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Curating equality, diversity and inclusion: event organisers as ethical and political agents in Mexico's community carnivals

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Abstract

Purpose – Mexico has a rich programme of community carnivals that both perpetuate and offer opportunities to subvert existing power structures and social relations. Carnival organisers have a key role to play in either reinforcing or challenging existing social norms and creating spaces of inclusion or exclusion. This study aims to explore the role of organisers as curators of the symbolic and structural conditions of inclusion and exclusion at these contested events.

Design/methodology/approach – An ethnographic approach was adopted to investigate the ways in which carnivals in the eastern region of the State of Mexico become spaces of inclusion and exclusion. Observations were conducted at 19 carnivals. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 carnival organisers.

Findings – Carnival organisers play a key role in shaping the extent to which these festivals are welcoming and inclusive for different groups. Organisers are in positions of power in terms of decision-making, programming and deciding who can participate and in what ways, positioned between local traditions and restrictive social norms and the subversive and transformative potential of carnival.

Originality/value – The study illustrates the important role organisers can play in supporting diversity and ensuring carnivals and festivals are inclusive spaces.

Keywords Carnival, Festival, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, Mexico, Organisers

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Small-scale events and festivals have the capacity to transform, either temporarily or permanently, the social and cultural structures of the communities that host them. Among these, carnivals occupy a distinctive position as ritualised forms of symbolic inversion (Bakhtin, 2009) that can simultaneously perpetuate and challenge prevailing structures of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Far from being mere entertainment, carnivals function as spaces where social order may be destabilised, reproduced or reinforced (Monterrubio and Dashper, 2025).

Within this dynamic, organisers play a particularly significant role. Their direct participation in the planning, design and implementation of carnival activities, tied with their structurally privileged position (Laing and Mair, 2015), grants them substantial power to shape the extent to which EDI principles are either embraced or obstructed in these events. However, despite the relevance of organisers as agents of social influence, their role in promoting or constraining equality and diversity has been largely ignored, especially in Latin America, a region historically marked by both social inequality and exclusion (Buvinic, 2004)

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and a growing number of festivals and events (Calderón-Acero, 2020; Santos-Díaz and López Guevara, 2022).

This research addresses this gap by focusing on the role of organisers in shaping EDI in carnivals in the eastern part of the State of Mexico. This area, situated in one of the country's most socio-culturally complex regions –characterised by persistent vulnerability, entrenched inequality, social exclusion, and polarisation (Bayón, 2008)– hosts a rich diversity of carnivals while simultaneously reproducing deep-rooted asymmetries and multiple forms of marginalisation. Analysing organisers' perspectives on EDI in this context is valuable, since specific sociocultural contexts strongly shape how diversity and inclusion are conceptualised, negotiated and endorsed. Building on ethnographic fieldwork, the study draws on interviews with 14 carnival organisers, examining how they perceive and enact inclusion (or exclusion) of women, LGBTQ + participants, people with disabilities, children, and older people in the organisation and performance of local carnivals.

In this vein, this article makes two central contributions. First, it advances the theoretical development of studies on EDI in event management by foregrounding the perspectives and practices of organisers, a stakeholder largely ignored both within the global and the Latin American literature. Second, it contributes to the regional knowledge of event management in Latin America, where studies on tourism, events and inclusion are considerably scant (Córdoba Andrade *et al.*, 2025) and carnival studies have tended to privilege symbolic, performative and heritage dimensions (Azor, 2006; Mariano and Endere, 2017; Martos, 2001) while neglecting festivals and events as potential drivers of social change.

Equality, diversity and inclusion in events, festivals and carnivals

Considering that event and festival management has evolved from a merely logistical and organisational practice into a paradigm that recognises its potential for profound social transformation (Finkel *et al*., 2019), the notions of EDI offer a critical ethical and political framework for analysing how community events engage with social difference and belonging. There are many different EDI-related phrases used in policy, practice and academic research, including "equality, diversity and inclusion" (EDI), "diversity, equality and inclusion" (DEI), "diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging", and "equity, diversity, inclusion and decolonization". The core concepts of equality, equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, justice, and others, are distinct if overlapping ideas that are "used to engage with problematic social situations marginalized groups face" (Wolbring and Nguyen, 2023, p. 170). Phrases that bring the concepts together, such as EDI or DEI, are increasingly used for policy frameworks as it is recognised that any individual concept has limitations in trying to address complex social problems of marginalisation and exclusion (Wolbring and Lillywhite, 2021). In this paper, we use "EDI" as a broad umbrella term to cover these different concepts brought together to support policy and practice aimed at addressing marginalisation of groups and individuals.

Equality is a poorly defined but widely used political ideal focused broadly on the idea of treating people as equals (Dworkin, 2018; Turner, 2020). The related concept of equity involves acknowledging that the actions required to achieve fairness and to enable people to be considered and treated as equals cannot be uniform, as individuals face different structural and systemic barriers, as well as limited opportunities, derived from their membership in one or more social groups; in other words, it refers to justice in access, participation, and benefits, addressing structural power asymmetries and the need to redress historical forms of exclusion and discrimination (Barnabe *et al.*, 2023; ONU Mujeres, 2011). Diversity, in turn, refers to the expanded representation of people from all populations within a collective, without limits to their variations and possibilities, thereby creating space for perspectives rooted in multiple forms of knowledge and experience. Inclusion does not refer merely to the numerical presence of diverse individuals but to the quality of their experience within the collective that they feel supported, respected, and valued as members (Barnabe *et al.*, 2023).

From an ethical perspective, EDI practices are grounded in values of recognition, care, and justice that guide how institutions and organisers conceive their responsibility towards others. Politically, these notions expose how power operates through decision-making and representation, showing that inclusion is never neutral but rather a negotiated and contested process (Ahmed, 2012). In this sense, EDI may be understood not only as a managerial rhetoric but as an ethical praxis: a continuous effort to translate moral commitments into affirmative and symbolic acts. In community events and festivals, this praxis becomes visible in the ways organisers shape spaces of participation, visibility, and coexistence that may either perpetuate or challenge existing inequalities and hierarchies.

Events, festivals and carnivals play important roles in communities around the world. Small-scale festivals which are designed by and for the local community represent the majority of events but have received far less attention by scholars than large-scale events and festivals, yet they have potential to act as catalysts for change on both individual and community levels (Tkaczynski *et al.*, 2022). Our focus in this study was on local carnivals, organised and delivered by and primarily for local communities, and their potential to contribute to social inclusion and support diversity.

Governments and municipalities are increasingly recognising the potential of small-scale events, festivals and carnivals to contribute to regional development and positive destination image with capacity to attract tourists and contribute to economic development and sustainability (Pappas *et al.*, 2024). They are also recognised as having potential to contribute to social sustainability locally through improving community connections and networks, supporting a sense of community pride, enhancing knowledge and understanding, and contributing to the continuity of local culture (Black, 2016). Festivals help foster a sense of community, providing participants and attendees with opportunities to develop a sense of belonging within their community, whether that be geographic and/or based around a shared interest or belief (Van Winkle and Woosnam, 2014). Regular attendance at local events can have a positive impact on sense of place and place attachment (Son and Krolikowski, 2025). Festivals can also help build social capital through efficient use of community resources, developing new partnerships and promoting social cohesion (Arcodia and Whitford, 2007; Wilks, 2011).

Festivals and carnivals are often presented as spaces of inclusion and acceptance that are "open to everyone", where traditional hierarchies are suspended, even if only temporarily, and all people can meet on an equal footing (Islam *et al.*, 2008; Pielichaty, 2015). However, the extent to which festivals really are for everyone and contribute to achieving EDI objectives is unclear. To date there has been a paucity of research focused on EDI in events (Calver *et al.*, 2025), but that which there is points to contradictory outcomes. Quinn *et al.* (2021) argue that many cities are now recognising the potential for festivals to contribute to greater cultural inclusion, and Hassanli *et al.* (2021) found that multicultural festivals can foster inclusion and a sense of belonging for marginalised groups, including refugees and migrant communities. Indeed, festival organisers increasingly try to embed diversity and inclusion into all stages of event design and delivery (Haryono *et al.*, 2025). However, Abbasian (2023) argues that although festivals can offer marginalised communities some sense of inclusion on the individual level, they have no tangible impact on wider social integration. Indeed, McGillivray and Walters (2024) point to the many tensions and challenges inherent in attempts to use events and festivals to achieve wider social and political goals.

Noh *et al.* (2024) explored the potential of special events and festivals to promote EDI and inclusive experiences amongst attendees, finding that the creation of a safe, inclusive environment where attendees felt comfortable to engage with others was essential. However, Lee and Jennifer (2025, p. 382) argue that many festivals "marginalise certain community groups and fail to engage in inclusive planning, often leading to structural exclusion or discrimination." Groups that have been marginalised at and by festivals include people with disabilities (Sage and Flores, 2019), gender minorities (Kinnunen and Honkanen, 2025a, b) minoritised communities (Shaw and Sullivan, 2011), migrants, ethnically minoritised groups

(Saeys, 2021), LGBTIQ + individuals (Ong *et al.*, 2021), refugees (Lewis, 2010), families with children (Stadler and Jepson, 2018), and, often, women (Platt and Finkel, 2020; Bows *et al.*, 2024). From the perspective of attendees, events and festivals can be best understood as paradoxical spaces that may offer opportunity for fun and engagement with like-minded people, but may also be spaces of exclusion, marginalisation and even violence.

Much previous research has focused on EDI and event attendees, with less attention paid to the perspectives of organisers and producers (Dashper and Finkel, 2020). However, organisers are essential in shaping the event content, delivery, atmosphere and messaging and are, therefore, key stakeholders to consider in any exploration of diversity and inclusion in and through events. Laing and Mair (2015) found that festival organisers do contribute to social inclusion goals through a variety of different activities and practices, but that the impact of these activities was limited to the transient community of event attendees and did not reach into the broader community. Swartjes (2024) focused on the marketing and communication activities of festival organisers and producers, suggesting that the notion that festivals are "welcoming to everyone" is at odds with basic marketing strategies that explicitly segment and differentiate potential audiences, placing some people as inherently outside the spectrum of potential participants while implicitly inviting others in. Hayes and Mogilnicka (2024) found that music festival producers see (racial) diversity as central to their vision and try to create open and non-discriminatory spaces. However, despite this, music festivals often remain non-diverse, dominated by a relatively narrow demographic that is predominantly white and middle class. Davies *et al.* (2025) explore some of these issues further, focusing on economic accessibility and the ways in which some people on low incomes are excluded from participation through financial barriers. They found that festival organisers are often aware of some of these barriers and are open to exploring possibilities to begin to reduce them, but few are actively taking measures to address this form of exclusion and were concerned about the practicality of implementing such initiatives, particularly in the challenging economic climate that festivals are operating in (Davies *et al.*, 2023). Event organisers are thus often placed in a challenging position when it comes to achieving EDI objectives. Many wish to create diverse and inclusive events that provide welcoming spaces for everyone, but are often constrained by budgets, competing priorities, lack of expertise in delivering EDI objectives, and the complexities of creating and sustaining truly inclusive events and festivals that take into account the needs of diverse groups and individuals.

Hayes and Mogilnicka (2024, p. 343) argue that diversity discourse has become ubiquitous -something that all organisations consider as part of their operations and practices- but that "there is little consensus on what diversity means in light of changing sociocultural identifications, what the policy goals and strategies are or should be and who or what should benefit from a diversity agenda". However, in the context of rising global populism and backlash in the United States under the Trump administration, the ubiquity and acceptance of the diversity discourse is increasingly being challenged, and the interests of social and economic elites are becoming more concentrated and apparent. Jordan (2023) suggests that festival governance structures may sometimes actively work against inclusion through tacit values of what constitutes "excellence" and what festival priorities should be, often defined in relation to the perceptions of a small, exclusive in-group. The lack of consensus on what diversity means, and what effective strategies to promote inclusivity might be for events, festivals and carnivals, becomes increasingly problematic in a wider context in which the very credibility of EDI (or DEI in the US) is being challenged and eroded (see Ng *et al.*, 2025). It is therefore increasingly important to understand more about what festival organisers understand EDI to be in the context of their event and organisation, as well as their priorities, practices and barriers to achieving greater inclusivity.

The majority of the research on EDI and festivals and events has been conducted in contexts in the Global North and is thus shaped by specific social, cultural and economic factors. There has been limited research on these topics from other regions, and even less from Latin America specifically, with some exceptions (e.g. Aguado *et al.*, 2024; Oliveirra, 2024; Monterrubio and

Dashper, 2025). This limited body of research suggests similarities with research on festivals in the Global North in that these events remain paradoxical spaces of inclusion and exclusion, freedom and restriction. However, the specific contexts in different Latin American countries shape how these ambiguities play out and may have consequences for how festival organisers navigate some of the complexities of EDI in the festival space, and so further investigation in these contexts is necessary for greater understanding of the contradictory relationship between events and inclusivity. In the next section we introduce the context of our research on EDI and events -Mexico- drawing on and adding to the limited body of Latin America-focused events research.

Research context and methods

Contextual background

Carnival in Mexico constitutes a profoundly heterogeneous and polysemic cultural phenomenon, expressed through a mosaic of dance, music and symbolism. It unfolds across nearly all of the country's 32 federal entities, spanning both urban and rural settings, and articulating forms of organisation that range from Indigenous to governmental. Its configuration encompasses ritual elements of pre-Hispanic origin, influences from colonial Christianity, and dances of European provenance (Azor, 2006; Quiroz Malca, 2013). Many of these carnivals are community festivities that have, in some cases, supplanted patron saint celebrations and significantly reproduce the identity markers and bonds of local populations (Hernández-Díaz and Castillo Balderas, 2019). This diversity reveals a dynamic process of appropriation, reinvention, and cultural mestizaje, which has allowed carnival to adapt continuously to dialogues between the traditional, the local, and the global (Newell and Jiménez Gordillo, 2023).

Although it is difficult to establish an exhaustive list of existing carnivals or to determine precisely when these festivities began to be celebrated on Mexican territory (Quiroz Malca, 2013), it is estimated that there are more than 300 carnivals at the national level (Newell and Jiménez Gordillo, 2023). Nevertheless, this figure likely underestimates the real scope due to limited documentation (Newell *et al.*, 2022) and the continual emergence of new carnival manifestations in contemporary contexts (Monterrubio and Dashper, 2025). Despite this proliferation, Mexican carnival has not been addressed comprehensively as a cultural ensemble with its own dynamics, representing a significant gap in anthropological and sociocultural research in the country (Newell and Jiménez Gordillo, 2023).

The central and southern regions of Mexico concentrate the greatest density and diversity of carnivals, which may be rooted in Indigenous worldviews, be of recent invention, or possess a hybrid nature. Carnival expressions in these territories display remarkable versatility, suggesting that carnival functions not only as a ritual inversion of the social order but also as a contested space for symbolic production (Newell and Jiménez Gordillo, 2023).

Carnivals in the eastern region of the State of Mexico are community celebrations held annually in the public spaces of mostly urban and semi-urban towns, embodying joy, festivity and celebration (Newell and Domínguez Cuanalo, 2024). They are characterised by parades and collective dances in which cuadrillas or comparsas, formed by couples, move through the streets and visit households to the rhythm of live music performed by wind orchestras or bands. Participants wear colourful costumes, masks and umbrellas; many men dress as women, recreating the female role, while others embody the male role (see Plate 1). In some carnivals, these roles are replaced by *charros* and *charras*, inspired by traditional Mexican horsemen and horsewomen. In all cases, the festivities often culminate in large-scale closing dances, accompanied by local spectators and visitors who join the vibrant atmosphere.

In its contemporary manifestation, Mexican carnival is widely recognised as a "festival of disorder", characterised by the temporary inversion of social norms, permissiveness, and the transgression of established roles. These festivities often feature parades of troupes, floats, costumes, masks, the crowning of a queen and an "ugly king", as well as the performative use

Plate 1. Street performance during the carnival of Chiconcuac, State of Mexico (2025). Source: Photograph by the first author

of male cross-dressing in various regions of the country (Quiroz Malca, 2013). Such practices underscore the subversive potential of carnival as a liminal space where hierarchies and social conventions may be temporarily inverted or reconfigured.

The State of Mexico, the sociocultural context of this study, is one of the 32 federal entities of the country, located in the central region. It is the most populous entity nationwide and exhibits profound social inequalities across multiple dimensions. In various urban and rural communities, women continue to face exclusion and gender inequality; older adults experience poverty, vulnerability and discrimination; and young people are affected by structural violence and inequity (Mejía Modesto, 2019). These factors shape a complex web of social tensions, which are also expressed within the realm of popular festivities.

In this sociocultural landscape, the State of Mexico stands out for its intense and varied carnival activity, particularly in its eastern region. Here, carnivals are not only festive practices with deep historical roots -some dating back over a century (Salinas, 2024)- but also spaces for symbolic expression, community participation, and, in some cases, identity negotiation.

One of the most emblematic examples is the carnival of Chimalhuacán, considered the longest in the country, with a duration exceeding 90 days and involving more than 150 troupes (Salvador, 2024). It is estimated that in 2025, it drew over 40,000 attendees, with a parade spanning three kilometres and featuring more than 150 dance groups, dozens of orchestras, hundreds of musicians and sound operators, mobile platforms, floats, and elaborate costumes. Particularly notable are the charro and charra outfits embroidered with sequins, gold and silver thread, colourful dresses adorned with beads, as well as handcrafted wax masks and hats made by local artisans. Beyond its sheer scale, this carnival displays diverse performative expressions through the participation of cross-dressed men, individuals dressed as clowns, superheroes, mascots, and film characters (Salinas Cesáreo, 2025).

Another significant carnival is that of San Salvador Atenco, with a history spanning more than 140 years. In it, two troupes -comprising masked men in colourful outfits with umbrellas, and cross-dressed individuals, whether male or female- form the core of a celebration that

strengthens community and identity bonds. This three-day carnival has begun to show changes in both its structure and function, possibly due to generational shifts (Herrera Carrazco and Zavala Hernández, 2015). Throughout this region, other similar carnivals exhibit variations in music, choreography and attire, reflecting an expressive richness in dialogue with the particularities of each community (Salinas, 2024).

Likewise, the Carnaval de Los Reyes la Paz, with over a century of history, brought together in 2025 more than 40 troupes and nearly 30 floats. The parade featured charro groups, a queen leading the procession with festive dress and representational attitude, as well as musicians and sound systems bringing the celebration to life with vibrant rhythms (Sánchez Tellez, 2025). Like others in the region, this celebration highlights both tensions and possibilities surrounding inclusion and representation in festive public spaces.

Taken together, the carnivals of the State of Mexico constitute a fertile field for the analysis of dynamics related to diversity, inclusion and equity. They reveal how communities reinterpret traditions, negotiate identities, and generate forms of cultural participation that may challenge, reproduce, or transform existing social structures.

Methodological approach

This study aimed to explore the forms and limitations of social inclusion within carnivals held in the eastern region of the State of Mexico. To this end, an ethnographic methodological approach was adopted, combining participant observation with in-depth interviews. This ethnographic approach, grounded in interpretivist epistemology, seeks to understand social realities from the subjective meanings, practices and interactions of participants within their sociocultural contexts (Radel, 2018). Such a perspective is particularly pertinent to this study, as it allows the exploration of how EDI is implemented, negotiated, contested and symbolically expressed through the embodied and relational practices that shape community carnivals.

The ethnographic approach is particularly suitable for research on events and festivals, as it enables a deep understanding of the symbolic, emotional, and relational dimensions that structure collective celebrations. Studies such as Arévalo (2009) demonstrate its value for examining the social and symbolic significance of carnivals as forms of intangible cultural heritage in Spain, revealing how festive practices embody community identities and memory. Similarly, Manzanares and Nava-Ramírez (2020) employed ethnographic methods -including participant observation and interviews- to analyse how gender equality policies shape women's participation in Mexican carnivals, exposing subtle dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. In Chile, Araya (2022) used ethnography with Afro-Chilean women's groups participating in Tumbe Carnaval in Arica to explore how they construct and transmit sonic and dance narratives, asserting cultural presence and resistance. Collectively, these works highlight the pertinence of ethnography for studying carnivals as spaces where identity, power, and culture are continuously negotiated and re-signified.

Participant observation made it possible to obtain a contextual overview of festive dynamics, as well as rich, detailed descriptions of practices, meanings, and lived experiences during the carnivals studied (Jorgensen, 2020). Fieldwork was conducted during 19 carnivals in different localities between 2024 and 2025, focusing particularly on expressions of inclusion, diversity, and equity within the festive space.

However, the central axis of this article lies in the interviews carried out with carnival organisers, who are regarded as key actors in the configuration of these celebrations. Their direct involvement in the design, planning, and implementation of carnival events places them in a structurally influential position, allowing them to shape which social groups participate, how they are represented, which cultural narratives are promoted, and what mechanisms are used to include or exclude specific sectors of society (Laing and Mair, 2015). Accordingly, this analysis focuses on understanding organisers' perspectives as strategic agents in the symbolic and material production of carnival.

Organisers were selected through non-probabilistic sampling, combining convenience and snowball techniques. The initial invitation to participate in the study was disseminated via social media, messaging applications (mainly WhatsApp), and the official Facebook pages of various carnival organisations. The selection process involved contacting organisers who were accessible and willing to collaborate, incorporating those who responded positively to the invitation. The inclusion criteria considered were that the carnival took place in the eastern region of the State of Mexico and that organisers expressed their willingness to participate. Although the study was qualitative, the cases were comparable insofar as all corresponded to community-based carnivals sharing similar organisational logics and regional sociocultural contexts.

The invitation to participate clearly explained the purpose of the research, the academic institutions involved, and the ethical considerations underpinning the study. These included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the interview at any point, and the opportunity to ask questions before and during the process (Fisher and Anushko, 2008).

Interviews were conducted in person, in locations chosen by the participants, including private homes, workplaces, and public spaces such as parks and shopping centres. In total, ten interviews were carried out, involving fourteen carnival organisers from ten different carnivals in the region. In three of these interviews, more than one organiser participated, as in the vast majority of cases decisions regarding the carnival are made collectively. The sample included thirteen men and one woman.

The interview instrument was composed of three main sections. The first focused on the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. The second gathered information regarding the carnival they organise, including its historical background, key dates, main activities, number of troupes, and the groups involved. The third and most critical section explored perceptions and practices related to social inclusion, paying particular attention to the material and symbolic participation of women, LGBTQ + individuals, people with disabilities, children, and older adults-groups that have historically and systematically faced discrimination in Mexico (Conapred, 2023). This semi-structured interview guide was reviewed by the researchers participating in the project, and the instrument was progressively refined based on insights from the first interviews. Its three dimensions -contextual, organisational, and EDI-related- guided both the formulation of questions and the analytical categories.

All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed using Office 365 Copilot. Each transcript was manually verified and corrected when necessary. Each transcript was read carefully to identify explicit and implicit references to the roles organisers have regarding EDI of the aforementioned groups. Relevant data were then grouped thematically according to three emerging categories. Thematic analysis with manual coding was applied, identifying recurrent meanings and organising them into categories derived from both the literature and participants' narratives. This categorisation was developed through a dialogue between the literature, as discussed above, and themes emerging from the interviews themselves. The resulting thematic axes are presented in the following section.

Findings and discussion

Carnival organisers play a central role in shaping the social structures of inclusion, diversity, and exclusion (Laing and Mair, 2015). Through their decisions, actions, and the symbolic frameworks they promote, they exercise a distinctive form of organisational agency that enables them to transform or challenge local social dynamics. They are not merely event coordinators; they design and manage the material and symbolic structures of the carnival. Their normative authority positions them as ethical and political agents who constantly navigate between community values, festive transgression, and social control.

Organisational agency

The implementation of principles of EDI in carnivals is closely tied to the leadership and decision-making roles played by organisers. These individuals, whether formally or informally recognised, act as key figures who determine the conditions and structures of participation. Their decisions influence not only the logistical operations of the event, but also the symbolic meaning and social legitimacy of carnival practices. While in some communities organisers are appointed through informal mechanisms, many carnivals have a clearly defined internal structure. In a formalised structure, Participant 11 -an organiser who has served as treasurer and secretary in a carnival with more than a century of history, and who has participated in carnival activities for over 20 years- described the distribution of roles as follows:

> We have a management committee made up of a president, secretary and treasurer. The president is our representative, and together with the secretary and treasurer we make decisions. As a committee, we decide on the orchestra and the costumes we are going to use, as well as the date of our participation. The treasurer keeps track of the members' payments. The three of us visit the place where the skirts and hats are made, and speak to the musicians to find out how much they will charge us this year; based on that, we determine how much each member will pay.

In addition, organisers act as resource managers and political mediators. They are responsible for raising funds, negotiating with local authorities, coordinating with other community organisations, and allocating both material and symbolic resources. Participant 6 -an organiser with over 25 years of experience in a carnival more than a hundred years old, located in the mountainous region- described this role as follows:

> As organisers, we're in charge of inviting people from the community to welcome us into their homes. We seek support for breakfasts, meals and fireworks. We approach our authorities to ask for help with public lighting throughout the event. . . we look for that kind of support from both the community and the auxiliary authorities in our area.

These decisions directly affect how the organisation is structured, which leadership dominates, how decision-making power is concentrated, what resources are used, and how and with whom the carnival establishes relationships. In this sense, organisers do not merely reflect local hierarchies and structures, but actively reproduce power asymmetries in decision-making and in the distribution of economic resources (Adongo and Kim, 2018).

Through this form of organisational agency, organisers exercise autonomy and symbolic power that shape the carnival not only as a celebratory event but also as a mechanism for concentrating decision-making and enforcing social regulation. Their capacity to act as leaders, negotiators, facilitators, and social gatekeepers positions them as key actors in defining the boundaries and possibilities of EDI in their communities.

Structures of inclusion and exclusion

Carnival organisers not only exercise autonomy and decision-making power; they also actively construct the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. They determine who is allowed to participate, how participation is organised, and under what conditions (Jordan, 2023). One such decision relates to age-based group separation. In some carnivals, separate groups are organised for girls, boys and adults, justified as a safety measure for children. Participant 13, a female participant, explained that in her community there is an organisation composed of older adults, and described how, through the carnival, they promote strategies to include children in the festive activities:

> What we try to do is divide the group into sections, and one of those is the children's section. The fourth section was the children's group. . . the kids, normally for their own safety, we place them at the very end of the carnival.

In other cases, organisational criteria have created greater possibilities for gender equality in access to carnival. Some communities have formed all-women comparsas, with women taking

leading roles in both dance and organisation. These experiences challenge the historically masculinised logic of carnival in Mexico (Córdova Plaza and Huerta Moreno, 2023) and other Latin American countries (Machado and Silveira, 2023), thereby expanding the horizon of gender equity in these celebrations. Participant 8 recounted that, in previous decades, carnival couples in his locality were composed exclusively of men, as women's participation was not socially accepted. He explained that this was due to the symbolic disorder associated with carnival and the fear that women might be linked to inappropriate behaviour within that festive context:

> In 2018, the idea emerged, and in 2019 it became reality -to create a comparsa made up exclusively of women, so they could have a space where they were the protagonists.

However, these inclusive practices often coexist with symbolic and structural barriers, particularly regarding gender. In some carnivals, participation is still conditioned by traditional norms that impose requirements related to age, gender or marital status -for instance, that women must be unmarried and without children. This tension between inclusive practices and traditional norms is clearly illustrated in the following account, where participant 3 describes how participation criteria are applied differently to men and women, leading to disputes over the legitimacy of certain participants:

> Some women are excluded from certain comparsas. . . married women, unlike married men, are not allowed to take part in carnival, because it's said that the tradition requires the women in this carnival to be *señoritas* or virgins. . . This year, the participation of a married woman with children was questioned, because other organisers claimed tradition didn't allow it. It was a horrible debate.

These exclusions are often legitimised in the name of tradition. Even though shifting social expectations and the carnival's symbolically subversive function create opportunities to challenge and renegotiate them, traditional norms and social relations sometimes prevail.

Organisers also shape inclusion through decisions about the temporal, spatial and logistical design of the event. While most carnivals are celebrated before Lent, some communities have changed the dates to avoid overlap with neighbouring festivities or to accommodate logistical needs. Organisers determine parade routes, performance schedules and key locations -all of which affect who can attend or participate. Unlike fixed-location events, the mobile nature of the carnival creates unique opportunities for inclusion, particularly for people with reduced mobility who can enjoy the spectacle from their homes. These individuals are symbolically integrated into the event not only as dancers, but as spectators, as suggested by participant 2 in the following account:

> In our comparsa, there aren't any members with disabilities, although I've seen them in others. But in the houses we visit, we sometimes notice a family member with a motor or intellectual disability, and we include them. . . when we see people like that, they're the first ones we approach to dance with, we hold their hands or make a gesture to bring them joy.

However, material barriers also persist, particularly related to financial resources, which influence who is able to participate and in what capacity. Participant 4, who has served as an organiser for the past two years, explained:

> Being an organiser or dancer usually involves significant costs: paying for costumes, music, food, and transport. We organisers contribute financially -yes, not all of us have the same means, but among those of us who can afford it, we cover the costs together.

Similarly, the role of carnival queen also involves demands linked to age, body aesthetics, and economic capital. These material inequalities limit access to symbolic leadership and protagonism. However, some organisers have promoted strategies to democratise participation, such as relaxing dress requirements or reducing fees, thereby increasing equity and accessibility for women in high-visibility roles. Participant 7 explained how, in response to growing interest from young women, his group creatively adapted the rules to broaden access to this symbolic position:

> At one point we had seven girls who wanted to be queens, but since we only chose one per year, we said we couldn't make them wait so long. What did we do as organisers? To give the young women the chance, we appointed one queen per day so they wouldn't have to wait years. We try to give young women their moment -to be queen for a day, queen of the carnival... in our group there's no distinction.

In short, organisers act as architects of inclusion and exclusion, shaping both the material and symbolic components of carnival. Neither inclusion nor exclusion occurs spontaneously -they are actively constructed through organisers' decisions, values, and practices.

Ethical, normative and political function

Due to their transgressive nature, carnivals enable the enactment of social behaviours, relationships, and symbolisms that may challenge established norms and traditions (Monterrubio and Dashper, 2025). In this context, organisers play a central role in mediating between community values and festive spontaneity, aiming to maintain the balance between social order and celebration. While their decisions can open spaces for diversity and inclusion, they may also subtly or explicitly limit the participation of groups or practices perceived as threatening to local norms.

Organisers function as moral and cultural gatekeepers, selecting, validating or rejecting individuals and expressions based on their perceptions of respect, tradition, and alignment with community values. Although many state that "everyone is welcome," participation is often contingent upon adherence to implicit behavioural norms. For example, LGBTQ + individuals may be allowed to perform as dancers, but only if they conform to locally defined standards of "respect," avoiding what is perceived as excessive or inappropriate expressiveness. This conditional inclusion was illustrated by participant 1 when asked about LGBTQ + participation:

> ... I dare say there were years when gay exhibitionism became very strong. I mean, you'd see the guys wearing thongs -look, I've got nothing against them- but there were children there, and they were asking, "What's going on? What's that?" If you're going to take part, do it within limits... with the respect it deserves.

This regulatory function is reinforced by traditional and religious discourses that govern non-normative bodies and identities, legitimising decisions about dress, dance pairings, choreographies, or the type of expressivity considered acceptable. The invocation of "cultural value" or "respect for tradition" often serves to justify cisnormative and heteronormative postures, though at times these same discourses are reinterpreted to foster symbolic transformation. Participant 3, a self-identified gay organiser from a group where inclusion policies vary, described how gender norms limited the performance of a gay dancer, while a trans woman was only able to participate after concealing her identity:

> There was a gay guy whose charro dance was, let's say, effeminate... and some said, "No, charros shouldn't dance like women; charros must dance like men, right?" So he got discouraged and didn't try again. But this year there was a trans woman... she told me not to let anyone know she was trans, because otherwise they'd kick her out of the group, attack her, assault her... that's also why some people are excluded from this comparsa. But in another group, they included her and gave her the chance -because she asked them to keep it a secret.

As a result, organisers are often caught in internal tensions and symbolic disputes. Carnival is not a harmonious space of diversity, but a contested field where contradictory visions of gender, identity, tradition and modernity are negotiated. In this space, organisers act as mediators -at times progressive, at others conservative, often contradictory- between competing demands for order and disorder, visibility and invisibility, innovation and loyalty to custom. Participant 14 described the tensions experienced when creating the first parade in over a century of carnival tradition in his locality:

> . . . if we had stuck to tradition, nothing would've changed -but change has been good. . . If we had stayed with the original carnival, we wouldn't have the colourful and joyful celebration we have now.

In short, organisers act not only as logistical and symbolic facilitators, but also as ethical and political actors. Through their decisions, they reproduce or challenge existing norms and power relations. As ethical curators, they determine which values are legitimised, which bodies are celebrated, and which behaviours are accepted or censured. Their agency is expressed in the everyday negotiations that define what the carnival includes, excludes, tolerates or transforms.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated the central role that organisers play in the promotion of EDI principles within carnivals. Through their organisational agency, organisers not only shape the structure and content of carnivals but also act as potential social transformers by either facilitating or restricting diversity and inclusion in their communities. Their decisions -constantly negotiated between tradition and modernity- determine who participates, as well as how and when, thereby enabling or constraining the visibility, prominence and celebration of historically marginalised groups.

This illustrates the power of organisers to shape events, festivals and carnivals and the experiences of those who participate and attend. Festivals are often considered to be free and liminal spaces, where "everyone is welcome". However, to make this happen, organisers need to proactively work to create safe and inclusive spaces and experiences. Very often, organisers state that they do not have the resources or skills to champion EDI (Davies *et al.*, 2025), or have to prioritise commercial over social interests (Swartjes, 2024), and so many festivals end up being sites of exclusion for marginalised groups (Lee and Jennifer, 2025). The example of community carnivals in Mexico presented in this paper illustrates that it does not always require large resources to create more inclusive spaces. The organisers of these carnivals are largely volunteers, working with relatively small budgets, but they demonstrate how small changes such as considering how to include children, or people with disabilities more actively in the carnival- can contribute to more inclusive experiences.

This does not mean that the carnivals discussed in this paper are utopian spaces of equality and inclusion, however. The power of organisers to shape priorities and make key decisions means that they can also work to actively exclude groups and individuals. Further, carnival organisers are constrained by minimal resources, and also by the wider social norms and expectations of the communities in which they operate, which necessarily restricts efforts to impact social change on a larger scale. However, carnival offers an opportunity to reshape social relations, even if only temporarily, to showcase what is possible in terms of diversity and inclusion (Monterrubio and Dashper, 2025). Organisers have a key role to play in this.

This article contributes to the international literature on event management by revealing how EDI principles take place in non-Western sociocultural contexts, which have been traditionally subordinated within global debates. In particular, it highlights the structural role of organisers in the democratisation of Latin American carnivals, thus expanding the discussion beyond the Eurocentric frameworks that currently dominate festival and event studies.

The findings also have practical implications: they can serve as a basis for reducing barriers and enhancing opportunities for inclusion in carnivals by raising organisers' awareness of the social importance of democratising events. This involves mediating between the demands of locally specific traditions and the contemporary need to open up carnivals to more diverse and equitable participation.

Given the breadth, diversity and sociocultural complexity of the Latin American context, further research is needed to explore the different dynamics, actors, power relations, and inclusive or exclusionary practices in carnivals across other parts of the continent. Such efforts

will enable the development of a more comprehensive and multi-contextual understanding of carnivals in the region, while also positioning Latin America not only as a territory with a rich and growing wealth of festivals and events, but also as a key contributor to global debates on event management and EDI principles.

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