

Accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in the UK meetings industry

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Abstract

Issues of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion are becoming increasingly important for MICE managers around the globe and need to be considered in terms of both event attendees and employees/meetings professionals. The UK MICE sector is facing an unprecedented period of disruption in relation to the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty of Brexit, the impacts of which may have far-reaching consequences in terms of equality and diversity. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 13 stakeholders - meeting planners, venue managers, entrepreneurs and member organization leaders - this paper considers how issues of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion are playing out in the changing landscape of the UK meetings industry. Findings suggest that although the MICE sector is paying increasing attention to the importance of accessibility, there is evidence of persistent inequality and marginalization on the grounds of gender, age, 'race' and (dis)ability. We question if a focus on diversity remains a priority in economically, politically, and socially unsettled times, and what this may mean for an inclusive future for the UK meetings industry.

Keywords: accessibility; Covid-19; diversity; equality; inclusion; MICE

Introduction

The meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) industry is an important subset of the wider events, travel, and hospitality sectors. The global MICE industry was valued at US \$805 billion in 2018, with Europe representing the largest market share (Sable et al., 2019). In the UK, the focus of this paper, the MICE industry is estimated to contribute at least £33.3 billion to the national economy, and to provide approximately half a million full time equivalent jobs (BVEP, 2014). The MICE sector, of which meetings make up the largest proportion, is thus a significant contributor to the global and UK economies and a key provider of employment opportunities.

In May 2019, Meetings Professionals International (MPI), the world's largest meetings and events industry association, released their State of Inclusion in Meetings and Events Report, which presented evidence based on a survey with (mainly US-based) meetings professionals that showed that the industry is placing increasing importance on tackling issues of accessibility, diversity and inclusion (MPI, 2019). The report highlighted numerous challenges surrounding diversity and inclusion in the sector, supporting an emerging yet scarce body of research within critical events studies which evidences marginalization and exclusion of certain groups and individuals in terms of both event consumption (as attendees) and production (employees in the sector) (e.g. Crichton & Finkel, 2019; Dashper, 2018; Duffy et al., 2018). This illustrates the importance of such studies to affirm scholarly literature, and, symbiotically, supports the justification for this kind of critical research to inform practice-based inquiry. Additionally, the dearth of previous studies demonstrates that this is an area which would benefit from greater investigation; thus, the current study seeks to act as a bridge by situating research in a UK context during a transitional time.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to understanding the UK meetings landscape in terms of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in the challenging times of COVID-19 and Brexit. The novelty of the study presents itself most prominently by addressing two key gaps in knowledge: 1) professional experiences in the UK meetings environment with regard to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion; and, 2) how meetings professionals think these uncharted crises will have an impact on the UK industry. Compared to existing literature, which mainly emphasizes consumer points of view, this paper focuses on the organizational side of the industry, highlighting the perspectives of those who work in UK MICE. We consider how economic precarity and uncertainty of future social policies are shaping the practices and priorities of meetings professionals. This is a woefully understudied area, and this research contributes to informing the knowledge gap surrounding challenges related to exclusion and possible marginalization in meetings provision. This will help to formulate a more holistic perspective of the UK meetings industry through the lens of accessibility and diversity by investigating current practices, and, thus, providing insight into how these practices could become more fully inclusive.

There is increasing attention being paid to issues of accessibility, diversity and inclusion in the MICE sector, but how to ensure the industry is diverse and accessible to all, and to create events that are truly inclusive, is a complex undertaking, beset by lack of consensus about what 'inclusivity' really means (see Finkel & Dashper, 2020). With these challenges of definitions, hierarchies of inclusion have emerged in some cases, with certain events focusing more fully on particular groups and communities, which can perhaps inadvertently exclude others. For example, an emphasis on including more women speakers at meetings, and thus avoiding the damaging optics of the 'manel' or all-male panel, could still be considered

exclusionary if all speakers are able-bodied and white (Platt & Finkel, 2018). This is of course not just about ‘ticking boxes’; rather, it is about including different perspectives and providing platforms for a variety of voices to ensure MICE events are not merely reiterating dominant discourses. The value of improving accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in MICE is recognized by nearly all in the industry; however, barriers remain in terms of implementing consistent best practice across the sector.

This paper contributes to further understanding about the ways in which the UK MICE industry is trying to address issues surrounding accessibility, diversity, and inclusion. We begin by discussing emerging research within this area in critical events studies. After introducing the research methods of the study, we draw on interview data with event professionals to consider if and how the UK MICE industry can work towards becoming a truly inclusive sector, open and welcoming for all.

Accessibility, diversity and inclusion in the MICE industry

Issues surrounding accessibility, diversity, and inclusion are an emerging topic in critical event studies, and it is only recently that these concepts have been explored in-depth framed around planned events. Critical event studies situates event landscapes in broader economic, social, and political issues, evaluating impacts on communities and places (Finkel et al., 2018). The development of the field of critical event studies (see Spracklen & Lamond, 2016) seeks to “set an agenda for ethical management, governance, and coexistence with the wider external world” (Robertson et al. 2018, 865), among other conceptual undertakings. The theoretical underpinning draw from cross-disciplinary literatures and methodologies (Platt &

Lamond, 2016), such as those from sociology, geography, cultural studies, media studies, and other social sciences, as a framework for analysis and interpretation. Although there are pockets of research on topics involving non-hegemonic communities' experiences at events, as well as associated policy implications and event design considerations, these topics are still considered niche, often sidelined, and remain the focus of only a handful of scholars. The work that has been conducted has been focused mainly on festivals (Barrera-Fernandez and Hernandez-Escampa, 2018; Platt & Finkel, 2020), cultural events (Hill & Sobande, 2018; Rodgers, 2018), sporting events (Dashper, 2016; Lenskyj, 2016), and para-sporting events (Cirilo dos Santos Neto et al., 2018; Misener et al., 2015) as well as the activism of LGBTQ Pride events (Caudwell, 2017; Lamond, 2017). The findings of these research studies all highlight the challenges associated with inclusionary practices, especially with regard to diverse and marginalized communities. MICE, especially academic conferences, have had some limited critical examination to date (Mair & Frew, 2018; Walters, 2018; Henderson, 2018), often relying on ethnographic approaches and concentrating on consumer/client perspectives. This provides scope for further exploration of the multi-layered processes and practices concerning accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in the experiential industries, especially with regard to employee and practitioner points of view.

When we think about accessibility, diversity, and inclusion, it is important to remember that these concepts, and corresponding experiences, "are interrelated and entangled, and the boundaries between them can often become blurred, especially with regard to event design, programming, production, and consumption" (Finkel & Dashper, 2020, p.476). Additionally, there are also issues with definitions of these terms between organizations, which illustrates why more research into marginalized groups is necessary, as experiences will be as diverse as the individuals and groups involved. Given these are also multifaceted concepts, which

address complex issues involving a myriad of cultural factors and a range of lived experiences which are too broad and complex to tackle in any one paper, our discussion in this section focuses on accessibility, diversity and inclusion frameworks as they intersect with planned events in general and MICE more specifically. Therefore, we have given prominence in this section to arguably the most visible (certainly the most researched, although this research is still minimal) issues in the UK industry at this time: 1) attendee experiences with regard to disability; and, 2) professional experiences with regard to gender (in)equality. While our focus in the discussion below is mainly limited to disability and gender, this has relevance to broader issues of diversity and accessibility as well. For example, issues pertaining to ethnic diversity are also notable and made even more so by the paucity of literature in this area. A few scholars have discussed ‘race’ and ethnicity with regard to events governance and design (Fletcher & Hylton, 2018; Zigamo, 2018); however, there is broad scope for future research in this area as well as for improvements in UK industry practices, as we discuss further in the findings below. As Ali (2018, p.122) suggests, there is a need for more diverse representation in events as well as “facilitating audience participation in a way that encourages inclusion and combats marginalisation.”

Considering Disability in MICE events

Accessibility in events contexts is often perceived as pertaining to mobility and physicality in the space. Boundaries to accessible MICE events often are focused on venues, such as conference and convention centers, university buildings, stadiums, and rooms for meetings and exhibitions. Although building regulations are standardized in a locality and not usually part of the remit of the events staff, event managers do have the responsibility of choosing locations and venues which are accessible for those with all kinds of special needs and

possible disabilities. This also could include accommodation and transport options near the conference for those who will be attending and requiring additional support and services (Walters, 2018). In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 states that it is a requirement “to make reasonable adjustments if a person with impairments is placed at a substantial disadvantage compared with non-disabled people or people who do not have their disability. It is unlawful discrimination if someone does not co-operate with their duty to make reasonable adjustments under this Act” (Finkel & Dashper, 2020, p.476). Therefore, although the event venue itself may be physically accessible, the additional infrastructure as part of the meeting also needs to be suitable for special requirements. Along with accessible spaces, Rodríguez-Zulaica and Fernández-Villarán Ara (2018) stressed the importance of sensitivity training for venue staff in order to assist event attendees with a broad range of potential disabilities, as not all are physical or visible. They found more of this kind of training has been happening in the last few years in Europe, but this is not codified and can lead to inconsistent experiences.

However, it is not only physical confines which can make MICE events inaccessible. Further complications, such as caring responsibilities, mental health, and personal circumstances, can often be barriers to participation. For example, Henderson (2018, 218) argues there is a need to facilitate “*access within* as well as *access to*” events. This could include event design and organization aspects, such as conference schedules, catering, and socialization activities, which can hinder or, indeed, facilitate full participation for all attendees. There can be seen to be a tripartite approach to improve accessibility in conference organization, as Walters (2018) sets out. Her advice on improving accessibility in a more equal and fair way is to focus upon what she deems the three main types of accessibility: physical accessibility, financial accessibility, and cognitive accessibility (i.e. mental and emotional wellbeing). It is only through attention to these three interconnected aspects that accessibility for the benefit of all

participants and not just mainstream groups will be able to be achieved (Walters, 2018). However, there is yet to be full agreement in the industry of how this is to be adopted as a priority.

Addressing gender (in)equality in MICE events

According to Finkel et al. (2018, p.2), “Diversity can be taken to mean individual and community diversity, such as those relating to gender, sexualities, ethnicity, age, religion, and so forth.” The issues related to diversity in events in general and MICE events more specifically are incredibly important. We are aware that there is a need for intersectionality, and there is a large gap in the literature approaching event studies in this way. We also understand that effective solutions vary on an event-by-event basis, and there is no off-the-shelf solution for addressing diversity issues in planned events. Additionally, it is often the case that business events reflect the broader environment of the industry they represent. We shine a spotlight here on issues related to gender, as it is one of the most relevant for the events industry. Indeed, the events industry is a female dominated industry in numerical terms, and courses at universities often have far higher numbers of female than male students; yet, men continue to dominate senior levels of management and board positions (BCDME, 2018). As Thomas (2017, p.202) points out in his comment on the formation of the Events Industry Board, “Women comprise about 75% of the events workforce, but there is a promotion and pay gap that favours men.” Therefore, diversity in this regard becomes associated with issues of (in)equality and exclusion. It is with this in mind that we discuss the implications of an unequal gendered workplace within the events industry.

There is a strong and well-developed body of critical feminist and gender-informed research in management studies more broadly; however, this has yet to be engaged with in any meaningful way in critical event studies. Work is a crucial political terrain and is fraught with inequality, discrimination, and marginalization. It is well established that work is characterized by gender inequality, with women experiencing the constraints of the glass ceiling, exclusion from the old boys' network, harassment, microaggressions and (symbolic) violence, and other forms of sexism (Dashper, 2020). As Ahmed (2017) argues, sexual harassment is often a part of organizational culture, which is very much tied to that organization's reputation. This makes it incredibly difficult to disrupt and disassemble, given the paradoxical situation that embedded institutional inequalities are often at odds with organizations' public relations activities and reputations.

Costa et al. (2017) apply Acker's (1990) concept of gendered organizations to work in tourism, showing how the ideal tourism worker is in fact a heterosexual man, with his life centered around a full time job to which he can commit fully, as his wife/partner caters for his personal needs and children. Women are more likely to lose out within such a setup, as they are often perceived to be less committed and therefore less suitable for positions of responsibility. Costa et al. (2017, p.66) conclude that "the concept of 'work' is implicitly gendered", positioning men and women differently in relation to discourses of success, leadership and authority. This gendering of work is rarely acknowledged, and organizations and positions are perceived to be benign and gender neutral. It is women and other marginalized workers who are seen to be deficient and underperforming, rather than there being any fundamental issues with how we understand, organize and reward performance in the workplace. Thus, Puwar (2004) contends that women and minorities are considered 'space invaders' in the entrenched white heteronormative male domain of the workplace.

There is a widely held perception that ‘gender issues’ in employment have been addressed, as women and men are now much more evenly represented numerically in the workplace and there are women visibly in positions of power in business and politics. However, this does not mean that gender is no longer an important aspect of work, and numerous scholars argue that progress towards greater equality has in fact stalled and may even be regressing (England, 2010; Friedman, 2015; Ridgeway, 2006). In this context, some women working in the events industry have been motivated to try to redress gender imbalances in leadership at local levels. These initiatives include mentoring schemes, such as the UK-based events industry scheme Fast Forward 15, and other support organizations and networks, such as Women in Tourism. These programs are important in terms of supporting, empowering and progressing individual women within their careers in the events industry (Dashper, 2018). However, they do little to challenge the wider issues related to restrictive hierarchical gender norms; therefore, while they are important for supporting individual women in their careers, on their own they will not fundamentally challenge gender inequality in the events industry (Dashper, 2019).

As Finkel and Dashper (2020) argue, “The goal of truly inclusive events is to enable diverse audiences to participate fully in an accessible, comfortable, and enjoyable manner. Yet, despite best intentions, sometimes this is difficult to achieve because along with social aspects, there are also cultural, economic, and political dimensions interwoven in the fabric of inclusionary practices” (p.484). The recipe for successful inclusive events requires attention to accessibility conditions and intersectional diversity perspectives, and it also requires attention to power dynamics. This applies to both consumption (attendee) and production (operations, governance, and management). Given events are experiential by their very

nature, it is important to be aware of the messages being communicated about who the event is for - or not for - in order to understand possible sites for inclusion and exclusion. In the MICE industry, this extends to who is and who is not made to feel included in event spaces as a result of organizational decisions. The following section sets out the methods for this research specifically focusing on the UK MICE industry.

Methods

In order to understand more about the ways in which the UK MICE industry is (or is not) addressing issues to do with accessibility, diversity and inclusion, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 professionals. We were interested in individuals' personal experiences in relation to these issues, as well as their professional insight into how the industry was addressing these complex points; thus, interviews offered an appropriate method to discuss both personal and professional insights.

Participants were selected based on their position within the MICE industry. We adopted a purposive sampling approach to try and include people with different personal and professional experiences and, therefore, our sample included individuals working at venues, agencies, business owners, representatives of industry associations, and entrepreneurs.

Participants were recruited through a range of approaches, including through discussions on diversity and equality on LinkedIn and other industry forums, through snowball sampling and recommendations from other event professionals, and through professional contacts. We endeavored to ensure a range of voices would be heard and deliberately sought out participants at different stages in their career and with different life experiences. Experiences

of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion are likely to differ dependent on an individual's own life experiences. For example, women may have different gendered experiences of the MICE industry to men (Dashper, 2020); and BAME professionals may be more aware of issues to do with 'race' and ethnicity within the sector than white people, as one of the privileges of whiteness is that 'race' is often largely invisible to white people's everyday experiences (Fletcher & Hylton, 2018). This is not to say that 'race' is not relevant to the experiences of white people, or gender to the experiences of men, for example, but that people in dominant groups may have different experiences, and often be less aware of their privilege, than those who are more marginalized.

As an exploratory study, our sample is relatively small to enable us to explore the experiences of participants in some depth. We recognize that, in many ways, our sample lacks diversity, with only two men and four people from black, Asian and minoritized ethnic groups, and no one who identified as disabled. However, we believe that, despite these limitations, our sample includes a broad range of professional and personal life experiences. We make no claim that our findings are representative of the whole MICE sector in the UK, but in line with feminist positions, believe that the individual experiences of our participants are revealing of broader issues beyond their own personal stories.

The research was conducted under the research ethics guidelines of Leeds Beckett University, and any identifying information has been removed and pseudonyms used to protect anonymity. Table 1 illustrates key information about the sample.

Pseudonym	MICE sector	Level of seniority	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Jane	Membership organization	Executive	Female	25	White
Peter	Weddings and hospitality	Entrepreneur	Male	33	White
Dianna	Membership organization and event design	Executive	Female	53	White
Jessica	Venue	Middle management	Female	27	White
Mark	Speaker and consultant	Entrepreneur	Male	45	White
Colleen	Exhibitions	Junior	Female	30	Black
Sarah	Conferences	Senior management	Female	47	White
Maddie	Venue	Middle management	Female	32	White
Nicola	Event	Entrepreneur	Female	35	White

	producer				
Sophie	Agency	Junior	Female	26	White
Sharice	Conferences	Entrepreneur	Female	45	Black
Lucy	Event producer	Entrepreneur	Female	38	Black
Nisha	Conferences	Senior management	Female	45	South Asian

Table 1: Interview participants

Interviews took place by phone due to restrictions on face-to-face interactions in place at the time due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We used a semi-structured interview guide to direct discussions around accessibility, diversity, and inclusion, but this remained flexible to enable further discussion of issues that arose in each interview. Interview topics covered participants' personal experiences of working in the MICE sector and their wider opinions of equality, diversity and inclusion in the industry. As interviewers, we did not know participants prior to interviews but we developed trust through sharing the purpose of the study and our commitment to not only understand issues of equality, diversity and inclusion, but to work to try and change them. Interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Transcripts were then thematically analyzed.

Following the six steps of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2012), we identified themes within the data, informed by the discussion of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion presented above.

Findings

We identified four key themes within the data: 1) understandings of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion issues within the MICE sector; 2) experiences of poor practice; 3) opportunities and challenges for future progress; and, 4) the (potential) impacts of Brexit and Covid-19.

What do accessibility, diversity and inclusion mean to those within the UK MICE sector?

There is growing recognition within the MICE sector that accessibility, diversity, and inclusion are important issues that need to be taken into account in event planning and operations, as well as in relation to work and employment. Finkel and Dashper (2020) note that, although the three concepts are interrelated, they are not the same and it is beneficial to think about each issue separately as well as how they link together. They argue that inclusivity is the ultimate goal within the events industry, and would mean achieving a situation where “all groups and individuals can play an active and meaningful role” (Finkel & Dashper, 2020, p.476). However, in order to achieve true inclusion, events need first to be accessible to all who want to partake. Jane, who holds a senior position within a membership organization, thought of accessibility largely in terms of physical access:

Accessibility means to me that everyone is physically able to access the event. In terms of having the necessary equipment for those who may need visual or hearing support, having the correct venue with the correct fittings to ensure that those who need access support can have this. (Jane)

Jane went on to identify how physical accessibility was an important factor in considering venues for events:

When picking venues, we do check the accessibility of all venues. It is fantastic to see that nearly all venues and meeting spaces in the city have taken into account inclusion and accessibility to support diversity, so that you hardly have to have it on your checklist anymore, as it is just a given. This is really positive and supportive of the industry and society. (Jane)

There is indeed a need to consider issues to do with physical accessibility and efforts to try and remove barriers to entry for those with a range of disabilities are extremely important, as discussed above. Peter, an entrepreneur, explained how he also has seen that venues are paying increased attention to (physical) accessibility issues, but that responsibility does not rest with venues alone:

I was highly impressed with XX Hotel following their recent refurbishment – how well equipped their facilities have become to meet the needs of the modern meetings industry. Their meeting rooms have been equipped with adjustable tables, screens, wireless connections to AV equipment and hearing loops, etc. But it does not stop here, it is also the responsibility of the organizers to ensure diversity and inclusion. (Peter)

He did, however, note that this was not yet universal, and many venues are still not considering accessibility properly:

Although I've seen some incredible improvements in the meetings industry over the past few years, it still stuns me that some events providers don't take into consideration the needs of accessibility during major multi-million pounds refurbishments. (Peter)

Accessibility is about more than providing physical access, and people may feel that an event or organization is inaccessible to them for a variety of reasons which may not always be obvious to event professionals (Walters, 2018). Therefore, diversity, in terms of who is involved with events - whether that be as speakers, delegates, organizers, or other roles - is important to try and ensure that a wide range of people feel welcome and able to participate (Finkel & Dashper, 2020).

Dianna, who holds a senior position within a membership organization as well as owning her own business, recognized the importance of diversity for attracting a wide range of people to work in the industry. She identified age as an important diversity issue and recognized the need for industry associations to innovate and incorporate diverse viewpoints in order to attract younger members:

We try to be as diverse as possible because we also realize that if you don't do that, you lose the next generation, because they don't want to be part of the old-fashioned associations anymore, right? They want to cherry pick. They've got a different way of learning, a different way of wanting to meet each other, so you have to be really aware of all diversity issues. (Dianna)

However, although there was broad consensus amongst our participants that diversity is important for the industry, some also recognized that, at the moment, the MICE sector in the UK is not very diverse in terms of employment. Sharice, who runs her own production company, stated:

The events industry is not very diverse. It's very white, very male, and as I've got more experience and become more senior, I've noticed this more. (Sharice).

Jessica, who holds a middle management position at a venue, explained this clearly:

I sometimes make a joke to friends in the industry who I know would not be offended by the joke, that everybody looks like me. I'm a white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes and if you go to any event in the industry, you'll find 50,000 of me there! There is some diversity, don't get me wrong, and I don't want to gloss over women of color, non-heterosexual people, homosexual people, people who are transgender, these people exist and are in the industry but I think we need to do more. (Jessica)

She went on to explain that she thought this was in part to do with the culture of the MICE industry, which she described as 'white girl' culture:

I can't think how to quite articulate it, we've moved away slightly from the air kissing on two cheeks but if I had to sum up the culture of the events industry in a gesture, that would be it! With a glass of prosecco in hand and an air kiss on each cheek and I think that probably doesn't appeal to everybody. Does that come down to class, gender, race, sexuality? I'm not sure. (Jessica)

As we discuss further below, this lack of diversity in the MICE industry and the broad culture of the sector can have exclusionary effects on those who feel they do not fit with the dominant 'type' of event professional, identified jokingly by Jessica.

Achieving a truly inclusive MICE sector in which everyone feels able to participate - whether as a delegate or worker - is a laudable goal. Jane identified inclusion as:

ensuring everyone is able to be involved in the event and that it doesn't exclude or deny anyone from being able to access it. In terms of my work and the meetings industry, I believe this means that when you put on an event it doesn't make anyone feel that because of their personal or work circumstances they can't be involved. Be that they don't feel they are intelligent enough or a high enough position at work or have care responsibilities so can't attend events at certain times or dates. (Jane)

Jessica took this further and argued that just removing barriers to entry is not enough and to be truly inclusive requires proactive effort on the part of everyone in the MICE industry:

Although I'm not being exclusionary, inclusivity isn't just about not actively excluding people, you can't just go "yeah but we don't have a sign on the door saying no black people, therefore we're inclusive". No, you're not. Just because you're not actively being racist does not make you inclusive. Inclusion needs to be active, not passive. (Jessica)

There was thus broad understanding amongst our participants of the core issues to do with accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in the MICE sector, as well as some awareness of the many challenges to overcoming barriers to their achievement.

Experiences of poor practice

Most of our participants had experience of poor practice in relation to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion within the UK MICE industry. For many, this was based on personal experience of feeling marginalized or disadvantaged on account of who they are. Diversity and inclusion are complex issues and different axes of discrimination can intersect within the experiences of any individual (see Finkel & Dashper, 2020). Sarah, a senior manager in the conferencing sector, spoke about her increasing feelings of marginalization in relation to being a middle aged woman in an industry dominated largely by men and by youth. Sarah had left a senior position in a large organization as she felt that she was being overlooked and excluded in workplace discussions and decision-making:

Women at that age, at my age, there's so many people I know of, my peers, that are doing what I did and are leaving roles because they feel that they're being looked over or they're feeling invisible... because I do honestly think it gets harder as you get older, particularly if you've got family, it does not get any easier... I really felt it at the organization where I was before, you know, there was this sort of, you started to become a little bit invisible... the years between 40 and 50 are the most crucial in your career in terms of your earning potential, but I think there is still an ageism

problem, well particularly in hospitality, also in events, and I think that women are juggling so much at that stage, and you feel a bit invisible. (Sarah)

Several of our female participants reported experiencing marginalization on account of gender, and in particular through sexual harassment in the MICE sector. Women are not a minority in the meetings industry, but this does not mean that they are fully included at all levels, as discussed above. Senior positions, particularly at board level, remain disproportionately dominated by men and women can feel excluded by a range of practices which may position them on the outside of dominant groups and ways of working (Dashper, 2018; 2020). Sexual harassment is a form of workplace discrimination that has long worked to marginalize women (Hunt et al., 2010). Nicola, an entrepreneur and business owner, explained some of her experiences:

I've had male clients crack onto me during meetings, sales pitches, you name it. I was in a meeting not that long ago actually, we were seeking investment for the business, and when I asked if there were any questions, one of the panel members asked me if I wanted to go for dinner. I doubt he'd have done that with a man. (Nicola)

Nicola explained how she did not think this man believed he was harassing her here, but that his question had undermined her professionalism and left her feeling as if she was not being taken seriously as a professional businessperson.

For Sophie, who is in a junior position at an events agency, the combination of her age and gender can sometimes place her in a vulnerable position in relation to senior male figures:

It's so awkward. The men I'm dealing with [at international conferences and trade shows] either say something like 'I've got a daughter your age' and act all paternal, which is pretty patronizing, or try it on with me. Sometimes both. (Sophie).

The onus is then on women to brush this off and try and ensure they remain professional in order to continue with business. That these occurrences have taken place in formal business settings, often in front of others, illustrates that some men do not see it as problematic to treat (usually younger) women in sexualized ways in the MICE workplace. Axes of power and discrimination, such as age and gender, do not operate in isolation and Sophie's experiences illustrate the importance of intersectionality in understanding lived experiences, an area that warrants further investigation in critical event studies, as Platt and Finkel (2018) previously noted.

Maddie, who works in middle management at a venue, had not experienced sexual harassment during her career, but did report feeling that she was not taken seriously as a young woman, and was frequently spoken over or ignored. As she gained in confidence, she responded to such behavior by actively asserting her presence:

Being a woman in business is tricky and being in a venue like I'm in, I witness it every day. I was on a management course last Friday and there were 45 men in the room and 3 women, and the women sat at the back, so I deliberately sat right in the middle, just to be there and be present. (Maddie).

Gender was an important issue in relation to diversity, accessibility, and inclusion for several of our female participants, as Dashper (2018, 2019, 2020) has previously identified in relation to the events and hospitality sectors in the UK.

Some participants also identified ‘race’ as a key issue and means through which exclusion can occur, although this is a topic not previously addressed in the events literature (see Fletcher and Hylton, 2018). Lucy, an entrepreneur, had experienced discrimination herself and saw this as part of a wider lack of awareness and engagement with issues of ‘race’ and inequality in the UK MICE sector:

I have experienced a lot of what can be described as systemic racism and bias, it's very much behavioral, and also I'd say access to certain resources and being included in certain networks. We experience this now, even when there has been wider exposure to issues of diversity. When the Black Lives Matter protests broke, I barely saw anything in the industry, I thought my LinkedIn feed was broken, no one was commenting on it at all. (Lucy)

Lucy identified an apparent discomfort in discussing issues to do with ‘race’ and racism in the sector, even in the context of global protests and demonstrations in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. Lucy identified this discomfort and unwillingness to address ‘race’ and racism as ‘white fragility’, as discussed by numerous scholars including DiAngelo (2018) and Eddo-Lodge (2018). This reflects what Jessica identified above as the dominant ‘white girl’ culture of the UK meetings industry. Jessica, who accepted she is the quintessential representative of this ‘white girl’ culture, went on to explain how she believed

black women were at risk of exclusion by virtue of their underrepresentation and apparent difference to this norm:

There is almost like a subculture in events which tends to be a lot of black women who I think have probably maybe felt excluded by the industry or pushed out, so they've kind of got their subsection of the industry where, I don't know, they might have quite a small business where it's events that do appeal to people from the black community, for example.

Not only does this lead to black women feeling excluded from the wider industry, but can also exacerbate differences and even lead to active discrimination:

I think the rest of the events industry would see that as not legitimate, or not a real event. Like if you phone up any venue and say you want to do a reggae brunch, you can almost hear them rolling their eyes... it's almost like the people who are organizing the reggae brunches, because they're not properly in the industry, they kind of don't know how to navigate it so well because they probably have been a bit pushed out of the industry. So, when they're trying to navigate it, they're doing it really clumsily and that's getting people's backs up, it's making people nervous. Most of them don't want to host those events. Those people are not getting properly into the industry and they're having to navigate the outskirts of it where it's venues that are just desperate for money, so they will take your reggae brunch and don't really care that you leave the kitchens in an absolute state afterwards. And then it kind of perpetuates that certain types of events and certain people who run those types of

events are pushed to the outskirts and seen as lesser, possibly that's going on.

(Jessica)

Jessica's own prejudices are visible in her comments here, which may reflect a view held by some others in the industry. She does, however, highlight how certain people - black women, in this case - can become excluded from the sector, pushing them to the margins and thereby increasing their exclusion as they do not have the contacts and networks necessary to flourish, positioning them as 'space invaders' (Puwar, 2004) in the dominant white culture of the industry. In such ways, the meetings industry is not accessible for people in this position.

This was supported by Sherise, who also identified the marginalization of black people within the 'formal' industry, noting that although many black and Asian people do run events, they are rarely part of the core industry and are instead pushed to the sidelines:

I've met lots of people who are unofficial event managers, they are doing it, but they're just not in the official sector, they're doing wedding planning, or whatever, but they are on the outskirts. And it's only a small few who go off and get qualifications and actually progress themselves. So they are there, they're just not in the actual formal industry, I think. (Sherise)

Colleen, who occupies a junior position in the exhibition sector, had experienced some of this marginalization herself:

I don't really see anything happening with race diversity in the exhibition industry, or the wider events industry, it's very white, and that was something that used to bother

me a lot and it stopped me from wanting to go to certain events, like award shows and things, so I just stopped after a while because I just felt uncomfortable ... I don't really go to big industry events. I'm probably going to be the one black person there, or maybe the one on my table and it just feels a bit uncomfortable sometimes.

(Colleen).

For Colleen, the lack of racial diversity she saw in the industry contributed to her feelings of marginalization and exclusion, and she responded by withdrawing from key activities, such as award shows. Such industry events are often important for networking and career progression, and so their inaccessibility in the eyes of people who feel like Colleen does about these situations can heighten their exclusion.

Lucy had also experienced direct discrimination and marginalization throughout her career:

When we do prospecting, for example, we'll do a lot on the phone and by email and it's all fine at that stage but what will happen is when they meet me in person they're surprised. I will go to places for a meeting and it will be assumed by even the receptionist that I'm a cleaner or a waitress or I'm just loitering in the lobby, generally speaking, and sometimes the person that I'm there to meet will walk past me several times, because they just don't realize I could be the person they're there to meet. And for that reason, if it's outward facing work, I do hire white people, because then I get over that hurdle really quickly.

Racist assumptions by clients and others in the MICE sector meant that Lucy was often overlooked, or assumed to be incompetent, marginalizing her as a black woman in the 'white girl culture' of the events industry. Having experienced such discrimination, she now adapts

her practices to circumvent biased opinions, often by employing white people to act as the outward face of the company in order to try and avoid losing business:

I do a lot of podcasts, a lot of demo videos, but I won't put my face in it, it's just my voice, essentially. That way hopefully my face doesn't put them off. I'm being very blunt here. We're [her company] great at what we do, we have the experience, the resources, but I'm very aware that with me as the face of it, we could miss out on opportunities. I've definitely lost business this way, definitely.

Lucy is proactive and vocal in the MICE sector about diversity and equality issues, but has experienced the realities of prejudice and racism. She recognized the real threats posed to her company:

And even though I do work to support diversity and inclusion, as I try and grow the business to the next stage, it is on my mind, and that's why I hire white people... Especially the sales team, and the business development teams, I use white people to do the outreach even if I've created the content, even if I've steered the strategy with them, I get them to do the outreach work with their peers and their colleagues.

As people from marginalized groups have long experienced (see Heilman, 2001), Lucy described having to prove herself as more competent than white competitors if she was to hope to be taken seriously and attract business:

I think once you've got them over the line it doesn't matter so much, but I feel that if I'm doing the outreach work, I have to put a lot of extra effort in to build their trust, and I know full well that they have used mediocre suppliers before, and we are much better, but it doesn't matter because the perception is that we are going to be incompetent so we always have to go over and beyond.

There is clearly a lack of diversity in the UK events industry in terms of ‘race’ and ethnicity, although to date there has been no empirical research on this issue. The dominant ‘white girl’ culture identified by Jessica works to exclude black and minoritized ethnic professionals, who are presumed to be unprofessional and incompetent. The experiences of Lucy, Sherise and Colleen within this study illustrate that ‘race’ and racism are integral to their professional lives within the sector, but this is rarely recognized or acknowledged within the dominant culture. Fletcher and Hylton (2018: 168) argue that “ideas of ‘race’, ethnicity and their intersections, and whiteness are neither currently addressed nor understood in the events literature”. There is thus urgent need for more empirical research exploring ‘race’ and ethnicity within the UK MICE sector to contribute to greater understanding which can then inform practice to first acknowledge and then address the ways in which the events industry is structured by ‘race’ and ethnicity, to the detriment of black and minoritized ethnic groups and individuals.

Barriers and opportunities for progress

Our findings suggest that accessibility, diversity, and inclusion are factors that are considered and taken into account within the UK meetings industry, at least to some extent. However, the many stories of marginalization we heard illustrate that there is still a long way to go before the sector can claim to be truly inclusive.

Dianna acknowledged the difficulties of trying to address issues to do with diversity and inclusion, identifying some of the reasons that some people may be reluctant to recognize and try and address these issues:

There's a fear of being different, fear of other people being different and not knowing how to cope. People in general do not like change, they do not want to be taken out of their comfortable mode, and they can be quite lazy as well. For these reasons it can be quite hard work to make events and organizing teams more accepting and inclusive. And they are often scared as they do not want to fail, they don't want to take the risk of not being good enough and being judged. We need preparation of staff and participants and what they can expect from the event, that's crucial for success.

(Dianna)

Nisha suggested that one barrier to greater diversity is to do with lack of understanding within some communities that events is a 'real' career:

A lot of Asians have this fixed mindset that their children have to be a doctor or a lawyer or a dentist, that kind of profession, with status. Generally, in the Asian community it is all about that status, and being a suitable partner to your husband or wife really. And I don't think parents really understand the creative industry, I think parents perhaps don't understand what events is, they just think oh it's weddings, they don't understand it and they don't see it as a profession. (Nisha)

There is thus work to be done to communicate to parents, teachers and others, particularly in minority communities, that the MICE sector provides numerous viable opportunities that can lead to successful careers. Dashper et al. (2020) discuss the ways in which lack of prior knowledge and experience of events management as an academic subject and potential career can affect potential students' choice of degree and university. Our findings here suggest that

this lack of wider knowledge may be particularly problematic for minority groups, contributing to ongoing lack of diversity in the MICE industry.

Making the MICE sector truly accessible and diverse, and thus working towards real inclusivity, is undoubtedly challenging, as there are so many issues to be considered. It is then perhaps unsurprising that some professionals tend to think about diversity and accessibility in terms of small, more achievable things like dietary requirements, as Jane explained:

I think venues and meeting spaces are becoming more aware of the variety of life choices and dietaries which are now present and more considerate of these. They tend to try and have a choice which would suit everyone to minimize risk of last minute issues. For example, not just having breakfast rolls (egg and bacon) but also fruit to provide a vegan, gluten free and healthy option. (Jane)

These kinds of issues are important and need to be considered by meetings professionals; however, they do not begin to tackle some of the more deep-rooted and complicated diversity issues related to factors like gender, age, and ‘race’ discussed in the previous section. It is much easier to provide a range of gluten-free breakfast options than to address racism, for example.

That said, several of our participants were taking individual actions to try and address lack of diversity and accessibility when they encountered it in the industry. For example, issues persist in the MICE sector with lack of diversity in terms of people invited to speak at events and join panel discussions. Such ‘expert spots’ often remain dominated by white men. There

is a move within the sector to call out such lack of diversity, but this often remains dependent on individuals to speak out, something Mark, an entrepreneur and professional speaker, tries to do:

I'm still that guy who says I won't do a panel talk unless there's a woman on the panel. I refuse to host an event unless I can see a diverse range of ethnicities and genders. I just did one in London for a new platform, and there was no woman on the panel, so I said, "I'm really sorry, but unless you can find someone in the next hour I will not do this event". We ended up getting an incredible woman who was just a bit nervous because she didn't think her English was good enough, which is why she didn't stand up when we asked originally. I think it's about putting the onus on event planners, on panel creators. I think now we just need to continue the fight. (Mark)

Jessica also tries to support individuals who might otherwise be marginalized and overlooked within the industry:

So if I'm asked to speak on a panel I will try to always recommend someone whose voice I think should be heard and sometimes I will try to do a bit of positive discrimination. We have a girl in our marketing team who is black and is fantastic at her job, if I thought she was crap I wouldn't be recommending her, but I will sometimes recommend her to talk on panels. I don't know if she'd be great on a panel but I always tell people that she'd be absolutely phenomenal, and she is good at her job, but she's a young black woman and I think if I can give her a leg up at least I've done a little bit for diversity. (Jessica)

Such individualized actions may not radically alter the culture of the sector and may only have limited effects on improving diversity and inclusion but are still important in trying to broaden accessibility and include more people and share opportunities. Maddie also tries to act in her professional life to ensure diversity issues are considered, although she recognizes that not everyone in the sector shares her awareness:

And of course the men are fantastic that we work with but they are in, you know, that sort of snowball effect and recruiting people who look like them and work like them, and so I'm just surrounded constantly by highly educated middle aged white men and it's just about trying to change that. So I'm working with the venue on different diversity projects that I'm helping them do and I'm looking at what else we can be doing to become an accessible organization. So I personally carry that ethos but not everybody else does, obviously, so it's trying to do my bit where I can and help put women on the map really. (Maddie)

There is always risk of backlash to diversity efforts from those in dominant groups who may feel threatened by such actions (Dashper, 2019). Peter worried that, in a desire to address issues of diversity and accessibility, it is possible to go too far and end up excluding others unintentionally:

I think in our efforts to ensure accessibility, diversity and inclusion, we've sometimes gone a step too far, where we've now included some that have previously been excluded, while we're beginning to exclude others. I don't think there's anyone out there that gets the balance quite right yet to be honest. (Peter)

It is indeed challenging to work towards greater accessibility, diversity, and inclusion without seeming to marginalize those already in positions of power, but the experiences shared by many of our participants highlight the need for direct action to tackle ongoing inequality.

The (potential) impacts of Brexit and Covid-19.

Factors beyond the MICE industry can affect ability and desire to focus on complex issues to do with accessibility, diversity and inclusion. Interviews for this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in 2020, when the UK was also going through the complicated process of Brexit. The pandemic was having profound effects on the MICE industry as events were cancelled, staff furloughed and made redundant, and uncertainty prevailed. In such an environment, there is danger that things to do with accessibility, diversity, and inclusion are considered less of a priority and slip down the agenda. However, as evidence from across various sections of society is already illustrating, the Covid-19 pandemic is accentuating inequality (Elliot Major & Machin, 2020). Our participants were conscious of this and how the pandemic was drawing attention to issues often less visible within the sector, such as inequality in relation to financial position and security, as Jessica explained:

I think going through this epidemic now where people are worried about their salaries and things like that and with furlough coming in, I just think it goes to show that there might be some people out there who have been able to put enough away in savings, or who might have wealthy families or some inheritance or something to rely on, but I think this shows that that is not the case for most people. (Jessica).

Peter acknowledged the impacts that the pandemic are and would have on the meetings industry, but also recognized potential for improving accessibility in the ‘new normal’ brought about by the pandemic:

I think it is already very clear that COVID-19 has a monumental effect on the meetings industry, impacting accessibility, diversity and inclusion. In my opinion, it is challenging to those having no access to the internet, however, otherwise it is proving to be a lot more accessible, diverse and inclusive than ever before with the online resources and technology we've got available to us now. Some are saying that following COVID-19 the events - and especially the meetings and training industry - will change drastically as we learn to take advantage of the technological advances during these challenging times. All of a sudden, we all are realizing that in the day and age of the service industry, most work, meetings and training can be done remotely, posing a true advantage to accessibility, diversity and inclusion. (Peter)

Jane also recognized opportunity that might come about as a result of the crisis and could help with achieving greater accessibility:

We have had to move all our meetings online and made them digital. This is something we had never done before so has had its challenges as we're having to start from scratch and learn everything as we go along but it's also presented a great opportunity to be able to make our meetings and work going forward more digital, which will allow us to increase our inclusivity to those who may not be able to be physically present, and increase our flexibility. However, on a flipside, not everyone may have full access to online platforms, and this can also be excluding. We are

taking the approach that for these individuals to be able to effectively work from home, their employer should be supplying them with what they need to do this. (Jane)

There will undoubtedly be new opportunities that result from the crisis, and switching to more digital formats will enable some to be more involved whilst excluding others. However, with the prolonged period of uncertainty that the crisis will bring, combined with further uncertainty and turmoil related to Brexit, the UK MICE sector is likely to be facing a very challenging future that will impact on different people in a variety of ways, as Jessica pointed out:

I think even if we're all back at work from the end of June, let's say, everything reopens, let's say the country goes back to normal, I don't think we're all going to be skipping back into our offices, throwing open our trays of canapes and cracking on as normal. We need to accept that the economy has taken a huge hit. It's been taking a hit for years leading up to coronavirus because of Brexit, which we've all sort of forgotten about because corona is dominating our newsfeeds at the moment, but spending wasn't great at the start of the year, and there was a real trend of this across the industry, it was not just for us, and now when people come back in, lots and lots of businesses have taken big hits, people personally have taken big financial hits. I think there is going to be this absolute joy of being able to see each other again and I think there will be a sort of surge of people wanting meetings and conferences and Christmas parties, don't we all just want to go to a massive Christmas party?! But I think at first, we're going to see nervousness about big group gatherings ...

Jessica addressed the need for the sector to work together and support those in difficult circumstances, which will be essential for trying to ensure that accessibility, diversity, and inclusion remain priorities for the UK MICE industry as it emerges from crises and shapes itself for the post-pandemic, post-Brexit world:

I think it's really important that we recognize it because I think something that we fail to do as an industry is to recognize when things aren't ok or when they're not working or they're not going well. I think we like to have this, "oh but we're just so fabulous and resilient and creative! We'll get through anything!" And sometimes we need to take a step back and go, do you know what, actually we are a nice-to-have, we're not an essential. And this is going to be hard. And people don't have a lot of money and let's not start bashing each other on delegate wranglers and whatever. Let's just take stock of what's actually happening and support each other through this turbulent time. (Jessica)

It is thus apparent from our findings that the UK MICE sector faces numerous challenges in relation to working towards greater accessibility, diversity and inclusion, ranging from lack of understanding and discomfort talking about 'difficult' issues, to the disruptive effects of wider crises related to Brexit and Covid-19. What is also clear, however, is that the sector needs to act, as even within our small sample there were numerous examples of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion on the basis of a range of factors including gender, age and 'race'. In the final section we discuss the wider conclusions to be drawn from this exploratory study.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have shown that professionals in the UK MICE industry consider issues to do with accessibility, diversity, and inclusion to be important, and they try to take them into account in terms of event planning, programming, and design. We have identified areas of good practice, such as ensuring venues are accessible for delegates with varying needs, as well as individual professionals demanding diversity of representation on panels at meetings and conferences. However, most of our participants also experienced some degree of marginalization themselves in relation to factors such as age, gender, and 'race', or witnessed this in relation to others. This indicates concrete implications of existing challenges in the UK meetings industry and how this original research contributes to an emerging body of critical work identifying exclusionary practices and amplifying narratives surrounding marginalization. Based on our evaluation of practitioner perspectives, it is thus apparent that there is a long way to go to achieve proper accessibility and diversity that is necessary if the UK MICE industry is to become inclusive and welcoming for everyone.

The current crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic is causing serious challenges for all sectors, and there is a sense of urgency for rapid responses to ensure that businesses survive and to reduce the number of people who lose their jobs. As we are all currently in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unknown what it means for practices going forward; however, such a crisis will inevitably inspire innovation in many ways. It is apparent that the MICE sector is responding positively to the need for increased flexibility and digitalization which may reshape the future of meetings for years to come. Yet, there is also a real risk that the necessity for quick action may result in outcomes that mean diversity and accessibility take a backseat in discussions about the future of the industry. For example, although online

meetings may provide greater access for some with caring responsibilities or certain disabilities, it also can cause inadvertent exclusion for those who are technology poor and, thus, increase the digital divide (Porter & Raeburn, 2020). The combination of the Covid-19 crisis and Brexit suggests a turbulent future for the UK MICE industry, and there is risk that in such an environment difficult conversations and actions to address inequality and discrimination get pushed aside. Our discussion in this paper illustrates that accessibility and diversity are extremely complicated issues which will not be addressed quickly, but also that they are integral to ensuring that the MICE industry develops truly inclusive responses to support all attendees and employees. There is thus a need to retain focus on long-term strategies and to embrace the current crisis as an opportunity to rethink the MICE workplace and associated practices to become more accessible, diverse, and inclusive.

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