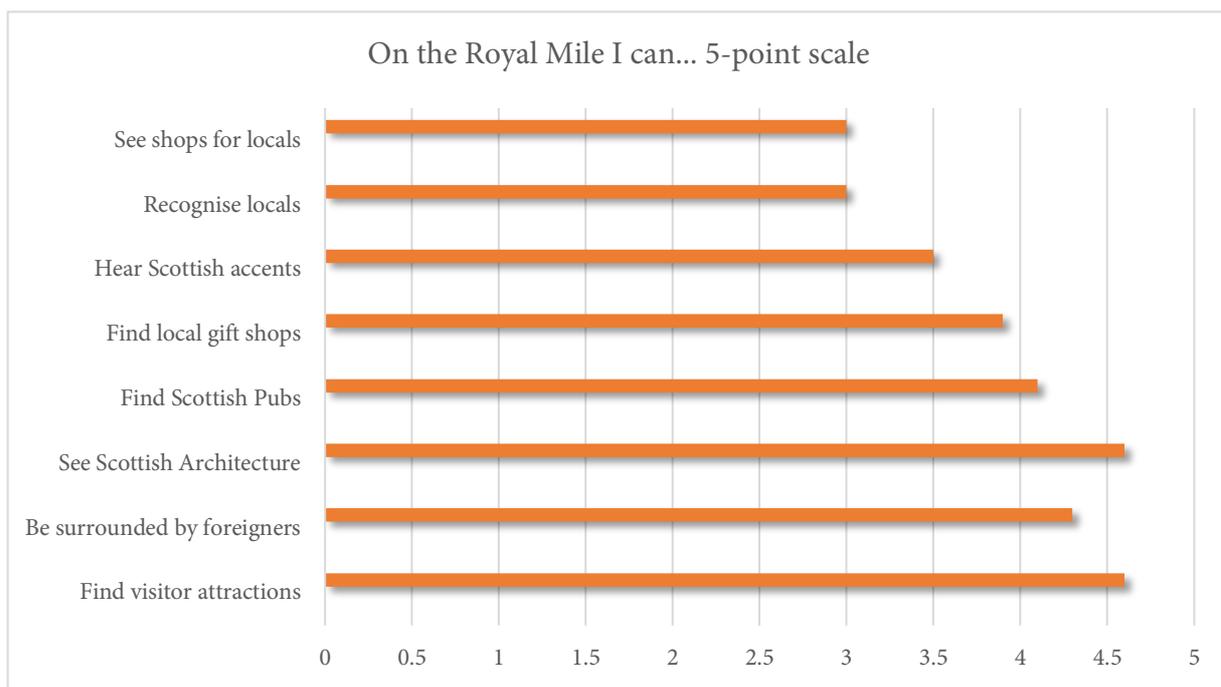
### 9.6    Commercial character

The Royal Mile was seen as either commercial, or very commercial by 80% of respondents.

## The Royal Mile is... - %

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Highly commercialised | 37 |
| Commercialised | 33 |
| Neutral | 21 |
| Not commercialised | 8 |
| Not commercialised at all | 4 |

### 9.7    Threats to perceived authenticity

An open-ended question was asked concerning what is <u>not</u> authentic about the Royal Mile. By far the most often-mentioned attribute was the retail sector – more specifically, the gift and souvenir shops. This response varied by nationality, with Italian (65%) and Scottish (51%) respondents most often mentioning gift/souvenir shops as 'not authentic' followed by Spaniards (48%) and Americans (46%). The score was far lower for Chinese visitors (16%).

**What is not authentic? Gifts/souvenir shops - %**

China 16

France 32

Germany 38
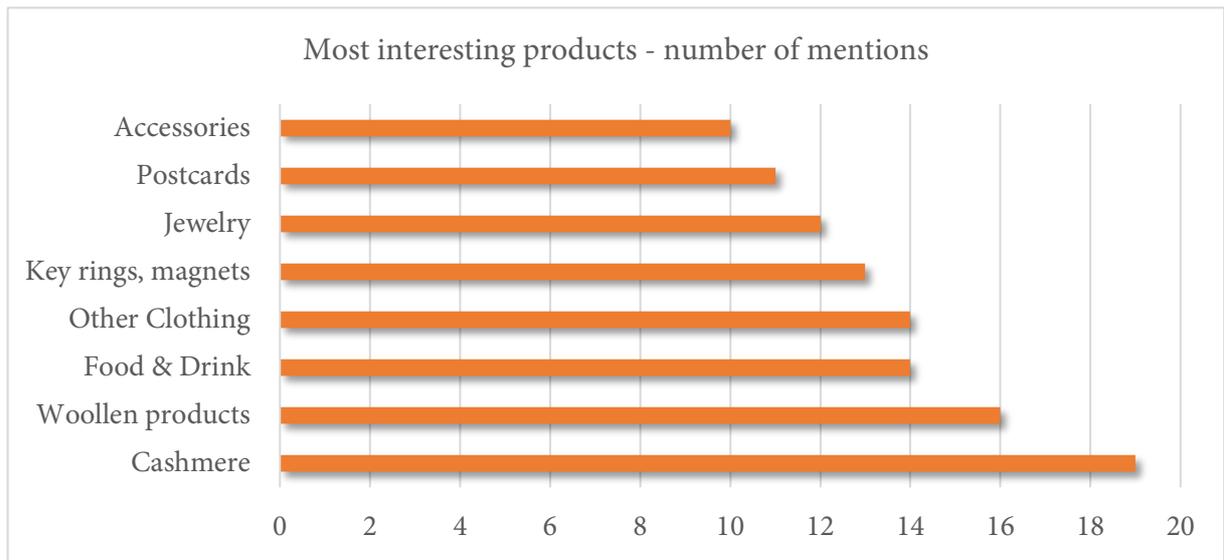
UK 40

U.S. 46

Spain 48

Scotland 51

Italy 65

However, Chinese visitors had by far the highest level of miscellaneous/'other' comments about what was 'not authentic', most of which concerned environmental factors. 25% of the Chinese respondents commented that construction and new buildings were 'not authentic', followed by 17% commenting on traffic congestion and 6% mentioning international/chain restaurants and rubbish on streets.

### 9.8   Research among shop assistants

Interviews with 44 shop assistants confirmed that visitors to the Royal Mile are looking primarily for Scottish sourcing, quality and authenticity in their purchases.

**Key sales drivers - 5 point scale**

Made by traditional methods 3

Made by local craftsmen 3.3

Uniqueness 3.7

Price 3.9

Authentic products 4

Quality 4.2

Scottish sourcing 4.25
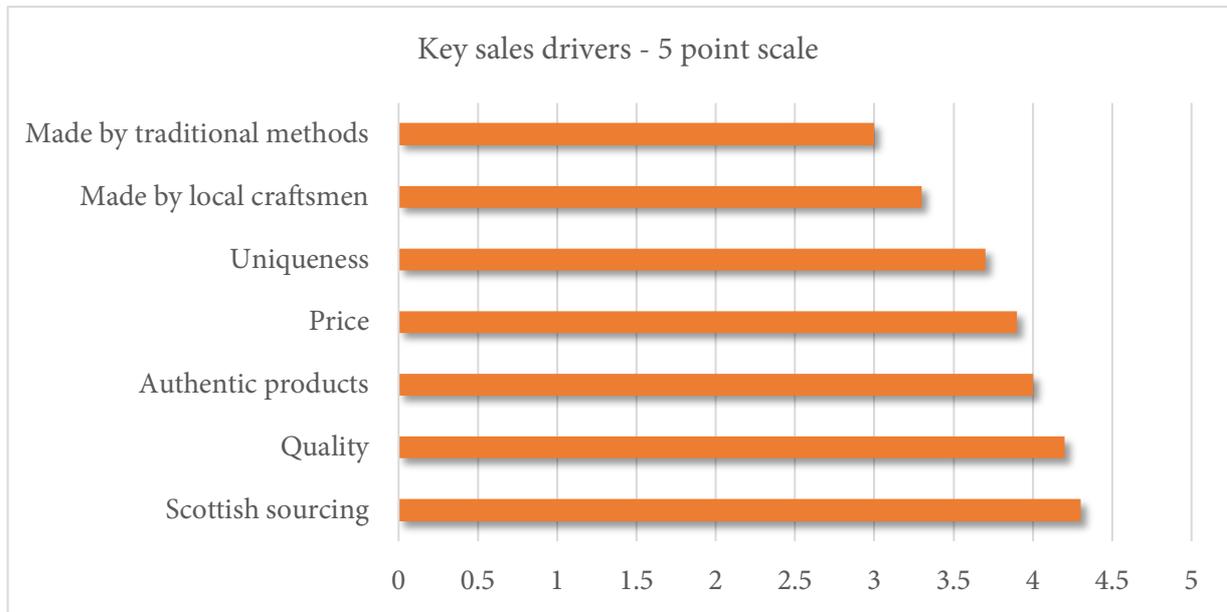
Cashmere, woollen products, other clothing items and accessories are by far the highest area of interest for customers on the Royal Mile and were mentioned on 59 occasions versus just 7 occasions for Scotch Whisky.

**Most interesting products - number of mentions**

| Product | Mentions |
|---|---|
| Accessories | 10 |
| Postcards | 11 |
| Jewelry | 12 |
| Key rings, magnets | 13 |
| Other Clothing | 14 |
| Food & Drink | 14 |
| Woollen products | 16 |
| Cashmere | 19 |

In a series of qualitative follow-up questions to shop assistants, a series of other points emerged. Although Scottish sourcing was seen as the highest attribute in driving sales, only about half of the shop assistants interviewed claimed that their merchandise was produced in Scotland. And while product quality was seen as a key attribute in driving sales, most shop assistants characterised their own merchandise as mass produced, and of average quality.

Shop assistants were also quick to express a point of view concerning other shops on the Royal Mile. Almost all saw the situation as negative, with many shops selling low quality products produced outside of the UK. Shop assistants also made various accusations about their competitors, including misinformation to customers, and that the culture is one of consistently 'pushing the boundaries' in terms of commercial practice. Finally, most shop assistants mentioned that they would not shop in the Royal Mile themselves.

## 10    Recommendations

10.1    The future success of the Royal Mile as a high-quality visitor destination is intimately linked to how we care and conserve its unique historic character. The buildings, closes and wynds, setted streets, squares, lighting, and public signage are all key drivers of its appeal. In recent years damage to the historic environment has increased due to the effects of climate change, increased traffic, and heavy visitor traffic at certain times of the year. Maintaining, and if possible, enhancing the appeal of this historic environment will require action in three areas:

Firstly, to redouble efforts to conserve key buildings and shopfronts through grants and expert support for residents and local businesses. While some public funding does exist to support this work via programmes such as Edinburgh World Heritage's Conservation Funding Programme, the Transient Visitor Levy could provide an invaluable additional source of funding to ensure the large quantity of conservation work required within the World Heritage Site is carried out effectively.

Second, to take steps to improve the public realm in ways that will enhance the experience of visitors and better build a sense of place. Examples of how this could be done are: improved high-quality wayfinding, investment in programmes such as the 'Twelve Closes' programme to rejuvenate neglected closes and wynds, as well as steps to address anti-social behaviour in public areas, such as Hunter Square.

Finally, new development where required must be carefully regulated in line with guidance contained within the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh Management Plan[13].

10.2    The appeal of the Royal Mile, and the Old Town in general, is also linked to the presence of a vibrant local residential community. Allowing the Royal Mile to become a tourist ghetto should be avoided at all costs – not only will this destroy the appeal of the area, it also runs contrary to our obligations as signatories to the World Heritage Convention and subsequent ICOMOS charters. Preserving and strengthening our local communities on the Royal Mile and around the Old Town therefore should be an important priority for the city. Previous efforts, such as the Royal Mile Action Plan of 2012 got off to an excellent start, achieved a high level of engagement from residents and local businesses, but were then left unresourced. Understandably, this has caused some resentment and cynicism. We recommend that an important strand of the promising City of Edinburgh Council City Centre Transformation initiative be dedicated to the specific needs of the Royal Mile and its communities, and that local people be involved in determining the future of this uniquely valuable resource.

10.3    It's clear that many visitors to the Royal Mile are being frustrated, and sometimes mislead, in their efforts to buy high-quality, authentic Scottish products, most notably in the textile category. To address this partially unmet key visitor need, as well as benefit local producers and manufacturers, a voluntary 'Made in Scotland' scheme should be actively considered. The 'Made in Italy' voluntary certification programme could be one model. On a more modest scale, the 'Made in Northern Ireland' programme which is used to promote locally produced merchandise at various locations including the Giants Causeway is also an option. To help deliver better customer service, and ensure greater transparency and good business practice, we also recommend that new training programmes be developed and made available for retailers, potentially coordinated by the Chamber of Commerce. Focus should be given to the importance of product quality and local provenance. Support could be available from the various Scottish industry associations whose products are sold on the Royal Mile. This would also be an opportunity to promote Scottish products, and develop sales approaches that work best for customers based on different needs and nationalities. We also recommend a review of enforcement procedures against misleading advertising claims and labelling on the Royal Mile.

10.4    Finally, we believe that the time has come for the city to consider a more proactive approach to shaping the retail sector on the Royal Mile, to ensure that the needs of visitors are met, as well as those of local residents and people that work in the area. Examples exist across Europe of how this can be done. Amsterdam has recently implemented a moratorium on the opening of any more of its ubiquitous waffle shops. Paris has developed a series of policies to encourage the opening of bookshops on the South Bank. Similar schemes could be considered for Edinburgh – it should be noted that in the world's first UNESCO City of Literature, there is no bookshop or newsagent on its principal thoroughfare. It should also be remembered that a large number of retail units in the Royal Mile are directly owned by the city. While we accept that overall the retail environment faces challenges and significant change, for example on Princes Street, this does not mean that we should postpone steps to create a higher a quality retail environment in the Old Town that better meets the needs of increasingly sophisticated visitors – as well as residents.

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[13] Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site – Management Plan, 2017 – 2022 (pp. 33-34)