
Editorial: Fostering belonging for marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable people through event design

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Introduction

Diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) “remains a marginal issue in event management journals, often confined to special issues” (Calver *et al.*, 2025, p. 1). This is another special collection dedicated to topics related to DEI. We commenced this issue with the aim of moving the conversation from fostering inclusion towards fostering belonging through event space and design. This is because of the growing literature that highlights that DEI practices by themselves can be ineffective in fostering engagement from marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups (Carr *et al.*, 2019; Filstad *et al.*, 2019). Davis (2021), for example, notes that DEI initiatives can create “more harm and trauma for the very group they are aimed to protect” because they are often developed to create an illusion of inclusion. Indeed, as DEI has gained prominence in the social sphere, more organisations and institutions have sought to implement DEI practices – sometimes without understanding the nuances required and inadvertently causing more harm and further segregating marginalised and/or vulnerable groups. Relatedly, DEI practices tend to focus on initiatives that can be implemented within a space as opposed to how people from marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups feel within a space. Belonging captures how the individual feels within an environment (Allen *et al.*, 2021) and provides a stringent perspective of the efficacy of DEI initiatives. Indeed, while DEI practices can contribute to belonging, without careful and meaningful implementation, they may not always enable it.

Events as spaces of recreation and socialisation play a significant role at bringing people from disparate and potentially distanced groups together (Walters and Jepson, 2019). In doing so, they can contribute to community cohesion and individual wellbeing. However, events as artifacts of society are shaped by social norms and hierarchies, and in turn can reinforce them. Ong *et al.* (2021), for instance, highlight how community events are designed by people who typically are the dominant majority in society and consequently reproduce social norms and hierarchies. Similarly, Lewis *et al.* (2025) focusing on the LGBTQ+ communities argued that even within minoritised groups, social hierarchies subconsciously influenced how event spaces are designed. These studies highlight that events as spaces can be consciously or subconsciously curated to reinforce hierarchies which can limit participation from diverse and marginalised groups. This is because how the event space and experience are designed can influence who is permitted to participate and how they are permitted to participate (Robertson *et al.*, 2018).

This collection

“Although there is no one universally agreed definition of what constitutes event design” (Antchak and Ramsbottom (2019, p. 22), when we invited papers for this special issue, we expected submissions to address some of the usual elements of event design, such as services, entertainment, settings and programmes. However, the submissions exceeded our expectations by exploring far broader DEI territory. Authors viewed event design by concentrating on the “why” and “how” of the event experiences, rather than limiting it to the logistical “what” and “when” of event planning.



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This collection brings together five papers that examine event design regarding marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups. The papers cover diverse types of events including academic conferences (Walters and Higgins-Desbiolles, 2025), music festivals (Kinnunen and Honkanen, 2025), carnivals (Monterrubio and Dashper, 2025), performing arts festivals (Lee and Jenifer, 2025), and online cultural and heritage events (Kerr et al., 2025). These papers also consider a range of marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable identities including gender minorities (Kinnunen and Honkanen, 2025), LGBTQ + people (Monterrubio and Dashper, 2025), people with disabilities (Lee and Jenifer, 2025) and people living with dementia (Kerr et al., 2025).

In this editorial, we highlight the common themes emerging from the papers in this collection. We put forward a framework of generic considerations that can be applied to event design acknowledging the diverse lived experiences of marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable people. Accordingly, we do not seek to summarise the studies contained in this section but point the reader to the findings and contributions made by these studies.

Towards fostering belonging through event design

The papers in this section indicate that to foster belonging, event organisers need to consider both the design of the event as well as the event environment. Design factors represent the tangible aspects of the event considering the venue and programming and are within the direct control of the event organiser. On the other hand, the event environment represents the social norms, interactions and experience while at the event and dictates the event experience. While the event organiser has less of a direct influence on the environment, they can use the event design to inform the social environment at the event. Figure 1 illustrates a framework based on the themes relative to the event design and the environment. We discuss these two components below citing papers from this collection to direct the reader to the contributions these papers make. At the core of the framework is the individual from marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups (as well as their family and carers) and events need to focus on making them seen and valued.

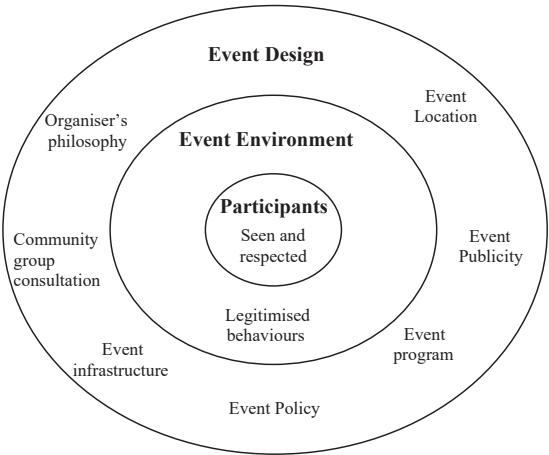


Figure 1. Concentric considerations in inclusive research

Event design

The event design includes the elements over which the event organisers have the strongest direct influence. The concepts relevant to the design of the event are now presented.

Organiser's philosophy: Organiser's perspectives on DEI and how they engaged and considered evolving social norms through the event's design informed perceptions of inclusion and belonging. Herein, events that reproduced social hierarchies through their design, premised on the traditional or conservative perspectives were seen as being exclusionary. [Monterrubio and Dashper \(2025\)](#), for instance, discuss this in the context of carnival in Mexico highlighting that women were now able to "engage more fully in the cultural traditions of the carnival" which was previously only open to men. Indeed, how events engage with evolving cultural norms around DEI signals how progressive they are, and consequently the experiences attendees can expect.

Community group consultation: Community groups were seen to be a valuable source of information when designing events to be socially inclusive. Engaging with community groups from marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable populations helped consider the nuances of that group and organise and execute events that reflected those nuances ([Monterrubio and Dashper, 2025](#)). Such consultation could take the form of partnerships or formal consultation committees ([Lee and Jenifer, 2025](#)) and demonstrated that organisers have a genuine intention of including them throughout the process as opposed to just at the end as event attendees.

Event facilities: Infrastructure represents the tangible part of the event including facilities like gender neutral toilets and accessibility features. [Kinnunen and Honkanen \(2025\)](#) highlight how the notion of access is typically considered "a barrier for persons with disabilities" but can also extend to providing gender-neutral toilets making the event accessible for gender minorities. In a performing arts festival context, [Lee and Jenifer \(2025\)](#) found that wheelchair access, hearing loops, quiet rooms and sensory packs, while available at some events were not provided at all – despite organisers acknowledging the importance of inclusion. Infrastructure dictates who can physically participate in the event experience, and organisers therefore need to consider who their attendees are likely to be and therefore the infrastructure that would be required.

Event policy: Having a policy that empowered marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable audiences was seen as essential towards creating an event environment that was inclusive. Such policies act as a physical artifact of the values of the event and can dictate behaviours that are considered transgressive with consequences that would ensue. However, it was not only important to have policies but to make sure that those policies were enacted when relevant to ensure marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable audiences felt safe. Policies needed to be specific and shared with event attendees to ensure they had an influence on the event environment ([Lee and Jenifer, 2025](#)). Doing so contributed to the reputation of the event and was important because "self-expression and identity-building are essential parts of empowerment, and they are only possible in a safe environment" ([Kinnunen and Honkanen, 2025](#)). Policy can dictate language guidelines that will be used in the event and in publicity material related to the event. For instance, [Kerr et al. \(2025\)](#), highlight the difference between an event marketed as "dementia friendly" versus one that was labelled as "for people affected by dementia" and how such labelling could play a role in who is attracted to attend the event.

Event program: How the event facilitated representation from minority groups was considered to influence the sense of belonging it enabled. Herein, [Walters and Higgins-Desbiolles \(2025\)](#) point out that academic conferences increasingly highlighted DEI groups in the context of "the subject of the research rather than to attendees who themselves may identify with one of more of these identities". They highlight that diversity at such events can be easily incorporated into how keynote speakers are selected. Indeed, having keynotes from diverse groups can also act as a visual sign of inclusion communicating who is permitted and celebrated within that space. Similarly, in a performing arts context, participations from artists with a disability "challenged stereotypical myths and encouraged viewers to reconsider their

attitudes towards” people with a disability (Lee and Jenifer, 2025). In this regard “tailoring themes and content to the audiences’ needs” was also essential to ensure diverse groups can meaningfully participate and benefit from that experience (Kerr et al., 2025).

Event publicity: This included how the event was advertised as well as the information that organisers provided as part of the event’s promotion. Here, having diverse identities represented on promotional materials helped challenge perceptions of normativity (Walters and Higgins-Desbiolles, 2025). Relatedly, publicising information about accessibility was also seen as important to enable attendance from people who may have a disability (Lee and Jenifer, 2025). Such cues in publicity materials helped signal the kind of experience attendees from marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups could experience.

Event location: Where the event is held also informs who can attend the event. In the context of academic conferences Walters and Higgins-Desbiolles (2025) argue that location “impacts on accessibility”. To illustrate this, they provide an example of a conference that stated ‘immigrant mobilities’ as a theme, and had listed countries from which nationals did not need a visa to attend the conference, but failed to consider or support those from other countries. Considerations about mobilities in this context can also have an influence on the registration process for the event, in that abstract submission deadlines would need to consider the length of time it may take some attendees to secure a visa to travel. In this regard, online events could contribute to more inclusive participation – particularly from people who may not be able to travel or afford the costs associated with a physical conference. However, Kerr et al. (2025), considering people with dementia and online cultural and heritage events, highlight that online events assume a level of technological knowledge and skill that participants may not have, creating a barrier to their participation. This suggests that a nuanced understanding of the audience is required to ensure diverse attendees can participate and are engaged with the event.

Event environment

The event environment reflected the social norms and behaviours permitted within the event that influences the event experience. Herein, behaviours that are permissible and legitimised within the event environment informed who was permitted within that space. Monterrubio and Dashper (2025) point out “transgressive behaviours can become opportunities for reinforcing traditional power structures”. How attendees themselves treated people influenced if marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable audiences felt like they were an equal part of the event community (Kinnunen and Honkanen, 2025). Herein, other attendees and the event organiser played a role by setting the norms for what behaviours are accepted and legitimised by calling out exclusionary behaviours or developing and enacting policies to prohibit them. Accordingly, the event environment was informed by elements related to the event’s design, and in turn influenced the experience the individual had at the event.

Concluding comments

Drawing from the insights presented in this collection, we propose that event design for DEI communities represents the intentional and inclusive orchestration of event elements that centres equity, amplifies diverse voices and creates accessible, culturally responsive experiences that foster belonging and meaningful participation for all attendees. The framework in Figure 1 highlights some of the common themes emerging across the papers we received. The framework positions belonging within an event context as a function of if participants from marginalised and/or potential vulnerable groups feel seen and valued within the event space. To do so, the framework argues the event environment has a strong effect on the individual given it comprises of the behaviours that the individual would experience during the event. This environment, however, can be informed by event design elements that are directly within the control of the event organisers.

The papers in this collection tended to be qualitative in nature, and there is a role for quantitative studies to measure the importance of inclusive design principles on the participant's sense of belonging at events. Studies could examine how inclusive design influence perceptions of belonging and the effect of different design elements on the belonging participants from marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups experience. Given the diverse range of marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups, we hope this collection instigates further scholarship to help challenge how events are currently designed.

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